

Embodied Civic Intimacy: Small States, Symbolic Power, and the Lived Experience of Democracy

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Abstract

How is democracy embodied in everyday life, and how can lived experience enrich how we measure it? Procedural indices offer fine-grained measurement of institutional architecture but capture less of the affective, embodied, and reputational textures of civic life in small, densely networked polities. Mainstream political sociology compounds this gap by centring large Western states and reducing small-state democracies to narratives of clientelism or elite capture. This thesis develops Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI), a mechanism most legible in small-state conditions but portable to compressed publics more broadly, to explain how compliance, dissent, and belonging are negotiated where visibility and proximity are inescapable, and where democracy is constituted through bodies, silences, and rituals as much as through institutions. The analysis is organised around three strands: the infiltration of elitism, the state management of dissent, and civil society's navigation of patronage networks. The question matters increasingly as compressed visibility, long characteristic of small states, now diffuses through digital publics and surveillance capitalism.

Malta and Singapore are compared through a most-similar systems design: postcolonial island states sharing density and colonial inheritance yet diverging sharply in regime trajectory. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design integrates political ethnography, forty elite interviews, discourse analysis, and longitudinal V-Dem and Freedom House data (2004–2024), with divergence between strands treated as analytical evidence rather than measurement error.

Extending Bourdieu's symbolic violence and building on Machin's embodied democracy, the thesis shows that despite divergent index scores, both states display convergent civic textures in which neutrality is conspicuous, absence is legible, and silence carries political weight. ECI operates through reputational sanction rather than material inducement or legal coercion. The contribution is empirical (small-state experience), theoretical (a relational, affective lens for ECI), and methodological (enriching quantitative indices with embodied evidence).

Keywords:

Embodied Civic Intimacy, Symbolic violence, Small-state democracy, Hybrid regimes, Political ethnography

Preface

This dissertation marks the culmination of a long intellectual and personal journey, one that could not have taken shape without the guidance, generosity, and encouragement of a few individuals and institutions. I express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino, whose mentorship shaped every stage of my doctoral experience. His intellectual openness, steady guidance, and commitment to critical inquiry provided both an anchor and a compass throughout this project. I am equally indebted to Prof. Alan Chong, whose insight and support during my time in Singapore sharpened my thinking and enriched my understanding of both the vibrant Southeast Asian region and political theory more broadly. His kind willingness to engage, challenge, and encourage has been invaluable.

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would resonate, yet they do. Singapore and its people have stayed with me quietly but profoundly.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem

Democracy occupies a central position in both political theory and comparative politics, yet it remains a deeply contested concept, simultaneously idealised as a normative aspiration and problematised as a lived practice. While liberal democratic governance continues to be championed globally as the benchmark for political legitimacy, the past decade has witnessed escalating concerns about its stability, inclusivity, and resilience. Across diverse regions and political systems, a growing body of academic scholarship indicates democratic backsliding, exposing structural vulnerabilities once assumed to be confined to fragile or less consolidated regimes.

The 2024 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Report underscores the gravity of this transformation. Of the sixty countries conducting national elections in 2024, more than half experienced measurable declines in democratic quality. Even more strikingly, 71% of the world's population now lives under autocratic rule, a dramatic increase from 48% in 2014 (Lindberg & Andersson, 2024). These statistics illustrate not an isolated shift but a systemic reconfiguration of the global democratic landscape. While quantitative statistics and reports offer an invaluable perspective on the changing contours of democracy, the way democracy is lived, experienced, and embodied is essential to building a robust and rounded picture of what is taking place on the ground and in people's daily lives.

In the context of this backdrop, it is timely to examine what democracy means in practice and to explore its lived realities alongside quantitative measures and frameworks. Institutional models and electoral mechanisms are profoundly significant in their scope, but they do not always account for the diverse ways democracy is negotiated, embodied, contested and lived within specific social, spatial, and cultural contexts. This thesis therefore foregrounds a central question: "In the midst of current global trends, how is democracy lived, embodied and experienced in everyday life?"

To address this overarching inquiry, the study is guided by three core analytical dimensions, which have been framed as guiding research questions. These research questions have been guided by current global trends (such as those highlighted in the 2024 V-Dem report) and developed with the intention of capturing the lived and embodied experience of democracy.

- 1) The influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?
- 2) The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors in Malta and Singapore reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?
- 3) The navigation of civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

Together, these three focal auxiliary questions enable a multidimensional analysis of embodied, everyday, lived democracy that connects institutional structures and dynamics with lived experiences, presenting a perspective on democracy and its relationship to power, practice, and experience. Furthermore, each of these questions helps to develop theoretical and conceptual anchors which will be harnessed throughout this study. These anchors are symbolic violence and embodied democracy.

Symbolic violence exposes how domination operates subtly through language, norms, and everyday practices that make power imbalances appear innately natural. It reveals how compliance and legitimacy are maintained without overt coercion, as citizens internalise cultural and institutional expectations that reproduce power relations (Bourdieu, 1991). By operationalising symbolic violence across discursive, spatial,

performative, and visibility domains, this conceptual anchor can reveal mechanisms of compliance and power that appear in everyday life and interactions.

Embodied democracy speaks directly to the notion of an everyday, lived democracy and reframes political life as something felt and experienced through bodies, spaces, public and private spaces, and emotions rather than confined to formal institutions and legislation. It highlights how democratic participation and belonging are enacted in everyday interactions, where gestures, proximity, and affective ties shape how citizens experience and negotiate power (Machin, 2022).

A thesis engaging with conceptual and theoretical foci of this scope benefits from being grounded in empirical observation. For this reason, this research will explore the everyday, lived nature of democracy in the current global context using two comparable small island nations as case studies: Malta and Singapore. Malta and Singapore both qualify as small island states, and share many features of commonality despite their distinctive cultural and political features. Both Malta and Singapore attained full independence almost at the same time; both self-classify as small island states; both began and thrived as British colonial outposts and military depots; both are globally significant due to their air and naval connectivity; both capitalise on their ports and strategically positioned harbours; both self-identify as parliamentary democracies, and both represent two of the most densely populated countries on the planet (Chong, 2020). Both Malta and Singapore's economies and health systems now depend on significant percentages of foreign labour, with the lived experiences of foreign workers (referred to as third country nationals or TCNs in Malta) often markedly different to that of national citizens.

By engaging in a comparative study of Malta and Singapore, the thesis examines how factors such as formal institutions, informal power structures, and patronage networks interact to produce forms of governance that resist straightforward classification and portray the richness and complexity of everyday democracy as it is lived. In so doing, this research positions Malta and Singapore along a spectrum of hybrid political systems

where democratic practices coexist with mechanisms of symbolic control, spatial regulation, and embodied negotiation.

This, the thesis aims to contribute to several underexplored debates. First, it responds to gaps in political sociology and democracy studies, which often privilege large Western states while neglecting the distinctive dynamics of small state democracies. Second, it addresses the need for qualitative ethnographic data to complement and enrich mainstream indices - such as V-Dem and Freedom House – that do not always capture the lived, everyday and embodied nature of democracy. Finally, by focusing on the conceptual anchors of symbolic violence and embodied democratic practices in the small state contexts of Malta and Singapore, it extends theoretical understandings of how power circulates in contexts where proximity, density, and social intimacy fundamentally shape political and everyday life.

Ultimately, this research positions small states as critical sites for thinking about how democracy is lived and experienced in everyday life. Through its comparative case study analysis, the study illuminates how Malta and Singapore exemplify broader global tensions between institutional formality and lived experience, stability and contestation, representation and exclusion. By interrogating these dynamics, the thesis seeks to enrich theoretical understandings of democratic hybridity while providing an empirically grounded account of how democracy is enacted, constrained, contested, embodied and reimagined in everyday contexts.

1.2 Enriching Existing Measurements of Democracy: Integrating Lived and Embodied Realities

Measurements of democracy must engage with a fundamental issue: why should democracy be measured at all, and for whom? Measurement does not serve a single purpose; rather, it responds to multiple, often competing constituencies. For scholars, it ensures comparability across time and space, allowing for theory-building about resilience and decline. For citizens, it can offer recognition of lived realities, transforming an abstract score into a symbolic resource in struggles for accountability.

For international actors, it becomes a strategic tool in aid allocation, diplomatic pressure, and global governance. Each of these audiences attaches different normative stakes-scholarly accuracy, civic justice, policy leverage-yet conventional indices assume these purposes can be collapsed into a single liberal-procedural checklist. Moreover, these quantitative indices sometimes privilege what is quantifiable, rather than qualitative democratic experience. By contrast, this study argues that measurement should be re-theorised as a practice attentive to embodied realities, such as participation, silence, and compliance. Exploring democracy as it is lived and embodied in daily life generates invaluable data that can complement existing dominant measures, such as those of Freedom House or V-Dem.

Measurement must also speak to geographical specificities, such as how democracy is experienced in civic spaces characterised by density, intimacy, and relational interdependence, like Malta and Singapore. Authority and legitimacy may be negotiated differently in locales where personal familiarity shapes participation, and where expressions of loyalty can matter as much as the casting of a ballot. In these contexts, governance is mediated as much through informal mechanisms, symbolic rituals, and embodied practices as through constitutional arrangements.

Case studies of small states can help to reveal and highlight the importance of capturing the lived, everyday nature of democracy (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018). In high-density contexts elites, activists, and citizens are often linked through overlapping familial, professional, and civic networks. Political power circulates through proximity, and informal practices such as patronage, clientelism, and symbolic displays of loyalty-often exert greater influence than formal structures (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Indicators calibrated for polities in which anonymity and institutional distance prevail may not always adequately capture these entanglements. Furthermore, a lived, embodied understanding of democracy helps to capture other intangible factors, such as the by colonial legacies that continue to shape governance and people's lives. For example, British administrative logics, bureaucratic hierarchies, and legal traditions persist in both Malta and Singapore, yet their legacies diverge: in Singapore, paternalist statecraft and appeals to "Asian values" frame compliance as cultural maturity, while in

Malta, kinship ties, party patronage, and affective networks weave political loyalty into intimate social life. These historically contingent trajectories shape democratic experience in ways that numerical score and Likert scale may not be able to fully capture.

A reliance on global indices also reflects deeper epistemological biases. By universalising Western liberal-democratic models, these tools marginalise alternative configurations. Singapore is routinely categorised as “partly free” or “authoritarian,” yet such classifications may overlook the ways in which stability, economic security, and meritocratic governance sustain legitimacy for many citizens (Morgenbesser, 2017). Malta, conversely, ranks highly on electoral freedoms, but these scores rarely register the clientelism, entrenched patronage, and polarisation that define everyday civic life and point to a darker underbelly. To recognise these blind spots requires methodological pluralism and a complementary approach to measuring democracy. This study therefore integrates ethnographic fieldwork with quantitative analysis, combining the reach and validity of datasets such as V-Dem and Freedom House with the qualitative depth and nuance of participant observation, elite interviews, and discourse analysis. Such a mixed-methods approach enables a more holistic account of how people experience and embody democracy in daily life.

By situating institutional indicators alongside lived experiences, this research challenges the assumption that procedural measures suffice to evaluate democratic health. It foregrounds the embodied dimensions of participation; the symbolic violence that sustains compliance, and the informal negotiations of power that sometimes escape codification. Measuring democracy, therefore, requires more than counting elections or codifying rights; it demands attention to how citizens enact and experience democratic life within their particular socio-political ecologies (Machin, 2015). In the case of small states, this means recognising the role of spatial proximity, symbolic practice, and historical legacy in shaping political belonging and agency. The point is not to reject measurement altogether, but to clarify its purposes and beneficiaries, expose its biases, and to develop methods capable of capturing civic realities alongside institutional guarantees. Only through such an expanded measurement framework can

political sociology effectively capture the micro, meso and macro elements of democracy.

1.3 Embodied and Lived Democracy

Democracy is often described through abstract frameworks - electoral systems, institutional arrangements, constitutional protections, and legal norms. Yet such formal dimensions constitute only one layer of democratic life. They offer little insight into how citizens *feel*, negotiate, and contest democracy in their everyday realities. Recent scholarship calls for a turn towards embodied and lived democracy (Machin, 2022; Frankenberger & Buhr, 2020), shifting focus from institutional blueprints to the granular ways power operates through bodies, emotions, spaces, and interactions. This perspective recognises democracy as something performed, embodied and experienced, rather than simply enacted through legal formality.

This thesis adopts *embodied democracy* as umbrella critical conceptual anchor for analysing how democratic life is lived, sensed, and negotiated through bodies, spaces, and routines.

Understanding democracy as lived and embodied illuminates three interconnected dimensions of political experience, some of which appear distinctively in small states:

Bodies in proximity - In small, dense states such as Malta and Singapore, elites, activists, and citizens inhabit tightly compressed spaces. Political figures are not distant abstractions; they are visible, tangible presences encountered in markets, community gatherings and celebrations, and everyday spaces. This spatial intimacy magnifies awareness of symbolic power, making authority palpable and relational rather than distant.

Spaces of negotiation - Civic spaces, public events, consultations, and rituals are not neutral backdrops but active arenas where authority is asserted, inclusion and exclusion are enacted, and belonging is staged. Through gestures, proximity, constraints and

choreography, these spaces physically materialise political hierarchies and shape how people embody civic identity.

Everyday encounters - In informal settings-workplaces, cafés, neighbourhoods, messaging groups, and on social media-citizens continuously decide whether to speak, remain silent, resist, or comply. These micro-interactions shape democratic meaning at a bodily level, creating lived repertoires of participation, avoidance, and accommodation that rarely appear in institutional accounts.

Embodied, everyday democracy also intersects in a unique way with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence introduced earlier. The embodied approach may help highlights how domination is internalised and negotiated through affective, spatial, and everyday practices. Symbolic violence explains how systems reproduce compliance by embedding power within cultural norms, social expectations, and emotional attachments; ultimately shaping consent without force (Bourdieu 1989). Through this lens, democratic participation is regulated not only by laws or institutions but also by internalised dispositions and *habitus* that make deference appear natural, even desirable.

Two comparative examples illustrate the potential interplay of these dynamics:

Malta - Dense patronage networks entwine political belonging with personal loyalty, structuring not only access to resources but also symbolic recognition within society. Participation often flows through familial ties, party allegiances, and networks of reciprocity, rendering neutrality socially precarious. In such contexts, civic identity is constantly negotiated through embodied acts of affiliation and recognition (Veenendaal, 2019).

Singapore - State discourses frequently invoke "Asian values" to frame political obedience as cultural obligation. Participation is constructed as harmonious collaboration rather than adversarial contestation, producing a civic identity where restraint and self-regulation signal belonging and duty (Sim, 2001). This discursive

framing embeds compliance within personal morality, aligning citizenship with disciplined subjectivity.

Frankenberger and Buhr (2020) emphasise that individuals differ profoundly in how they define, interpret, and experience democracy. Lived accounts thus provide access to diverse civic life worlds, revealing tensions between national narratives and personal realities. For example, while state discourse in Singapore celebrates multiculturalism, ethnographic encounters expose the controlled spatial visibility and muted civic presence of migrant workers. Similarly, in Malta, *festas* perform unity but often reproduce partisan divides, with symbolic inclusion and exclusion orchestrated through seemingly communal rituals. Such patterns illustrate how participation is staged, bounded, and embodied: while some are visible, others are silent.

By centering embodied experiences as a core conceptual anchor, this thesis will endeavour to complement macro-level frameworks of democratic governance and micro-level practices of civic life. Formal indices, such as Freedom House and V-Dem, frequently quantify democracy through electoral competitiveness, institutional transparency, legal protections, or freedom of expression. Yet these metrics may not always capture the intimacy of power in small states, where the proximity between rulers and ruled collapses conventional distinctions between public and private, individual and collective. In Malta and Singapore, decisions made in parliament reverberate immediately within personal networks; symbolic hierarchies are performed not only in legislative chambers but in streets, cafés, community gatherings, and housing estates. In many cases, while one may appear formally or legally free to express their opinion or beliefs, they choose to self-censor because they understand the potential implications of doing so in a small state context.

Adopting an embodied approach also highlights the affective registers of democracy by highlighting the ways emotions like pride, shame, resentment, or gratitude mediate relationships between citizens and institutions. Expressions of gratitude towards state “care” in Singapore coexist with quiet resignation over curtailed agency, while in Malta, loyalty to political parties often carries affective weight rooted in kinship histories and

collective memory. These affective attachments anchor power in deeply personal ways, sustaining systems of compliance in often invisible ways without explicit coercion.

Ultimately, lived, everyday, and embodied democracy foregrounds how bodies become sites where authority, belonging, and resistance are negotiated. By combining symbolic violence with ethnographic attention to spatial practices, emotional repertoires, and everyday encounters, and the disciplining of bodies, this thesis conceptualises democracy not as a static institutional ideal but as an ongoing, fluid, embodied negotiation. Through the comparative cases of Malta and Singapore, it demonstrates how symbolic power operates differently across contexts - sometimes through discourses of cultural harmony, sometimes through dense personal networks - while revealing shared dynamics of proximity, visibility, and social intimacy unique to small states.

By situating civic embodiment as a core consideration of analysis, it opens conceptual space for understanding how democracy is felt, enacted, and contested in everyday life, and highlighting the subtle negotiations through which power, belonging, and compliance are made material.

Building on this lens, a specific small-state mechanism is named as embodied civic intimacy: the way density, proximity, and visibility organise everyday compliance and belonging while keeping coercion largely offstage. The term sits within the broader idea of embodied democracy but links it explicitly to symbolic violence in small states.

1.4 Small States as Case Studies

Despite decades of extensive scholarship, mainstream democratic studies often focus on large Western states, privileging institutional frameworks derived from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. These dominant paradigms assume that insights from larger polities can be extrapolated to all contexts, often overlooking how different democratic dynamics can play out in smaller, territorially constrained states. Consequently, small states have historically been

treated as marginal, appearing sporadically in the literature as descriptive anomalies rather than as critical cases that challenge foundational assumptions about democratic practice.

Where small states do appear, their portrayal is often reductive. Much of the scholarship frames them through exceptionalist narratives focused on clientelism, elite capture, or patronage-based politics, rarely integrating these dynamics into broader theoretical debates that inform democratic health and legitimacy (Corbett, 2015; Veenendaal, 2020). This neglect is striking given that small states - defined here as those with populations under one million - comprise approximately 20% of the global political system (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Their systematic underrepresentation leaves a substantial empirical and theoretical void, particularly given the increasingly urgent need to understand how democracy operates in diverse, context-specific environments.

Small states exhibit distinctive political characteristics that unsettle assumptions derived from large-state models. Their compact geographies create intense spatial density and proximity, where citizens, political elites, and institutions interact in highly compressed spaces. Social networks are highly visible, often collapsing distinctions between public and private life. Decision-making processes are frequently mediated through personalised politics, privileging direct relational access over impersonal bureaucratic distance. These states also embody forms of hybrid governance, where formal democratic frameworks coexist with informal practices such as symbolic allegiance, patronage, and embedded elite networks. Their size amplifies geopolitical exposure, making them especially vulnerable to external economic dependencies and regional pressures. Finally, elite–citizen intimacy characterises political life; leaders frequently maintain direct personal relationships with constituents, influencing how legitimacy, representation, and inclusion are perceived and enacted.

Classical political theorists recognised that scale profoundly shapes democratic experience. Plato idealised smaller polities, arguing they fostered collective cohesion and a stronger sense of shared purpose. Similarly, Tocqueville (1835) contrasted the intimate, participatory democracies of antiquity with sprawling modern systems, noting

that scale influences how citizens experience agency, deliberation, and civic responsibility. Contemporary scholars, including Veenendaal and Corbett (2015, 2018, 2020), argue that the persistent exclusion of small states from comparative frameworks undermines the universality of democratic theory itself. As they emphasise, studying the unique political and social dynamics of small states offers “valuable insights for comparative analysis”, enriching both empirical understanding and theoretical precision.

This thesis seeks to address this omission by positioning Malta and Singapore as comparative case studies. These two small, densely populated, postcolonial island states provide fertile ground for exploring how spatial constraints, institutional architectures, and socio-political cultures intersect to shape democratic life. While they share structural similarities - limited territorial size, complex colonial legacies, reliance on foreign labour, and strategic global positioning - they diverge sharply in their political cultures, demographic dynamics, and regional alignments. Malta’s status as the smallest member of the European Union subjects it to EU regulatory frameworks and external accountability mechanisms, while Singapore’s role as a founding member of ASEAN situates it within a distinct set of geopolitical imperatives, emphasising stability, economic pragmatism, and regional influence. These contrasts enable an interrogation of how comparable structural constraints generate divergent democratic trajectories. In Malta, the archipelago’s spatial constraints simultaneously accommodate civic rituals, partisan spectacles, and patronage networks - where kinship and political loyalty are performed openly - most visibly through unrestrained, capital-driven land development enabled by selective regulation that favours the profit of the privileged few over the overall environmental and social wellbeing. In Singapore, symbolic hierarchies are structured through spatial policies such as Housing & Development Board (HDB) quotas, shaping multiracial harmony while embedding invisible forms of exclusion and control. This spatial intimacy magnifies political recognisability: dissent, allegiance, and even silence become legible, personal, and socially consequential.

Ultimately, small states offer rich qualitative insight for a study focusing on lived and embodied democracy: compressed geographies, intimate political cultures, familiarity

and loyalty produces distinctive expressions of everyday democracy. By positioning Malta and Singapore as two comparative cases, this thesis seeks to generate insights that are both contextually grounded and globally relevant, demonstrating that the study of small states can help to advance nuanced, inclusive, and empirically robust understanding of democracy.

1.5 Comparative Rationale: Malta and Singapore

In small states, the democratic experience is intensified by spatial immediacy, heightened social visibility, and interpersonal entanglements, producing dynamics that are less perceptible in large-state contexts. Malta and Singapore were selected as comparative cases due to their intersecting structural features yet markedly divergent political trajectories. Both are small, densely populated, postcolonial island states whose geographies, colonial inheritances, and economic dependencies create comparable structural constraints. However, they have evolved distinct governance logics, regional alignments, and multicultural dynamics.

A most-similar systems design informs this comparative analysis. Most-similar systems design is commonly used as a comparative analysis approach in political studies to compare cases which are alike in almost every way except for the outcome, which facilitates the goal of isolating variables that lead to differences (Steinmetz, 2019). By holding structural variables constant while tracing divergences in governance practices, elite-citizen relations, and civic participation, this study illuminates how “smallness” conditions the experience of democracy in distinct ways and overlapping ways.

Table 1.0 Comparative Overview of Malta and Singapore

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Malta</i>	<i>Singapore</i>
Population	563,443	6,036,860
Geography	316 km ²	735.6 km ²
Regional Alignment	EU membership	ASEAN founding member
Governance Model	Pluralist but clientelist	Developmental, centralised
Demographics	Emerging multiculturalism via migration	Established multiethnic diversity
Colonial Legacy	Former British colony	Former British colony
Labour Dependence	High reliance on Third Country Nationals	High reliance on migrant labour
Global Integration	Bound by EU accountability frameworks	Highly autonomous, balancing ASEAN and global ties

Eurostat (2025); Singapore Department of Statistics (2024)

Both states share structural commonalities - small size, limited territorial resources, dense populations, British colonial legacies, and heavy reliance on foreign labour - yet their political paths diverge sharply. This makes them ideal cases for analysing how comparable constraints interact with different institutional logics to produce distinct democratic dynamics.

For Malta, EU membership anchors governance to supranational legal and accountability frameworks, embedding decision-making within European norms around transparency, human rights, and policy harmonisation. This often forces Maltese political actors to reconcile localised clientelist traditions with externally imposed democratic standards. By contrast, Singapore enjoys greater autonomy in policymaking. As a founding member of ASEAN, it navigates its regional obligations while

simultaneously positioning itself as a global economic hub, crafting governance mechanisms unbounded by supranational oversight.

1.5.1 Governance Logics and Institutional Divergence

Malta and Singapore both operate under the formal structure of pluralist parliamentary democracies, yet they embody profoundly different political cultures and logics of legitimacy.

In Malta, democratic practice is deeply intertwined with social networks and emotional loyalties. Electoral competition coexists with entrenched systems of patronage and partisan identity, where political engagement is structured by kinship, reputation, and reciprocal obligation. Access to employment, public services, and civic resources is often mediated through personal or partisan ties, producing a form of symbolic power that collapses boundaries between state, party, and community. Politics here is lived as a mode of social belonging - intensely personal, affective, and embedded in everyday life.

Singapore, by contrast, represents a *developmental state* characterised by centralisation, technocratic governance, and strategic control. Its legitimacy rests less on personal patronage than on institutional performance - effective policy delivery, economic growth, and the maintenance of order. Power is sustained through normative and ideological mechanisms rather than direct coercion. Appeals to harmony, meritocracy, and disciplined citizenship constitute a form of symbolic violence that naturalises compliance. The selective invocation of “Asian values” transforms obedience into a civic virtue, fusing collective identity with the state’s developmental mission.

Both contexts are shaped by postcolonial continuities of British rule, yet these legacies are lived differently. In Singapore, colonial hierarchies persist through racialised governance - evident in housing quotas and laws such as the *Internal Security Act*, inherited from imperial security regimes. In Malta, colonial residues are refracted through Europeanisation and the endurance of dense patronage networks, embedding informal authority within everyday institutions.

Comparing these trajectories reveals how colonial inheritances, positionality, and cultural intimacy converge to reproduce power. In each setting, historical structures are not mere remnants of empire but living forces that organise everyday civic life, moral authority, and the spaces of belonging.

1.5.2 Multicultural Dynamics and Labour Dependencies

Both Malta and Singapore confront demographic transformations, but at different stages and scales. Singapore's multicultural composition - primarily Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian communities - has long been institutionalised through ethnic quotas, bilingual education policies, and spatial integration strategies like HDB quotas. This managed diversity reflects state-led efforts to pre-empt ethnic fragmentation while reinforcing narratives of meritocratic inclusion.

Malta, by contrast, is experiencing emerging multiculturalism driven largely by an influx of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) over the past decade. While these labour flows sustain key sectors such as healthcare, construction, and tourism, integration policies remain limited, often positioning migrants on the margins of civic recognition. This creates symbolic hierarchies between citizens and non-citizens, amplifying debates around belonging, identity, and rights in a historically homogenous society.

1.5.3 Geopolitical Alignments and Global Integration

Regional embeddedness further differentiates the two states' democratic trajectories. Singapore leverages its ASEAN membership to balance regional obligations with global economic autonomy, positioning itself as a key logistics, finance, and technology hub. Malta, conversely, occupies a distinct positionality as the EU's smallest member state, yet distinct from mainland Europe and in a crucial strategic position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, its policies are shaped by European directives across environmental, social, and fiscal governance, binding it to accountability mechanisms absent in Singapore.

This divergence in global positioning affects democratic practice. In Malta, external oversight constrains elite discretion while simultaneously creating friction between local traditions of clientelism and supranational regulatory expectations. Singapore, unencumbered by comparable constraints, exercises sovereignty in shaping internal policies, prioritising economic pragmatism and social cohesion over external models of liberal democracy.

1.5.4 Analytical Relevance

By situating Malta and Singapore in comparative dialogue, this study interrogates how structural similarities intersect with divergent institutional logics to generate distinct forms of democracy. This approach illuminates a broader question: How do governance practices, multicultural realities, and colonial inheritances shape lived democracy in contexts where proximity to power is intensified by spatial and social density?

Through this comparative rationale, Malta and Singapore emerge as complementary case studies revealing how smallness, coloniality, and global integration interact to produce unique democratic configurations.

1.6 Methodological Overview

This study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell et al., 2003), integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore democracy as an institutional construct and also as a lived, embodied civic experience. The design reflects the study's epistemological commitment to treating formal governance structures and everyday practices as mutually constitutive, recognising that numerical indices alone cannot account for the subtleties of symbolic power, embodied interactions, and spatial politics that shape democratic realities in Malta and Singapore. Both methodological strands were executed concurrently, analysed independently, and then integrated to illuminate points of convergence and divergence between institutional indicators and lived democratic practices.

1.6.1 Qualitative Components

The qualitative dimension is anchored in political ethnography, elite interviews, and textual analysis, each strategically designed to expose how democracy is enacted, negotiated, and constrained within small state contexts.

1.6.1.1 Political Ethnography

Fieldwork was conducted in Malta and Singapore over extended periods, involving immersion in diverse civic, political, and social environments. The ethnographic strategy included participant observation across public and semi-private spaces: community gatherings and celebrations, political rallies, informal social gatherings, and state-organised events. Research logs captured thick descriptions of everyday interactions, emphasising how symbolic violence manifests through embodied practices-silences, gestures, rituals, and spatial exclusions.

In Singapore, attention centred on ritualised participation, state-managed consultations, and the regulation or subtle suppression of dissent, revealing how stability is maintained through subtle mechanisms of compliance and consent rather than overt coercion. In Malta, ethnography engaged directly with diverse dimensions of partisan influence, intimate patron-client networks, and activist forums, capturing how political tribalism, personal ties, and kinship obligations intersect with institutional narratives.

Reflexive entries documented the researcher's shifting positionality: an outsider in Singapore negotiating sensitivities around authority, race, and colonial legacies, and an insider in Malta grappling with familial, historical, and emotional entanglements.

1.6.1.2 Elite Interviews

Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout 2024, in both states, encompassing policymakers, journalists, civil-society leaders, and activists. Snowball sampling was used strategically to navigate elite networks and hard-to-reach actors, especially in politically sensitive contexts where formal channels were opaque.

Interview protocols were semi-structured in order to elicit data concerning experiences of governance, revealing data around the issues of the infiltration of elitism, the management of dissent, the presence of patronage, and how institutional authority, cultural norms, and informal pressures shape participation. In Malta, interviewees frequently reflected on clientelism and the emotional stakes of partisanship. In Singapore, participants discussed state paternalism, social discipline, and racialised governance, often balancing narratives of gratitude for stability with quiet reservations about autonomy and agency.

1.6.1.3 Textual Analysis

A comparative textual corpus was constructed, incorporating political speeches, media discourses, policy documents, and legislative frameworks. Texts were examined for symbolic framing, narrative control, and discursive silences-identifying how elites legitimise authority and manage dissent.

For example, Singapore's invocation of "Asian Values" surfaced repeatedly as a justification for collective obedience and legal frameworks like the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), while Maltese discourses embedded clientelist loyalty into public rituals, especially during community gatherings and celebrations. Across both states, policy texts were analysed alongside ethnographic observations to link formal narratives with embodied democratic experiences.

1.6.1.4 Qualitative Coding and Analysis

All qualitative data-including fieldnotes, elite interviews, and documentary materials-were analysed through an iterative, manual thematic-coding process guided by a hybrid inductive–deductive logic. The procedure sought to capture both the theoretically pre-defined mechanisms drawn from the study’s conceptual anchors (*symbolic violence* and *embodied democracy*) and the emergent patterns and themes that surfaced organically during field engagement.

Transcribed interviews and ethnographic logs were imported into structured analytic tables and coded manually rather than through software. Manual coding was deliberately chosen to maintain embodied familiarity with the data, allowing the researcher to attend closely to tone, gesture, and context-dimensions central to the study’s focus on embodiment and civic intimacy. Each transcript underwent two passes:

1. Open Coding (Inductive Pass): Initial reading identified recurring words, , and actions associated with compliance, belonging, or dissent (e.g., “visibility,” “gratitude,” “silence,” “reciprocity”).
2. Focused Coding (Deductive Pass): These emergent codes were then clustered under deductive categories corresponding to the analytical framework: *discursive/linguistic*, *spatial*, *performative*, and *visibility* domains of symbolic power.

A theme was defined as a patterned meaning that recurred across at least three distinct data sources-interviews, observations, or textual artefacts-and that contributed interpretively to one or more research questions. Themes thus functioned not as frequency counts but as analytical condensations of meaning linking lived experience to theoretical constructs.

Because the study was conducted primarily by a single researcher, conventional inter-coder reliability was replaced by a regime of reflexive consistency checks. These included:

- Iterative memo-writing: analytic memos were composed after each coding cycle to record interpretive decisions and evolving theoretical links.
- Temporal replication: key transcripts were re-coded several weeks apart to test for internal consistency of interpretation.
- Peer debriefing: excerpts and coding decisions were discussed with two academic peers familiar with Singaporean political scenario but not directly involved in the project; discrepancies or alternative readings were logged and reflected in subsequent revisions.
- Audit trail: a chronological log documented coding iterations, memo updates, and category refinements was undertaken to preserve analytic transparency.

This reflexive approach ensured methodological rigour while recognising that, in interpretivist research, credibility derives from transparency of reasoning rather than mechanical replication (Auspurg and Burdül, 2022).

1.6.2 Quantitative Components

The quantitative component complements the study's ethnographic and interview data by evaluating formal institutional dimensions of democracy in Malta and Singapore. It draws on longitudinal datasets from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Version 14, 2024 release) and the Freedom House *Freedom in the World* dataset (2024 edition), selected for their conceptual breadth, methodological transparency, and global comparability. Together, these indices enable a systematic assessment of governance quality from independence to the present - Malta (1964) and Singapore (1965) - and facilitate alignment with the study's central and auxiliary research questions.

From more than 400 V-Dem indicators and 25 Freedom House items, a subset of conceptually relevant measures was chosen to capture key institutional features:

- civil liberties,
- electoral integrity,
- executive constraints,
- media pluralism, and
- associational freedoms.

All indicators were normalised to a common 0–1 scale to permit temporal and cross-indicator comparison. The operationalisation proceeded in three steps. First, indicators were mapped onto the study’s analytical anchors-symbolic violence (institutional constraint and discursive control) and, embodied democracy (participation and expression. Second, longitudinal trends were visualised to trace trajectories of convergence and divergence between the two states. Third, these quantitative trajectories were juxtaposed with qualitative findings to test whether formal scores reflected or obscured lived democratic experience.

The analysis focused on the three auxiliary research questions (which were designed to operationalise the main research question):

Table 2.0 Research Questions and Correlative Indicators

Research Question	Analytical Focus	V-Dem Indicators	Freedom House Variables	Expected Insight
The influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and	Executive constraints; judicial independence; rule of law	v2x_libdem v2x_jucon v2xlg_legcon v2x_execorr v2x_civlib	C1-C3; F2, F4; G4	Reveals institutional limits on executive power and

Research Question	Analytical Focus	V-Dem Indicators	Freedom House Variables	Expected Insight
informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?		v2clgenc v2clpolcl v2x_egal v2xel_frefair v2xnp_client v2clsocgrp v2x_cspart		legal impartiality.
The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?	Freedom of expression; media censorship; academic and cultural freedom	v2x_freexp_altinf v2meslfcen v2x_frassoc_thick v2smgovsmcenprc v2smorgviol v2x_libdem v2x_civlib v2clsocgrp	D1-D4; E1, E2; G3	Measures symbolic control through discourse and censorship.
Navigating civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and	Civil society participation; electoral competitiveness; freedom of association	v2x_cspart v2xcs_ccsi v2xel_frefair v2x_frassoc_thick v2clsocgrp v2xnp_client v2x_freexp_altinf v2x_egal v2x_civlib	B1-B4; E1-E2; D4; G3	Captures opportunities for participation and contestation.

Research Question	Analytical Focus	V-Dem Indicators	Freedom House Variables	Expected Insight
navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?		v2smgovsmcenprc v2smorgviol		

Visual analytical tools - graphs and tables generated in Microsoft Excel - were used to synthesise these data and to compare quantitative patterns with qualitative insights. This integration foregrounded points of convergence, where formal institutional measures aligned with lived democratic experience, and points of divergence, where official metrics masked underlying tensions between measured democracy and embodied democracy.

1.6.2.1 Integration and Triangulation

In keeping with the convergent parallel design, qualitative and quantitative strands were analysed independently before integration. Triangulation occurred at two levels:

Empirical Convergence - mapping consistencies between institutional indices and participants lived experiences. For example, V-Dem indicators suggesting strong executive constraints in Singapore were interrogated against ethnographic evidence of performative participation and self-censorship mechanisms.

Empirical Divergence - highlighting mismatches where formal measures obscure complex realities. In Malta, indices indicate robust associational freedoms, yet fieldwork reveals that access to civic platforms often hinges on partisan allegiance and kinship networks.

This integrated approach exposes hidden democratic dynamics that can sometimes be rendered invisible by aggregate measures, situating the institutional within the embodied and the symbolic.

1.6.2.2 Integration Procedure

The integration of qualitative and quantitative strands followed a convergent parallel design, in which both data types were collected and analysed independently before being systematically brought together for interpretive synthesis (Creswell et al., 2003). The purpose of this design was not merely to corroborate findings across datasets, but to expose points of tension between measured democracy and lived democracy-where institutional indicators either confirmed or contradicted the embodied civic realities observed ethnographically.

Sequential Logic

The analytic process proceeded in three iterative stages:

Qualitative Foundation (Stage 1):

The analysis began with the coding of qualitative materials-fieldnotes, elite interviews, and textual documents-using a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. Deductive codes were generated from the conceptual anchors (*symbolic violence*, *embodied democracy*, *small-state hybridity*), while inductive sub-codes emerged from recurring patterns in participant narratives (e.g., “anticipatory silence,” “ritualised compliance,” “visibility of absence”). These themes produced a preliminary map of *lived, embodied, everyday democratic practices* in each case.

Quantitative Alignment (Stage 2):

Parallel to qualitative analysis, longitudinal datasets from V-Dem (v14) and Freedom

House (2024 edition) were examined to trace institutional trajectories in electoral integrity, executive constraints, and civil liberties. This stage focused on identifying divergences between formal democratic scores and the patterns of civic practice emerging from ethnographic and interview data. Quantitative visualisations (time-series graphs) were used to locate key inflection points-moments of institutional change or democratic stagnation.

Cross-Modal Synthesis (Stage 3):

The final stage entailed an interpretive triangulation that cross-referenced coded qualitative insights with quantitative patterns. Rather than seeking numerical validation of ethnographic findings, the aim was analytical juxtaposition: to reveal how formal indicators illuminate structural trends while ethnographic data expose the *embodied mechanisms* through which those trends are lived, contested, or resisted.

Criteria for Convergence and Divergence

Integration followed two explicit criteria:

- Convergence was recorded where qualitative and quantitative findings mutually reinforced one another. *Example:* Both V-Dem data and interview narratives showed declining perceptions of media freedom in Malta post-2019, confirming an erosion of institutional and lived openness.
- Divergence was recorded where embodied practices contradicted institutional metrics.

Example: Singapore's consistently high V-Dem scores on "government effectiveness" coincided with ethnographic accounts of anticipatory self-censorship and symbolic inclusion, suggesting that procedural stability masked affective constraint.

These criteria allowed the analysis to treat divergence not as error but as epistemological insight—a signal that lived democracy operates beyond what quantitative measures can capture.

Integration Flow Diagram (Textual Description)

Below is the structure of the analytic process as represented in the dissertation's figure:

Stage 1: Qualitative Coding

(Fieldnotes, Interviews, Texts)

↓

Emergent Themes: visibility, civic intimacy

↓

Stage 2: Quantitative Analysis

(V-Dem & Freedom House)

↓

Identified Institutional Trends & Inflection Points

↓

Stage 3: Integration and Triangulation

Comparative Matrix:

- Convergent Patterns

- Divergent Patterns

↓

Interpretive Synthesis:

Embodied Civic Intimacy as mediating mechanism

This flow captures the parallel-yet-iterative nature of the design. Insights from fieldwork guided the interpretation of quantitative anomalies, while statistical trends prompted deeper interrogation of ethnographic themes.

Outcome of Integration

Through this process, *Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI)* emerged as the bridging mechanism explaining why formal democratic structures in small states appear stable even as lived civic experience reveals constraint, compliance, and negotiated belonging. The integrated synthesis thus transforms quantitative patterns into embodied meaning, aligning institutional data with the affective and symbolic textures of everyday democratic life.

1.7 Reflexivity and Positionality

My positionality as both an insider and outsider shaped this comparative research in profound ways, influencing access, interpretation, and the forms of reflexivity applied throughout the research. In Malta, my insider status was defined by cultural fluency, historical embeddedness, and affective proximity to the political lifeworld. Years of immersion within local networks enabled access to informal civic spaces, private narratives, and hidden practices often excluded from formal accounts. These were not merely professional advantages, but deeply embodied orientations shaped by personal memory, kinship connections, and longstanding participation within the social and political fabric. This intimacy allowed me to decode subtle symbolic cues, contextualise political speech within its affective registers, and identify forms of everyday symbolic violence that might otherwise remain concealed—such as the quiet pressures of patronage, the emotional labour underpinning partisan loyalty, or the habitual silences surrounding dissent.

Yet, insider ethnography in Malta came with epistemological tensions and ethical challenges. Proximity rendered me hyper-visible in spaces where anonymity is virtually impossible, a dynamic intensified by Malta's density and "everyone-knows-everyone" political habitus. My presence at local and national events, civic meetings, or activist forums was never neutral; social ties and reputation were constantly at stake, influencing both the data offered to me and my interpretation of it. This necessitated a

continual process of defamiliarization - consciously unsettling my own assumptions, interrogating received narratives, and disentangling personal loyalties from analytical claims. As scholars such as Mitchell (1991) caution, insider ethnography risks reproducing dominant discourses unless reflexivity actively contests them. Writing critically about clientelism, political tribalism, and gendered exclusion thus became not a detached diagnosis but an introspective confrontation with my own civic inheritance and complicity within these systems.

In Singapore, by contrast, my outsider status shaped the research in markedly different ways. Lacking pre-existing embeddedness, I was positioned at the margins of tightly regulated civic life, and access to elite networks, everyday practices, and political spaces required deliberate negotiation. At times, my foreignness insulated me from certain social obligations and enabled an analytic detachment unavailable in Malta; the absence of historical entanglement fostered a form of critical distance that sharpened my sensitivity to patterns of symbolic control, regulatory discipline, and engineered civic obedience. However, this detachment also exposed me to new forms of visibility and vulnerability. Singapore's small-island spatiality renders bodies highly legible, and my status as a temporary participant in its civic choreography meant that establishing trust was contingent on careful relational work, respect for silences, and heightened attentiveness to local norms of discretion.

Ethnographic immersion in Singapore revealed how symbolic violence operates through paternalistic state narratives, ritualised participation, and spatial regulation. For example, my positionality enabled me to observe how public compliance was not enforced solely through coercion but cultivated through performative inclusion, satisfaction with material security, and appeals to "Asian values" linking obedience to cultural maturity.

Navigating these two positions-insider in Malta, outsider in Singapore-generated a productive tension between proximity and distance. Reflexivity became not merely a methodological posture but an ongoing negotiation between embodiment and detachment. In Malta, intimate familiarity demanded rigorous critical self-awareness to

avoid unreflective reproduction of local logics; in Singapore, distance required interpretive humility, resisting the imposition of external frameworks onto unfamiliar civic practices. This dual orientation allowed me to trace convergences and divergences in how democracy is lived, negotiated, and contested across these small states, particularly regarding visibility, belonging, and participation.

Ultimately, this dual positionality enriched the comparative analysis by enabling a layered understanding of democracy as simultaneously embodied and negotiated, situated and transnational. Holding insider familiarity in tandem with outsider distance facilitated the illumination of mechanisms that would have remained opaque from a single vantage point. It enabled me to engage deeply with Malta's affective and informal political life worlds while recognising the engineered silences and symbolic controls shaping Singapore's calibrated civic sphere. This reflexive engagement foregrounds how the researcher's body, history, and emotional entanglements are inseparable from the knowledge produced, and how democratic experience itself is differently inhabited, contested, and made meaningful within these two small state contexts. The consciousness of the prominence and presence of the body and emotions in the research process parallels the prominence and presence of the body and affect in everyday democratic life.

1.8 Research Gap and Contribution

This thesis offers a scholarly contribution to the field of political sociology, placing a particular emphasis on the lived, everyday experience of democracy in Malta and Singapore. The conceptual constructs of symbolic violence and embodied democracy are operationalised to orientate the focus of the thesis and theoretically structure it. Three research questions help to further refine the inquiry by specifically exploring the presence of elitism; the management of dissent by the state, and the navigation of patronage networks by civil society.

1.8.1 Refinement of Theoretical Focus

The original research design, as approved by the University of Malta Senate, framed Malta and Singapore primarily through a comparative evaluation of democratic quality, using global indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House to benchmark institutional performance. However, insights from fieldwork and ethnographic immersion revealed that procedural measures could further be enriched by explorations of democracy as lived and negotiated within these small states. Across interviews, observations, and textual analysis, dynamics of proximity, visibility, and dense relational networks repeatedly emerged as central to shaping belonging, compliance, and dissent.

In response, the study refined its analytical orientation, adopting a stronger interpretivist approach that integrated institutional indicators with embodied ethnographic insights and elite interviews. This evolution led to the development of the concept of embodied civic intimacy. Embodied civic intimacy is introduced in this thesis to capture the way that density, proximity, and visibility organise everyday compliance and belonging while keeping coercion largely offstage in small state democratic environments.. While the comparative scope, case selection, and research objectives remain unchanged, this conceptual refinement enables a deeper understanding of the intersection between symbolic violence and, the lived experience of democracy in Malta and Singapore. Embodied civic intimacy also illuminates a unique contribution to political sociology scholarship that was born of the research process and immersion in the field, and complements the understanding of small state democracies offered by existing formal datasets such as V-Dem.

1.8.2 Empirical Gap

Amanda Machin (2022) notes that scrutiny of the bodily is somewhat missing in contemporary democratic theory. Further, democracy scholarship such as the work of Dzeke et al. (2025), calls attention to the importance of demonstrating how common lived experiences, rather than party or ideology, fundamentally impact democratic health. It is also important to recognise that democracy scholarship has long centred on

large Western states, sometimes omitting to capture the breadth of experience and insight present in the daily democratic realities of citizens in small states. This thesis aims to address these empirical gaps, by drawing attention to the lived, embodied experience of democracy in two small states.

By integrating Malta and Singapore into broader democracy debates, it exposes the sometimes-overlooked dynamics of compliance, dissent, and symbolic negotiation that can occur in the high-density, high-visibility contexts of small state democracies.

1.8.3 Theoretical Gap

Prevailing theories of democracy inadequately address the interplay between symbolic power and, embodied participation in small states. Conventional models, grounded largely in juridical and institutional logics, overlook the subtle mechanisms of domination, consent, and identity formation that operate within everyday civic life. This thesis advances democratic theory by introducing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence into the analysis of civic participation in small states - an approach rarely applied in political sociology. Symbolic violence exposes how power functions imperceptibly yet pervasively through language, ritual, spatial organization, and normative expectations, producing compliance without overt coercion (Bourdieu, 1989). In small state settings, symbolic domination is neither abstract nor distant-it is materially inscribed in the everyday performances that define belonging, exclusion, and the lived realities of democratic life. Through an examination of discursive domination, performative compliance, and visibility politics, the study demonstrates how democratic consent is constructed, contested, and embodied in routine practices.

Building on Machin's (2022) notion of embodied democracy, the research foregrounds the corporeal experience of participation, showing how democratic life is lived through the body, particularly in densely populated states such as Malta and Singapore. In these intimate civic environments, proximity to power and the spatial compression of public life intensify the effects of symbolic power, rendering them viscerally tangible.

1.8.4 Methodological Gap

Methodologically, the study integrates political ethnography with quantitative analysis to produce a multi-dimensional contribution.

Mainstream democracy indices, including V-Dem and Freedom House, privilege formal institutions and aggregate indicators, thereby overlooking how institutional structures, informal networks, and everyday practices interact to shape democratic life.

This thesis redresses that limitation through a mixed-methods approach combining political ethnography, elite interviews, discourse analysis, and quantitative indicators. Ethnographic immersion provides direct engagement with citizens' lived experiences, revealing how individuals negotiate symbolic violence, spatial regulation, and institutional power in their daily lives. Elite interviews capture the views of policymakers, political actors, and civil society leaders, while textual and discursive analyses trace how official narratives construct participation, belonging, and dissent. Quantitative data from V-Dem and Freedom House complement these qualitative insights, situating Malta and Singapore within global democratic patterns.

Through this triangulation, the study develops a textured understanding of democracy that integrates its institutional, relational, and embodied dimensions. This methodological synthesis advances the evaluation of democratic health in small states beyond institutional strength alone, encompassing citizens' lived, everyday experiences, and the subtle mechanisms of symbolic power.

In uniting political ethnography with comparative quantitative analysis, the research offers a meaningful methodological contribution. By integrating field observation, discourse analysis, and cross-national data, the study foregrounds democracy as a lived, situated and embodied practice rather than an abstract or universal form.

1.8.5 Readers' Guide

A project of this scope requires a map to help orientate the reader and trace the trajectory of the argument that will unfold.

Having offered an overview of the context from which the research question (and accompanying auxiliary three research questions) were developed, it is useful to now delineate the focus of each of the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, offers a holistic appraisal of political sociology and democracy studies scholarship, both historical and contemporary, that holds relevance for situating and developing this thesis. The literature review is divided into three sections for ease of reading: Section One contemplates diverse meanings and definitions of democracy across time and space; Section Two contemplates bodies and power, setting the scene for considerations of democracy as embodied and the multifarious ways in which power plays out in democratic settings; and Section Three integrates the research and literature reviewed to identify key gaps and synthesise the work, thereby identifying the intellectual space this thesis will occupy within the field of political sociology.

Chapter Three provides the overview of the project's ontological, epistemological and methodological approach. The chapter is divided into five sections, first outlining the epistemological and ontological stances and aligned research paradigm. The second section clarifies and elaborates upon the research design, offering a rationale for the use of case studies and mixed methods. The third section then shifts focus to explore the qualitative and quantitative elements of data collection, expanding upon the ethnographic strategies and quantitative indices that were utilise. Section four outlines data analysis and methods to check for validity, while section five outlines the importance of researcher positionality and reflexivity in informing and guiding the research process.

Chapter Four explores the findings gathered and subsequently analysed during the data collection phase. The Singaporean case study is explored first, with the qualitative data unpacked and analysed according to the three orientating research questions outlined in the introduction. Themes that were developed from the data are grouped according to those three questions. The Maltese case study findings are then developed in the

same format. The quantitative data based on indices relevant to those three questions is then presented for Malta and Singapore.

Chapter Five charts the analysis and interpretation of the research findings. The development of, and rationale for, the mechanism of embodied civic intimacy (ECI) is presented. ECI is explored as a sociological lens that can guide and support in making sense of democracy dynamics in small state contexts. The data is also explored for instances of convergence (where quantitative indices align with lived ethnographic experience) and divergence (where indices veer away from lived experience). Prominent themes are also identified, synthesised and developed; for example, the prevalence and significance of gender, embodiment identity and belonging, or the interlocking of postcolonial residue and symbolic violence. Finally, the interpretative significance of triangulation is raised, positioning triangulation in the context of this thesis as a generative epistemological approach rather than a mere fact-checking exercise.

Chapter Six, the conclusion, offers some final reflections with respect to the significance and weight of this work, its possible future applications and implications, and the limitations that may confine its scope or generalisability.

1.8.6 Contribution, Policy Relevance and Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the field of political sociology by exploring how democracy is lived and embodied in two small states. Rather than treating Malta and Singapore as peripheral anomalies, the study demonstrates how their dense spatiality, relational proximities, and unique political cultures create distinctive democratic practices and lived.

First and foremost, this thesis offers a fresh conceptualisation of lived and embodied democracy. While academia increasingly recognises the importance of embodiment, political science sometimes treats the embodied turn as a peripheral concern rather than a methodological and theoretical pivot (Thanem and Knights, 2019). In this thesis,

embodiment is central: democracy is understood not only as a set of institutional arrangements or discursive ideals but as an affective, sensory, and spatial experience, lived directly through the body. An embodied, everyday understanding of democracy acknowledges the importance of voting, laws and political systems, but also includes lived experiences as practiced through daily relationships, bodily feelings, and interactions in civic life. Democratic values such as freedom, equality, and responsiveness are seen to be fostered through sensory, emotional, and social engagements, rendering democracy a fluid becoming process rather than a static state. In Malta and Singapore, where elites and citizens share physical and social spaces, democracy is negotiated through proximity: in crowded events, regulated housing estates, community rituals, and street-level encounters where political belonging and exclusion are materially felt. By combining this embodied perspective with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the thesis reveals how democratic consent is cultivated, contested, and absorbed through subtle, often unspoken, social cues and expectations. This integration offers a novel lens for understanding how power becomes naturalised in civic life and civilian bodies, particularly where physical closeness intensifies symbolic control.

This thesis additionally operationalises symbolic violence across discursive, spatial, performative, and visibility domains, demonstrating how informal power, ritualised consent, and everyday silence intersect to shape democratic experiences in ways that may be invisible in large-scale models of democracy.

Malta and Singapore reveal how political legitimacy and civic belonging are produced not simply through formal elections or constitutional frameworks but through embodied practices and symbolic narratives embedded in daily life. The study traces how "soft" coercion operates when compliance arises not from overt repression but from internalised norms, ritualised consent, and misrecognised authority. Examples from Malta and Singapore illustrate how civic rituals such as local and national celebrations, housing policies, and public consultations become sites where domination is normalised while dissent is subtly constrained. In doing so, the study extends the

theoretical scope of symbolic violence beyond its traditional sociological roots into the empirical study of small-state democracies.

Finally, the research introduces a methodological innovation by combining political ethnography, elite interviews, discourse analysis, and quantitative longitudinal data into a multi-layered comparative design. Existing democracy indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House capture institutional breadth but benefit from complementary data demonstrating how democracy is enacted and experienced in lived contexts. By embedding ethnographic immersion within a comparative framework, this study produces a multi-scalar analytic lens that connects individual experiences, institutional structures, and global trends. This approach offers a replicable model for future studies seeking to measure democratic quality beyond formal indicators, privileging qualitative factors such as embodiment and, and lived everyday practice.

Overall, this thesis offers a fresh way of viewing lived democracy - not as a static ideal but as a contested, embodied, and symbolically mediated practice. Political participation is mediated not only by laws, elections, and parties but also through affective ties, personal reputations, kinship networks, and spatial arrangements. By analysing these overlapping dynamics, the study moves democratic theory beyond abstract ideals toward its lived expressions, revealing the interplay between symbolic power and civic agency. In doing so, it contributes new theoretical tools, empirical insights, and methodological approaches for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand democratic life in its full complexity, particularly in the context of small states.

The contributions of this thesis may hold policy relevance. By unpacking how symbolic violence and embodied practices shape participation, the study offers insights for policymakers, civil society organisations, and international bodies seeking to strengthen democratic engagement where conventional frameworks fall short.

For policymakers in small states, the research underscores that high spatial intimacy and tightly interwoven social networks demand governance approaches that are

contextually sensitive. Institutional reforms designed for large, impersonal democracies may produce unintended consequences when transplanted into micro-polities, where visibility, reputation, and affective belonging profoundly influence political behaviour.

For civil society organisations, the study emphasises the importance of engaging beyond formal arenas and recognising the power of embodied, everyday democratic practices. In small states, fostering inclusive participation often requires navigating informal patronage networks, cultural traditions, and historically embedded symbolic hierarchies rather than relying solely on legal protections or procedural reforms.

For international bodies and comparative democracy researchers, the findings call for metrics that can more comprehensively capture lived civic realities. Indices privileging electoral mechanisms or constitutional formality risk overlooking the subtle negotiations of power embedded in ordinary life-the whispered silences, performative rituals, and exclusions of migrant populations that profoundly shape democratic belonging.

The comparative analysis of Malta and Singapore also reveals how colonial legacies, geopolitical alignments, and multicultural dynamics complicate democratic participation in small states. While Malta's EU membership introduces external accountability mechanisms, Singapore's ASEAN context prioritises sovereignty, security, and pragmatic governance. Understanding these historically embedded and regionally specific dynamics is essential for designing policies that reflect local political cultures rather than imposing one-size-fits-all models of "good governance".

These contributions are intentionally modest. Rather than prescribing fixed solutions, the thesis provides a foundation for further inquiry into the embodied and symbolic dimensions of democracy. Its value lies in offering a theoretical and methodological framework that future researchers can adapt and expand-by integrating additional comparative cases, testing its applicability in other contexts, and refining measures of lived democratic participation.

2.0 Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the diverse literature that underpin the study of democracy, symbolic violence and embodied democracy, elite dynamics, patronage and civic participation. The scope is intentionally broad and reflexive, recognising that each of these bodies of scholarship contain both celebratory and critical accounts, often in tension with one another. This chapter does not treat democracy as a self-evident good; nor small states as inherently fragile or resilient; nor symbolic power as purely oppressive or emancipatory. Instead, the review works to chart and track omissions: identifying where connections have been overlooked, where existing analyses have stalled, and where opportunities exist to extend the theoretical conversation have not been enacted. In doing so, it responds to the expectation that a literature review should not only synthesise existing work but also prepare the conceptual ground for the research questions and design that will follow.

The organisation of the chapter follows four interrelated objectives. First, it considers scholarship on democracy and hybridisation, examining the evolution from classical concerns related to democratic fragility in polities to contemporary recognition of hybrid regimes that straddle democratic and authoritarian features. This body of work exposes persistent ambiguities in the definition and measurement of democracy, drawing attention to its procedural, substantive, and embodied dimensions. Second, the chapter turns to the sociology of small states, a field that is helpful to understand the contexts of Malta and Singapore. Here, issues of personalisation, patronage, incumbency, and relational density are foregrounded, alongside debates about whether smallness fosters intimacy and accountability or instead facilitates capture by elites. Third, the chapter introduces literature on symbolic power, embodiment, and visibility. This includes Bourdieu's theorisation of symbolic violence, anthropological accounts of affective governance and ritualised compliance, and feminist and phenomenological insights into the body as a site of political practice. Together, these perspectives reveal how domination is naturalised not only through laws and institutions but also through posture, silence, ritual, and spatial intimacy. Fourth, the chapter integrates these

threads, identifying a gap in the existing literature, the way in which the visibility of bodies in compressed environments can amplify both compliance and dissent.

The role of this review is not to showcase reading breadth for its own sake but to orient the reader to why these specific literatures matter in the context of this study. The discussion of democracy and hybridity grounds the analysis in debates about the meaning and limits of democratic forms. The turn to small-state sociology ensures that Malta and Singapore are not treated as marginal curiosities but as sites where the stakes of scale, intimacy, and visibility can be interpreted most clearly. The engagement with symbolic and embodied power allows the thesis to move beyond institutionalist explanations, capturing the subtler mechanisms through which domination is reproduced and contested in everyday life. Finally, the integrative framework sketches out the theoretical lacunae that motivate the research questions: how democracy is embodied and experienced, and how it is intensified within the compressed social geographies of small states.

Throughout, the review signals scholarly reflexivity by acknowledging the existence of competing paradigms and unresolved debates. It clarifies scope by confining itself to three domains—democracy, small-state sociology, and symbolic/embodied power—without straying into the more general background provided in Chapter 1 or the theorisation developed in Chapter 5. It avoids redundancy by resisting the temptation to narrate history for its own sake, focusing instead on how these literatures intersect to create a fertile but under-explored problem space.

In this sense, the chapter is more than a summary of what others have said: it is a roadmap that identifies gaps, highlights tensions, and prepares the ground for the methodological and empirical analysis that follows. In bringing together democracy, small states, and embodied power under a single frame, it constructs the intellectual architecture necessary to support the thesis's central contribution: an account of how democratic life in Malta and Singapore is shaped not only by institutions and elites, but also by proximity, ritual, and the visible choreography of everyday bodies in small spaces.

Part I: Democracy and Its Contested Meanings

2.1 Classical and Normative Roots

The contested meanings of democracy cannot be disentangled from the intellectual genealogy that has traced its promises, failures, and ambiguities for over two millennia. The genealogy is not presented here as a primer in political philosophy but as a conceptual scaffolding. It demonstrates how anxieties about democracy's scale, its dependence on virtue, and its susceptibility to majority domination have shaped the discourse from its earliest articulations in the Greek *polis* through to contemporary political science. These recurring concerns matter because they prepare the ground for the later exploration of small-state democracies such as Malta and Singapore. In these compact polities, where compressed geographies and relational density render political life unusually intimate, the dilemmas identified by classical and normative thinkers reappear with striking clarity.

2.1.1 Plato and the instability of liberty

Plato's *Republic* remains one of the earliest and most powerful critiques of democracy. Writing in the shadow of Athens' political turbulence, he saw in democracy not stability but a dangerous indulgence of unrestrained freedom. Democracy, he argued, "endorses unrestrained desires while overlooking the importance of wisdom and virtuous leadership". When each individual pursues their own pleasures without restraint, civic order disintegrates, knowledge is disregarded, and authority collapses into the hands of demagogues.

For Plato (2007), the problem was not simply desire but scale. The larger the state, the greater the diversity of desires, and the more unmanageable the political order. He believed that "large, diverse city states are incapable of sustaining just, steady governance". Leaders in such democracies become preoccupied with popularity rather than virtue, eroding the moral hierarchy required for stability. Democracy thus tends toward its own dissolution, descending first into disorder and then into tyranny.

Against this backdrop, Plato envisioned his *Kallipolis*, an ideal small city-state where size is contained, leadership is entrusted to philosopher-kings, and hierarchy sustains order. The contrast between the disordered large democracy and the controlled small polis establishes one of the first theoretical links between territorial scale and democratic viability.

This emphasis on smallness resonates deeply with later concerns in small-state sociology. In Malta, for instance, civic intimacy and dense personal networks render politics highly visible and reputationally charged (Veenendaal, 2019). In Singapore, compressed geographies heighten surveillance and discipline, echoing Plato's fear that liberty without restraint collapses into coercion. While Plato rejected democracy outright, his insistence that scale determines stability anticipates the central claim of this thesis: that democracy's meaning and expression is always conditioned by the size and intimacy of the polity.

2.1.2 Aristotle and the virtue of moderation

Aristotle's *Politics* develops a more pragmatic assessment. Like his teacher, he classified democracy as a deviant form when it privileged the many poor at the expense of the common good. Yet Aristotle (1998) refused to dismiss it entirely. He believed democracy could be stabilised if anchored in civic virtue and balanced by the presence of a strong middle class. Unlike Plato's insistence on philosopher-kings, Aristotle emphasised moderation, arguing that extremes of wealth or poverty destabilise regimes, while middling citizens cultivate equilibrium.

Scale again emerges as decisive. Aristotle argued that smaller polities better sustain civic responsibility because citizens know each other personally and share accountability. Large states, by contrast, suffer from anonymity, making corruption and demagoguery more likely. His preference for the *polis* was thus not nostalgic but structural: it recognised that civic intimacy fosters the mutual visibility necessary for virtue.

Aristotle's reflections on moderation prefigure later sociological concerns with solidarity and collective consciousness. Durkheim's analysis of social cohesion as the "glue that kept society cohesive and functioning" (Durkheim, 1997) extends Aristotle's claim that virtue is relational, arising from bonds between citizens. In Malta, these bonds manifest in kinship ties, community events, and patronage networks; in Singapore, they appear in state-orchestrated rituals of harmony. Both contexts demonstrate that civic virtue is not an abstraction but an embodied practice, shaped by density, visibility, and cultural norms. However, in both the cases of Malta and Singapore, it could be argued that while civic intimacy fosters mutual visibility, it does not necessarily lead to virtue or reduced corruption. Similarly, from a Durkheimian perspective, while civic intimacy certainly leads to enhanced social cohesion, there is evidence in both the Singaporean and Maltese contexts that social cohesion borne of proximity can be repressive on the expression of individual freedoms.

2.1.3 Montesquieu and the proportionality of regimes

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1989) translates classical anxieties into Enlightenment institutionalism. His separation of powers is his most famous contribution, but equally important is his conviction that the viability of regimes depends on territorial scale. Republics, he argued, suit small states where citizens can actively participate and monitor their leaders. Monarchies are suited to medium-sized states, while despotisms are the only feasible order in vast empires.

This theory of proportionality places scale at the centre of constitutional design. For Montesquieu, small republics nurture virtue and liberty precisely because intimacy makes oversight possible. Large states, by contrast, require centralisation to manage complexity, creating conditions ripe for despotism.

Montesquieu's linkage of size and liberty prefigures Dahl and Tufte's twentieth-century analysis, and his vision resonates with modern small-state democracies. In Malta, the compact territory enhances citizen oversight but also intensifies personalisation and

clientelism. In Singapore, the small scale enables efficient governance yet also heightens the paternalistic tendencies of a centralised state. Montesquieu thus supplies a bridge between classical political theory and contemporary small-state analysis, showing that size is not incidental but constitutive of democratic possibility. Interestingly, the paternalism present in Singapore's government challenges Montesquieu's ideas of large states sponsoring the conditions for despotism to take place, as paternalism can be considered a milder form of despotism. In the small state of Singapore, protection and care is provided in exchange for loyalty and obedience from citizens. Liberty is not nurtured in the Singaporean context, in contrast to Montesquieu's claims of small size being linked to freedom.

2.1.4 Tocqueville and the paradox of equality

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) deepens the genealogy by observing democracy in practice. He admired America's vibrancy, especially its proliferation of local associations, which he believed tempered democracy's atomising tendencies. Voluntary organisations drew citizens out of private life, fostering habits of cooperation and sustaining liberty.

Yet Tocqueville also identified a paradox. The very drive towards equality that makes democracy attractive can lead to what he called "soft despotism." When individuals prioritise personal security and equality, they willingly cede liberty to a paternalistic state. In such contexts, the state assumes ever-expanding control, not through force but through citizens' voluntary compliance. Tocqueville warned that "the freedom that individuals in democracies long for becomes eroded by the very governmental force that promised it".

Although Tocqueville did not systematise the link between size and instability as explicitly as Plato or Montesquieu, he nonetheless associated diversity and restlessness with large polities. Small-scale associations counteracted this tendency by fostering cohesion and civic life.

Tocqueville's insights resonate with contemporary small states. Singapore, often described as paternalistic or "guided" (Tan & Preece, 2022), exemplifies his fear that citizens might trade liberty for stability and prosperity. Malta, with its dense associational life but deep partisan polarisation, illustrates both sides of Tocqueville's paradox: vibrant civic engagement on one hand, and the risk of factionalism and state overreach on the other. His critique demonstrates the paradox that democratic intimacy can nurture freedom but also legitimise paternalistic oversight.

2.1.5 Mill and the tyranny of the majority

John Stuart Mill (2010) represents the liberal effort to reconcile democracy with individual liberty. In *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill argued that democracy is valuable not merely for producing collective decisions but for cultivating individuality. Participation, he believed, educates citizens, fostering autonomy and reason.

Yet Mill also issued a stark warning against the "tyranny of the majority." Unlike despotism, this tyranny arises when the majority suppresses minority voices, stifling dissent and homogenising opinion. Mill therefore insisted on strong protections for free expression and minority rights, without which democracy degenerates into conformity.

Mill's concerns intersect with contemporary critiques of procedural democracy. As Sen (2009) and Bonvin et al. (2017) argue, participation alone does not guarantee substantive democracy if inequalities prevent genuine inclusion. In small states, the tyranny of the majority often takes embodied forms: reputational pressures, clientelist obligations, the pressure to conform for the purposes of social cohesion and the fear of ostracism silences dissent. Malta's highly polarised two-party system and Singapore's pervasive culture of self-censorship illustrate Mill's warning that majoritarianism can corrode individuality even without overt coercion, particularly in small state contexts where civic intimacy is prevalent.

2.1.6 Dahl, Tufte, and the problem of scale

Robert Dahl transformed democratic theory by grounding it in empirical analysis. Rejecting both idealised models and crude majoritarianism, he developed the concept of polyarchy to describe regimes that achieve democracy through inclusive participation and contestation. Democracy, for Dahl, is a fluid and ongoing process, never fully realised but always approximated through institutions that safeguard rights, enable opposition, and ensure competition.

Dahl's preoccupation with scale, however, makes his work particularly relevant here. In *Size and Democracy* (1973), co-authored with Edward Tufte, he systematically analysed how the size of polities shapes democratic life. Small states, they argued, facilitate intimacy, accessibility, and engagement, but risk domination by entrenched elites. Large states, conversely, dilute intimacy, produce alienation, and enable bureaucratic capture. Neither is unambiguously preferable, each entails trade-offs between intimacy and efficiency, proximity and capture. This insight challenges some of the more binary representations of classical democracy and scale such as those of Plato, who idealised the small polity or Kallipolis.

This insight directly informs the analysis of Malta and Singapore. Malta demonstrates how intimacy can generate hyper-personalised politics, clientelism, and reputational coercion. Singapore illustrates how smallness can enable centralised efficiency but also paternalistic control. In both cases, smallness fosters benefits and drawbacks. Dahl and Tufte thus provide the modern vocabulary-intimacy versus capture-for understanding democracy's scale dilemmas. Their analysis bridges classical theory and contemporary sociology, anchoring the study of small-state hybridity in a lineage of concern with size.

2.1.7 Anchoring small-state hybridity in classical debates

What unites these thinkers across centuries is their recognition that democracy is never self-sustaining. Its character changes, depending on the structures of virtue, on the restraint of majority impulses, and crucially, on the scale of the polity. Plato warned that

largeness produces disorder and tyranny; Aristotle insisted that virtue flourishes in intimacy; Montesquieu formalised the proportionality between size and regime; Tocqueville demonstrated that equality could erode liberty through soft despotism; Mill warned against majoritarian suppression of individuality; and Dahl and Tufte systematised the trade-offs between intimacy and capture.

For Malta and Singapore, these insights offer more than a historical overview. They justify treating small states as insightful diagnostic sites for democracy. In Malta, kinship ties and dense partisan networks echo Aristotle's vision of virtue rooted in intimacy, but they also produce the clientelist distortions Plato and Mill feared. In Singapore, paternalistic governance exemplifies Tocqueville's soft despotism, while the PAP's dominance illustrates Dahl's concern with elite capture in small polities.

By situating small states within this intellectual genealogy, we see that their peculiarities are not anomalies but intensified versions of dilemmas as old as the concept of democracy itself. Concerns with scale, intimacy, and majority power have haunted democratic theory for centuries; Malta and Singapore simply render them unusually visible.

2.1.8 Conclusion

Democracy's meaning has always been conditioned by the scale of the polity. Both classical and contemporary theorists have shown that democracy depends not only on institutions but also on civic virtue, moderation, and safeguards against majority domination. Malta and Singapore illustrate these classical dilemmas in concentrated form, revealing how small states magnify both the strengths and vulnerabilities of democratic life.

2.2 Modern typologies of democracy

2.2.1 Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy has become so embedded in the global political imagination that its features often function as the assumed essence of democracy itself. As the European Center for Populism Studies explains, liberal democracy is both an ideology and a governing system grounded in representative institutions, multiparty elections, the rule of law, and the protection of civil and political rights (European Center for Populism Studies, n.d.). The separation of powers between legislative, executive, and judicial branches, the presence of civil liberties such as free expression, association, and assembly, and a market economy with safeguards against state overreach are seen as its defining characteristics. In many contexts, a vertical separation of powers into municipal, provincial, and national levels also supplements this model, dispersing authority and preventing abuse while expanding avenues for public input.

Yet the normative dominance of liberal democracy is not merely descriptive but carries evaluative weight. As Dahl (1989) points out, it represents a culmination of Western traditions privileging individual autonomy and procedural guarantees. The liberal conception interweaves with capitalist economic systems, encouraging citizens to view political rights as analogous to market freedoms, exercised primarily for personal advancement rather than collective transformation. In this framing, democracy becomes not simply a system of governance but an ideology of individualism, consumerism and private gain. Human rights in this model are tethered tightly to the capacity for self-expression, political participation, and consumption of information - assumptions that are far from universal in other contexts (Schmidt, 2018).

Critics underscore that this liberal conflation between political and economic liberalism is deeply culturally situated. Koelble and Lipuma (2008) caution that conventional measures of democracy are structurally biased toward liberal-democratic norms, resulting in postcolonial or non-Western regimes being coded as defective when they do not mirror Western trajectories. This concern also surfaces in the evaluation of

democracy indices. Projects such as V-Dem formally incorporate multiple dimensions - electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian - yet Wolff (2023) observes that its discursive centre of gravity has increasingly narrowed to liberal democracy as the hegemonic ideal.

In consequence, both qualitative research and quantitative datasets converge on liberalism as the standard, obscuring alternative variants or hybrid forms of democracy (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011; Kurki, 2010). A further blind spot concerns developmental state logics. Classic East Asian cases-Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore-have been analysed not only (or even primarily) through liberal criteria but as developmental states that deliberately prioritise rapid industrialisation, technological upgrading and social transformation under strategic, capable, and relatively autonomous bureaucracies (Johnson, 1982; Woo-Cumings, 1999). Read this way, democratic value is routinely benchmarked against performance-export competitiveness, productivity growth, infrastructural build-out-rather than against liberal-procedural yardsticks alone. Treating the developmental state as a parallel typology therefore complicates the evaluative primacy of liberal democracy: it highlights how some polities claim legitimacy through state capacity, long time horizons, and credible industrial policy, even where liberal rights are truncated.

The privileging of liberal democracy within measurement frameworks produces tangible consequences and biases. Comparative analyses risk neglecting political cultures in which social solidarity, religious authority, cultural traditions or economic equality take precedence over individual autonomy. In postcolonial small states such as Malta and Singapore, for instance, the emphasis on legal-rational institutions coexists with clientelism, kinship networks, and embodied forms of civic intimacy-dimensions obscured when liberalism is treated as the universal template. As Rahim (2008) observes in relation to Singapore, such regimes are frequently labelled “illiberal,” “semi-,” or “guided” democracies, illustrating how liberal democracy operates less as one model among many than as the normative yardstick against which others are judged.

It is precisely this global dominance of liberal democracy that makes it necessary, within the present thesis, to displace it from analytical primacy. Acknowledging its cultural and ideological foundations allows for the serious consideration of alternative forms, rather than consigning them to the status of deviations from a liberal script. The developmental state perspective reinforces this displacement: Singapore, in particular, has long been interpreted both as a hybrid democracy and as a developmental state, where performance legitimacy-grounded in economic growth, skills formation, and export success-is explicitly prioritised over liberal-procedural ideals (Johnson, 1982; Woo-Cumings, 1999; Kasahara, 2013).

2.2.2 Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy arose as a corrective to the limits of liberal representation, gaining traction in the 1960s amid wider calls for radicalising citizen engagement. Rather than relegating citizens to periodic voting, participatory models insist that people should be directly empowered to shape the policies and decisions affecting their lives. Bherer et al. (2016) emphasise that participatory democracy involves both institutional innovations - such as participatory budgeting, citizens' councils, and neighbourhood planning forums - and broader civic mobilisation through civil society organisations.

Its theoretical roots are entwined with Habermas's (1989) vision of revitalising the public sphere as a space where democratic will-formation could take place. For proponents, participation extends accountability, enhances transparency, and renders outcomes more legitimate because they are shaped by those most affected. Tendler (1998) links these mechanisms to the "good governance" discourse, which maintains that public involvement compels elected leaders to act more responsibly and curtails corruption. In contexts of contested policies, participatory input can also soften opposition, allowing politically contentious decisions to be accepted as fairer.

Yet as Bonvin et al. (2017) warn, participation is often procedural rather than substantive. Many initiatives require consultation with citizens but then disregard their views when final decisions are made. This transforms participation into rhetoric - a

symbolic gesture legitimising outcomes that remain elite-driven. Similarly, Sen (2009) stresses that the capacity to participate is unequally distributed. Factors such as socio-economic status, education, gender, or ethnicity shape who is able to speak, be heard, and influence outcomes. In practice, participation may reinforce inequality when marginalised groups are nominally included but practically excluded through intimidation, stigma, or lack of resources.

In Malta and Singapore, the limits of participatory democracy are especially visible. In Malta, public consultation on urban planning often functions as a thin form of communication rather than genuine co-decision-making, dominated by business lobbying groups and sidelining ordinary citizens (Conrad et al., 2011). In Singapore, laws restricting assembly and speech sharply delimit participation, while initiatives such as the People's Association co-opt grassroots organisations into government machinery (Weiss, 2017). In both contexts, participatory avenues exist, but their capacity to alter substantive outcomes is compromised.

Despite these shortcomings, participatory democracy remains a vital normative claim: that citizens should not only select rulers but actively co-govern. Its inclusion in typologies highlights democracy's expansive potential to move beyond elite mediation and institutional minimalism.

2.2.3 Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy builds on the participatory ideal but shifts the focus from the breadth of involvement to the quality of dialogue. Habermas's discourse ethics asserts that political legitimacy rests not only on who participates but on how decisions are reached - through reason-giving, respect, and open exchange (Bächtiger et al., 2018). In this vision, coercion, manipulation, and emotional appeals are excluded; only arguments that could be universally accepted by all participants sustain legitimacy.

The appeal of deliberative democracy lies in its aspiration to transform political disagreement into rational consensus, producing outcomes that reflect the public good

rather than factional interest. It responds to long-standing concerns, from Plato to Tocqueville, that democracy risks degenerating into demagoguery and populism. By emphasising rational discourse, deliberative theory seeks to insulate democracy from precisely these dangers.

However, critics highlight the profound inequalities that structure deliberation. Sen (2009) notes that formal inclusion in dialogue cannot erase disparities of capacity, education, or social standing. Fraser (1997) underscores that gendered, classed, and racialised dynamics persist: men interrupt more often, minority voices are dismissed, and less socially prestigious groups self-censor or are silenced. Even the call to participate in deliberation can burden those already disadvantaged, creating what Bonvin et al. (2017) describe as exclusionary outcomes disguised as inclusive processes.

In small-state contexts such as Malta and Singapore, deliberative ideals encounter distinctive spatial and cultural constraints. In settings where “everyone knows everyone,” reputational risk profoundly influences who chooses to speak, the manner in which they do so, and whether dissenting voices emerge at all. In Singapore, for instance, People’s Association Community Clubs ostensibly provide venues for consultation; yet, as Tan (2003) demonstrates, they frequently serve as mechanisms of surveillance and ideological control. This dynamic aligns with the developmental-state ethos, in which technocratic direction and policy coherence are prioritised over open-ended deliberation (Woo-Cumings, 1999). In Malta, deliberation concerning land use and development is similarly compromised by elite capture and systemic corruption, where decisions are reached privately and public dialogue functions largely as political theatre (Caruana Galizia & Caruana Galizia, 2017).

Deliberative democracy, therefore, reveals both its promise and its peril. As a normative model, it articulates the democratic aspiration of reaching reasoned consensus. In practice, however, it frequently exposes entrenched inequalities, illustrating how the appearance of procedural fairness can mask conditions of substantive exclusion.

2.2.4 Consociational democracy

Consociational democracy addresses the challenge of governing deeply divided societies. Lijphart's (1969) seminal work identified how fragmented polities, especially in Europe, could achieve stability through elite cooperation rather than majoritarian rule. The model rests on four pillars: grand coalitions across rival groups, mutual vetoes to protect minority interests, proportionality in political representation, and segmental autonomy in cultural or religious matters.

The central insight is that democracy need not be equated with majority dominance. In contexts of entrenched cleavages - linguistic, religious, ethnic - simple majoritarianism risks civil strife or authoritarian relapse. By contrast, consociational arrangements encourage elites from different segments to bargain, compromise, and share power, producing stability in otherwise unstable contexts. Andeweg (2000) later refined this model, introducing the notion of "consociational engineering" to describe deliberate institutional designs fostering consensus in divided societies.

Yet critics question whether consociationalism entrenches the very divisions it seeks to manage. By institutionalising segmental differences, it may harden boundaries, encourage elite cartelisation, and inhibit the emergence of cross-cutting solidarities. Moreover, consociational stability often depends on elite goodwill rather than grassroots inclusion, raising concerns about democratic depth.

For small states such as Malta, which are historically polarised along partisan lines, the lessons of consociationalism resonate. The two-party system, reinforced by clientelism and expressed also in community cultural events such as village *festas* that mirror political divisions (Boissevain, 1984; Mitchell, 2002), functions as a de facto consociational arrangement, albeit one marked by exclusion rather than inclusive power-sharing. Singapore, although not typically described as consociational, illustrates how elite pacts across ethnic groups - embedded in mechanisms like the Group Representation Constituency system - embody aspects of consociational logic by ensuring ethnic representation within a tightly controlled framework that can end up

perpetuating existing ethnic divisions, such as in state housing contexts (Noor & Leong, 2013).

Thus, consociational democracy broadens the taxonomy by demonstrating that democratic stability in plural societies may require elite cooperation, institutionalised vetoes, and consensus rather than simple majority rule.

2.2.5 Socialist democracy

Socialist democracy presents a paradox: it claims democratic legitimacy while being embedded in state socialist frameworks that often centralise authority. Pap (2023) argues that socialist democracy is distinctive from liberal democracy because decision-making is located among workers and labour collectives rather than political elites. Its ideological foundation lies in popular sovereignty exercised through the structures of production, challenging capitalist inequality and reframing the meaning of democratic agency.

The roots of socialist democracy stretch back to Marx and Engels' insistence that political forms are shaped by class struggle (Marx & Engels, 1848). Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony further elaborated how capitalist states sustain domination not only through coercion but by manufacturing consent, providing a conceptual lens to analyse how socialist democracies might mobilise working-class support, sometimes against their best interests. In small states such as Malta, Mintoff's regime embodied elements of pragmatic democratic socialism, introducing welfare reforms, state-owned enterprises, and equal pay legislation while seeking to assert independence from colonial and ecclesiastical elites (Mayo, 2013; Vella, 2009).

Socialist democracy's challenge to liberal models lies in its redefinition of the locus of democracy. Where liberal democracy foregrounds rights and liberties within political institutions, socialist democracy embeds democracy in material relations, making labour and class the basis of sovereignty. Yet this vision is not without contradictions. Socialist democracies frequently conflate party with state, leading to one-party

dominance that undermines pluralism. In practice, claims of worker sovereignty often translate into elite control or a vanguard justified in the name of the proletariat.

Nevertheless, socialist democracy remains a vital typology. It highlights the ideological contest over the purpose of democracy - whether to protect individual rights, as in liberalism, or to reconfigure economic relations of inequality, as in socialism. By including socialist variants, the taxonomy resists liberal assumptions and foregrounds alternative traditions that have profoundly shaped democratic experiments worldwide.

2.2.6 Religious democracy

Religious democracy represents regimes where democracy is formally entwined with religious authority. Greenawalt (2020) underscores the difficulty of balancing democratic neutrality with the accommodation of religious practices, particularly when those practices conflict with secular laws. The result is a spectrum of possible arrangements, from states that symbolically privilege a faith to those where religious law directly informs policy and governance.

The sociological significance of religious democracy extends beyond institutional design. As Weber (2001) and later Mann (1973) noted, religion functions as a form of ideological power with deep political consequences, shaping cohesion, legitimising elites, and influencing popular consciousness. In this sense, religious democracy exemplifies how political legitimacy can be rooted not only in rational-legal authority but also in sacred traditions and narratives.

The tensions inherent in religious democracy are evident in its dilemmas: how to accommodate pluralism when one religion is privileged; how to sustain civil rights when religious doctrine conflicts with democratic norms, and how to balance divine authority with popular sovereignty. These tensions illustrate that democracy's relationship to secularism is not universal, but culturally contingent.

Religious democracy also reveals how political belonging can be intertwined with theological identity. In contexts where citizenship is defined by adherence to faith, exclusion of minorities or dissenters may be heightened, producing hybrid regimes where democratic institutions coexist with theological boundaries. Yet at the same time, religious frameworks may provide powerful sources of solidarity and legitimacy, enabling regimes to mobilise collective action in ways secular models cannot.

By recognising religious democracy as a distinct type, this taxonomy foregrounds the breadth of ways in which democracy is configured. It resists the secular bias implicit in liberal models and acknowledges that religion remains a potent political force shaping democratic outcomes. Religious democracy holds weight as a concept for both Malta and Singapore. In Malta, the Catholic Church was closely intertwined with the state apparatus until the sixties. However, its imprint and influence still remain, notable in examples such as the complete prohibition of abortion in Malta, the only country in the EU to hold this position. In Singapore, the prevalence of Confucian values and ideals (sometimes identified as Asian values) strongly impacts policymaking. Confucianism represents a cultural and ethical ideology, which some scholars also classify as a religion due to elements such as the veneration of ancestors (Sun, 2013).

2.2.7 Conclusion

The typologies of liberal, participatory, deliberative, consociational, socialist, and religious democracy together demonstrate the wide range of meanings attached to democratic practice, and their relevance in the cases of Malta and Singapore. Each variant highlights different principles - individual rights, citizen empowerment, rational dialogue, elite cooperation, worker sovereignty, or religious legitimacy. Each also reveals the inherent tensions and contradictions present in each of these forms of democracy.

For this thesis, the significance of presenting this taxonomy lies in resisting the naturalisation of liberal democracy as the sole model. Comparative research that assumes liberalism as the norm risks mischaracterising hybrid regimes such as Malta

and Singapore, where clientelism, civic intimacy, and cultural traditions profoundly shape democratic life, and elements of consociational, deliberative, participatory, religious and socialist democracy are present. By situating these cases within a wider field of democratic types, the analysis can more accurately critique measurement frameworks and foreground the plurality of democratic experiences.

2.3 Hybrid/grey-zone regimes

The contemporary study of democracy has become increasingly concerned with political regimes that resist classification within the conventional binary of liberal democracy versus authoritarian rule. Following the post–Cold War diffusion of electoral institutions and constitutional frameworks, a wide range of systems emerged that display democratic forms while diverging significantly from liberal-democratic norms in practice. To categorise such regimes merely as “flawed democracies” or “partial autocracies” risks obscuring the distinctive dynamics that constitute them. The literature on hybrid or “grey-zone” regimes-developed by scholars such as Thomas Carothers, Larry Diamond, Wolfgang Merkel, Andreas Schedler, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, and Fareed Zakaria-provides a conceptual foundation for analysing cases such as Malta and Singapore.

Both states maintain electoral competition and institutional continuity, yet their democratic practices are characterized by patronage, manipulation, illiberal constraints, and circumscribed accountability. These features underscore the relevance of hybridity frameworks for their analysis. At the same time, developmental state theory offers a complementary perspective, particularly for understanding Singapore. This approach highlights how regimes construct legitimacy through state capacity, industrial policy, and long-term planning, thereby linking hybridity to the concept of performance-based legitimacy (Johnson, 1982; Woo-Cumings, 1999).

2.3.1 Carothers and the “grey zone”

Thomas Carothers’ seminal essay, *The End of the Transition Paradigm* (2002), mounted a decisive critique against the linear “transition paradigm” that had dominated political science since the third wave of democratisation. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, it was assumed that regimes located between authoritarianism and democracy were inherently transitional, moving either forward towards democratic consolidation or backward into renewed authoritarianism. Carothers challenged this teleological view by observing that many regimes seemed to be stuck in what he called the “grey zone”: neither clearly democratic nor clearly authoritarian but combining institutional features of both. Crucially, Carothers identified that these grey-zone regimes were not merely in temporary limbo but had become stable political forms in their own right.

Within this grey zone, Carothers described two recurrent patterns. The first is “feckless pluralism,” in which countries maintain formal electoral competition and regular alternation in power, but where politics is hollowed out by weak institutions, pervasive corruption, and a lack of public faith in political elites. In such systems, citizens are able to vote governments in and out of office, but the quality of governance remains stagnant, and democratic accountability is more symbolic than substantive. Malta’s experience resonates strongly with this model. The island’s electoral politics are vibrantly contested, boasting some of the highest voter turnout rates in the world, yet this pluralism often veils the persistence of clientelism, executive dominance, and partisan capture of institutions. Mediterranean literature associated with Luigi Graziano (1973) and Simona Piattoni (2001), suggests this durability is not idiosyncratic: southern European institutional environments-dense party organisations anchored in municipalities and parishes, public sectors that dominate local labour markets, and highly discretionary planning and procurement regimes-systematically stabilise hybridity via clientelism. In such settings, distributional particularism becomes a credible currency of accountability, substituting for broad programmatic commitment and reproducing a regional equilibrium rather than a merely Maltese pathology.

Carothers' second pattern is that of "dominant-power politics," in which elections are formally conducted but one political grouping monopolises authority to such an extent that the prospect of genuine alternation of power is effectively foreclosed. Singapore exemplifies this model. Since independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has secured repeated electoral victories with overwhelming parliamentary majorities. These outcomes have been reinforced by institutional mechanisms such as electoral engineering, defamation legislation, and stringent media regulation. While citizens formally retain the right to vote, the political arena is structured in ways that systematically marginalise opposition parties and entrench incumbents.

The endurance of this dominant-power configuration in Singapore cannot be explained solely by formal institutional constraints. It is also maintained through affective and embodied practices: ritualised performances of national belonging, reputational pressures within dense social networks, and the pervasive symbolic violence of self-censorship. Importantly, its durability is further illuminated by developmental-state logics. Elite consensus, a perceived meritocratic bureaucracy, and policies oriented toward export-led competitiveness generate performance-based legitimacy that supplements-and at times offsets-the illiberal mechanisms of control (Johnson, 1982; Woo-Cumings, 1999).

Carothers' framework thus helps to show why both Malta and Singapore belong squarely in the grey zone. They display distinct variants of hybridity-Malta through hollow pluralism rooted in Mediterranean clientelist architectures (Graziano (1973); Piattoni (2001)), Singapore through dominant-party entrenchment-yet both illustrate Carothers' central point: hybridity is not transitional but durable.

2.3.2 Diamond and pseudo-democracy

Larry Diamond (2002) extended this critique by highlighting the rise of "pseudo-democracies." For Diamond, the diffusion of electoral processes across the globe led many regimes to adopt the outward trappings of democracy-elections, constitutions, political parties-while gutting them of meaningful contestation and accountability.

These pseudo-democracies were not merely authoritarian regimes in disguise but hybrid systems where electoral forms coexist with illiberal practices.

Diamond distinguished between electoral democracies, where elections are minimally competitive, and liberal democracies, where elections are embedded in a broader structure of rights and checks and balances. Pseudo-democracies fall short of this liberal ideal: they hold elections, but these are manipulated or constrained; they host opposition parties, but these are marginalised; they recognise rights on paper, but these are frequently violated. Singapore once again fits this typology: elections occur regularly and are procedurally orderly, yet the broader environment-dominated by the PAP, controlled by state-linked media, and constrained by defamation laws-renders competition symbolic rather than substantive.

Malta's pseudo-democratic features manifest differently. Here, elections are highly competitive, and opposition parties can win power, but the wider liberal infrastructure is weakened by entrenched clientelism, partisan capture of media, and the weak accountability of institutions. The assassination of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 underscores Diamond's point: elections alone are insufficient if institutions cannot protect rights, ensure transparency, or constrain the abuse of power.

Diamond's conceptual contribution lies in foregrounding the quality of democracy. His typology insists that researchers move beyond the presence or absence of elections (often highlighted as the ultimate liberal marker of democracy) to scrutinise the robustness of institutions, the fairness of competition, and the lived reality of rights. For the purposes of this thesis, Diamond's framework highlights why Malta and Singapore cannot be treated as merely "defective" versions of liberal democracies. Their hybridity is substantive, not accidental, and it shapes the lived and embodied democratic experiences of their citizens.

2.3.3 Merkel and embedded democracy

Wolfgang Merkel (2004) advanced the field by developing the model of “embedded democracy.” He argued that liberal democracy can be understood as a complex system of interdependent partial regimes: (1) free and fair electoral processes, (2) political rights of participation, (3) civil liberties, (4) horizontal accountability, and (5) the effective power to govern. A democracy is defective when one or more of these components is systematically weakened or violated.

Applying Merkel’s model to Malta reveals several defective elements. Electoral competition is robust, but horizontal accountability is compromised by the concentration of executive power and the co-optation of oversight institutions. Civil liberties exist formally but are undermined by harassment of journalists and the pervasive intertwining of politics and business elites. The effective power to govern is further distorted by clientelist linkages, where political leaders use state resources to reward supporters, blurring the line between public office and private interest.

In Singapore, the principal democratic deficits lie in the spheres of political rights and civil liberties. Although elections are held regularly, meaningful competition is constrained by restrictions on opposition campaigning, stringent media regulation, and extensive gerrymandering, all of which undermine genuine political participation. Civil liberties are further curtailed through laws limiting freedom of assembly, speech, and association, while horizontal accountability remains weak due to the People’s Action Party’s dominance over the judiciary and other state institutions. At the same time, the state’s governing capacity is exceptionally strong: Singapore’s bureaucracy is highly capable, efficient, and largely free from corruption, producing consistently impressive socio-economic outcomes. Merkel’s framework thus illuminates the paradox of Singapore’s hybrid regime: a democracy weakened by its deficits in liberty but sustained by its extraordinary capacity to govern and produce results. Singapore’s legitimacy as a hybrid paternalistic regime is often justified by supporters and commentators as a trade-off: stability and success come at the expense of freedom of expression and individual rights. This tension between capacity and liberty mirrors the broader

developmental state model, in which legitimacy is secured less through political pluralism than through effective governance, industrial policy, and administrative coherence (Kasahara, 2013; Routley, 2012).

By disaggregating democracy into partial regimes, Merkel allows for nuanced comparisons across cases. Malta and Singapore embody different combinations of defects, reminding us that hybridity is not monolithic but contextually specific. This insight is vital for the small-state focus of this thesis, where institutional and social compression amplify the visibility of such defects in everyday life.

2.3.4 Schedler and the “menu of manipulation”

Andreas Schedler (2002, 2006) crystallised the idea that hybrid regimes sustain themselves not by accident but through the deliberate deployment of a “menu of manipulation.” He argued that rulers in such regimes seek to preserve the appearance of democracy while subtly distorting it to entrench their power. The menu includes strategies such as restricting opposition access to finance and media, manipulating electoral rules, intimidating voters, engaging in patronage distribution, and selectively enforcing the law.

Singapore offers a textbook illustration of this menu of manipulation instruments. Electoral boundaries are redrawn by committees housed within the Prime Minister’s Office, often only months before polling, a practice that systematically disadvantages opposition parties. Defamation suits and heavy financial penalties have long functioned as deterrents against dissenting politicians and journalists, while the mainstream media-dominated by state-linked outlets-maintains a consistently pro-government stance. More recently, legislation such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) has further empowered ministers to censor or restrict online content deemed false or destabilising, entrenching the People’s Action Party (PAP) as the ultimate arbiter of political truth. At the same time, the state deploys an extensive system of patronage through subsidised housing, healthcare, and education-public goods that not only

secure popular legitimacy but also foster material dependence on the ruling party. Viewed through the lens of the developmental state, these mechanisms do more than entrench political dominance: they also facilitate economic upgrading, from housing and skill formation to industrial and technological policy, thereby converting socio-economic progress into durable political legitimacy (Woo-Cumings, 1999; Stubbs, 2017).

In Malta, manipulation is less institutionalised but no less potent. Patronage networks saturate public life, with access to jobs, contracts, and resources frequently mediated by partisan loyalty. Partisan media outlets reinforce polarisation and insulate citizens within competing echo chambers. The rule of law is compromised by ambiguity and selective enforcement, allowing elites to evade accountability. Corruption scandals, from public procurement to hospital privatisations, illustrate how manipulation operates not only during elections but across governance more broadly.

Schedler's conceptualisation is invaluable because it shows hybridity as an active process. Malta and Singapore are not merely incomplete democracies; they are regimes where manipulation is normalised, institutionalised, and embodied. Citizens internalise these rules, engaging in self-censorship or cultivating personalist ties to politicians, thereby reproducing hybridity in everyday interactions. The emphasis on symbolic violence and embodied civic intimacy in this thesis intersects vividly with Schedler's framework: manipulation is not only institutional but lived.

2.3.5 Levitsky and Way: competitive authoritarianism

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2002) advanced the hybridity debate by coining the concept of "competitive authoritarianism." In these regimes, formal democratic institutions are sufficiently meaningful that opposition can contest for power, but the playing field is so heavily tilted that incumbents enjoy a decisive advantage. Unlike closed authoritarian regimes, competitive authoritarianism tolerates some opposition and pluralism, but unlike democracies, competition is neither fair nor even.

Levitsky and Way identify four arenas where competition typically occurs: elections, legislatures, judiciaries, and the media. In competitive authoritarian regimes, these arenas are formally open but heavily manipulated. Elections may allow opposition candidates to run, but incumbents monopolise resources, manipulate rules, and intimidate rivals. Legislatures may include opposition members, but their influence is marginal. Judiciaries may formally exist, but their independence is compromised. The media may be pluralistic in principle, but state control ensures that criticism is muted or punished.

Singapore aligns strongly with this model. Opposition parties exist and contest elections, yet the PAP's dominance over finance, media, and institutions renders them perpetually marginal. The legislature includes opposition MPs, but their influence is circumscribed. Courts adjudicate cases, but consistent victories for the PAP in politically sensitive lawsuits suggest structural bias. The media is tightly controlled, limiting the space for genuine pluralism. Singapore thus exemplifies a competitive authoritarian regime: formally competitive, substantively skewed.

Malta presents a more complex case. Its two-party system allows for genuine alternation of power, suggesting greater competitiveness than Singapore. Yet smaller parties are effectively excluded, and patronage-driven politics skews the playing field even within the two-party duopoly. The assassination of a journalist critical of corruption underscored the fragility of Malta's pluralism. While not as starkly skewed as Singapore, Malta nonetheless demonstrates competitive authoritarian tendencies in its marginalisation of independent voices and entrenchment of elite power.

Levitsky and Way's model is particularly useful for this thesis because it highlights hybridity as structured and durable. Malta and Singapore are not drifting between democracy and authoritarianism; they are locked into competitive authoritarian logics that have proven remarkably resilient.

2.3.6 Zakaria and illiberal democracy

Fareed Zakaria (1997) popularised the term “illiberal democracy” to describe regimes that hold elections but fail to uphold the constitutional liberalism that gives democracy its substantive meaning. He cautioned against equating democracy with elections, noting that many regimes in the post–Cold War world embraced electoralism while suppressing rights, marginalising minorities, and undermining the rule of law.

Singapore exemplifies Zakaria’s argument. Elections are orderly and regular, but civil rights are curtailed. Freedom of expression is constrained by censorship laws; public assembly is restricted; LGBTQIA+ rights remain truncated. The judiciary is formally independent but functions within parameters shaped by the PAP. Citizens are free to vote but not fully free to speak, protest, or organise.

In Malta, illiberal tendencies manifest through the manipulation of the rule of law and the exploitation of legal ambiguity. Ambiguously worded legislation and selective enforcement create loopholes for elites, allowing corruption and clientelism to flourish. Journalists critical of the government face harassment, lawsuits, or worse. Civil society is often energised in response, and its very mobilisation underscores the illiberal tendencies of the state. However, it is critical to acknowledge that mobilisation can also be explained in other ways, such as through political opportunity structures (Tilly, McAdam, Tarrow 2001) which create openings in times of external political shifts that activists or other critics can exploit.

Zakaria’s insight is crucial for this thesis because it underscores the normative stakes of hybridity. Malta and Singapore may appear democratic, but their illiberal practices reveal deeper deficits that cannot be dismissed as marginal. To treat them as “flawed democracies” is to overlook the ways illiberalism is systematically embedded within their political and social structures.

2.3.7 Transitional versus stable hybridity

A central debate in the hybridity literature concerns whether hybrid regimes are transitional or stable. Early democratisation theory assumed hybridity was temporary, a waypoint on the road to consolidation. But as Carothers, Diamond, Merkel, Schedler, Levitsky and Way, and Zakaria demonstrate, hybridity is often a stable equilibrium. Hybrid regimes may persist for decades, adapting and reproducing themselves in response to challenges.

Malta and Singapore illustrate this durability. Malta has been independent since 1964, with an uninterrupted two-party system marked by high turnout, partisan loyalty, and entrenched patronage. Despite EU membership and external pressure, clientelism and corruption remain endemic. Singapore has been governed by the PAP since 1959, maintaining stability and prosperity through a hybrid model of electoral competition, technocratic governance, and illiberal control. Neither case suggests imminent democratic consolidation or authoritarian collapse. Instead, both illustrate the stable hybridity of small states: regimes where formal institutions coexist with manipulation, patronage, and embodied compliance.

2.3.8 Hybridity, small states, and embodied civic intimacy

The hybridity debate also intersects with the themes developed earlier in this review: symbolic violence, embodied democracy, and small-state sociology. In Malta, hybridity is reproduced through clientelist exchanges in everyday life, where personal ties to politicians determine access to jobs or favours. In Singapore, hybridity is sustained through spatially engineered compliance, from the surveillance of public assemblies to the ritualised discipline of National Day parades. In both cases, hybridity is not only institutional but embodied, performed through gestures of loyalty, acts of silence, or participation in civic rituals.

This embodied dimension intensifies in small states, where spatial compression, dense networks, and limited anonymity heighten the visibility of compliance and dissent.

Citizens cannot easily withdraw into anonymity; their political allegiances and actions are observed, remembered, and evaluated within tight-knit communities. This amplifies the power of symbolic violence, ensuring that hybridity is lived as much through everyday discipline as through formal institutions.

2.3.9 Conclusion

The hybrid/grey-zone literature is an important orientating concept for this thesis. Carothers' grey zone, Diamond's pseudo-democracy, Merkel's embedded democracy, Schedler's menu of manipulation, Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism, and Zakaria's illiberal democracy each contribute vital insights. Together, they dislodge the teleology of democratisation and insist that hybridity be treated as an analytically distinct, stable regime type.

This framework legitimises the classification of Malta and Singapore not as failed liberal democracies, but as hybrid regimes in their own right. Malta exemplifies a form of feckless pluralism and delegative democracy sustained by clientelism and executive dominance. By contrast, Singapore epitomises dominant-party competitive authoritarianism, maintained through institutional manipulation, technocratic governance, and illiberal restrictions. Both cases represent stable rather than transitional hybrids.

Introducing the developmental state as a parallel typology further clarifies the nature of their hybridity. In Singapore, hybridity is inseparable from performance legitimacy rooted in state capacity and industrial policy, whereas Malta's hybridity is more convincingly explained by clientelist equilibria than by developmental coordination (Johnson, 1982; Woo-Cumings, 1999; Kasahara, 2013). Situating Malta and Singapore within this debate allows this thesis to present them as diagnostic sites for examining how hybridity is intensified by small-state dynamics, embodied civic intimacy, and symbolic violence.

Hybrid regimes should therefore be understood not only as institutional configurations but also as lived systems, reproduced through everyday practices-gestures, silences, rituals, and reputational pressures. This recognition establishes the conceptual foundation for the empirical chapters that follow, which analyse Malta and Singapore as analytically distinct hybrid regimes whose quotidian practices illuminate the embodied dynamics of contemporary democracy.

2.4 Measurement and its limits

The comparative study of democracy has long relied on measurement. From the mid-twentieth century onward, the development of indices such as Freedom House, and most recently the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project – amongst various others – has enabled scholars and policymakers to track global democratic trajectories with remarkable consistency. The appeal of these datasets lies in their promise of comparability and coverage: they provide uniform assessments across all countries and across time, offering the possibility of identifying patterns, diagnosing democratic backsliding, and benchmarking performance. Yet the same qualities that render them indispensable also expose them to criticism. The very act of reducing democracy to a set of indicators risks concept stretching, validity problems, and the imposition of normative biases, especially when applied to small states such as Malta and Singapore, where distinctive political dynamics are often invisible to frameworks designed with larger polities in mind.

This section evaluates the principal indices, balancing their strengths and weaknesses. It examines how Freedom House and V-Dem contribute to the measurement of democracy, while probing the critiques that question their validity. It also integrates perspectives from Baldacchino, Veenendaal, and others to show how small-state blind spots complicate measurement. In so doing, it prepares the ground for this thesis's methodological innovation: a Triangulated Validation Loop that integrates quantitative datasets with qualitative attention to lived democratic practices, filling the gaps that indices leave open.

2.4.1 Freedom House: accessibility and bluntness

Among all indices, Freedom House is arguably the most influential. Since the 1970s it has published the annual “Freedom in the World” reports, rating countries as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free.” The simplicity of this tripartite classification is central to its influence: journalists, policymakers, and civil society organisations can readily cite its rankings, and its long time-series provides a unique historical overview to map shifts over time (Freedom House Singapore Report, 2022; Malta: Freedom in the World Report, 2022). The index evaluates two broad categories-political rights and civil liberties-each scored out of four points-and then aggregates them into the final freedom status.

For scholars, Freedom House offers the advantage of longitudinal comparability. Its annual updates make it possible to trace the rise and fall of democratic performance across decades. For example, Freedom House consistently ranks Malta as “free,” highlighting its strong electoral participation and civil liberties, while Singapore is usually classified as “partly free,” pointing to restrictions on media, civil society, and opposition parties. The index thus provides a baseline understanding of how these two small states fit into global democracy trends.

Yet the same accessibility that gives Freedom House its power also represents its weakness. The reduction of complex political realities into a single composite score risks oversimplification. As Koelble and Lipuma (2008) note, such indices embed a liberal democratic bias, treating Western experiences as the gold standard and casting deviations as deficiencies. For Singapore, this translates into a persistent undervaluation: the index scores its restrictions heavily, while failing to register the legitimacy that stems from economic prosperity, stability, and collective wellbeing, all of which shape the lived experience of democracy (Tan, 2010; Mutalib, 2000). For Malta, the “free” classification conceals informal practices of clientelism, patronage, and personalised politics, which profoundly distort the exercise of democratic rights and impact civic life (Veenendaal, 2019; Baldacchino, 2002).

Freedom House is also vulnerable to accusations of concept stretching. By subsuming civil liberties, rule of law, and media pluralism under a single democratic label, it risks conflating liberalism with democracy, contrary to Sen's (2009) insistence that substantive outcomes, not just institutional forms, define democracy. The result is that Freedom House may capture the procedural features of democracy, but it cannot address how those features land and are expressed in everyday life and bodies, nor can it accommodate hybrid forms that do not map neatly onto liberal ideals.

2.4.2 V-Dem: disaggregation and normative drift

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project emerged in 2014 to remedy precisely these problems. Unlike Freedom House's blunt typology, V-Dem disaggregates democracy into five high-level principles: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. Each is broken down into indices, components, sub-components, and indicators, producing an unprecedentedly rich dataset (Coppedge et al., 2015; Lindberg et al., 2014). This architecture allows scholars to zoom in on specific democratic dimensions most relevant to their research, while still benefitting from global comparability. For example, electoral democracy is measured not only by free and fair elections but also by access to alternative information and freedom of association, approximating Dahl's notion of polyarchy.

This fine-grained approach explains V-Dem's rapid rise in prominence. It resonates with Weinstein's (1996) emphasis on democracy as process and with Dewey's (1991) vision of democracy as lived experience, providing researchers with multiple entry points. For this thesis, V-Dem's coverage of participatory and deliberative democracy is particularly valuable, as it offers indicators that, while imperfect, gesture towards the embodied and everyday practices explored qualitatively in Malta and Singapore.

However, V-Dem is not immune to critique. Its reliance on expert coders raises questions of inter-coder reliability and normative bias (Coppedge, 2023). Moreover, as Wolff (2023) observes, the project has increasingly narrowed its focus towards liberal democracy as the hegemonic model, despite its initial promise of pluralism. This

discursive convergence reflects a broader trend since the 1980s, when the contestation over the meaning of democracy waned and liberalism became the default template (Burnell, 2000; Kurki, 2010).

For states like Singapore, where democracy is hybridised with Confucian values and pragmatic authoritarianism, such convergence risks misclassification. For Malta, V-Dem's scores may highlight electoral robustness but fail to register the distortions introduced by clientelism and elite networks (Veenendaal, 2019).

Even V-Dem's celebrated disaggregation faces limits. Its indicators for participatory democracy, for example, focus on civil society organisation membership and public consultation processes. In Malta, where public participation in environmental planning often masks elite capture (Conrad et al., 2011), such indicators may overstate inclusivity. In Singapore, where grassroots bodies like the People's Association are structurally linked to the ruling party and kickbacks, (Weiss, 2017), measures of associational life risk conflating state-orchestrated participation with genuine civic engagement.

2.4.3 Strengths: comparability, coverage, and scholarly currency

Despite their limitations, indices remain indispensable for comparative political research. Their standardised coverage and cross-national comparability allow scholars to locate individual cases within broader global patterns-revealing, for instance, whether Singapore's restrictions are exceptional in its region or whether Malta's turnout rates stand out internationally. Beyond measurement, indices function as a shared scholarly language, facilitating dialogue across disciplines and enabling the accumulation of comparative knowledge.

They also act as disciplinary gatekeepers: researchers often employ them not for their perfection, but because they provide a common frame through which cases can enter broader debates. To disregard them entirely risks appearing partial or methodologically

insular. This thesis therefore treats such indices not as definitive measures, but as necessary points of departure.

2.4.4 Weaknesses: concept stretching, validity, and normative bias

The critiques, however, cannot be understated. Indices suffer from concept stretching, conflating different aspects of democracy into single scores. They face validity challenges, as their indicators may not capture what they purport to measure. They also embody normative biases, privileging liberal democracy as the default template and pathologizing divergence.

These weaknesses are amplified in hybrid regimes. Singapore illustrates this vividly: its electoral system is competitive in form but tightly constrained in practice; its governance is efficient but repressive; its legitimacy is grounded less in liberal rights than in performance and collective wellbeing (Mutalib, 2000; Vasil, 2020). Freedom House's "partly free" classification captures restriction but not legitimacy. V-Dem's liberal indicators highlight constraints but miss the symbolic violence of self-censorship (Bourdieu, 1996; Teo, 2021). Similarly, Malta's classification as "free" conceals the pervasive influence of clientelism, patronage, and informal networks (Veenendaal, 2019; Baldacchino, 2002). In other words, indices fail to comprehensively capture the nuance, character and complexity of hybrid regimes in small states.

2.4.5 Small-state blind spots

Global large-scale democracy indices, do not always capture the complexity and nuance of small states where compressed social geographies and dense interpersonal networks can shape democracy in distinctive ways. As Baldacchino (2018) observes, small states often go unnoticed internationally unless they cause problems. Veenendaal (2020b) shows that small states exhibit high turnout and apparent stability, yet beneath the surface lie personalised politics, incumbency, and clientelism.

For Malta, high turnout-often exceeding 90%-is read by indices as democratic vibrancy (Howe, 1987; Hirczy, 1995). Yet this turnout is fuelled by partisan polarisation and clientelist dependence, not civic dedication. Freedom House scores Malta as “free,” but such scores overlook the culture of patronage that inhibits genuine accountability (Veenendaal, 2019). For Singapore, indices highlight restrictions on media and civil society, but miss the embodied compliance generated by spatial intimacy and reputational pressures. Citizens refrain from dissent not only because of formal laws but also because “everyone knows everyone” in compressed social spaces, and Asian values dictate the importance of collective wellbeing over individual preference (Bourdieu, 1996; Roth, 2021).

Small states do not always cohere with expectations of impersonal institutions, clear boundaries between public and private, and pluralist competition. Rather, small states defy these assumptions: politics is personal, institutions are entwined with informal networks, and reputation regulates behaviour as much as law. By failing to account for these dynamics, indices can misrepresent small-state democracies.

2.4.6 Towards a methodological gap

Acknowledging both the strengths and weaknesses of indices clarifies the methodological gap this thesis addresses. Indices provide comparability, coverage, and scholarly legitimacy, but they do not always capture the embodied, intimate, and informal dimensions of democracy.

This gap therefore opens space for methodological innovation. The Triangulated Validation Loop applied in the following chapter integrates quantitative datasets like Freedom House and V-Dem with qualitative attention to lived democratic practices in Malta and Singapore. By triangulating institutional measures with embodied experiences, symbolic rituals, and everyday interactions, this approach aims to produce a more holistic understanding of democracy in the small state case studies of Malta and Singapore.

2.4.7 Conclusion

Freedom House and V-Dem, amongst various other indices, are indispensable tools for the comparative study of democracy. They offer breadth, comparability, and continuity, providing a common language for scholars and policymakers. Yet their weaknesses—concept stretching, validity problems, normative bias—are significant, especially in small states where democracy is shaped as much by informal networks, embodied rituals, and symbolic violence as by formal institutions (Paldam, 2021). Malta and Singapore illustrate these blind spots vividly, demonstrating how indices may not fully capture the lived reality of democracy.

By situating these indices within a balanced appraisal, this section has identified the methodological gap that this thesis seeks to fill. Indices are not dismissed but repurposed: used as baselines that can be complemented by qualitative methods that capture what they cannot. The forthcoming methodological chapter introduces the Triangulated Validation Loop, an approach designed to integrate quantitative comparability with qualitative specificity, thereby offering a more nuanced account of democracy in small-state contexts.

2.5 Defining “Smallness”

The term “small state” is ubiquitous across the fields of political science, sociology, and international relations, yet its meaning is far from settled. Scholars have long disagreed about whether smallness should be defined by numerical thresholds, relational power, or by multi-dimensional qualities that resist simple quantification. This definitional ambiguity matters. As Mouritzen and Wivel (2005) caution, the lack of consensus has impeded theoretical coherence and hindered the accumulation of knowledge across comparative studies. In political sociology in particular, where attention to social structures and everyday practices is central, the conceptualisation of smallness cannot be taken for granted.

For this research, the issue has immediate methodological stakes. While Malta falls unambiguously into the category of small states by almost any measure, Singapore appears anomalous. With a population exceeding 5.5 million, it is larger than most micro-polities typically studied in the small state literature. Without a clear rationale, its inclusion risks attracting criticism. As such, this section systematically reviews the competing definitions of smallness: threshold approaches based on population or territory, pragmatic and multi-dimensional frameworks that emphasise informality and capacity, and relational power approaches drawn from international relations. It then situates Malta and Singapore within these debates, addressing head-on why both should be considered small states for the purposes of this study. The conclusion outlines the operational definition that will anchor the comparative logic of this thesis.

2.5.1 Threshold approaches: counting citizens and drawing lines

The most straightforward way of defining smallness has been conducted through thresholds of population size. Such approaches offer the advantage of simplicity and comparability, particularly when deployed by international organisations or large-scale datasets. Freedom House, for example, has commonly classified small states as those with populations under 1.5 million (Veenendaal, 2020). The World Bank has employed a similar cut-off in its economic and development work, grouping together countries below 1.5 million for analytical purposes (World Bank, 2017). These thresholds are widely used because they provide a clean, quantitative demarcation and facilitate cross-national comparison.

Yet within this camp there is little consensus about where exactly to draw the line. Ott (2000) identifies small states as those below one million, while Srebrnik (2004) opts for a stricter threshold of half a million. At the other extreme, Marriott (1943) and Molis (2006) have suggested far higher ceilings, of 16 million and 25 million respectively, based on historical or regional contexts. Under these more generous definitions, even Madagascar and the Netherlands can be considered “small.”

The arbitrariness of these thresholds is immediately apparent. Malta, with its 520,000 inhabitants, fits comfortably within any of the lower benchmarks. Its smallness is numerically incontestable. Singapore, however, poses a challenge. Under Srebrnik's 500,000 cut-off it is many times too large; under Ott's one million it remains excluded; under Freedom House's 1.5 million or the World Bank's similar figure it is again too populous. Yet under Marriott's or Molis's definitions, Singapore sits firmly within the category. Depending on which benchmark is chosen, Singapore can be either paradigmatically small or unambiguously medium-sized.

This variability reveals the limitations of relying exclusively on thresholds. Population is an important factor, but it fails to capture the political and sociological dynamics that make small states distinctive. Two states with identical populations may experience politics very differently depending on territorial dispersion, density, or institutional capacity. Malta and Singapore illustrate this point vividly. Malta is a compact Mediterranean island with the highest population density in the European Union, where political and social networks overlap intimately. Singapore, while more populous, is also territorially minuscule, with 6 million people compressed into a land area smaller than Greater London. Both polities thus exhibit many of the traits associated with smallness, despite their demographic disparity.

Threshold approaches also tend to assume that size scales linearly with political dynamics. Yet as Plato observed in *The Republic*, the quality of democracy often deteriorates as states grow too large, overwhelmed by the plurality of desires and opinions (Plato, 2007). Tocqueville (1835) similarly noted that democracy's promise of equality and individualism could, in large nations, erode liberty and foster paternalistic overreach. Montesquieu too argued that liberal government is most effectively sustained in smaller territories, where proximity ensures citizens remain connected to procedures and vigilant against corruption (cited in Levi, 2006). These classical insights suggest that smallness is more about the manageability of scale and intimacy of relations than raw numbers. By that logic, Singapore-though demographically larger than Malta-still embodies the compressed, high-visibility conditions of a small state.

Ultimately, threshold approaches offer a useful starting point but fail to capture the sociological essence of smallness. They risk both over- and under-inclusion, excluding cases like Singapore that share small-state dynamics while including larger countries whose politics are shaped by entirely different logics.

2.5.2 Pragmatic and multi-dimensional definitions

To overcome the shortcomings of numerical cut-offs, scholars have advanced more pragmatic, multi-dimensional definitions. Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) provide one of the most influential frameworks, distinguishing three ideal-type understandings of small states.

The first defines smallness in negative terms: small states are those that are not great powers. They lack systemic responsibility for global stability, cannot unilaterally dictate international law, and operate largely within the frameworks set by others. While this captures the peripherality of small states, it risks inflating the category to include nearly all but a handful of global giants.

The second focuses on material capacity, particularly population and military resources. Drawing from Handel (1990:13), who argued that military power has historically been tied to population size, this definition sees small states as lacking the material heft to project force or shape outcomes independently. Yet as Baldacchino and Wivel note, this again collapses smallness into demographics and struggles with anomalies such as Singapore: small in landmass, lacking natural resources, yet commanding a formidable military and global economic role.

The third understands smallness as a political construct, produced through the perceptions of citizens, institutions, and other states. Here, smallness is relational and socially constructed, but the risk lies in relativism: a state may be small in one context and not in another, depending on perspective.

Having weighed the strengths and limitations of these three types, Baldacchino and Wivel (2020:7) advance a pragmatic synthesis. Small states are defined by limited economic, political, and administrative capacity; reduced competition and monopolisation in politics and markets; prevalence of informality, reduced hierarchy, and personalisation in politics; and vulnerability to external shocks. This definition captures the sociological consequences of smallness rather than simply its numerical indicators.

The implications are profound. Veenendaal (2020) has shown that small states often feature highly personalised politics, clientelist networks, and power concentration, yet simultaneously high levels of citizen engagement and voter turnout. Corbett and Veenendaal (2015) argue that small states are valuable precisely because they expose dynamics of intimacy and proximity that are less visible in larger contexts. Baldacchino (2018:4) adds that while small states rarely capture outside attention, their internal dramas-of patronage, informality, and compressed political cultures-provide rich laboratories for political sociology.

Thorhallsson (2018:19) extends this pragmatic approach with an emphasis on relational asymmetry. Smallness is context-specific: a state may be weak in one domain but influential in another. For instance, Malta is economically and militarily peripheral but wields disproportionate influence within the EU, where unanimity rules empower even the smallest members. Singapore, though territorially minuscule, leverages economic strength and diplomatic agility to shape ASEAN agendas and global trade regimes.

Crucially, pragmatic definitions also resonate with sociological insights from earlier chapters. Clientelism, patronage, and personalisation-so pervasive in Malta-are not anomalies but structural consequences of compressed societies (Farrugia, 1993; Veenendaal, 2019). In Singapore, the paternalistic dominance of the People's Action Party, the reliance on performance legitimacy, and the internalisation of discipline and self-censorship similarly reflect small-state dynamics of proximity, visibility, and limited anonymity (Mutalib, 2000; Vasil, 2020; Tan & Preece, 2022).

By focusing on the small state features of capacity, informality, and vulnerability, pragmatic definitions thus encompass both archetypal micro-states like Malta and more complex cases like Singapore.

2.5.3 Relational power approaches

Another influential perspective defines smallness through relational power. Rather than treating size as an absolute, scholars such as Katzenstein (1985) and Keohane (1969) emphasise a state's position within asymmetrical power structures. A small state is one that cannot alter systemic outcomes on its own, must accommodate itself to larger actors, and is disproportionately vulnerable to external shocks.

This approach shifts the focus from domestic scale to external relations. It highlights the dependency of small states on larger ones for security, trade, and global governance. Yet it also reveals the agency of small states, which can exercise influence through coalition-building, moral authority, and niche diplomacy. Katzenstein (1985) famously illustrated how small European states leveraged consensus politics and corporatist structures to thrive in the shadow of larger neighbours.

Thorhallsson (2018) refines this by emphasising relational asymmetry. Smallness is not a fixed condition but varies by domain. A state may be militarily weak yet diplomatically strong, or globally marginal yet regionally central. Malta illustrates this duality: it cannot project power globally, but within the EU it can block measures requiring unanimity and thereby wield disproportionate influence. Singapore, for its part, is dwarfed by Indonesia and Malaysia but within ASEAN has acted as a policy entrepreneur, shaping regional norms and leveraging its reputation for stability and prosperity.

Relational power approaches also resonate with sociological insights about elite networks and symbolic domination. Domhoff's (1990, 2006) work on the power elite shows how elites wield disproportionate influence through interconnected networks, while Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power demonstrates how domination is reproduced through the internalisation of norms. In small states, where visibility is

heightened and networks are compressed, these dynamics are particularly salient. Malta's clientelist networks and Singapore's tightly managed civic sphere exemplify how relational asymmetries manifest both externally and internally.

By situating smallness within broader systems of power, relational approaches complement pragmatic definitions. They remind us that smallness is not simply about numbers but about vulnerability, dependency, and the strategic deployment of limited resources in asymmetrical contexts.

2.5.4 Malta and Singapore: justifying inclusion

Against this theoretical backdrop, the selection of Malta and Singapore as comparative cases rests on solid justification.

Malta epitomises the micro-state ideal: with just over half a million residents packed into one of the world's densest territories, it demonstrates smallness in its most concentrated form. Politics there is personal, clientelist, and woven into the fabric of daily life. Party allegiance structures social relations, as Baldacchino (2002) observes in his account of Maltese villagers tracing networks of patronage and obligation. Local *festas* and neighbourhood rivalries mirror partisan divisions, embedding politics within social rituals and interactions (Boissevain, 1984; Mitchell, 2002). In Malta, smallness is lived experientially-politicians and citizens encounter each other routinely, anonymity is scarce, and personal and political spheres blur and blend.

Singapore, by contrast, stretches the conceptual boundaries of smallness. With nearly six million inhabitants, it exceeds the demographic thresholds typically used to define small states. Yet by territorial, resource-based, and geopolitical measures, it remains small. Its political system reflects key attributes of smallness: limited political space, high visibility, constrained anonymity, and the dominance of a single party legitimised through performance and paternalistic control (Mutalib, 2000; Vasil, 2020). Dissent is highly visible, self-censorship pervasive, and conformity ritualised in public life-from

civic campaigns to the everyday discipline of MRT spaces. These dynamics reveal the embodied intimacy characteristic of small-state politics.

Juxtaposing Malta and Singapore yields analytical leverage. Malta anchors the lower bound of smallness; Singapore tests its upper limits. Their comparison exposes the elasticity and multidimensionality of the concept, showing that smallness transcends mere population counts. It emerges instead as an interplay of demographic, spatial, relational, and institutional factors. Malta illustrates the quintessential micro-state condition; Singapore demonstrates how a relatively populous polity can still embody the sociological dynamics of smallness when geography, density, and vulnerability converge.

This comparative logic also engages enduring theoretical debates. Thinkers from Plato and Montesquieu to Dahl and Tufte (1973) have argued that small polities foster democratic engagement through proximity and accessibility (Plato, 2007; Levy, 2006). Tocqueville (1835) warned of paternalism in large democracies, while Saati (2022) shows that citizens of small states tend to exhibit higher trust and participation. Malta exemplifies this through exceptionally high voter turnout; Singapore illustrates how smallness can sustain hybrid democratic forms rooted in discipline and symbolic compliance. Together, they serve as diagnostic cases for examining how size influences democracy within compressed and hybrid regimes.

In this study, smallness denotes not population alone but a configuration of relational, spatial, and informational compression. While small-state scholarship often adopts a numerical cutoff (typically under one million residents), such measures overlook the conditions under which civic intimacy becomes politically consequential. Small-state conditions, as defined here, involve high relational density, spatial compactness, and reputational proximity-settings in which political actors are easily visible to one another and operate within short social distances.

Both Malta and Singapore meet these conditions, though through distinct mechanisms: Malta through demographic smallness and thick interpersonal networks; Singapore

through spatial confinement, bureaucratic penetration, and the circulation of reputation within a bounded public sphere. The comparison thus focuses on the conditions of smallness, rather than on absolute size.

2.5.5 Conclusion - Towards an Operational Choice

In light of these debates, this research adopts Baldacchino and Wivel's (2020) pragmatic, multi-dimensional definition of small states as its operational framework. Smallness here is defined not simply by population but by the sociological consequences of limited capacity, compressed structures, personalisation, informality, and vulnerability to external shocks. This definition captures both Malta and Singapore within a coherent conceptual space, while avoiding the arbitrariness of thresholds and the relativism of purely constructivist accounts.

This operational choice anchors the comparative logic of the thesis. It legitimises the inclusion of Singapore alongside Malta by showing that both exhibit the defining features of small states, even if one is demographically larger. It also pre-empts potential scepticism by demonstrating awareness of threshold approaches, engaging with multi-dimensional and relational definitions, and explicitly situating the research project within the scholarly field. Malta and Singapore thus become not anomalous cases but illustrative poles of small-state dynamics: one archetypal, the other boundary-stretching.

In sum, defining "smallness" is not a preliminary housekeeping exercise but a substantive theoretical intervention. It determines case selection, shapes interpretation, and grounds comparative analysis. By adopting a pragmatic, multi-dimensional definition that encompasses both Malta and Singapore, this project situates itself firmly within the debates on small states and establishes a clear rationale for its comparative study of embodied civic intimacy in small-state democracies.

2.6 Democratic opportunities and risks of small states

The question of whether smallness is an advantage or liability for democracy has persisted for centuries. Theorists as far back as Plato and Montesquieu suggested that political scale matters profoundly, with both associating smaller units with more stable, accountable, and participatory governance. In the modern era, Dahl and Tufte's (1973) influential *Size and Democracy* crystallised this line of thought, positing that smaller polities hold distinct democratic advantages by virtue of their intimacy and proximity. The oft-quoted phrase "small is beautiful" captures this idealistic vision: when states are small, citizens can know their leaders, leaders can be held to account, and political life is experienced as immediate rather than abstract. This line of argument has continued to inspire research, with scholars such as Anckar (2002) elaborating on the way compression cultivates familiarity, social cohesion, and heightened trust in democratic institutions.

Yet, against this celebratory discourse, an equally forceful critique insists that smallness may undermine rather than enhance democracy. Ott (2000) argues that the intimacy of small societies can enable capture by elites, blurring the line between public and private and weakening institutional autonomy. Fraser (1997) shows how structural inequalities shape who can participate meaningfully, warning that exhortations to participate may simply reproduce exclusions. Bonvin et al. (2017) stress that participation itself can be manipulated or instrumentalised by governments, turning democratic rituals into hollow performances. From this vantage point, small states may appear less as paragons of democracy than as sites where conformity, manipulation, and clientelism are magnified.

Malta and Singapore exemplify this tension. Both are archetypal small states, but their democratic experiences differ in revealing ways.

This section explores these debates in detail, tracing the democratic opportunities and risks of small states. It situates Dahl and Tufte's optimism alongside Ott's scepticism, balancing Anckar's emphasis on intimacy with Fraser and Bonvin's critiques of

participation and using Malta and Singapore to ground the theoretical claims in lived contexts. Smallness can be interpreted as a double-edged condition - simultaneously enabling and constraining democracy, producing both solidarity and capture, vibrancy and manipulation.

2.6.1 The romance of smallness: intimacy, accessibility, and solidarity

The democratic allure of smallness rests on the presumption that small scale structures social and political relations in ways that larger states cannot replicate. Dahl and Tufte (1973) argue that citizens in small polities enjoy direct and frequent access to their representatives. In such contexts, leaders are not remote figures encountered only through mass media or abstract institutions; they are neighbours, acquaintances, and even kin. The accessibility of rulers makes it difficult for them to ignore grievances or govern without responsiveness.

Ankar (2002) extends this argument by highlighting the intimacy of civic life in small societies. Proximity cultivates familiarity, which in turn fosters trust. When citizens recognise one another and are visible to their leaders, political participation acquires a sense of immediacy. This intimacy also reinforces collective identity, echoing Durkheim's (1997) notion of "collective consciousness" as the moral glue of society. Solidarity, rather than alienation, is the default condition.

Empirical evidence from small states appears to support this romantic view. Veenendaal (2020b) demonstrates that turnout levels in many micro-polities - including Iceland, Nauru, Antigua, Barbuda, and Malta - regularly exceed 85 or 90 percent. Such figures stand in stark contrast to the declining participation observed in larger democracies across Europe and North America. Kwong and Wong (2017) similarly note that in small societies, citizens are often "hooked" on politics because its effects are so visible and immediate in their everyday lives. Unlike in larger polities, where politics can feel distant or irrelevant, small-state citizens cannot easily escape its reach.

Malta exemplifies these dynamics. Its extraordinary turnout rates, coupled with the intensity of its two-party system, produce a political culture where civic engagement is woven into the fabric of everyday life (Zammit, 2018; Cini, 2002). The *festa*, as Mitchell (2002) and Boissevain (1984) demonstrate, symbolises how ritualised cultural life merges with political factionalism, embedding partisanship within the rhythms of community life. Participation is not confined to periodic elections but permeates social rituals, reinforcing political identity and solidarity. In this sense, Malta appears to epitomise the democratic vibrancy that Dahl, Tufte, and Anckar envisioned.

Singapore, while less electorally participatory, nonetheless illustrates the accessibility dimension of smallness. Citizens frequently encounter their MPs through cultural clubs and grassroots organisations linked to the People's Association (Tan, 2003). Leaders are visible in neighbourhood spaces, responding to concerns over housing, public order, and social welfare. The accessibility of politicians in everyday life provides a sense of immediacy that larger polities often lack. From this perspective, Singapore's smallness sustains a form of civic intimacy that fosters stability and responsiveness, even if formal political competition is limited.

Thus, in their most optimistic register, small states appear to offer a form of democracy that is closer, more personal, and more solidaristic than their larger counterparts. Citizens are not lost in the anonymity of mass electorates but embedded in dense networks of recognition, accountability, and trust.

2.6.2 The critique of smallness: conformity, capture, and manipulation

The celebratory discourse of smallness, however, obscures its darker undercurrents. Ott (2000) warns that intimacy can as easily enable capture as it can foster accountability. In small states, the same proximity that allows citizens to reach their leaders also enables leaders to intrude into the private life of citizens, extending patronage networks and consolidating control. The blurring of public and private undermines institutional autonomy, creating fertile ground for clientelism and corruption. Fraser's (1997) analysis of participatory democracy underscores how structural inequalities inflect the

seemingly egalitarian promise of participation. In practice, deliberative spaces are dominated by those with greater cultural, economic, or gendered capital. In small states, where reputational sanction is magnified, marginalised groups may find participation especially costly. Silence, rather than voice, becomes the rational choice when dissent risks ostracism, economic, or reputational reprisal. Consensus, in such settings, may be less a sign of democratic agreement than of coerced conformity or self-censorship.

Bonvin et al. (2017) push this critique further by showing how participation can be manipulated by authorities. Governments may invite citizens to participate in consultation exercises but then disregard their views when inconvenient. Participation becomes a ritual designed to legitimise preordained decisions rather than a channel for genuine influence (which admittedly can also occur in larger polities). In Malta, environmental planning provides a vivid example: although mechanisms for public input exist, Conrad et al. (2011) show that these are routinely overshadowed by elite lobbying, with citizen voices marginalised. In Singapore, legal frameworks such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and the Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (FICA) constrain public expression, channelling participation into tightly managed arenas where dissent is contained rather than empowered (Teo, 2021).

The critiques resonate with a broader literature on small states that emphasises clientelism, personalisation, and patronage as endemic features of their politics (Veenendaal, 2019; Srebrnik, 2004). Malta exemplifies this pattern. Its dense networks of kinship and partisanship create a political culture where access to resources is mediated through clientelist ties, and where loyalty to party often trumps ideological debate (Boissevain, 1984; Zammit, 2018). The very intimacy that Dahl and Tufte celebrate becomes, in practice, the medium through which political elites consolidate power and the status quo. Singapore too, despite its rhetoric of meritocracy and stability, exhibits similar dynamics in subtler ways. Patronage is exercised through appointments of colleagues from government-linked corporations or grassroots organisations, consolidating the ruling PAP's hegemony while maintaining an

appearance of responsiveness (Weiss, 2017). From this vantage point, smallness appears less as a boon and more as a risk factor for democracy. It magnifies elite dominance, fosters conformity, and transforms participation into ritual rather than empowerment.

Yet to treat these dynamics in Malta-or elsewhere in the region-as mere “small-state pathology” risks misdiagnosis. The Mediterranean literature associated with Graziano, Piattoni, and Kitschelt reframes what looks like distortion as a durable equilibrium of democratic accountability. Clientelism here is not a leftover of “traditional politics” but a structured exchange rooted in organisational capacity, discretionary institutions, and electoral incentives (Graziano, 1973; Piattoni, 2001; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Graziano’s analysis of postwar Italy showed how mayors, party secretaries, and local notables served as brokers who channelled jobs, permits, or contracts in exchange for loyalty. Piattoni extended this framework by demonstrating how parties weave such brokerage into their representative functions, colonising welfare offices, development agencies, and municipal planning departments. Kitschelt, in turn, located clientelism within the menu of linkage strategies that parties choose under competitive elections, emphasising the role of monitoring capacity and electoral rules in sustaining particularistic exchange.

Seen through this lens, Malta is less an anomaly of scale than a textbook case of Mediterranean clientelistic equilibrium. Its reliance on public employment, discretionary planning permissions, and localised contracting mirrors the distributive levers identified across Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Brokers in Maltese politics-whether MPs, local councillors, or party-linked lawyers-mobilise kinship networks and parish structures in ways structurally homologous to their counterparts elsewhere in the region. What smallness magnifies is not a pathology unique to islands but the density and visibility of these exchanges. In practice, the Maltese case demonstrates how democratic accountability in the Mediterranean often takes the form of personalised reciprocity rather than impersonal programmatic representation. What looks like capture from one vantage point can thus be read, from another, as the functioning of a regional equilibrium in which citizens secure access not by adhering to

universal rules or laws, but by cultivating durable ties to brokers who can deliver. Engaging in patronage networks can thus yield material benefits for citizens who may not have access to other means of securing them.

2.6.3 Turnout and participation: indicators of ambivalence

Turnout has become a key site of contestation in evaluating small-state democracy. High participation is often cited as evidence of democratic vibrancy, but critical scholarship reveals more ambivalent interpretations.

Malta provides the paradigmatic case of high turnout. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, which has averaged data over the most recent 9 elections in Malta until the present, Malta has an average 88.42% voter turnout, even though voting is voluntary (Howe, 1987; Hirczy, 1995; IEFS n.d.). On the surface, this appears to confirm Dahl and Tufte's thesis that smallness fosters engagement. Yet closer inspection suggests that turnout is driven as much by clientelism, partisanship, and reputational pressure as by democratic enthusiasm. Hirczy (1995) emphasises that in Malta's tightly polarised two-party system, abstention is not a neutral choice but a visible act of withdrawal that can invite suspicion or social sanction. The dense interconnectedness of Maltese society means that non-voting is conspicuous; participation is as much compelled by social pressure as by civic virtue. In this sense, high turnout reflects the weight of conformity as much as the vibrancy of democracy.

Singapore represents the other extreme. Despite compulsory voting, effective participation has been low, with Schraufnagel et al. (2014) noting that 63 percent abstained between 1998 and 2011. The reasons are not apathy but rational calculations: citizens recognise the dominance of the PAP and the limited prospects of opposition parties. Voting feels futile, and abstention becomes a silent form of resistance or disengagement. The state's punitive measures for non-voting - fines and removal from the electoral roll - create bureaucratic hurdles, but these have not been sufficient to overcome disillusionment. Participation here is constrained not by conformity but by disenchantment.

Together, Malta and Singapore illustrate the double-edged nature of turnout as an indicator. High turnout can coexist with clientelism and compulsion, while low turnout can coexist with prosperity and stability. Neither should be uncritically equated with democratic health or failure. Instead, turnout must be read contextually, in relation to the structural and cultural dynamics that shape participation.

2.6.4 Embodiment, ritual, and symbolic violence in small states

The concept of symbolic violence offers a lens to understand how participation is embodied and naturalised in small states. Bourdieu (1991) describes symbolic violence as the subtle process through which domination is internalised and accepted as common sense. In small polities, where visibility is heightened and anonymity is scarce, participation becomes a bodily practice governed by norms of compliance.

In Malta, the village *festa* epitomises this dynamic. As Mitchell (2002) shows, *festas* are not merely religious or cultural events but arenas where political identities are performed and reinforced. Participation signals loyalty; abstention marks dissent. The ritual itself becomes a form of symbolic domination, disciplining citizens through reputational pressure. Similarly, electoral participation is a profoundly embodied act: to be seen at the polls is to signal belonging, whereas absence becomes both conspicuous and suspect. This embodied visibility is reinforced by the practices of political parties, which maintain their own electoral registers. These registers not only map the extent of a party's political capital but also function as mechanisms of surveillance and mobilisation during voting. Voters' presence is carefully tracked, and any absence is promptly addressed through direct contact on election day - encouraging participation and, where reluctance persists, offering incentives to secure a vote. Records of such absences are systematically retained by both parties, further embedding participation within a structure of mutual observation and accountability.

In Singapore, the 'Kampong Spirit' mindset-where collective interests are prioritised over individual desires-functions as an affective technology of compliance by cultivating belonging and unity (Mazzarella, 2017). Citizens are mobilised to display loyalty through

choreographed participation, silence, and bodily discipline. The PAP's initiatives, from the Singapore Kindness Movement to community rituals, regulate behaviour and gesture, naturalising conformity through the body. Symbolic violence here operates less through coercion than through the subtle shaping of affect, appearance, and bodily comportment.

In both cases, smallness amplifies the effects of symbolic violence. Limited territorial scale and dense social networks ensure that bodies are visible, reputations are at stake, and compliance is internalised. Participation thus becomes double-edged: it is the site of democratic belonging but also of domination.

2.6.5 Tensions as the defining feature of small-state democracy

Considered together, the literature demonstrates that smallness cannot be cast simply as opportunity or risk. It is, rather, ambivalence that defines small-state democracy. Dahl, Tufte, and Anckar's optimism highlights genuine opportunities: closeness to leaders, heightened solidarity, high participation, and civic intimacy. Ott, Fraser, and Bonvin underscore the risks: capture, conformity, manipulation, and exclusion. Malta and Singapore, in their different trajectories, embody this ambivalence. Malta exhibits extraordinary participation and vibrant ritual life but also entrenched clientelism and polarisation. Singapore delivers stability, prosperity, and civic intimacy, but at the cost of constrained pluralism and managed participation.

The implication is clear: small states are sites rich in data that reveal democracy's inner tensions in heightened form. They make visible the fine line between intimacy and conformity, between participation and compulsion, between solidarity and capture. To romanticise smallness as an unalloyed good is to ignore the evidence of manipulation and domination; to dismiss it as pathological is to overlook the real opportunities for civic engagement and solidarity. A rigorous analysis must therefore embrace ambivalence, recognising smallness as a contradictory condition that intensifies both the opportunities and the risks of democracy.

2.6.6 Conclusion

Smallness emerges as a profoundly ambivalent condition for democracy, offering both intimacy and solidarity while also magnifying the risks of conformity and capture. The closeness of leaders and citizens in small states can foster trust, accountability, and vibrant participation, as Malta illustrates, but it can equally sustain clientelism, manipulation, and elite dominance. Singapore shows the reverse dynamic: civic intimacy and stability coexist with managed pluralism and constrained participation. These cases reveal that smallness intensifies democracy's tensions, rather than resolving them. Ultimately, small states are best understood not as models or pathologies, but as sites where the promises and perils of democracy are rendered in sharper relief.

2.7 Informality, personalisation, and postcolonial legacies

The democratic life of small states such as Malta and Singapore cannot be understood through institutional arrangements alone. Their compressed geographies, intimate social structures, and colonial inheritances combine to produce forms of political practice that are at once informal, personalised, and saturated with legacies of domination. Democracy here is not exhausted by procedural rules but enacted through elite webs, reputational dynamics, and inherited scripts of authority that persist long after formal independence. This section develops the conceptual scaffolding for these dynamics, elaborating how informality, personalisation, and postcolonial legacies structure the discursive, spatial, and performative dimensions of politics that will be explored empirically in later chapters.

The starting point lies in the blurred boundaries that characterise political life in small states. As Veenendaal (2020) stresses, the density of social relations in island societies collapses the separation between public and private, allowing political ties to bleed into everyday life. In Malta, politics saturates the social field: individuals carry intricate knowledge of partisan affiliations, mapping networks of kinship, friendship, and obligation that extend far beyond formal party structures (Baldacchino, 2002). Such

webs operate as channels of influence where favours, employment opportunities, and access to limited state resources circulate less through impersonal procedures than through recognisable personal ties. Farrugia (1993) describes these as “social webs” through which politics is practised informally alongside formal democratic institutions. In Singapore, by contrast, informality is less visible but no less powerful: state-endorsed grassroots organisations such as the People’s Association provide controlled spaces where participation is channelled through networks structurally linked to the ruling People’s Action Party, blurring the line between civic engagement and surveillance (Weiss, 2017). In both contexts, informality does not signal the absence of order but the presence of alternative channels of political practice where obligations and reputations carry binding force.

Clientelism provides a critical lens for understanding how blurred boundaries between public and private shape democratic practice. Kitschelt (2000) defines it as a direct exchange of goods or favours for political support, a mode of politics that, while informal, carries profoundly formal consequences for governance. In small states, clientelism often becomes the dominant linkage mechanism between citizens and elites, overshadowing programmatic debate or ideological distinction. Stokes (2005) stresses that such exchanges hinge on monitoring: citizens’ loyalty must be visible, and elites’ delivery must be observable. The density of social relations in Malta and Singapore provides precisely this visibility. In Malta, where voting is not legally compulsory but socially inescapable, neighbours and kinship networks ensure that defections are reputationally costly (Hirczy, 1995). In Singapore, loyalty is expressed less at the ballot box than through participation in orchestrated rituals, from National Service to grassroots councils, where conformity is both visible and expected.

Seen through the Mediterranean scholarship of Graziano, Piattoni, and Kitschelt, these practices are not vestiges of “traditional politics” but elements of a structured political technology. Clientelism persists because it draws on a triad of distributive levers—public employment, discretionary planning permissions, and small infrastructure contracts—that are easy to particularise, difficult to audit, and highly effective in producing reciprocal obligations. In Malta, municipal jobs, rezoning approvals, and neighbourhood

projects generate streams of reciprocity that can be harvested electorally, while the social density of village life allows brokers to monitor compliance without violating ballot secrecy. Parties and their brokers weave these resources into networks of brokerage, selectivity, and contingency, rewarding loyalists and sidelining defectors. The result is not merely a pathology of smallness but part of a wider Mediterranean equilibrium of democratic accountability in which distributional particularism substitutes for programmatic commitment.

The persistence of clientelism contributes directly to incumbency. As Veenendaal (2018) shows, incumbents in small states frequently maintain long tenures because they can cultivate dense networks of dependency that reinforce their authority over time. Patronage resources allow them to entrench support, while citizens' reliance on such exchanges discourages collective action for reform. The resulting structures resemble what Domhoff (1990, 2006) termed the "power elite," where overlapping social, economic, and political networks concentrate influence in a narrow circle. Yet in small states this concentration is intensified by spatial intimacy: elites are not distant actors hidden in bureaucratic chambers, but figures encountered daily in public squares, community events, markets, and neighbourhood meetings. The informality of access does not necessarily democratise power; rather, it heightens citizens' dependence on elite goodwill while reinforcing asymmetries of obligation.

If informality describes the texture of political relations, personalisation explains their focal point in the figure of the leader. Corbett and Veenendaal (2017) argue that small states exhibit a hyper-personalisation of politics, where competition revolves less around party platforms than around the charisma, reputation, and accessibility of individual leaders. This is not a marginal phenomenon but a structural condition of small polities, where dense proximity and limited anonymity make leaders' reputations disproportionately significant. Weber's ([1922] 1978) typology of authority illuminates this: in Malta and Singapore, rational-legal structures coexist with, and are often overshadowed by, charismatic and traditional forms of legitimacy.

The Maltese case demonstrates the ways in which personalised leadership fuses with partisan identity to structure political life. Dom Mintoff, often referred to as *Il-Perit*, embodied a postcolonial leader who combined defiance of colonial powers with the construction of a welfare state that reoriented Malta's economy towards the needs of its people (Mayo, 2013). His authority was not confined to institutional office but extended into cultural and symbolic life, as he challenged ecclesiastical power, cultivated ties with the Arab world, and introduced progressive reforms such as pay parity, secularisation, and national health services (Sammut, 1989; Fenech, 2012). Mintoff's charisma and defiance rendered him a symbolic father of the nation, and his legacy continues to shape Maltese politics long after his departure. In contemporary Malta, the partisan system remains intensely personalised, with loyalty to party leaders intertwining with familial and community life (Zammit, 2018). Political allegiance is not merely an ideological choice, but a social identity reinforced by reputational expectations in everyday interactions.

Singapore provides a parallel but distinctive case in the figure of Lee Kuan Yew. Lee's leadership fused Confucian hierarchy with technocratic pragmatism, envisioning society as a pyramid led by a talented minority whose discipline and foresight would ensure national survival (Patapan, 2013). His meritocratic ethos justified the co-optation of talent into government, blurring the boundary between civil society and state. This personalised meritocracy was reinforced by financial incentives, with ministerial salaries pegged to elite private-sector incomes to attract and retain capable leaders (Quah, 2015). Lee's charisma, discipline, and relentless emphasis on collective order made him the embodiment of Singapore's nation-building project. His discourse on "Asian values" framed the rejection of Western liberal democracy as a cultural necessity, intertwining personal authority with ideological legitimacy (Barr, 1999; Dirlik, 1995). The PAP's enduring dominance, sustained by reputational politics and ritualised compliance, bears the imprint of Lee's personalised legacy, where the leader is less a representative figure than a paternalistic guarantor of stability and prosperity.

The personalisation of leadership in both Malta and Singapore illustrates how reputational dynamics organise democratic life in small states. In personalised systems,

politics becomes reputationally embodied: citizens' trust, loyalty, and dissent are mediated through the figure of the leader rather than abstract institutions. In Malta, this dynamic fuels polarisation within a two-party system where leaders' reputations divide not only electorates but communities and families. In Singapore, reputational politics operates through a disciplined conformity to PAP authority, where dissent carries social as well as legal risks. In both contexts, personalised leadership amplifies the performative dimension of democracy: citizens signal belonging, loyalty, or dissent through visible gestures, participation, or silence, all of which carry reputational weight in compressed social geographies.

Overlaying these informal and personalised dynamics are the enduring legacies of colonialism. Postcolonial theorists emphasise that colonialism does not end with independence but leaves enduring structures of power, law, and culture that shape postcolonial states. Said's (1978) analysis of *Orientalism* demonstrates how colonial powers produced knowledge systems that essentialised and subordinated colonised peoples, legitimising domination through representation. Fanon (1967) traced the psychological scars left by colonial subjugation, showing how domination becomes internalised in the colonised psyche. Mamdani (1996) analysed how colonialism bifurcated authority into civic and customary domains, producing hybrid structures that persist in postcolonial governance. These insights illuminate the postcolonial inheritances of Malta and Singapore, both of which endured long periods of British rule that reshaped their legal, political, and cultural landscapes.

Malta's colonial legacy is evident in its hybrid legal system, a patchwork of Roman, Italian, British, and French influences that continues to produce ambiguity and discretionary judicial power (Donlan, Ando & Zammit, 2012; Orlando-Salling, 2025). British colonial rule entrenched centralised governance and fostered patronage systems that persist in the bloated public sector and clientelist politics of contemporary Malta (Zammit, 1984; Veenendaal, 2019). The exploitation of legal ambiguity as a political tool, described by Scalpello (2024), echoes colonial strategies of control through flexible interpretation, enabling elites to bend rules to their advantage while preserving a

veneer of legality. Colonialism thus left behind not only institutions but practices of ambiguity, patronage, and informality that continue to structure Maltese democracy.

Singapore's colonial inheritance is equally pronounced. British colonial law introduced detention without trial, a practice that persists in contemporary legislation such as the Internal Security Act, allowing indefinite detention under the guise of national security (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The colonial privilege of English education created an administrative elite whose dominance continues in the civil service, where political considerations still shape appointments (Wong, 2023). The PAP's emphasis on meritocracy, while projecting a postcolonial narrative of corruption-free governance, bears the imprint of colonial bureaucratic elitism, where access to opportunities was stratified by education and language. However, the postcolonial discourse of "Asian values" represents an inversion of Orientalist representations: where the colonial state portrayed Asian societies as deficient in order and rationality, Singaporean leaders rearticulated Confucian hierarchy and discipline as cultural strengths that justified a departure from liberal democracy and the imprint of colonial culture (Barr & Skrbis, 2008; Dirlik, 1995).

In general, postcolonial inheritances underscore how colonial legacies infuse the discursive, spatial, and performative domains of democracy. In Malta, colonial residues manifest in the discursive ambiguity of legal and political rhetoric, the spatial organisation of dense and polarised communities, and the performative rituals of partisan *festas* that fuse religious, cultural, and political identities (Mitchell, 2002; Wain, 2013). In Singapore, colonial legacies shape discourses of meritocracy and Asian values, spatial practices of surveillance and discipline in public spaces, and performative rituals of compliance such as community support and grassroots meetings. Srebrnik (2004) cautions that small states do not necessarily deepen democracy; rather, their postcolonial inheritances often hybridise democratic practice, producing systems where informal networks, personalised authority, and colonial residues combine to sustain regimes that are neither fully liberal nor fully authoritarian. In other words, the colonial legacy can strongly influence the hybridisation of a small state democracy.

The convergence of informality, personalisation, and postcolonial legacies thus provides a conceptual lens for analysing small-state democracies, and making sense of democratic hybridity. Informality reveals how elite webs, and blurred boundaries organise political practice through networks of obligation and clientelism (Veenendaal, 2018; Kitschelt, 2000; Stokes, 2005). Personalisation highlights how leadership becomes reputationally embodied, structuring politics around charismatic figures whose authority transcends ideology (Patapan, 2013; Mayo, 2013). Postcolonial analysis uncovers how colonial structures of law, bureaucracy, and discourse persist in shaping institutions, practices, and cultural narratives (Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963; Mamdani, 1996; Srebrnik, 2004; Barr, 1999). Together, these dynamics demonstrate that democracy in Malta and Singapore is not reducible to formal institutions but is lived and negotiated through discursive framings, spatial compressions, and performative embodied practices that will be examined in detail in the finding's chapters.

Part II: Symbolic Power, Embodiment, and Visibility

The previous section established the theoretical groundwork by tracing how democracy's meaning is conditioned by scale, hybridity, and visibility. It demonstrated that in small states, political life is shaped by proximity and embodied interaction as much as by institutions or ideology. Part II shall extend this analysis from conceptual debates to lived practice. It examines how power operates through everyday gestures, rituals, and spatial arrangements, showing that democracy is sustained or subverted through the ways citizens and elites inhabit small spaces together. Where Part I mapped democracy's contested forms, Part II investigates its sensory and performative dimensions - how intimacy, surveillance, and symbolic display translate abstract principles into social experience. This shift from theory to embodiment clarifies the central claim of the thesis: that in small states, the democratic condition is negotiated not only through constitutional design but through the visible, affective, and relational practices that make political life tangible.

2.8 Symbolic power and misrecognition

The endurance of domination without recourse to overt coercion represents one of the most persistent puzzles of political sociology. If democracies and hybrid regimes alike rest upon consent, what explains the ways in which citizens internalise inequality and comply with arrangements that so often curtail their freedoms? Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of symbolic power, and in particular his concept of symbolic violence, provides a vocabulary capable of capturing these subtle, frequently invisible dynamics. Wacquant extends these insights into analyses of urban space, race, and penal regimes, while Lukes offers a complementary framework through his three dimensions of power. Yet no theoretical approach is complete without reflexivity: critics such as Burawoy (2019) and Swartz (1997) remind us that domination is never absolute, and that agency and resistance, however constrained, persist. This section develops these insights in depth, situating them in the compressed contexts of Malta and Singapore, where civic intimacy, reputational economies, and dense visibility intensify the dynamics of misrecognition.

2.8.1 Symbolic power in Bourdieu's sociology

For Bourdieu, symbolic power is “that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not *want* to know that they are subject to it” (Bourdieu, 1991:164). Unlike physical violence or direct coercion, symbolic power does not rely on force but on recognition: it is effective precisely because it is misrecognised as natural, legitimate, or inevitable. This insight builds on his broader conceptual architecture of habitus, field, and capital. Habitus refers to the system of durable dispositions that orient perception and action, sedimented through repeated experience. Fields are structured spaces of positions and position-takings, characterised by struggles over different forms of capital - economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Symbolic violence arises when dominant groups impose the terms of recognition in such a way that the dominated consent to their own domination, internalising hierarchies in their very bodily comportment (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996).

Symbolic power is thus embodied. Shame, hesitation, silence, or exaggerated deference all represent bodily traces of domination. Bourdieu insisted that symbolic domination relieves the dominated from any sense of responsibility for their own subordination. It is not that they actively choose submission; rather, the categories and norms that structure their dispositions naturalise subordination, and make alternative orientations appear unthinkable. As he argued in *Pascalian Meditations*, the state creates “common symbolic forms of thought” through protracted processes of inculcation, which then become immanent to its subjects, orchestrating habitus and producing a tacit consensus on what is self-evident (Bourdieu, 1997:175).

These insights resonate strongly in small, densely networked societies. Darmanin Kissaun and Clark (2022) refer to Malta as an “island of shame”, pointing out that geographical contingencies, historical events and traditions have converged to create a social reality in Malta where shame operates as an influential tool for managing individual and group reputation. Malta is characterised by pronounced social, sexual and economic stratification, family solidarity and reliance on kinship ties. One's social identity is fundamental and depends largely on public opinion, Shame can therefore be effectively operationalised as a mechanism to ensure compliance. In Singapore, embodied comportment in public spaces - silence on the MRT, punctual compliance with queues, ritualised participation in multicultural celebrations- reflects not merely personal preference but the internalisation of civic discipline as the horizon of legitimate belonging. In both contexts, citizens may insist they are acting freely, yet the bodily regulation of speech, gesture, and presence points to deeper forms of symbolic coercion.

2.8.2 Wacquant and the extension of symbolic power

Loïc Wacquant, Bourdieu's close collaborator, extends this account by insisting that symbolic power cannot be understood apart from its institutional and material bases. In his studies of urban marginality and the penal state, Wacquant (2009) shows how symbolic domination operates through ostensibly neutral categories such as “the unemployed,” “the immigrant,” or “the criminal,” which then justify punitive policies

and intensify social exclusion. He insists that symbolic power is not only linguistic or cultural but profoundly embodied: domination materialises in the spatial segregation of housing estates, the bodily discipline of welfare bureaucracies, and the hyper-visibility of stigmatised groups under surveillance.

Applied to Malta and Singapore, Wacquant's emphasis reveals how state practices embed symbolic violence in the regulation of everyday life. In Singapore, the People's Association and its network of grassroots organisations appear to foster community cohesion, yet they simultaneously function as ideological apparatuses reinforcing the ruling party's dominance (Weiss, 2017). Their rituals of participation demand visible compliance, rendering dissent conspicuous and costly. In Malta, clientelist networks operate through everyday transactions that blur the boundary between friendship, obligation, and political loyalty (Boissevain, 1984). The citizen who accepts a favour does not simply gain material benefit but internalises a mode of relation that naturalises hierarchical obligation. Darmanin Kissaun and Clark (2022) also add that while shame is operationalised as a form of soft coercion in tightly knit Maltese society, honour is also harnessed in a similar way; in this sense, an obligation or a favour carries with it the need to uphold one's honour. Wacquant's perspective allows us to see how symbolic power is not only inscribed in habitus but is actively produced through organisational practices that structure visibility, belonging, and exclusion.

2.8.3 Lukes and the third dimension of power

While Bourdieu and Wacquant stress the embodied and emotional reproduction of domination, Steven Lukes (2005) provides a parallel framework that clarifies its mechanisms. His three dimensions of power begin with the most overt: observable decision-making, where A gets B to do something B would not otherwise do. The second dimension involves control over the agenda, excluding certain issues from political debate. The third dimension, most germane here, is the shaping of desires and perceptions such that conflict does not arise at all. Power is most effective when the dominated accept their situation as natural or inevitable, never imagining alternatives, thereby reducing the potential for conflict or contestation.

This third-dimension dovetails with Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition. In Malta, partisan rivalries and symbolic rituals do not merely express political affiliation but shape citizens' sense of what politics is, narrowing the horizon of contestation. The very terms of recognition render dissent unintelligible or dishonourable. In Singapore, ritualised civility and the rhetoric of national unity channel desire into sanctioned forms of expression - celebrating multicultural harmony or economic growth - while rendering critique unpatriotic, antisocial, or in violation of Asian values. Citizens internalise the sense that silence, compliance, or pragmatic acceptance are the proper modes of democratic engagement.

2.8.4 Misrecognition and complicity

At the core of symbolic power lies misrecognition: the acceptance of domination as legitimate or natural. Misrecognition is not a matter of error or ignorance but of embodied complicity. Citizens may know, at some level, that clientelism breeds inequality or that censorship curtails freedom, yet they participate in the rituals, gestures, and silences that reproduce these systems. In Malta, the voter who accepts patronage simultaneously complains of corruption; in Singapore, the citizen who laments restrictions on free speech simultaneously refrains from public criticism, justifying silence as pragmatic. Such contradictions are not anomalies but speak to the very texture of symbolic domination.

Bourdieu emphasised that symbolic violence is exercised "with the active complicity of those who undergo it" (Bourdieu, 1984:190). This complicity is not voluntary in the liberal sense but arises from the way dispositions are structured. In compressed societies in particular, where reputational visibility is intense, the cost of dissent is amplified and the risk is intensified: everyone knows who participates in community events, who attends rallies, who refrains from national celebrations. Those who represent a threat to social cohesion or the status quo may face reputational damage that inhibits career opportunities or ostracises them from society. In such contexts,

compliance appears less as submission and more as common sense, the price of social harmony and personal wellbeing.

2.8.5 Critiques: Burawoy and Swartz

Yet to adopt Bourdieu's framework uncritically risks overstating the totalising reach of symbolic power. Burawoy's (1990) ethnographic studies of labour regimes insist that workers are never mere dupes of domination; they negotiate, resist, and sometimes subvert the very arrangements that constrain them. Even within clientelist systems or ritualised regimes, citizens find spaces of manoeuvre. In Malta, environmental movements have mobilised against elite development projects, forcing concessions from the government (Briguglio, 2018). In Singapore, the Pink Dot movement has reframed national narratives and undertaken peaceful but symbolically potent actions, such as wearing pink, to claim space for LGBTQIA+ identities within the confines of tightly controlled Singaporean society (Jung, 2021). These are not outright revolutions but micro-resistances that reveal the incompleteness of misrecognition.

Swartz (2013) likewise warns against reducing Bourdieu to a theorist of reproduction. For him, the concept of field implies struggle and fluidity: capital can be reallocated, positions contested, and dispositions recalibrated. Symbolic violence is real but never final or fixed. Indeed, Bourdieu himself acknowledged that democracy is an unfinished process of making institutions less unjust and social relations less unequal (Bourdieu, 1996). To highlight symbolic power in its full complexity is not to deny agency but to show why resistance can be difficult, partial, and often invisible.

2.8.6 Symbolic power in small-state democracies

The relevance of symbolic power becomes particularly acute in small states. In Malta, the intimacy of social life means that political affiliations are known, reputations carefully managed, and participation in civic rituals deeply visible (Zammit, 2018). Patronage and clientelism do not simply distort democratic institutions; they embody symbolic economies of belonging where domination is misrecognised as loyalty or

community, and honour and shame help ensure compliance. In Singapore, the density of urban space, the state's cultivation of civility, and the orchestration of public rituals generate an environment where compliance is embodied, and dissent is conspicuous.

Both states exemplify what might be called civic intimacy: the condition where spatial proximity and relational density intensify the workings of symbolic power. Citizens internalise expectations not only because the state imposes them but because neighbours, kin, and colleagues are ever-present witnesses—and judges. The body becomes a political surface: silence, participation, and gesture all signal allegiance, dissent, or complicity. Symbolic violence operates not only through the state but through the gaze of others who are also subordinated, mediated by compressed geographies and reputational economies.

2.8.7 Reflexivity and balance

To employ Bourdieu's framework without critique would risk determinism; to ignore symbolic power would risk naivety. The reflexive task, then, is to balance recognition of symbolic domination with attentiveness to agency and resistance. Burawoy and Swartz remind us that fields are dynamic, misrecognition is never total, and embodied dispositions can be reconfigured. Yet symbolic power remains indispensable for explaining why domination persists despite widespread awareness of inequality, why citizens comply with arrangements they critique, and why democracy often functions procedurally while remaining substantively constrained. The uniquely compressed conditions of Malta and Singapore further highlight why symbolic power can be so effectively deployed in small state democracies.

Symbolic power additionally explains how hybrid regimes such as Malta and Singapore sustain themselves without relying solely on coercion. Patronage, ritualised civility and orchestrated compliance, work less by silencing dissent than by making dissent unthinkable, dishonourable, or reputationally ruinous. Yet moments of rupture - civil society protests in Malta, LGBTQIA+ mobilisation in Singapore - confirm that symbolic domination is always partial. Recognising these tensions provides the theoretical

backbone of this study, enabling a nuanced account of how embodiment, visibility, and misrecognition shape the lived and embodied experience of democracy in small states.

2.8.8 Conclusion

This analysis shows how symbolic power sustains domination by making inequality appear natural, legitimate, and inevitable. In Malta and Singapore, civic intimacy, reputational economies, and embodied compliance intensify these dynamics, rendering dissent costly and often unthinkable. Yet symbolic domination is never absolute: micro-resistances, social movements, and shifting fields demonstrate that agency persists within constraint. Taken together, these insights highlight both the durability and fragility of symbolic power, offering a nuanced account of how democracy in small states operates through complicity as much as through contestation.

2.9 Embodiment and Affect

The preceding chapters have demonstrated how democracy in small states is hybridised, shaped not only by formal institutional arrangements but by the symbolic repertoires, informal practices, and compressed geographies that structure everyday political life. Yet if democracy is to be fully grasped in its texture and force, analysis must extend beyond the discursive or institutional. Democracy is also a matter of embodiment and affect. Politics is inscribed on the body, enacted through gesture and posture, and mediated by emotions that circulate among the public. The turn to embodiment and affect represents more than an addition to democratic theory. It reframes what counts as political, emphasising that democratic belonging is not merely spoken but felt; not only reasoned but carried in the gut, the chest, and the skin. Such a perspective allows us to bridge from abstract notions of symbolic violence into the lived, bodily experience of democratic life in Malta and Singapore.

2.9.1 Habitus, symbolic violence, and embodied compliance

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is indispensable for understanding how democracy takes root not just in institutions but in bodies. Habitus describes the durable, embodied dispositions that individuals acquire through socialisation, which orient action in ways that feel natural and unchosen (Bourdieu, 1997). The citizen who knows when to speak and when to remain silent, how to stand in a queue, or how to display respect in the presence of political authority is not consciously following a rulebook; rather, she is enacting a bodily history sedimented through repetition.

Bourdieu (1996) shows that this habituated compliance is the mechanism through which symbolic violence operates. Domination does not require constant overt coercion when citizens have internalised the norms that sustain it. This complicity is not freely chosen but embodied: it manifests in timidity, shame, silence, or the subtle bodily adjustments that signal deference. In small states such as Malta and Singapore, where anonymity is scarce and reputational stakes are high, such embodied compliance is intensified. The citizen is not only subject to state surveillance but also to the gaze of neighbours, kin, and acquaintances. Knowing that "everyone knows everyone" heightens the compulsion to perform compliance bodily, whether through participation in a community event or through the disciplined comportment expected in Singapore's public spaces.

Monique Scheer (2012) advances this insight by conceptualising emotions themselves as practices. To feel shame at dissent, pride in ritual, or discomfort in transgression is not a private interior state but a socially cultivated disposition. Emotions, like gestures, are learned and enacted. When Maltese villagers feel collective joy in the triumph of their local or national celebrations or Singaporeans experience pride during orchestrated National Day celebrations, they are not simply expressing inner feelings but reproducing the affective habitus of their polity. Compliance is not only visible in outward obedience but felt in the body's emotional rhythms, aligning citizens with the state's symbolic order.

2.9.2 Affective economies: how emotions circulate

Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2014) theory of affective economies enriches this account by showing how emotions "stick" to signs, bodies, and institutions, thereby shaping collective attachments. Emotions do not simply arise within individuals but circulate among them, attaching pride to flags, resentment to migrants, or fear to dissenters. In Malta, the *fešta* operates as a prime site of such affective economies. Pride sticks to the saint's statue, to the fireworks, to the band marches, turning religious ritual into a visceral experience of collective belonging that also affirms partisan loyalties (Mitchell, 2002). Non-participation, in this compressed environment, accrues the sticky effect of shame or suspicion, marking the body as out of place in the communal rhythm.

In Singapore, state initiatives such as the Singapore Kindness Movement or the meticulously choreographed multicultural events such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas, etc, are technologies of affective economy. Smiling, thanking, or bowing become not just gestures of politeness but affective obligations that circulate pride, discipline, humility, civility, and loyalty. Citizens are interpellated affectively into the national project, not through coercion but through the management of emotion and gesture, which is rationalised through the embrace of Confucianism and Asian values. In this way, the affective economy functions as a subtle but powerful extension of symbolic violence: it naturalises the link between feeling good and performing compliance, rendering dissent affectively uncomfortable or shameful.

2.9.3 Affective and intimate publics

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) conceptualises affective publics as networked collectivities that form around shared affect as much as shared discourse. In small-state democracies, such publics emerge with heightened intensity because of spatial density and social proximity. The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta generated an affective public that coalesced around grief, outrage, and a demand for accountability (Briguglio, 2021). Citizens did not merely voice rational arguments but mobilised visceral feelings of loss and anger that resonated across kinship and partisan divides. Similarly, in

Singapore, the Pink Dot movement has cultivated affective publics that mobilise joy, solidarity, and pride to contest exclusionary norms (Jung, 2021).

Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of intimate publics deepens this analysis. Intimate publics are spaces where collective attachments are forged through shared affective worlds that feel personal while being profoundly political. They are sustained by everyday narratives of hardship, aspiration, or resilience that resonate at the level of lived experience. In Malta, the intimate public is often anchored in narratives of sacrifice and survival - the rhetoric of "our small island nation" persevering against external pressures. In Singapore, the intimate public is tied to narratives of pragmatism and familial responsibility, where civic belonging is experienced as an extension of kinship duty. These intimate publics bind citizens emotionally to the nation, creating infrastructures of attachment that are as affectively powerful as formal institutions.

2.9.4 Embodied politics: bodies as democratic agents

Amanda Machin (2015, 2022) has argued for a political remembering of bodies, challenging the tendency of democratic theory to treat the political as disembodied. For Machin, bodies are not peripheral to politics but central to it: they facilitate, inhibit, and transform political interaction. Politics occurs between bodies, through their visibility, their vulnerability, and their disruptive potential.

In Malta, the embodied exuberance of *festas* - collective marching, flag-waving, fireworks - transforms the body into a medium of political and cultural allegiance. The ritualised rivalries between factions mirror partisan divides, turning bodily display into a form of symbolic contestation (Boissevain, 1984; Mitchell, 2002). In Singapore, the opposite dynamic is visible: the disciplined and orderly behaviours of commuters in MRT stations, the nurtured sense of community, and the pervasive regulation of bodily comportment reflect a politics of civility where bodies signal compliance through restraint. Both cases reveal that democracy is enacted through embodied politics, though the forms of expression - exuberant or disciplined - differ.

Machin's intervention also helps explain how marginalised bodies experience democratic exclusion. Bodies that do not conform - LGBTQIA+ bodies in Singapore, TCN migrant bodies in Malta - disrupt the expected choreography and are rendered awkward, painful, or even dangerous. These moments of embodied resistance expose the limits of democratic inclusion and highlight how civic intimacy is always stratified by affective and bodily norms.

2.9.5 From abstract power to lived, bodily experience

The convergence of Bourdieu's habitus, Ahmed's affective economies, Papacharissi's affective publics, Berlant's intimate publics, and Machin's embodied politics demonstrates that democracy cannot be holistically understood without attention to the body and to affect. Compliance, belonging, and dissent are not abstract choices but embodied practices, affectively charged and socially visible. This insight is particularly salient in small states, where compressed geographies and dense networks heighten the stakes of embodiment.

In Malta, the citizen's body is a visible participant in rituals of partisan loyalty, church feasts, and public protest. Participation affirms belonging, while absence or dissent is immediately legible, rendering one an outsider. In Singapore, the citizen's body is disciplined into Confucian civility, its gestures regulated by state narratives of harmony and pragmatism. In both cases, the body is a political surface, inscribed with the traces of power, compliance, and resistance.

2.9.6 Towards civic intimacy

Foregrounding embodiment and affect provides the conceptual bridge to this thesis's forthcoming claim that civic intimacy is not only discursive but embodied. Civic intimacy emerges from the proximity of small-state life, where visibility is unavoidable and reputational stakes are high. But it is sustained not only by words or narratives but by the affective atmospheres and embodied practices that make compliance feel natural

and dissent costly. To theorise civic intimacy without attention to embodiment and affect would be to miss the very texture of small-state democratic life.

By situating embodiment and affect at the centre of analysis, this thesis aligns itself with the affective turn in democratic theory (Ahmed, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015; Berlant, 2011; Machin, 2015, 2022). It asserts that democracy is not only spoken but felt, not only codified but carried in the body, and that in the compressed spaces of Malta and Singapore, this embodied civic intimacy is the primary medium through which symbolic violence is lived.

2.9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that democracy in small states is lived as much through bodies and emotions as through institutions and discourse. Drawing on concepts of habitus, affective economies, and embodied publics, it has demonstrated how compliance, belonging, and dissent are enacted through gestures, feelings, and everyday comportment. In Malta and Singapore, compressed geographies intensify these dynamics, making civic intimacy both visible and affectively charged. Ultimately, democracy here is not only reasoned but felt, inscribed on the body and sustained through the affective atmospheres that render compliance natural and dissent costly.

2.10 Visibility, surveillance, and everyday compliance

The dynamics of visibility and surveillance are central to understanding how compliance and belonging are produced in everyday life. In contexts where anonymity is limited and density compresses social space, visibility becomes more than an incidental condition of social interaction: it is a mechanism of governance in its own right, an infrastructure that shapes the conduct of individuals and collectivities. To see and to be seen is not merely a sensory matter but a political one, structuring what is possible to express, what must be concealed, and how belonging must be enacted. In this respect, visibility forms the connective tissue between structural modalities of power and the micro-practices of everyday compliance. The frameworks offered by Michel Foucault, Andrea Brighenti,

James Scott, and Lisa Wedeen provide complementary perspectives on these dynamics, and together they explain how dense proximity and constant exposure generate environments where compliance is anticipated, reputational sanction is feared, and belonging is perpetually staged.

Theorists of power have long understood that surveillance is never a neutral enterprise. Yet its implications for small states, where spatial intimacy, population density, and relational closeness heighten the stakes of visibility, require special attention. The absence of anonymity in such contexts makes the experience of surveillance qualitatively different from that of larger, more diffuse polities. One's conduct is not only subject to official oversight but constantly exposed to neighbours, kin, colleagues, and acquaintances who occupy overlapping roles in civil, political, and economic spheres. Compliance thus emerges not simply from formal regulation but from reputational economies sustained through continuous observation, ensuring appropriate comportment and conformity. To situate these conditions conceptually, Foucault's notions of discipline and governmentality, Brighenti's theorisation of visibility regimes, Scott's account of hidden transcripts, and Wedeen's reflections on ambiguity and performance offer a robust analytic scaffold.

2.10.1 Foucault: Discipline, governmentality, and the internalisation of surveillance

Michel Foucault's writings are foundational for grasping how visibility produces compliant subjects. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he traces the shift from spectacular forms of sovereign punishment to the subtler operations of disciplinary power. Rather than inflicting terror through public executions, modern power operates through the regulation of bodies, gestures, and spaces, creating subjects who police themselves. The emblematic figure of this transformation is the Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for a prison where inmates never know whether they are being watched but are aware that they could be under surveillance at any given moment, thus influencing their behaviour and choices. The genius of this model lies in its capacity to induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility without the need for constant, in-person oversight or coercion, assuring the automatic functioning of power.

Disciplinary power works through minutiae: the regulation of posture, schedules, comportment, and routines. It produces docile bodies that internalise the gaze of authority. The subject of discipline is never simply coerced from without but is induced to participate in their own subjugation. This internalisation is particularly relevant in spatially intimate contexts, where the gaze is not merely imagined but continually enacted by peers and acquaintances. The disciplinary gaze does not only descend from the state; it radiates horizontally through dense social networks, so that every act and omission is potentially subject to observation and evaluation.

Foucault's later work on governmentality extends this logic beyond the microphysics of discipline to the broader rationalities of governance. Governmentality refers to the "conduct of conduct": the ways in which states, institutions, and social actors shape the field of possible action so that individuals align themselves with desired norms. Crucially, governmentality does not rely primarily on repression. It functions by cultivating self-regulating subjects who experience their compliance as voluntary, even virtuous. Citizens are interpellated into projects of collective wellbeing, security, or prosperity, and they adjust their behaviour accordingly.

In small states, where the distinction between public and private is porous and where the density of relationships collapses distance, governmentality acquires particular force. The proximity of governing elites, the immediacy of reputational consequences, and the constant exposure and visibility of everyday behaviour creates fertile ground for anticipatory alignment with expected norms. Individuals learn to modulate their speech, manage their appearances, and regulate their social interactions not only because formal sanctions might ensue but because the dense mesh of acquaintanceship ensures that deviation is rapidly visible and detrimentally consequential. Thus, the Foucauldian nexus of surveillance, discipline, and governmentality is magnified by spatial intimacy, producing subjects who anticipate the gaze of both the state and their peers in the enactment of compliance.

2.10.2 Brighenti: Visibility regimes and the politics of recognition

While Foucault identifies visibility as a general mechanism of power, Andrea Brighenti (2007) advances the analysis by emphasising the structured and differentiated ways in which visibility is organised. For Brighenti, visibility is not a uniform condition but a regime: a patterned distribution of light, attention, and recognition that privileges some actors while obscuring others. Visibility regimes determine who counts as a legitimate subject, what actions are spotlighted as exemplary or deviant, and which identities are rendered invisible altogether.

A visibility regime is not merely about being seen but about being recognised within an order of meaning. To appear in public is to be framed, categorised, and judged according to existing norms. This renders visibility deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, visibility enables participation, allowing individuals to assert presence and claim recognition. On the other hand, it exposes them to surveillance, judgment, and sanction. In this ambivalence lies the productive tension of visibility regimes: they simultaneously invite subjects into belonging and hold them accountable to the standards of the community.

In contexts of compressed geography, visibility regimes operate with heightened intensity. Rituals of belonging, public events, and everyday encounters become sites where recognition is distributed, and reputations are cemented. Abstention or silence may carry as much significance as overt acts, for to refuse visibility is itself legible as a deviation from expected conduct. In such environments, compliance is not simply a matter of obeying laws but of managing appearances within visibility regimes that render deviation particularly conspicuous.

Brighenti's framework allows us to see how compliance emerges not only from fear of punishment but from the reputational economies sustained by visibility. Individuals act in anticipation of how their gestures will be interpreted, calibrating their performances to secure recognition and avoid stigma. This anticipatory calibration provides a direct

conceptual link to the process of self-censorship, which operates not as a singular act of repression but as an ongoing negotiation of appearances within regimes of visibility.

2.10.3 Scott: Hidden transcripts and the subterranean life of resistance

If Foucault and Brighenti illuminate how visibility structures compliance, James Scott offers insight into the counterpoint: the hidden spaces where dissent exists and persists. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott distinguishes between the public transcript - the outward displays of loyalty, deference, or compliance - and the hidden transcript - the discourse of critique, irony, and resistance that circulates out of the master's sight. Public transcripts are the performances required to sustain appearances of consent and conformity, while hidden transcripts are the murmurs, jokes, rumours, and coded gestures through which subordinates articulate their discontent.

The existence of hidden transcripts underscores the incompleteness of surveillance. No regime, however intrusive, can eliminate the backstage spaces where alternative discourses are voiced. Even in contexts where surveillance appears omnipresent, subjects find ways to articulate critique, whether through humour, silence, or coded forms of speech. These hidden transcripts do not necessarily constitute open resistance, but they complicate the neat image of consensus. They remind us that public displays of compliance may coexist with private skepticism or cynicism, and that the surface of loyalty may mask deeper undercurrents of dissent.

Yet in dense environments where exposure is high and absence is conspicuous, the boundary between public and hidden transcripts is fragile. A careless remark, a misplaced gesture, or a misjudged silence may bring the hidden into the open, with potentially damaging consequences. Thus, the maintenance of hidden transcripts requires careful management of ambiguity, irony, and concealment.

For small states, where everyone is known and reputations are fragile, the circulation of hidden transcripts is especially delicate. The intimate scale of interaction means that what is said in private may easily spill into the public realm. Gossip, rumour, and

innuendo carry unusual weight, and the line between compliance and critique is perpetually negotiated. This precariousness of hidden transcripts links directly to the fear of reputational sanction: to be exposed as a critic or dissenter is not merely to risk official punishment but to jeopardise one's social belonging.

2.10.4 Wedeen: Ambiguity, performance, and the durability of compliance

Lisa Wedeen's studies of authoritarian contexts (1999) bring to light another dimension of compliance: its performative and ambiguous character. In her ethnography of Syria, Wedeen demonstrates that citizens often participate in rituals of loyalty not because they believe in their authenticity but because non-participation carries risks. What sustains authoritarian rule is not genuine conviction but the repeated enactment of compliance, however cynical or ironic.

The key here is ambiguity. Performances of loyalty can be both sincere and insincere, both affirming and mocking, both empty and consequential. Citizens may know that the rituals are absurd, and rulers may know that the citizens know, yet the very act of performance sustains the system. What matters is not belief but enactment. Ambiguity thus becomes a resource for both rulers and ruled: for rulers, it allows the appearance of consensus; for citizens, it provides a way to navigate danger by exaggerating, feigning, or hollowing out their performances. It is a necessary social mask that enables participation in civil society.

This perspective complicates the binary of compliance and resistance. To participate in rituals of loyalty may be an act of fear, a cynical strategy, or a genuine expression - and often all at once. Ambiguity ensures that compliance cannot be easily read, and this very indeterminacy sustains the endurance of authoritarian or hybrid regimes.

In small states, where absence or deviation is conspicuous, the pressure to perform belonging is acute. To refuse performance altogether is to mark oneself as an outsider. But performance need not be wholehearted: it can be ironic, exaggerated, obligatory, or strategically minimal. Wedeen's framework thus helps explain how individuals can

sustain appearances of loyalty while privately skeptical, and how ambiguity itself becomes a tool for navigating the expectations of visibility.

2.10.5 Synthesis: Visibility, compliance, and the anticipation of sanction

The four frameworks examined here converge to illuminate how visibility and surveillance shape everyday compliance. Foucault provides the structural logic of discipline and governmentality, explaining how surveillance is internalised and subjects become self-regulating. Brighenti shows how visibility is patterned into regimes of recognition that render compliance legible and deviance conspicuous. Scott reveals the subterranean life of hidden transcripts, where critique persists beneath the veneer of loyalty. Wedeen underscores the ambiguous and performative nature of compliance, where enactments may be hollow yet effective.

Together, these perspectives explain how exposure, density, and surveillance generate conditions in which compliance is both compelled and negotiated. To live under visibility is to manage appearances, to anticipate the gaze, and to calibrate performances of belonging. Dissent is not absent but displaced into hidden transcripts, ambiguous gestures, or ironic performances. Belief is not required; enactment is sufficient.

This synthesis directly underpins the two processes developed in later chapters: anticipatory self-censorship and reputational sanctioning. Anticipatory self-censorship arises when individuals internalise the gaze of both state and community, moderating their speech and behaviour in advance of possible sanction. It is not the fear of punishment alone but the constant anticipation of visibility that produces silence, restraint, and conformity.

Reputational sanctioning, meanwhile, operates through the informal but potent consequences of being seen to deviate. In dense environments where anonymity is scarce, reputations circulate quickly, and the cost of being marked as disloyal can be socially and materially significant. Both processes are not ancillary but integral to the operation of visibility regimes in small states.

2.10.6 Conclusion

Visibility and surveillance are not merely contextual features of political life but central mechanisms through which compliance is organised, and belonging is enacted.

When woven together, these insights explain why compliance in small states is not reducible to coercion or consent but is sustained through the interplay of visibility, surveillance, and performance. Subjects comply not only because they must but because they anticipate the gaze of others, fear reputational sanction, and perform belonging in ambiguous ways. Compliance is thus both embodied and enacted, both internalised and staged.

This theoretical synthesis establishes the conceptual ground for the subsequent empirical analysis. By highlighting the mechanisms of anticipatory self-censorship and reputational sanctioning, it shows how proximity, density, and visibility organise civic life in compressed environments. Everyday compliance emerges not as a simple act of obedience but as an intricate negotiation of appearances, performances, and silences, through which belonging is both affirmed and constrained.

Part III: Toward an Integrative Framework

The previous section examined how democracy is embodied in small states, showing that power and legitimacy are enacted through visibility, ritual, and everyday interaction. It revealed that civic intimacy can both sustain and constrain democratic life, producing compliance as readily as participation. Part III shall build on these insights by shifting from interpretation to investigation - from the theoretical framing of embodiment to the empirical analysis of how these dynamics unfold in Malta and Singapore. It applies the conceptual tools developed so far to concrete political practices, institutional structures, and lived experiences. Through comparative case study and methodological triangulation, Part III tests how symbolic and embodied power operate within different hybrid configurations. The focus moves from what

democracy feels like to how it functions in practice, clarifying the mechanisms through which small-state intimacy, visibility, and hybridity shape democratic outcomes.

2.11 Converging debates and conceptual gap

The preceding review has traversed a wide terrain, from the critical traditions of political sociology to recent engagements with embodied democracy, from the distinctive political trajectories of small states to the subtle workings of symbolic violence. Taken together, these literatures provide a dense and sometimes contradictory account of how democracy is enacted, constrained, and reproduced. What emerges most forcefully is not a unified theory, but a series of parallel insights that reveal the inadequacy of existing frameworks to capture the full complexity of democratic life in small hybrid polities such as Malta and Singapore. This coming section synthesises the key strands, situates their points of convergence and divergence, and identifies the conceptual gap that calls for the integrative framework developed in this thesis.

2.11.1 Hybridity: formal institutions do not tell the whole story

One of the clearest themes across the literature is the inadequacy of focusing solely on formal institutions to account for the lived dynamics of democracy. The proliferation of typologies of hybrid democracy-illiberal, defective, controlled, electoral authoritarian, semi-democratic-reflects a widespread recognition that many regimes sit uneasily between established categories (Bogaards, 2009). Such typologies have provided descriptive utility, but they often privilege institutional features: electoral systems, party competition, separation of powers, or constitutional provisions (Coppedge et al., 2015). In doing so, they risk reproducing the very binaries they sought to escape, depicting regimes as partial versions of liberal democracy rather than as distinctive orders with their own logics of practice.

Malta and Singapore both exemplify this problem. Singapore's extraordinary economic success, extensive welfare provisions, and rigorous administrative order coexist with extensive constraints on media freedom, civil liberties, and opposition politics (Mutalib,

2000; Vasil, 2020). Similarly, Malta exhibits exemplary electoral participation and progressive civil rights legislation, yet clientelism, patronage, and executive dominance undermine substantive democratic accountability (Veenendaal, 2019; Zammit, 2018). Existing frameworks can label these states “hybrid,” but such a label describes their deviation from an ideal type rather than explaining how their specific mechanisms of compliance and contestation work. Hybridity as a concept reveals that formal institutions cannot tell the whole story, but it does not furnish a deeper account of how democracy is lived and embodied in these polities.

2.11.2 Small states: density, informality, exposure

A second body of work comes from the literature on small states, which identifies size, density, and informality as defining features of their political life. Scholars such as Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) and Corbett and Veenendaal (2015) contend that small states cannot be analysed with the same frameworks used for larger polities, because the compression of social space fundamentally reshapes political dynamics. In territories where high population density coexists with limited geographic scale, citizens, elites, and institutions are drawn into constant interaction. These repeated encounters reduce anonymity, heighten visibility, and blur the boundary between public and private roles.

Within this environment, informal networks proliferate and clientelistic ties become a natural mode of exchange. Politics acquires a distinctly personalised character: leaders are recognised not only as officeholders but also as familiar acquaintances in daily life (Farrugia, 1993; Baldacchino, 2002). What might appear in larger states as opportunistic payoff transactions instead functions in small states more like an embedded process. Dense social relations ensure both the personalisation of political exchange and the community’s capacity to monitor and enforce it, thereby sustaining the credibility of clientelist chains.

In Malta, partisan loyalties permeate everyday social life: kinship ties and neighbourhood relations become political markers in themselves (Mitchell, 2002; Wain,

2013). In Singapore, the state's carefully managed multiculturalism is reinforced through spatial regulation, surveillance, and reputational discipline, all of which shape how citizens present themselves in public (Tan, 2003; Roth, 2021). Despite their very different political histories, both contexts illustrate how density and visibility reshape democratic practice by embedding compliance within the micro-interactions of daily existence. These interactions—filing a form, making a call, jumping a queue, securing a minor project, subcontracting work—compose an administrative choreography that is legible not only to neighbours and colleagues but, in aggregate, to the electorate itself.

Yet much of the small states' literature, while adept at mapping patronage, incumbency, and clientelism, remains focused at the meso-structural level. What it often underplays are the embodied and symbolic micro dimensions of power: how political authority is reproduced through the gestures, performances, and shared meanings that circulate in dense social fields.

2.11.3 Symbolic and embodied power: the lived experience of compliance

The third body of work, centring on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and recent engagements with embodied democracy, foregrounds the lived and bodily dimensions of political life. Symbolic power operates not through overt coercion but through the internalisation of norms that render domination natural and misrecognition routine (Bourdieu, 1997; Emirbayer, 2013). In small states, where anonymity is limited and visibility constant, this symbolic order is embodied in posture, silence, gesture, and performance. Citizens learn to discipline themselves in anticipation of reputational sanction: to attend an event, to display a flag, to refrain from online critique, or to signal loyalty through bodily comportment (Machin, 2015; Ahmed, 2014). Reputational sanction can have material effects as well as symbolic effects—one's life opportunities, such as access to work, may be impacted in small states.

Anthropological and phenomenological approaches remind us that democracy cannot be reduced to abstract institutions or procedural checklists. It is lived and enacted through the body's sensory, spatial, and affective engagements (Csordas, 1994;

Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Pink, 2015). Rituals of compliance make this visible. Whether in Singapore's carefully choreographed multicultural festivities or Malta's exuberant religious *festas*, citizens are bound to the state through affective infrastructures that render belonging not only palpable but obligatory (Berlant, 2011; Mazzarella, 2017). In this sense, democracy is less a matter of indices or institutional design than a process inscribed on and through bodies in everyday life. Even the mundane workflow of governance takes on an embodied form: the physical act of visiting the broker's office, the sensory spectacle of machinery paving "our" street, the staged expressions of gratitude at ribbon-cuttings, and, eventually, the subtle but measurable shift in voter turnout. Together, these gestures compose an embodied, everyday choreography in which affect, administration, and political choice converge.

2.11.4 Converging debates: toward density + embodiment + hybridity

Taken together, these perspectives converge on a critical insight: democracy cannot be adequately grasped through institutional analysis alone. The concept of hybridity demonstrates that formal measures often generalise or obscure as much as they reveal. Insights from small-state sociology highlight how density, visibility, and informality reconfigure political interactions. Approaches emphasising embodiment and symbolic power further illuminate how compliance, legitimacy, and belonging are enacted through bodies, emotions, and spatial arrangements. This trajectory illustrates hybridity not as a static label but as a lived circuitry or assemblage that interweaves density, embodiment, and distributive politics.

Yet despite this convergence, existing frameworks have not been able to articulate how these dynamics interact. The hybridity literature acknowledges informal mechanisms but rarely explores their embodied dimension. Small-state studies richly document patronage and personalisation but often overlook the affective and symbolic practices that reproduce them. Research on embodied democracy highlights bodily compliance and affective atmospheres but has not systematically examined how these are amplified in compressed, relationally dense environments.

The result is a conceptual gap: no existing framework explains how density, embodiment, and hybridity co-constitute democratic practice in small polities.

2.11.5 Identifying the gap

The democracy literature, especially as operationalised in indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House, focuses overwhelmingly on institutions and formal guarantees. These measures capture elections, media freedom, or judicial independence, but they cannot always register how democracy is enacted in the intimate spaces of neighbourhoods, workplaces, and rituals (Coppedge et al., 2015; Wolff, 2023). They offer comparative breadth at the cost of embodied depth.

Small-state sociology, while attentive to proximity, patronage, and incumbency, remains largely structural. Analyses of personalisation and clientelism (Veenendaal, 2019; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2017) illuminate how density fosters informal networks, but they do not capture the embodied micropolitics through which compliance is performed and contested in everyday life. They describe the architecture of relations but not the lived experience of navigating them.

The literature on symbolic and embodied power, by contrast, richly details how domination is internalised and how bodies reproduce social orders (Bourdieu, 1997; Machin, 2015). Yet it has rarely been applied systematically to small states, where density magnifies the stakes of visibility, exposure, and misrecognition. Theorisations of embodied democracy remain largely conceptual, not empirically grounded in the specific conditions of compressed polities.

Thus, while each strand provides crucial insights, none explains how democratic practice in small hybrid states is shaped by the interaction of density, embodiment, and hybridity. The absence of such a framework leaves political sociology unable to account for why compliance is so resilient in contexts where formal institutions appear weak, or why dissent is simultaneously visible and constrained in environments saturated with proximity.

2.11.6 The intellectual space of this thesis

This lacuna is precisely the intellectual space this thesis enters. By weaving together the insights of hybridity, small-state sociology, and embodied symbolic power, the project develops an integrative framework that accounts for the lived experience of democracy in Malta and Singapore. The concept of embodied civic intimacy, introduced later, emerges as a response to this gap: a way of theorising how proximity, density, and visibility organise compliance, belonging, and dissent in small hybrid polities.

This framework does not reject institutional or structural analyses; rather, it contends that such approaches must be complemented by attention to embodiment, lived experience and spatial proximity. While acknowledging the value of indices, it also highlights that other methods are needed to in capturing the micro-politics of everyday life. Similarly, it does not dismiss hybridity but seeks to move beyond mere typological classification, offering instead an account of how hybrid democracies are enacted and sustained through bodily practices, symbolic rituals, and affective infrastructures. From an empirical perspective, this resembles not abstract “corruption perceptions” but a reproducible sequence of administrative interactions that culminate in observable electoral outcomes.

In sum, the literature has illuminated critical dimensions of democracy but left unexamined the nexus where density, embodiment, and hybridity intersect. This is the bridge that connects the review to the framework developed in this thesis. By entering this conceptual space, the project aims to enrich both the sociology of democracy and the comparative study of small states, showing how the intimate textures of everyday life are central to the persistence and transformation of democratic practices.

2.12 Provisional direction

In tracing the diverse literatures surveyed across political sociology, democracy studies, small state scholarship, and postcolonial theory, it becomes increasingly evident that the multiple strands of analysis are not simply descriptive or additive. Rather, they begin

to generate a provisional set of processes that appear recurrently across different bodies of work, offering a way of orienting the analysis without yet presenting an original theoretical claim. The task here is not to unveil a contribution prematurely, but to foreshadow possible lines of conceptual synthesis that emerge from the reviewed scholarship. In this sense, the review is generative rather than merely descriptive: it produces guiding concepts and points of orientation that will later be subjected to empirical testing and inductive refinement. For the purposes of coherence, four candidate processes can be sketched at this juncture: visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, reputational sanctioning, and symbolic participation. These are not asserted as definitive mechanisms. Instead, it must be stressed that “these are explored and refined empirically in Chapter 5.

The first of these provisional processes, the visibility of absence, draws upon multiple discussions across the literature on embodied democracy, affective governance, and the dynamics of small state intimacy. Scholars working from phenomenological and anthropological perspectives have highlighted the body as a medium of political life, where compliance and dissent are inscribed in gesture, presence, and posture (Csordas, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Machin, 2015). In the compressed geographies of small island states, where “everyone knows everyone” and social density collapses the boundaries between private and public, the act of not appearing can take on disproportionate political significance. As Pink (2015) and Ahmed (2014) show in other contexts, affect circulates through absence as much as presence: the failure to attend a community event in Malta, or the decision not to display the expected gestures of civic propriety in Singapore, may become a conspicuous mark of dissent. The concept of embodied civic intimacy developed earlier is particularly relevant here, for it foregrounds how spatial density and reputational immediacy render absences acutely visible. In Malta’s village *festas*, Mitchell’s (2002) analysis of *pika* demonstrates that non-participation is legible not as neutrality but as affiliation with rival factions. In Singapore, where state-orchestrated performances of unity dominate daily life rituals, not displaying the sanctioned forms of participation or compliant behaviour (such as silence on the MRT) likewise risks exposure. This dynamic of visibility suggests that

absence itself functions as a mechanism of democratic regulation. It transforms silence into a signal, thereby producing political effects even when no active voice is raised.

From this flows a second candidate process: anticipatory self-censorship. Here, the emphasis is on the internalisation of disciplinary norms that precede overt coercion. Political sociology has long been attentive to the ways ideology and hegemony operate through the shaping of consciousness (Gramsci, 1971; Horkheimer and Adorno, [1948] 2002). In Bourdieu's (1997) theory of symbolic violence, domination occurs precisely when the dominated unconsciously align their conduct with the expectations of power, reproducing inequality without external compulsion. Within Malta and Singapore, as discussed extensively in prior sections, the prevalence of self-censorship among journalists, academics, and ordinary citizens demonstrates how the fear of sanction becomes anticipatory (Teo, 2021; Zammit, 2018). In Singapore, legal instruments such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) or the Foreign Interference Counter-Measures Act (FICA) create a climate where actors censor themselves not because they have already been punished but because they anticipate the high costs of transgression (Roth, 2021). In Malta, the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia and the climate of libel intimidation against journalists fostered a culture where many pre-emptively moderate their speech to avoid harassment or worse (Briguglio, 2021). This anticipatory mechanism resonates with what Berlant (2008) terms "intimate infrastructures": the embedding of compliance not through force but through affect, expectation, and habituated foresight. In small states where anonymity is minimal, the anticipation of being seen and judged heightens this process. Self-censorship is therefore not merely a legal strategy but an embodied habitus, sedimented into everyday democratic life.

Closely related is the third provisional process: reputational sanctioning. While anticipatory self-censorship operates within the interiority of the subject, reputational sanctioning unfolds through the social circulation of judgement in compressed civic environments. Durkheim's (1997) concept of collective consciousness is salient here: the shared moral bonds that maintain social cohesion operate through approval and disapproval, and through social emotions such as shame and honour. In small states,

where kinship ties, patronage networks, and partisan alignments are inescapable, reputational consequences acquire heightened force (Veenendaal, 2019; Baldacchino, 2002). Maltese politics, with its entrenched clientelist practices, exemplifies this mechanism: public allegiance or dis-allegiance reverberates through networks of obligation, affecting access to resources, jobs, and social standing (Boissevain, 1984; Zammit, 2018). In Singapore, reputational sanctioning is evident in the way grassroots organisations like the People's Association mediate between citizens and the state, filtering dissent by embedding it in systems of surveillance and moral evaluation (Weiss, 2017). What emerges is a mechanism by which democratic participation is disciplined not only by law but by the reputational economy of tightly knit societies. Citizens are not only voting subjects but also visible neighbours, colleagues, parishioners, or fellow commuters, whose reputations circulate continuously. Symbolic violence, in Bourdieu's sense, operates here by naturalising the consequences of reputational loss: ostracism, diminished opportunities, or stigmatisation appear as the natural fallout of one's choices rather than as politically structured sanctions.

Finally, the literature also points towards a fourth candidate process: symbolic or tokenistic participation. This refers to the ritualised and often procedural forms of engagement that appear democratic in form but are limited in substance. As Sen (2009) and Bonvin et al. (2017) emphasise, participation may be formally solicited yet discarded in decision-making, amounting to little more than rhetorical inclusion. In Singapore, orchestrated mass events or the carefully managed forums held at Community Clubs exemplify participation as spectacle or performative, fostering identification without enabling deliberation (Tan & Tan, 2003; Thaiyalan, 2020). In Malta, environmental consultations or planning hearings are frequently described as tokenistic, where citizen voices are overshadowed by lobbying groups or political elites (Conrad et al., 2011). Bonvin et al.'s (2017) warning that participatory rhetoric can devolve into symbolic gestures rather than substantive empowerment finds particular resonance here. The anthropological literature on ritual reinforces this reading: Berlant's (2011) notion of political rituals as intimate infrastructures shows how embodied displays of unity produce affective attachment to the state while limiting the

transformative potential of participation. Symbolic participation thus functions less to enable contestation than to reaffirm the legitimacy of the regime.

Taken together, these four provisional processes - visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, reputational sanctioning, and symbolic participation - emerge from the literature surveyed. These processes offer nuanced and novel pathways into considering the three focal auxiliary research questions of this thesis (the infiltration of elitism, management of dissent, and civil society's navigation of patronage). These four provisional processes are not offered here as definitive findings or original contributions; to do so would risk overstepping the evidentiary basis of a review chapter. Instead, they are presented as candidate orientations that will guide the empirical investigation in relation to the overarching thesis question and auxiliary questions. They additionally offer a conceptual orientation that demonstrates how these processes flow through institutions, society and individuals at macro, meso and micro levels, leading to their consolidation. Their recurrence across political sociology, critical theory, and small state scholarship suggests that they may capture important dynamics of how democracy is lived and embodied in contexts like Malta and Singapore, where proximity, density, and hybridity heighten the salience of symbolic power. Yet it must be underscored once again: "These are refined inductively in Chapter 5, based on empirical analysis." The purpose here is foreshadowing rather than unveiling.

The generative quality of the literature review lies precisely in this movement from description to hypothesis: rather than simply cataloguing existing knowledge, the review sparks conceptual possibilities that can later be tested, challenged, or transformed. By sketching these candidate processes, the chapter demonstrates how theory and empirics are already in conversation in relation to the core questions of the thesis before fieldwork is undertaken. The originality of this project will rest not in having named these processes here, but in the empirical refinement that follows - in showing how they operate, intersect, or diverge in the lived realities of citizens in Malta and Singapore by drawing on empirical data, and in elaborating embodied civic intimacy as a distinctive theoretical contribution.

2.13 Conclusion

This chapter has traversed a deliberately wide intellectual terrain, from classical debates on scale and fragility, through modern taxonomies of democracy and the institutionalist analyses of hybridity, to the sociological, postcolonial and phenomenological literatures that foreground smallness, embodiment, and symbolic power. Its purpose has been to identify the conceptual gaps that persist even after decades of scholarship.

Three insights stand out. First, the hybridity literature has moved the field beyond teleological transition models, demonstrating that regimes such as Malta and Singapore are not defective democracies en route to consolidation but stable hybrid formations with their own internal logics. Yet its institutional emphasis explains how rules are bent and opposition constrained without illuminating the everyday practices through which hybridity is reproduced. Second, the sociology of small states has shown that density, intimacy, and informality fundamentally alter the texture of politics, producing both exceptional turnout and entrenched clientelism. But here too the analysis remains largely structural, underplaying how visibility, reputational sanction, and embodied proximity shape compliance and dissent. Third, theories of symbolic and embodied power demonstrate how domination is naturalised through affect, gesture, and ritual, yet they have seldom been mobilised to explain the distinctive dynamics of hybrid small polities where anonymity is scarce, and compliance is lived corporeally.

The absence of a framework that systematically connects these three literatures is more than an academic oversight: it leads to empirical misreadings. Malta's turnout risks being celebrated as democratic vitality when it is also a product of reputational compulsion; Singapore's civility risks being miscast as cultural predisposition when it is equally an embodied effect of surveillance and affective governance. Existing accounts capture fragments of the story, but none explains how hybridity, smallness, and embodiment co-constitute one another in the everyday negotiation of democracy.

It is precisely into this gap that the present thesis intervenes. Its contribution lies not in discarding existing traditions but in bringing them into dialogue, so that institutional

analyses of hybridity are supplemented by sociologies of small-state density, and both are refracted through theories of embodiment and symbolic power. This triangulation prepares the ground for a new framework capable of accounting for the lived everyday democratic experience of Malta and Singapore - cases that must be treated not as anomalies but as diagnostic sites where democracy's contradictions are intensified and rendered visible.

The review has also insisted on reflexivity: refusing to treat democracy as self-evidently good, small states as inherently fragile or resilient, or symbolic power as purely coercive or emancipatory. Instead, it has traced the ambivalence and paradox that animates each field: democracy is at once procedural and substantive, empowering and constraining; smallness produces both intimacy and capture; embodiment sustains both compliance and resistance. The task, therefore, is not to choose between optimism and critique, but to show how these tensions are lived in compressed civic environments.

The next chapter operationalises this orientation. It sets out the methodological design - a Triangulated Validation Loop - which combines the comparability of quantitative indices with the depth of qualitative and phenomenological attention to bodies, affects, and everyday practices. In doing so, it equips the analysis to demonstrate how hybrid democracy in Malta and Singapore is reproduced not only through formal institutions but also through proximity, ritual, visibility, and the embodied negotiation of compliance and dissent.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Epistemological Foundations and Research Paradigm

The methodological foundations of this thesis are grounded in a careful philosophical positioning that recognises democracy not as a fixed or objective entity, but as a lived, contested, and embodied phenomenon. To investigate how democracy is experienced in Malta and Singapore-two small, hybrid states where density and visibility amplify the stakes of civic interaction-the research requires a paradigm that acknowledges the fluidity of democratic meaning, while remaining attentive to the material and symbolic structures that constrain and shape political life. This section situates the study ontologically and epistemologically, outlining the interpretive commitments that guide its methodology, the pragmatic sensibilities that enrich its scope, and the reasons for rejecting alternative paradigmatic approaches.

3.1.1 Ontological stance: democracy as contested, lived, and embodied

At the most fundamental level, this research proceeded from the recognition that democracy could not be treated as a bounded object existing independently of social actors. Rather, democracy was produced and reproduced through embodied practices, symbolic rituals, and contested meanings. This position resonated with constructivist ontology, which emphasised that reality was socially produced and negotiated (Schwandt, 1998; Willis, 2007). In Malta, the community events functioned as a ritual through which political identity was enacted and performed; in Singapore, civic compliance was cultivated through orchestrated public rituals and everyday practices of civility. In both contexts, democracy was not a disembodied abstraction, but a phenomenon lived through the body, through reputation, and through the dense spatiality of small-state life.

Yet to adopt a purely constructivist ontology would have risked neglecting the enduring presence of structures-institutions, laws, and elite networks-that shaped and

constrained these lived experiences. A critical realist inflection was therefore incorporated, recognising that while democratic life was socially constructed, it was nonetheless conditioned by durable structures that existed independently of individual perception (Bourdieu, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In Malta, the persistence of clientelist networks reflected structural conditions of patronage, originating from colonisation, that long outlasted the intentions of individual actors (Veenendaal, 2019). In Singapore, the state's apparatus of surveillance and regulation had material durability beyond citizens' everyday performances of compliance (Mutalib, 2000).

Thus, the ontological stance adopted here positioned democracy as both socially constructed and structurally conditioned: it was lived and embodied by actors in their everyday interactions yet always mediated by enduring political and cultural formations. This dual recognition allowed the study to attend simultaneously to agency and structure, to the fluid meanings citizens ascribed to democracy, and to the material architectures that shaped their possibilities.

3.1.2 Paradigmatic orientation: interpretivism enriched by critical pragmatism

To operationalise this ontological stance, the research adopted an interpretivist paradigm as its primary orientation. Interpretivism was premised on the understanding that knowledge arose through grasping the subjective meanings individuals attached to their actions and contexts (Schwandt, 1998). For the purposes of this thesis, interpretivism offered a lens sensitive enough to capture the lived, embodied, and symbolic experiences of democracy in Malta and Singapore. Rather than asking the binary question of whether these states were "democratic" or "authoritarian," the interpretivist approach made possible a richer inquiry into how democracy was negotiated under conditions of spatial compression, civic intimacy, and hybrid institutional design.

Interpretivism foregrounded the importance of lived experience. It positioned knowledge as inextricably linked to the situated perspectives of participants, resisting universal generalisation in favour of thick, context-specific understanding (McChesney

& Aldridge, 2019). This made it particularly resonant with the objectives of this study, which sought to document how Maltese and Singaporean citizens embodied democracy through everyday rituals, silences, and performances, rather than reducing their experiences to abstract scores or indices.

At the same time, interpretivism alone risked drifting into relativism if it neglected the broader structural and normative implications of its findings. For this reason, the paradigm was enriched by critical pragmatism, which provided the philosophical grounding to engage critically with structures of inequality while remaining attentive to the practicalities of knowledge production (Hall, 2013). Critical pragmatism recognised that knowledge was not neutral but shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts, and that the act of research itself was entangled with power relations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This was crucial for a project that investigated democracy in postcolonial small states, where colonial inheritances, symbolic violence, and elite capture continued to shape civic life (Baldacchino, 2002; Srebrnik, 2004).

Critical pragmatism also supported the integration of mixed methods within an interpretivist frame. As McChesney and Aldridge (2019) argued, interpretivism could inform all aspects of mixed methods research by foregrounding context and lived experience. In this study, ethnographic immersion, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis were placed alongside democracy indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House. Critical pragmatism allowed these diverse sources of knowledge to be integrated without privileging one over the other, ensuring that both embodied experiences and quantitative indicators contributed to the analysis (Creswell et al., 2003; Demir & Pismek, 2018).

Thus, the interpretivist–pragmatist synthesis offered a flexible yet principled and thorough foundation. It legitimised qualitative attentiveness to meaning and embodiment, while also embracing pragmatic engagement with quantitative measures and comparative data. It enabled critique of inequality and symbolic violence, while avoiding the rigidity of dogmatic paradigms.

3.1.3 Rejection of alternative paradigms

In selecting this paradigmatic orientation, other approaches were considered and ultimately rejected. Positivist and post-positivist paradigms, with their emphasis on objectivity, causal inference, and generalisability, are ill-suited to the aims of this project. Positivism cannot capture the affective, embodied, and symbolic dimensions of democracy that are central to the research questions. For example, reputational sanctioning in Malta or anticipatory self-censorship in Singapore cannot be adequately measured through surveys or institutional indicators alone; they require interpretive sensitivity to silence, gesture, and ritual (Bourdieu, 1996; Teo, 2021).

Post-positivism, while acknowledging the fallibility of knowledge, still privileges objective measurement and hypothesis testing. In doing so, it risks reducing the lived complexities of democracy to variables and scores. Such an approach would miss the intimate textures of small-state political life that this thesis seeks to illuminate.

The transformative paradigm was also considered. Rooted in critiques of power relations and oriented towards social justice (Mertens, 2003), the transformative approach resonated with this researcher's concern with symbolic violence and inequality. However, its primary focus on marginalised groups would have been too restrictive for this project, which seeks to capture the experiences and perspectives of elites, bureaucrats, and everyday citizens across the social spectrum. To confine the analysis to marginalised voices alone would risk neglecting the role of elite practices, patronage networks, and orchestrated rituals that are central to understanding democracy in Malta and Singapore (Weiss, 2017; Zammit, 2018). As Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) suggest, the transformative orientation may be better conceived as a research purpose rather than as a paradigmatic foundation.

3.1.4 Linking paradigm to research question

The chosen paradigm directly shaped how the research questions were posed and answered. Rather than asking the evaluative question "Was Malta/Singapore

democratic?”, the interpretivist–pragmatist approach reframed the inquiry as “How was democracy lived, embodied, and negotiated under conditions of density and visibility?” This reframing shifted the focus from institutional checklists to everyday practices, from abstract definitions to embodied experiences. This question itself invites a non-binary answer that welcomes the possibility of nuance and ambivalence.

It made possible questions about how reputation disciplined political participation in Malta, how silence became a mode of civic compliance in Singapore, how smallness amplified symbolic violence, and how hybridity was embodied in ritual and affect. It also facilitated a comparative analysis that respected the specificity of each case while recognising the shared dynamics of small-state civic intimacy.

3.1.5 Contribution to theory: interpretivism and democracy beyond procedure

By situating itself within an interpretivist paradigm enriched by critical pragmatism, this study contributed to contemporary debates that sought to move democracy beyond procedural definitions. As scholars such as Kurki (2010) and Wolff (2023) had noted, liberal democracy remained the hegemonic standard in comparative politics, often obscuring alternative or hybrid forms. Interpretivism allowed this project to resist that reduction, instead treating Malta and Singapore not as defective democracies but as diagnostic sites where the embodied and affective dimensions of democratic life were unusually visible.

This contribution lay in articulating how civic intimacy—the condition produced by density, visibility, and proximity in small states—shaped the lived experience of democracy. Interpretivism, with its attentiveness to meaning, embodiment, and context, was uniquely suited to trace how rituals, silences, and reputations constituted democratic practice. Critical pragmatism ensured that this account remained engaged with questions of inequality and power, avoiding relativism while resisting the imposition of universal models.

In this way, the chosen epistemological foundations not only justified the methodological choices of ethnography, interviews, and mixed methods triangulation, but also positioned the thesis to intervene in broader theoretical debates about democracy, hybridity, and small-state politics.

3.1.6 Conclusion

This study positions democracy not as a fixed category but as a lived, embodied, and contested phenomenon shaped by both everyday practices and enduring structures. Adopting a constructivist ontology enriched with critical realism, it acknowledges that while democracy is socially produced through rituals, silences, and reputations, it is also constrained by institutions, laws, and elite networks. Methodologically, it draws on an interpretivist paradigm, further strengthened by critical pragmatism, to capture the meanings citizens attach to democratic life while remaining attentive to structures that beget inequality and power. By rejecting positivist, post-positivist, and narrowly transformative paradigms, the research foregrounds thick, context-sensitive understandings of democracy in Malta and Singapore. Ultimately, this approach contributes to theory by moving beyond procedural definitions, highlighting how civic intimacy in small states makes visible the affective and symbolic dimensions of democratic practice.

3.2 Research Design: Comparative, Mixed Methods, and Case Study Strategy

The logic of this study's research design emerges directly from its interpretivist paradigm and the commitment to situating Malta and Singapore as diagnostic sites for exploring the paradoxes of small-state democracy. The overarching methodological aim is to create a comparative framework capable of explaining why two small, densely populated, postcolonial island states, embedded in different geopolitical constellations, produce democratic practices that converge in lived experience while diverging sharply in global regime classifications. This tension requires a design that can mobilise comparative leverage, case study precision, and the integrative power of mixed methods.

3.2.1 Comparative logic and most-similar systems design

The comparative foundation of this project rested on a most-similar systems design, since Malta and Singapore shared a set of striking structural characteristics. Both were territorially compact, demographically dense, and shaped by enduring legacies of colonial rule. Each had developed a globalised, service-based economy and earned a reputation for political stability despite their small size. These parallels, however, concealed a fundamental divergence in regime classification. Malta was consistently coded by Freedom House as “free” and was firmly embedded within the pluralist democratic architecture of the European Union, even though its democracy was compromised by entrenched patterns of patronage and clientelism. Singapore, by contrast, was categorised as “partly free,” its stability rooted in the dominant-party system of the People’s Action Party (PAP), which sharply restricted political pluralism even while sustaining decades of continuity.

The rationale for employing a most-similar systems design lay in its capacity to maximise analytical leverage on the central paradox animating this thesis: why did democratic practices in everyday life appear so similar across the two contexts—manifested in shared civic rituals, embodied forms of intimacy, and reputational sanctioning—despite the starkly divergent regime classifications assigned by indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House? As Lijphart (1971) argued in his seminal work on comparative politics, the strength of this design was its ability to hold structural variables constant and thereby expose the explanatory weight of political culture, informal practices, and embodied dynamics. The comparison between Malta and Singapore thus provided a vantage point from which to interrogate the blind spots of global democracy measurement and to illuminate the subtler mechanisms through which democratic life in small states was constituted.

The research design also required addressing an uneven emphasis between the two cases, a feature that reflected the empirical realities of each context rather than undermined the analysis. In Singapore, the prominence of statutory instruments and bureaucratic regulation made legal and policy analysis indispensable. In Malta, by

contrast, democratic life unfolded most vividly through community events, kinship networks, and clientelist rituals, which ethnographic methods were uniquely equipped to capture. This methodological unevenness was anticipated and treated as an analytic strength rather than a flaw, since it demonstrated that hybridity in small states took shape through distinct repertoires: juridical–bureaucratic in Singapore and socio-cultural in Malta. Methodological pluralism therefore emerged not merely as a pragmatic choice but as a necessary condition for capturing these divergent modalities within a single comparative frame.

3.2.2 Case study justification: boundaries and temporal scope

The comparative logic of this research was grounded in a multiple case study design, chosen to capture how democratic practices are shaped and experienced within distinct yet comparable small-state contexts. Malta and Singapore provide analytically valuable contrasts: both are densely networked, postcolonial island states marked by concentrated authority and social intimacy, yet they diverge in political traditions, institutional legacies, and cultural imaginaries. Examining these cases side by side allows democracy to be explored as a lived and evolving process situated within bounded but globally connected environments (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2003; Willis, 2007).

The spatial boundaries of each case are defined by their insular geographies and compact social structures, which heighten proximity between citizens and the state. This proximity renders symbolic power and civic participation more visible and affectively charged, producing distinct modes of belonging, compliance, and contestation. In Malta, everyday politics are mediated through patronage and kinship ties, while in Singapore they are channelled through disciplined civic order and moral regulation - together illustrating how democratic participation is both enabled and constrained by spatial intimacy.

The temporal scope extends beyond the immediate fieldwork period to encompass longer historical trajectories. Although ethnographic immersion occurred during discrete, time-bounded visits - ongoing observation in Malta and a concentrated multi-

month study in Singapore - the analysis integrates longitudinal data from democracy indices such as V-Dem and Freedom House. These time-series datasets, reaching back several decades, situate contemporary experiences within wider patterns of democratic consolidation, hybridisation, or backsliding (Coppedge et al., 2015; Freedom House, 2022). This extended temporal lens enables the study to link everyday democratic practices to institutional evolution and historical memory, avoiding purely synchronic interpretations detached from process.

3.2.3 Mixed methods rationale: convergent parallel design

The project required methodological pluralism to account for both institutional classifications and embodied practices, which in turn necessitated a mixed methods strategy. As outlined in Section 3.1, it employed a convergent parallel design (Creswell et al., 2003). In this design, qualitative and quantitative strands were collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and subsequently integrated. This structure ensured that neither strand was subordinated to the other. It preserved the interpretivist concern with lived experience while maintaining the breadth and comparability afforded by indices.

The qualitative component employed a combination of political ethnography, participant observation, reflexive field journaling, discourse analysis, textual interpretation, and semi-structured interviews with elites. Through these tools, it became possible to uncover the embodied, affective, and routine dimensions of democratic life: the reputational sanctioning expressed in Maltese communal celebrations like the *festa*; the rigorous observance of laws in Singapore designed to preserve social order and security; and the subtle silences or gestures that conveyed a readiness for self-censorship. These methodological choices proved essential for exposing dynamics of symbolic violence and civic intimacy that lie beyond the reach of quantitative indicators (Bourdieu, 1991; Machin, 2015).

The quantitative strand centred on the systematic analysis of democratic indices, particularly V-Dem and Freedom House. These indices provided breadth by situating

Malta and Singapore within global trends and by supplying longitudinal evidence of continuity and change. Yet, as demonstrated in the literature review, indices carried liberal biases, struggled with validity in small states, and often misrepresented hybrid regimes (Koelble & Lipuma, 2008; Wolff, 2023). For this reason, indices were treated not as authoritative verdicts but as interlocutors, to be interrogated and reinterpreted through ethnographic evidence. This stance preserved their utility while counteracting their blind spots.

The convergent parallel design therefore addressed the limitations of each strand. Indices offered comparability and coverage but failed to capture texture and embodiment. Ethnography contributed depth and specificity but risked exceptionalism and limited generalisability. Their integration generated a more holistic account—one that was at once situated and comparative, reflexive and rigorous.

3.2.4 Integration strategy: the Triangulated Integration Matrix

Integration was not left to ad hoc interpretation but was operationalised through a structured Triangulated Integration Matrix (TIM). This mechanism ensured a systematic confrontation between qualitative and quantitative findings across three empirical dimensions. The first dimension concerned observed practice, captured in ethnographic fieldnotes that documented rituals, silences, and everyday civic interactions. The second involved narrative justifications, drawn from discourse materials such as political speeches, media texts, and policy documents. The third dimension focused on lived experience, reflected in elite interview narratives and reflexive accounts of embodied democratic practice.

For each domain of democracy measured by indices such as freedom of expression, civil society participation, or electoral integrity, the TIM mapped corresponding qualitative evidence. When qualitative and quantitative strands converged, the alignment reinforced the validity of index scores; when they diverged, the contrast exposed blind spots, revealing moments in which indices either misrepresented or overlooked lived practices. For instance, although Freedom House classified Malta as “free,”

ethnographic evidence highlighted clientelist obligations and reputational coercion that compromised substantive liberties. Conversely, Singapore's low civil liberties scores resonated with ethnographic accounts of self-censorship and orchestrated compliance, thereby reinforcing the reliability of those ratings.

The TIM applied triangulation in a robust and unique way to ensure the rigor of analysis across three domains. Qualitative accounts interrogated quantitative scores, illustrating where convergence confirmed existing measures, where divergence demanded critical reappraisal, and where the absence of evidence in one strand underscored the indispensability of the other. In this way, the TIM operationalised the thesis's theoretical commitment to embodied civic intimacy: the recognition that democracy had to be studied not only through institutions and indices but also through the choreography of everyday bodies in compressed spaces.

3.2.5 Addressing small-N logics

Critiques of small-N comparative designs often focus on selection bias, limited generalisability, and anecdotes. This project addressed those critiques directly. It situated Malta and Singapore within a most-similar systems framework, so case selection followed a defined comparative logic rather than ad hoc choice, anchoring the analysis in the comparative paradox that framed the study. It adopted a mixed methods design that embedded qualitative findings within a matrix of quantitative indicators, which grounded ethnographic observations in measurable patterns and thereby reduced the risk of anecdotal inference or exceptionalism. It also acknowledged the limits of small-N inference-especially the impossibility of universal generalisation-and treated those limits as integral to an interpretivist commitment to context-specific knowledge, while contributing to debates on small-state hybridity and embodied democracy (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2015; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020).

Rigour arose not from numerical breadth but from methodological transparency, structured integration across methods, and explicit engagement with critique. The combination of ethnographic specificity and index-based comparability managed

known small-N vulnerabilities and used Malta and Singapore as diagnostic cases that illuminated paradoxes of democracy under smallness.

A further design consideration concerned asymmetry in the voices accessed. In both Malta and Singapore, activists, journalists, and opposition figures were more willing to be interviewed, so the corpus disproportionately foregrounded constraint, surveillance, and dissent. To mitigate this imbalance, the study incorporated countervailing material from official documents, government discourses, and international rankings that portrayed these states in more favourable terms. For example, Singapore's repeated top placement in the Chandler Good Government Index and Malta's consistently high electoral-democracy scores in Freedom House were analysed not as definitive verdicts but as rival indicators to be triangulated with critical testimony. Their inclusion enabled systematic consideration of compliance, legitimacy, and approval alongside repression and constraint, which reduced the risk of confirmation bias and strengthened the comparative analysis.

3.2.7 Conclusion

The research design had operationalised the thesis's interpretivist paradigm by bringing together comparative logic, carefully bounded case studies, and a convergent mixed methods approach into a unified strategy. Malta and Singapore, though structurally similar yet classificatory divergent, offered the comparative leverage required to interrogate the paradox of convergent lived democracy alongside divergent scores. The case study framework provided the necessary bounded depth, while the convergent parallel mixed methods approach balanced the breadth of quantitative indices with the depth of ethnographic inquiry. The Triangulated Integration Matrix ensured rigorous integration by transforming triangulation into a deliberate analytic strategy that revealed patterns of convergence, divergence, and overlooked blind spots.

Through the explicit mapping of research questions onto design elements, the study demonstrated methodological rigour, transparency, and reflexive engagement with critiques of small-N logic. In doing so, the research design not only addressed the

empirical puzzle presented by Malta and Singapore but also contributed to broader methodological debates in comparative politics, mixed methods research, and the study of small-state democracy.

3.3 Data Collection Strategies

The design of this study rests upon a mixed methods framework that deliberately juxtaposes qualitative and quantitative strands in order to excavate the lived textures of democracy in Malta and Singapore. The integration of these strands reflects both epistemological commitments to interpretivism and the pragmatic necessity of engaging phenomena that are at once discursive, embodied, institutional, and statistical. What follows is an extensive discussion of the data collection strategies employed. Each subsection is situated within the dual imperative of fit-for-purpose methodological design and anticipatory responsiveness to any concerns regarding bias, access, and sensitivity.

3.3.1 Qualitative Strand: Political Ethnography

Ethnography had been chosen as the cornerstone of the qualitative strand because it uniquely illuminated the micro-foundations of political life. Democracy, particularly in hybrid regimes and small states, could not be understood solely through institutional accounts or survey instruments; it had to be grasped as it was lived, enacted, and embodied in everyday practice. As Wedeen (2010) observed, there was “never nothing going on”: silences, gestures, rituals, and omissions were as politically charged as speeches or laws. Political ethnography, therefore, provided a vantage point from which to capture how domination and compliance were naturalised through embodied routines and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Curato & Doerr, 2022).

The study mobilised ethnography through immersion in both Malta and Singapore. In Malta, the researcher’s insider status facilitated continuous engagement across multiple sites-local and national gatherings and celebrations, neighbourhood meetings, informal conversations, and civil society gatherings. This sustained immersion allowed

the interpretation of subtle shifts in tone, gesture, and silence, all of which proved indispensable for analysing how clientelism, reputational sanction, and symbolic participation were reproduced in everyday life.

Singapore, by contrast, required immersion as an outsider. Fieldwork extended over several months, providing the minimum duration necessary to move beyond surface civility and begin to apprehend the unspoken codes of deference, discipline, and restraint. In this setting, the ethnographer was simultaneously observer and participant, navigating a civic milieu where public speech was tightly managed and where silences communicated as forcefully as words. Singaporean self-censorship, ambient surveillance, and ritualised harmony demanded close attention to non-verbal cues—downcast eyes, pauses before answering, calculated politeness—which served as indicators of symbolic violence in action.

By embedding himself in two contrasting positionalities—insider in Malta and outsider in Singapore—the researcher was able to triangulate how ethnography exposed the choreography of compliance. In both contexts, immersion was not an act of neutral presence but of reflexive engagement. Reflexive journaling, fieldnotes, and daily self-audits recorded how the researcher’s positionality—privilege in Singapore, familiarity in Malta—shaped what was seen and how it was interpreted. This reflexivity addresses concerns about bias, acknowledging that insider and outsider positions were both enabling and constraining, and that ethnographic validity emerged from the transparent negotiation of these dynamics.

3.3.2 Qualitative Strand: Elite Interviews

Alongside participant observation, the study employed semi-structured elite interviews to gain insider perspectives on democratic practice, institutional design, and civic participation. The decision to focus on elite interviews was rooted in their unique capacity to access forms of knowledge unavailable through public discourse: the guarded reflections of politicians, civil servants, academics, activists, and journalists who operated at the intersection of formal authority and informal influence (Dexter,

1970; Kezar, 2003). By beginning with elites, the study positioned itself to uncover dynamics that would otherwise have remained obscured. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that while elites have unique access to knowledge and power, the data sourced from elites presents a limitation—it is not data that can be generalised to the general population. An elite perspective cannot necessarily speak to the view of a migrant worker in Singapore or Malta. Furthermore, the process of securing elite participation means the interview process can be fraught with challenges such as difficulty in accessing the individual or power asymmetries. Elites may also protect their own interests by controlling the narrative (Collett, 2023).

It is important to emphasise that privileging elite interviews was a deliberate methodological decision rather than an incidental one. In both Malta and Singapore, elites occupied the nexus between formal institutions and informal networks, and their perspectives were uniquely positioned to illuminate the mechanisms through which symbolic violence, reputational sanction, and compliance were enacted. Moreover, the comparative design of the thesis required parity across cases, and balance was maintained by conducting twenty interviews in each context to ensure representativeness. The focus on elites also responded to practical constraints. In Singapore, where anticipatory obedience and surveillance generated widespread reluctance among ordinary citizens to speak openly, elite actors often remained the only viable interlocutors. For this reason, elites were not treated as proxies or “stand-ins” for democratic publics, but as diagnostic voices whose positional authority made visible the entanglement of state structures, civic repertoires, and lived practices.

Once the rationale for selecting elites was established, attention turned to the design of the interviews themselves. These followed a semi-structured format, a choice based on methodological reasoning rather than convenience. Semi-structured protocols offered a balance between consistency and flexibility. On the one hand, a core set of questions ensured comparability across interviews; on the other, open-ended prompts and iterative follow-ups allowed respondents to guide the conversation towards themes they considered most significant. This flexibility proved particularly vital in

politically sensitive contexts, where building trust frequently required a departure from scripted questions in favour of a more conversational rapport.

The next step concerned sampling strategies. Here, purposive and snowballing techniques were combined and stratified across key socio-political categories. In Malta, purposive entry points were relatively easy to establish through personal networks, media contacts, and civil society actors. In Singapore, by contrast, the atmosphere of repression necessitated reliance on snowball sampling, where trust-based referrals provided the only feasible access to participants willing to discuss politics. Anticipating the risk of homogeneity inherent in snowballing, the researcher incorporated a stratified purposive framework to secure representation across institutional roles (government, opposition, civil society, media, academia), socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity, and political orientation (Cohen and Arieli, 2011).

With sampling procedures in place, the study also required a clear operationalisation of saturation. To avoid the vagueness that often undermines qualitative research, saturation was defined as three consecutive interviews within each stratification category that produced no new thematic codes (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This operational definition facilitated methodological rigour and provided a concrete threshold for concluding data collection. In practice, saturation was reached at twenty interviews in Malta and twenty in Singapore, generating a corpus of forty elite accounts that combined both depth and diversity.

Finally, protocols for piloting, iteration, and trust-building were implemented systematically. An initial pilot set of questions was tested with Maltese interlocutors, which enabled refinement of language, pacing, and sensitivity. Feedback loops were also embedded at the conclusion of each interview, where respondents were invited to critique the questions and suggest themes or revised questions. This iterative process of updating the interview schedule not only improved the quality of the data but also conveyed respect, which further fostered trust with elite respondents. Trust-building was reinforced through careful attention to the interview setting, explicit assurances of anonymity, and recognition of the risks participants faced-particularly in Singapore,

where fear of reprisal was palpable and demanded heightened sensitivity on the part of the researcher.

The below table summarises the interview sample across analytically defined strata. The table details the number of participants per stratum, gender balance, and whether thematic saturation was achieved according to the criterion of three consecutive interviews without the emergence of new codes. This visual overview complements the narrative discussion of sampling diversity and demonstrates the systematic assessment of coverage within and across participant groups.

Table 3.0 Composition and Background of Interview Participants and Data Saturation

Stratum	n Interviews (M / F)	Gender Balance	Saturation Reached?	Key Themes Saturated
Government Policy Elite /	10 (6 M / 4 F)	Male-skewed	✓ Yes	Symbolic performance; compliance narratives
Opposition Activists /	8 (4 M / 4 F)	Balanced	✓ Yes	Dissent; reputational sanctioning
Civil Society Leaders	9 (5 M / 4 F)	Balanced	≈ Partial	Resource dependency; anticipatory self-censorship
Media Professionals	7 (3 M / 4 F)	Slight female bias	✓ Yes	Visibility of absence; narrative control

Stratum	n Interviews (M / F)	Gender Balance	Saturation Reached?	Key Themes Saturated
Academic / Expert Informants	6 (4 M / 2 F)	Male-skewed	X No (new codes emerged)	Patronage networks; informal legitimacy
Total	40 (22 M / 18 F)			

Note: “Saturation reached” = three consecutive interviews within a stratum with no emergence of new codes.

The *strata × n interviews × saturation* table above provides evidence of adequate thematic coverage across strata. This table also guided the sequencing of subsequent interviews and analytic prioritisation.

3.3.3 Qualitative Strand: Textual Analysis

Ethnography and interviews were supplemented with textual and discourse analysis, a triangulation that proved especially crucial in Singapore, where self-censorship restricted the candour of many interlocutors. Texts therefore became indispensable, offering insights into what could not be voiced directly in conversation. The corpus of materials consisted of parliamentary speeches, policy papers, government white papers, and outputs from state media in both Malta and Singapore. Wherever possible, this collection was expanded with independent media articles, NGO reports, and activist blogs. The analysis drew on interpretivist and semiotic approaches as outlined by Fairclough (2015), focusing not only on explicit arguments but also on silences, metaphors, and symbolic repertoires.

The incorporation of textual analysis counters directly to two concerns: access and sensitivity. In Singapore, access to elite voices was often obstructed by fear, yet parliamentary records and policy documents provided alternative routes into understanding state rationalities. Sensitivity was managed by redirecting certain

analyses from potentially vulnerable interlocutors toward publicly available texts, thereby reducing risks for participants while still mapping the discursive dimensions of hybrid democracy.

Methodologically, textual analysis illuminated the ways symbolic violence was produced. Official narratives of harmony, prosperity, and stability foreclosed avenues of critique by framing dissent as unpatriotic or illegitimate. In Malta, the study of parliamentary debates exposed rhetorical strategies that naturalised patronage, while in Singapore, media texts demonstrated how silence was framed as civility and compliance as responsibility. These findings corroborated and extended the ethnographic record, ensuring that the qualitative inquiry did not depend exclusively on testimonies given under conditions of vulnerability.

3.3.4 Quantitative Strand: Democracy Indices

The quantitative strand of the study was grounded in the systematic analysis of two internationally recognised democracy indices: Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. These indices were chosen because they represented the disciplinary standard against which claims about democratic quality were most frequently evaluated (Coppedge et al., 2015; Freedom House, 2022). Freedom House had provided annual ratings of political rights and civil liberties since 1972, while V-Dem offered a more disaggregated dataset, encompassing electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian dimensions, with coverage beginning in 1900. Together, these datasets enabled a longitudinal analysis of Malta and Singapore across a twenty-year period, from 2004 to 2024, allowing the study to trace trajectories of resilience, erosion, and hybridisation.

The justification for using these indices rested on three interconnected reasons. They ensured comparability by situating Malta and Singapore within global patterns, thereby avoiding a narrow or parochial focus. They also guaranteed continuity, since their long time series made it possible to identify significant turning points, such as Singapore's introduction of the POFMA legislation in 2019 or the institutional crises in Malta that

followed the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017. Finally, they supported triangulation by allowing index scores to be cross-checked against qualitative findings, which made it possible to assess whether lived experiences aligned with or diverged from statistical representations.

At the same time, the study remained explicit about the limitations inherent in such indices. Both Freedom House and V-Dem privileged liberal democracy as their normative model, which meant that they often misclassified hybrid regimes or overlooked the specificities of small-state dynamics. In Malta, high “free” scores obscured entrenched practices of clientelism and reputational coercion, while in Singapore, “partly free” rankings captured restrictions on rights but failed to account for legitimacy derived from state performance, stability, and symbolic compliance. By acknowledging these imperfections, the research positioned indices not as authoritative arbiters of democratic quality but as interlocutors whose findings required interrogation through qualitative evidence.

To preserve transparency in methodology, the study included a detailed appendix table listing the specific indicators drawn from V-Dem (such as v2x_freexp_altinf, v2x_cspart, v2x_libdem, v2x_egal, v2xcs_ccsi) and Freedom House (E1–E3; B1–B4; C1–C3). For each indicator, the appendix specified codes, years of coverage, and thematic relevance, thereby clarifying how quantitative measures were linked to ethnographic findings and allowing reviewers to trace the reasoning behind indicator selection. In addition, one or two annotated line charts were produced for each case over the period 2004–2024. These visualisations aligned indicator trends with the years of fieldwork, illustrating how fluctuations in index scores corresponded to lived civic experiences and making the interaction between quantitative and qualitative strands both visible and verifiable.

3.3.5 Sampling Strategy

The study’s sampling strategy was shaped by a combination of intentional design and contextual constraint. The original plan relied on purposive sampling, with the researcher aiming to engage individuals selected according to pre-defined categories of

institutional role, political orientation, and demographic background. Yet the climate of repression and fear in Singapore required a methodological shift toward snowball sampling, in which participants directed the researcher to trusted contacts. This shift was not treated as a limitation but as a demonstration of methodological adaptability, framed as a deliberate strength rather than a compromise.

Snowballing was implemented through stratified purposive seeding to secure diversity across government, opposition, civil society, media, academia, socio-economic classes, genders, ethnicities, and age cohorts. Entry points were intentionally sought among peripheral actors, such as independent journalists and grassroots activists, in order to counterbalance the biases that tend to arise when researching privileged elites.

Saturation was defined with unusual precision: three consecutive interviews within any stratification category that yielded no new codes signalled saturation. This operational definition resisted vague claims that saturation could be discerned by researcher intuition alone and introduced transparency into the process. In practice, the study conducted forty interviews, twenty in each country, and achieved saturation across most categories.

The danger of elite-centrism was explicitly addressed by embedding the interviews within a broader methodological ecology. Ethnographic immersion, participant observation, and reflexive journaling captured the lived textures of everyday compliance and silence, while discourse analysis of media, parliamentary records, and ritual practices documented how democratic life was enacted beyond elite speech. Elites thus formed only one analytic layer within a triangulated framework rather than serving as the exclusive source of evidence. This integration ensured that embodied, everyday, and marginal registers of democracy were systematically incorporated, even in situations where direct access to non-elite interlocutors remained constrained.

3.3.6 Ethical Collection Practices

The ethical challenges of researching democracy in small hybrid states proved formidable, as participants faced the possibility of reputational harm, professional sanction, or even legal repercussions if their views were disclosed. For this reason, ethical collection practices were conceived not as supplementary procedures but as essential safeguards that underpinned the research process itself.

All participants were fully briefed about the aims of the study, their right to withdraw at any point, and the risks associated with participation. Informed consent was obtained through explicit opt-in procedures, and participants were given the option of preserving anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. In politically sensitive settings such as Singapore, anonymity was treated as the default standard, with all identifying details meticulously removed from transcripts and fieldnotes to prevent inadvertent exposure.

Data management followed the University of Malta's Research Ethics and Data Protection framework (REDP approval ARTS-2023-00438). All interview recordings, transcripts and photos were stored on password-protected drives, and with the recordings and transcripts securely deleted once the project had concluded. Ethnographic fieldnotes, reflexive journals, the textual and discursive materials, including political speeches, policy documents, and media outputs were retained.

Special attention was devoted to elite participants, whose professional visibility sometimes rendered anonymisation impractical. In such cases, explicit negotiations took place regarding what could be attributed, and participants were offered editorial control over any quotations used. At the same time, grassroots participants were afforded further protection by deliberately avoiding the collection of unnecessary personal identifiers that might enable indirect tracing of their identities.

Ethical responsibility also extended to the question of representation. The researcher deliberately resisted the temptation to highlight dramatic testimonies that could place participants at risk. Instead, such accounts were carefully triangulated with textual and

observational evidence to ensure both analytical robustness and participant safety. This approach embodied Behar's (1996) principle of "vulnerable observation," prioritising the security and well-being of participants over the pursuit of exhaustive analytical completeness. It is important to note that despite being offered the option of anonymity, all elite participants opted to share their identities.

3.3.7 Framing Adaptability as Strength

Throughout the data collection process, methodological adaptability was presented not as a sign of weakness but as a demonstration of reflexive rigour. The shift from purposive to snowball sampling in Singapore, though initially compelled by repression, was reconstructed as a conscious strategy for reaching sensitive networks and demonstrated the ability to pivot and adapt in spite of unforeseen challenge. Use of textual analysis functioned as a way to compensate for silenced voices while still preserving validity. The explicit operationalisation of saturation addresses potential concerns about arbitrariness by making the thresholds for data sufficiency transparent. Similarly, the use of imperfect indices, rather than being treated as a methodological liability, was reframed as a means of interrogating the normative assumptions embedded within established measurement frameworks.

The outcome was a data collection strategy that acknowledged its constraints without allowing them to obscure the research process. Instead, these limitations were reinterpreted as analytically productive. By treating constraint as a resource rather than an obstacle, the study illustrated how methodological practices could evolve under pressure. This evolution was not incidental but intrinsic to the challenges of researching democracy in hybrid, small-state contexts, where adaptability itself became a defining feature of rigorous inquiry.

3.3.8 Conclusion

This study's data collection design demonstrates how methodological plurality and adaptability can yield deeper insights into democracy's lived textures in small hybrid

states. By combining ethnography, elite interviews, textual analysis, and democracy indices, the research balanced insider and outsider perspectives, qualitative depth and quantitative breadth, as well as rigor and reflexivity. Constraints encountered in the field-such as surveillance, repression, and elite dominance-were not treated as limitations but as analytical resources, prompting methodological innovation, flexibility, and the ability to respond to inevitable challenges that arise in the field. Ultimately, this approach underscored that in contexts like Malta and Singapore, validity emerges not from rigid adherence to method, but from transparent negotiation of positionality, ethical responsibility, and pragmatic responsiveness.

3.4 Data Analysis and Validity Strategies

The analytic stage of this thesis was conceived not as a mechanical exercise in data sorting but as a sustained process of interrogation, reflexivity, and integration. Its dual purpose was to demonstrate how diverse empirical materials-ethnographic observations, interview transcripts, discourse texts, and quantitative datasets-were systematically transformed into grounded findings that could be compared, and to ensure that this transformation was conducted with methodological rigour, reflexive awareness, and transparency. In pursuing this approach, the analysis directly addressed a recurrent critique of ethnographic political research-that it risks devolving into “anecdotal ethnography” detached from validation (Wedeen, 2010; Burawoy, 2003). The procedures adopted thus illustrated how the interplay between interpretivist political ethnography and comparative index analysis generated findings that were descriptively rich, theoretically resonant, and empirically credible within the wider field of comparative democracy research.

The analysis unfolded within the convergent parallel mixed-methods framework outlined in Section 3.2. Qualitative and quantitative strands were first examined independently and then re-integrated through what this thesis termed the Triangulated Validation Loop. This process ensured that index scores were not treated as self-evident but interrogated in light of qualitative insights, while ethnographic interpretations were situated within longitudinal and comparative indicators. Rather than privileging one

mode of analysis over the other, the framework wove them together to construct a multidimensional understanding of democratic life in Malta and Singapore.

Conducting ethnographic and elite research within small, densely networked states demanded heightened ethical vigilance due to the limited anonymity and reputational exposure inherent in such contexts. Some interviewees were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details-including institutional roles, neighbourhoods, and event contexts-were modified or merged into composite descriptions to preserve analytic authenticity while preventing traceability. Informed consent was obtained in writing or, where written consent risked visibility, through recorded verbal agreement in accordance with a standardised protocol approved by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee. Participants were reminded that withdrawal was possible at any stage without consequence. All digital files were encrypted and stored securely on a university server, accessible only to the researcher, with reflexive notes maintained separately from raw data to prevent cross-identification.

Given the intimate scale of civic life in Malta and Singapore, ethical integrity further required continuous situational consent-reconfirming participants' comfort with the inclusion of specific narratives as analysis progressed and potential sensitivities emerged. This relational approach prioritised trust over procedural formality, reflecting the study's broader commitment to understanding democracy as an embodied and interpersonal practice.

3.4.1 Qualitative Analysis

3.4.1.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Iterative Coding and Interpretation

The qualitative corpus consisted of semi-structured elite interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, reflexive journals, and a range of textual and discursive materials, including political speeches, policy documents, and media outputs. These materials were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021).

As Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) explore in their influential work on reflexive thematic analysis, themes do not simply emerge from the data, but rather, are actively constructed by the researcher through a process that is interpretive, subjective and iterative. The researcher plays an active role by creating and shaping the analysis. Themes arise because the researcher engages with the data with meaning and intention, as opposed to the idea of being unearthed by the researcher. As such, the themes and patterns that are generated from thematic analysis are indelibly shaped by the researcher's subjective stance and perspective, although they still are based on meaningful patterns that are present in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). Given this context, one of the most important elements of reflexive thematic analysis is the researcher's ongoing role in knowledge production and rendering this process as transparent as possible. As Braun and Clarke (2019:13) point out:

"The researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research."

The coding process of the elite interviews unfolded in several stages. Each transcript or text was first read through in its entirety to capture a sense of the text as a whole, and to develop a feeling for each interview in relation to others. Any immediate themes, patterns or ideas that leapt out in these initial read-throughs were annotated in the margins of the text (in Google Doc format). The Singapore texts were analysed first, then the Maltese texts carried out once analysis of the Singaporean texts were complete. In addition to the text, attention was also paid to silences, hesitations, metaphors, and embodied gestures noted in the fieldnotes, following Bourdieu's argument that symbolic violence often operates through what remains unspoken or taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1991; Swartz, 1997). Following this first reading of the texts and unspoken language, initial codes, themes and patterns were created using broad brushstrokes (i.e. with the understanding that the theme may change or be refined as a more nuanced interpretation was developed over further readings and analyses).

A second reading of the interviews was then carried out with more confidence due to greater familiarity with the material. Refinement was made to the first round of codes/themes and patterns; for example, “smallness leads to silencing” became refined to “civic intimacy and self-censorship”. A set of themes was identified and colour coded in this second reading, then the colour codes were applied across the interview texts. Bare sections of text were re-read and analysed for further meaning, with some additional codes gleaned during this process (for example, the code of affective compliance was generated during this stage in relation to the examples of Singaporeans being educated and encouraged to smile and behave graciously in public spaces).

The initial codes and themes were subsequently refined and rearranged through repeated readings, generating higher-order themes that ultimately structured the findings chapters. For example, civic intimacy and self-censorship became split into size and personalisation and smallness, stability, security and heightened control.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive notes were kept to document the reasoning behind coding decisions. These notes served as a safeguard against what Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified as “conceptual overreach,” a risk that is especially acute when applying abstract constructs such as symbolic violence or hybridity to empirical data. For each coded instance, detailed justifications were recorded, specifying why a particular passage was interpreted as, for example, evidence of reputational sanctioning rather than as a general political complaint.

It is important to briefly allude to the creation of themes for both Malta and Singapore. While in some cases there were clear overlaps of the themes across the two cases (for example, the theme regarding inequality and labour), in other cases, themes were only pertinent to one case (for example, smallness and memory in Malta, and in the case of Singapore, democracy at home: proportioning ethnicities in government housing).

3.4.1.2 Discourse and Semiotic Analysis

A discourse-analytic layer of interpretation was carried out in parallel, concentrating on the semiotic dimensions of political texts. Drawing on Fairclough and Fairclough (2015), political speeches, government campaigns, and symbolic rituals were examined not only for their explicit propositional content but also for the metaphors, silences, and affective cues through which legitimacy was constructed. Singapore's National Day parades, for instance, were approached as semiotic performances in which synchronised bodily movements, colour-coded symbolism, and orchestrated chants materialised the PAP's narrative of harmony, collective over individual, and discipline. In Malta, village *festas* were interpreted as political texts in their own right, with their banners, fireworks, and processions serving as semiotic markers of partisan loyalty, as discussed by Mitchell (2002) and Boissevain (1984).

This form of textual and semiotic analysis made it possible to move beyond the literal statements of political elites and into the underlying structures of meaning and symbolic power that shaped democratic life. At the same time, it provided the analytical space to integrate Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition (1997) and Wedeen's account of authoritarian performance (1999) into the empirical inquiry. In doing so, the research gained a conceptual vocabulary for explaining why citizens might participate enthusiastically in rituals that, while affirming community and belonging, simultaneously reinforced the mechanisms of domination.

3.4.1.3 Reflexive Coding Audits

The interpretive nature of the analysis required particular care to reduce the risks of bias and over-interpretation. To address this, a reflexive coding audit mechanism was employed. After each coding cycle, selected data segments were reviewed by academic colleagues who were familiar with either the Maltese or the Singaporean contexts, but who were not directly involved in the project. These peers interrogated coding decisions and proposed alternative interpretations. Their critiques and suggestions were then integrated into revised coding schemes.

This process of peer debriefing was consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility and confirmability, as it ensured that interpretations were not shaped solely by the researcher's positionality but were strengthened through engagement with multiple critical readers. When combined with reflexive memos and detailed audit trails, this approach created a layered strategy that enhanced the analytic rigour of the qualitative interpretation.

3.4.2 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative component had been conceived not as an isolated dataset but as a complementary lens through which the qualitative findings could be interrogated and contextualised. Data were drawn primarily from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Freedom House, while indices such as Polity IV, the EIU Democracy Index, and the Sustainable Governance Indicators were also consulted where they offered relevant insights.

3.4.2.1 Longitudinal Graphing and Trend Analysis

For both Malta and Singapore, longitudinal data that spanned two decades, from 2004 to 2024, were extracted from V-Dem v.15. Line graphs were generated in order to visualise the trends in key indicators, which included electoral democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and egalitarian democracy. In addition to these visualisations, Freedom House scores were also tabulated so as to allow for a cross-case comparison of political rights and civil liberties. These visualisations were not treated as self-sufficient "truths" but rather as heuristic devices that could be used to explore the relationship between quantitative indicators and qualitative accounts. For instance, Malta's consistently high electoral democracy scores were juxtaposed with ethnographic accounts that documented practices of clientelism and reputational coercion, which revealed the discrepancy between the procedural robustness of its electoral system and the substantive fragility of its democratic culture. By contrast, Singapore's relatively high scores on clean elections were contextualised through

interviews that described patterns of anticipatory obedience and the manipulation of electoral boundaries through gerrymandering, which demonstrated the manner in which institutional efficiency coexisted with restricted pluralism.

3.4.2.2 Comparative Benchmarking

Beyond the longitudinal analysis, quantitative data were employed to benchmark Malta and Singapore against both regional and global averages, and this comparative exercise made it possible to underscore in greater depth the distinctive trajectories that small states followed. In the case of Malta, the consistently high turnout rates and the robustness of its electoral processes placed it significantly above European Union averages, yet at the same time its safeguards against corruption remained comparatively weak. This weakness confirmed and reinforced the concerns raised by interviewees about the risks of elite capture, a theme that has been emphasised in previous scholarship (Veenendaal, 2019).

Singapore, by contrast, displayed a markedly different pattern: it consistently outperformed its regional neighbours in terms of governance efficiency, achieving levels that positioned it as one of the strongest performers in the region, but at the same time it ranked among the lowest with respect to civil liberties. This imbalance captured and reflected the hybrid paradox already noted in Chapter 5, whereby strong state capacity coexisted with restrictions on fundamental freedoms. The act of benchmarking these two small states against wider regional and global standards allowed the research to place the dynamics of small-state politics within a more expansive comparative frame, ensuring that Malta and Singapore were not regarded as isolated or idiosyncratic cases, but rather as diagnostic sites through which broader patterns and tensions within the global democratic landscape could be examined and better understood.

3.4.3 Integration: The Triangulated Validation Loop

The analytic strategy revolved around the Triangulated Validation Loop, a recursive process that continually cross-examined qualitative and quantitative findings. This loop

operated simultaneously on three levels: observed practice, which drew on ethnographic fieldnotes documenting lived experiences of compliance and dissent; narrative justification, which relied on discourse materials and interview accounts that framed or rationalised these practices; and index measurement, which consisted of quantitative indicators designed to capture the institutionalised dimensions of democracy.

A finding was considered analytically robust only when evidence of convergence appeared across at least two of these levels. For instance, Freedom House's low scores for Singapore's freedom of expression were validated by interviewees' accounts of anticipatory self-censorship and by field observations of silence in public spaces. Similarly, Malta's high voter turnout rates were interrogated not only through statistical evidence but also through ethnographic findings that revealed reputational sanctioning and textual analysis that exposed the role of partisan media. When such convergence occurred, it was treated as confirmation that both datasets reinforced each other. Yet, when divergence appeared, it was not dismissed as an error but treated as revelation. For example, V-Dem's high participatory democracy scores for Malta conflicted with interviewees' accounts of tokenistic consultation processes. This dissonance was not explained away but instead analysed as evidence of blind spots within the index, thereby broadening and enriching the overall interpretation of democratic practices.

Counterevidence played a central role in this analytic process. Divergences between qualitative testimony and quantitative indicators were not discarded as anomalies but interrogated as potential places of revelation and insight. Malta's exceptionally high turnout rates, coded in indices as signs of democratic vibrancy, were read alongside ethnographic accounts that revealed reputational coercion. Conversely, Singapore's top rankings for governance capacity stood in stark tension with interviewees' descriptions of severely curtailed pluralism. Such contrasts were systematically logged within the validation loop and analysed to expose the limitations and blind spots of each data source. In this way, positive measures of stability or legitimacy operated as built-in checks against an overemphasis on critical testimony, while their divergence from lived experience itself became an empirical finding. These tensions illuminated the

mechanics of compliance and symbolic violence in small states, demonstrating that counterevidence was not an obstacle but an indispensable component of the analytic framework.

3.4.3.1 Triangulated Integration Matrix (TIM)

The Triangulated Integration Matrix (TIM) was developed to demonstrate how the study's analytic process functioned in practice. Serving as a schematic representation of the research's mixed-method procedure, the TIM visualises the systematic integration of three strands of evidence-observed practice (ethnographic data), narrative justification (interviews and discourse), and index measurement (Freedom House and V-Dem)-across the study's five core themes. By explicitly mapping points of convergence, divergence, and falsification, the TIM ensured that triangulation was carried out to the most robust, analytically active level possible.

Purpose and Function

The Triangulated Integration Matrix (TIM) operationalises the mixed-method design by structuring the interaction between qualitative and quantitative evidence to uncover the mechanisms of Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI). It demonstrates how embodied civic routines align with or contradict formal indicators of democracy, transforming triangulation into a generative explanatory model that reveals how lived practices, discursive accounts, and institutional metrics jointly shape the relational texture of democratic life. Beyond its procedural role, the TIM represents a methodological innovation that safeguards interpretive research of this nature against charges of anecdotalism. By formalising the integration of ethnographic, discursive, and index-based data within a replicable grid, it converts narrative synthesis into a transparent, auditable, analytic process. Each convergence or divergence between data types is systematically logged, ensuring that qualitative insights are corroborated through structured comparison rather than selective illustration. Thus, the TIM functions not only as an integrative framework but also as an embedded architecture of validity,

embedding rigour within the interpretive workflow and demonstrating how small-N evidence can produce generalisable causal insight.

Analytic Flow

Stage 1 – Qualitative Foundation: Inductive Grounding of Practice

Observational notes, local publications, and interviews revealed recurrent acts of attendance, avoidance, anticipation, and display. These were consolidated into four emergent mechanisms-visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, reputational sanctioning, and symbolic participation-which together form the qualitative spine of the TIM.

Stage 2 – Quantitative Alignment: Structural Anchoring and Temporal Calibration

Indicators from Freedom House and V-Dem were disaggregated into dimensions of civil liberties, participation, and accountability, then aligned with empirical episodes drawn from the qualitative corpus.

Stage 3 – Integration and Triangulated Comparison: Mechanism Testing

The qualitative and quantitative strands were integrated within the TIM grid across five thematic domains-participation, expression, representation, constraint, and legitimacy. Each cell of the matrix registers whether evidence demonstrates Convergence (empirical agreement across strands), Divergence (contradiction exposing analytic blind spots), or Falsification (evidence negating a proposed causal link). This cross-mapping identifies how embodied routines substantiate, complicate, or refute quantitative portrayals of democratic quality.

Table 4.0 Testing the ECI Lens

Mechanism	Observed Practice (Ethnography)	Narrative		Index / Metric Layer	Interpretive Outcome
		Justification (Interviews / Discourse)			
Visibility of Absence	Attendance and absence in festas / RC events socially monitored.	“Everyone notices who isn’t there.”	Indices conflate turnout with engagement.	Divergence: Visibility misread as participation.	
Anticipatory Self- Censorship	Routine moderation of speech in informal settings.	“Better not say too much.”	Civil-liberty scores remain high.	Convergence: Institutional openness masks relational restraint.	
Reputational Sanctioning	Gossip, exclusion, informal punishment for dissent.	“Word gets around.”	Indices omit informal control.	Divergence: Hidden coercion under stable indicators.	
Symbolic Participation	Rehearsed civic rituals, visible unity.	“Showing support,” “being part of.”	Participation metrics inflated.	Falsification: Ritual presence ≠ democratic engagement.	

The Interpretive Loop: Recursive Integration

The Interpretive Loop functions as the recursive engine of the TIM, transforming it from a static comparison grid into a dynamic interpretive system. Recursive integration and iteration are aligned with the interpretivist nature of this research project. It proceeds through four iterative moves:

1. Extraction: Mechanisms are identified inductively through recurring empirical patterns in what participants do and speak.
2. Calibration: Qualitative findings are juxtaposed with index data to achieve temporal and categorical alignment, highlighting points of narrative or numerical tension.
3. Reconciliation: Divergences are interrogated to determine whether they reflect index omission or analytic overreach. Interpretive priority is granted to observable practice as the most immediate indicator of embodied democracy.
4. Reiteration: Revised mechanism definitions feed back into coding, refining conceptual vocabulary and empirical mapping.

This loop ensures that explanation, not typology, anchors the comparative analysis. By tracing causal texture-how proximity, exposure, and symbolic performance reproduce hybrid civic orders-the TIM clarifies how micro-level routines sustain macro-level democratic patterns. It thereby translates participation from a statistical category into an embodied practice, and democracy from an index value into a lived relational order.

Table 5.0 Framing Findings with Respect to Research Questions

Theme	Observed Practice (Ethnography / Fieldnotes)	Narrative Justification (Interviews / Discourse)	Index Measurement (Freedom House / V- Dem)	Convergence / Divergence
Civic participation	Singapore: MRT “loud silence,” choreographed National Day rehearsals. Malta: bodily exuberance in	Singapore: activists describe anticipatory self- censorship and compliance through bodily discipline. Malta:	V-Dem: Malta high in electoral democracy; Singapore low in civil liberties. Freedom House: low civil liberties	Convergence: Embodied compliance (Singapore); reputational participation (Malta).

Theme	Observed Practice (Ethnography / Fieldnotes)	Narrative Justification (Interviews / Discourse)	Index Measurement (Freedom House / V-Dem)	Convergence / Divergence
Elite influence	festas; abstention conspicuous. Singapore: silence at cafés, surveillance at Speakers' Corner. Malta: self-censorship after Caruana Galizia's assassination.	women politicians describe gendered scrutiny and embodied barriers to participation. Singapore: "kill the chicken to scare the monkeys." Malta: intimidation of dissenters.	for Singapore, high for Malta.	Divergence: Indices miss gendered embodiment in Malta. Convergence: Singapore's low scores align with lived silence. Falsification: Malta's high scores contradicted by ethnography → re-theorised as hybrid, not fully "free."
	Singapore: visible gerrymandering ; silence in civic rituals. Malta: clientelism saturating festas	Singapore: opposition candidates face harassment or co-optation. Malta: elites describe capture of institutions.	Freedom House: Malta "free"; Singapore "partly free."	Indices register Singapore's restriction (convergence) but miss Malta's clientelism and

Theme	Observed Practice (Ethnography / Fieldnotes)	Narrative Justification (Interviews / Discourse)	Index Measurement (Freedom House / V-Dem)	Convergence / Divergence
Identity and belonging in the state	and daily exchange.	Singapore: elites invoke “siege mentality.” Malta: small-scale politics breeds suspicion.		institutional capture (divergence).
	Singapore: migrant workers segregated by race; Malta: migrants scapegoated, precarious labour. Singapore: density justifies surveillance and control. Malta: “everyone knows everyone”; abstention is risky.	Singapore: Malays face property price penalties. Malta: politicians exploit anti-foreigner rhetoric.	V-Dem: egalitarian democracy low in Singapore, higher in Malta.	Divergence: Index overstates Malta’s egalitarianism, overlooking migrant exclusion. Divergence: Indices miss how smallness amplifies reputational sanctioning and conformity.

The Triangulated Validation Loop captured the iterative process of cross-checking evidence across ethnographic observations, interview narratives, and democracy indices. The Triangulated Integration Matrix, in turn, schematised how this looping

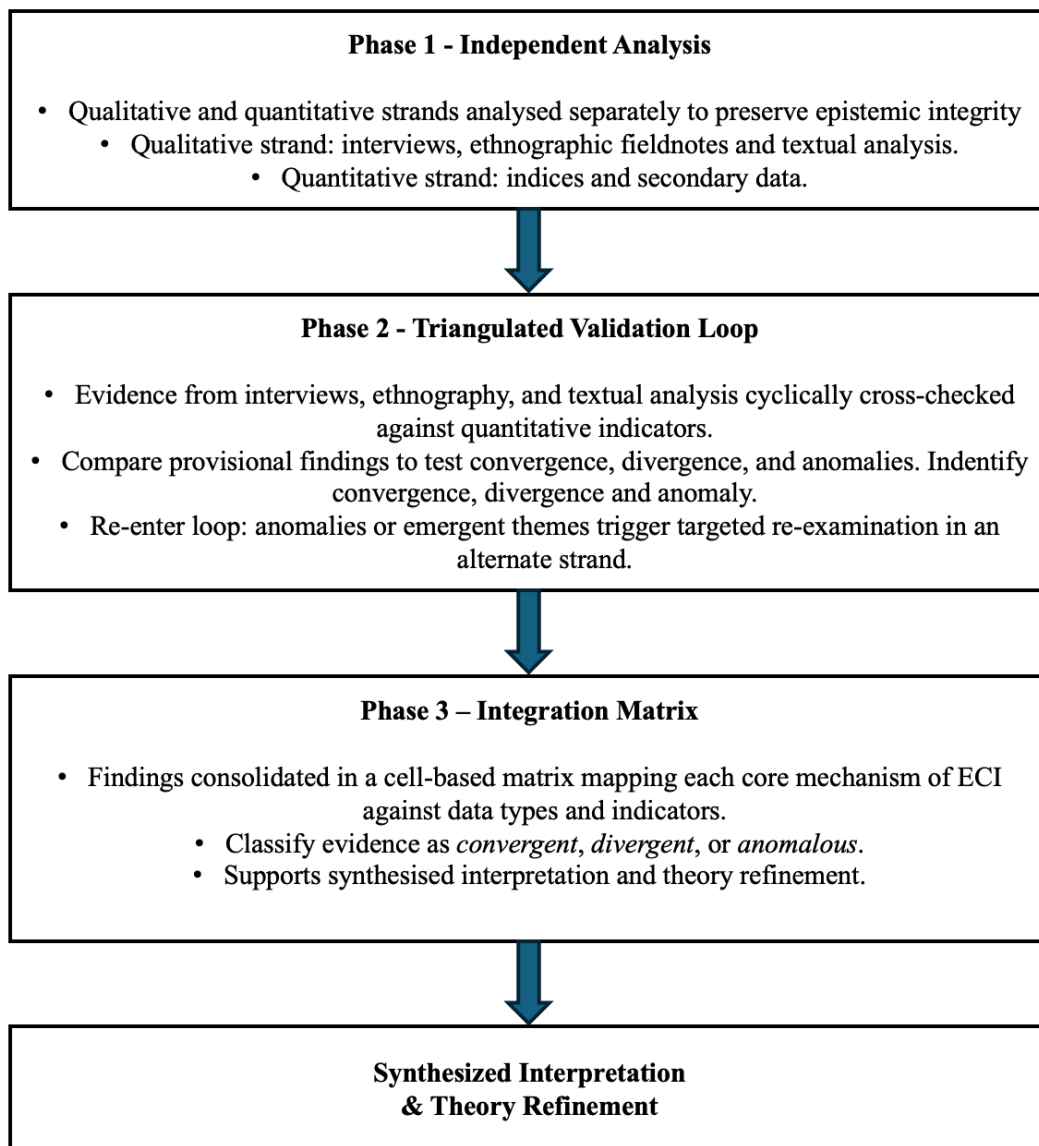
process operated across the study's five themes. Together, they ensured methodological rigour and interpretive transparency, extending triangulation beyond validity testing to establish a systematic mode of explanation. Their combined application-illustrated in Chapter 5, Table 5.1-demonstrates how convergence, divergence, and falsification unfolded across thematic domains, showing how Embodied Civic Intimacy bridges experiential and structural dimensions of democracy.

3.4.3.2 Triangulated Validation Loop and Integration Matrix

The figure below summarises the iterative validation and integration process underpinning the mixed-methods design.

The Triangulated Validation Loop depicts how evidence from interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and textual analysis was cyclically cross-checked against quantitative indicators to test between convergence, divergence and anomalies.

- Phase 1 – Independent analysis: qualitative and quantitative strands analysed separately to preserve epistemic integrity.
- Phase 2 – Validation loop: emergent themes from one strand triggered targeted re-examination in the other (e.g., index anomalies prompting discourse checks, or vice versa).
- Phase 3 – Integration matrix: findings consolidated in a cell-based matrix mapping each core mechanism of ECI against data types and indicators, distinguishing convergent, divergent and anomalous evidence.



The sample matrix below is anonymised and schematic, designed to illustrate the logic of integration rather than disclose identifiable material. It demonstrates how triangulation functions not as an additive procedure but as an iterative epistemological stance underpinning the mixed-methods design.

3.4.4 Validity Strategies

Ensuring validity in a mixed-methods interpretivist project required moving beyond positivist notions of reliability and embracing strategies that aligned with the epistemological orientation of the study. The research therefore relied on a

combination of triangulation, reflexivity, and transparency, each of which served to strengthen the robustness and credibility of the findings.

Triangulation was carried out across multiple dimensions. Data were drawn from a range of sources, including interviews, ethnographic observations, indices, and discourse texts. These were analysed through different methods such as reflexive thematic analysis, textual analysis, graphing, and benchmarking. The theoretical framing also drew upon diverse traditions, including symbolic violence, hybridity, and small-state sociology. By interweaving sources, methods, and theories in this way, the study achieved what Denzin (1978) described as “crisscrossing perspectives,” ensuring that no single approach or conceptual lens dominated interpretation.

Where possible, preliminary findings were shared with participants in order to assess resonance and credibility. This practice was particularly feasible in Malta, where respondents were able to confirm, challenge, or refine interpretations, thereby adding further nuance to the analysis. In Singapore, by contrast, the political sensitivities of the context constrained opportunities for formal respondent validation. Nevertheless, feedback was sought indirectly through trusted interlocutors in academic and civil society settings, providing a measure of participant voice even in a restricted environment.

The process of coding also incorporated mechanisms of reflexive accountability. Peer review of coding decisions served as a safeguard against overgeneralisation or subjectivity bias, particularly in the application of abstract constructs such as symbolic violence. By inviting colleagues to scrutinise coding choices, the research subjected its interpretive process to external critique, thereby reinforcing both analytic discipline and credibility.

Equally important was the commitment to transparency. The project’s appendices included fieldnotes, coding memos, ethics forms, and participant matrices, to assist with retracing the analytic process and evaluate the plausibility of the conclusions. In line with Stake’s (1995) checklist for case study quality, the inclusion of raw data excerpts

and audit trails reflected an openness to scrutiny and a willingness to expose the research process to critical engagement.

Through this layered approach, validity was not reduced to technical measures of reliability but was instead secured through an interpretivist logic that foregrounded triangulation, reflexivity, an iterative analysis approach, and transparency.

3.4.5 Conclusion: From Raw Material to Reflexive Rigour

The analytic strategies described earlier demonstrated how raw material had been transformed into findings that were simultaneously empirically grounded and theoretically illuminating. The combined use of thematic and textual analysis, reflexive audits, longitudinal graphing, benchmarking, and the Triangulated Validation Loop ensured that the study moved decisively beyond anecdotal observations and towards systematic rigour. Each of these strategies contributed to a methodological framework that turned scattered insights into a coherent body of evidence.

At the same time, the analysis remained attentive to the distinctive dangers inherent in small-state research. In Malta, there was always the risk of over-familiarity, while in Singapore access to data was often restricted, and in both contexts the temptation to generalise from limited samples persisted. By embedding reflexivity, triangulation, and transparency at every stage, the study was able to mitigate these dangers rather than overlook or suppress them. Reflexivity allowed the researcher to confront positionality, triangulation validated findings across methods using iteration, and transparency ensured that interpretive choices could be traced and evaluated.

Crucially, analytic rigour was shown to depend not only on methodological precision but also on epistemological stance. Divergences between ethnographic observations and quantitative indices were treated as moments of revelation rather than as errors to be corrected. This approach made it possible to view apparent inconsistencies as productive sites of knowledge, highlighting tensions that required explanation rather

than dismissal. In this way, the analysis modelled a practice that was both critical in its interrogation of assumptions and constructive in its capacity to generate new insight.

By adopting this stance, the chapter established the conditions for the interpretive synthesis undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5. The findings were not merely presented in isolation but were re-situated within a broader theoretical scaffolding that drew on concepts of hybridity, small-state sociology, and symbolic violence. Thus, the chapter prepared the ground for a discussion that was not only empirical in its evidentiary base but also interpretive in its theoretical ambition.

3.5 Reflexivity, Ethics, and Limitations

The methodological architecture of this thesis cannot be understood without a sustained engagement with reflexivity, ethics, and limitations. These are not supplementary concerns appended to the technical narrative of research design; they are constitutive of how knowledge in this project was generated, shaped, and interpreted. In examining democracy as it is lived in Malta and Singapore—two small, postcolonial states where visibility, proximity, and reputation infuse civic life—questions of positionality, ethical responsibility, and methodological constraint are inseparable from the analysis itself. This section therefore integrates reflexivity, ethics, and limitations into a single framework, showing how they shaped the research process and, in turn, became findings in their own right.

3.5.1 Researcher Positionality: Insider/Outsider Dynamics

The researcher's positionality had been shaped by a dual identity: insider in Malta and outsider in Singapore. This duality did not function as a hindrance but as an analytic resource, offering a comparative lens that sharpened the understanding of civic intimacy through contrast and reflection across the two contexts.

In Malta, cultural fluency provided immediate access to networks and enabled candid interviews. Familiarity with partisan codes embedded in village *festas*, kinship

structures, and the circulation of local gossip allowed the researcher to interpret the unspoken dimensions of everyday politics, resonating with earlier ethnographic insights (Boissevain, 1984; Mitchell, 2002; Veenendaal, 2019). Yet such proximity also carried the risk of normalising clientelism and patronage, rendering them invisible as taken-for-granted practices. To mitigate this, impressions were systematically triangulated with textual sources, media reporting, and peer debriefings, ensuring that analysis did not collapse into an uncritical reproduction of insider assumptions.

In Singapore, by contrast, outsider status posed an entirely different set of challenges. Institutional affiliation with Nanyang Technological University opened doors to elite actors, but among grassroots participants it occasionally provoked suspicion. Citizens were acutely conscious of surveillance and reputational risk, and the researcher's Western identity created a paradoxical combination of privilege and distance. Unlike interlocutors, the researcher could speak openly, publish without fear of reprisal, and withdraw from the field at will. This asymmetry required ongoing reflexive negotiation, as the researcher was alternately welcomed as a legitimate scholar and regarded as a potential threat. The ambiguity of this positionality, echoing Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, revealed the extent to which surveillance and suspicion structured civic life in Singapore.

Ultimately, the insider/outsider duality generated what may be described as contrastive reflexivity. Elements that appeared naturalised in one context became visible only when set against the other. Malta's noisy, performative partisanship rendered Singapore's silences more pronounced, while Singapore's muted compliance underscored the entrenchment of Maltese clientelism. From a critical pragmatist perspective, this dynamic confirmed that knowledge was always situated and partial, shaped by the vantage point of the observer.

3.5.2 Emotional Resonance as Data

Ethnographic immersion carried profound emotional weight, and this weight proved methodologically productive. During my fieldwork in Singapore, separation from my

five-month-old daughter generated a constant undercurrent of grief that became inseparable from the research process. Encounters with migrant workers who video-called their children in public spaces echoed my own routines, producing moments of affective recognition in which the boundaries between personal loss and political exclusion collapsed. In keeping with Behar's (1996) notion of "vulnerable observation," these resonances demonstrated that emotion could serve as data, revealing how civic intimacy was shaped as much through absence as through presence.

Other episodes reinforced this recognition. I recalled overhearing two Malay women discuss religious patriarchy and domestic abuse, a moment that moved me to tears. Such responses were not reducible to personal sentiment; rather, they exemplified what Lorimer (2010) described as "emotional knowledge," forms of understanding available only through embodied immersion. Emotion did not distort interpretation in these instances but instead sharpened awareness of the subtle textures of compliance, silence, and marginalisation that organised everyday democracy in Singapore.

In Malta, the emotional register differed markedly. The intimacy of local politics often appeared overbearing, where neutrality was glaringly visible and reputational sanctioning almost immediate. My long familiarity with these dynamics sometimes rendered them banal, yet reflexive journaling reminded me that banality itself constituted a political affect - the normalisation of processes such as clientelism into everyday common sense.

In both contexts, emotion-whether grief, alienation, or banality-was not a peripheral by-product but a structuring condition of fieldwork. Reflexivity transformed these experiences into analytical leverage, exposing how affect infused the very fabric of civic life, offering rich revelations about the nature of democracy as it is lived in the most everyday sense.

3.5.3 Ethical Dilemmas in Practice

The study received formal ethical approval from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee and fully complied with GDPR regulations. Informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling were ensured, with participants in sensitive roles allowed to review and redact their transcripts. However, while these measures fulfilled procedural requirements, they did not resolve the deeper ethical dilemmas that arose in the course of research. The real challenges emerged not from bureaucratic compliance but from the lived politics of visibility, silence, and representation.

In Singapore, silence itself became a central feature of the field. Participants frequently demonstrated an acute awareness of the "red lines" that could not be crossed. Surveillance was pervasive and diffuse, shaping a climate in which dissent could be expressed only in whispers, in coded language, or through strategic silence. To press for candour in such conditions would have risked exposing participants to greater vulnerability. It was in response to this environment that I adopted what might be termed a practice of "reflexive restraint." Rather than attempting to break through silences, I accepted them as meaningful data in their own right and refrained from seeking disclosures that could compromise participants' safety.

In Malta, the ethical difficulties were of an entirely different nature. Here, access to participants was abundant, but the field was dominated by elite voices whose accounts threatened to drown out alternative perspectives. The risk lay not in silence but through the saturation of a dominant viewpoint, where the dominance of those in power could be inadvertently reproduced through research itself. To counter this, I actively sought out actors on the margins-independent journalists, grassroots organisers, and politicians from the main political parties, but also from alternative parties-and made deliberate choices during thematic analysis to foreground their perspectives alongside those of elites. This effort aimed to disrupt the imbalance of representation rather than reinforce it.

The most disquieting dimension of the research, however, was the recognition of my own complicity. My privileged positionality - secured by a foreign passport and reinforced by institutional protection through academic affiliation - allowed me to benefit from the very systems I sought to critique. This realisation echoed Taussig's (1992) warning that ethnographic observation can itself enact symbolic violence when it extracts testimony without adequately confronting the asymmetries of power at play. Researcher reflexivity, in this context, entails acknowledging that any research process inevitably involves some degree of power imbalance or asymmetry; while such imbalance cannot always be fully offset or corrected, it can - and must - be consciously recognised and critically engaged with.

In response, I sought to mitigate this risk by anonymising vulnerable interlocutors, withholding sensitive material that could endanger them, and deliberately presenting contradictions rather than asserting definitive or universal truths. In this way, silence once more emerged not only as a practical safeguard but also as an ethical stance and an analytic category through which the politics of fieldwork could be interpreted.

3.5.4 Limitations as Findings

No methodological design was free from constraint, particularly in the study of small states where density and visibility intensified both access and risk. This project inevitably confronted limitations arising from case selection, sampling strategies, positional asymmetries, and the epistemic biases embedded in global indices. Yet rather than undermining the study, these very constraints illuminated the dynamics and oversights it sought to investigate.

The small-N, multiple case study design allowed for considerable depth but inevitably restricted generalisability. Malta and Singapore functioned as illustrative rather than representative cases. Their boundedness, however, underscored how civic intimacy unfolded under conditions of smallness. Snowball sampling, especially in Singapore, enabled crucial access but reproduced network redundancies, making dissenting voices more elusive. In Malta, insider positionality risked normalising clientelism, while in

Singapore, outsider estrangement hindered access to subterranean networks. Neither positionality was neutral, but each revealed the uneven ways in which democracy was experienced across different civic ecologies.

Global indices such as Freedom House and V-Dem provided useful tools for longitudinal comparison, but their liberal biases obscured hybrid realities. Malta's consistently high ratings concealed the corrosive effects of clientelism, whereas Singapore's persistently low scores failed to capture the legitimacy that many citizens attributed to stability and prosperity. The Triangulated Validation Loop developed in this study transformed these blind spots into sites of productive analysis, juxtaposing field data with index findings to expose tensions between procedural measurement and substantive experience.

Another limitation emerged from the relative scarcity of explicitly pro-government or compliant perspectives in the qualitative corpus, particularly in Singapore. A climate of anticipatory self-censorship and reputational risk meant that citizens supportive of the PAP, or politically indifferent, were less likely to participate. This skew was not ignored but reflexively acknowledged and treated as diagnostic of the civic climate itself: the struggle to access affirmative voices revealed the boundedness of political discourse. To address this asymmetry, the analysis incorporated government communications, parliamentary records, and international governance assessments as supplementary sources. These did not "balance" the corpus in any positivist sense, but they provided a critical counterpoint, ensuring that legitimacy, stability, and satisfaction were examined alongside repression, constraint, and dissent.

Thus, what initially appeared as methodological limitations-sampling redundancies, index biases, insider/outsider asymmetries-proved diagnostic of symbolic power and violence. They exposed how visibility, silence, and reputational sanction shaped not only democratic life but also its scholarly study. In small states, the boundaries between subject and method, ethics and analysis, remained porous. To research democracy was to encounter the very dynamics of intimacy, constraint, and symbolic violence that citizens themselves navigated.

3.5.5 Conclusion

Reflexivity, ethics, and limitations were not treated as ancillary considerations but as methodological insights that shaped the very conceptual framework of this thesis. Emotional resonance transformed grief and alienation into epistemological tools, turning experiences of loss and estrangement into ways of knowing that carried analytical weight. The insider/outsider duality fostered a contrastive reflexivity that deepened comparative analysis, allowing the positional shifts of the researcher to illuminate the lived dynamics under study. Ethical dilemmas exposed the political significance of silence, the structural dominance of elites, and the complicity of research itself, revealing how the act of inquiry was entangled in the very power relations it sought to analyse. Limitations, far from undermining validity, became findings, reflecting the mechanisms of symbolic power that were central to the investigation.

Taken together, these dimensions reinforced the central claim of the thesis: democracy in small hybrid states could not be understood solely through institutions, metrics, or indices. It had to be apprehended through the embodied, affective, and intimate practices of everyday life-practices that not only generated knowledge but also constrained its very production. By placing reflexivity, ethics, and limitations at the core of its methodology, this study demonstrated that examining democracy in Malta and Singapore meant confronting and being transformed by the dynamics of visibility, intimacy, and symbolic violence that defined their civic fabric.

3.6 Conclusion

This thesis grounds its methodology in an interpretivist paradigm enriched by critical pragmatism, viewing democracy as a lived, contested, and embodied practice that is socially constructed yet constrained by durable structures. Using a most-similar systems design, multiple case study of Malta and Singapore, it deploys a convergent mixed-methods design-political ethnography, elite interviews, and textual analysis alongside V-Dem and Freedom House data-integrated through a Triangulated Integration Matrix and Validation Loop to systematically test convergence and expose index blind spots.

The approach prioritises context, embodiment, and civic intimacy while maintaining analytical rigour via transparent coding, peer audits, longitudinal benchmarking, and explicit mapping of research questions to methods. Reflexivity, ethics, and acknowledged limitations are treated as findings in their own right, revealing how small-state density, visibility, and reputation shape both democratic life and the research process. Collectively, this unique methodological research design advances theory beyond proceduralism, showing how hybrid democracies are constituted through rituals, silences, and symbolic power.

4.0 Findings: When democracy is both felt and measured: What ethnography and indices tell us about Malta and Singapore

Following the precepts of convergent parallel design discussed earlier, the collection and analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data for both Malta and Singapore was carried out concurrently.

As explored in the data analysis section of the methodology, reflexive thematic analysis was engaged to construct themes in a meaningful way from the data. After multiple rounds of reading and re-reading the transcripts for Malta and Singapore, codes that were identified were refined and then developed into themes.

These themes were then organised according to the broader conceptual analysis strands identified in the introduction, which will be reiterated here for reference:

- 1). The influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?
- 2). The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?
- 3). Navigating civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

The Singaporean case study will first be explored, followed by the Maltese case study.

While these three orientating analytical strands have been used to organise the findings for both Malta and Singapore, the themes that have been developed and explored in

each case study sometimes differ. For example, gender featured as an embodied democratic issue in Malta, while it did not in Singapore. In Singapore, however, coercion and control over embodied behaviours, such as smiling, was a theme that was apparent and developed during reflexive thematic analysis.

The quantitative findings for both Malta and Singapore are listed separately at the end of this chapter. The V-Dem data and Freedom house data are depicted as line graphs and tables, drawing on relevant and resonant indicators and indices correlating to the five core themes.

4.1 Setting the scene: An outsider inside Singapore's guided democracy

Diverse elements of Singapore hint at chaos: tropical heat, wild monsoon rains, and around 6 million bodies packed into an island that measures just 735.6 km². However, Singapore is anything but chaotic. Rather, hyper-regulation and a profoundly pervasive—yet subtle—control underpins everything, from public spaces to social life.

My Mediterranean sensibilities, accustomed to the boisterous disorganisation and liveliness of Malta, were challenged in every respect in Singapore. The “loud silence” of Singapore's public spaces - the Mass Rapid Transit system (MRT), malls, campuses - felt unsettling. Certain civic norms that enrich Maltese life, such as the exchange of smiles with strangers in the streets or the initiation of friendly chat in public settings—often went unreciprocated. While watching Singapore National Day rehearsals, I was struck by the joylessness and discipline, a deep contrast to the fun, frivolity and spontaneity present in Maltese village *festas*. The atmosphere was festive yet strangely devoid of spontaneous celebration. Every cheer felt choreographed, every flag waved in unison. Standing among the silent spectators, I felt like part of a machine - not a reveller, but part of a socially engineered spectacle of national unity.

To the casual observer, it would appear as though Singaporean citizens are passive bystanders, alienated from others and estranged from political consciousness. However, this quietness and profound observance of social norms appeared to me,

through my fieldwork and interviews, as a deeply embedded, taught habitus, and a prescribed behaviour. An invisible hand shapes Singaporean life across multiple dimensions, and that hand is the PAP.

From August 2024 until November 2024, I was immersed in the field in Singapore as a political ethnographer, steeping myself in Singaporean society to learn as much as possible about the nature of democracy on this Southeast Asian Island. The findings that will be unpacked in this chapter point to the rich complexity and nuance of the Singaporean experience: Democracy is hybridised, an authoritarian underbelly cloaked in procedural liberal elements. Interviews, fieldwork observations, textual analysis, ethnographic reflections and quantitative datasets paint a picture of a democracy that impacts and shapes body, mind, emotions, social life, civic life, working life, family life, political life, and even education. In other words, the way Singaporeans live out their democracy influences every aspect of their being. More poignantly, the way in which the government extends the experience of democracy to citizens is deeply conditional and often symbolic, rather than substantive.

Before launching into the findings, it is also vital to offer some balance and perspective. The interviewees, whose observations, experiences, and reflections comprise a large proportion of this data, were nearly all very critical of the PAP. These individuals were members of academia, the opposition, journalists, writers, historians, and activists. Their views paint a picture of democracy in Singapore that is severely constrained and strongly curated by government forces. However, it is important to acknowledge that the vast majority of those living in Singapore approve of the PAP regime, and in some international measures, Singapore tops global governance ranks. For example, in 2024, Singapore gained top position in the Chandler Good Government Index (CGGI) released on May 15. South Korea was the only other Asian country in the top 20, in 20th position. Singapore reached the number one ranking due to gaining first place in three of the seven pillars measured: leadership and foresight; strong institutions, and an attractive marketplace. While the CGGI measure evaluates governance, not democracy, it nonetheless highlights that Singapore's government can be viewed in a positive light in

some respects, and it is vital to recognise that to present a balanced portrayal of the government.

In the coming sections, the major themes that were developed from the Singapore findings will be explored in depth, with qualitative insights offered first, and quantitative analyses presented after them. To further contextualise the quantitative findings, which are represented as democratic value indicators sourced from V-Dem (v.15) and Freedom House, graphs comparing Singapore with the wider Asian region over the past two decades have been included. These graphs have been created using V-Dem data and software and look specifically at liberal, deliberative, participatory, electoral, and egalitarian elements of democracy.

4.2 Themes relating to the influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?

Ethnographic excerpt: A Reflection from the field

“My awareness of a hybrid zone between democracy and authoritarianism became finely tuned through conversations with elites and experts who resided in Singapore’s academic and policy worlds. While crude analyses of Singapore often label the regime outright as authoritarian, those with whom I spoke referred to a system of governance that was “guided”- procedurally democratic in form and appearance, but authoritarian in essence and substance. Textual analysis of documentation in public spaces, online journalistic critiques and exposés, and casual interactions revealed the unspoken agreement or social contract that rights were conditional on the upholding of state norms and expectations. The full experience of Singaporean democratic citizenship is linked inextricably to contribution and production, and freedom is meted out in exact proportion to the stability desired by the state.”

Singapore achieves stability and maintains legitimacy through a hybrid political configuration that merges democratic symbolism with technocratic efficiency and informal authoritarian power mechanisms. Tools such as elite control, formal and informal networks and the guise of meritocracy are used by PAP under the umbrella of

democratic order, blurring the boundaries of authoritarianism and liberal democracy. In Singapore, Asian values such as Confucianism are often presented as cultural anchors that justify governance models that champion harmony, hierarchy, respect, discipline, stability, community, and adherence to tradition. However, my experience and interpretation of these values suggests they also function as justifications for control in addition to the embodiment of a deeply founded cultural ethos.

Indeed, recent research conducted by Nord et al., (2025) harnessed the most recent V-Dem dataset (v.15) to demonstrate that hybrid regimes currently dominate world democracies by blending the boundaries between democracy and authoritarianism. Singapore embodies this hybridity through its adherence to procedural democracy, technocratic management, and carefully curated populist narratives, such as the importance of Asian values and meritocracy. Recalling Öniş (2017) work, the Singaporean democracy model represents a hybrid regime with liberal tendencies: it focuses on economic development and democratisation while simultaneously facing serious challenges in institutionalising liberal democracy due to pervasive authoritarian tendencies. The following sections additionally uncover some of the specific ways in which informal networks and elite influence shape the nature of Singaporean democracy.

4.2.1 Dressing the state as a democracy: Techniques to tilt the playing field

For self-exiled journalist Terry Xu, hybrid democracy and elite influence in Singapore is apparent through multiple avenues, with the drawing of electoral boundaries representing a prime example. When the voting behaviour of these parcels is analysed following elections, boundaries are redrawn based on the results of the past election to ensure PAP dominance, redividing and grouping zones that favoured the opposition. Lawyer and Singaporean political exile, Tan Wah Piow, additionally mentioned the commonality of gerrymandering: “Gerrymandering affecting Parliamentary constituencies in Singapore is so blatantly unfair to the opposition. The Presidential election cannot likewise be considered fair or democratic when the eligibility of the candidacy is so narrowly defined that it disenfranchises the majority of the population.”

Xu also highlighted that opposition candidates often receive lesser coverage, or are treated as invisible in the media, thus impacting their ability to compete on an even footing in elections. He elaborated: “I wouldn’t say bias. It’s more censorship, meaning they would not cover the information about the opposition candidate. They would cover less about the opposition candidate or civil society.”

Leong-Sze Hian added to this reflection, explaining that good opposition candidates are ignored, while less competent ones are interviewed regularly to highlight their ineptitude (and therefore unsuitability for leadership). Singaporean human rights activist and social worker Jolovan Wham also emphasised the various techniques through which opposition candidates are placed at a disadvantage: “You have opposition politicians who might find themselves being investigated by the police for seemingly really small things. Or there could be a smear campaign to make a particular opposition politician look bad. If you're an opposition politician, you'll be very worried about your employment prospects, for instance, because generally there is a fear among people about hiring employees from the opposition camp or fear of wanting to do business with someone who is too strongly associated with the opposition.” Such insights speak directly to the notion of reputational sanctioning and the risk of high visibility in small states.

Thum also explained how opponents or dissidents could be singled out and integrated into the machinery of governance to remove competition or threats to the status quo: “So, there is also a process of co-optation, where the government has been, well, historically good, but less so nowadays, at identifying people who are talented outside or people who are critics of the government and bringing them in. George Yeo, the former foreign minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, the current foreign minister, were both critics and they were brought into the system. Vivian has really made a 180-degree turn in his views.”

Beyond electoral design, Singapore’s governance is sustained through an intricate institutional ecology that embeds the ruling party within the machinery of the state.

Bilveer Singh characterises this as a systematic PAPisation of governance: a professional civil service synchronised with party priorities; statutory boards that translate political directives into administrative expertise; and a labour movement, via the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), functioning as a para-political partner rather than a counterweight. The People's Association and its grassroots networks extend this integration into everyday community management, aligning neighbourhood life with the architecture of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs). Complementary constitutional innovations - the GRC and Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) schemes - reinforce the choreography of managed pluralism: they guarantee opposition visibility while preserving decisive executive control. These mechanisms demonstrate how dominance is normalised through institutional design, converting the appearance of procedural fairness into a durable performance of consensus.

Research also revealed Singaporean versions of material patronage for those who supported the government, despite the glaring absence of any literature or studies on patronage or clientelism within the island state. One particular example that arose was the promise of housing estate upgrades in exchange for electoral loyalty. According to reports in one example, housing wards that voted in favour of the incumbent saw upgrades, while opposition-supporting wards were excluded from the scheme (Chin, 1997). Public housing, where more than 80% of the population resides, can therefore be used as a tool to consolidate PAP control.

4.2.2 Absence of independent checks and balances and abuse of power

Many interview participants drew attention to the absence of autonomous auditing bodies to keep checks and balances against the government in place. As Xu explained: *"See, the thing here is, in Singapore there's no truly independent body because all the bodies ultimately just report to the Prime Minister. So, very frankly, the Prime Minister has a say over all the decisions to proceed in terms of investigation."*

Sol Iglesias, an associate Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines, also pointed out that the lack of checks and balances created issues surrounding accountability, transparency, and the upholding of rights, particularly in the

case of political dissidents. Iglesias is also married to PJ Thum, a scholar and critic of the Singaporean government. *"(There's) a lack of independent institutions. There's no commission on human rights, for example. There's no ombudsman. These sorts of checks and balances. In a way, it's perhaps not necessarily systematically disadvantageous to ordinary people, unless like in my husband's case, for example, you are one of the very few people that the regime may perceive as some kind of political threat. And then the machinery can be mobilised to make life very difficult for you."*

Others referred to the government's ability to change the constitution with relative ease, an issue which was viewed as an undemocratic abuse of power. Tan referred to the research of former Attorney General Francis Seow, who wrote several books highlighting the PAP's unconstitutional, unethical activities with respect to his experiences as a dissident of the regime:

"In 'To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison' he mentioned a 'Tan Wah Piow Amendment' to the constitution introduced by the Singapore Government in 1987, allowing for the revocation of Tan Wah Piow. Francis Seow saw it as a measure intended to legitimise the stripping of Tan's citizenship to prevent him from returning to Singapore. Seow use this as an example of how the legal and constitutional framework in Singapore could be manipulated for political purposes, particularly to silence critics of the government."

Singaporean academic and politician James Gomez added: *"Yeah, I think the key thing to understand is that nothing in Singapore is independent. It's interdependent to the political structure. So that's why it works like that as a system to self-correct, to self-check."*

Thum similarly echoed: *"They have changed the constitution on average once a year since Independence, so the constitution is meaningless because they just change it to whatever they want."*He elaborated further: *"So, the rule of law in Singapore is very strong...The letter of the law is very strong. The spirit of the law is almost meaningless, because of discretion, POFMA being the big example. The government can simply tell*

you the truth is X and you have to accept it and fighting that is hard, it's expensive, it's time consuming."

The experience of Tan Wah Piow similarly demonstrates how the spirit of the rule of law is absent in Singapore, with legal processes appearing procedural rather than substantive. PJ Thum noted in particular that the inclusion of discretion into legislation creates space for ambivalence and the abuse of power: *"FICA doesn't even have recourse to the courts. They have secret tribunals. But there's other laws where they sidestep the rule of law entirely. The Internal Security Act is one. Criminal Law Temporary Provisions Act where they are permitted to suspend the normal rule of law in the interest of security. And that is also part of the Constitution where they can carve out all sorts of exemptions to our freedom of expression, our right to free expression in the interest of security, harmony, and national interests."*

These observations demonstrate that political morality and rule of law are both compromised by Singapore's hybrid regime. As Miyasaki (2022) outlines, democracy is intertwined with moral principles that expect public officials to conduct themselves in ways that reflect a commitment to the common good, rather than acting from a place of self-interest. Leaders must uphold the word of the law and also uphold the spirit of those laws, which should be anchored in fairness, transparency, and justice. While the rule of law should ensure that democracy protects minorities and individual rights, this principle can be flouted if political actors disregard moral constraints and twist the legal system to serve their personal interests, as evident in the examples provided above.

4.2.3 Sidestepping democracy and meritocracy: Cronyism, elite capture and informal networks

Peeling back further layers behind the veneer of democracy revealed the way in which social and cultural capital, cronyism, and informal networks enabled the longevity of the PAP. The relevance of Charles Wright Mills' (1956) concept of the power elite was particularly relevant to the observations that were shared. These elites often move in the same circles, receive the same types of education and form part of the same social

networks, which allows them to collude and collaborate with ease across diverse sectors of society. Although they operate in distinctive institutions, they often engage with each other in formal and informal settings, divulging resources and information, ultimately shaping policies that affect the wider public.

Iglesias noted: *“So, the question is, to what extent do the political elites, the economic elites, and so on, benefit from a system that privileges more than a stable ruling class that revolves around the Lee family and their allies and the People's Action Party as part of the party? So, is it some kind of crony form of corruption? Perhaps.”*

Leong-Sze Hian and PJ Thum explained how informal networks enabled the entrenchment of influence beyond formal democratic structures. The creation of networks of trust rendered it easy to place people in key positions to facilitate decision-making at an elite level. Thum explained that: *“Informal networks are easily legitimised within the system because the system gives the Prime Minister and the Cabinet a lot of discretion about who they can appoint and the kind of decisions that they make...The current Attorney General is Lucian Wong, the Prime Minister's former personal lawyer, the second Chief Justice, Yong Pung How, was Lee Kuan Yew's good friend from Cambridge who hadn't even practiced law in 20 years....They are informal, but they've been formalised so you don't say, “This is my buddy.” You say, “Oh, this is the Attorney General. This is the Minister,” whatever. And you look at how many ministers are children of previous politicians, again, network of trust. How many ministers used to be the personal secretary of a previous minister, including the current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong's office, so networks of trust.”*

Jamus Lim, Singaporean academic and member of parliament representing the Workers' Party, and Jolovan Wham both additionally pointed out that these networks of trust have infiltrated national bodies such as the labour union, ensuring that a member from the government is permanently embedded within the group. Lim elaborated *“All the major positions in the Trade Union Congress are held by sitting MPs of the ruling party. In contrast, an opposition member will never be able to be a part of this union and likewise would never be invited to any of the union activities. The union,*

of course, on paper they can say they run independently, and they elect their own leadership, but then right at the top there is always an appointment that comes from the government.”

Jolovan Wham elaborated that certain elite individuals were inserted into influential positions or awarded contracts, bypassing due processes and the meritocracy Singapore so strongly ascribes to and claims it practices: *“And you will find that the friends, allies, and associates and even relatives, family members of those who are in positions of power will all somehow be parachuted into these different positions, either within government or within the business community. So, one very clear example of that was, the husband of the manpower minister (Josephine Teo) was also the CEO of some company that was in charge of construction. I think during COVID, there was a need suddenly for more dorms to be built, so then immediately they got the contract. You know what I mean?”*

The Straits Times published a story about the incident, noting that Wham had been issued letters of demand from Teo’s lawyers, requesting a public apology and retraction of the corruption claim.

While the examples provided above which highlight the ways in which nepotism and cronyism shape the corridors of power, Singapore has ironically long cultivated a narrative of espousing meritocracy. Indeed, an NUS white paper on Singapore’s evolving meritocracy issued the following statement from former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the National Day Rally in 2019: *“Let me start with how we are giving our young the best possible start in life. So that anyone who works hard will have a chance to succeed, regardless of starting point or family background. Because this is what meritocracy in Singapore is about.”*

Some of the interviewees commented specifically on the propaganda of meritocracy, noting that connections, cultural and social capital and class-based advantages were often concealed behind the veneer of meritocratic appointments. Gomez reflected: *“On paper, Singapore is a meritocracy in many things...if you are, say, a prominent business*

family, or you're a prominent political family and you have a child, usually the firstborn son, there's a very good chance that if you decided as that firstborn son that you wanted to pursue a career in politics, you would probably have a lot of connections. So, if you look on paper, it's very meritocratic because after all, they went to the best universities, they had very good jobs even prior to joining politics. It doesn't necessarily come across as kind of a corrupt system. I would not go as far as to say it's a corrupt system, but it's certainly true that you would have certain advantages if you were in the political or the economic elite."

For Iglesias, the experience of meritocracy strongly depends on one's socio-economic background: *"I mean, meritocracy is a very powerful thing. I would say in Singapore and again, there is this difference between how ordinary people probably experience it and how the rich and powerful members of the ruling elite experience it. But the fact is, a very close-knit, highly conservative elite basically runs the show."*

Tan further explained that while Singapore may outwardly appear as a democracy, an elite "mafia" were controlling it: *"I start from the standpoint that the ruling PAP is the Mafia that captured the Singapore State. But as a Smart Mafia, it likes to dress the State as a democracy and did that with great success, aided no doubt by the huge State coffers enabling it to buy local and international influence."*

Charles Wright Mills' power elite theory (1956) offers charged insights into the nature of this phenomenon and how it exists and is perpetuated in Singapore. As Mills noted, the power elite can consist of individuals as diverse as corporate executives, military personnel and politicians. Overlocking networks of association through social interactions, education, and networking render informal collaboration and collusion easier. The subsequent sharing of information, resources, and decision-making that arises not only undermines the rule of law and democratic checks and balances but has a distinctive impact on wider society and the trajectory that politics takes, as observed by Tan, Iglesias and Gomez. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff's (2006) work adds further nuance to understandings of the power elite by highlighting some of the techniques used to naturalise and normalise this excessive elite influence, such as control of the

mass media, which is certainly evidence in Singapore, particularly following the passage of POFMA in 2019.

Wham's experience with *The Straits Times* resonates with this reflection. PAP preoccupation with nation-building and social engineering also indicates the importance of public relations and the control of narratives in Singapore, guiding the development of certain views and perspectives around national identity while concealing others. The idea of nation-building and identity will be explored later in this chapter.

Overall, hybrid governance in Singapore fuses soft authoritarianism with procedural democratic rituals, directed by the hands of elites who are often invisible. The PAP operates under a model of guided democracy engineered to prioritise control, efficiency, and performance. PAP dominance is reinforced through para-political organisations, elite recruitment through informal networks of trust, civil service alignment, and patronage. While discourses of meritocracy are circulated and promoted by the elite, the insights explored above suggest that the practice of meritocracy is somewhat hollow, particularly in elite circles or positions of influence. Finally, the possibility of genuine political pluralism is strongly inhibited. Fear of defamation and political reprisal mean opposition candidates or supporters often choose to anticipatorily self-censor or curb self-expression by self-policing, a strong demonstration of the hegemonic control invoked by the state, and a norm that will be explored in greater depth in the coming sections.

4.2.4 Size and personalisation: Informal networks and nepotism

Gomez pointed out that Singapore's size is directly correlated to the nature of elite control in the upper echelons of politics. Smallness can facilitate nepotism; *"You read Ross Waddington's book; he says Singapore is run by a network of 400. They are married to each other, they marry their children to each other, they place each other in different places because you see, Singapore is so small."*

PJ Thum elaborated further on this idea: *“Singapore's ruling elite is actually really, really tiny. And Lee Kuan Yew himself said, if the top 100 people in our government were in a plane and it crashed, Singapore would collapse, which is incredibly arrogant. I don't think it'd make a damn difference if we lost the top 100 people. You can see why they think that way because they are so interconnected.”*

For Jolovan Wham, Singapore's size means that the cultivation of an authoritarian political landscape is rendered significantly easier, because these informal networks of influence have more absolute control over the populace: *“The smallness of the country means that control is easy and almost absolute. So, all the major institutions in this country are also controlled by the same party. Our unions, our civil society, even the judiciary, the businesses, business associations, it's all connected in one way or other to this one party. Media too, of course.”*

PJ Thum added this perspective, exploring how smallness can contribute to informal networks and appointments of “trust”: *“Because of the small size of Singapore and how small and interconnected all these social, economic, and educational networks are, what we see in general is the formalisation of informal friendship and trust networks.”*

The observations above overlap with the observations of Corbett and Veenendaal (2018), who highlight that small states can be prone to tight networks of political and economic elites enforcing agendas, elevating the risk of corruption, elite capture and “groupthink” occurring.

4.3 Themes relating to the management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?

Ethnographic excerpt: A reflection from the field

“As I moved through the city in the relentless heat, I became acutely aware of the bodily impositions: the self-imposed stiffness in people's postures, the unconscious

suppression of small talk, the awareness of space and silence. Even the simple act of making eye contact or offering a greeting to a stranger felt quietly proscribed, as if social spontaneity itself had been muted. Stepping onto the MRT platform was like moving between two climates: the oppressive tropical heat clung to my skin, only to be stripped away abruptly by the over-cooled air of the train. Inside, the silence pressed against my ears, the hush so complete I could hear the faint creak of my shoes. I watched as people arranged themselves, arms tucked in, faces lowered, bodies turned slightly away from one another, a collective choreography of withdrawal.”

Interestingly, the concept of embodiment arose in tandem with the exploration and development of themes pertaining to question two. Embodiment speaks of the idea of democracy as more than a cognitive experience or system of institutions: it can encompass lived, material and sensorial elements of life. As Machin (2022) notes, embodied democracy emphasises the idea that democracy includes the lived experiences, feelings, and interactions of people as they participate in the political process. The scholarship of theorists such as Weinstein (1996) and Burstein (1981) additionally highlights the importance of the concrete outcomes and material effects of democratic regimes on people’s lives. Bentley (2005) and Stears (2011) develop the idea that real or realist democracy refers to more than empowerment opportunities at the ballot box—but also education and living standards and experiences, encompassing the material, spatial, and sensory dimensions of everyday life.

The discipline, arrangement and visibility of bodies in Singapore according to PAP rationales was present in myriad ways in the data. Authority is enforced through embodied practices, such as capital punishment or government-enforced norms on social practices such as queuing. Identity and belonging also takes on an embodied element: migrant workers are rendered invisible, relegated to places that their bodies can’t be seen.

4.3.1 Smile: The making of a more gracious nation

This theme of embodied democracy in relation to Singaporean PAP authority and national identity emerged organically in diverse, and sometimes surprising ways with my interview informants. One of the most curiously revealing and compelling interviews was with a representative of the Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM). SKM encourages Singaporeans to “be greater” and actively participate in the shaping of a more “gracious society”. While the SKM is an NGO, it is affiliated with the government, sometimes pairing with the Ministry of Education, National Environmental Agency, and Land Transport Authority. According to the SKM representative, the movement found its origins in part in the initiatives of Lee Kuan Yew’s nation-building initiatives: *“So, in the 1980s, Lee Kuan Yew started the Courtesy Campaign, really for Singaporeans to practice basic courtesy because we are a very young nation. Simple things like queuing up orderly. Now Singaporeans love to queue. We queue for good food at the hawker centre. We queue to buy tickets, we queue orderly.”*

The SKM representative explained that such initiatives were seized upon and further developed by later Prime Ministers, leading to registration as a charity with the Institution of a Public Character (IPC) (registered and approved) status in 1997. Nowadays, SKM is funded primarily by the government. Singapore’s Societies Act legislation governs the registration and operation of all charities, and those that do not receive governmental approval are deemed unlawful. From this perspective, SKM can be understood to be a PAP-approved body. Indeed, the representative further explained: *“The Ministry of Education is one of our core partners when we work a lot with the schools. In fact, as part of their citizenship education...every quarter, there is a planned curriculum on what values they're going to learn.”*

The inclusion of citizenship education in Singapore represents a civic *habitus* of sorts which is taught and inculcated from a young age. The SKM representative also spoke of creating “smile zones” in schools where students have to smile when they pass through, or local running groups where joggers make their way through public parks smiling at people. The forced production of emotions, in place of genuine and spontaneous

human expression, indicates the Singaporean state's influence in shaping not only mind and body, but also emotions.

This concept of enforcing and teaching kindness could be construed as lacking authenticity. Indeed, there are some parallels with Arlie Hochschild's work on emotional labour (1983), where she explores the commodification of human feelings in labour, founding this analysis on Marx's alienation theory. The production and demonstration of emotions also resonate with ideas around the impact of social and cultural norms on the body. Bodies also often encompass the dominant order by replicating unconscious and conscious conventions that may in some cases be harmful or repressive. These ideas lean into Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, and highlight the uncomfortable nexus between social performance, the inculcation of values, and the production of emotions in the Singaporean social and political landscape. Closely linked to the cultivation of certain emotions and comportment by the PAP was the control of bodies in dense and compressed civil spaces, which will be developed below.

4.3.2 Spatial intimacy, bodies and control

Exiled Singaporean journalist Terry Xu, editor of *The Online Citizen*, highlighted in our interview how Singapore's high population density intersects with its model of democracy and embodied control. He recalled the 2013 population white paper, which proposed a significant increase in population by 2030 and was, in his words, "bulldozed" through despite public resistance.

Singapore, among the world's smallest nations geographically, has the third highest population density - over 8,200 people per square kilometre compared to Malta's 1,691 per square kilometre. In such a densely populated environment, immigration and population planning are not merely political issues but questions of spatial justice, privacy, and human dignity. The social engineering that shapes Singaporean civic life is closely tied to this density: an intensely managed, highly compressed urban landscape is easier to control when its inhabitants are conditioned into embodied habits of discipline, restraint, and quiet obedience.

This regulation of space and behaviour is evident in the micro-routines of everyday life. During a field observation at a condominium in Jurong, the pristine cleanliness of shared areas and the orderly movement of residents through manicured pathways illustrated how bodily comportment is subtly policed - where even minor deviations from social norms become conspicuous acts of non-compliance. At a local food hawker market, the rigid silence among patrons contrasted starkly with the absence of visible enforcement, illustrating how bodily discipline in civic spaces is internalised and collectively enacted.

Singaporean historian and journalist PJ Thum reinforced this observation, suggesting that figures such as K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs, operate under the belief that “if he just passes enough laws, he can make everything completely controlled and serene.” Thum cited the proliferation of legal instruments - the Public Order Act, the Maintenance of Racial Harmony framework, and the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act - as mechanisms designed to regulate not only public speech but physical space, interpersonal interactions, and civic behaviour. His reflections underscore how freedom of expression and movement are profoundly mediated through a dense legal and moral architecture that governs how Singaporeans act, speak, and relate to one another, demonstrating the confluence of institutional and juridical with personal and physical.

This logic of embodied citizenship also materialises most visibly through National Service (NS). As Alan Chong observes, NS was conceived as a “school for the nation,” a corporeal project that drills collective discipline into the male population and dissolves social and ethnic distinctions within a single performative routine. The resulting *Total Defence habitus* extends the bodily discipline of the barracks into everyday civic life - through reservist call-ups, workplace preparedness and the normalisation of sacrifice as patriotic duty. The male body thus becomes both a site of defence and a medium through which the state enacts belonging, aligning national resilience with corporeal conformity.

The performative nature of civic participation was further illustrated during the researcher’s attendance at the “Building Bridges” seminar on racial harmony at the

OnePeople.sg Hall of Trust in Toa Payoh. Co-hosted by OnePeople.sg and the National Integration Council, the event gathered around a hundred participants - students, civil servants, and retirees - beneath banners proclaiming *Unity in Diversity*. Traditional refreshments and carefully moderated dialogues structured a ritualised display of inclusion, where critique was couched in politeness and dissent remained deferential. When Senior Parliamentary Secretary Shawn Huang addressed the audience with the message, "Inclusion is a collective effort," the response was not applause but silent, courteous nods. Participants later described the session as a "discussion without disruption," encapsulating Singapore's civic ethos: participation mediated through ordered and orchestrated civility.

This vignette reveals the deeper embodied choreography of democratic life in Singapore. Authority operates less through overt coercion than through an affective politics of harmony, where silence, self-control and restraint are elevated as civic virtues. Within this spatial and emotional order, domination is reimagined as politeness and compliance reframed as consensus - an embodiment of how control in Singapore is maintained through the disciplined aesthetics and choreography of order and harmony.

4.3.3 Democracy at home: Proportioning ethnicities in government housing

The control of bodies also manifests in other meaningful ways in Singaporean society. Blogger and financial advisor Leong-Sze Hian additionally raised the issue of ethnicity and housing in Singapore, demonstrating the way in which the PAP control and curate the placement of certain bodies in space to promote racial harmony. Singapore's famed public housing, managed by the HDB, which provides housing to more than 80% of the population, is curated and micro-managed according to the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP). This policy sets limits for the proportion of homeowners of different ethnicities living in public housing. According to Leong-Sze Hian: *"Public flats cannot have more than 25% of any minority race because they want the population to mix together. So, good intention, but the problem is if you are Malay and you have reached that limit, you can only sell to a Malay and not to a Chinese. Malays are lower income,*

so your price will drop and the guy who wants to buy from you knows that you have no choice, but to sell to him, he will lower your price some more. So easily your price will be 20 to 30% less from the guy next to you because he's Chinese. Now somebody just wrote about this a few weeks ago and he was POFMA-d."

Zhu and Said (2024) offer a comprehensive explanation of how the EIP can impact sales. They write: *"When the Chinese quota is maxed out, non-Chinese sellers can only sell to those who are also not Chinese - a significantly smaller pool of eligible buyers. This can impact the flat's selling price, or lengthen the time taken to sell - difficulties which have been acknowledged by the government and debated about in Parliament."*

Leong-Sze Hian's observation has been made by other Singaporeans who are also critical of the detrimental effects of EIP on ethnic minorities. A property agent suggested that racial minorities face greater difficulties selling compared to their Chinese counterparts, as the quotas are based on Singapore's demographics, which as of 2024 was 75.6% Chinese, 15.1% Malays, 7.6% Indians and 1.7% other races (known as "Others") among citizens (Zhu and Said, 2024). The video made by the agent was called into disrepute by the government, who required the agent to publish a correction notice under POFMA.

Tan (2003) additionally notes that ethnic conflicts impact many postcolonial societies, and Singapore opted to enshrine racial and religious harmony as one of its five Shared Values, which espouse its national ideology. The Singaporean policy of multiracialism, in which no ethnicity or race should be unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by state laws, institutions and policies, has seen extensive social, constitutional and institutional engineering to ensure that harmony and ethnic stability reigns supreme (Tan, 2003). As explored earlier in the literature review, Singapore has also been shaped by elements of Confucianism, which prioritise values such as harmony, unity, and collectivism. While the intention of ensuring multiculturalism and mingling in housing situations is in some way a foil to the intensive focus on individualism and social atomisation that Tocqueville and Plato associated with Western expressions of democracy, the particular way in

which it is enacted in Singapore in some respects entrenches inequality by embedding certain ethnicities in lower socio-economic brackets.

4.3.4 Democracy and disciplining non-compliant bodies

Another embodied issue that arose in conversation with Leong-Sze Hian Sze Hian regarded Singapore's high capital execution and corporal punishment rates. Singapore has one of the highest execution rates in the world and was once described as the 'world execution capital' (Yap and Tan, 2020). Those who protest against the death penalty are targeted by the government, with Human Rights Watch noting that they are harassed and intimidated with government officials often invoking POFMA against bodies such as the Transformative Justice Collective, requiring them to post "corrections" notices on material they have shared. Singapore also practices corporal punishment in the form of caning the bare buttocks of men with a rattan cane, a colonial-esque style punishment that speaks to the extensive punitive impact left by British colonisation on the island nation. For many offenses, caning is mandatory, and caning can also be carried out on juveniles. Leong-Sze Hian stated *"I think on a per capita basis, we have the most capital executions in the world, undisputed the most...it's by hanging...if you are below 50 years old, for many crimes, they have rotan, caning. The caning is so bad that if you're over 50, they cannot cane you."*

Such forms of punishment demonstrate an exercise of power by the state over citizens that extends beyond soft coercion into overt dominion. As Machin (2015) notes, democratic theory must consider bodies, because bodies are disciplined by politics and are transformed by political interactions. For Machin (2022), there is a symbiotic relationship between democratic interaction and bodily experience. Bodies disrupt, facilitate, inhibit, and enliven political interactions. The body can be controlled, disciplined, and dominated by the state in instances where individuals do not quietly espouse and respect the quiet but forceful symbolic restrictions placed on them.

This disciplinary mechanism is enacted not through overt policing but through the silent regulation of public comportment. As the Singaporean Ministry of Home Affairs

explains, the sanction of the death penalty is harnessed to ensure people toe the line across a wide range of social norms and expectations. The spectres of hanging and caning, both relics of a British colonial past that persists into the postcolonial Singaporean present, provide profound insight into the power the state wields over the body. As Chun (2009) points out in his reading of political culture in Singapore, the lengths to which the puritanical government goes to suppressing and controlling unproductive, unsavoury and hedonistic behaviour (many executions are for drug trafficking) speaks to the deeply curated nation-building, social-engineering focus of the PAP.

4.3.5 Stratified citizenship and the margins of democracy

Ethnographic excerpt: A reflection from the field

“Walking through the glitzy corridors during my daily visits to Raffles City mall in the Civic District, I began to realise that this version of Singapore wasn’t available to everyone. My forays into Little India, Geylang, Yishun, and Chinatown revealed cultural richness and grit - but the state’s hand remained visible, sanitising history and curating the past, to construct a vision of a harmonised, multiracial nation. In these socially engineered spaces, what is missing is a sense of tradition, history, and working-class life. Traditional kampongs, for example, once communal hearts, have been replaced by controlled high-rise homogeneity. Farming, fishing, and traditional ways of life were exchanged for industrial development. Migrant workers - predominantly from India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines - inhabit a parallel version of Singapore, simultaneously visible yet excluded from civic life. Indian workers confined to construction zones and Filipino domestic helpers reveal layers of exclusion hidden beneath Singapore’s glossy and advanced cosmopolitanism.”

In Singapore, citizenship is unevenly experienced and stratified across racial, economic, colonial, and migration lines. Despite a carefully cultivated external image of multicultural harmony, Singapore reveals significant stratification along ethnic, class, and migration lines. Symbolic inclusion espoused in multiracial narratives often masks

deeper structural exclusion. As Tan (2005) notes, multiracialism is a socially engineered project in Singapore, finding its expression in legislation such as the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and the EIP, designed to foster electoral and spatial integration of different races. However, interview data and textual analysis suggest that the orchestrated performance of multiracialism Singapore espouses may be at odds with the lived and embodied experience of many Singaporeans.

For Noor and Leong (2013), different countries have distinctive approaches to multicultural governance. In the Singaporean model, multicultural governance is guided by pragmatic realism, an economic focus, and the needs of a global city. These foci mean that a substantive multiracialism is compromised: Cultural diversity is showcased but depoliticised - critical minority voices are marginalised in favour of festive, state-curated multiculturalism. Racial dynamics are inescapable. Chinese, Malay, Indian, and 'minority others' co-exist, but not equally, as the Chinese community holds dominance economically, socially, and politically. Malays appeared peripheral, with a calm resilience, while Indians, especially migrant workers, bear the brunt of visible marginalisation. Their roles as carers, cleaners, and labourers seemed fixed, their presence quietly tolerated rather than embraced.

The symbolic invisibility becomes spatially visible during Sunday gatherings in Bugis and other central area, where migrant communities - Filipino, Indian, and Thai - surface in group formations, their consumption patterns and social movements subtly delineating their marginal civic status from the mainstream Chinese-dominated public sphere.

Stratification appeared consistently throughout Singapore, even though it was not always overt. The harmonised cohesion present in Singapore's multiracial narratives was underpinned by hierarchy and exclusion.

Singapore's GRC (Group Representation Constituency) offers a form of tokenistic minority inclusion and representation without altering Chinese dominance. As many of my interview informants such as James Gomez emphasised, Singapore is dominantly Chinese, despite outward appearances. Despite public celebrations of diversity, power

remains concentrated in Chinese hands, with Malays and Indians underrepresented in elite sectors. The intersectionality of “foreignness” and poverty, or lower socio-economic status, was a theme raised by a number of interviewees. Gomez, for example, reflected and offered the following insights on stratified experiences of democratic citizenship: *“I think the poor want to exercise their rights or want to have a change in policy because they are affected most...you have 45% foreigners in Singapore, probably 5% are rich working for banks, that kind of entity. But the 40% are all working class, for them it's even worse. They don't even have a right to vote, so they cannot impact policy.”*

For Jolovan Wham, access to services and assistance was more challenging for those with fewer resources—such as migrant workers; *“I mean, you should talk to poorer communities in Singapore, they often find it hard to access services, especially if they want aid. They want to apply for financial assistance and things like that, there's a lot of surveillance. They put you through a lot of paperwork before you can just get a few hundred dollars. I believe this is by design.”*

Similarly, Leong-Sze Hian Sze Hian explained that migrant workers have a significantly distinct experience of Singapore's glossy cosmopolitan cityscape and sophisticated technocracy; *“All the migrant workers, after midnight, they go to Little India and they sleep along the corridor. And every night at 7:30, a few hundred migrant workers queue up at the restaurant to get free food in Little India. These are what we call those who are waiting for their court cases against the employer to be heard. So, they have no job, they have no bed to sleep, they have no food.”*

Singapore's HDB racial quotas institutionalise inequality while appearing to promote racial mixing and harmony. Racial categorisation persists via National Registration Identity Card race listings and housing quotas. These quotas can limit ethnic economic ability (as outlined in the earlier example of Malay citizens being forced to sell to Malays who are generally a lower socio-economic echelon) and create rigid and fixed categories around ethnic identity. Migrants, especially from South Asia, additionally face legal and social constraints on residency and family formation. Multiculturalism is thus managed

inclusion within a stratified system, with the housing market a critical tool in the social engineering and nation-building project of Singapore.

4.3.6 Concealing inequality through strategy

Another theme that became apparent from conversations and immersion in the Singaporean social field was the engineered way in which PAP developed strategies to conceal structural inequality, to render the appearance of a robustly prosperous, unified, and meritocratic nation state. Strategies such as the absence of an official national poverty line, redistributive policies like cash handouts of health subsidies, soften or hide the bite of inequality without addressing core structural disparities. Iglesias explained; *"We've been unable to contain widening inequality in the country. So, let's say per capita GDP is still pretty high, and because of the government's housing policy, you don't really see a lot of homelessness and that sort of thing. You don't really see a lot of overt poverty, but some of this can be quite hidden."*

PJ Thum noted that inequality was further exacerbated by factors such as severe overcrowding, increasing healthcare costs, and the rapidly rising cost of living. He also referred to the widening gap between rich and poor: *"Singapore has a lot of ultra-rich, but a lot of poor, and especially the lowest 20% are way, way behind. If you've seen my article on inequality, Gini coefficient seems to be falling, but that's because the top 80%, their incomes are rising and then the bottom 20% their incomes are really far behind. It's quite astonishing...People can see the Lamborghinis and Maseratis on the street but no amount of saying, "Oh, Gini coefficient is falling," is going to make people feel like life is getting fairer if they see that."*

For Leong-Sze Hian Sze Hian, the government's refusal to acknowledge poverty was exemplified by its lack of a formally defined poverty line; *"No. We don't need a poverty line because we have no poverty. Of course, the simple measure is below half the median. So, the government's response was, "No problem, all these poor people, we are giving them a lot of government transfers."*

Leong-Sze Hian elaborated further on the smoke and mirror reality of government transfers: *“So, they count all these subsidies that are not in cash. They say, “I topped up your MediSave account to pay for your medical,” but they are simply giving me money to pay for higher costs in the future, and they call it a government transfer.”*

Another strategy for concealing inequality and poverty was to outlaw it or create an environment that rejects it. Leong-Sze Hian explained that you don't see homeless people in Singapore because there are laws associated with vagrancy, such as public nuisance or begging. Singaporean parks also have benches with metal bars to discourage sleeping rough. Bodies become invisible through these control mechanisms. Those who don't conform to the Singaporean identity espoused by the PAP are not welcome. The idea of social engineering emerges again: The reality of poverty and inequality can be erased and concealed through transfers, directed narratives (no official poverty line), thus creating an image of a nation that appears egalitarian, prosperous and stable, despite data that suggests otherwise. Chinatown appeared sanitised - its old shophouses repainted in pastel hues, streets spotless, hawker stalls tightly regulated. Yet, the scent of incense from a discreet temple hinted at layers of history and concealed culture under the gloss.

The margins of Singapore's democracy are sustained not only through legal constraints but through the uneven distribution of care and voice. The observation of a Singaporean acquaintance highlighted how mental health governance exemplifies this gap: despite pervasive rhetoric of social resilience, suicide remains criminalised and access to therapy is impeded by high costs and long waiting times. Welfare, in this register, is measured by productivity rather than by affective well-being. The same calculus shapes the knowledge economy. Universities filter employment through a narrow pedigree of global rankings, producing what the acquaintance calls an “intellectual monoculture” that disciplines thought and limits dissent within academic institutions. These exclusions intersect materially in the housing market, where expatriate investment and speculative holding elevate prices beyond local reach. The result is a stratified citizenship in which emotional, intellectual, and spatial securities are differently

rationed - the lived architecture of a developmental state that governs through scarcity as much as through abundance.

4.3.7 Post-colonial realities and the search for identity

Several interviewees mentioned Singapore's identity crisis. For these individuals, Singapore felt alienated from its cultural past and history, defined by narratives constructed by the PAP.

PJ Thum offered the following reflections: *"Singapore is a small city-state island with no memory, unlike Indonesia or Philippines or Thailand of a time before colonialism...Our traditional culture is colonial culture. No one in living memory in Singapore has had any knowledge of a government at the point where we became independent, of a government other than a colonial government."*

Thum also explained that the post-independence Singaporean elite embraced and perpetuated colonial measures, which has indelibly shaped the postcolonial nature of Singapore today; *"If you think of people like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, because of the destruction of so much traditional culture by the colonial authorities and the replacing it of a culture which was inherent on subjugation and obedience to a colonial authority, the post-independence elite quickly adopted those same methods, tactics, justifications, the same moral arguments...you see the way the government continues to govern and speak today, it is very colonial, neo-colonial I guess you might call it."*

As Fanon reflects in *'Black Skin, White Masks'* (1952) the nature of colonialism is to reshape the psyche of the colonised, influencing their internal experience of self and a desire to emulate the way of the coloniser. The internalisation and continuation of the way of the colonised as more advanced reflects a form of symbolic violence. As Fanon reflects (1952:17): *"To speak...means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."* Fanon's words highlight how the language and culture of the coloniser are weighed down with power that influences the minds of those who are made to embrace them. A key theme of Fanon's work is the need of the colonised to

re-establish and reclaim identity in the wake of psychological and cultural colonisation, a process which is ongoing. This resonates with the experience of Singapore. In the absence of traditional culture, Singapore continues to honour and uphold many British ways of being and governing. Thum also noted that the absence of a genuine connection to a cultural past and history means the PAP are on a quest to redefine national identity and what it means to be Singaporean. The ongoing nation-building project is connected to this search for meaning; *“The PAP has always justified crushing cultural norms and shaping for nation-building purposes. It’s redefined our national identity several times...we don’t have a connection to stuff before 1890...the PAP sought to promote modernity as our culture, and it was quick to demolish a lot of traditional ways of life in pursuit of modernity. For example, HDB, they just demolished compounds (kampong) and said, “No, we’re all going to live in flats. Forget about fishing, forget about these farms. We’re going to do industry. Forget about traditional ways of life. You’re going to retrain and become modern industrial citizens. We are modern. We are connected to the British. We are advanced and civilised.”*

Embracing modernity, development, technology and advancement represented a critical element of the new Singapore nation-building project. In so doing, traditional ways of being and doing had to be reshaped and pigeonholed as a quaint relic of the past, without being inserted into the modern identity of Singapore in any meaningful way. Singapore’s postcolonial identity extends beyond culture and economic development, however; it also encompasses sanctions, punishment, and tools of control. Thum pointed out: *“It justifies the continuation of colonial policies of oppression, 377, 3778, but also the Internal Security Act, the Emergency Regulations, Sedition Act, all introduced by the British, all still maintained by the PAP.”*

Singapore’s colonial past impacts its present in other significant ways. Barr and Skrbis (2008) note that the Singaporean narrative of meritocracy often conceals patronage that has been used by leaders to achieve their own ends, which finds its origins in colonialism. For example, the country bears the evidence of colonial vestiges in its politically motivated appointments (Wong, 2023). Top public service positions are based in part on political considerations in the civil service. Similarly, elite networks and

political regime-making considerations strongly shape public sector opportunities. Even Singapore's divisions along ethnic lines echoes racial division during its time under British colonial rule.

4.3.8 Smallness, stability, security, and heightened control

Ethnographic excerpt: A reflection from the field

"Singapore's small territorial and demographic size produce a political paradox. While smallness theoretically fosters institutional accessibility, it simultaneously magnifies elite entrenchment. Political elites remain spatially and socially proximate to citizens yet distant in real power. Institutions blur with personalities; proximity enables surveillance rather than enhancing democratic accountability. Smallness also intensifies public rituals: National Day parades were massive yet emotionally intimate; even ecological victories like clean water status were magnified into national myths reinforcing governmental paternalism. Thus, the politics of smallness magnifies both the possibilities for civic connection and the mechanisms of centralised control, binding bodies, spaces, and memories into an intricate, tightly controlled political and structural choreography."

Population density, proximity, and size in general impacted democratic processes with respect to the way in which state institutions and political actors reinforced authority, negotiated dissent, and shaped national identity. As Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) articulate, smallness can be linked to the absence of pluralism, reduced choice, and overwhelming social pressure to conform to dominant codes, phenomena that became apparent in interview material and fieldwork observations.

The relationship between size, stability, and control arose in various permutations during my conversations with interviewees and immersion in the field. Tan Wah Piow articulated this connection succinctly: *"Smallness - as a city-state with an area of just 750 square miles and 5.6 million residents, 80% of whom live in government-controlled housing - makes it easy for micro-political control."*

Sol Iglesias expanded upon this observation, explaining how smallness can help qualify heightened control: *“Smallness justifies all sorts of curtailments of individual freedom because of this sort of notion that they are under siege somehow, a small country amid a hostile, predominantly Muslim Southeast Asia. And so, security policy, foreign policy, and then domestic policy, usually smallness is a way to sort of invoke all sorts of justifications, but essentially that Singapore is vulnerable...smallness is part of that exceptionalist narrative, particularly spotted out by the political elite when they need to.”*

Terry Xu also explained how the connection between smallness and security was used as a mechanism of control and was ingrained in people, impacting their behaviour and interpersonal interactions: *“It’s just social engineering because you always want to keep the people in the sense of danger and then tout yourself as your protector...just take time to sit in our public transport. I think it’s very rare that you have a democratic country that is not in any immediate threat or risk to constantly remind the people to look out for bombs in your train—“please look out for any suspicious individual” – It’s reminding people that they are in a constant threat and that you need the constant, what’s that, policing in order to maintain the peace that you perceive to have.”*

The representative from SKM similarly observed that Singaporeans have trust issues. This feeling of threat impacts how one feels in their body, how they move through social life, how they engage with others, and the nature of their everyday life; *“How do you trust? You’re always told from a young age, don’t talk to strangers, you don’t know what they want from you. Because as a small nation, we have to protect ourselves...security is always an issue.”*

The examples offered above present rich insights into the way in which the PAP operationalises—or even weaponises—the status of smallness. Smallness in Singapore can be invoked as a means for heightening control, surveillance and vigilance, ensuring compliance from citizens by promising safety and paternalistic caretaking in return.

Prof. Alan Chong's supervisory reflections situated the politics of smallness within a longer intellectual lineage. From Plato's ideal of the compact polis to Tocqueville's claim that democracy flourishes at a manageable scale, the small state becomes a laboratory for proximity between rulers and ruled. Yet, as Chong reminds us, smallness in the Asian context should not be mistaken for weakness. Its compactness enables administrative agility, moral cohesion, and the cultivation of legitimacy through intimacy. In his lectures he further suggested that Singapore's state capitalism inherits the grammar of colonial governance - discipline, productivity, and external dependence - but redeploys these as technologies of survival. The small state thus performs sovereignty through self-containment: governing as if the colonial condition never ended, only perfected into efficiency.

4.3.9 The legacy of a symbolic leader

The formative influence of Lee Kuan Yew played and continues to play an impactful role on national identity in Singapore. For Tan Wah Piow, Lee Kuan Yew was responsible for the political architecture that rendered the state capture of Singapore possible. Lee left a legacy, but it was achieved through undemocratic means such as making amendments to the Constitution, aided and abetted by a minute class of hand-picked elites. Patapan (2013) reflects that Lee pictured society as a pyramidal structure that functioned most effectively with a handpicked minority of leaders at the top, efficient executives in the middle, and the general populace at the base. Patapan (2013) cites Lee as saying: *"Remember, when we started, we were not even one society, never mind a nation. We were several different separate societies brought together under the British, an accident of history. Our loyalties and roots were in different parts of China, India and the Malay Archipelago."*

Nation-building therefore represented a critical component of Lee's approach to governing Singapore, a process that continues to this day. However, critics such as Tan Wah Piow point out that the form of nation-building envisioned by Lee hinged on excessive control; *"The Lee Kuan Yew model is sustainable only through repressive*

micro-political management, which is not sustainable in the long run because it is not organic."

Sol Iglesias offered this perspective on the mythic legacy of Lee Kuan Yew in the nation-building of Singapore: *"Lee Kuan Yew, of course, overshadows everything and everyone else...That's why the PAP jealously guards all of this, this narrative with Lee Kuan Yew at the centre of it because the PAP's legitimacy comes from the sort of worship that Lee Kuan Yew somehow was indispensable to the political order, to its stature as an economically well developed, highly developed country."*

For PJ Thum, the grandiose stature Lee Kuan Yew has come to hold is hollow, and the forward trajectory of Singapore is compromised by this rigid adherence to his legacy; *"Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Kuan Yew, the man's been dead for almost a decade, and the ministers are all still saying, "Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Kuan Yew." Why? The guy stepped down as prime minister in 1990. He left the cabinet in 2011. He died in 2015, but today, Lee Kuan Yew, Lee Kuan Yew, why? Because that's all they have."*

4.4 Themes relating to navigating civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

4.4.1 Contested civic space: Civil society, surveillance, and silent dissent

Ethnographic excerpt: A reflection from the field

"Public spaces such as Speakers' Corner, once hailed as a site of liberalisation, now functions as heavily surveilled and micro-managed space. NGOs and online platforms operate within strict "red lines," mastering the art of coded critique and symbolic defiance to remain visible. Digital governance - especially through the enactment of POFMA - normalises anticipatory self-disciplining, with citizens self-censoring before repression even materialises. This anticipatory obedience extends into private spheres:

Café discussions among locals were often self-edited, casual political jokes were whispered, and foreigners like me were cautioned indirectly by academics to "choose your words wisely."

As interviews and analysis came to reveal, Singaporean civil society is marked by pervasive surveillance, digital control, and anticipatory self-censorship. Grassroots actors and activists must negotiate state constraints and shrinking digital spaces for deliberation and resistance. In these conditions, silent or symbolic dissent replaces active participation, highlighting the meaningfulness of democratic spectatorship. Silence isn't necessarily politically apathetic in this context: In the case of many Singaporeans, silence is a measured, cautious, and deliberate response to the spectre of political repression and punishment. Through memes, symbolic absence, and careful phrasing, citizens adapt to narrow discursive boundaries without direct confrontation. Micro-acts like muted protests, symbolic vigils, and strategic silences allow limited contestation while avoiding legal reprisal.

Dr Gillian Koh, a Singaporean political scientist and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), NUS, helped situate these lived practices within a longer arc of Singapore's developmental state. She argues that political participation has been shaped by a governing ideology that prioritised stability and economic progress over liberal contestation, with engagement channelled through institutionally bounded avenues. In this view, laws on public assembly, media regulation, and restrictions on associations have historically structured the perimeter of civic action even as civil society has grown in capacity and diversity. Koh also notes emergent modes of participation - policy consultations, online petitions, and issue-based civic movements - have been taken up most visibly by younger Singaporeans. Read together with the evidence above, her account explains why participation is often cautious, symbolic, or episodic: the durability of participation ultimately turns on the degree of trust that can be sustained between state and society.

The discourse of “harmony” as a disciplining trope emerged in recurrent textual patterns from a brief analysis undertaken on government statements, and community outreach materials. The *Shared Values* White Paper (1991) served as a historical anchor and the *Our Singapore Conversation* summary (2013) as a discursive bridge. Furthermore, in consecutive National Day Rally speeches in the recent decade, appeals to racial and religious harmony were explicitly paired with exhortations to online civility and “responsible speech,” framing social cohesion as contingent on individual restraint. Harmony, a word traditionally connoted with peace and unity carries other connotations in Singapore—its use in political or civil discourse carries subtle coercion or symbolic violence in its subtext.

4.4.2 The depoliticization of civic, cultural and social life

Conversations with activists, academics, and politicians reveal that while the People’s Action Party (PAP) formally creates symbolic spaces for civic participation, such engagement remains tightly constrained and carefully bounded. The state permits activism largely around depoliticised and “safe” causes - kindness, elderly care, or smiling campaigns - while discouraging structural critique or transformative political action.

Koh’s scholarship nuances this picture by distinguishing between *state-curated* and *state-bounded* participation. Although she acknowledges the restrictive effects of assembly laws, media controls, and association rules, she also observes that citizens have increasingly experimented with “safer” participatory forms - policy-feedback exercises, online petitions, and targeted civic campaigns that avoid overt opposition. This cautious expansion, especially evident among younger Singaporeans, blends digital advocacy with issue-specific engagement. In Koh’s analysis, such activities do not overturn de-politicisation; rather, they illustrate a managed participation that remains constructive, non-confrontational, and ultimately dependent on political trust and the state’s tolerance of limited activism. However, first-hand accounts from activists illustrate the fragility and conditional nature of even this bounded participation.

Leong Sze Hian recounted how his attempt to stage protests at the Speakers' Corner - the only legally designated protest site in Singapore - resulted in prosecution: "We grew to the largest protest ever, 6,000 people... And what did they do? They charged my friends for holding an illegal protest in the only place where you can legally protest."

Jolovan Wham similarly noted that government surveillance intensifies with influence: "If you're just an ordinary citizen expressing a political opinion, it's fine. It's only when you start to gain influence that they begin to target you - you'll be on some kind of watch list."

Opposition politician Jamus Lim reinforced the point, stressing that basic political expression remains criminalised: "There isn't really free speech... If you make a political speech or hold a placard without a permit, you could be arrested. There's no right of protest in Singapore."

Wham further described how NGOs and advocacy groups face systemic barriers under laws such as the *Societies Act*. Organisations that do not secure government approval risk surveillance, deregistration, or funding restrictions: "There's this law that gives the government wide powers to investigate any registered society... Politically oriented charities can be denied status, which effectively blocks their fundraising."

James Gomez added that while legislation like the *Societies Act* and *Political Donations Act* overtly restrict civil society, the deeper constraint lies in pervasive self-censorship. Fear of repercussions has produced a culture where citizens internalise the limits of permissible expression: "The laws themselves are not the main problem - it's the culture of self-censorship and the reluctance to engage in anything political."

Historian and academic PJ Thum described Singapore's "democracy" as a purely consultative exercise: "In Singapore, democracy means sending your views to be considered by ministers and civil servants. If your views are considered, then

democracy has occurred.”

Gomez and Wham concurred that much of what passes for participation is performative - a public relations exercise in which state-directed “feedback sessions” simulate deliberation without redistributing power or influence.

Taken together, these accounts starkly contrast with Amartya Sen’s conception of meaningful democracy, which requires *government by discussion*, broad-based participation, and genuine public dialogue (Sen, 1999; 2009). Evaluated through this lens, Singapore’s civic engagement appears procedural rather than substantive - its deliberative institutions hollowed out by state orchestration and social conditioning.

Underlying this system is what Pierre Bourdieu and subsequent scholars such as Topper (2001) describe as *symbolic violence*: the subtle imposition of meanings that naturalise hierarchy and suppress dissent. In Singapore, symbolic violence manifests through the moralisation of obedience and the aestheticization of harmony, transforming political compliance into civic virtue and duty. The space for genuine civil society thus remains symbolic rather than substantive.

Field observations at Hong Lim Park - the city-state’s officially designated site for public assembly - vividly demonstrate how what seems like limited liberalisation is, in fact, a carefully choreographed performance operating within tightly controlled boundaries of disciplinary visibility. In effect, allowing assembly in a single, clearly demarcated location functions as a mechanism of control: protesters are made visible, spatially contained, and separated from the flows of everyday urban life. Rather than signalling genuine expansion of civil-society space, this arrangement performs a dual gesture - a nominal concession of assembly rights alongside a visible reaffirmation of state oversight. The zone’s spatial constraints, together with its regulation of timing, crowd size, and police presence, reveal that liberalising reforms are defined less by their scope than by the extent to which they are monitored, formalised, and staged as part of an orchestrated theatre of control. NGOs and online communities navigate these invisible red lines with precision, crafting coded critique and symbolic acts of defiance. In daily life, self-

regulation becomes deeply embodied: in cafés, jokes are whispered; on the MRT, voices drop and bodies shrink. Silence itself turns into a form of civic etiquette - what one interviewee described as “respectful harmony.”

As another academic reflected: “No one tells you not to speak - you just know when silence is safer. It’s not fear, exactly. It’s a habit.”

This habitual discretion exemplifies the concept of *anticipatory self-censorship* - a key feature of what Foucault termed *governmentality*: the internalisation of surveillance and control. Domination here operates affectively, not coercively - sustained by the moralisation of restraint and the naturalisation of visibility’s consequences.

4.4.3 Control of the grassroots as a form of surveillance

For PJ Thum, the PAP have long understood the power of co-opting grassroots movements and devised a range of different grassroots initiatives as a way to replace organic networks and extend state surveillance into everyday community life. PAP-run and funded grassroots early learning centres like Sparkle Tots, which is Singapore’s largest preschool operator and employer, offers 350 preschools island-wide and enrolls more than 40,000 children. These preschools teach loyalty to state values and integrate ideological socialisation into play and learning. For example, the Sparkle Tots website states that the core values of the organisation are GRIT: graciousness, respect, integrity, and teamwork—values that resonate with PAP ideology and Confucian or Asian values such as collective wellbeing over that of the individual, harmony, and propriety.

During fieldwork in West Jurong, one interviewee described Sparkle Tots - as “civic classrooms”: “Parents see care, but it’s also loyalty training. That’s the genius of Singapore - governance as affection.” This statement captures the subtle fusion of governance, welfare, and loyalty - how symbolic power is embedded within everyday institutions of care. In such systems, citizens internalise gratitude as loyalty, transforming welfare into moral pedagogy. The result is not coercion but affective governance: control through care, compliance through affection. Taken together, these

accounts reveal a consistent pattern: the persistence of informal power networks, elite dominance, and the subversion of meritocratic and democratic principles.

The People's Association represents another very well-known example of a major grassroots organisation that is run by the PAP, along with the National Trades Union Congress. On this, Thum reflected; *"The goal of the People's Association from day one was to replace some of these grassroots networks. The goal of controlling the National Trades Union Congress was to have a docile and compliant trade union network. And then there was also this thing called the Works Brigade, which doesn't exist anymore, but today there are other forms of grassroots organisations that the PAP uses to connect to the ground. These include residence committees, citizens consultative committees. These help the PAP understand what's going on and disseminate their message. They act as a form of a filter."*

Thum pointed out that those who participate in these networks sometimes receive special benefits or kickbacks: *"If you then participate in the PAP grassroots, you get benefits. Simple things like having an advantage in school choice for your children, being first in line for picking a parking spot, for being notified of new benefits, new schemes, new things that PAP are doing. Accessing welfare, accessing grants, accessing resources from the government, having the ear of the people who have the ear of the minister."*

In this sense, PAP grassroots movements almost represent an intermediary between the elite and the citizens, offering a means of informal or indirect patronage or clientelism.

Berenschot and Aspinall's (2020) research in the field suggests that while early research compared the intensity of clientelistic practices across different countries, more recent research into the phenomenon highlights the different forms and expressions that clientelistic politics can take, how politicians carry out patronage, or what is offered to citizens. Patronage dominated democracies can therefore be either defined as community-centred or party-centred, as the examples present in Singapore suggest party-centred patronage democracies. These are characterised by strong party control

over state resources, and therefore tend to be longer-term, relational expressions of clientelism. These exchanges usually involve state resources rather than money, and there is a reliance on party-networks—or in this case, grassroots movements—for their distribution (Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020).

Lim offered his view on the politicisation of People's Association, explaining that People's Associations in opposition constituencies use the losing candidate from the ruling party as the advisor for that area, rather than the winning opposition candidate. The influence of PAP on the People's Association therefore remains unbroken.

This co-optation of the People's Association becomes apparent in everyday community settings. At Boon Lay MRT station, I observed elderly grassroots volunteers whose presence extended beyond maintenance roles, symbolically enacting community oversight during civic activities, embodying a subtle form of neighbourly surveillance.

Singapore's civil society is not only constrained but carefully cultivated. The Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM) and its Seed Kindness Fund (SKF) illustrate a pedagogy of safe participation: citizens, especially youth, are encouraged to act on community concerns through micro-grants of up to a thousand dollars, but always within a moral vocabulary of politeness, harmony, and order. These state-proximate programmes rehearse civic initiative while circumscribing its political potential - a choreography of engagement that produces civility without contestation.

The same logic of managed responsiveness extends into policy timing. The government's abrupt block of the Income Insurance–Allianz merger on public-interest grounds was read as a pre-emptive performance of vigilance, signalling protection of citizens before opposition voices could claim the issue. Soon after, the launch of the SkillsFuture Jobseeker Support (SJS) scheme - short-term cash assistance framed as 'dynamic social protection' - demonstrated the technocracy's capacity to learn and adjust publicly. Together, these episodes show how responsiveness itself becomes an instrument of control: the state choreographs participation and correction to reaffirm its moral and managerial authority.

4.4.4 Media censorship and digital control

As many of the interviewees were activists, writers, academics, politicians, or journalists, the theme of media censorship and control arose multiple times. Media regulation in Singapore reveals a procedural but hollow democracy. Mainstream outlets align with state narratives, and POFMA legislation grants ministers sweeping powers to correct or suppress content based on “inaccuracy”. Defamation lawsuits against opposition figures discourage critical journalism. The media functions not to challenge power but to reproduce the hegemonic PAP consensus, reinforcing stability at the cost of deliberative democracy.

While the rise in digital platforms offers civic possibilities for freedom of expression, counter views are heavily monitored. The state uses algorithms, influencers, and surveillance to prevent the diaspora of contrasting views, and the POFMA legislation to produce anticipatory self-censorship. Thus, while digital spaces are theoretically open, the digital sphere replicates offline surveillance, narrowing the emancipatory potential of digital democracy. Resistance persists, but it is increasingly fragile and clandestine. Those who attempt to publish critiques find themselves pursued and persecuted, such as Terry Xu, editor of ‘The Online Citizen’.

PJ Thum explained: *“They drove Terry out of the country by loading him up with more and more crazy ridiculous demands for, “We need this document, that document, justification, we need to know every single cent, every penny you spent here, there, everywhere...And Terry finally gave up and was like, “You know what, this is ridiculous. I’m not going to cooperate.” And then of course the government was like, “Oh, see, Terry won’t cooperate with the rules. These are reasonable rules that apply to people to ensure that we have a safe online environment, and he won’t cooperate with them. Therefore, he has something to hide. He has a breach of these rules. He is clearly up to no good.” And then so many police reports and all that. Next thing you know, he’s just like, “Screw this,” and now he’s in Taiwan because he can’t live in Singapore.”*

Jamus Lim added that Singapore's lack of press freedom, which is acknowledged globally, has exacerbated in recent years: *"For a long time, there was at least some nominal independence in the sense that the main newspaper as well as the main TV broadcaster are owned by the state, but they weren't fully funded by the state...The funding for Singapore Press Holdings now comes entirely out of the government budget."*

Wham added that beyond legislation and overt oppression, what was most effective was the self-censorship, again resonating with the theme of state-sponsored symbolic violence; *"Self-censorship, in the sense of editors and journalists knowing where the line is in terms of what they can write, is quite widespread. Journalists and editors themselves tell me about the self-censorship that they practice when they're working on stories."*

Self-censorship also came about as a result of high-profile cases that the PAP uses to educate citizens into compliance. PJ Thum used the expression, *"Kill the chicken to scare the monkeys"*: those who do speak out are punished as an example to instil fear and anticipatory self-censorship in others who might dare to dissent. Terry Xu represents a case of a chicken killed to scare the monkeys. Beyond the realm of media, censorship also extends to scholarly research, studies, and presentations. Singapore's major public universities are under the management of the Ministry of Education, so university presidents and chancellors are often closely tied to the PAP.

Terry Xu and Jamus Lim mentioned that high-profile professors or lecturers who are outspoken about government policies often find themselves denied tenure or made to leave their institution. Following this, others in academia learn by example to curb these critiques lest they lose their jobs.

Lim also explained that this repression affects future appointments: *"So, the whole department can make a recommendation for a candidate, they may get glowing letters of recommendation, but then you have the president of the university, or the chancellor basically kill it because they feel that they don't want to upset the establishment."*

Sol Iglesias offered her experience of the way in which this censorship is applied from above: *"I was invited by a colleague at NUS for a conference. And then my colleague, a few months after, asked me if we could speak on the phone. He called and told me essentially that the higher-ups had asked him to disinvite me from the panel and he wasn't given a reason...he told me he thought it's because of the fact that I'm married to PJ Thum, a Singaporean historian who is considered a political dissident by the Singapore authorities."*

PJ Thum pointed out that the level of the repression faced by academics in Singapore means that certain topics of scholarship are contraband or "sensitive", such as Singaporean politics, human rights, race and religion, sociology and history. He also added: *"The National University of Singapore does zero research on the post-war history of Singapore, because you cannot write accurately on the post-war history of Singapore without getting in trouble with the PAP. So, no history of Singapore after World War II and then there's like no political science, nothing in Singapore. Law, there's commercial law, there's constitutional law, but civil rights law, nothing. Then things like sociology, a lot of humanities, nothing in Singapore because there's just no academic freedom. But more importantly, grant funding, the government is the main source of grants, and it will not give you money."*

Wham similarly added that as long as academics don't deal with sensitive topics that challenge official narratives, there's no real problem. In other words, academic scholarship must adhere to the nation-building stories cultivated by the PAP.

Thum additionally noted: *"The Minister himself said that universities must support the national interest and when necessary, we remind universities that they must support the national interests."*

It is interesting to contextualise the above observations in light of Lee and Willnat's (2009) work on political communication in Singapore. Singapore presents an idea of the media as an apolitical or depoliticised entity that holds the role of informing, educating,

and entertaining Singaporeans while steadfastly avoiding sensitive political issues. Lee and Willnat (2009) additionally note that Singapore has a clear stance regarding political communication that politics are the domain of professional politicians, so no person, group, organisation or association is equipped to offer commentary on national policies or matters without first becoming part of a political party. As a result, political communication research in Singapore has been suppressed, and academics are often dissuaded from exploring the boundaries of political deliberation.

4.5 Seeing with new eyes: Exploring Malta's 'flawed democracy' as an insider

Malta, though among the smallest and often least remarked upon member states of the European Union, holds a depth of complexity that defies its scale. Situated at the heart of the Mediterranean, the island may be physically easy to navigate, yet socially and politically, it is anything but straightforward. For those who call it home, Malta is not merely an insular archipelago, it is a lived reality shaped by contradiction, tension, and a persistent sense of unease.

Over the course of nearly forty years, my experience of life in Malta has been marked by a quiet but enduring unrest, perceptible even in my early years. I grew up in a working-class family and attended church schools where many of my peers came from professional and business backgrounds. This juxtaposition brought the island's subtle, yet deeply entrenched, social divides of the 1990s into sharp relief. In Malta's tightly woven social fabric, distinctions of class were not abstract notions, they could be immediately visible and deeply felt in past decades. Yet this reality has become more fluid in contemporary Maltese society. It was this early exposure to social inequality that fostered in me a critical perspective, one which would, over time, develop into a sustained commitment to activism.

What began as a reaction to an intuited class struggle, gradually became a mode of being. My aspirations and personal character have been shaped by this lens, forthright, engaged, and politically aware. Academically I am drawn to questions of governance, social justice, and environmental responsibility not merely out of intellectual interest,

but from a belief that active, critical engagement is not just warranted but essential, particularly in a society where power often resides in a few hands and dissent can be difficult to sustain.

Malta's scale, paradoxically, allows for a unique perspective from which to interrogate larger questions of political culture, societal organisation, and sustainability. This interweaving of personal experience and academic inquiry lies at the heart of my work and continues to shape my resolve to understand, and where possible, to improve the society in which I have made a home, both for myself and for my family.

Several interviewees expressed sharp criticism, and concerns about the state of Maltese democracy featured prominently throughout the conversations. A significant number raised issues such as clientelism, weakened institutional independence, media partisanship, and intensifying political polarisation. While a handful adopted more measured or pragmatic stances, the prevailing narrative was one of democratic stress. The interviews, taken collectively, reveal a democracy characterised by imbalance and elite dominance, raising serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and the competitiveness of democratic processes.

At the same time, in order to present a balanced picture, it is important to note that many Maltese citizens continue to express trust in the existing political system. Figures from the latest '*L-Istat tan-Nazzjon*' conference held in June 2025, indicate that despite a record-low level of political interest and rapidly declining trust, where only 30.8 % of Maltese now rate politics as 'very important' (with a staggering 33.5 % reporting no interest at all, especially among younger adults), voter turnout in Malta remains remarkably robust by international standards. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74.8 %) plan to vote in the next general election, reflecting that, even as faith in political institutions falters, citizens continue to demonstrate strong engagement in democratic processes through the ballot box (State of the Nation Survey, 2025).

Moreover, Malta functions within the institutional framework of the EU, though international assessments, such as the Democracy Index 2024 by the EIU, have recently

rated it as a “flawed democracy.” Yet despite this label, Malta regularly ranks above numerous other countries worldwide. These divergent assessments underscore the intricacy of evaluating democratic health in the Maltese context, where active civic participation exists alongside enduring structural concerns.

The following sections examine five principal themes that emerged from the Maltese data. Each theme is first explored through the qualitative insights of interview participants, followed by corresponding quantitative analysis.

4.6 Themes relating to the influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?

4.6.1 Density, development and (lack of) democracy: Spatial authoritarianism

Malta, like Singapore, is an extremely dense island nation with respect to population. The Mediterranean Island comprises a land area of just 316km², with 1,610 people per square kilometre as at 2023, rendering it one of the most densely populated places on the planet (World Bank, 2023). Interviewees spoke to the nexus of democracy, deliberation, elite influence, environment, construction, and urban landscape, and the impact of the intersection of these on their lived, everyday, embodied experience on life in Malta.

For Arnold Cassola, Professor in Comparative Literature at the UoM and long-standing independent politician, a lack of democratic engagement leads to a living situation that is detrimental to the wellbeing of all, including the natural environment; *“In Malta, economic development drives high-level politics. If Malta has towers everywhere, it’s because the economic elite pressured the government into unsustainable construction...Malta is 28km by 18km, yet we act like a country ten times that size. We mimic others - “Catania has an industrial estate, so why not us?” - without realising they have the space, and we don’t. Here we build horizontally and vertically with no regard for stormwater management - everything floods because we’ve paved over natural absorption areas.”*

Cassola added that there needs to be greater consultation and deliberation with respect to a vision for the future of Malta that preserves the environment, history, and quality of life for Maltese and those who visit in place of the current paradigm, based on construction, development, and cheap tourism; *“We refuse to rethink development. We could pivot to services, niche tourism - like faith tourism in Gozo, akin to Santiago de Compostela - or diving tourism, which we already have, but then we pollute prime diving sites with sewage. We had military tourism potential (e.g., the Victoria Lines), but those sites are neglected. These alternatives could bring more revenue than cheap beer-and-party tourists. But here, it’s all about numbers. We complain about overpopulation, yet we keep importing people because the economy - driven by construction - will collapse otherwise. It’s a vicious circle.”*

Kevin Aquilina, Professor of Law at the UoM expanded upon the clientelistic element of construction and development: *“Governments are funded by business. Consequently, the government repays these favours through consultancy contracts or direct orders. Is there any accountability for this work through a registry? The government yields to developers’ pressure. When an exam was held and three-quarters failed, the response was to lower the standards to accommodate them. That’s patronage - absolute clientelism.”*

A senior academic at the UoM, who preferred to be referred to as an ‘academic informant’, emphasised the nature of concern surrounding development and construction, which in many cases was driven by personal impact, rather than awareness of the impact on wider civil society. This personally focused concern represents the liberal democratic phenomenon which Tocqueville and Plato cautioned about, where individuals become overly concerned with their personal experience, desires and wishes, rather than the wellbeing and good of wider society: *“Involvement in civil society, particularly within environmental groups, revealed that some participants with good intentions, came from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, one prominent environmental advocate owned substantial land and publicly championed environmental causes. However, this individual subsequently*

demolished their residence to develop apartment buildings, demonstrating a noteworthy discrepancy between their earlier rhetoric and values and later actions rooted in their material privilege.”

Cassola added that in recent years, however, there is a growing collective awareness and movement against unbridled development that is politically driven and conscious. There is an interesting overlap with Singapore and the development of housing estates, with differential treatment for areas based on their political leanings, a profoundly undemocratic reality: *“The focus used to be solely on the North. Now it’s the South too. People wake up only when development hits their backyard - “imbecile syndrome.” But now we see Sliema residents going to Żurrieq, and Marsascala residents supporting Sliema. That’s excellent. It puts pressure on politicians. In Malta, votes are the only threat that politicians respect. If you can show you represent enough votes, they’ll change course. It’s unfair, but it’s the reality. Now, the South has the upper hand. You’ll notice that projects in Marsascala, Mqabba, Żurrieq were scrapped - those are Labour strongholds, so the government hesitates. In PN-leaning areas, that caution isn’t there.”*

Cassola’s observation resonated with the phenomenon described in the Singapore data, where the PAP’s decisions regarding housing and developmental upgrades were informed by party politics. In PAP strongholds, housing developments were upgraded while opposition areas were passed over. This phenomenon speaks directly to the nature of elite capture, smallness, and allocation of state resources for clientelistic purposes—those who support the government receive material benefits.

Research carried out by Naomi Galea in 2020 explored the intersection of land, planning, development and democracy in Malta. Galea noted that analysis of contemporary online and print newspapers and interviews with representatives of Planning Authority, the Environment and Resources Agency, the NGOs *‘Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar’* and *‘Inħobbu l-Gżira’*, the Malta Business Association and the Manoel Island Foundation resulted in substantial democratic deficit in the planning and development of Maltese land. There is a profound lack of environmental, social, health, and archaeological impact assessments prior to development, in conjunction with the

involvement of personnel with evident conflict of interest and snubbing of petitions (one with more than 8,500 signatures), indicating that deliberative and participatory democracy is overlooked in the rush to develop land. Galea (2020) also noted that political interference with decisions and a public that is kept deliberately uneducated on planning matters help maintain this democratic deficit. The constraints on deliberative and participatory processes is a theme that will emerge and be explored in later sections of the Maltese findings.

4.6.2 Tracing democratic hybridity in Malta

The theme of democratic hybridity in Malta also resonated with observations and reflections from Singaporean informants around the lack of true meritocracy, the power and influence of informal networks, and the absence of authentic checks and balances. However, in the Maltese context, other issues that were distinctive were raised too. These included the myriad benefits of financial advantage and upper socio-economic status among those seeking positions of power, the diverse ways in which a drift from democracy occurred with respect to institutional and judicial processes, the advantages of incumbency, and the idea of duopoly.

Professor John Chircop, a historian of social and economic development, situated Malta's present democratic challenges within a deep historical continuum. As he observes, *"The problem with capital is that it always accumulates in the same hands... When industrialisation began, the merchants opposed it... [the merchant class] was allied with the Catholic Church, which at the time owned much land."* This enduring concentration of economic and political power created informal networks that have persisted across generations, subtly shaping Malta's political and economic decision-making structures. Chircop identifies the 1970s export-oriented development drive under Dom Mintoff as a pivotal moment - a *"democratic revolution"* that *"gave local producers the chance to start exporting,"* thereby fostering *"a new Maltese middle class with an entrepreneurial mentality."* Yet, as he cautions, this period of expansion was also marked by widespread corruption, illustrating the paradox of economic democratisation alongside deepening informal influence.

Across interviews, diverse voices highlighted how these entrenched networks continue to undermine democratic processes in Malta. Former President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca reflected on the norms of political party culture: *"I don't feel restricted or inhibited in speaking out. I would never compromise and have always been that way. Of course, when I was a member of a political party, it was like being part of a club, so a certain level of loyalty was expected."* Her remarks reveal how loyalty and informal expectations and pressure can temper independent thinking within party structures, sustaining a culture of conformity and compliance rather than accountability. Similarly, Dr. Marlene Farrugia offered a more scathing critique, arguing that informal networks have hollowed out Maltese democracy: *"I don't think democracy has been functioning for quite a few years now. We have a semblance of democracy... but when you dig deeper, you realise that for many years there's been a network composed of businessmen, non-businessmen, aristocrats, and other powerful individuals... who call the shots and ensure that elected politicians remain their puppets."* This assertion aligns with the broader theme of procedural versus real democracy - a system where formal democratic processes mask the rule of informal elites.

Journalist Lou Bondi underscored the implications for the rule of law: *"There are two separate issues here: the political elite and the rule of law. If the rule of law is strong, it should make everyone accountable... But here, we experience institutional blockage... Once that octopus is in place, it controls the government, not the other way around."* Bondi's metaphor of the "octopus" evokes the suffocating reach of corruption and the paralysis of once-functioning institutions. In a similar vein, Cassola illustrated how elite capture manifests through subservient appointments: *"We've just seen a blatant example. The governing party has captured the offices of the Attorney General and the Police Commissioner. They simply appoint someone subservient - like the current State Advocate, who used to be the university's lawyer."* Such "capture" ensures institutional obedience, mirroring the dynamics of elite consolidation described in Singapore.

Kristy Debono expanded on how informal power operates less through overt coercion and more through access and subtle influence: *"Informal power brokers... can have a*

quiet but decisive impact on the direction of policy. Their influence is not always visible to the public, and rarely documented, but it is very real.” She added: *“Influence isn’t always about exerting pressure... Often, it’s about access. Those who have regular, informal lines of communication with decision-makers... are more likely to have their concerns heard early, long before a policy even reaches the public sphere.”* Debono’s observations illuminate how informal relationships function as shadow governance - where access, not accountability, dictates outcomes. The reflections of Farrugia, Bondi, and Cassola together point to a pattern of elite dominance comparable to that seen in Singapore. Just as Tan described the “capture” of the Singaporean state by the PAP, Cassola’s remarks highlight a similar “capture” of Malta’s key institutions.

The work of Mills (1956) and Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) underscores how such elite power brokers consolidate control in ways that are largely invisible to the public yet decisively shape outcomes. As Debono notes, those with privileged access to policymakers *“are more likely to have their concerns heard early,”* revealing how economic elites in Malta can effectively steer political agendas. Indeed, as Zammit (2021) documented in a 2021 interview with construction magnate Joseph Portelli, Portelli openly admitted to meeting with officials *“to accelerate processes,”* exemplifying the normalisation of elite influence. Political scientist Veenendaal (2019) further contextualises this within Malta’s small-state dynamics, arguing that clientelism has fostered executive dominance and recurring corruption scandals. The island’s high population density and close-knit networks facilitate direct contact between politicians and business elites, heightening risks of favouritism, cronyism, patronage and financial dependency.

Consequently, democratic processes - whether deliberative or participatory - are compromised, as executive power becomes both concentrated and self-perpetuating. The corrosion of meritocracy emerges as a key theme linked to Malta’s informal power structures. Professor Kevin Aquilina posed the critical question: *“So, are we a democracy or an oligarchy? Studying our system reveals an oligarchy. The ‘democracy’ chapter only applies during elections, then it closes. Appointments are political, regardless of merit. Meritocracy does not exist.”* His remarks underscore how

clientelism and political loyalty routinely override competence and fairness in public appointments. Emanuel Delia, author and activist, offered a concrete example: *“When we do get merit-based policies, they’re weak and give a false sense of fairness. Public service recruitment is one such example... Between Joseph Muscat being sworn in and ministers taking office, he changed all permanent secretaries, undermining civil service neutrality.”* Delia’s critique reveals how elite manipulation of institutional appointments reinforces executive dominance, entrenching what might best be termed a hybrid democracy - democratic in form, oligarchic in substance.

From Chircop’s historical account of merchant-Catholic alliances to contemporary examples of institutional capture and procedural democracy, Malta’s experience exemplifies how small-state dynamics can magnify the power of elites while rendering their extensive influence almost invisible. The outcome is a democracy that functions in name, but in practice remains tightly bound by the enduring logic of oligarchic control.

4.6.3 Funding visibility: The advantage of capital

The issue of economic advantage is closely linked to that of informal networks and elite privilege. The benefits of economic capital in shaping political careers and positions were expressed by a number of interviewees. Having economic advantage helps to ensure that those who make it into government are members of the elite, potentially shaping the decisions they make.

Kristy Debono drew on her personal experience, explaining: *“Economic status also shapes political engagement. Campaigning requires time, funding, and networks - luxuries not equally available to everyone. As someone who came from a working-class background, I’ve seen how demanding it is to stay visible and active without the financial cushion or institutional backing others may enjoy.”*

Emanuel Delia additionally mentioned that campaigning is expensive, which excludes poorer or more marginalised communities from running. Candidates are expected to be constantly visible, which is hard for working people.

He further elaborated on the impact of wealth on political parties at large in Malta: *“The core flaw in our democracy is that political parties are entirely privately funded, with little transparency. People mistakenly assume there’s oversight. In reality, parties are funded by a small group of economic elites. To hide this, parties commit crimes – for example, laundering cash via public telethons.”*

In other words, the material demands associated with being a politician preclude many citizens from considering it a viable career path. Those already within the elite are best positioned to assume the mantle of the role, with their suitability further compounded by their embeddedness within existing social and cultural circles. Elites are easily facilitated into MP and politician roles in a way that may appear naturalised and meritocratic but is really underpinned by access to existing forms of capital.

4.6.4 Procedural versus substantive democracy

Directly related to the themes of informal networks and weak meritocracy is the idea of procedural *versus* substantive democracy. Similar to the Singaporean case, interviewees highlighted that while proper electoral procedures appear to be in place and followed, there are ways that the system is tilted in favour of the incumbent or other powerful elites.

Chircop recalled that *“with the creation of a middle class came high levels of corruption; at that time, three-quarters of ministers and even the police were corrupt.”* This undermined the credibility of formal institutions and eroded public trust.

Professor Kevin Aquilina referenced the nature of representative democracy in Malta and its profound limitations with respect to substantive participation and deliberation.

“If we go back to the Greek roots, we don’t have “rule by the people” in Malta. What we have is rule by representatives - so it’s not direct Greek democracy, but indirect. In Malta’s system, people vote every five years, and then the politicians ignore them - or

even act against their interests. So, you have two opposing camps: what the electorate wants, and what politicians do once in power, often thinking only of themselves. As a government employee, you're supposed to safeguard the interests of governance, yet you're answerable to a minister who can harm your career."

The above observation resonates with the theme of political morality, briefly explored in the literature review. As political theorists like Miyasaki (2022) point out, democracy is deeply intertwined with moral principles that expect public officials to conduct themselves in ways that reflect a commitment to the common good, rather than acting from a place of self-interest. However, when self-interest becomes predominant, then democracy is detrimentally impacted, and democratic processes are undermined for all.

Kristy Debono offered the following reflection: *"Elections in Malta are procedurally fair, with high voter turnout, clear rules, and strong institutional oversight. The public generally trusts the voting process, and the technical administration of elections is sound. However, real competitiveness is more complicated. While the electoral process is fair in structure, the system still tilts in favour of those with resources, connections, or incumbency, hence, leaving others to work twice as hard to be seen and heard."*

Debono took care to explain the power of incumbency in Malta, emphasising that sitting representatives often enjoy greater visibility, institutional access, and the ability to directly assist constituents. This visibility gives them a significant advantage over newcomers, regardless of merit or ideas.

She elaborated further: *"Candidates representing the party in government are especially well-positioned. They benefit not only from the party brand but also from access to state resources, events, and decision-making - which can be used, subtly or overtly, to reinforce their local presence and fulfil constituency expectations. This dynamic skews the playing field and makes it harder for opposition candidates to compete on equal terms."*

Emanuel Delia also voiced his concerns on the power of incumbency in Malta. He explained the intersection between incumbency, patronage, and elections: *“Incumbency is exploited. In 1987 and 2017, public sector employment surged before elections. Planning permits are also used politically, turning votes into transactions.”*

As explored in the literature review, Tsagkroni and Veenendaal (2025) found that smaller jurisdictions may lead to less competitive elections that may also play a part in incumbency. Veenendaal (2018) has additionally observed that the prevalence of patron-client networks, which are more common in small states, can contribute to incumbency tendencies with the leadership style of incumbents becoming more authoritarian with the passage of time. This blend of procedural democracy with authoritarian tendencies symbolises the hybridised nature of democracy in small states, which allows incumbents to often establish and maintain clientelistic networks with more relative ease compared to larger democracies, which in turn feeds into incumbency.

The theme of procedural *versus* substantive democracy was explored and expressed in various ways by the interviewees. Another element of this sub-theme that was highlighted was the lack of checks and balances to ensure power is kept in-check, and the rule of law maintained.

Professor Kevin Aquilina offered the following considerations regarding transparency and accountability in Malta: *“Public administration is operating in secrecy rather than under freedom of information. Take, for example, the case when Clayton Bartolo was Minister for Tourism - he never answered parliamentary questions or NGOs, forcing the auditor to intervene. So, transparency? Questionable. Transparency International reports on Malta too. How accountable is the government? The Prime Minister makes all national decisions except for appointing the Chief Justice - that alone through the Venice Commission. So, the power remains political - not independent from government or politicians.”*

Aquilina offered further concrete examples that illustrated the lack of substantive independence within the Maltese government: *“For commissioners, if the PM and Leader of the Opposition don’t agree, the PM decides. The PM also appoints the Attorney General and State Advocate and can even remove them from Parliament. So how independent are they really? With an absolute majority, the Prime Minister controls everything. He exerts power in Parliament through the whip system - if you disobey, you're reprimanded by your party. We have a governance system that is the antithesis of democracy.”*

Similarly, Delia pointed out that there is an abuse of power within institutions that can silence critics and constrain democratic activity and civil society: *“Institutions abuse their powers to target critics. For instance, the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations checks bank accounts of members of NGOs like Repubblika without consent – under the guise of anti-money laundering. The Ombudsman’s powers are also undermined – reducing his ability to investigate and correct administrative failings.”*

Finally, drawing on the Daphne Caruana Galizia case that is heavily marked on the Maltese national consciousness, the academic informant pointed out that judicial processes in Malta are compromised: *““There should be greater effort to support courts in addressing the issue of delays, while safeguarding judicial independence and court autonomy. As the adage goes, justice delayed is justice denied. A prominent example illustrating this is the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia on October 16, 2017, whose case has experienced significant delays with ongoing legal proceedings and no conviction of the mastermind as of 2025. In contrast, the murder case of Swedish journalist Kim Wall, who was killed in August 2017, proceeded swiftly: from the time of her death to the conviction and imprisonment of the perpetrator occurred within less than a year. This stark difference highlights the challenges in timely justice delivery in Malta. The prolonged delays in Caruana Galizia’s case deny justice years after the crime.”*

Zammit (2018) suggests that Caruana Galizia’s death and the Maltese government’s subsequent actions indicate that, while the island state has aimed to win a veneer of

public approval, not enough has been done to ensure that impartial institutions to ensure accountability and transparency are in place.

4.6.5 Democracy: duopoly or monopoly?

Political theorists and scholars, such as Hasancebi (2023), observe that Malta represents an excellent example of a *de facto* bipartisan country. No parties other than the PL or PN have obtained representation in Maltese Parliament since the state became independent in 1964, thus making Malta one of the purest two-party electoral systems in the world (Hasancebi, 2023). However, some interviewees alluded to the fact that Malta represents a duopoly, or even a monopoly, with the two major parties protecting each other's interests.

The deeply embedded bipartisan nature of Maltese politics that is mirrored in cultural and social life renders it difficult for smaller parties to enter the melee. It is difficult for oppositional actors or minority parties to gain traction as outlined earlier, thus resulting in a political landscape that does not substantially change.

Emanuel Delia offered the following consideration: *“Elections are managed by the two parties in parliament. OSCE’s suggestion for civil society to monitor them was rejected. I believe the parties monitor each other well – but when they share interests (e.g. income declarations), they protect each other.”*

Kristy Debono explained that the nature of the two-party system renders it challenging for other actors to enter the political field: *“The dominance of the two main parties makes it difficult for smaller groups or independents to gain ground.”*

Delia also commented on the bipartisan political culture of Malta and its impact on democracy: *“Due to our anthropological makeup, we have a deeply entrenched two-party system. This duality is also seen in local culture – for example, two-band clubs in villages. These clubs mobilise identities and mock rivals, often with a “winner takes all”*

mindset. At political level, this becomes a tyranny of the majority. Those who lose are humiliated and excluded."

Dr. Marlene Farrugia elaborated on ideas similar to Delia's, explaining how this dualistic tribalism is encouraged in Malta: *"This is why, during election campaigns, many stories emerge at just the right time, and why we see both major parties encouraging tribalism as a means to maintain their duopoly - if not monopoly. Not only do the parties choose whom to elect, but the network behind them actually decides, in collaboration with the party, who will receive the best propaganda to get elected... We're now in a system of "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours". We're facing a duopoly, if not a monopoly."* Veenendaal (2019) forges a connection between political polarisation and corruption, arguing that, within the bifurcated political landscape of Malta, neutral institutions (or individuals) are hard to find, and corruption scandals are therefore likely to be another expression of partisan antagonism.

Chircop argued that *"informal networks cut across every institution here, including the university itself, and they were not built overnight... they keep adapting to maintain power"*. As in *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi (1958) di Lampedusa, 'We must change in order to stay the same, and so that nothing changes.'

Dr. Marthese Portelli, former politician and now CEO of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, argued that what many citizens believe to be democracy in their daily lives is, in fact, a false perception. True democracy, she stressed, depends on the strength of institutions, with clear separation of roles, proper accountability, and respect for those in public office - something she noted is often lacking: *"People believe they experience democracy in their daily lives, but what they experience is not true democracy. Institutions play a very important role, and there needs to be clear separation - knowing who is responsible for what and keeping everyone in check... Citizens do not respect politicians."*

4.7 Themes relating to the management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?

4.7.1 The margins of democracy: Stratified citizenship, labour, and postcolonial exclusion

Like Singapore, marginalised and truncated experiences of democracy was also a prominent theme in the Malta findings. Identity and belonging within the Maltese nation-state were very much influenced by the discourse and narratives of state institutions and political actors. In particular, racism and migration appeared as critical considerations in the testimonies of interviewees, who highlighted the conflicted relationship Malta had with immigrant labour. Unlike Singapore, the Maltese government did not focus on fostering discourses or initiatives of multiculturalism or harmonious multiracial coexistence, thus the recent influx of Sub-Saharan immigrants into Malta was seized upon by politicians as a populist point of leverage with concerned voters. The legacy of colonialism also emerged in discourse, with interviewees emphasising how colonial legislative frameworks and mentalities informed present-day realities, contributing to exclusion and inequality.

4.10.1 Exclusion, migrants and national identity

The concept of exclusion with respect to national identity arose in conversation with diverse interviewees, who articulated the binary mentality present in Maltese society and politics towards who “belongs” in the nation, and merits the full, egalitarian experience of democratic citizenship, and who does not.

For Lou Bondi, it was clear that Malta had no encompassing or inclusive approach towards fostering multiculturalism, despite a demography that was rapidly becoming multicultural. In 2023, foreign immigrants comprised 28.1% of Malta's total population, according to NSO Malta (Malta National Statistics Office, 2024). The foreign population grew by 15.3% between 2022 and 2023, while the Maltese population increased by only 0.1%. He elaborated: *“I can say we don’t have multiculturalism in Malta. True*

multiculturalism involves positive policies helping people from different countries live, work, and integrate. I lived in Canada for 12 years - they have multicultural ministries at national, provincial, and city levels with big budgets. There, being Canadian and Maltese or Indian isn't contradictory. We don't have that. Both parties fear it due to political backlash - "you're bringing more foreigners."

For Dr. Marlene Farrugia, national identity was constantly in a state of flux, and it was essential to use identity to enfold different peoples in, rather than weaponised and harnessed to shut them out: *"National identity exists and is continuously developing - it is not static. Today's national identity includes the influence of various nationalities that, over generations, now form part of Maltese society. National identity should not be instrumentalised to spread hate and division...Instead, it should be used to foster cohesion among different cultures and traditions."*

According to Cassola, populism harnessed binary and exclusionary narratives surrounding migrants to leverage votes and support from the Maltese population. Interestingly, Cassola also expressed a conditional approach to embracing migrants that was contingent upon them upholding the rule of law: *"Populist rhetoric, especially anti-foreigner narratives, is politically effective. If you defend third-country nationals, you lose support. Both parties bash foreigners. But it should be about behaviour, not nationality. If someone is law-abiding and pays taxes, why kick them out? If they break the law, yes - repatriate them."*

Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca explained that while NGOs campaigned for the rights of migrants, migrants themselves felt inhibited from participating or expressing themselves: *"Migrants' voices are being amplified through their respective NGOs. As to whether they participate, there have been marches where they have taken part. However, I've spoken to migrants who are afraid to speak out, partly because certain exclusionary narratives in the country make them feel uncomfortable to do so."*

Parliamentary Secretary Glenn Bedingfield offered a different perspective on exclusion, expressing that many migrants choose to segregate themselves from Maltese society:

“(Exclusion is) not necessarily because of the policies but more due to the groups themselves. For example, in the school in Raħal Ġdid, almost half or three-quarters of the children are Arab - but we didn’t make it a school for foreigners. Same in Ħamrun. Then you have Indians, Serbs, and Eastern Europeans who group together in areas like St. Paul’s Bay. But that’s not due to the government - it’s them grouping up...they are so closely knit that they exclude themselves.”

Bedingfield went on to explain that the situation may shift in several decades if migrants intermarried with Maltese citizens, which would contribute to future generations of migrant children being recognised as Maltese. However, this long-term view didn’t acknowledge the needs of migrants now, or policies or measures that could help ensure they are enfolded into Maltese society, to experience a sense of inclusion and egalitarian democracy.

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence offers a perspective through which to make sense of this exclusion with respect to egalitarian democracy. For migrants, symbolic power accounts for the diverse expressions of discipline by which the individual is made to become consciously and unconsciously aware of their subordinate place in the social hierarchy, both vis-à-vis individual relationships, but also systematically through institutions, their position in the labour market, and the discourses that are implicit and explicit surrounding their identity and belongingness (Bourdieu, 1989). The lack of inclusion or policies that enfold migrants into Maltese political, social, cultural, and civic life at a systemic and institutional level represents symbolic violence on the part of the Maltese state. As later testimonies in this section will show, many feel afraid to express themselves or their needs for fear of repercussion and are aware of their status as scapegoats for national issues.

4.7.2 Inequality and labour

The sub-theme of inequality and labour is closely tied to exclusionary identities, because the vast majority of individuals who experience inequality, exploitation and diminished access to democratic rights and freedoms in the Maltese labour market are migrants.

Debono (2021) points out that Maltese legislation at one point placed migrants at the mercy of their employers, since they face deportation if they lose their job and do not find another one within 10 days. Migrants in general face precarious and poorly paid work conditions in Malta. A new migrant labour policy to regulate foreign workers and curb abuse is, however, currently in a phase of public consultation, with measures such as an extended grace period (thirty days with the possibility of a further thirty-day extension) likely to roll out later in 2025. This was an issue many interviewees offered their thoughts on.

Chircop observed that “today, because the economy is no longer based on manufacturing - less than 9–11% remains - and much of the workforce is foreign, things are different.” This change has altered the socio-economic base of democratic participation.

Professor Arnold Cassola reflected: *“Then there’s the double-dealing: you bring in foreigners as cheap labour without basic rights, and later you scapegoat them to look like you’re taking action. The debate within the Nationalist Party has moved far right - people like Alex Borg speaking of overpopulation. But if you want to reduce it, target the ones exploiting migrant labour and making money off them.”*

Bedingfield explained that migrant workers held a critical role in the fabric of society, undertaking work that no-one else wanted: *“These workers are doing jobs Maltese people no longer want to do - like construction and catering. In my time, we used to work those jobs in summer, but nowadays no one wants to.”*

Dr. Lawrence Gonzi, former Prime Minister of Malta from 2004 to 2013, and former leader of the Nationalist Party also emphasised that migrant workers were the backbone of the labour market, occupying poorly paid but essential jobs across the labour spectrum: *“Without these foreign workers, we wouldn’t have carers, nurses, or manual workers in construction, nor street cleaners. The rhetoric says one thing, but practice is different. Look at bus drivers and taxi drivers - they’re foreigners. Even at a funeral yesterday, cemetery workers were foreign. As politicians, we don’t have the guts*

to say that we need these workers...The truth is, the decision to employ foreigners isn't just due to a lack of Maltese - it's because foreigners cost less."

For Dr. Marlene Farrugia, there was a profoundly undemocratic paradox in the treatment of migrant labourers: *"We should not be afraid of those who, if not for their presence in our society, our hospitals and hotels would now be shut. We pretend to give them a role but then don't let them work properly for the country."*

Such insights and reflections stretched beyond migrants' experiences of the labour market to encompass experiences of stratified or truncated citizenship, which will be explored below.

4.7.3 Stratified citizenship

Inequality in labour conditions and exclusion surrounding who belongs in the nation and who does not are both representations of a more insidious phenomenon: stratified citizenship. The experience of stratified citizenship maps directly onto the concept of egalitarian democracy: whether diverse individuals in society enjoy equal access to resources, political rights, freedoms and opportunities. While it is clear that many migrant individuals in Malta experience stratified citizenship, there are others in Malta that may not enjoy the full breadth that democratic citizenship is supposed to offer them.

The academic informant spoke about the stratified experiences of women and those with less social or cultural capital. Her statement illustrates intersectionality by highlighting how multiple, overlapping social factors - such as cultural and social capital, gender, and migrant status - combine to shape people's experiences and opportunities. She points out that in many countries, including Malta, those with high cultural and social capital, often stemming from longer-established roots, enjoy advantages not only through overt mechanisms like patronage but also through informal, exclusionary decision-making processes such as "boys' clubs." This means women and first-generation individuals face systemic barriers that intersect, limiting their career

progression. Decisions about careers and opportunities are often predestined within privileged networks, reflecting power asymmetries beyond just gender bias.

Kristy Debono similarly expanded on this idea of social and cultural capital. She explained that while in theory politics and participation in politics is open to everyone, the reality is that different social groups experience challenges specific to their identity that may inhibit their ability to participate; *“In theory, Malta offers a democratic space where anyone can participate in politics. But in practice, not all social groups experience the same ease of access or the same starting point. From my own journey, as someone who does not come from a political family...I can say with confidence that the road is far more difficult for those who fall outside traditional power structures. Those without inherited networks or established names often have to work twice as hard, especially on the ground.”*

Delia explored the experience of stratified citizenship with respect to those seeking to enter politics, using the idea of “filters” to explain how stratification of the political sphere happens: *“Our system has informal and formal filters. The informal one is whether a person is accepted and mobilised by a party. The formal one is whether they are elected. Clear discrimination exists – women, professionals, non-lawyers, and those without wealth face greater hurdles.”*

For Professor and sociologist Michael Briguglio, Malta has seen some improvement in certain areas of inclusivity and citizenship, while surpassing the rights and inclusion of others, such as workers and third-country nationals: *“In some respects, inclusivity has improved - LGBTIQ laws, or even passport sales. But if you’re fleeing war and find yourself in the middle of the Mediterranean, there’s no inclusivity there. It’s uneven. The same goes for workers’ rights. In a society with 100,000 foreign residents, I imagine many have no voice - especially third-country nationals. What voice do they have in policies about them?”*

Ultimately, Professor Kevin Aquilina brought the issue of stratified citizenship back to the fore as a fundamental issue of democracy—and a failing on the part of Malta,

emphasising the idea of procedural democracy versus substantive democracy: *“Democracy exists as a façade so Malta can call itself a democratic republic. But is it really a republic if some people get two pensions while others get only one, or women are paid less than men for the same job, or workers earn below the minimum wage or suffer precarious conditions?”*

4.7.4 Navigating Malta’s postcolonial reality

The legacy of colonialism, and its enduring imprint on Maltese culture, identity, society, politics and legislation also appeared in conversations with the elite interviewees.

For many, such as Cassola, this legacy was indelible, and affected current day mindsets, detrimentally impacting Malta’s present hybridised expression of democracy, and the pervasiveness of authoritarian tendencies: *“We have 2,000–3,000 years of feudal and colonial history. Our mindset is still feudal - we were barons’ property, sold or rented like land to the Knights in exchange for a falcon. That created a mentality of obedience. The concept of jus primae noctis - though a myth - symbolises this internalised servitude, now projected onto ministers. We didn’t legally think for ourselves until 1964. Being a free-thinker here is hard - you must constantly go against the grain.”*

Emanuel Delia succinctly pointed out that there is an authoritarian dominance embedded in the executive order, passed down from colonialism: *“Our executive has inherited the ability to override institutional independence at will – benevolently or otherwise – rooted in colonial traditions.”*

For Kristy Debono, political culture in Malta is shaped by the legacy of colonialism. She similarly espoused an awareness of the inherent obedience, groupthink and authoritarian tendencies that impact participation, egalitarian and deliberative elements of democracy: *“Malta’s political culture is still deeply influenced by its colonial past and strong religious traditions. British rule left behind solid institutions and a respect for law and order, but also a top-down mentality that can limit grassroots participation. People often expect the state to lead, rather than feel empowered to*

shape policy themselves. Religion, especially Catholicism, continues to shape public values, particularly around family, community, and morality. Even as society modernises, these values still influence how democracy is understood and debated.”

Bedingfield offered a perspective on the layers of different colonial influence that have shaped Malta’s present-day reality: *“Governance is a direct effect of British colonialism, including how we register companies. Governance is therefore intrinsically tied to colonialism. Even the 1964 blood constitution is based on Anglo-Saxon models. The legal field, less so, as it’s made up from everywhere - Today, our system is more continental: French, Spanish, and German.”*

Indeed, Orlando-Salling (2025) emphasises that Malta’s geographical position has meant that colonisation after colonisation has taken place, leaving a legacy that has impacted legal, political, social, and cultural life on the island. Malta has consistently been criticised for exercising the disproportionate power of the executive, a phenomenon that is deeply colonial in nature (Veenendaal, 2019). Xu (2018) also reflects that colonial powers typically foster elite networks and patronage systems that warp both political and social dynamics, often distorting the allocation of public sector positions and diminishing the incentives of bureaucrats to perform (Xu, 2018). It is clear that Malta’s colonial legacies and power structures continue to shape contemporary democratic processes, institutions, and inequalities. The issue of identity appears to be tied to this postcolonial reality: As explored earlier in this section, Malta has placed little emphasis on multicultural policies and initiatives, and there is a largely reactionary, divisive response to the rapidly growing migrant population. The issue of identity, memory and smallness will be picked up and explored in greater depth in the last theme of the findings section.

4.7.5 Smallness, memory and identity

Dr. Marlene Farrugia offered the following reflection on Maltese identity: *“National identity is not fixed - it evolves every day. It is a collective, evolving memory. The greatest threat to national identity comes not from foreigners, but from the current government,*

which has enabled the destruction of Malta's natural, architectural, and cultural heritage. Much of our collective memory is being lost. When heritage buildings are destroyed and the elderly pass away, their stories disappear - and so does our history. The biggest attack on national identity is committed by those in power who destroy what defines us as a nation."

Professor Kevin Aquilina reflected on the diverse elements that comprise Malta's identity, emphasising the importance of historical, cultural, legislative, colonial, and social aspects: *"Many write about this - identities formed around language, religion, food, Maltese folk songs...I'm currently reading on constitutional identity, trying to understand all Malta's identities: A small nation state, a Mediterranean state, the "Switzerland of the Med," a post-colonial state, a European state."*

Finally, Professor Josann Cutajar explained that Malta is still searching to make sense of itself, a process that was somewhat halted by its entry into the EU: *"We still haven't figured out who we are. I start with people older than me who still believe in the "golden days" of British rule. Then there's my generation, which began to search for our own identity. Unfortunately, this process stopped when we joined the EU."*

These questions of identity intersect with other considerations that impact the nature of Malta's democracy. The work of Campbell and Hall (2009), for example, argues that small, more culturally homogeneous countries can leverage national identity more effectively than larger, more culturally heterogeneous countries. For Francis Fukuyama (2018), national identity can be informed by formal laws and institutions that relate to official languages, festivals, celebrations, history, school curricula, and expectations about the criteria an individual must meet to be considered a genuine member of the community (Fukuyama, 2018). In this sense, there is a conditional connection between identity and democracy—an individual can enjoy the benefits of democracy if they uphold the elements of identity. Fukuyama (2018) asserts that a liberal democracy can be understood as an implicit contract between the citizens of a nation and their government. This contract requires the relinquishing of certain rights in order to allow the government to protect other rights that are viewed to be more fundamental.

While the PAP have ascribed assiduously to a strong nation-building program in Singapore, the reflections shared by Maltese participants above suggest some oscillation and ambivalence in the national identity consciously cultivated by the Maltese government. As Campbell and Hall (2009) assert, national culture and identity represent powerful tools for ensuring that citizens align with actions that benefit national political interests. In a sense, the deliberate construction of national identity carries within it appropriate behavioural norms, approved emotions, and sanctioned comportment, all examples of the subtle coercion and social engineering aligned with symbolic power. While the PAP in Singapore has operationalised national identity in a very strident way, various governments in Malta have not devoted themselves as deliberately to a nation and identity-building project.

4.8 Themes relating to Navigating civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

4.8.1 The gendered body: The embodied experience of femaleness and democracy
The intersection of the body, physical space, and democracy was a theme that also emerged from the Malta findings too, albeit in different expressions than those of Singapore.

In the case of Malta, the experience of the way in which gendered bodies experienced democracy arose as a critical consideration and point of reflection of many female interviewees. Nestled in contextual literature which highlights the issue of abortion, women in the labour market, and the visibility of Maltese women in civil and political society, the importance of gendered bodies was clearly manifest in its importance.

For Dr. Miriam Dalli, current Minister for Environment, Energy and Enterprise, and former member of the European Parliament, being a woman in political settings was challenging across multiple fronts: “I’ll speak about Malta, though this experience is

mirrored in other contexts too...Women still find it very difficult to participate independently and to be treated equally to men. Women are more harshly judged, and society does not fully accept them - women have to give more. A woman is savagely criticised even when it's not her fault. And this isn't about women against women or men against women...Yesterday we had a TRAN (European Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism) meeting, and out of two parties, I was the only woman present. And that says a lot about the current situation of gender participation."

Dalli's observations about the gendered nature of interpersonal interactions in political settings, and was mirrored by other interviewees, including Dr Marlene Farrugia, former Member of Parliament and former leader of the Democratic Party. For Farrugia, an implicit assumption that women should occupy a certain place in society— behind a man— became explicit in her lived experience: "In 2017, when my party joined Simon (Busuttil – former PN Leader)'s in a coalition for the election, it was used against us because there's a sentiment that a woman should stand behind a man. So, when a woman feels equal to a man and speaks up, they know they can attack her with contempt. Just like they did with Daphne - calling her a witch, a prostitute, "this and that".

Kristy Debono, Maltese economist, former member of the Parliament, explained that the challenges for Maltese women who want to enter political and civic life are layered, and that their experience of democracy is therefore different, impacted by their gendered beingness, and the concomitant social and cultural responsibilities and norms: "It's not that Maltese voters are reluctant to elect women - they do. But political life, by its nature, often clashes with the demands of family and professional life, which women disproportionately shoulder. I've experienced first-hand the constant balancing act, and how unforgiving political structures can be when it comes to the realities of caregiving and household responsibilities. It's not the will that's lacking, but the system that makes it harder for women to sustain a political career over time...This dynamic creates a situation where, although the mechanisms of democracy are in place and highly active, the quality of democratic experience can vary significantly..."

Professor Josann Cutajar, Head of Department of Gender and Sexualities and Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta reflected that women have been at the forefront of a number of political and social considerations in Malta: “First, the EU was pressuring us because there were not enough women in the workforce. So, we had to increase the number of women working - but mainly in secondary jobs where there’s little pay. We don’t want more people; we want to stop apologising for having children. The breadwinner model is designed around someone who doesn’t need to care for children - so if you do have kids, you need nannies or even surrogacy, like in America. I, for example, am against abortion - and considered conservative. But if I believe in the right to choose, and I believe in justice, should I impose my rights on someone who has no voice.”

The testimonies of Cutajar, Debono, Farrugia and Dalli speak to the complexity of the nexus of gender, politics, democracy, and embodied beingness. Machin (2015) for example, reflects that identifications of gender and nation corporeally intersect in distinctive ways. Feminists observe that it is very often female bodies that hold the responsibility of reproducing (national) identities: women’s bodies are expected to reproduce the nation biologically, culturally, and symbolically (Yuval-Davis, 1997) - and as Cutajar noted, also reproduce the labour force as well as participate within it. However, as these Maltese women pointed out, the democratic experience for women in Malta is somewhat truncated: Women can participate in politics but will not experience the full breadth of experience and respect that is attributed to their male counterparts. Should they become too visible or vocal, they will be critiqued to ensure they remain in their corner. They must enter the labour market, but these jobs are often secondary or auxiliary, and poorly remunerated. Women must balance professional and family life, including the majority of caregiving duties in many cases, and women must also bear the brunt of unforgiving expectations related to performance.

A Central Bank of Malta report (2023) noted that the facilitation of female participation in the labour market was a major social policy target since joining the EU, with female participation rising strongly since 2005, reaching 59.9% in 2021 (Caruana, 2023). However, the report also found that one of the major reasons for female inactivity in

the labour market was due to caregiving duties, which appeared to be much stronger in Malta than in the wider European area. The report also noted that the majority of women in Malta are employed in services such as health and social work activities, education, the wholesale and retail sector and the 'other services' sector, which comprise jobs with a lower-earning potential and contribute to gender pay discrepancy. These findings correlate with the observations of the women interviewed, who voiced the challenges of working, caregiving, mothering, running households, and participating in civic life.

Beyond Malta, a similar entanglement of gender, discipline, and civic visibility is evident in Singapore. Field notes from Singapore reveal a different but equally constraining configuration of gendered participation. Women are prominently represented in the labour market, particularly in the service and professional sectors, yet they remain almost absent from blue-collar work such as bus driving, construction, or technical labour. This absence from manual or infrastructural roles reflects an unspoken hierarchy of respectability in which female visibility is confined to socially "appropriate" occupations. As recorded in ethnographic observation, "women are significantly represented in the labour market... however, they are less visible in blue-collar roles such as bus drivers, construction workers, and technicians," suggesting a civic order that recognises women's contribution only when it conforms to established social scripts.

Complementing this, the state-driven Singapore Kindness Movement illustrates how emotional and behavioural discipline are institutionalised as civic virtues. Originally launched as a government campaign to instil courtesy and later expanded to values such as empathy and gratitude, it is embedded in school curricula from preschool to university. Through initiatives like the "smile zone," where students are encouraged to perform happiness in public spaces, this movement encodes emotional compliance as a social ideal. Such campaigns - funded by the Ministry of Culture and integrated into citizenship education - construct gendered expectations of restraint, care, and social harmony, mirroring the affective labour Maltese women describe in balancing public presence and private duty.

At the same time, accounts from Singaporean academics and activists illustrate how women's public visibility remains precarious. Sol Iglesias, a political scientist, recounted her exclusion from an academic conference at the National University of Singapore after authorities objected to her participation due to her association with a political dissident. Her experience underscores how institutional control extends beyond explicit censorship to the quiet disciplining of women whose intellectual or civic presence transgresses the state's expectations of deference. Activist Jolovan Wham similarly described the city-state's "authoritarian smallness," where power is centralised and dissent tightly contained - conditions that render civic and gendered embodiment both visible and vulnerable.

Thus, in Singapore as in Malta, gendered democracy operates through the body: through what it is allowed to do, where it may appear, and how it must behave. In both contexts, the democratic subject is required to be disciplined - morally in Malta's patriarchal milieu, affectively in Singapore's technocratic one.

Such reflections speak to the nature of embodied democracy—indeed, Sanders (1997: 353) observes that the citizens often described in deliberative democracy theories "seem to live on another planet" and are "devoid of race, class and gender", which is the reason that the privileges experienced by certain groups go undetected.

4.8.2 Contested civic space: Civil society, surveillance, and the symbolic violence of self-censorship

Democratic access to the civic sphere represented a source of focus for many interviewees. Like Singapore, questions of participation, control, surveillance, symbolic violence, power, and coercion were themes that ran through conversations and were apparent also in textual analysis. Of all the themes explored in the findings chapter, the theme of contested civic space had the most overlap and similarities between Malta and Singapore.

For many Maltese individuals, the spectre of backlash, repression, reputational damage or harm prevented many from expressing themselves, their opinions, or taking a stance on public matters.

Professor Michael Briguglio stated frankly: *“What hinders broader participation? Some people genuinely fear being active because they worry it could affect their job.”*

Kristy Debono observed that in Malta, those who vocally diverge from populist narratives or the traditionally accepted status quo can experience social exclusion, vilification, or cancellation. The consequences can be harmful socially, personally, or professionally; *“This creates a chilling effect on public dialogue. While technically free to speak, individuals may self-censor for fear of reputational damage or backlash from powerful informal networks. As a result, the diversity of opinions in the public sphere becomes narrower, and those outside the dominant discourse may feel voiceless or marginalised...Hence, in this environment, democracy risks becoming performative rather than participatory. Protecting the right to speak must go hand in hand with fostering a culture that tolerates, even welcomes, pluralism - especially when views are unpopular or challenge the status quo.”*

Cassola pointed to Maltese scholars, thinkers and writers who have moved away from Malta in order to be able to fully express themselves: *“Sebastian Tanti Burlo’ lives abroad. Many critical writers have lived abroad too. I’ve written about Maltese migrant writers - Antoine Cassar and others. Critical minds exist, but many work under fear - of discrimination, lack of promotion, exclusion. Fear is real and tangible in Malta. Officially, there is regulation - but much of the censorship is self-imposed. If you criticise the state too much, your funding could be pulled.”*

Beyond the threat of reputational damage and funding loss, however, lie very real threats and dangers for those who dare to comment too critically on the political establishment in Malta. Emanuel Delia referred to the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and the repression the government has practised in silencing her memory: *“Many fear the risks of political involvement – the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia is a*

reminder. Recently, a civil servant was photographed lighting a candle in her memory, and his photo was published with calls for his dismissal by the Central Bank. No rules were broken, but this intimidation discourages others."

Dr. Lawrence Gonzi also referred to examples of symbolic violence and repression demonstrated towards those expressing public grief for Daphne Caruana Galizia. He mentioned the well-known example of former Justice Minister Owen Bonnici, who ordered government employees to remove flowers, candles and tributes placed at the foot of Galizia's memorial in the dead of night.

However, Bedingfield disagreed with the idea that Maltese citizens practiced self-censorship in certain situations for fear of reprisal: *"We removed censorship. The right to expression is protected. We don't have censorship laws - so everyone can say what they want."*

Self-censorship in Malta, as explained by Gonzi, Delia, Cassola and Debono represents a potent example of symbolic violence. The threat of reputational or personal reprisal is sufficient enough to ensure quiet coercion and that dissidents remain largely silent and in step with hegemonic discourse. The death of Daphne Caruana Galizia represented a turning point in Maltese society—many citizens became aware there was a cost for freedom of expression and deliberation, and that cost was too high to risk.

4.8.3 Dispersing dissent through tokenism, coercion and control

In addition to self-censorship, there are other ways that civil society in Malta is constrained, participation is bounded and controlled, and deliberation is rendered symbolic rather than genuine.

Kristy Debono explained that in some cases democratic processes are bypassed, or "tainted" and a tokenistic or symbolic response to public pressure or concern is enacted: *"While dissent is tolerated, the pattern suggests that the government often responds based on political expediency with symbolic gestures to appease public sentiment rather than out of a consistent commitment to transparency or justice...While formal*

mechanisms exist such as parliamentary debates or public inquiries in many cases, the response leans more toward managing optics through symbolic gestures or informal pressure...freedom of speech is often even more fraught to express views that challenge the prevailing narratives promoted by dominant media outlets, influential social media personalities, or certain well-positioned NGOs.”

For Emanuel Delia, while there was tolerance for dissent, there was no real space for deliberation or exploration of that dissent. Rather, strategies were employed to discourage genuine participation and contestation of issues; *“Generally, the government tolerates the parliamentary opposition and its media. But it does not treat independent actors equally. It uses threats of legal reform, criminalisation, and sanctions to discourage dissent. During COVID, dissenters were labelled “traitors,” deterring public participation.”* Here, the emotions of shame and honour, powerful tropes in nation building narratives to ensure voluntary compliance, become evident again—those who engage in approved behaviour can feel an innate sense of honour and belonging, while those who deviate from accepted narratives, norms and behaviours are stigmatised to feel shame.

Professor Kevin Aquilina referenced the soft coercion demonstrated towards those who dissent or speak out on topics that cast the government in a poor light, particularly towards dissenting journalists. He argued that this symbolic violence has become institutionalised: *“Violence today is more symbolic - like locking journalists inside buildings...Today, it’s psychological - intimidation and fear. “If you publish something against me, there will be consequences.” Daphne Caruana Galizia is the classic example. Violence can become institutionalised, with insiders complicit - as in Daphne’s case, where accusations suggest insiders were involved. Marilyn Clarke’s book documents many cases of violence against journalists. There’s also exclusionary violence: the PM invites some journalists but not others - censorship by omission. That’s psychological violence too.”*

Dr. Marlene Farrugia also emphasised the lack of a free press, which further contributed to a tightly controlled discursive environment: *“I need to mention the hijacking of the*

media by the government through selective indirect financing and favouritism toward certain media houses and journalists, and the direct demonisation of others. Not to mention the debacle of the national broadcaster. Democracy without a free and functioning journalism...cannot function. It is a charade.”

Zammit (2018) notes that Caruana Galizia’s case strongly influenced political life in Malta, revealing the coercion and control exerted over the media by the government. Despite the passage of Malta’s Media and Defamation Act in 2018 which was supposed to empower the press with greater journalistic freedom and protection from libel suits, Malta’s ranking in the World Press Freedom Index has generally spiralled downwards in recent years, ranking 78 in 2022 and dropping to 84 in 2023. 2025 saw a climb upwards to 67th, but with a low ranking of 23rd out of 27 in the EU bloc (World Press Freedom Index, 2025). RSF stated that Caruana Galizia’s death lifted the veil on the judicial harassment and intimidation to which journalists are routinely subjected in the island state. For example, journalists in Malta must have a government-issued “access card” to attend press conferences or provide coverage of government events. Such initiatives are evocative of measures taken in Singapore to control the media.

4.8.4 The downfall of social media as a forum for meaningful participation and deliberation

A number of Maltese interviewees reflected upon whether digital spaces offered a meaningful forum for civic participation, expression, and transformation. While many Singaporean activists valued social media for its ability to provide a space for civic expression (when the government didn’t enact POFMA), for the Maltese interviewees, social media did not provide space for meaningful interaction or deliberation, but rather, the erosion of substantive conversations or change:

The following insight was offered by Dalli: *“What concerns me is that social media has changed many things, including how people participate. Many feel comfortable hiding behind a keyboard, and I believe democracy today isn’t what it was 10 or 20 years ago - and the same goes for freedom of speech. Before, perhaps there was less freedom of*

speech, but people weren't afraid to go out and speak their mind. Today, people hide behind keyboards and are more vicious and harsher."

Emanuel Delia explored the intersection of Galizia's assassination with social media engagement: *"Even eight years later, we live in Daphne Caruana Galizia's shadow – her blog massively shaped public discourse. But does it enhance civic engagement? "Civic" is key. I rarely see persuasion on social media – mostly people yelling into echo chambers. Social media is full of intimidation and hate. People are raped and assaulted there metaphorically all the time. So, no, I don't think it enables civic engagement. It raises awareness, but at the cost of quality conversation."*

Kristy Debono emphasised that social media had further compounded the traction of dominant voices and populist discourse: *"The loudest voices often dominate online spaces, and the line between journalism, bloggers, self-appointed opinionists, armchair critics and activism has become increasingly blurred. Social media, in particular, can create echo chambers and escalate polarisation. In some cases, individuals who express views outside the dominant or populist online narrative, especially more moderate or conservative voices, risk being discredited, harassed, or excluded altogether."*

The academic informant highlighted the dual impact of social media on democratic engagement: while it has empowered citizens to organize collectively, it has also contributed to further fragmentation of the public sphere. She noted that digital media originally held the promise of enhancing citizen participation in democratic processes, grounded in the traditional ideal of the "fourth estate" - the freedom of the press and expression as a cornerstone of democracy. However, this ideal has been disrupted. Although social media platforms empower individuals in theory, such empowerment often remains superficial; actions like clicking "like" or "share" do not constitute meaningful empowerment capable of generating substantive social or political change. True democratic transformation demands depth and substance beyond digital gestures.

4.8.5 The necessity of meaningful grassroots participation

Chircop linked the decline of grassroots spaces in Malta to the closure of the dockyard, which he described as “a major blow” to the Labour movement, reducing the organisational capacity of one of Malta’s key working-class constituencies.

In the absence of meaningful deliberation in online spaces such as social media, the need for genuine civic engagement, interactions and initiatives becomes more urgent. As the voices above illustrate, dissent in social media spaces can be performative rather than genuinely participative or substantive. A number of interviewees raised the issue that grassroots movements and initiatives are therefore essential.

Professor Michael Briguglio emphasised the role of grassroots in offsetting the democratic deficit, and the fact that personalism, a common trait of small states, can in some instances facilitate this grassroots expression: *“Grassroots movements and civil society are vital to counter the democratic deficit. Thank goodness certain NGOs exist, or many issues would go unaddressed. Still, there are many invisible voices - people who only express themselves when they meet politicians at home visits, band clubs, or football clubs.”*

Emanuel Delia acknowledged that while there were some efforts to incorporate the views of citizens at a grassroots level, more action was needed to elevate participation across the board in diverse spheres of civic life: *“Some institutions make efforts to reach out. Parliament broadcasts its sessions online, though there is no data on reach or audience. Political parties engage with activists, but there is limited room for constructive public contribution to debate. The executive conducts consultations, some linked to budget processes (e.g. pre-budget documents), and others where politicians expect public support. There are statutory consultations, especially in planning, which are publicly open. Still, I feel civil participation has limited impact...The judiciary does not consult the public, signalling its separation from the people. Institutions appear open to receiving citizen feedback. Academics seem to be consulted, but only in limited areas,*

and they tend to avoid strong judgement to preserve potential future engagement.” Again, the spectre of tokenism rather than substantive democracy rears its head.

For Dr. Lawrence Gonzi and Kristy Debono, certain formative events such as the Jean-Paul Sofia case (where a young construction worker died when the building he was working on collapsed due to unsafe conditions) have forged open space for greater civic engagement at a grassroots level.

Dr Lawrence Gonzi offered the following consideration: *“I think there’s been a transformation in the last ten years. Civil society has almost taken over the role of the opposition. Civil society in our country never had a space to act, now after the Jean Paul Sofia case it found its voice.”*

Kristy Debono further elaborated how civil society came together to force action on the part of the government: *“Initially, the government resisted calls for a public inquiry into Sofia’s tragic death, despite growing concern. It was only after sustained public protest, political pressure, and a strong emotional appeal from his parents, amplified by media and civil society, that the government reversed its position and agreed to the inquiry.”*

The above examples speak to the meaningful change that genuine grassroots engagement can foster when the public are emotionally motivated and mobilised. Qin (2023) highlights that grassroots democracy represents a potent form of participatory democracy. When citizens engage in grassroots democracy, they can experience benefits personally in conjunction with society as a whole (Qin, 2023). Tomba (2014:3) refers to this engagement of relations between the state and civil society as “everyday practices of power in the neighbourhood”. Malta’s experiences with genuine grassroots engagement in recent years contrasts that of Singapore, where grassroots have largely been co-opted by the state as a means of surveillance and control of civil society.

4.8.6 The politics of smallness: Density, proximity, and mistrust

The effect of smallness on democratic processes was unpacked in distinctive ways by interviewees. Similar to Singapore, smallness led to certain outcomes such as trust issues, personalism, patronage, and the embeddedness of elite groups, and identity. However, these sub-themes emerged in slightly distinctive ways to those of Singapore: for example, rather than a lack of trust and insecurity due to external threats, mistrust in Malta appears to stem from suspicion of others within the country.

Dr. Lawrence Gonzi offered the following thoughts on the way in which smallness can undermine trust in democratic processes: *“In a small country where everyone knows each other, suspicion - whether founded or not - can undermine the system. Ask the people and you’ll find a level of doubt about the systems and institutions. So, while the influence is there, our small size continues to cast doubt, and especially when things go wrong, people start to suspect that everything is flawed.”*

Gonzi further elaborated on why this mistrust can impact negatively on democratic systems: *“The theme of being a small country will recur in my responses. In Malta, even if a decision is taken genuinely, the fact that we are small automatically raises suspicion. That’s a great misfortune. If you find someone who is impartial and also perceived to be fair, then the structures will work. But if any one of these is missing, the structures won’t function, and decisions won’t be taken in the common interest but rather in the interest of a small group.”*

Professor Arnold Cassola offered the following perspective on smallness, personalism and fear: *“But the country’s small size breeds fear - everyone knows each other.”*

For the academic informant, smallness led to mistrust on a number of different things - not just democratic processes. Malta’s small size creates a unique social environment characterized by intense and frequent interpersonal communication. This closeness breeds a heightened sense of community but also results in ambivalence and polarisation around contentious themes such as abortion. The dense social networks

foster both strong social cohesion and social control, often reinforcing traditional norms and expectations. The intimate social fabric amplifies debates and tensions around sensitive cultural and moral topics

Ironically, the source of mistrust that Cassola and Gonzi refer to above stems from personalisation and proximity - a factor common in small states. It is also noteworthy to ponder the contrast to Singapore here: the mistrust Singaporeans spoke about was not in relation to each other—but in relation to a perceived external threat, which was consciously cultivated by the PAP. Many Maltese interviewees also acknowledged that although proximity bred mistrust, proximity and personalisation were instrumental to maintaining access to people in power, getting things done, and harnessing connections to improve one's life and opportunities.

4.8.7 Smallness and the importance of networks and connections

However, while smallness fostered mistrust, the importance of maintaining strategic connections in a small state such as Malta was nonetheless emphasised by the majority of the interviewees. There were diverse reasons provided for why the cultivation of networks and connections was so critical.

Dalli offered this perspective, based on limited resources: *"I have friends from all backgrounds and beliefs. On an island where resources are limited, I can't afford to filter people out."*

Kristy Debono explained that fundamental village ties and tribalism strongly shape everyday political and democratic realities in Malta: *"Culturally, politics remains very personal. Loyalty, relationships, and village ties often matter more than ideology. While this creates a highly engaged electorate, it can also blur the lines between public service and political favour. Informal networks such as political party clubs, NGOs, pressure groups and union structures continue to shape the everyday experience of democracy. While these networks can increase access and responsiveness, they can also reinforce a culture where personal contacts matter more than transparent procedures, leading to*

frustration and disillusionment. This is inevitable due to Malta being a small, tight-knit community, where accessibility to people in power is very attainable.”

Professor Michael Briguglio explained that connections and being legitimised matters a lot in a small state like Malta; where the reality on the ground differs significantly from how the state is presented: *“On paper, we’re a pluralist democracy. But in a small society like Malta, if you’re delegitimised, the impact is greater. Maltese literature talks about this a lot - it shows how symbolic governance can marginalise you. A label can work in your favour or against you. Malta, as a political structure, is a liberal democracy and an EU member state, but that doesn’t explain everything - there are also networks, patronage, social connections...”*

Professor Josann Cutajar referenced the importance of social and cultural capital in Malta, and the way in which this capital and connections could be leveraged to change one’s lived, everyday reality in ways that are meaningful: *“Power doesn’t only mean wealth. It’s also about who you know. If you know, for instance, the minister’s driver, then you have power. The same applies in hospitals: if you know a nurse, you can skip the queue. There is no rule of law if you have connections.”*

As already explored extensively throughout this thesis, theorists in the field of small state democracy such as Dahl and Tufte (1973) argue that smaller democracies allow citizens to access elected officials with greater accessibility, engage in spur of the moment conversations with them, and impel them to become more engaged in political and everyday life, as seen in the examples above. When voters can access officials with closeness and ease, they can express their needs and wants with greater clarity. However, as Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) point out, this small state-specific informality, reduced hierarchy, and personalisation in politics can contribute to structural distortions in democracy. While citizens may have greater access to and means of achieving their personal goals and needs, this is at the expense of egalitarian democracy.

4.13 Drawing on democracy datasets: Quantitative insights from indices

From a quantitative perspective, data from V-Dem and Freedom House datasets offers valuable insights to complement and contextualise these qualitative observations. Although these datasets represent two of the most globally recognised and far-ranging in their evaluations of different forms of democracy, it is nonetheless vital to briefly note again that they are not necessarily value neutral measures; for example, both are influenced by Western normative biases, and both rely on expert assessments that may also carry a certain level of bias. Coppedge (2023), one of the founders of the V-Dem projects, notes in a V-Dem working paper, “We do not claim that our concepts are value neutral; obviously, we all favour democracy, and definitions of democracy must necessarily wrestle with questions of equality, fairness, and freedom.” From this viewpoint, it is helpful to point out that the quantitative data that is used here and in other places in the findings has been harnessed as a tool to help contextualise and offer breadth and test the qualitative findings that were discussed.

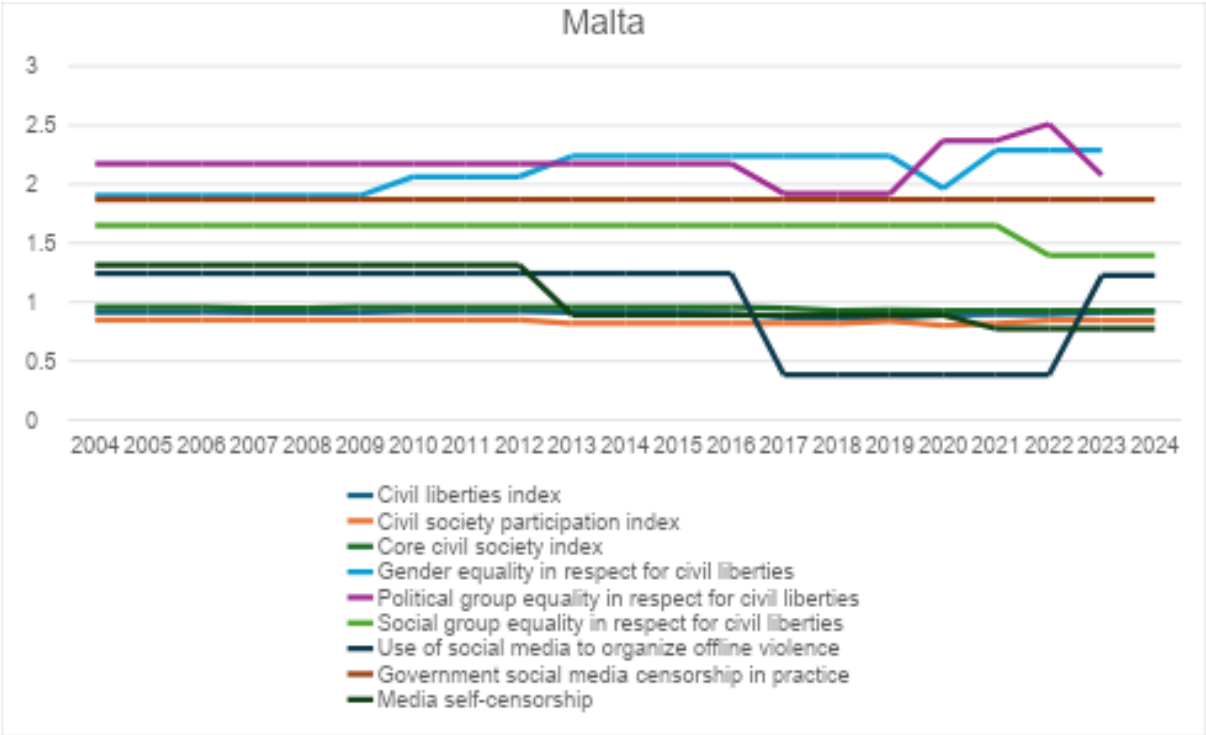
4.13.1 Indexed insight: Navigating civil society: How grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives

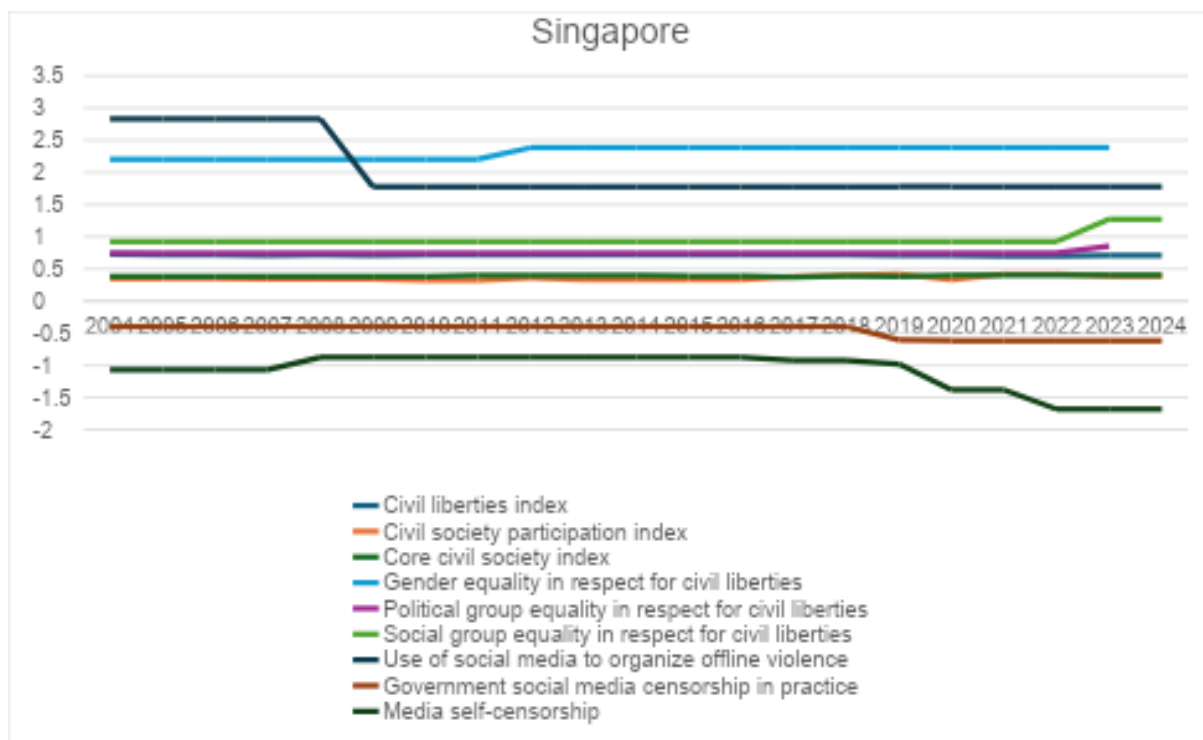
The empirical assessment of civil society and expression-based democratic experiences in Malta and Singapore, as drawn from the V-Dem (v.15) dataset and the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” (FIW) 2024 report, reveals distinct trajectories in associational and expressive freedoms over the past two decades.

Malta consistently scores higher across most indicators relevant to civil society. In 2024, Malta’s Civil Liberties Index (v2x_civlib) stood at 0.917, compared to Singapore’s 0.709. Similarly, Malta’s Core Civil Society Index (v2xcs_ccsi) remained stable at 0.929, whereas Singapore’s fluctuated below 0.403 from 2010 onwards. Singapore’s Civil Society Participation Index (v2x_cspart) ranged between 0.323 and 0.419, peaking

briefly in 2021, while Malta’s scores ranged from 0.821 to 0.849 throughout the same period.

Other V-Dem indices reflect further divergence. Singapore exhibited consistently higher levels of government censorship on social media (v2smgovsmcenprc), maintaining a constant score of 1.871 from 2004 to 2024, while Malta registered negative values throughout the period (e.g., -0.617 in 2024), indicating relatively low censorship. Media self-censorship (v2meslfcen) was also persistently higher in Singapore, reaching 1.68 by 2024, compared to Malta's stable lower range of 0.775 since 2013.





Freedom House sub-indices from 2024 support these findings. Malta scored 3 or 4 out of 4 across categories D1–D4 and E1–E3, reflecting robust protections for media, academic, and expressive freedoms, as well as associational rights. In contrast, Singapore scored between 1 and 3 across the same categories. Notably, Singapore received 1/4 in areas such as media freedom (D1), academic freedom (D3), freedom of assembly (E1), and freedom for NGOs (E2), indicating significant legal and normative constraints.

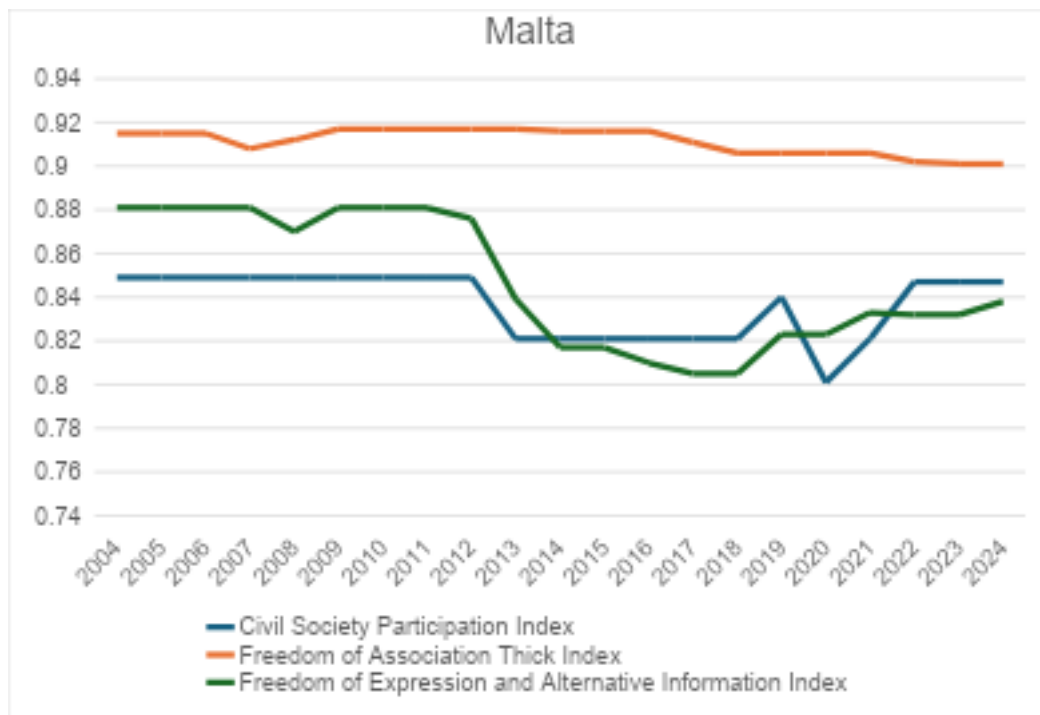
Table 6.0 Freedom House Indices Relevant to Navigating Civil Society

Freedom House Indices 2024	Singapore	Malta
D1 Free and independent media	1/4	3/4
D2 Free to practice religion	3/4	4/4
D3 Academic freedom	1/4	4/4
D4 Free to express political views or views on sensitive topics	2/4	3/4

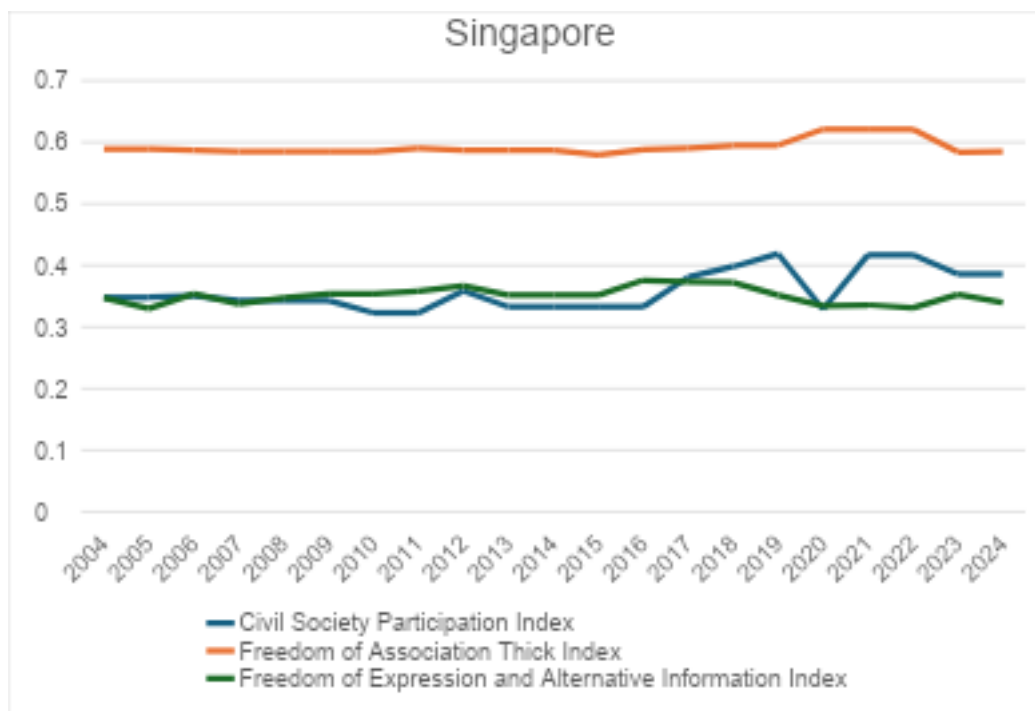
E1 Freedom of assembly	1/4	4/4
E2 Freedom for NGOs	1/4	4/4
E3 Freedom for trade unions	1/4	4/4

A longitudinal critique of the V-Dem dataset from 2004 to 2024 reveals stagnation or marginal deterioration in Singapore’s civic space indicators, especially in media self-censorship and civil society participation. While there were slight increases in the gender equality index (v2clgenc1) from 1.905 in 2004 to 2.289 in 2023, the core civil society and participation indices remained low or declined. Malta, by contrast, maintained relatively high and stable scores across most V-Dem indicators, although minor declines in the civil liberties index were observed after 2010.

The quantitative data reflect a consistently more constrained civil society environment in Singapore compared to Malta, with little evidence of substantive liberalisation in the Singaporean context over the two-decade period. These findings are derived from systematic measurements defined in the V-Dem Codebook (v.15) (2024) and Freedom House’s assessment metrics, as outlined in the respective codebook and dataset documentation. Civil society participation and expressive freedoms are also richly captured in V-Dem and Freedom House data, and worthy of unpacking here. According to the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2025), Malta has consistently maintained high scores in the Civil Society Participation Index (v2x_cspart), the Freedom of Association Thick Index (v2x_frassoc_thick), and the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Information Index (v2x_freexp_altinf). In 2004, Malta recorded 0.849 (v2x_cspart), 0.915 (v2x_frassoc_thick), and 0.881 (v2x_freexp_altinf). These values remained stable until a gradual decline began in 2013, reaching 0.847, 0.901, and 0.838 respectively by 2024. This decline suggests modest erosion in associational and expressive dimensions, though overall levels remain substantially higher than global averages.



In contrast, Singapore's values in the same indices have remained markedly lower. Starting from 0.348 (v2x_cspart), 0.589 (v2x_frassoc_thick), and 0.347 (v2x_freexp_altinf) in 2004, there has been no sustained upward trend. Values fluctuated slightly, with a temporary increase in civil society participation to 0.419 in 2019, but by 2024 had returned to 0.386 (v2x_cspart), 0.585 (v2x_frassoc_thick), and 0.340 (v2x_freexp_altinf). This indicates continued structural constraints on civil society autonomy and public expression.



Corroborating these findings, the 2024 Freedom House FIW report rates Malta at 4/4 for both the E1 and E2 subcomponents regarding freedom of assembly and freedom of association, whilst rating 3/4 for the D4 subcomponent regarding freedom of expression. In contrast, Singapore is rated 1/4 for both the E1 and E2 subcomponents, and 2/4 for the D4 subcomponent, indicating significant limitations on civic and expressive liberties.

Table 7.0 Freedom House Indices Relevant to Expressive Liberties

Freedom House Indices 2024	Singapore	Malta
E1 Freedom of assembly	1/4	4/4
E2 Freedom of association	1/4	4/4
D4 Freedom of expression	2/4	3/4

A review of the V-Dem time series data reveals broader trends worth noting. Malta's indices, although high, demonstrate a marginal but consistent decline post-2012, particularly in freedom of expression. Conversely, Singapore shows slight increases in

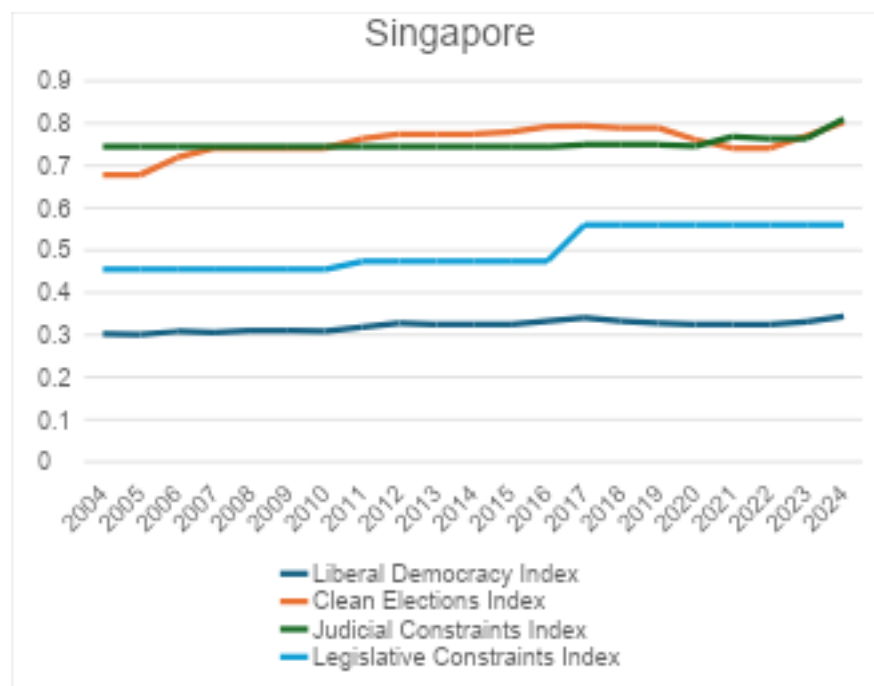
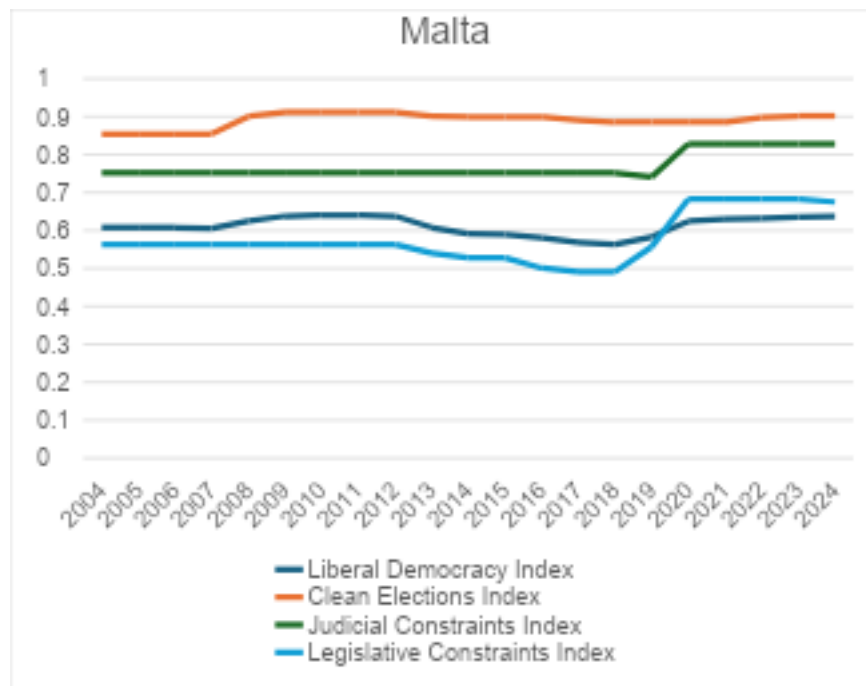
certain years, yet no consistent upward momentum, underscoring a persistent pattern of institutional restriction rather than liberalisation. Notably, civil society participation in Singapore peaked briefly in 2019 before reverting, indicating episodic rather than systemic openings.

In conclusion, the data illustrate a bifurcated pattern: Malta sustains a high but slightly declining trajectory in civic and expressive freedoms, whereas Singapore maintains a low and stagnant profile in the same domains. These findings underscore divergent democratic realities between the two states, as captured through both the V-Dem (v.15) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2025) and Freedom House metrics.

4.13.2 Indexed Insight: Unpacking the influence of elitism, institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks in shaping political decision-making

An analysis of democratic performance in Malta and Singapore, based on data from the V-Dem (v.15) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2025) and Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report, reveals a complex, hybridised democratic configuration in both countries. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (v2x_libdem), Clean Elections Index (v2xel_frefair), Judicial Constraints Index (v2x_jucon), and Legislative Constraints Index (v2xlg_legcon) were used to assess the quality and nature of democratic institutions over a 20-year period (2004–2024). These indices reflect key dimensions of democracy including electoral integrity, judicial oversight, and legislative independence.

In 2024, Malta recorded a Liberal Democracy Index of 0.637, with high and stable Clean Elections scores (0.902) and sustained high Judicial Constraints (0.828). Legislative constraints remained moderate at 0.675. Singapore, in contrast, had a significantly lower Liberal Democracy Index of 0.343, though it also showed improvement from 0.303 in 2004. The Clean Elections Index rose from 0.678 to 0.802, and Judicial Constraints improved from 0.745 to 0.811. Legislative constraints, however, remained static at 0.56 over the same period.



Freedom House data further supports this differentiation. In 2024, Malta scored higher than Singapore in all indicators under sections B1–B4 (electoral process and political pluralism) and C1–C3 (government functioning and institutional constraints), with Malta receiving full or near-full scores (3/4 or 4/4), while Singapore's scores remained lower, typically at 2/4. One exception is the corruption safeguards indicator (C2), where

Singapore outperforms Malta, scoring 3/4 compared to Malta’s 2/4, aligning with V-Dem’s consistent low clientelism and corruption indices for Singapore.

Table 8.0 Freedom House Indices Relevant to Elite Influence

Freedom House Indices 2024	Singapore	Malta
B1 Right to organise	2/4	3/4
B2 Opposition	2/4	4/4
B3 Freedom to choose	2/4	3/4
B4 Electoral opportunities for all	2/4	4/4
C1 Functioning of government	2/4	4/4
C2 Corruption safeguards	3/4	2/4
C3 Openness and transparency	2/4	3/4

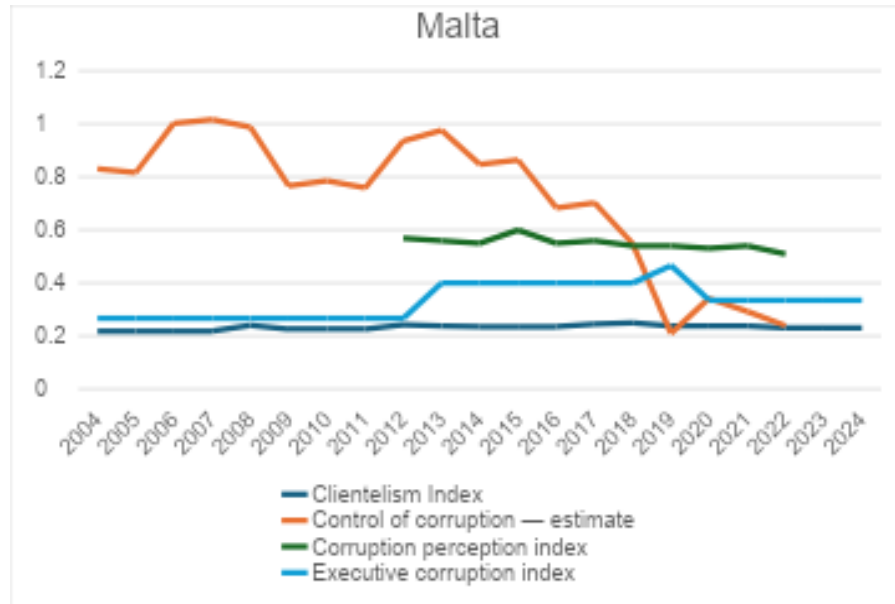
A critique of the longitudinal data from V-Dem reveals persistent structural rigidity in Singapore’s legislative institutions, as reflected by the legislative constraints index, which did not rise above 0.56 over two decades. While electoral and judicial indices in Singapore have gradually improved, the absence of legislative development limits broader liberal democratic progress. Malta, meanwhile, demonstrated more consistent scores across all indices, though improvements plateaued after 2020.

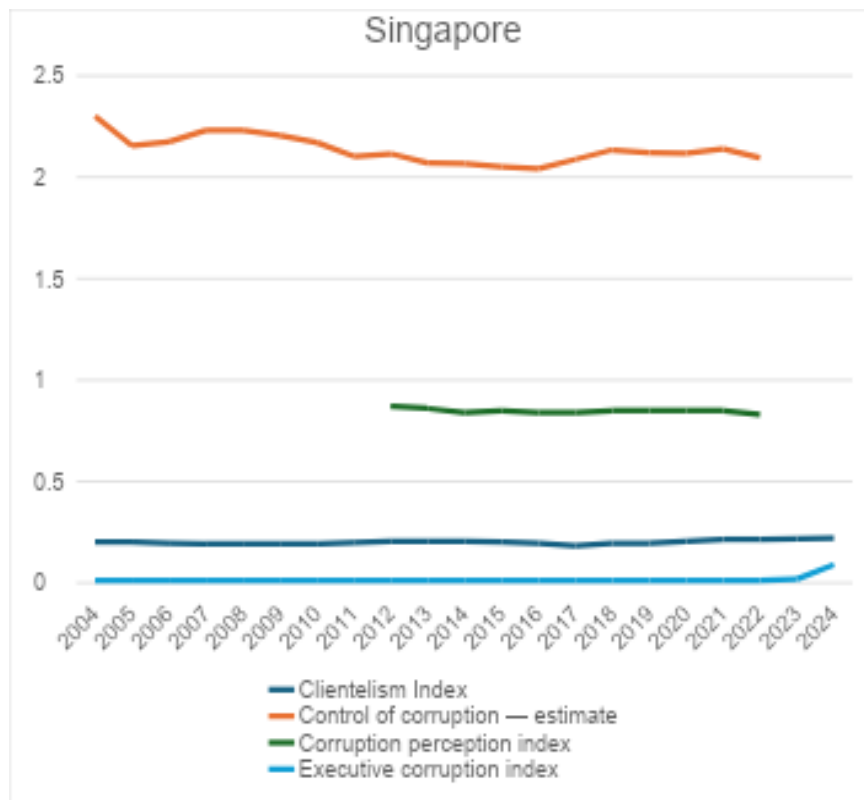
These findings collectively depict Malta as a state with procedural and institutional structures aligning more closely with liberal democracy, while Singapore exhibits a hybrid model characterised by clean elections and bureaucratic efficiency within a context of executive dominance and constrained pluralism.

Quantitative indicators of elite influence, corruption and cronyism are also essential to consider. Between 2004 and 2024, data from the V-Dem (v.15) dataset and Freedom House's Freedom in the World report highlight differing trajectories for Malta and

Singapore regarding corruption-related governance indicators. The analysis focuses on four key V-Dem and World Bank indicators: the clientelism index (v2xnp_client), control of corruption estimate (e_wbgi_cce), Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (e_ti_cpi), and the executive corruption index (v2x_execorr). These are complemented by Freedom House indicators C2 and F2, which respectively assess safeguards against official corruption and due process in civil and criminal matters.

Singapore consistently scores lower than Malta on the V-Dem clientelism index, with values ranging from 0.202 to 0.221, indicating lower levels of clientelism. In contrast, Malta's index fluctuates from 0.218 to 0.251 over the same period, suggesting relatively higher levels of clientelistic practices. Similarly, Singapore maintains significantly higher scores on the control of corruption estimate, with values consistently above 2.0, peaking at 2.301 in 2004 and remaining above 2.0 through 2022. Malta, by comparison, experiences a steady decline in control of corruption, from 0.831 in 2004 to a low of 0.239 in 2022, indicating an erosion in institutional corruption control.





Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, available from 2012 to 2022, further reflects this disparity. Singapore’s scores remain in the mid-80s throughout the period (peaking at 87 in 2012), while Malta’s scores decline from 57 in 2012 to 51 in 2022. Regarding executive corruption, Singapore remains stable at 0.012 through most of the timeline, indicating minimal levels of executive corruption. Malta shows an increase from 0.267 in 2004 to 0.466 in 2019, before stabilizing at 0.335 in subsequent years.

Freedom House data from 2024 align with these trends. For indicator C2 (safeguards against official corruption), Malta scores 2/4, while Singapore scores 3/4, reflecting relatively stronger anti-corruption safeguards in the latter. However, in F2 (due process), Malta receives a 3/4 rating, while Singapore is rated at 2/4, indicating more robust legal guarantees for due process in Malta.

Table 9.0 Freedom House Indices Relevant to Corruption

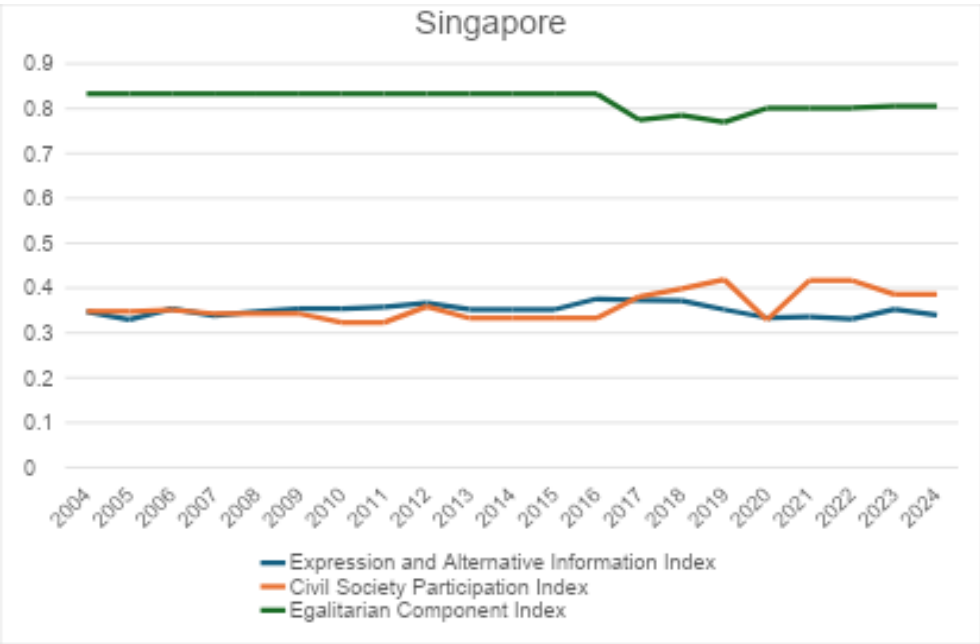
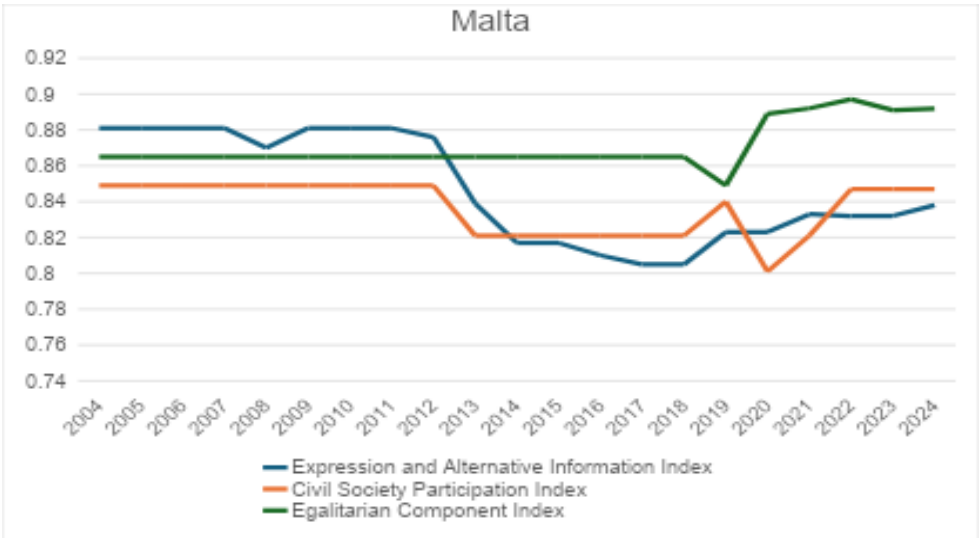
Freedom House Index 2024	Singapore	Malta
C2 Are safeguards against official corruption safe and effective?	3/4	2/4
F2 Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	2/4	3/4

Critically, over the two-decade period, Malta’s governance indicators in the V-Dem dataset reveal a deteriorating trend. Both the control of corruption estimates and the executive corruption index signal increasing vulnerabilities in institutional integrity. The gradual rise in clientelism scores suggests persistent informal political practices, while the declining corruption perception index indicates diminishing public trust. In contrast, Singapore maintains a stable pattern across all indicators, with only minor variations, suggesting institutional consistency and resilience. These long-term trends point to a divergence in governance performance between the two small states, with Singapore exhibiting institutional continuity and Malta showing signs of governance degradation over time.

4.13.3 Indexed insight: The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging

In the qualitative analysis section, experiences of stratification, inequality and marginalisation were grouped under question two, which explored the way in which state institutions and political actors shaped belonging, inclusion and identity. The comparative analysis of democratic access in Malta and Singapore, using data from the V-Dem (v.15) dataset and the Freedom House Freedom in the World (FIW) report, reveals systematic differences and longitudinal trends in civil and political rights that underscore stratified citizenship in Malta and Singapore.

According to V-Dem indicators, Malta consistently registers higher scores than Singapore across two key indices: the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Information Index (v2x_freexp_altinf) and the Civil Society Participation Index (v2x_cspart). In 2024, Malta scored 0.838 and 0.847 on these indices respectively, whereas Singapore scored 0.34 and 0.386. This indicates a substantial disparity in the extent of expressive freedoms and civic engagement opportunities between the two states.



However, the Egalitarian Component Index (v2x_egal), which captures the degree of substantive equality in rights and access across social groups, reveals a contrasting pattern. Singapore maintained relatively stable scores around 0.833 from 2004 through 2016, followed by a gradual decline and subsequent modest recovery, reaching 0.805 in 2024. Malta, on the other hand, showed a slight upward trend in this index, increasing from 0.865 in 2004 to 0.892 in 2024, indicating enhanced egalitarian access over time.

The 20-year trend in V-Dem data suggests that while Malta has experienced marginal gains in all three indices, particularly in equality-related metrics, Singapore’s trajectory has been comparatively stagnant or declined slightly, particularly in civil society participation. Notably, Singapore’s expression index remained below 0.4 throughout the period, whereas Malta consistently maintained scores above 0.8, indicating a persistent democratic gap in expressive freedoms.

Complementing this, the FIW subcomponent scores for 2024 - F4 Equal treatment and freedom from discrimination, G3 Personal social freedoms, and G4 Equality of opportunity and freedom from exploitation - are identical for both countries. Each country scored 2/4 on F4 and 3/4 on G3 and G4. While this suggests formal parity in certain civil liberties, it does not reflect the broader discrepancies observed in V-Dem indices. This divergence highlights a potential limitation in the granularity of FIW indicators in capturing the stratified nature of democratic access, particularly for minority and marginalized groups.

Table 10.0 Freedom House Indices Relevant to Freedom from Discrimination and Equality

Freedom House Indices 2024	Singapore	Malta
F4 Equal treatment freedom from discrimination	2/4	2/4
G3 Personal social freedoms	3/4	3/4

In sum, Malta demonstrates more consistent and higher levels of freedom of expression, civil society participation, and egalitarianism over the past two decades compared to Singapore. The longitudinal V-Dem data further illustrates that improvements in civic space and democratic equality in Singapore have been limited, especially in comparison to Malta. These patterns underline the differentiated and unequal distribution of democratic rights across these two contexts, despite comparable scores in certain FIW civil liberties categories.

4.14 Conclusion

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews, texts, discourse, reflexive ethnographic material and fieldwork notes led to the identification of a number of distinctive themes that were organised under the broader analytical strands of:

- 1). The influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?
- 2). The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?
- 3). The navigation of civil society: How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians harness patronage networks and navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

Throughout these three questions which have been harnessed to organise the findings chapter, the analytical concepts of symbolic violence and embodiment track and flow consistently.

In Singapore, the concept of embodiment was strongly present in themes pertaining to the control of bodies in public spaces, as related to the pressure to conform to certain civic behavioural norms such as smiling and graciousness. In the case of Malta embodiment arose in a different way: informants explained how women experience exclusion and marginalisation in political settings and the way in which democratic experience was gendered. Embodiment was present in both Malta and Singapore with respect to the organisation of space, daily living, housing, and density. Symbolic violence similarly appeared both implicitly and explicitly across a range of themes: In Singapore, symbolic violence shaped civic spaces and how people used them, and indeed, how people engaged in civic life. Symbolic violence also impacted inclusion, exclusion and belonging: concealing those, such as migrants, from fully experiencing the breadth of democratic citizenship enjoyed by Malaysian or Chinese Singaporeans.

In Malta, symbolic violence also appeared in themes pertaining to self-censorship and contested civic spaces and notions of stratified citizenship. However, symbolic violence also appeared in themes related to smallness and trust. Malta's smaller size (in comparison to Singapore) rendered symbolic violence more apparent in interpersonal relationships where individuals were aware not to speak out of turn or jeopardise relationships that could have a detrimental impact on opportunities. The quantitative component of the findings yielded findings that in many cases resonated with the qualitative findings. It is important to note that in some circumstances, it was challenging finding relevant or coherent indicators to check and triangulate the qualitative data, even given the broad datasets of V-Dem and Freedom House. For example, indicators related to smallness and personalisation were not available, although these both arose as prominent themes in Malta and Singapore. In these instances, the qualitative data proved essential for offering fine-grained insights that were not available in quantitative datasets. Equally, however, the quantitative data offered longitudinal and encompassing insights in a way that the qualitative data couldn't, tracing the trajectory of shifts in each democratic theme over two decades.

The triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data will be explored in greater analytic depth in the coming discussion and conclusion section, along with the implication and application of the research findings.

5.0 Analysis

5.1 From findings to interpretation: setting the focus of the chapter

The role of this chapter is to perform an explicit transition from the descriptive to the interpretive. This interpretive shift is necessary because the empirical work has achieved saturation. The recurring themes, presented within the analytical arc of the three orientating questions no longer need further empirical illustration. What they require is explanation.

The methodological design itself plays a critical role in facilitating this shift to the interpretive. As outlined in Chapter 3, the Triangulated Validation Loop and the Integration Matrix (TIM) were never intended as neutral tools for verifying data but as deliberate mechanisms to convert divergence into insight. Where indicators such as Freedom House or V-Dem aligned with ethnographic evidence, their reliability was reinforced; where they diverged - such as Malta's classification as "free" despite pervasive clientelism, or Singapore's low civil-liberty scores despite widespread perceptions of legitimacy and stability - these contradictions became analytically fertile. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to render such divergences interpretable: to transform apparent anomalies into findings and, in doing so, advance a more dynamic understanding of lived, everyday, embodied experience of democracy in Malta and Singapore.

At the outset of the project, the central research question was posed in deliberately broad terms: "In the midst of current global trends, how is democracy embodied, lived and experienced in everyday life?" This was supplemented by auxiliary questions concerning the role of elite influence and informal networks, symbolic violence and the shaping of consent by the state, and patronage and civic intimacy in shaping deliberation and participation.

After Chapter 4, however, these questions must be re-stated in a way that reflects their empirical saturation. The "how" of lived democracy is no longer a matter of open

exploration but one of interpretive synthesis. What the data reveal is that democracy in Malta and Singapore is embodied, hybrid, stratified, contested, and paradoxical. The overarching question therefore becomes: how do these dynamics interlock to inform the everyday, lived dimensions of democracy?

To clarify the logic of what follows, it is useful to specify inputs and outputs. The inputs are threefold: the themes generated in Chapter 4; the methodological architecture of Chapter 3; and the theoretical scaffolding of Chapter 2. The outputs are likewise threefold: the interpretive synthesis offered by Embodied Civic Intimacy; the reconceptualization of mismatches between indices and lived realities as productive divergences; and the comparative insights generated by placing Malta and Singapore side by side as small, hybrid democracies.

The diverse themes developed and explored in Chapter 4 constitute the empirical raw material, which will be indispensable to the unfolding of this chapter. Many themes contain within them practices - bodily comportments, informal networks, stratifications, silences, and reputational sanctions - that demand interpretation beyond their surface description. As visible in the findings chapter, the conceptual tools of embodied democracy and symbolic violence offer a pathway into understanding the mechanisms that can underpin and orientate these themes and dynamics. It is the intention of this chapter to now develop a higher order approach to understanding these findings within the analytical context of the research questions and theoretical concepts of symbolic violence and embodiment. That approach is Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI).

5.2 The conceptual engine for interpretation: Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI)

5.2.1 Embodied Civic Intimacy: Democracy under Conditions of Smallness

Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) is proposed as a conceptual-contextual mechanism that emerges under small-state conditions. As evident in the findings presented in this thesis, smallness both in Malta and Singapore generates a distinctive political ecology

in which density, proximity, intimacy and limited anonymity deeply shape the lived, embodied experience of democracy. In these environments, political life exceeds constitutional arrangements, electoral procedures, and institutional design, spilling over into other domains. Democratic dynamics and democracy are also enacted through bodily comportment, silence, gesture, and participation - domains where reputational sanction functions as a central and unavoidable mechanism of civic regulation. ECI is proposed as a complementary tool that can help make sense of how democratic subjectivity is formed, enforced, and reproduced under conditions of *smallness*. It offers a bounded, integrative, sociological lens that fills specific blind spots regarding small states.

It is vital to emphasise that although ECI builds on universal social dynamics such as visibility, reputation, and affective belonging, its analytical scope is intentionally delimited. It should not be mistaken for a general theory of social control but understood as a mechanism of compliance particular to *compact publics*, where high density, multiplex social ties, and scarce anonymity make reputational sanction effectively substitutive for formal legal coercion or material incentives. In these contexts, civic order and compliance is sustained primarily through the *anticipatory self-regulation* induced by embodied visibility, rather than through general fear of punishment or expectation of reward.

This specificity distinguishes ECI from broader concepts like symbolic power or social capital. Whereas those frameworks describe generalisable resources or hierarchies, ECI offers an account of how intimacy, embodiment, and visibility sustain democratic order in settings where smallness organizes social and political life.

To render this process intelligible, one must go beyond descriptive catalogues of phenomena such as gossip, anticipatory silence, ritualised participation, or stratified belonging that appeared in the themes discussed in the findings chapter. These fragments gain meaning only when articulated within a mechanism that shows how smallness itself generates compliance and belonging. ECI offers rich layers of textured insight to further develop these themes within the context of smallness: density creates

unavoidable visibility; visibility activates affect; and affect, sedimented on and through bodies, produces embodied compliance and reputationally charged belonging. In this sense, democracy in small states is lived viscerally and reputationally, rather than exclusively procedurally or institutionally (Machin, 2022; Bourdieu, 1991).

The analytic value of ECI lies in its capacity to integrate the diverse observations presented in the findings chapter into a single explanatory frame. Silence on Singapore's Mass Rapid Transit is not merely a cultural habit but a civic discipline, where passengers anticipate the gaze of strangers and regulate themselves accordingly. In Malta, placing items at Daphne Caruana Galizia's spontaneous memorial site was reputationally conspicuous - those who placed candles or other items of remembrance risked being seen by government officials, who removed the items in the early hours of the morning and threw them away, citing that it was "civic responsibility" to keep the monument clean. In both contexts, absence becomes visible, silence legible, and participation in compliant ways compulsory. What appears at first as cultural idiosyncrasy is revealed as the operation of a common structuring logic, underpinned by symbolic violence and manifested through embodied practices in everyday life.

The framework resonates with Albert Hirschman's classic trichotomy of *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* (1970) but also exposes its gaps. Hirschman's model identifies *exit* - the act of withdrawing from an organization or state - and *voice* - the attempt to repair it through protest or persuasion - as two fundamental mechanisms through which decline can be countered. *Loyalty*, in turn, moderates the tension between them: it can delay exit and sustain voice by binding members to a shared cause or identity. Hirschman conceived these as dynamic forces that preserve institutional vitality by transforming dissatisfaction into either renewal or realignment. Yet, as he acknowledged, *voice* is a "messy" political act - ranging from mild complaint to open dissent - and its effectiveness depends on social structure and costs of expression. His framework presupposes a minimum pluralism, where exit is possible and voice remains meaningful.

In the microstate or small state context, however, these assumptions falter. As Baldacchino and Veenendaal (2018) demonstrate through their "MITE" framework -

Monopoly, Intimacy, Totality, and Emigration - the ecology of smallness produces social saturation and role entanglement that erode the conditions for both exit and voice. Political and economic monopolies concentrate opportunity in a few hands; social intimacy ensures that dissent is personal, not abstract; and the total reach of the state binds every citizen into webs of interdependence where “everybody depends on government for something.” Under these pressures, dissent carries reputational and material penalties disproportionate to the act itself. As a result, *compliance* - a quiet adaptation to prevailing norms - emerges as a distinct behavioural mode that Hirschman’s triad cannot capture. Moreover, *exit* in small states frequently becomes *exile*, as evident in the cases of citizens such as Terry Xu or Sebastian Tanti Burlo: emigration is not simply a market-like withdrawal but a socially final act, closing off the possibility of return or continued engagement. In such societies, *voice* is muted by proximity, *exit* is absolute, and *loyalty* is often pragmatic rather than principled.

Civic behaviour under conditions of smallness is therefore best described through four interlocking categories - *loyalty, compliance, dissent, and exit-as-exile* - which extend Hirschman’s framework while grounding it in the realities of microstate politics. This reformulation situates ECI within a deeper tradition of political thought, preserving Hirschman’s insight that systems endure through the interplay of participation and withdrawal, yet adapting it to contexts where intimacy, monopoly, and the threat of ostracism transform everyday politics into an exercise in survival.

5.2.2 The Mechanism of Embodied Civic Intimacy

ECI is not a metaphor but an analytic mechanism explaining how bodies become implicated in reproducing democracy under conditions of density and proximity. In such environments - whether a Singaporean condominium where landscaped walkways make comportment conspicuous, or a Maltese town where reputational economies hinge on public ritual - encounters are inescapable. Proximity ensures visibility, rendering gestures, silences, and absences legible and suffused with meaning. Through visibility, affect circulates pride, shame, loyalty, and fear attached to performances of belonging. This circulation produces embodied compliance, as citizens regulate

themselves, reproducing belonging through everyday routines and safeguarding themselves from reputational sanction by engaging in compliance. The naturalisation of these practices speaks to the presence of symbolic violence, as clearly articulated sanctions are unnecessary to enforce this compliance.

The process of ECI is not merely descriptive. ECI operates through affective mediators that translate visibility into conformity - shame at potential exclusion, pride in visible belonging, and attachment to communal recognition. These emotions function as regulatory mechanisms aligning individual comportment with prescribed collective norms and traditions in small states. Thus, proximity and visibility generate compliance only through the emotional economies they activate. ECI should therefore be understood as a mechanism linking structural density to behavioural conformity through embodied affect, rather than as a regime type or cultural condition.

In Singapore, social campaigns to promote smiling and graciousness represent affective mediators that convert visibility into conformity, while in Malta, the reputational sanction of journalists who veer away from acceptable narratives example the same logic. Both exemplify the same logic: democracy lived through embodied intimacy.

5.2.3 Positioning ECI Among Theories of Power, Democracy and Mobilisation

Placing ECI within wider theoretical traditions highlights its contribution and context. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence explains how domination is naturalised and internalised, yet in small states compliance is not only internal but reputationally visible and publicly sanctioned, since anonymity is scarce and abstention conspicuous. Work on embodied democracy, such as Machin's (2022) insistence that politics is bodily enacted, highlights corporeality as intrinsic to democracy, but often treats embodiment as universal. ECI specifies how embodiment in compressed settings is constitutive and specific: bodies are reputationally charged, and gestures acquire explicitly political meaning in small contexts.

Theories of affective and intimate publics also resonate. Papacharissi (2015) emphasises how emotions circulate across networked publics, and Berlant (2008) explores intimate publics formed through shared attachments. ECI refines these insights by locating affect not in diffuse media networks but in proximate, recognisable bodies. As Delia stated in his interview, in Malta, there are two band clubs in villages. These clubs mobilise identities and mock rivals, often with a “winner takes all” mindset. At the political level, this becomes a tyranny of the majority. Those who lose are humiliated and excluded. In Singapore, emotions of pride or shame are harnessed to condone desirable behaviour and dissuade undesirable comportment: as James Gomez added, legislation like the Societies Act and Political Donations Act overtly restrict civil society, however, the deeper constraint lies in pervasive self-censorship that is tied to the affective climate of fear, shame and guilt. Fear of repercussions has produced a culture where citizens internalise the limits of permissible expression by practising self-censorship and avoiding engagement in anything political. Affect here attaches to specific bodies in specific spaces, intensifying reputational sanction.

Theories of visibility regimes - from Foucault’s (1977) panopticism to Brighenti’s (2007) politics of visibility and Wedeen’s (1999) performative compliance - stress the disciplining effects of being seen. Yet they tend to frame visibility as either vertical surveillance by the state or horizontal peer monitoring. In small states, visibility is relationally thickened by proximity. In Malta, as Dalli reflected, *“I have friends from all backgrounds and beliefs. On an island where resources are limited, I can’t afford to filter people out.”*

ECI is thus not reducible to symbolic violence, embodied democracy, affective publics, or visibility regimes. It synthesises insights from all these traditions but anchors them in the specific condition of smallness, where density, proximity, and limited anonymity heighten reputational stakes.

It is also helpful to briefly consider ECI with respect to mobilisation. While ECI generates a lens of understanding around the pressures of intimacy and density in small states and how they may impact on democratic engagement and participation, alternative

theories exist to account for the ways in which political actors can harness political opportunity beyond the pressures of civic intimacy. Tilly and McAdam's seminal work on political opportunity structures speaks directly to this idea, offering a richly nuanced perspective. Political opportunity structures theory identifies factors such as openness and closure in institutional authorities, elite alignments, alliances, and the willingness of the state to use force as instrumental in determining the likelihood of success for those challenging the system (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996). In later work, Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam (2001) expanded upon the opportunities for mobilisation offered by static structural features to explore more dynamic changes and mechanisms such as brokerage (between previously unlinked actors) and certification (external recognition by authorities) to unpack how social movement and change unfolds. Reflections provided by the Singaporean and Maltese informants in the findings chapter speak to this perspective; being an activist/critic in Malta and in Singapore carries different political opportunities.

5.2.4 Scope Conditions and Boundary Cases

For the ECI lens to function as a useful sociological tool, its scope conditions must be clearly specified. Three are central. First, ECI requires relational density and limited anonymity: territorial compression and demographic intensity generate repeated encounters across civic, professional, and social spheres, making absence or deviance conspicuous. Second, it depends on multiplex social ties, where individuals interact across overlapping domains, amplifying reputational interdependence. Third, it relies on cultural scripts that link participation to belonging - rituals, narratives, and embodied gestures that translate civic involvement into legitimacy and social recognition.

ECI weakens or collapses when these structural and relational foundations erode. In low-density microstates with limited digital interconnection, relational thinness produces civic apathy rather than anticipatory self-censorship. In high-anonymity megacities, reputational traces dissipate quickly; symbolic practices may persist but lack the embodied immediacy and weight that gives ECI causal traction. In both extremes,

feedback loops of visibility and reputational accountability are too diffuse to sustain the mechanism.

These boundary conditions clarify ECI's limits and prevent conceptual overstretch while revealing its multi-level operation.

- At the micro-level, individuals internalise reputational expectations, adjusting comportment in everyday contexts - remaining silent on public transport, joining communal rituals, or avoiding conspicuous participation, or non-participation.
- At the meso-level, organisations mobilise reputational economies to align participation with collective and institutional goals. An example here would be the Maltese Prime Minister inviting certain journalists to events, while omitting others.
- At the macro-level, states formalise these logics through policy design, embedding reputational governance in institutions - for example, Singapore's Ethnic Integration Policy, which spatially curates ethnic proximity in public housing to materialize civic cohesion.

Across these scales, ECI operates through the interaction of interpersonal affect and institutional design rather than being reducible to either. Situational examples illustrate how ECI unfolds in small state contexts: proximity ensures repeated encounters; visibility renders behaviour legible; affect attaches to visibility, embodied compliance is generated. Through this translation of bodily practice into governance, ECI connects everyday interaction with macro-level order.

Empirically, ECI is most likely to emerge under structural configurations characterised by:

1. High relational density, where social and professional networks overlap, reinforcing visibility and reputational dependence.
2. Scarce anonymity, where spatial or demographic compression makes individual conduct publicly knowable and accountable.

3. Non-trivial sanction or monitoring risk, whether through formal enforcement or informal surveillance that induces anticipatory restraint.

Conversely, ECI weakens where anonymity is widespread - as in large, urbanised, or digitally fragmented publics that dilute reputational exposure - or where pluralism norms legitimise nonconformity, reducing the reputational costs of dissent. Cases exhibiting persistent, low-cost dissent within dense relational environments would thus constitute empirical falsifiers.

To render ECI's explanatory scope testable and falsifiable, three counterfactual probes are specified:

1. If anonymity increases - as in diaspora settings or large urban contexts where personal visibility diminishes - ECI effects should decline, since the visibility of absence and anticipatory monitoring weaken.
2. If dense relational ties coexist with strong pluralism norms, reputational sanctioning should decrease despite high density, showing that ECI depends on exposure unbuffered by pluralist tolerance.
3. If material incentives dominate under low visibility, participation should follow those incentives rather than ECI dynamics, demonstrating that ECI explains compliance only where reputational exposure - not transactional exchange - structures behaviour.

Together, these counterfactuals specify the conditions under which ECI should fail, ensuring that its analytical scope remains empirically verifiable and conceptually bounded.

5.2.5 Rival Mechanisms and the Casual Distinctiveness of ECI

To establish its distinctiveness as a sociological lens, Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) must be contrasted with the principal mechanisms conventionally used to explain compliance in small states - clientelism and repression - both of which operate through externally

applied inducement or constraint. Clientelism functions through material exchange: in Malta, access to employment, permits, or planning approvals has long been mediated by partisan networks, with loyalty sustained as long as benefits flow and withdrawn once they cease. Repression, by contrast, relies on coercive sanction: in Singapore, instruments such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) publicly discipline dissent, and compliance rises in direct response to visible enforcement.

ECI departs fundamentally from both. It explains conformity where neither material reward nor formal coercion is present - where even neutrality or silence attracts sanction. Abstaining from a *festa* in Malta entails reputational costs unconnected to clientelist exchange, speaking too loudly on an MRT train in Singapore risks embarrassment and disapproving glances or reprimands from others despite no police presence. Its distinctive causal signature is thus reputational sanction without material inducement or legal threat.

Yet this does not render law or policy irrelevant. In dense polities such as Singapore, legal instruments like POFMA or the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) function as priming cues within a reputational economy: they remind citizens of potential sanction, and these cues circulate horizontally through gossip, observation, and anticipatory silence. Law provides the initial trigger, while the structural condition of smallness ensures amplification and internalisation through civic intimacy. This interaction between law and reputation is one of co-production rather than substitution. Formal regulation primes the field of civic intimacy instead of replacing it. Legal provisions such as POFMA or libel statutes do not directly cause reputational discipline; rather, they signal the boundaries of permissible speech, which citizens then internalise and reproduce through social judgment. In this way, law supplies the scaffolding of an informal order in which reputational sanction operates autonomously but recognisably within the same moral economy.

The economic dimension is similarly intertwined: clientelist exchange or market dependency often provides the material substrate through which reputational cues gain

meaning. A useful way to visualise this is as a continuum - legal → reputational → embodied - capturing how external coercion shades into internalised compliance. ECI thus represents the modal mechanism through which compliance is reproduced in small states: via reputational exposure rather than overt compulsion. It frequently coexists with, and intensifies, formal regulation.

At the same time, ECI clarifies why clientelism and repression themselves operate with unusual intensity in small states. In Malta, clientelist networks bind not only through resource exchange but because defection is visible: to decline a favour or shift allegiance is socially conspicuous. In Singapore, repressive measures reverberate disproportionately because density accelerates diffusion: acts of punishment or silence spread swiftly through tight relational webs, rendering dissent conspicuous and costly, even potentially leading to extreme outcomes such as exile. ECI therefore does not displace these mechanisms but amplifies them, showing how familiar instruments of control acquire extraordinary potency in compact polities.

The broader explanatory claim is that smallness - conceived as a structural condition of high relational density and reputational proximity - amplifies symbolic power in ways that cannot be explained by regime type, media ownership, or formal legal instruments alone. To substantiate this claim, the analysis must demonstrate that the mechanisms of ECI persist when formal authority weakens and vary systematically with degrees of relational exposure.

Three tests isolate this independence.

First, the autonomy of visibility of absence is examined against coercive regulation. In Malta, participation in the local community, organisations, and activities occurs without statutory compulsion, yet withdrawal is noticed, discussed, and sometimes sanctioned through subtle exclusion. These reputational consequences arise from interpersonal familiarity, not formal governance. In Singapore, similar dynamics appear in grassroots and Residents' Committee events, where participation is informally monitored despite

no legal obligation. The persistence of visible conformity without direct enforcement shows that reputational proximity alone can produce behavioural regularity.

Second, anticipatory self-censorship is distinguished from the reach of law. Formal instruments such as POFMA and FICA in Singapore, or libel and defamation codes in Malta, define the outer boundaries of permissible speech, yet restraint emerges long before those limits are approached. Respondents in both settings describe hesitation in everyday, non-political conversations, moderating tone and topic from awareness that “people talk” or that remarks may circulate beyond control. This anticipatory calibration illustrates that self-monitoring under exposure - a core micro-mechanism of civic intimacy - operates independently of legal threat.

Third, spatial variation isolates the effect of relational compression. In densely networked localities - urban parishes, town councils, or housing estates - social proximity heightens both reputational sanctioning and symbolic participation. In peripheral or less connected areas, such as enclaves in Malta where migrants tend to group together and live, these effects weaken: dissent becomes more visible yet less costly, and participation loses its compulsory tone. This intra-case contrast confirms that it is density and exposure, rather than institutional form, that intensify symbolic power.

Across these cases, regime type and legal structure function less as primary causes than as enabling environments. They shape context but cannot, on their own, explain the embodied conformity distinctive of small states. The mechanisms of ECI transcend legal and institutional boundaries, adapting flexibly while varying with the density of social relations. In this process, smallness emerges as an amplifying condition that transforms the everyday visibility of social life into a sustained mode of governance. Whether in systems marked by clientelism or repression, ECI heightens their effectiveness by rendering deviation immediately legible; where such systems are absent, it nonetheless governs through the subtler force of reputational exposure.

5.2.6 Predictions and comparative portability

The concept of ECI provides a coherent and testable framework for explaining participation and conformity in settings characterised by dense social interconnections. ECI posits that participation peaks where reputational visibility is most intense - such as in small Maltese villages or densely populated Singaporean housing estates - regardless of material rewards or legal coercion. In these environments, neutrality often attracts stronger social sanctions than open opposition, since abstention is perceived as a withdrawal from communal belonging. Consequently, small and socially dense states, where individuals are bound by multiplex ties, should display higher levels of anticipatory obedience than larger states with comparable degrees of clientelism or repression. By contrast, diaspora communities embedded in more anonymous settings experience weaker reputational sanctions, underscoring ECI's dependence on density and visibility.

Although ECI's formulation draws from ethnographic immersion in Malta and Singapore, its mechanism is not confined to Catholic ritual or Confucian civility. Yet, the exclusive focus on these two relationally saturated societies risks both overstating universality and introducing small-N selection bias. Malta and Singapore constitute "most-likely cases," where proximity and reputational exposure are maximised - ideal for identifying the mechanism but limited for testing its generalisability. Stronger inference would require the inclusion of least likely or negative control cases, such as Iceland or New Zealand, where smallness coexists with pluralistic norms and lower reputational saturation. If ECI operates only weakly in such contexts, this would refine its boundary conditions rather than invalidate it, thereby demonstrating falsifiability. Alternatively, the current design may be read as a critical-case study (Flyvbjerg 2006), aimed not at universal generalisation but at testing the existence and internal coherence of the mechanism under conditions of maximal visibility. Framing Malta and Singapore in this way clarifies the inferential limits of the study while emphasising its contribution to the field of political sociology.

2. Neutrality	Penalty	Rate	(NPR):
The proportion of interviews or observed cases in which abstention or neutrality provokes negative social or professional consequences, relative to instances of open dissent.			
Prediction: NPR should exceed the frequency of sanctions for overt opposition, reflecting ECI's emphasis on visibility and the normative compulsion to be seen as a participant.			

Together, these indicators make ECI's propositions auditable. If participation density does not rise with relational exposure, or if neutrality is tolerated as readily as dissent, the explanatory power of ECI is empirically undermined.

5.2.7 Empirical Illustrations

The empirical record substantiates how ECI operates through proximity, visibility, and reputational sanction. Across both Malta and Singapore, civic comportment is produced not only through institutional design but also through embodied, everyday, lived enactments of discipline, belonging, gesture and silence.

In Singapore, field observations revealed how anticipatory discipline is woven into public comportment. Silence on the MRT is not imposed by visible authority but internalised through mutual visibility - every passenger's stillness polices the other. In Jurong West commuters were observed to be 'quiet' to the point that silence felt loud, exemplifying how civic virtue is learned through bodily restraint. This discipline extended to domestic space: condominiums such as those in Jurong manifested cleanliness, symmetry, and mutual surveillance, where shared amenities and open visibility transform proximity into self-regulation. The same logic extended to infrastructure - public cleanliness, queueing, and landscaping function as aesthetic markers of moral order.

Interviewees corroborated this embodied regulation. Activist Jolovan Wham describes Singapore as "democratic in form but not in substance," where control operates "by

design” through interconnected institutions, rendering dissent reputationally risky rather than legally impossible. Economist and opposition MP Jamus Lim similarly notes that civic participation is structured through “apparatus that favour the incumbent,” from grassroots associations to trade unions, ensuring conformity through selective visibility rather than overt coercion. Former journalist Leong Sze Hian adds that even designated protest spaces such as *Speakers’ Corner* become sites of paradoxical discipline, where protesters were charged for “stepping on the concrete path” instead of the grass. These embodied gestures of containment - quietness, queuing, and spatial obedience - constitute the corporeal texture of civic life.

Everyday ethnographic detail strengthens this interpretation. At the National Day Parade, uniformed synchrony fuses celebration with compulsory participation: citizens rehearse belonging through choreographed movement and collective chant. The F-16 jets mightily cruising above the city state and the young recruits of every ethnicity marching in unison illustrated how national intimacy is performed through bodies that move together under surveillance. Even leisure spaces - the meticulously regulated hawker centres and public promenades - invite participation while delimiting dissent. Here, ECI manifests as a choreography of compliance, where civic worth is measured by one’s bodily alignment with public decorum.

Yet Singapore’s discipline also has an affective underside. Encounters with migrant workers at Little India or elderly cleaners on university campuses expose a stratified intimacy: closeness without equality. Wham’s work with migrant NGOs highlights how marginalisation is rendered visible through density, a concept which also came to mind whilst observing immigrant workers video-calling families on the MRT. Visibility here becomes a double bind - those most visible are also those least empowered to speak. Thus, ECI explains how bodily presence within public space simultaneously affirms belonging and enacts exclusion.

In Malta, similar dynamics of reputational sanction operate through smaller-scale proximity. The refusal/resistance to participate within the community incurs subtle penalties, such as abstention from local celebration is read as aloofness or arrogance.

Former president Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca articulates this moral economy of visibility, insisting that “participation and poverty cannot be separated - silence is produced when survival overrides speech”. Her statement underscores that civic participation in Malta is not merely institutional but embodied through face-to-face recognition in dense communities.

Politicians and civil-society actors describe how informal networks and gendered expectations reproduce civic conformity. Miriam Dalli recounts that Maltese women in politics “must give more than 100 percent” and are “savagely criticised even for appearance,” revealing how reputational sanction disciplines the female body into compliance. Likewise, sociologist Michael Briguglio observes that in a “small society, if you are delegitimised, the impact is greater,” highlighting how visibility magnifies conformity. Here, civic intimacy is enforced through gossip, surveillance, and emotional proximity - the same mechanisms that sustain communal solidarity also punish deviance.

Across both sites, ECI illuminates how civic order emerges through *embodied relationality*. In Singapore, visibility is technocratically engineered through spatial design; in Malta, it is communally sustained through interpersonal familiarity. Both translate moral legitimacy into corporeal comportment - standing correctly, smiling appropriately, celebrating publicly, or remaining silent when necessary. The comparative lens reveals that discipline need not rely on coercion; it thrives in intimacy. Bodies become the medium through which the state and the community intertwine, producing citizenship as a felt, visible, and disciplined form of belonging.

5.2.8 Implications for Democracy Studies

The explanatory power of ECI lies in its capacity to resolve puzzles that existing democracy scholarship leaves open. Studies of hybridity, small-state sociology, and affect have each identified key mechanisms of power - manipulation, intimacy, and emotion - but they remain analytically fragmented. Hybridity describes how authority is maintained through informal or illiberal practices; small-state sociology exposes how

density and familiarity generate personalised politics; and affect theory reveals how attachment and fear sustain compliance. Yet none explains why these forces converge with such intensity in small states. ECI provides the missing bridge. It demonstrates that the decisive factor is not the invention of novel political tools but the amplification of ordinary ones through smallness - where proximity, visibility, and embodied affect transform routine governance into intimate domination. ECI can most effectively be understood and applied as a mechanism that *emerges* under small-state conditions. While it is true that global indices offer fine-grained measurements regarding the more intimate, lived elements of democracy, ECI represents a complementary, integrative addition that can fill specific blind spots regarding small states.

Installing ECI at the centre of democratic analysis reframes the Malta–Singapore paradox. It interprets hybridity that is present in the literature review and findings chapters not as a failure of liberalism but as a small-state intensification and expression of democracy's affective and reputational dimensions. Density compresses the boundaries between public and private; visibility ensures that civic behaviour is constantly observed; and affect - shame, pride, loyalty - renders political conformity emotionally charged. Democratic subjectivity in such contexts is literally inscribed through bodies: how one greets a minister, performs silence, or displays allegiance in public space becomes a political act. ECI therefore redefines the study of democracy as a study of embodied participation, showing that citizenship is not only institutional or cognitive but also affective, embodied and reputational.

Crucially, ECI incorporates colonial prehistories into this analytic frame for the first time. The intimate modes of power that characterise Malta and Singapore are not post-colonial inventions, but continuations of colonial governance translated into civic intimacy. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, both states inherited bureaucratic hierarchies and moral vocabularies that naturalised deference and surveillance. In Malta, British administrative legacies fused with Mediterranean patronage networks to produce a clientelist equilibrium in which access to resources remains mediated by personal obligation and political loyalty. In Singapore, colonial bureaucracy merged with

Confucian and developmentalist ideals of order and discipline, generating a paternalistic ethos that equates civic virtue with obedience and productivity. These colonial residues operate as prehistories of ECI, embedding ritualised compliance, embodied self-censorship, and reputational dependence into democratic life. Smallness amplifies these inheritances: in compact polities, historical hierarchies are not abstract memories but living infrastructures of behaviour, visible in the everyday choreography of deference, recognition, and belonging.

Applying the lens of ECI yields three advances.

First, it bridges macro-institutional and micro-affective analysis, revealing how formal hybridity is sustained through embodied intimacy.

Second, situates civic emotion and visibility as central to how democratic life is lived in small states.

Third, it recasts colonial history as a temporal dimension of hybridity, showing how inherited repertoires of discipline and care are re-embodied in post-colonial democratic practice.

ECI reinterprets hybrid governance as ritualised compliance, colonial residues as prehistories of civic intimacy, and ethnography as the method most capable of uncovering these dynamics. By grounding democracy in density, visibility, and affect, ECI enriches the analysis of small-state politics to one of embodied intensity - revealing how democracy, far from being abstract or procedural, is lived through the felt intimacies of everyday life.

5.2.9 Operationalising ECI

The concept of Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) explains how the compressed social geographies of small states shape democratic life through proximity, familiarity, and reputational exposure. While earlier sections demonstrated ECI's interpretive power as

a unifying analytical lens, its further value depends on specifying the concrete mechanisms through which civic intimacy is enacted and reproduced. This section therefore advances from thematic formulation to testable framework, articulating the pathways and practices that link structural conditions to observable practices in Malta and Singapore, and indeed, in small states in general.

Although the mechanisms of ECI are ethnographically derived, their analytical strength lies in clear empirical anchoring. To ensure that constructs such as visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, and symbolic participation remain comparable across contexts, the study defines operational indicators that render these processes observable. Two primary measures are proposed:

- Participation Density Ratio (PDR): the proportion of individuals participating in high-visibility local settings relative to national averages.
- Neutrality Penalty Rate (NPR): the proportion of cases in which abstention or neutrality incurs reputational or professional cost.

These indicators align with existing comparative datasets - such as V-Dem's "fear of expressing opinion" variable and the World Values Survey's items on trust and civic participation - facilitating replication and cross-national extension. Short field-based vignettes from Malta and Singapore illustrate how these indicators translate civic intimacy into measurable social dynamics, bridging ethnographic nuance with quantitative auditability.

In both settings, citizens inhabit dense relational fields where political, occupational, and familial networks overlap. This small-state density transforms everyday acts of participation and speech into visible signals of belonging or dissent. To capture this transformation systematically, ECI is expressed as a series of interlinked mechanisms operating through four recurrent processes in dense contexts: visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, reputational sanctioning, and symbolic participation.

This operationalisation allows ECI to function as more than a descriptive or interpretive theme. It provides a systematic comparative framework linking qualitative observations to empirical referents, enabling analysis of how structural density converts proximity into symbolic power through embodied routines of visibility, discretion, and participation. Across Malta and Singapore, each mechanism appears, interacts, and at times breaks down, rendering Embodied Civic Intimacy an empirically traceable and falsifiable account of how democratic life is lived in small states.

5.2.9.1 Visibility of Absence

In small-state environments, the density of social relations and the proximity of reputational networks make civic behaviour unusually visible. The limited scale of associational life means that absence itself becomes a legible social act, heightening the social costs of dissent. In settings such as Malta and Singapore, not attending community or state-linked events is rarely read as indifference. Rather, absence tends to signify disengagement, disloyalty, or discreet protest. This dynamic constitutes the first mechanism of *Embodied Civic Intimacy* (ECI): the visibility of absence.

The underlying trigger of this mechanism lies in the compression of overlapping networks - political, occupational, and familial - which produces environments of high relational concentration. Within these dense circuits, participation is continuously monitored, whether through direct acquaintance or the circulation of gossip, and individuals anticipate state or social disapproval and adjust speech accordingly. This condition generates a distinct micro-mechanism: reputational exposure. Individuals internalise the awareness that their absence will be noticed, discussed, and interpreted. The anticipation of that scrutiny - whether in the form of curiosity or suspicion - encourages conformity without explicit coercion. Participation thus becomes as much a defensive act as an expressive one: people attend events, sign petitions, or display civic symbols not only to demonstrate belonging, but also to avoid the interpretive ambiguity that non-participation would invite.

The counterfactual condition for this mechanism would be a setting in which absence is socially neutral, where one's failure to participate provokes no commentary or inference. Yet such neutrality was rarely found in either Malta or Singapore. Instead, absence consistently carried interpretive charge, confirming that civic intimacy transforms physical proximity into symbolic power.

To ground this theoretical claim in replicable evidence, the study specifies three complementary procedures that make absence socially legible and empirically testable across cases.

5.2.9.2 Participation and Attendance Mapping

Primary data are drawn from event rosters, committee memberships, and civic participation archives in both Malta's vibrant associational life and Singapore's organised civic structures. These records document not only attendance frequency but also patterns of representational visibility - who appears, who withdraws, and who replaces whom. Temporal mapping of these patterns identifies moments when non-attendance deviates from routine fluctuation and instead provokes relational commentary. Such deviations mark instances of reputational exposure independent of any formal sanction.

5.2.9.3 Mediated Visibility Tracking

Local newspapers, community newsletters, and social-media documentation extend the analysis from physical to mediated presence. Photo galleries, captioned acknowledgements, and tagged attendance posts establish public records of participation. When the absence of a familiar figure prompts speculation or commentary in media coverage or online threads, the case is symbolically logged as an instance of visible absence. This measure captures how the relational density of small states leaves digital and textual traces of civic presence - and absence alike.

5.2.9.4 Narrative Coding of Consequence

Interview transcripts were checked for episodes where absence or deviation carried perceptible consequences - such as missed opportunities, strained relations, or reputational damage. Instances include the Maltese civil servant publicly shamed for attending Daphne Caruana Galizia's vigil, and Singaporean residents whose non-participation or behavioural lapses in communal spaces drew visible disapproval. Each reference is categorised by event type, network reach, and tone of recognition, capturing how reputational sanction operates across personal, professional, and civic spheres. The coding distinguishes between generalised observations ("people notice when you don't show up") and specific cases where recognition of absence directly altered interaction or access - for example, exclusion from professional opportunities, social invitations, or state-affiliated forums.

Through these interlocking procedures, the visibility of absence emerges as an empirically grounded indicator of ECI. It captures a subtle yet pervasive feature of civic life in small states: the transformation of non-participation into a socially communicative act. In relational ecologies where everyone is known and networks overlap, even silence acquires performative weight. The small state, by its very intimacy, converts absence into visibility - the simplest act of not showing up in the socially prescribed way becomes a meaningful and sanctionable expression of dissent, with harsher consequences in small state contexts.

5.2.9.5 Anticipatory Self-Censorship

If the visibility of absence concerns what is seen, anticipatory self-censorship concerns what is left unsaid. In small states, where reputational distance is minimal and the boundaries between private and public communication are porous, individuals internalise the likelihood that speech circulates quickly and may be traced back to them. This awareness produces a distinctive form of civic discipline: the pre-emptive editing of one's own expression. It is not silence imposed by overt repression, but restraint produced through the anticipation of consequence.

The trigger of this mechanism lies at the intersection of visibility and perceived surveillance. In Singapore, extensive legal frameworks such as the *Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act* (POFMA) and the *Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act* (FICA) make the potential costs of mis-speech tangible, even when rarely enforced. In Malta, an equivalent perception arises from dense social familiarity, where a critical comment about a local figure can traverse familial or occupational boundaries within hours. In both cases, the expectation that words *travel* conditions behaviour before expression occurs.

Empirically, this anticipatory discipline is pervasive. Respondents in both settings described an “invisible censorship” that precedes any formal sanction. Former journalist Leong Sze Hian explained that opposition figures were “covered less, or not at all” by state-linked media, making visibility itself precarious. Activist Jolovan Wham observed that “you don’t even need to be told what you can’t say - everyone already knows.” The chilling effect of POFMA and FICA operates primarily through expectation rather than enforcement: the mere existence of these laws primes self-restraint. As PJ Thum noted, “the rule of law here is very strong in the letter but meaningless in spirit - you internalise where the limits are before you test them.” Everyday conversation thus unfolds within an affective field of reputational risk: citizens edit speech, moderate tone, and avoid political references in ordinary exchanges, knowing that “people talk” and remarks can circulate beyond control.

In Malta, anticipatory silence manifests through social intervisibility and reputational costs. Former President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca remarked that “participation and poverty cannot be separated – silence is produced when survival overrides speech.” Journalists and activists described how criticism of party patronage or corruption reverberates rapidly through small communities, often reaching employers or relatives within hours. Abstaining from village festas or political rituals marks one as aloof or oppositional; conversely, public gestures of affiliation - wearing party colours, attending commemorations - serve as reputational insurance. One civil-society actor noted that “everyone knows who spoke to whom by the end of the day,” illustrating how visibility

of interaction itself disciplines expression. Delia captured the same logic in academia: “Academics seem to be consulted, but only in limited areas, and they tend to avoid strong judgement to preserve potential future engagement.” These examples show that self-censorship is not a conscious political act but an embodied routine - a habitual calibration of voice, tone, and timing grounded in the expectation of repercussion.

The micro-mechanism is therefore one of anticipatory discipline. Individuals gauge not only what they wish to say but who might hear it, where it might circulate, and how it might return to them. Interviews contain repeated phrases such as “better not say,” “people will know,” and “someone might report,” all indicating that censorship is internalised long before external enforcement occurs. The observable indicators extend beyond testimony to textual and discursive sources: the patterned avoidance of explicit criticism in community newspapers; the prevalence of euphemism and coded language online; and the state’s recurrent invocation of “responsibility,” “harmony,” and “respect,” which frame restraint as civic virtue. In Singapore, this moral vocabulary is institutionalised through campaigns such as the *Singapore Kindness Movement*; in Malta, it is reproduced through appeals to communal loyalty and party belonging.

Field observations corroborate these dynamics. In Singapore’s Mass Rapid Transit, silence is not mere etiquette but a civic discipline - each passenger’s composure policing the others. At the Building Bridges seminar in Toa Payoh, critique was permitted only within carefully moderated civility: a “discussion without disruption.” Online spaces mirror this behaviour, with WhatsApp groups routinely self-moderating and users deleting posts to pre-empt circulation. In Malta, social-media exchanges reveal parallel habits of euphemism, delayed posting, and coded critique. The resulting communicative economy is one of prudential expression - neither total silence nor free critique, but a calibrated middle ground shaped by proximity and consequence.

The falsifiers of this mechanism would be sustained instances of open, critical speech in public arenas without social or institutional reprisal. Few such examples persist over time in either Malta or Singapore. Instead, what endures is a pervasive calibration of expression, a civic prudence that transforms anticipation into compliance long before

any formal sanction is applied. Quantitative indicators reinforce this ethnographic record: V-Dem data show Singapore stabilising in the lower quartile for *Freedom of Expression* while Malta, though rated “free,” exhibits steady decline in *media autonomy* and *alternative sources of information*. These divergences between formal classification and lived experience expose the limits of liberal metrics in capturing embodied restraint.

Anticipatory self-censorship thus exemplifies how Embodied Civic Intimacy operates at the micro-level. It links visibility, affect, and compliance in a causal chain whereby surveillance - real or imagined - becomes internalised as anticipation. Through this mechanism, smallness translates density into discipline: citizens learn to measure words against potential audiences, to anticipate reputational reverberation, and to manage self-presentation as an act of civic survival.

Democracy in such contexts is maintained not through enforced silence but through a choreography of restraint, an affective governance where civility appears consensual yet is sustained by the embodied awareness that to speak too freely is to be seen, and to be seen is to be judged.

5.2.9.6 Reputational Sanctioning

Where *anticipatory self-censorship* governs expression through internal restraint, *reputational sanctioning* operates externally through collective enforcement. In compact societies where personal, professional, and political domains intersect, reputation functions as an informal currency of trust and access. The limited size of social and institutional networks allows information to circulate swiftly, ensuring that behaviour - particularly behaviour perceived as oppositional or inimical to national narratives and agendas - rarely remains private. This permeability of networks forms the trigger for the mechanism: dense multiplex relationships that blur the boundaries between civic, occupational, and familial spheres.

The micro-mechanism emerges when reputational information travels through these overlapping circles. Acts of deviation - public criticism, withdrawal from sanctioned initiatives, or refusal of expected support - are rapidly translated into narratives that label individuals as unreliable, disloyal, dangerous or ungrateful. Discipline is often extra-judicial, occurring through the recalibration of opportunity. Gossip, selective exclusion, or the quiet withholding of invitations and favours operate as subtle sanctions that reaffirm collective norms while maintaining plausible deniability. The fear of such reputational damage sustains conformity more effectively than overt punishment. In extreme examples, such as that of Terry Xu or Tan Wah Piow, reputational sanctioning forces exile. In the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta, reputational sanctioning led to the ultimate form of silence of dissent—murder.

Observable indicators of this process appear in multiple domains. Interview narratives in both Malta and Singapore contain recurring phrases such as “word gets around” or “people remember,” signalling awareness of an informal surveillance ecology that regulates civic belonging through reputational exposure. In Malta, respondents described how outspoken individuals or organisations critical of government lines experienced tangible obstacles in accessing municipal employment or state-linked funding streams. Artists and NGOs reported that grant applications were delayed or denied following public criticism, while local officials quietly signalled disapproval through withdrawal of invitations or patronage. These dynamics were mirrored in gendered form: as Miriam Dalli observed, women in politics “must give more than 100 percent” and are “savagely criticised even for appearance,” underscoring how visibility and proximity operate through bodily and moral policing as much as through material sanction. The same reputational logics extended to the media sphere, where journalists such as Daphne Caruana Galizia, or others subsequently excluded from government press events, exemplified how “people remember” functions as a disciplinary mechanism. Silence and complicity are rewarded with access, while dissent becomes legible and enduring through gossip, withdrawal, and ostracism.

Comparable reputational economies operate in Singapore, where community-leader hierarchies and state-linked grassroots organisations perform a parallel function of

policing loyalty and distance. Jolovan Wham and Jamus Lim both described how opposition figures and activists often faced subtle but effective exclusion from employment or professional advancement, with employers “fear[ing] hiring employees from the opposition camp” lest reputational association jeopardise their own security or standing. These practices reveal how informal surveillance and symbolic sanctioning become embedded in everyday economic life. The same logic extends to spatial governance: the state’s practice of upgrading housing estates in pro-PAP wards operates as a collective commendation, materially and symbolically rewarding loyalty while rendering opposition areas visibly neglected. Through these intersecting mechanisms - employment gatekeeping, public recognition, and spatial differentiation - Singapore’s civic hierarchy converts proximity into reputational exposure and discipline.

Across both contexts, such patterns illustrate how reputational sanctioning transforms social connectedness into a mechanism of governance. Familiarity and visibility, rather than anonymity or formal coercion, generate civic compliance. The fear of being remembered - or forgotten - becomes a powerful disciplinary resource, converting intimacy into surveillance and belonging into control.

Falsifiers would include documented instances of dissent that carry no subsequent reputational cost, or the emergence of counter-networks capable of shielding non-conforming actors from exclusion. While isolated examples exist, they are exceptional and fragile. Overall, the evidence shows that in both contexts, reputational standing mediates civic legitimacy. Through *reputational sanctioning*, small-state intimacy converts interpersonal knowledge into a disciplinary resource, ensuring that the maintenance of a good name becomes indistinguishable from civic compliance.

5.2.9.7 Symbolic Participation

The final mechanism of Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI), symbolic participation, captures how public unity is enacted and measured through visible, performative acts rather than deliberative engagement. In small states, where the social field is compact and

audiences are familiar, civic rituals acquire heightened importance as markers of belonging. The trigger for this mechanism is the structural emphasis on cohesion and consensus: governments and community leaders alike frame participation in collective events as evidence of harmony, loyalty, and civic maturity. The result is a political culture in which being *seen* to participate carries more weight than engaging in contestation or debate.

The micro-mechanism translates this emphasis into practice. Individuals internalise the expectation that attendance and visible enthusiasm are equivalent to democratic contribution. Participation thus becomes an act of symbolic alignment: citizens perform unity through bodily presence, while authorities interpret that presence as consent. Rather than expressing political conviction, participation reassures both the performer and the observer that the collective narrative of stability remains intact. In this way, symbolic participation substitutes ritual affirmation for critical dialogue, sustaining legitimacy through repetition and spectacle.

Observable indicators of this mechanism are found in both the frequency and framing of public participation. In Singapore, initiatives such as the *OnePeople.sg* “Building Bridges” dialogues on racial harmony and the choreographed comportment observed in Housing and Development Board estates exemplify how civic virtue is performed through visible discipline. These events present harmony and inclusion as participatory ideals, where speech is polite, disagreement is muted, and bodily comportment becomes a sign of respectability. In Malta, comparable logics operate through the highly personalised and reputationally saturated sphere of community and political life: visibility at local council meetings, NGO launches, or party activities is read as affirmation of loyalty, while nonattendance or silence is quickly noticed and discussed. Female politicians in particular described being “savagely criticised even for appearance,” as Miriam Dalli noted, revealing how embodied scrutiny functions as a form of reputational discipline. Across both contexts, interviewees described participation as “showing support,” underscoring how expressive conformity is woven into the ordinary grammar of belonging. National and local media further reinforce these scripts, framing visibility, civility, and presence as the essence of civic virtue.

Falsifiers would include contexts in which sustained, critical, and publicly tolerated dissent coexists with mass participation - an equilibrium seldom observed in either case. Overall, *symbolic participation* demonstrates how small-state democracies convert civic ritual into a form of embodied consent, rendering visibility itself the dominant measure of belonging and legitimacy.

5.2.9.8 Cross-Case Application and Testing

The comparative application of *Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI)* across Malta and Singapore demonstrates how small-state density shapes democratic life through distinct yet convergent mechanisms. Taken together, *visibility of absence*, *anticipatory self-censorship*, *reputational sanctioning*, and *symbolic participation* form an integrated chain through which proximity, familiarity, and surveillance - whether social or institutional - govern the boundaries of civic expression. Across both contexts, the relationship is consistent: as reputational proximity intensifies, expressive autonomy narrows, and the value of visible conformity rises. This pattern links the micro-dynamics of interaction to the macro-structure of small-state governance, allowing ECI to function as a sociological lens that magnifies and casts into relief that which may not be fully captured by global democracy datasets.

The comparative logic rests on variation in the configuration of control. Malta exhibits high relational density but relatively low formal regulation: citizens navigate intimacy through networks of kinship, locality, and patronage, where reputation operates as the principal disciplining force. Singapore, in contrast, combines strong formal regulation with moderate relational density, institutionalising restraint through legal and bureaucratic channels while sustaining the same symbolic demands for unity. The mechanisms differ in texture but converge in effect - both produce civic compliance through the internalisation of exposure and the public performance of belonging.

Testing the framework requires seeking its limits. *Visibility of absence* and *reputational sanctioning* would be falsified by cases where non-participation or dissent incurs no

reputational cost. *Anticipatory self-censorship* would fail where individuals engage in open criticism without sanction or stigma. *Symbolic participation* would weaken if collective rituals coexist with durable, tolerated pluralism. The empirical chapters show that such conditions are rare and often short-lived, reinforcing the explanatory coherence of ECI across the two cases.

By operationalising ECI through these mechanisms, this study links embodied civic practice to the structural logics of small-state democracy. It demonstrates that civic intimacy is not a cultural idiosyncrasy but a patterned mode of governance through which proximity becomes power, visibility becomes compliance, and participation becomes the embodied sign of belonging.

5.2.10 Conclusion

Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) explains how the structural condition of smallness - defined by density, multiplexity, and limited anonymity - generates a distinctive form of democratic subjectivity sustained through proximity, visibility, and affect. It captures how, in small states, citizens are bound not only by institutions or interests but by reputational exposure - the awareness that gestures, silences, and absences are seen, remembered, and circulated. ECI's causal signature lies in reputational sanction without material exchange or legal coercion: compliance is reproduced through embodied anticipation rather than external compulsion.

Through mechanisms of visibility of absence, anticipatory self-censorship, reputational sanctioning, and symbolic participation, ECI traces how small-state density converts ordinary social encounters into political performances of belonging and compliance. These mechanisms transform democratic participation into a choreography of presence and restraint, where being seen becomes synonymous with loyalty and silence functions as a civic language. The result is an affective economy of compliance, in which emotion, recognition, and exposure operate as instruments of governance.

ECI does not replace familiar explanations such as clientelism, repression, or hybridity; rather, it amplifies them by showing why these mechanisms are unusually potent in compact, dense settings. It clarifies why neutrality is costly, why dissent reverberates so detrimentally, and how affect fuses with visibility to produce a civic order that is both participatory and disciplined.

The comparative analysis of Malta and Singapore demonstrates ECI's portability and falsifiability. Despite their contrasting political architectures - Malta's informal relational density and Singapore's formal regulatory state - both reproduce the same underlying dynamic: democratic life lived through embodied intimacy, where proximity transforms reputation into symbolic power.

In sum, ECI reveals how smallness produces democracy as a lived, reputational practice - a politics inscribed on bodies, sustained by affect, and governed through visibility. It shows that in small states, proximity is power, compliance is embodied, and belonging is performed.

5.3 The Malta–Singapore paradox: divergent scores, convergent lives

The paradox begins with a classificatory puzzle. On Freedom House's most recent scales, Malta is designated "free," while Singapore is coded "partly free." V-Dem echoes this divergence: Malta sustains liberal democracy index values well above 0.6, with consistently strong scores for clean elections, judicial independence, and legislative constraints, whereas Singapore lingers below 0.35, its progress plateaued despite gradual improvements in clean elections and bureaucratic quality. On paper, then, the two polities are not twins but opposites: one is a European Union member subject to supranational oversight, its institutions formally liberal; the other, a city-state widely described as a guided democracy, governed by a party that has never relinquished office.

Yet the lived record uncovered in ethnographic immersion and interviews unsettles this contrast. Both places exhibit a strikingly similar repertoire of civic practices:

participation that feels compulsory rather than freely chosen, dissent that is muted more by reputational sanction than outright repression, and neutrality that carries visible social costs. In short, citizens in both contexts live democracy not as a field of open contestation but as a domain of anticipatory obedience and reputational policing. This section traces how smallness intensifies these effects, converting classification mismatches into substantive findings. The Malta–Singapore paradox is vital in demonstrating how density and visibility compress hybrid democracy into embodied compliance.

5.3.1 Divergent Scores: Procedural Indicators

To appreciate the paradox, it is important first to map the classificatory divergence. Malta’s V-Dem indices show civil society participation and freedom of expression values above 0.8 across two decades. Freedom House 2024 gives it 4/4 in freedom of assembly, association, and expression, and 3–4/4 on most measures of pluralism and institutional constraints. The state is therefore coded as procedurally free, albeit labelled a “flawed democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit due to corruption scandals and institutional weakness.

Singapore’s indicators tell a different story. Freedom House rates it 1/4 for assembly, association, and expression, and 2/4 for pluralism. V-Dem values for expression and association rarely rise above 0.4, with legislative constraints on the executive static at 0.56 for two decades. The procedural picture is one of restriction, tight control, and bounded participation.

If indices were our only guides, Malta and Singapore would appear to inhabit distinct democratic worlds. But the ethnographic record demonstrates that these scores capture only part of the story.

5.3.2 Convergent lives: ethnographic realities

5.3.2.1 Malta: participation as reputational mandate

Maltese interviewees consistently described politics as a sphere where opting out is nearly impossible. Former President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca admitted that being part of a party was “like being part of a club” where loyalty is demanded. Kristy Debono recalled that campaigning requires “time, funding, and networks - luxuries not equally available to everyone,” noting that citizens often feel obligated to align visibly with one of the two major parties. The reputational consequences of silence or neutrality were repeatedly highlighted. Emanuel Delia captured this ethos starkly: “Elections are managed by the two parties in parliament ... when they share interests ... they protect each other”.

Such accounts echo the ethnographic sense that Maltese smallness magnifies visibility: who attends a rally, who canvasses for which party, who abstains, all quickly circulate in networks dense enough to transform private preference into public reputation. Neutrality is not treated as a civic right but as a breach of communal loyalty.

5.3.2.2 Singapore: silence and anticipatory obedience

Fieldwork in Singapore presented a mirror. Everyday spaces - the MRT, libraries, condominium corridors - were saturated with silence so thick it felt choreographed. Interviewees linked this comportment to dense visibility and reputational risk. Historian PJ Thum emphasised how laws such as the Public Order Act, the Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act, and POFMA combine to signal that speech is dangerous; citizens then regulate themselves before repression materialises. Activist Jolovan Wham described how “ordinary citizens” could express opinions freely only until they gained influence - at which point surveillance, targeting, and even discrediting begins.

Ethnography reinforced this experiential silence. MRT rides were characterised by pervasive silence in crowded places where even eye contact felt risky. National Day

parades evoked awe but also a sense of rehearsed choreography. In such settings, citizens participate - standing, singing, waving flags - but dissent is displaced into absence or whisper.

5.3.3 Parallel outcomes

Despite their classificatory distance, Malta and Singapore converge in outcome: participation without contestation. Maltese citizens show up at rallies, festas, and elections because non-participation is reputationally dangerous; Singaporeans comply with silence, rituals, and state-curated events because deviance is conspicuous and potentially sanctioned. In both, the body is enlisted into democracy: to be seen at the festa, to be silent in the MRT, to wave at the parade, to demonstrate support for one's village party. The compulsion is less coercive than reputational, but no less binding.

5.3.4 Smallness as Amplifier

What renders these convergences intelligible is not institutional similarity but demographic compression. Both Malta and Singapore are among the most densely populated polities in the world: Malta with around 1,800 people per km², Singapore with around 8,200 per km². In such conditions, absence is legible. A Maltese neighbour who skips a festa is noticed; a Singaporean who talks too loudly on the MRT is conspicuous.

Interviewees were acutely aware of this. Maltese politician Marlene Farrugia spoke of networks of businessmen and aristocrats "who call the shots and ensure that elected politicians remain their puppets", describing a field so small that dissenters cannot escape their gaze. Singaporean exile Terry Xu made a similar point: "It's just social engineering because you always want to keep the people in the sense of danger and then tout yourself as your protector", or PJ Thum's example of "killing a chicken to scare the monkeys".

Smallness thus transforms familiar instruments of hybridity - clientelism in Malta, media control in Singapore - into reputationally binding practices. In large states, a defector can disappear into anonymity. In small states, every act- or non-act- holds consequences.

5.3.5 The Costs of Dissent

5.3.5.1 Malta: reputational sanctioning

In Malta, reputational sanctioning is the dominant cost. Women politicians such as Miriam Dalli and Marlene Farrugia described harsher judgment, contempt, and gendered slurs. Journalists like Daphne Caruana Galizia paid the ultimate price, her assassination seared into Maltese memory as a warning of what happens when critique becomes too visible. Citizens, too, face softer sanctions: exclusion from networks, stalled careers, social ostracism. The smallness of Malta ensures that reputational damage circulates quickly and is difficult to repair. As Miriam Dalli commented, *“I have friends from all backgrounds and beliefs. On an island where resources are limited, I can’t afford to filter people out.”* This comment was echoed and espoused in myriad ways by other interviewees.

5.3.5.2 Singapore: anticipatory obedience

In Singapore, the cost is anticipatory. Journalistic exiles like Terry Xu recounted how endless bureaucratic demands drove him abroad. NGOs applying for charity status that held agendas out of the scope of PAP approval were stalled into ineffectiveness. Citizens described how “smiling at an elderly worker” could be rebuffed, the refusal a reminder of the disciplined boundaries of interaction. Academics such as Sol Iglesias have their participation in conferences removed before potential dissent can even take place. Entire fields of scholarly enquiry are absent from universities lest they provoke critical thinking. Here, dissent rarely escalates to open confrontation; the cost is internalised as self-censorship, anticipatory silence, and the ritualisation of compliance.

5.3.6 Diagnostic convergence

The paradox thus crystallises: Malta's democracy is formally plural but reputationally unforgiving; Singapore's is procedurally constrained but experientially similar. In both, dissent is costly not simply because of laws or institutions, but because smallness magnifies visibility and transforms civic life into a reputational minefield.

5.3.6.1 From Paradox to Deeper Understanding

The Malta–Singapore paradox matters not as a curiosity but as an anomaly awaiting greater insight. Standard indices see divergence - free versus partly free - because they may privilege procedural checks and formal liberties over substantive experience. Lived experience reveals convergence - compulsory participation, muted dissent, reputational policing - because smallness intensifies embodied civic intimacy.

The paradox also previews two dynamics that subsequent sections will unpack in greater depth. In Singapore, anticipatory obedience is the dominant mode: silence on the MRT, careful phrasing in cafés, muted vigils and symbolic protests. In Malta, reputational sanctioning is more overt: gossip networks, visible party loyalty, reputational destruction of women or dissenters. Both are expressions of embodied civic intimacy, differentiated only in modality.

5.3.7 Conclusion

The Malta–Singapore paradox demonstrates that divergence in indices can coexist with convergence in lived democratic practice. Malta's procedural freedoms do not spare its citizens from reputational coercion; Singapore's procedural constraints are internalised into anticipatory compliance. Smallness is the amplifier that brings these logics together. What appears as a contradiction in indices is, under ethnographic scrutiny, a mechanism: hybrid regimes compressed by density converge on embodied democracy enforced by reputation.

5.4 Embodiment, identity, and democratic belonging

The paradox traced in the previous section illustrated how Malta and Singapore, despite occupying divergent positions on global indices, converge in lived repertoires of reputationally enforced compliance. To sustain the analysis, however, it is necessary to descend from the polity-wide puzzle into the differentiated terrain of bodies: which citizens are hyper-visible, which are muted, and which can extend their democratic reach through elite insulation. Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI), as the interpretive lens, reveals that small-state density does not bear evenly across populations. Instead, its force is stratified along gendered, racialised, and classed lines. Intimacy contracts belonging for some - women under perpetual scrutiny in Malta, migrants disciplined into silence in Singapore - while expanding it for others, particularly elites whose dense connections extend rather than curtail their political agency. This “double movement” makes clear that embodied democracy in small states is not a flat field of equal intimacy, but a landscape scored by uneven costs and privileges.

5.4.1 Gendered hyper-visibility in Malta and Singapore

Democratic participation is never gender-neutral. In small or compressed polities, the female body in public life acquires heightened significance, its visibility tightly policed and its legitimacy contingent. A comparative reading of Malta and Singapore demonstrates how Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) contracts women’s belonging in democracy through distinct yet equally disciplining modalities: reputational economies in Malta and choreographies of civility in Singapore.

In Malta, women in politics encounter an acute form of reputational sanction that transforms their presence into hyper-visibility. The island’s compressed social terrain magnifies every gesture, alliance, or misstep, leaving women disproportionately vulnerable to scrutiny and sanction. Minister Miriam Dalli has described how women are judged “more harshly” and “savagely criticised even when it’s not [their] fault,” underscoring the absence of the presumption of legitimacy routinely granted to men. Similarly, former MP Marlene Farrugia’s alliance with then-PN leader Simon Busuttil

was weaponised against her, invoked as evidence of cultural nonconformity to a script dictating that “a woman should stand behind a man.” Her refusal of this subordinate role triggered contempt, slurs, and reputational assault.

The assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia remains the starkest reminder of how reputational violence can escalate into physical annihilation, etching into Malta’s civic consciousness the costs of dissent for women. Testimonies from Kristy Debono and Professor Josann Cutajar further illustrate the compounded burdens: women are held to unforgiving standards of political performance while simultaneously expected to sustain reproductive and care roles, often within a labour market that relegates them to poorly paid, secondary positions. It is helpful to add relevant context here: in 2005, Malta’s female employment rate (for women aged 20-64) measured at 36.4%, which was the lowest among all EU member states at the time. The increase in women in the workforce in Malta is a recent development (Caruana, 2023).

In this small-state polity, anonymity is scarce, and women’s participation becomes a form of civic exposure. Their bodies and reputations are converted into sites where propriety, loyalty, and morality are contested. Reputational sanction thus functions intersectionally: women face partisan attacks layered with gendered stigma, and in village contexts where festa attendance and party-club loyalty already signify belonging, their political presence attracts intensified surveillance. Malta’s democracy therefore formally includes women but simultaneously undermines them through economies of reputational violence that compress their visibility into punitive hyper-exposure.

In Singapore, gendered hyper-visibility takes a different form. Here, women are not primarily subjected to reputational slander but to scripts of civility, stratification, and religious expectation that choreograph their comportment. Women are highly visible in service, catering, and white-collar professions but remain strikingly absent from blue-collar work. Construction sites, bus depots, and technical trades are almost exclusively male domains; the rare sight of Malay women as bus drivers is perceived as a visible breach of entrenched cultural and religious boundaries.

Public rituals further discipline women's comportment into choreographed restraint, extending from the grand spectacle of civic parades to the ordinary gestures of service, schooling, and work. Chinese women, in particular, are positioned within these orchestrated performances of civility - whether in the synchronised movements of daily recitations, the prescribed smiles of customer-service campaigns, or the silent grace expected of volunteers distributing "Be Kind, Be Gracious" packs in public spaces. Everyday acts - waiting patiently in hawker-centre queues, standing neatly during school assemblies, lowering the voice in crowded trains, or maintaining a polite smile at the cashier - become quiet affirmations of civic order. These bodily cues are not incidental courtesies but rehearsed competencies through which respectability and belonging are made visible. Regulation thus shifts from explicit coercion to embodied conformity: a civic habitus in which discipline of posture, voice, and expression replaces spontaneity as the recognised measure of virtue and participation.

Such discipline extends into mundane routines. In MRT carriages, both women and men lower their gazes and minimise movement, managing visibility through anticipatory self-discipline. Yet civility is stratified. Middle-class Chinese women function as emblems of national harmony, prominently displayed in corporate offices, civic rituals, and housing estates curated by ethnic quotas. Minority and migrant women, by contrast, experience precarious hyper-visibility. Filipina domestic workers and Thai labourers, largely invisible during the week, gather in central plazas on Sundays; their colourful presence instantly marks them as outsiders, tolerated yet scrutinised in a city otherwise devoted to suppressing difference. Within Malay Muslim families, women's visibility is further regulated by fathers and husbands through dress, comportment, and marriage, ensuring that modesty and obedience serve as embodied markers of civic respectability.

Singapore thus contracts women's civic belonging not through reputational slander, as in Malta, but through choreographies of civility and stratified participation. To be visible is to embody discipline: smiling in designated spaces, remaining silent in rituals, avoiding occupations deemed inappropriate, and appearing in public only within sanctioned ethnic and classed boundaries. Women who transgress these norms - Malay

bus drivers, Chinese women rejecting submissiveness, or Filipina domestic workers claiming central plazas - become hyper-visible as deviations from civic scripts.

Taken together, Malta and Singapore reveal two distinct modalities through which Embodied Civic Intimacy circumscribes women's democratic participation. In Malta, punitive reputational economies magnify women's political presence into a constant liability, where visibility is a source of sanction and even danger. In Singapore, civic order is sustained through choreographed civility and occupational stratification, rendering women present yet tightly disciplined. Across both contexts, formal inclusion in democratic and economic life is undermined by embodied norms that make women's civic visibility conditional and costly.

5.4.2 Race, Ethnicity, and Embodied Civic Intimacy in Small Democracies

In small democracies such as Malta and Singapore, race and ethnicity decisively shape how citizens experience what this thesis terms embodied civic intimacy (ECI). ECI captures the ways in which density, visibility, and proximity render political presence unavoidable: in contexts where "everyone sees everyone," participation, silence, and absence alike acquire reputational weight. While class and gender also mediate civic life, racialised belonging introduces an additional axis through which both compliance and dissent are embodied, scrutinised, and regulated.

Singapore exemplifies the deliberate institutionalisation of diversity as a tool of governance. Since independence, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has enshrined multiracialism in law and policy, promoting it as a cornerstone of national identity. Mechanisms such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing and the Group Representation Constituency system ostensibly secure integration. Yet these arrangements simultaneously function as instruments of control, disciplining the spatial distribution and political presence of minorities.

The EIP demonstrates this paradox most starkly. Once ethnic quotas are reached, Malay and Indian homeowners may sell only within their own ethnic group, depressing resale

values and constraining upward mobility. As Leong Sze Hian observes, Malay households may lose as much as 30% compared to Chinese neighbours - a cost produced not by market forces but by state design. In the densely populated housing estates where most Singaporeans live, such disparities are highly visible, attaching reputational narratives of immobility and disadvantage to entire communities.

Field observations underscore these stratifications. In districts such as Jurong or Chinatown, Chinese dominance is spatially inscribed, while Malay and Indian citizens occupy more marginal positions. Migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, along with Filipino domestic helpers, are even more starkly excluded: confined to dormitories, kitchens, and construction sites during the week, they emerge in plazas and retail districts on Sundays - suddenly visible yet politically muted. Here, visibility marks exclusion rather than belonging.

ECI thus contracts minority presence by fusing visibility with stigma. Everyday interactions - such as the compression of unpapered Indian workers in Little India, who hang around along the sheltered pavements and alleys, or the queues of migrant workers waiting to receive free food. These racialised bodies are hidden, concealed, allocated to areas away from the order and gloss of Singapore's cityscape - signal how racialised bodies are reputationally coded as inferior or risky. State rituals amplify this logic. National Day parades choreograph multi-ethnic harmony, casting Malay and Indian soldiers as hyper-visible tokens of unity while material inequalities persist. This is the paradox of Singaporean intimacy: minorities are celebrated symbolically yet structurally disadvantaged through quotas, punitive labour regimes, and enduring marginalisation.

Malta illustrates how rapid demographic change unsettles entrenched civic intimacies. Historically homogeneous and divided along partisan lines, the island has in the past decade turned heavily to Third Country Nationals (TCNs) from North Africa, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa to sustain construction, care, and hospitality sectors. These migrants are highly visible in workplaces and neighbourhoods yet remain politically and legally invisible. Marlene Farrugia pointed out the paradox: *"We should*

not be afraid of those who, if not for their presence in our society, our hospitals and hotels would now be shut. We pretend to give them a role but then don't let them work properly for the country."

In tightly knit communities where "everyone knows everyone," reputational exposure magnifies exclusion. Even Maltese citizens struggle to remain neutral in a partisan culture anchored by festas and other local rituals. Migrants, lacking access to these civic performances, are denied the anchors of belonging that structure Maltese life. Their presence is tolerated as an economic necessity but denied symbolic recognition as part of the nation. Racialised difference here intersects with class, positioning TCNs as permanent outsiders within Malta's civic imaginary.

Across both Malta and Singapore, ECI amplifies or contracts belonging in different ways. For dominant groups - Chinese Singaporeans or Maltese citizens - participation in civic rituals appears natural and embeds them within economies of loyalty. For minorities, however, visibility produces vulnerability. In Singapore, Malays risk reputational charges of disloyalty if they challenge state narratives of harmony, while migrants face deportation if they cross civic "red lines." In Malta, TCNs' conspicuous presence in neighbourhoods confirms their "otherness," while their absence from festas entrenches exclusion.

In both contexts, race often serves as a proxy for class. In Singapore, the EIP converts ethnic status into economic disadvantage, while migrant workers' racialised visibility maps directly onto precarious, low-wage labour. In Malta, migrants' "out-of-placeness" within neighbourhoods and rituals reinforces their civic marginality, even as their labour underwrites the economy.

Race and ethnicity profoundly condition how democracy is lived in small states. In Singapore, institutionalised diversity bolsters state legitimacy even as it embeds structural disadvantages for minorities and migrants. In Malta, the collision of new multicultural realities with entrenched partisan intimacy relegates migrants to civic margins. In both settings, smallness magnifies the visibility of racialised difference,

making neutrality costly and belonging uneven, and amplifying the potential for symbolic violence.

For dominant groups, ECI affirms political presence; for minorities, it entrenches exclusion. Yet moments of resistance reveal that civic intimacy is not solely disciplinary but also a potential resource for solidarity. Recognising these dynamics is essential for theorising democracy not as a uniform ideal but as a stratified, embodied practice deeply entangled with race, class, and the politics of smallness.

5.4.3 Class and elite networks: expanded belonging

If women in Malta and migrants in Singapore embody the contracted side of intimacy, elites in both contexts demonstrate its expansionary potential. In Malta, interviewees repeatedly described the dense interlocking networks of businessmen, aristocrats, and party insiders who “call the shots” and ensure politicians remain their “puppets”. Marlene Farrugia spoke of a network spanning “businessmen, non-businessmen, aristocrats, and other powerful individuals” whose influence subordinates elected officials. Lou Bondi noted that once “5–6 people can get away with corruption that puts €500,000 in their pocket, others will feel entitled” to smaller gains, illustrating how elite impunity cascades downward. For those within the circle, however, embodied democracy is expansive: presence at festas, access to ministers, or ties to developers translate into amplified influence rather than sanction.

Kristy Debono highlighted how economic capital tilts the field: campaigning requires “time, funding, and networks,” luxuries of the wealthy. Without inherited connections, newcomers must work “twice as hard to be seen and heard”. Emanuel Delia described parties as funded by small groups of elites who launder money through public telethons. These accounts show that ECI amplifies advantages for elites: their dense visibility is not reputationally dangerous but politically enabling. Proximity to power, rather than constraining, ensures access, favours, and protection.

Singapore exhibits a parallel dynamic. Jamus Lim explained how the labour union is formally independent yet led entirely by sitting MPs from the ruling party, rendering it inaccessible to opposition voices. Jolovan Wham noted how the husband of a minister received lucrative construction contracts during COVID, an example of elite placement transforming crisis into opportunity. PJ Thum observed that the Attorney General was the Prime Minister's former lawyer, while the Chief Justice was a personal friend, illustrating how informal trust networks are formalised into state authority. For these elites, embodied civic intimacy does not contract but expand visibility in elite circles ensures opportunities, appointments, and insulation from sanction.

In Jurong, ethnographic observations exposed determined access to resources such as childcare places or medical queues. Political appointments and contracts were described as distributed through trust networks rather than open competition. Here, intimacy is not reputational peril but capital: proximity generates trust, trust generates opportunity, and opportunity consolidates belonging.

5.4.4 The double movement of embodied democracy

Across both Malta and Singapore, the Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) lens reveals a double movement: the same mechanism of smallness, density, and proximity that intensifies visibility produces sharply divergent outcomes. For some bodies - Maltese women politicians and migrant workers in Malta and Singapore - this compression of social distance turns visibility into a liability, contracting democratic belonging through reputational sanction, embodied exclusion, or heightened surveillance. For others - business elites in Malta and technocratic families or political allies in Singapore - the same density amplifies influence, transforming visibility into an asset that consolidates reach and authority. Proximity and reputational intimacy thus operate universally, but their effects are profoundly stratified by one's embodied and social position.

This stratification underscores that embodiment within ECI is inherently intersectional. Visibility and reputational sanction are not evenly distributed but mediated through gender, class, ethnicity, and occupational status. Who becomes seen, remembered, or

judged depends on one's position within intersecting hierarchies of privilege and vulnerability. In Malta, women's civic exposure intertwines with class and partisan proximity; in Singapore, ethnicity and economic status shape both the reach and the risk of being visible. Recognising these layered differentiations clarifies that ECI functions not as a uniform democratic mechanism but as a stratified field of reputational power. Future research might extend this analysis by systematically tracing how reputational costs vary across social categories - quantifying, for instance, the differential sanctioning of women, migrants, and elites - to reveal how intimacy is not only embodied but socially and culturally distributed.

Such stratification also explains why small-state democracy cannot be assessed solely through institutional metrics. While Malta may perform well on measures of gender representation and Singapore on indices of multicultural integration, lived democracy manifests unevenly across bodies. For women, migrants, and minorities, intimacy operates as a mode of coercion; for elites, as a mode of empowerment. These asymmetries highlight the interpretive value of ECI: democratic belonging in small states is not merely uneven in its outcomes but is actively produced through the very mechanism of smallness itself.

5.4.5 Preparing for governance

The uneven positioning of bodies under ECI lays the foundation for the governance analysis that follows. If reputational intimacy contracts belonging for some while expanding it for others, then governance arrangements - whether formal institutions, informal networks, or ritual performances - will necessarily be felt and reproduced differently across these groups. Women politicians in Malta experience hybrid governance as reputationally punitive; migrant workers in Singapore experience it as bureaucratically exclusionary; elites in both contexts experience it as an extension of their reach. To understand hybrid governance in small states, one must first recognise that it is lived through these stratified embodiments of intimacy. The next section takes up this challenge directly.

5.5 Hybrid governance + symbolic power: how rule endures without force

Durability in small hybrid regimes does not rest solely on coercion, nor does it depend on institutional legitimacy in the liberal sense. In Malta and Singapore alike, political rule is sustained through a dense interlacing of formal and informal arrangements, amplified by symbolic rituals that render compliance not just necessary but reputationally unavoidable. Embodied Civic Intimacy provides an interpretive approach to understanding how these different modalities - festive partisanship in Malta, technocratic choreography in Singapore - operate as everyday performances of loyalty. Each context embeds citizens in networks where absence becomes conspicuous, silence is legible, and ritualised participation is translated into political stability. Hybrid governance is therefore not an abstract configuration but a lived reality in which formal procedures are inseparable from the embodied rituals of everyday political life.

The Maltese case demonstrates this fusion most vividly in the realm of party-state interpenetration. Electoral procedures are scrupulously formal - high turnout, clear rules, robust oversight by international observers - yet they are enveloped in clientelist circuits and partisan cultures that leave little space for neutral citizenship. As Kristy Debono observed, campaigning demands time, resources, and visibility that only those with pre-existing networks can sustain, ensuring that politics is lived less as an institutional contest than as an embodied mandate to demonstrate loyalty. Informal power brokers - business magnates, aristocratic families, and entrenched interest groups - extend their influence into the very fabric of governance, shaping appointments, tilting procurement, and placing trusted intermediaries into key state offices. Yet this influence is not hidden in the shadows of corruption scandals alone; it is performed through symbolic gestures in village festas, band clubs, and church squares, where party banners dominate public space and reputational visibility binds citizens into partisan identities. Hybrid governance thus functions through a constant oscillation: the legality of elections coexists with the ritualised demands of clientelist loyalty, generating a system in which formal rule is always doubled by informal enforcement.

Singapore provides a contrasting but structurally parallel modality. Here, the idiom is not festive partisanship but juridical technocracy. Elections are regular, and the rule of law is formally robust, yet the spirit of that law is bent toward containment. As PJ Thum noted, ministers wield discretionary powers under acts such as POFMA or the Internal Security Act, enabling the government to dictate truth claims and silence dissent. Gerrymandering and the Group Representation Constituency system cloak procedural democracy in legality while ensuring PAP dominance. But this formal dominance does not endure through coercion alone; it is sustained by ritualised performances of civility. The Singapore Kindness Movement's enforced "smile zones" in schools or orchestrated flag-waving at National Day parades transform emotional expression into state-curated loyalty. MRT carriages thick with silence, or food hawker markets policed by mutual observation, are not mere urban quirks but embodied practices that render dissent conspicuous and risky. If non-compliant behaviour is policed in a hawkers' market, citizens become inherently aware that politically meaningful dissent will be met with even greater restraint. Formal statutes channel behaviour, but it is the everyday choreography of civility that makes compliance visible, and therefore reputationally compulsory.

In both Malta and Singapore, the endurance of political rule relies less on coercion than on symbolic power. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is central here, yet within these small states the mechanism is intensified by their very scale. Smallness magnifies visibility: anonymity is rare, and every act of participation or abstention becomes instantly legible. This condition - *Embodied Civic Intimacy* - transforms symbolic gestures into binding performances.

In Malta, reputational harm travels swiftly through dense gossip networks and partisan media ecosystems, disciplining public expression. In Singapore, silence in public spaces and conformity to choreographed rituals of deference communicate loyalty without words. In both settings, compliance is not simply demanded but enacted through bodily performance - reinforced by social density and codified in symbolic ritual.

The consequences of dissent underscore this dynamic: Tan Wah Piow’s exile after challenging the Singaporean government, and the professional marginalization faced by Maltese academics who voice excessive criticism, exemplify how symbolic power governs through reputation, visibility, and the embodied enactment of conformity.

The following table is a structured framework that disaggregates symbolic violence into five distinct domains. This framework accompanying table presented these domains alongside their working definitions, indicative indicators, and illustrative examples drawn from Malta and Singapore. In doing so, the coding architecture it renders symbolic violence - an abstract Bourdieusian concept - into an empirically traceable analytic tool. While this table maps the five domains, it is important to note that there is some overlap between them, which speaks to the fluidity and ambiguity of symbol violence: for example, the existence of the Speaker’s Corner in Singapore demonstrates discursive domination, spatial control and even self-censorship, as those who speak out of turn or in incendiary ways in this space may be silenced or sanctioned.

Table 11.0 The Domains of Symbolic Violence

Domain	Definition	Indicative Indicators	Example (Malta/Singapore)
Discursive Domination	Control exerted through language, framing, and narrative authority	Silencing dissent via rhetoric; delegitimising opposition; patriotic scripts	Parliamentary debates framing opposition as “unpatriotic”

Domain	Definition	Indicative Indicators	Example (Malta/Singapore)
Spatial Control	Regulation of behaviour through spatial design and visibility	Segregated civic spaces; controlled assembly zones; architectural hierarchy	State-sanctioned protest zones in Singapore such as the Speaker's Corner
Performative Compliance	Embodied rituals that signal loyalty or obedience	Public parades, rituals, community events, flag displays, orchestrated participation	National Day parade participation as civic duty
Self-Censorship Mechanisms	Anticipatory silencing shaped by fear of sanction or reputational damage	Avoidance of taboo topics; coded language; withdrawal from public discourse	Citizens avoiding critique of PAP in informal conversations
Visibility/Invisibility Politics	Strategic rendering of certain groups/voices hyper-visible or invisible	Amplifying elites; marginalising minorities; selective media coverage	Limited coverage of migrant workers in mainstream media, limited spaces for them to meaningfully contribute views on policies that affect them

The Maltese modality leans heavily on socio-cultural symbolism. Festas operate simultaneously as religious events, cultural festivals, and partisan rallies. Party clubs extend the reach of formal institutions into everyday life, operating as spaces where political allegiance is performed through socialising, drinking, and volunteering. Informal brokers connect these cultural rituals to governance outcomes: planning permits, employment in public agencies, or access to contracts flow through partisan mediation. These arrangements are not secret; they are enacted publicly, transforming patronage into a visible theatre of belonging. The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia underscored the reputational stakes of dissent, showing how visibility itself can escalate into mortal danger. Yet for most citizens, the sanction is softer but no less binding: ostracism and shame, blocked careers, or vilification in partisan media. The durability of Maltese governance thus rests on the intertwining of festive rituals and clientelist enforcement, producing a socio-cultural modality where compliance is reputationally secured.

Singapore, by contrast, sustains rule through juridical and technocratic symbolism. Law is omnipresent: citizens know that minor infractions - unauthorised protests, critical blog posts, unlicensed associations - can trigger investigation or sanction. Yet the frequency of overt repression is relatively low. Instead, governance is enacted through anticipatory self-censorship, underpinned by rituals of civility. National Day parades are the apex of this choreography, where military displays and synchronised cheering fuse nationalism with democratic performance. Grassroots organisations like the People's Association extend state presence into neighbourhood life, offering access to benefits and social recognition in exchange for participation. Even seemingly apolitical campaigns, such as those promoting kindness or cleanliness or free state education for tots, embed citizens in state-curated rituals of civic virtue. These rituals transform governance into an embodied practice: silence on the MRT, smiles in "kindness zones," orderly queues at hawker stalls. Compliance is less about fear of police intervention than about the reputational risks of conspicuous deviance in a densely surveilled civic space.

The comparative payoff lies precisely in these distinct modalities. Malta's hybrid governance is festive, partisan, and clientelist, embedding citizens in a socio-cultural theatre where loyalty is displayed through attendance, gossip, and visible allegiance. Singapore's hybrid governance is juridical, technocratic, and choreographed, embedding citizens in statutory regimes and orchestrated rituals that script civility as loyalty. Yet both modalities produce similar outcomes: embodied compliance secured through reputational sanction, with symbolic power as the binding force. Embodied Civic Intimacy explains why these different idioms converge: smallness amplifies the reputational weight of symbolic rituals, transforming hybrid governance into a lived practice of anticipatory obedience.

This analysis also reveals how hybridity is reproduced daily, rather than merely codified in institutions. Scholarship on hybrid regimes often catalogues distortions - gerrymandering, patronage, clientelism - but treats them as institutional features. What Malta and Singapore demonstrate is that distortion is lived through embodied rituals. Compliance is enacted not just at the ballot box or in parliament but in the micro-practices of everyday life. Hybrid governance endures because it is embodied: reputationally enforced through rituals that make absence visible and deviance conspicuous.

The durability of these regimes also depends on the strategic fusion of formal legality with informal symbolism. In Malta, electoral rules are scrupulously maintained, but incumbency is tilted through patronage and clientelist exchange. In Singapore, elections are clean, but constituencies are engineered, and opposition candidates are constrained by defamation suits and media invisibility. Both states perform democracy procedurally while embedding informal or symbolic constraints that limit substantive contestation. This hybrid configuration is not accidental; it is precisely what allows rule to endure without constant recourse to force. Citizens are bound not by fear of imprisonment alone but by the reputational costs of visible deviance in small, dense communities.

Symbolic power and violence are therefore the glue that binds hybrid governance. It operates through rituals of loyalty that translate abstract authority into embodied practice. Embodied Civic Intimacy explains why these rituals are effective: density renders them visible; proximity ensures their circulation and affect attaches reputational weight to compliance. Symbolic power becomes embodied power, and hybrid governance endures without needing to wield force continually.

The implications extend beyond Malta and Singapore. Small states amplify the force of symbolic power because reputational economies operate at high velocity. Gossip in Malta, or anticipatory silence in Singapore, travels quickly and binds citizens more tightly than formal sanctions could.

Hybrid governance exposes both the distortions of democracy and the everyday mechanisms through which those distortions are continually reproduced. As Andrea Brighenti, James Scott, and Lisa Wedeen emphasize in their respective works, rule persists not primarily through coercion but because citizens themselves embody it. Dense proximity and constant exposure create environments in which compliance becomes habitual and anticipated.

Brighenti's framework, in particular, reveals that such compliance arises less from fear of punishment than from the reputational economies sustained by visibility. Individuals act with an acute awareness of how their gestures will be interpreted, carefully calibrating their performances to gain recognition and to avoid stigma or shame.

In this sense, Malta's festive partisanship and Singapore's choreographed civility represent distinct idioms of the same underlying mechanism: the conversion of symbolic rituals into reputationally binding performances of loyalty.

5.6 Postcolonial legacies as infrastructures of symbolic violence

5.6.1 Colonial sediments in Malta and Singapore

The colonial inheritance of Malta and Singapore is not a remote historical backdrop but a living grammar of politics. In both sites, the lineaments of domination - patronage in Malta, emergency powers in Singapore - survive as repertoires through which elites govern, and ordinary citizens misrecognise subordination as natural. Bourdieu's symbolic violence captures precisely this misrecognition: a system of domination operating not by brute force but by embedding obedience in the taken-for-granted practices of civic life. Smallness intensifies the visibility of these residues. In dense communities where every gesture circulates quickly, inherited scripts are constantly on display, policed by gossip in Malta and by silence in Singapore.

In Malta, feudal deference and baronial patronage were already entrenched by the time of the Knights of St John and later deepened under British rule. The *longue durée* of being ruled - by Knights, by empire, by colonial governors - has sedimented a mentality of obedience and dependency. Professor Arnold Cassola's remark that Maltese "mindset is still feudal - we were barons' property, sold or rented like land" illustrates how far back the imprint runs. Colonial institutions legitimised a political culture where deference to patrons was normalised, and independence in 1964 did not rupture this structure. Instead, party elites inherited the mantle of barons, converting patron-vassal logics into the modern idiom of clientelism.

Singapore's colonial residue took another form. The British left behind an arsenal of emergency powers - Internal Security Act (ISA), Sedition Act, Criminal Law Temporary Provisions - that licensed pre-emptive state action in the name of order. As PJ Thum pointed out, these laws were "introduced by the British, all still maintained by the PAP". The authoritarian underbelly of Singapore's hybrid democracy therefore cannot be understood without its colonial genealogy: a culture of governance premised on suspicion, surveillance, and executive discretion. Where Malta's inheritance was feudal loyalty, Singapore's was the bureaucratic state of emergency. Both continue to operate

as infrastructures of symbolic violence: patronage taken as natural reciprocity in Malta; silence as civic virtue in Singapore.

5.6.2 Patronage and misrecognition in Malta

Colonialism in Malta entrenched not only political domination but also its social misrecognition. Emanuel Delia observed that “our executive has inherited the ability to override institutional independence at will – rooted in colonial traditions”. What might otherwise be named authoritarian overreach is domesticated as routine executive prerogative. The fusion of patronage and politics ensures that citizens often experience state benefits not as rights but as favours granted by party intermediaries.

Interviewees described how this legacy plays out in everyday democratic life. Professor Kevin Aquilina remarked that Malta’s legal and constitutional framework remains deeply tied to Anglo-Saxon models, with the 1964 constitution itself derivative of colonial templates. But rather than stabilising democracy, this inheritance has produced excessive executive dominance. Appointments of the Attorney General, State Advocate, and police chiefs by prime ministerial discretion replicate colonial concentration of power at the centre.

Ordinary citizens internalise this arrangement through practices of loyalty and gratitude. Campaigning, as Kristy Debono highlighted, demands “time, funding, and networks - luxuries not equally available to everyone”. Such networks are rarely merit-based; they are reproduced through familial, village, and partisan ties. In this sense, the colonial legacy of patronage has become misrecognised as community care: the minister’s favour, the councillor’s intervention, the planning permit expedited through a party office. To reject this script is reputationally dangerous in Malta’s small villages, where gossip circulates quickly and absence from party events is conspicuous.

Feudal residues also surface in language. Cassola’s reference to *jus primae noctis* as symbolic of “internalised servitude”, though apocryphal, reveals how Maltese political culture still codes authority in quasi-feudal idioms. This myth operates as symbolic

violence: it sustains the perception that subordination to elites has always been natural, that power is theirs by inheritance rather than consent.

Yet this domination is never total. The Jean-Paul Sofia case, where civil society protests forced the government into a public inquiry over unsafe construction, showed that the colonial residue of obedience can fracture under pressure. Here, grassroots mobilisation punctured the long-standing patronage script, demonstrating that symbolic violence, while powerful, is not omnipotent.

5.6.3 Emergency powers and ritualised obedience in Singapore

Singapore's colonial inheritance is equally visible but differently articulated. The postcolonial state retained almost wholesale the British emergency toolkit. Thum underscored that "the Internal Security Act, the Emergency Regulations, Sedition Act - all introduced by the British - are still maintained by the PAP". The persistence of these instruments ensures that even when repression is rare, its shadow is long. Citizens anticipate the possibility of sanction and regulate themselves accordingly.

This anticipatory obedience is symbolically violent because it cloaks domination in the guise of civic virtue. Silence on the MRT appears as natural comportment, a shared civic habitus. Yet it is underwritten by the colonial inheritance of laws that legitimate pre-emptive repression. Citizens misrecognise their own restraint as politeness or harmony, when in fact it is the internalisation of the emergency state.

Vivid glimpses of this inheritance at work were obtained from ethnographic experiences in Singapore. National Day rehearsals were festive yet strangely devoid of spontaneous celebration. Every cheer felt choreographed, every flag waved in unison. This choreography is a direct descendant of colonial public order rituals, where mass gatherings were carefully staged to project loyalty. The PAP has simply repurposed the colonial theatre of order into a nationalist one, where silence and synchrony become civic obligations.

Similarly, the state's use of multicultural policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in housing reflects colonial practices of racial classification. As Leong Sze Hian explained, Malays forced to sell within their ethnic quota suffer a 20–30% loss in property value. The British racial census categories have thus been transposed into property markets, materialising colonial classifications in everyday life. Misrecognition occurs when these quotas are accepted as “multiracial harmony,” rather than as the institutionalisation of racial hierarchy.

Yet here too, domination is not seamless. Migrant workers gathering on Sundays in Little India and Bugis temporarily disrupt the script. Their conspicuous visibility, though tolerated only in leisure pockets, momentarily unsettles the colonial order. Likewise, activists such as Jolovan Wham who contest migrant exclusion embody the fissures where symbolic violence falters.

5.6.4 Smallness as an amplifier of colonial residue

What distinguishes Malta and Singapore is not only the content of their colonial residues but the intensity with which smallness amplifies them. In larger states, clientelist bargains or emergency powers may operate more diffusely, their effects dispersed across wider populations. In small, dense polities, these residues become inescapable.

In Singapore, reputational sanction circulates through dense civic networks where restraint is immediately legible. At a OnePeople.sg racial harmony seminar, critique was couched in politeness and dissent performed deferentially - a choreography of civility where silence signified belonging. Likewise, the Singapore Kindness Movement's “smile zones” in schools and the disciplined quiet of the MRT manifest how emotional comportment is publicly curated and monitored. In Malta, visibility operates through proximity within local political and social circles: journalists who depart from acceptable narratives, or citizens who resist reciprocal obligations within partisan networks, quickly become the subject of gossip and exclusion. Planning approvals and clientelist favours

are reputational currencies, and refusal to participate in community rituals or party activities is conspicuously noted.

This amplification ensures that colonial residues endure not only institutionally but bodily. Singaporeans embody deference through rehearsed civility at state-sanctioned events and the restrained postures of public life, while Maltese citizens embody loyalty through gestures of compliance within partisan and familial networks. In both settings, symbolic violence is enacted through bodies that internalise colonial scripts of hierarchy and decorum, carrying them into the present as embodied habits of civic life.

5.6.5 Cracks and ruptures

Yet symbolic violence never wholly forecloses resistance. In Malta, Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination - while intended as a silencing act - galvanised public consciousness about the costs of corruption and the weakness of institutions. Grassroots protests following Jean-Paul Sofia's death compelled the government into accountability. These ruptures reveal that even deeply sedimented colonial legacies can be contested when reputational sanction flips direction: from those who dissent to those who refuse reform.

In Singapore, the visible discomfort of migrant gatherings or the small acts of friendliness rebuffed in public space - such as the researcher's attempted smile to an elderly worker met with refusal - are moments where the choreography of civility strains. The very need for campaigns like the Singapore Kindness Movement, with its "smile zones" and orchestrated graciousness, betrays the fragility of symbolic compliance. Domination requires constant subtle reinforcement and threat because misrecognition can never be assumed to be permanent.

5.6.6 Conclusion

Malta and Singapore embody distinct colonial inheritances - patronage and feudal deference in one, emergency powers and bureaucratic suspicion in the other. Yet both

reveal how these residues persist as infrastructures of symbolic violence. Citizens misrecognise clientelism as a natural community obligation, or silence as civic virtue. Smallness intensifies these effects: in intimate polities, every act is visible, every absence reputational, every silence legible. But domination is never total. Ruptures - assassinations that spark outrage, tragedies that galvanise protest, migrant gatherings that spill into public view - remind us that colonial legacies can be reactivated but also contested. Symbolic violence is powerful, but its grip depends on constant reproduction, and smallness makes that reproduction both easier to enforce and easier to fracture.

5.7 Procedural vs. substantive democracy: measuring what matters (and what we miss)

Freedom House and V-Dem are invaluable maps of formal guarantees - elections held, courts constrained or not, media free or tethered. But the fieldwork and time-series evidence assembled in the Findings show two systematic misreads when those maps are used as territory: Malta's procedural radiance masks substantive fragility, and Singapore's procedural deficit coexists with a performance-based, affective legitimacy that ordinary citizens recognise in their daily dealings with the state. Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) can offer insight into why both misreads persist. Under conditions of smallness, density and reputational visibility, participation can be compulsory without being free, silence can be dutiful without being coerced, and state-orchestrated civility can be a lived substitute for liberal contestation. Indices –cannot always capture these fine-grained measurements and insights or score these embodied effects, which is why triangulated measurement is so essential.

Across two decades, Malta posts consistently high values on V-Dem's Civil Society Participation and Freedom of Expression indices and strong scores on Clean Elections and Judicial Constraints; Freedom House likewise awards full marks on assembly, association and expression. The Liberal Democracy Index sits comfortably in the upper mid-range. On paper, Malta is performing democracy extremely competently. Singapore, conversely, lives at the other end of the charts: low Freedom House sub-scores for assembly, association and expression; V-Dem values for expression and

association rarely rising above 0.4; legislative constraints flatlining for years. On paper, Singapore is the problem case.

But the same Findings chapter that plots those curves also shows how they mislead if read as verdicts rather than variables. In Malta, high proceduralism rides alongside eroding control of corruption (World Bank governance estimates decline steadily from 2004 to 2022) and a rise in clientelistic practices; Transparency International perceptions worsen during the 2012–2022 window, and executive corruption indicators tick upward before stabilising at a higher plateau. Those are not epistemic quibbles; they are evidence that formal protections have not prevented substantive decay in the integrity of rule. The dataset itself names the blind spot: indices can track the existence of an ombudsman or court, but not whether reputational economies neutralise them in practice.

Singapore's mirror image is equally stark. The same V-Dem panels that suppress its liberties register consistently strong control-of-corruption scores, low clientelism, improving clean-elections values and stable judicial constraints, even while legislative checks stagnate. Those quantitative seams tie directly to lived experience in the Singapore journal: corruption cases involving high office are prosecuted with unusual celerity and severity (former minister S. Iswaran's conviction and twelve-month sentence; Cabinet's public stance that "those who stray will be held to account"), and system shocks - like the multi-day East-West Line rail failure - trigger immediate, ministerial acknowledgment of responsibility, cost bearing by the operator, and timetable commitments to an investigative report. These are not liberal merits in the textbook sense, but they are recognisable public-good performances that feed a practical, affective legitimacy felt by citizens. The indices do not have a field for that feeling.

ECI tells us why. In small, dense polities, what is at stake is not only whether elections are free or speech is protected in statute; it is how proximity and visibility attach affect to behaviour and make compliance bodily. Malta's high turnout amid collapsing political interest - nearly three-quarters still plan to vote even as only 30.8% say politics is "very

important” and a third report no interest at all - reads, through ECI, as reputational democracy: the ballot is compulsory by custom and tradition, neutrality is legible and costly in village networks, and abstention is a visible breach of belonging. That is procedural vitality paired with substantive hollowness. Indices celebrate the first and cannot see the second.

In Singapore, the same ECI mechanism works inversely. Formal deliberation is tightly bounded; yet state performance saturates intimate life in ways that produce trust, not through contestation but through repeated, visible competence and responsiveness. The diary record over the research period shows the state moving at institutional speed to regulate deepfakes during election windows (the Elections Integrity of Online Advertising amendments), to pilot a jobseekers’ income support with quarterly review clauses and phased citizenship coverage, to revisit animal welfare statutes after high-profile cruelty cases, to reshape sea-based aquaculture toward sustainability under cost and environmental pressure, to expand legacy planning through the LPA campaign, and to position long-horizon decarbonisation at Singapore International Energy Week with cross-border solar import commitments. These are not procedural liberalisations; they are performance choices that citizens feel in their routines as predictability, safety and care. Affective legitimacy accumulates in that register; the indices have no cell for it.

The Findings’ methodological preface is explicit: this project was designed as a convergent parallel inquiry in which divergences between qualitative and quantitative evidence are treated as information-rich findings, not errors. Triangulation is the architecture that de-mystifies mismatch. When V-Dem and Freedom House align with observation, trust the convergence; when they don’t, the divergence is data. That epistemic stance is not a methodological flourish; it is the only honest way to measure democracy where smallness compresses formal rules into embodied repertoires.

Consider Malta through that lens. The indices correctly capture that parties contend in genuine elections and that media and association enjoy formal freedoms; they miss that participation is reputationally compelled and that procedural access has become a substitute for substantive contestation. The State of the Nation survey cited in the

Findings is an index-proof: procedural engagement is sky-high by intention; civic interest collapses; and yet citizens still plan to file through the ritual. This is a picture of what ECI predicts: proximity and visibility translating into anticipatory obedience to the turnout norm, with little expectation that voice will move policy. The trend lines on corruption control and clientelism supply a complementary, time-series warning: a regime can protect procedures and still allow the executive to tilt the substance of rule through informal networks the indices do not score. In practice, as the Findings chapter narrates across multiple sub-sections, formal scrutiny mechanisms are blunted by executive discretion, opacity in public administration, and partisan duopolies that protect each other when incentives align. Indices can flag none of that unless it erupts into a legal change or a scandal with enough international salience to be coded.

Now consider Singapore without defensiveness. The point is not to wish away the low civil-liberties ratings. It is to ask what they fail to predict. If the indices' verdict were singularly determinative, one would expect a fraying of rule credibility, diffuse corruption, or a public cynicism and resistance that spills into non-compliance. Yet the findings point to a different equilibrium: a state that moves policy quickly when social needs surface; that polices elite deviance in a way that is legible as fairness; that self-corrects administratively when systems fail; and that attempts to pre-empt reputational harms to electoral integrity in the digital arena through explicit rulemaking. The worker-protection turn for platform delivery riders, with built-in review cycles; the ministerial apology and assumption of costs after the EWL track damage; the animal welfare statute review following violent cases; and the staged LPA push for ageing citizens - each example demonstrates a governing compact in which authority performs in exchange for compliance. ECI calls that anticipatory obedience under legitimated care; liberal indices call it illiberalism. Both are true statements about different facets of the same polity.

If we recast measurement around ECI, three analytic moves follow.

First, weights must shift from "Can citizens do X?" to "What happens to citizens who do or do not do X where everyone is seen by everyone?" Malta's village-level reputational

circuits give abstention a cost that is not captured by turnout rates; Singapore's dense civility scripts make quietism, discipline and self-control signals of belonging that are not captured by participation counts. The Findings already offer proxyable seams: in Malta, declared voting intention amid declared disinterest; in Singapore, stable control-of-corruption and clean-election improvements paired with chronic legislative constraint stagnation. The former is a red flag for procedural vitality without substantive pluralism; the latter is a yellow flag for competent hegemony without institutionalised opposition. Triangulation reads those flags in light of what bodies do in public.

Second, substance must be inferred in part from performance-credibility events - moments when the regime takes costly, public-facing decisions that would be irrational if responsiveness were a mere slogan. The Iswaran conviction and sentence, amplified by the Prime Minister's statement that personal pain does not trump institutional integrity; the EWL (East West Line) disruption response; the quick legislative attention to election-period deepfakes; and the explicit willingness to expand involuntary-unemployment support after quarterly reviews are exactly those moments. They do not absolve low liberties scores; they complicate what the scores mean for lived legitimacy. A measurement regime that cannot code those events as positive contributions to trust will over-predict instability in Singaporean governance.

Third, indices need a visibility correction. Under smallness, the social cost of deviance is not constant. In Malta, that cost makes party attendance, canvassing, and village rituals reputationally compulsory; turnout then records compliance, not consent. In Singapore, that cost makes the breaking of civility scripts conspicuous; public discipline then records the costs of perceived disorder, not just state coercion. A visibility correction would not change the underlying coding rubrics, but it would instruct analysts to discount certain procedural positives in high-visibility settings (e.g., turnout; nominal public consultations), and to add a qualitative performance note where material responsiveness mitigates low formal pluralism. The Findings' comparative design - placing Malta's high-procedure/low-substance next to Singapore's low-procedure/high-performance - supplies the template.

In Malta, the problem to measure is not absence of elections or media bans; it is the saturation of democratic life by reputational economies. That saturation shows up in the survey paradox just noted; in the time-series slippage on corruption control and perceptions; and in policy arenas, like spatial planning, where the Findings record democratic deficit in impact assessment, consultation and the insulation of executive decisions from grassroots contestation. A re-coded Malta score would integrate those drifts as substantive penalties even when procedural boxes are ticked.

In Singapore, the problem to measure is not absence of performance; it is the cost of voice. The ethnographic reflections around the Elections Integrity amendments show a state preoccupied with the manipulative potential of new media during campaigns; the POFMA architecture reported in the Findings sits behind much anticipatory self-censorship chronicled elsewhere in the dataset; and the academic and civil society episodes parsed in the Findings chapter illustrate how social and career penalties police the line without overt bans. A re-coded Singapore score would bank performance-credibility events as legitimacy credits, while continuing to debit restrictions on assembly, association and expression. The net effect would still be a low liberties score - but one that better predicts stability in practice because it recognises the affective return citizens extract from a state that delivers.

The method that gets us there is already in the thesis' backbone. The Findings opened by framing a convergent parallel design in which ethnography, interviews, textual analysis and indices were analysed concurrently, not sequentially, and "mismatches between indices and lived realities" were treated as analytically productive. Section-level quantitative panels did not decorate qualitative claims; they complicated them. That is precisely what is required to prevent indices from collapsing procedure into verdict. Triangulation, in this usage, is not a defensive hedge against bias; it is a way of turning divergence into an object of exploration, explanation and enriched understanding.

Seen this way, ECI is not a rival to quantitative measurement; it is a calibration and a lens that can impart greater insight and understanding in small state contexts. Ask of

any indicator two questions: what does this variable capture about formal guarantees, and how might proximity, visibility and affect reshape its meaning in practice? Malta's turnout, Malta's lively social media and press, Malta's formal assembly freedoms - code them high, then discount them by the reputational price of neutrality in dense networks. Singapore's clean elections, control of corruption and technocratic policy churn - code them as institutional performance, then debit liberties where voice is chilled and civil society is bounded by licensing, defamation risks and ministerial correction powers. The resulting picture is less elegant than a single index; it is more faithful to how people experience rule in their everyday lives and bodies.

Two ethnographic reflections instantiate this logic. When the government moved to block Allianz's acquisition of a majority stake in Income Insurance through retrospective amendment, the Workers' Party did not oppose the bill, arguing instead about process uncertainty while accepting the public-interest rationale that cooperative social missions might be compromised in private majority control. Whatever one's normative view of retrospective law-making, the event reads in ECI terms as another performance-legitimacy moment: the state acting pre-emptively to protect a social compact around insurance provision, with opposition assent because the public-interest claim resonated. Liberal indices code this as executive overreach; citizens who worry about social risk may feel reassured, not threatened.

Similarly, the government's roll-out of the SkillsFuture Jobseeker Support scheme - temporary income for the involuntarily unemployed, phased by citizenship and subject to quarterly learning reviews - exhibits the same pattern: circumscribed by eligibility and a modest ceiling, but designed with iterative correction and expansion in view. In liberal-institutional terms, it is social policy, not democratic deepening; in lived terms, for those navigating Singapore's fast labour market, it is the state's hand showing up when needed, which is exactly the effect that fuels compliance in an ECI system.

5.7.1 Beyond Procedure: Converging Substantive Benchmarks in Malta and Singapore - Protection Felt, Accountability Seen

The idea that procedural yardsticks neglect the lived substance of democracy is illustrated by Malta's Vision 2050, Repubblika's Democratic Vision 2050, and the 2025 electoral manifestos of Singapore's People's Action Party and Workers' Party. Despite their different contexts, both countries highlight the same test of democratic credibility: protection that is tangible and accountability that is visible. Viewed together, these Maltese and Singaporean policy frameworks show how two small, densely networked polities converge on a substantive standard of democracy while following distinct paths to reach it.

In Malta, *Vision 2050* locates legitimacy in a state that can plan, deliver, and demonstrate progress - codified outcome targets (HDI top-20 by 2035; top-10 by 2050; median disposable income at 135% of EU-27; top-five in EU life satisfaction) and a hardwired implementation core (a central Programme Management Office, a national KPI dashboard, and dated 2030/2035 milestones) anchored in four interlocking pillars (sustainable growth; citizen-centred services; resilience and modern education; smart land-and-sea use) and enabling systems (adaptive, data-driven governance, funding, digital twins/AI, brand) (Government of Malta, 2025). *Democratic Vision 2050* accepts the practical horizon but insists that delivery without law does not convince: it details a rule-of-law crisis, a system of corruption, and hollowed public sphere, and then enumerates the institutional repairs that convert formal rights into everyday relief - independent and adequately resourced prosecution and policing, enforceable administrative justice and FOI, anti-SLAPP beyond EU minima, media-ownership transparency and PBS independence, and parliamentary oversight with teeth, framed within constitutional renewal that domestically embeds EU Article 2 values (Repubblika, 2025). The Maltese pair thus splits the labour of credibility: a governmental storyboard that specifies what will improve and how it will be tracked, and a civil-society programme that specifies what must constrain power, so improvement is believed.

Singapore's political manifestos trace the same substantive endpoint with a different grammar. The PAP organises legitimacy as throughput and care: "refresh our social compact," carry Forward Singapore engagements into policy, and keep costs manageable while protecting the life-cycle anchors - the availability of jobs and homes, affordable healthcare, financial security for seniors, and a sustainability transition cast as a shared national project. The promise is that performance earns trust, and the register is intentionally concrete - help with cost-of-living pressures, more accessible public-housing options, investment in care infrastructure, and city-wide liveability (PAP, 2025). The Workers' Party, by contrast, makes contestability the test. It begins by reasserting Singapore's Westminster foundations and the constitutional role of a loyal opposition, then designs mechanisms citizens can audit in daylight: a Standing Parliamentary Committee on the Cost of Living that holds public hearings; redundancy insurance as a universal floor against job shocks (with defined payout and contribution rules); a less regressive fiscal mix than a higher GST via a specified basket of alternatives; and a transparent review of the HDB Ethnic Integration Policy to prevent minorities bearing hidden resale penalties (WP, 2025). One manifesto speaks the grammar of "we will do"; the other, the grammar of "let us see it done." Both, however, define substance as experienced protection and visible accountability - precisely the phenomena standard indices struggle to register.

The contrasts matter analytically. Malta's debate is a tension between a programme of delivery that presumes constraint (*Vision 2050*) and a programme of constraint without which delivery cannot convince (Repubblika). Singapore's debate is a tension between a throughput claim (PAP) and a visibility claim (WP). Malta's governmental text emphasises a whole-of-government implementation core (PMO, dashboards, enablers) to standardise action across ministries; its civil-society counterpart emphasises horizontal checks that operate outside the delivery core (prosecution/police independence, administrative courts, public-interest media) (Government of Malta, 2025; Repubblika, 2025). In Singapore, the PAP's claim is capability-centred (policy throughput and care infrastructure), while the WP's claim is procedure-as-experience (open committee hearings; scrutiny you can watch; income-shock insurance you can claim; a tax mix you can understand) (PAP, 2025; WP, 2025). Yet when read through

small-state conditions - density, proximity, and limited anonymity - the destination is identical: in both countries, citizens read democracy off hourly encounters with protection (can I ride out price spikes, illness, job loss, housing disadvantage?) and publicly witnessed constraint (can I see power examined - at a hearing, in a newsroom, in court - without penalty for those who speak?).

This explains why embodied civic intimacy is necessary to interpret the divergence between scores and experience. In Malta, where reputations travel quickly through tight partisan and professional networks, *Vision 2050*'s KPI-laden programme lowers uncertainty only if *Democratic Vision 2050*'s protections lower the reputational cost of speaking, dissenting, or abstaining from partisan theatres. In Singapore, where silence, restraint and self-discipline are everyday norms, the PAP's throughput makes care palpable, while the WP's visibility proposals make accountability public - together approximating the same substantive test that Maltese texts articulate in a European rule-of-law key. Across both cases, then, the manifestos and visions function as country-specific specifications of substance: they tell us that in small, dense polities, legitimacy is not awarded for formal compliance but for protection that can be felt and scrutiny that can be seen.

5.8 Triangulation as a generative epistemological approach

The analytical claims of this chapter do not emerge from an act of discovery that was linear, unambiguous, or neatly cumulative. They were forged through a practice of triangulation that surpassed a mere validity check and instead operated as the epistemological core of the project. To treat triangulation as a tick-box exercise would have meant approaching the quantitative indices, the ethnographic record, and the discursive testimonies as three separate routes toward the same "truth," each serving to corroborate or disconfirm the others. Such a conception misrecognises what actually occurred. The interpretive stance adopted here treated convergence as meaningful confirmation, but also divergence and even falsification as equally productive sites of knowledge. Put differently, triangulation here was not a technique for closure but a

method for opening; its purpose was not to eliminate friction but to harness it into insight.

The methodological blueprint for this stance was embedded in the research design from the outset. Chapter 3 set out the Triangulated Validation Loop and the Triangulated Integration Matrix as deliberate architectures through which qualitative and quantitative strands were confronted with one another, sometimes in ways that reinforced and at other times in ways that unsettled. Convergence between strands was treated as reinforcing validity, but mismatches were never coded as failure; rather, they were treated as data in their own right. Malta's high democracy scores paired with reputational coercion at village level, or Singapore's low liberties ratings paired with the diary's repeated observations of citizens expressing trust in state responsiveness, exemplify how divergence became generative rather than anomalous.

This epistemological stance is evident in how claims were built in the preceding sections. When Maltese respondents described the impossibility of political neutrality because "everyone knows everyone," this could have been dismissed as anecdotal colour against the backdrop of Freedom House's consistently high ratings. Instead, the mismatch was recorded as an analytic finding: procedural pluralism did not prevent substantive reputational coercion, and the index could not capture that cost. Similarly, when Singaporean interviewees and the field journal converged on depictions of silence in MRT carriages so thick it felt orchestrated, the resonance with low civil liberties scores in V-Dem strengthened the interpretation that anticipatory obedience was not incidental but systemic. In both cases, the triangulated process created a dialectical relationship between strands: neither was privileged as definitive, and both were treated as lenses refracting the same civic phenomenon.

The implications of this approach are best seen through the micro-logics of evidence integration. Consider how the Malta case confronted the paradox between robust electoral procedures and widespread perceptions of clientelism. Voter turnout remained among the highest in Europe, and indices recorded consistently strong performance on electoral integrity. Yet elite interviewees recounted how campaigning

was viable only for those with access to time, funds, and pre-existing networks, while ethnographic immersion at *festas* revealed reputational sanctioning of those who failed to display partisan allegiance. The Integration Matrix aligned these strands against one another and demanded interpretation of their tension. To regard turnout as proof of procedural vitality without considering reputational cost would have been to misread coercion as enthusiasm. Triangulation exposed that gap.

The Singapore case yielded its own epistemological challenges. The diary repeatedly noted how silence pervaded everyday spaces, how eye contact was carefully avoided in crowded places, and how “every cheer felt choreographed” at National Day rehearsals. These observations could have been dismissed as the impressionistic perceptions of an outsider. Yet when mapped against Freedom House sub-scores of 1/4 for assembly and expression, and V-Dem’s stagnation in legislative constraints, they gained additional evidentiary weight. What clinched their analytic credibility was the convergence with elite testimonies such as PJ Thum’s observation that the law is wielded to dictate truth claims and activists’ accounts of repression through anticipatory obedience. The triangulated confrontation between fieldnotes, interview narratives, and index values yielded a more textured claim: silence in Singapore is not only an incidental cultural reserve stemming from Confucianism or Asian values, but a form of embodied civic intimacy reproduced through density and law.

Triangulation also required recognising instances where quantitative indices painted a more favourable picture than qualitative evidence warranted. The conviction of former transport minister S. Iswaran - prosecuted and sentenced within a year of his offences - was duly captured in V-Dem’s consistently high scores for control of corruption. Yet ethnographic accounts complicate this image of integrity. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, Singapore’s hybrid governance produces a paradoxical moral economy in which corruption is both publicly condemned and quietly embedded within elite networks. Interviewees such as Terry Xu and Leong Sze Hian described forms of elite capture that escape formal measurement: the revolving door between state-linked corporations and political appointments, opaque procurement in government-linked companies, and selective enforcement of disciplinary norms that shield the political core. These

practices exemplify *performative incorruptibility* - a system that enacts visible punishment at the periphery while preserving informal privilege at the centre.

Field observations reinforce this tension. The Singapore diary records immaculate public order, pervasive surveillance, and staged civic virtue - manifest in “smile zones” at schools and the militarised precision of National Day rehearsals. Together they form a moral spectacle of integrity, where discipline substitutes for transparency. Beneath the technocratic polish, however, lie subtle corruptions of proximity: patronage in housing allocation, preferential access to state contracts, and the insulation of senior officials through familial and business ties. These everyday entanglements reveal that Singapore’s control of corruption operates less through pluralistic accountability than through hierarchical containment.

Empirically, the Iswaran case illustrates how anti-corruption prosecutions can consolidate rather than undermine the ruling party’s moral authority. Such cases dramatise state vigilance while diverting attention from structural conflicts of interest. V-Dem registers integrity because conviction followed swiftly; ethnographic evidence, by contrast, exposes an affective climate of fear and silence that obscures deeper forms of collusion. In this light, Singapore’s “clean” governance functions as a managed reputational asset sustained through ECI: proximity, visibility, and shame uphold the façade of incorruptibility even as they suppress acknowledgment of its concealed underside.

The journal’s entry on the case underscored the speed and severity with which justice was delivered, contrasting sharply with the perception of impunity in Malta. Here, triangulation revealed convergence: the lived experience of citizens, the recorded actions of the state, and the quantitative indicators aligned, strengthening confidence in the claim that Singapore’s hybrid governance sustains legitimacy partly through procedural integrity in anti-corruption enforcement.

Yet not all divergences were so easily reconciled, and it is precisely in those moments that triangulation as an epistemological stance comes into clearest view. The 2019

introduction of Singapore's legislation on online falsehoods (POFMA) was described by interlocutors as a chilling mechanism that instilled anticipatory self-censorship. Fieldnotes corroborated this sense, observing how even casual conversation in cafés seemed restrained, with long pauses before responses. The indices, however, did not register any dramatic change: Singapore's already low civil liberties scores remained flat. This divergence did not invalidate either strand. Instead, it generated the analytic claim that indices are blunt instruments unable to register incremental intensification of symbolic control, whereas ethnography can expose its embodied effects. Divergence became evidence of the blind spot of measurement.

The Maltese mirror case was the institutional stalemate following the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia. While Freedom House and V-Dem maintained high scores for media freedom and civil society participation in Malta, the ethnographic record described widespread fear, muted dissent, and reputational ostracism for critics. Elite interviewees emphasised that despite formal protections, the substantive environment for journalism had deteriorated to the point where silence was common, with the examples given such as non-compliant journalists being locked in rooms or not invited to press releases or formal events. The divergence between high scores and muted voices was not treated as error but as revelation: indices recorded procedures, but lived practice demonstrated substantive contraction.

In this way, triangulation resisted the epistemological temptation to rank methods. The ethnographic diary was not privileged over indices; the quantitative data were not treated as hard truths against anecdotal noise. Instead, each strand was assigned the role of interrogator. Indices interrogated lived experience by exposing where perception risked overstating fragility; lived practice interrogated indices by showing where formal procedures masked substantive hollowing. This reciprocal interrogation is what made triangulation more than corroboration; it made it a stance of inquiry.

Triangulation in this project cannot be separated from the researcher's dual positionality: insider in Malta, outsider in Singapore. These vantage points did not merely colour the data; they produced distinct sightlines into how civic intimacy

functioned. Far from being an obstacle, this contrast became one of the engines of triangulation. By comparing what was visible in Malta but obscure in Singapore, and vice versa, the project transformed positional asymmetry into comparative advantage.

In Malta, cultural fluency provided access to networks that would have been impenetrable to an external researcher. Shared language, family ties, and long-term immersion meant that reputational sanctioning was not inferred but observed at intimate range. At festas, the absence of a family from a procession was immediately remarked upon, interpreted, and circulated through gossip. Interviews with party insiders revealed how such reputational markers were strategically monitored and mobilised. The diary of these encounters, though not exotic to a Maltese insider, was revelatory when placed against the indices. Freedom House's "free" rating seemed to suggest procedural strength, yet the insider's observations of reputational gossip exposed how freedom was undercut by social costs and kinship ties that were invisible to external coders.

Singapore required a different orientation. Here, outsider status meant the researcher encountered surfaces rather than depths: silence in libraries, choreographed politeness in public spaces, and the disorienting feeling that every action was being subtly watched. Locals rarely volunteered political opinions without careful hesitation, and even when trust was secured, conversations were guarded. Outsider estrangement sharpened sensitivity to these silences. Where a Singaporean might normalise the quiet in an MRT carriage, the outsider heard it as "loud silence". The absence of casual chatter, the refusal to return a smile, or the calculated avoidance of eye contact became ethnographic data. Outsider-ness, then, made visible the anticipatory obedience that indexes scored as low liberties but which citizens embodied as silence.

Triangulation thus functioned through contrastive reflexivity. In Malta, overfamiliarity risked normalising clientelism as "just how things work." In Singapore, distance risked exaggerating silence as exceptional. The solution was not to eliminate positionality but to triangulate it: insider impressions were cross-checked against textual and interview evidence; outsider estrangement was counterbalanced by indices and secondary

sources. Reflexive journaling ensured that affective responses - frustration at silence in Singapore, banality at clientelism in Malta - were recorded not as bias to be excised but as data to be interpreted.

The methodological chapter already emphasised how reflexivity was embedded at every stage, but in practice it became a form of triangulation itself. For example, the grief of separation from family during Singapore fieldwork produced heightened empathy with migrant workers who video-called their children in public spaces. This emotional resonance was logged as data, then triangulated with interviews describing migrant isolation and with policy analysis showing restrictive visa regimes. The convergence of affect, testimony, and structural policy produced a credible claim: Singapore's density makes migrant absence hyper-visible, yet their belonging is confined to labour and bounded enclaves, such as Little India where food and social networks can be encountered. Emotion here was not distortion but triangulated evidence.

In Malta, reflexive awareness took a different form. Long familiarity with partisan rituals risked rendering them invisible. The challenge was to treat the overbearing presence of party clubs, gossip networks, and reputational sanction not as background noise but as empirical material. This was achieved by deliberately juxtaposing insider observations with the language of indices. Where V-Dem registered strong participatory democracy, the researcher's reflexive notes recorded how neutrality was reputationally costly in village settings. The tension between score and lived practice was not resolved; it was triangulated into the claim that procedural vibrancy masked substantive constraint.

These positional asymmetries shaped not only what was seen but also what could not be seen.

In Singapore, the reluctance of ordinary citizens to grant interviews meant that elite testimonies dominated the corpus. Rather than treat this as a flaw, the methodology explicitly triangulated elite voices with textual sources and ethnography. Silence was itself interpreted as a finding: the absence of grassroots testimony was symptomatic of

anticipatory obedience. In Malta, the opposite challenge prevailed: access was abundant, but elites dominated the soundscape. Triangulation required actively seeking counter-voices - journalists, activists, women politicians - to prevent elite capture of the narrative. Here again, absence became data: the overrepresentation of elites was treated as diagnostic of how smallness concentrates influence.

This epistemological stance also required confronting complicity. In Singapore, the researcher's Western passport and academic affiliation conferred protection unavailable to locals. The ability to speak openly, publish without fear of reprisal, and withdraw from the field at will produce an asymmetry that could not be ignored. Reflexive notes logged the discomfort of privilege, then triangulated it with interview testimony describing the risks citizens faced for much smaller acts of dissent. The very contrast between the researcher's safety and interlocutors' vulnerability was treated as evidence of how reputational sanction and anticipatory obedience structure civic life.

In Malta, complicity took subtler forms. Insider status brought not only access but also obligations: friendships and family ties carried the risk of reproducing partisan assumptions. Triangulation here meant deliberately confronting moments where insider common sense clashed with external indicators. For instance, local interlocutors might insist that Malta's elections are fully free, while the researcher's reflexive notes recalled how abstention was reputationally penalised. Rather than adjudicate between them, triangulation treated the dissonance as evidence of hybridity: elections can be both formally free and substantively constrained.

By foregrounding positionality, triangulation in this thesis demonstrates that knowledge is always situated, and in small, dense states, it is situated bodily. To see reputational sanction in Malta required being inside networks where gossip circulates. To feel anticipatory obedience in Singapore required being outside enough to hear silence as strange. These positional asymmetries did not weaken the claims; they sharpened them by producing sightlines into dynamics that indices and interviews alone could not capture.

If triangulation was an epistemological stance, its operationalisation occurred most visibly in the confrontation of three evidentiary registers: observed practice, narrative justification, and index measurement. Each of these alone risked partialities, but brought together, and especially when they pulled apart, they revealed the dynamics of embodied civic intimacy more sharply than any could in isolation.

5.8.1 Observed practice as embodied record

The first register was ethnographic immersion and reflexive journaling. In Malta, practice was captured through the embodied repertoires of festas, party clubs, and village gossip, where participation was reputationally policed. In Singapore, it appeared as silence in MRT carriages, calculated politeness in cafés, and synchronised flag-waving at National Day rehearsals. These practices, observed in situ, provided the visceral evidence of how density made absence conspicuous and compliance bodily.

Yet on their own, practices risked being overinterpreted. Silence in Singapore might be read as cultural shyness rather than anticipatory obedience; high turnout in Malta might be read as enthusiasm rather than reputational coercion. Triangulation prevented such slippages by requiring each observation to be confronted with discursive justification and index measures.

5.8.2 Narrative justification as rationalisation

The second register was narrative testimony: elite interviews, textual sources, and public discourses that sought to rationalise practices. Maltese politicians openly described how “5–6 people can get away with corruption that puts €500,000 in their pocket, others will feel entitled”. Journalists noted how reputational sanctions could derail careers, while activists recalled the muted atmosphere after Daphne Caruana Galizia’s assassination. In Singapore, opposition MPs narrated how laws like POFMA curtailed dissent; activists described “kill the chicken to scare the monkeys” repression; migrant advocates detailed the bureaucratic constraints that rendered labourers voiceless.

These justifications contextualised observed practices. MRT silence was not only noted but explained by interlocutors as a form of anticipatory self-censorship. *Festa* attendance was not only seen but narrated as a reputational obligation. Yet these narratives could also overstate fragility or reproduce elite biases. Without the counterweight of indices, they risked becoming free-floating critique.

5.8.3 Index measurement as procedural map

The third register was quantitative indices - Freedom House, V-Dem, Transparency International - which supplied the procedural map against which lived practices and narratives could be read. Malta's scores of 4/4 for assembly and expression, or Singapore's stagnation below 0.4 in V-Dem expression scores, offered an externalised, comparative baseline. Yet, as the methodology chapter argued, indices are blunt instruments: they capture formal procedures but not reputational economies. Alone, they risked fetishising procedure and missing substance.

5.8.4 Friction as method

The epistemological breakthrough did not emerge from the convergence of the three strands, but from their collision. Triangulation approached the resulting mismatches not as anomalies, but as meaningful signals.

In Singapore, this tension is visible in the case of Sparkle Tots, a childcare service operated by the PAP Community Foundation. The program adopts an affordable model aimed at improving the quality of preschool education while simultaneously instilling the People's Action Party's vision of Singaporean civic values in young children. A parallel example can be found in the People's Associations, whose official mission is to "build and bridge communities." Yet, beneath this rhetoric of inclusivity, they function as a subtle yet potent mechanism of political patronage, engaging citizens in what are essentially state directed "grassroots" movements.

In Malta, the disjunction between participatory ideals and material realities appears differently. The government presents its consultation processes as opportunities for citizen deliberation and participation in policymaking. In practice, however, property developers continue to drive extensive and largely uncontrolled urban expansion - compromising the overall quality of life for the Maltese population. This contradiction became particularly evident after the Marsaskala yacht-marina project was abandoned in 2024 following strong public opposition. Yet, in recent weeks the same locality faced a new proposal for a ferry terminal - poorly detailed and widely viewed as another instance of commercial interests steering public decisions.

Thus, the critical insight lies not in harmony but in collision: these examples reveal how proclaimed ideals of community, participation, and education often conceal deeper structures of control, patronage, and economic interest.

For example, in Malta, the State of the Nation survey reported that only 30.8% of citizens considered politics “very important,” yet nearly three-quarters still intended to vote. Observed practice of festa attendance confirmed reputational compulsion, and narratives from politicians and activists rationalised this as social expectation. Indices, however, read turnout as vitality. The friction revealed the truth: turnout was reputationally compelled compliance, not substantive enthusiasm. Divergence thus became the finding.

In Singapore, the Iswaran corruption case crystallised a different triangulation. Indices registered Singapore’s strong control-of-corruption scores; observed practice in the diary recorded the public impact of the conviction; elite narratives underscored the state’s zero-tolerance stance. Here convergence strengthened validity. But in the same polity, POFMA’s chilling effect on speech was observed in MRT silences and narrated by activists, while indices showed little movement. Divergence here exposed the blind spot: embodied compliance was intensifying even as scores stayed static.

5.8.5 Falsification as discovery

The stance also incorporated falsification as an epistemic resource. When ethnography suggested a claim that indices directly contradicted, the tension was logged rather than suppressed. A striking instance occurred in Malta's media landscape. The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia and subsequent climate of fear suggested substantive contraction of press freedom. Yet indices awarded Malta consistently high scores. Rather than discard either, triangulation falsified the assumption that high scores equated to vibrant journalism. The contradiction itself was the finding: indices missed reputational intimidation that silenced dissent.

In Singapore, falsification surfaced in the mismatch between observed racial hierarchies and the state's proclaimed multiracialism. The Ethnic Integration Policy was narrated as ensuring harmony, yet interviewees recounted financial penalties borne by Malays and Indians. Indices recorded moderate egalitarian scores. The falsification was instructive: what was coded as integration was experienced as stratification.

By making space for falsification, the project refused the lure of coherence. Instead of forcing alignment, it embraced misalignment as diagnostic. This refusal is precisely what distinguishes triangulation here from box-ticking exercises. In conventional designs, divergence would be explained away to preserve validity; here, divergence was treated as revelation.

5.8.6 Triangulation as friction engine

The result was a process in which triangulation did not smooth evidence into consensus but staged productive friction. Practices revealed embodiment, narratives provided justification, and indices mapped procedures. Where they converged, confidence was strengthened. Where they diverged, insight was generated. Where they falsified one another, blind spots were exposed.

This stance aligns with the methodological claim that democracy in small, hybrid states can be enriched by being studied through multiple lenses. Reputational sanction in Malta is invisible to indices; anticipatory obedience in Singapore is illegible without ethnography. Yet indices provide necessary comparability, preventing ethnography from collapsing into anecdotal exceptionalism. Only through triangulated friction can embodied civic intimacy be surfaced as a mechanism.

What, then, does it mean to take triangulation as an epistemological stance rather than a procedural validity check? Above all, it means recognising that the work of this chapter was not to prove democracy in Malta and Singapore as more or less real than indices suggest, but to show how the very misfits between strands became the findings, revealing the deep complexity and hybridity of democracy in these two cases. Triangulation was essential in transforming incoherence into insight.

5.8.7 Beyond indices, beyond anecdotes

The methodological payoff lies in modelling a way of studying small-state democracy that resists two temptations. The first is fetishising indices as final arbiters. Freedom House and V-Dem provide indispensable longitudinal data, but they cannot as effectively capture reputational sanction, anticipatory silence or self-censorship, or embodied compliance. To treat them as verdicts is to confuse maps with territories. The second temptation is privileging anecdotes. Ethnographic fieldnotes and elite testimonies give texture, but without the counterweight of indices they risk exaggerating fragility, over-privileging anomaly, or normalising banality. Triangulation insists on neither dismissal nor deference. Instead, it treats the clash as data.

The Maltese case demonstrates this necessity vividly. Indices consistently coded Malta as free, yet ethnographic observation of reputational coercion and narratives of elite capture undermined that verdict. To rely on indices alone would have produced a celebratory but misleading account of vibrant democracy. To rely only on anecdote would have yielded an impressionistic chronicle of corruption and gossip. Only by staging their tension could the analytic claim be made: Malta's democracy is

procedurally robust but substantively hollowed, sustained by reputational coercion rather than pluralist enthusiasm.

Singapore provides the counterpoint. Indices coded it as deficient in liberties, a judgment corroborated by narratives of repression and ethnographic silence. But convergence alone would have missed the affective legitimacy citizens experience when the state prosecutes elite corruption swiftly, restores services after infrastructure failures, or expands welfare provision incrementally. The diary's record of Iswaran's conviction, the immediate assumption of costs after the East–West Line disruption, and the rapid legislative attention to deepfakes during election windows show how performance itself becomes a democratic currency. Triangulation allowed these events to be read not as contradictions but as evidence of how substantive legitimacy can coexist with procedural restriction.

5.8.8 Silence, neutrality, and symbolic participation

The stance also surfaces dynamics that are invisible in conventional comparative politics: silence, neutrality costs, and symbolic participation. These do not appear in indices because they are not codifiable in institutional terms. Yet in Malta, neutrality at *festas* was reputationally perilous; in Singapore, silence in MRT carriages was reputationally expected. These embodied repertoires are not marginal quirks; they are the mechanism of compliance. Triangulation enabled them to be seen because it demanded confrontation between practices, narratives, and scores. Where scores missed them, divergence was logged as finding; where narratives overstated them, indices corrected the exaggeration.

5.8.9 Positionality as analytic leverage

The integration of positionality into triangulation further ensured that claims were not presented as view-from-nowhere abstractions. Insider familiarity in Malta made reputational sanction legible; outsider estrangement in Singapore made silence strange. Reflexive journaling converted emotion - banality in Malta, grief and estrangement in

Singapore - into analytic leverage. These affective registers, triangulated with testimony and indices, revealed that democracy is not only institutional or discursive but bodily. To have treated positionality as bias would have stripped the project of its sharpest sightlines. By embedding positionality into triangulation, the study demonstrated that knowledge is always situated, and in small states, always embodied.

5.8.10 Triangulation as method-in-the-analysis

What distinguishes this project is that triangulation did not remain in the methodological preface but was carried into the analysis itself. The Integration Matrix, which systematically mapped convergence, divergence, and falsification across practices, narratives, and indices, was not simply a decorative device. It became critical to interpretation. This is why Section 5.8 sits at the close of the chapter: not as appendix but as methodological payoff. The chapter has shown that studying small-state democracy requires neither surrender to indices nor abandonment to anecdote. It requires staging the friction between them.

This payoff is especially salient in contexts like Malta and Singapore, where smallness amplifies visibility. In such polities, neutrality is not neutral, silence is not empty, and participation is not always voluntary. Symbolic power, and indeed, symbolic violence, underpins compliance and conformity. Indices cannot score these subtleties; anecdotes cannot generalise them. Triangulation turns these tensions into data, showing that democracy is embodied, reputational, and intimate.

5.8.11 Conclusion: friction as finding

Triangulation here was not a tool for confirming what was already suspected, but a practice of discovery in its own right. Convergence strengthened validity, divergence revealed blind spots, and falsification exposed misrecognition. Positionality was triangulated into evidence rather than bracketed as bias. Emotion was recorded as data rather than dismissed as distortion. Indices were treated as interlocutors rather than

verdicts. In all this, triangulation ceased to be a box-ticking exercise and became an epistemological stance.

The result is a model of analysis that can travel beyond Malta and Singapore. In any small, dense polity where civic life is compressed, triangulation as a stance allows scholars to read silence, neutrality, and symbolic participation as democratic repertoires rather than anomalies. It offers a way of studying democracy that takes friction seriously, treating misfits between indices and lived reality not as an error but as a signal. That is the methodological lesson this chapter leaves behind: democracy in small states is not best seen where scores and practices align, but where they pull apart. Triangulation makes those pulls visible, and in doing so, turns mismatch into the very engine of finding.

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 Reframing the Thesis

This thesis began with a question that appeared simple but proved conceptually demanding: In the midst of current global trends, how is democracy embodied and lived, embodied and experienced in everyday life? To facilitate the research process, this question was further refined and focused to concentrate on three specific analytical strands:

- 1). The influence of elitism: What role do institutional constraints, elite power, and informal networks play in shaping political decision-making?
- 2). The management of dissent and shaping of consensus by the state: How do state institutions and political actors reinforce authority, negotiate dissent, and shape national identity and belonging?
- 3). Navigating civil society: Civic participation and resistance: “How do grassroots movements, civil society organisations and civilians navigate legal constraints and state control to influence civic participation and democratic deliberation in their everyday lives?

Malta and Singapore differ sharply in population size - Malta with just over half a million citizens, Singapore with nearly six million - both are treated here as small states. This is because the concept of “smallness” extends beyond demographic thresholds (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). Malta represents the archetypal microstate, its numerical smallness indisputable. Singapore, by contrast, stretches the category in terms of population, yet its territorial compactness, extreme density, resource scarcity, and geopolitical vulnerability place it squarely within the small-state condition. In both contexts, smallness manifests sociologically: compressed civic spaces, scarce anonymity, hyper-visibility, and politics deeply entwined with everyday life. By adopting a pragmatic, multi-dimensional definition of smallness, this study situates Malta and

Singapore within the same analytical frame, showing how both exemplify the intimate, reputational dynamics that distinguish small-state democracies.

Rather than assessing these polities against external benchmarks of liberal institutions or rights guarantees, the study traced the everyday practices through which democracy is embodied, enacted, and constrained in environments marked by density and visibility.

But intimacy does not float free of material life. In both sites, the choreography of presence and silence rests on determinate relations of labour, capital, and colonial inheritance - conditions that shape who can risk dissent, who must perform loyalty, and how democracy is made to appear as common sense, even when it is saturated with symbolic power imbalances.

The above reframing has yielded an argument that moves democratic theory away from procedural checklists and toward an appreciation of democracy as lived experience. In Malta and Singapore, democracy is not reducible to laws or indices but is continuously negotiated in intimate networks where presence and absence, loyalty and dissent, civility and silence acquire political weight. Despite their divergent rankings in indices such as Freedom House - Malta consistently rated “free,” Singapore “partly free” - both societies display convergent democratic textures. Citizens are expected to participate visibly and appropriately, dissent and divergence is conspicuously punished, and neutrality carries reputational penalties. Politics permeates daily life: Maltese community events where absence is legible as disloyalty, Singaporean rituals of civility that smooth conflict while constraining contestation, workplaces and housing estates where allegiances are silently tracked. These are not incidental cultural practices but the very infrastructure of democracy in compressed civic spaces.

At the centre of this analysis stands the concept of *Embodied Civic Intimacy* (ECI), developed here as a bounded sociological lens capable of capturing lived dynamics that are not always fully represented in global democracy indices. ECI explains how proximity, visibility, and affect interact in small polities to produce democratic

subjectivity. It illuminates why Maltese citizens vote at rates exceeding ninety percent, not solely from enthusiasm but because abstention inflicts reputational harm. It clarifies why Singaporeans maintain outward conformity while harbouring private reservations: bodily practices of anticipatory obedience - politeness on the MRT, ritualised civility in housing estates, careful narrative management - uphold unity in a diverse polity. Through ECI, belonging becomes legible, dissent becomes conspicuous, and neutrality itself becomes a political act.

The reframing achieved by ECI contributes to the field of political sociology in several ways. First, it highlights the inadequacy of indices that privilege formal procedure and assume anonymity. In compressed settings, anonymity is scarce, and every gesture reverberates in intimate networks. To understand democracy here requires more than measuring elections or rights; it demands attention to how silence, absence, and bodily comportment circulate as signals of loyalty or betrayal. This recognition unsettles mainstream indicators. Malta's high ratings obscure the coercive force of clientelism, reputational sanction, and media intimidation - culminating in the assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. Singapore's middling scores highlight curtailed liberties but fail to register the substantive legitimacy many citizens attach to welfare provision, housing, and ritualised social order. Indices, by privileging procedural dimensions, miss the reputational and affective infrastructures that sustain or constrain democracy in small states.

Second, it reveals a paradox of compressed democracies: high levels of visible participation coexist with muted dissent. In Malta, kinship ties and partisan rituals generate extraordinary electoral mobilisation while silencing critique. In Singapore, civic life is choreographed through civility and consensus, while laws such as POFMA and pervasive informal pressures displace dissent into silence. Institutional differences thus converge in lived experience: participation without contestation, belonging without full liberty. Existing frameworks - whether hybridity theory or Bourdieu's symbolic violence - cannot fully capture this. Hybridity describes institutional mixes ("feckless pluralism," "dominant-power politics") but not how these arrangements are lived in embodied practice. Bourdieu's scholarship illuminates how domination is misrecognised as

legitimate but offers less traction on how visibility in small states magnifies symbolic power. ECI bridges these literatures, showing how proximity and affect intensify reputational sanction, sustaining hybridity through embodied compliance with is subtly coercive rather than overtly punitive.

Third, ECI provides a portable analytic that connects small-state dynamics to broader global transformations and trends (which represented a central consideration of the overarching research question. The mechanisms it identifies - proximity, visibility, affect - are not confined to island societies can also be applied to other small or compressed populations. Digital publics increasingly replicate these conditions: constant visibility, reputational economies, affective circulation. On social media, as in Malta or Singapore, silence is interpreted as dissent, absence from ritualised posting is read as disloyalty, and reputational sanction enforces conformity. Small states thus serve as laboratories for dynamics that are rapidly globalising under surveillance capitalism and algorithmic governance.

Importantly, ECI is not merely descriptive but critical. It by offering insight into embodied, everyday conditions of democracy as it is lived. In Malta, the normalisation of clientelism, reputational sanctioning, and partisan capture is often dismissed as cultural inevitability, while in Singapore the orchestration of civility is celebrated as pragmatic stability. ECI strips away these justifications by revealing them as mechanisms of compliance rooted in proximity, density, and visibility. It denies elites the comfort of calling coercion a “quirk” of island life or an “Asian value,” and it denies citizens the illusion that survival strategies amount to genuine agency. In doing so, it reframes democratic reform not as a matter of procedural tinkering but as a confrontation with deeply embedded reputational economies and affective rituals that sustain compliance under the guise of participation. Otherwise, civic intimacy remains a relay for class power: reputational sanction and anticipatory obedience reproduce elite advantage in everyday life, naturalising domination not only in law but in habitus, thereby exemplifying symbolic violence.

The conceptual innovation of ECI also derives from its genealogy. It is indebted to a long line of thinkers for whom scale has always mattered. Plato worried about the unruliness of large democracies; Aristotle (1998) favoured smaller polities where virtue could be cultivated; Montesquieu (1989) argued that republics require small territories; Tocqueville (1835) admired America's vibrancy but warned against soft despotism. Dahl and Tufte (1973) later systematised these anxieties, showing that smallness simultaneously fosters both participation and elite dominance. From this classical background, ECI inherits the insight that scale is not peripheral but constitutive of democracy.

Small-state sociology supplies a second stratum. Ethnographies by Boissevain (1984), Baldacchino (2002), Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) documented how politics in micro-polities is personalised, clientelist, and reputationally saturated. Their accounts of scarce anonymity and constant observation resonate directly with the dynamics theorised here.

From Pierre Bourdieu (1989), ECI leans into the conceptual architecture of symbolic violence: the idea that domination is sustained through misrecognition and embodied habitus. Yet in small states, symbolic violence is magnified by visibility; neutrality itself becomes conspicuous. Abstaining from a Maltese festa or breaking Singaporean civility scripts is not merely cultural non-participation but reputational defiance.

From democratic theory's turn to the body, especially Amanda Machin's (2015, 2022) work on embodied democracy, comes the legitimisation of treating bodily comportment, ritual, and silence as central data. ECI narrows this insight: in small states, embodiment is not just universal but reputationally charged.

From the affective turn - Sara Ahmed (2004) on affective economies, Lauren Berlant (2008) on intimate publics, Zizi Papacharissi (2015) on networked affective publics - ECI learns how pride, shame, and fear circulate to structure belonging and dissent. In Malta, partisan rituals bind citizens through pride and shame; in Singapore, civility campaigns cultivate pride in harmony while instilling fear of deviance.

From Foucault's (1997) analysis of surveillance, Brighenti's regimes of visibility, Scott's (1990) hidden transcripts, and Wedeen's (1999) ambiguous performances, ECI draws the insight that compliance is sustained through visibility and performance. Yet it extends these frameworks by showing that in compressed societies visibility is not episodic but constant, rendering neutrality structurally impossible.

Finally, from hybridity theory (Carothers, Levitsky and Way, Schedler), ECI borrows the recognition that regimes are not transitional but stable blends of authoritarian and democratic features. Its contribution is to show that hybridity is not only institutional but embodied: sustained through silence, ritual, and reputational conformity.

By synthesising these strands, ECI advances a distinct claim: that reputational sanction is the central mechanism of compliance in small states. Unlike clientelism, which is transactional, or repression, which is coercive, ECI explains why abstention or neutrality is itself costly. Compliance emerges not from material inducements or legal threats but from embodied anticipation of sanction under constant civic gaze.

The genealogy matters not only for intellectual legitimacy but for demonstrating that ECI is simultaneously indebted and innovative. Its originality lies in revealing how smallness amplifies symbolic power through embodied intimacy.

Reframing the thesis through ECI therefore accomplishes three things. It distils the central argument that democracy in small states is enacted not only through formal institutions but also through bodies, gazes, and affective repertoires. It clarifies the mechanisms - proximity, visibility, affect - through which compliance is generated, showing how neutrality becomes legible as dissent. And it integrates ethnographic evidence, comparative insight, and theoretical synthesis into a unified framework with portability beyond Malta and Singapore.

The application of ECI facilitates this thesis to become an exploration of how democracy is *embodied, expressed and experienced* when intimacy permeates the fabric of civic life. This shift in perspective demands that we move beyond the notion of democracy

as a set of rights guaranteed by institutions, toward an understanding of it as a network of obligations enacted among citizens. It requires attention to how political participation extends from ballots to bodies, from procedural compliance to performative engagement.

Through the bounded lens of ECI, democracy appears not as a fixed checklist of institutional features, but as a fragile choreography of participation, silence, and belonging - continually negotiated under the scrutiny of others. Although the mechanisms identified by the ECI are theoretically general, their practical operation depends on specific structural conditions. They become most visible where social density is high, where multiplex relationships intertwine civic, professional, and familial domains, and where social visibility sustains credible forms of reputational sanction.

In such contexts - typically small or tightly networked polities - the costs of withdrawal from public life are primarily social rather than legal. It is this saturation of mutual legibility that animates the democratic mechanism in practice. Small states, therefore, should not be viewed as marginal anomalies but as crucial sites for rethinking democratic theory itself. They illuminate the affective, relational, and reputational foundations upon which civic life in the twenty-first century ultimately depends.

6.2 Core Contribution

The contribution of this thesis rests in how it explores democracy as an embodied, lived, experiential and reputational practice rather than an abstract system of institutions. To make that move required more than a descriptive comparison of Malta and Singapore; it required developing a conceptual vocabulary that could explain how political subjectivity is formed in compressed civic environments where anonymity is scarce, visibility is constant and affect circulates rapidly. The concept of Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) represents the central innovation of this work, a framework that renders visible elements of the democratic experience that larger global indices cannot always fully capture.

At its most basic level, ECI accounts for how citizens in small states live democracy through the body, through reputational economies, and through affective repertoires. But the significance of this framework lies not in a surface description of intimacy, which many observers of small polities have casually noted, but in demonstrating how intimacy becomes a structuring mechanism of compliance. Political science has long been preoccupied with scale, yet often in a purely institutional sense: smallness is treated as a variable that increases participation or fosters corruption. What this thesis demonstrates is that smallness does not merely shape electoral turnout or elite access; it saturates the fabric of everyday interaction, where absence from a community ritual or silence on a contentious issue can carry the weight of political betrayal. ECI thus advances democratic theory by revealing how the very condition of smallness produces reputational costs that are as consequential as any legal sanction or policy reform.

This move is conceptually distinct from existing accounts of hybridity or symbolic power. Hybridity theories catalogue mixtures of democratic and authoritarian traits, but they leave unexplored how those mixtures are sustained through embodied routines. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence captures how domination is misrecognised as natural, yet it remains too general to explain why abstention from a Maltese *festa* or failure to display civility in Singapore is immediately legible as political defiance. By specifying how reputation operates as a disciplining force, ECI extends these theoretical traditions into terrain they were not designed to illuminate. It does not discard them but retools them, showing that what matters in compressed civic contexts is not only institutional design or discursive framing but the anticipation of how one's body, gestures, and silences will be read by others.

The empirical contribution lies in how Malta and Singapore are repositioned within comparative politics. They have often been cast as awkward cases: Malta celebrated as a noisy but vibrant democracy, Singapore dismissed as a hybrid regime that leans towards authoritarianism. In this study, their juxtaposition reveals a convergence that unsettles those standard portrayals. Malta's dazzling electoral turnout is exposed as less an expression of civic enthusiasm than a performance compelled by kinship obligations, partisan surveillance, and reputational threat. Singapore's carefully choreographed

public rituals are shown not as bland consensus but as embodied practices that discipline dissent and make civility compulsory. When viewed side by side, both polities reveal how visible participation can coexist with muted contestation, producing a paradox of inclusion without liberty.

This paradox cannot be explained by resorting to generic claims about culture or tradition, which too often have served as dismissive explanations for the democratic distortions of small states. The application of the sociological lens of ECI reveals deeper truths. In Malta, clientelism is still frequently rationalised as a Mediterranean quirk, the inevitable result of tight kinship networks. In Singapore, harmony and order are celebrated as pragmatic “Asian values” that justify limits on dissent. ECI confronts these rationalisations directly by showing that they are not benign cultural habits but disciplinary mechanisms that compel compliance through reputation and affect. In doing so, the thesis strips away the veneer of inevitability that has shielded these systems from critique. Culture here is not an excuse but a vehicle of sanction, and stability is not the neutral outcome of wise governance but the embodied product of citizens anticipating reputational consequences at every turn. Moreover, the disparity in how these regimes are evaluated by formal democracy indices reinforces this critique. The harshness with which Singapore’s regime is judged by quantitative democratic measures - contrasted with the leniency afforded to Malta - strongly suggests that Western liberal bias indelibly shapes these instruments. Measures such as Freedom House and V-Dem privilege procedural liberalism and individual rights as universal norms, thereby penalising developmental or communitarian models like Singapore’s while overlooking Malta’s informal clientelist distortions. This asymmetry reveals that such indices do not merely record democracy but reproduce a specifically Western conception of it, embedding liberalism as the global benchmark against which all other political forms are judged.

The methodological contribution is equally significant. Much of democracy research is split between the quantitative ambition of indices, which privilege comparability and abstraction, and the thick descriptions of ethnography, which provide texture but rarely travel. This study refused that division. By placing Freedom House and V-Dem datasets

in conversation with ethnographic immersion in Maltese and Singaporean civic life, the research design treated divergences as evidence rather than error. Where indices reported democratic robustness in Malta, fieldwork revealed reputational coercion and gendered scrutiny. Where they depicted Singapore as stifled, observation uncovered subtle repertoires of civility and affective belonging that make compliance durable. These frictions were not smoothed away but mobilised to show what each method occludes.

The resulting triangulated approach also embedded reflexivity as an epistemological stance. As an insider to Maltese networks, I could detect reputational cues invisible to an outsider; as an outsider in Singapore, I could see the silences and affective scripts that residents took for granted. This positionality was not incidental but integral, producing what I termed the Integration Matrix: a methodological device that did not merely cross-check data but exposed how different vantage points illuminate distinct dimensions of democratic life. In practice, this meant that the same phenomenon - a high voter turnout, a quiet MRT carriage - was never taken at face value but interrogated through the lens of both quantifiable measurement and embodied experience. The methodological contribution is thus not only empirical insight but also a model for how to study democracy in a way that refuses the separation of numbers from narratives, institutions from affect, or participation from embodiment.

Taken together, these arguments also reposition the study of small states as advantageous to the advancement of the understanding of democracy. The findings of this thesis suggest that the affective and reputational foundations of democratic life are rendered with unusual clarity in small states. Far from being marginal, they illuminate dynamics that increasingly define democratic practice on a global scale. In an era where digital publics, workplaces, and even classrooms replicate the compressed conditions of intimacy, visibility, and reputational sanction that have long characterised micro-polities, the experiences of small states become paradigmatic rather than exceptional. By theorising democracy in Malta and Singapore as *embodied civic intimacy* (ECI), the thesis not only reinterprets the democratic significance of small states but also advances

a transferable analytic for understanding how democracy is lived under conditions of shrinking anonymity and intensifying visibility.

The distinctiveness of this contribution lies in its resistance to comfort. ECI does not permit political elites to dismiss practices of clientelism, reputational coercion, or choreographed civility as benign cultural traits, nor does it allow citizens to mistake strategic compliance for genuine agency. Instead, it exposes the moral and emotional costs of neutrality, the burdens of silence, and the ways in which political belonging is enforced through the embodied anticipation of others' judgment. This is not an argument that promises easy remedies. On the contrary, it contends that any meaningful democratic reform in Malta or Singapore must begin by dismantling the reputational economies and affective, often embodied rituals that sustain civic compliance. Such a transformation cannot be achieved through institutional adjustments alone. Yet, the very act of naming these mechanisms constitutes an essential first step toward reimagining democratic life under conditions of pervasive visibility.

The conceptual, empirical, and methodological strands of this thesis converge in a unified contribution: democracy cannot be understood, measured, or reformed without attending to its intimate, lived, embodied dimensions. In this thesis, the case studies of Malta and Singapore serve as powerful examples for grasping the fragility and ambivalence of democratic practice in the twenty-first century. Without accounting for the embodied and reputational dynamics that govern how citizens navigate participation, silence, and belonging, democratic theory and political sociology remain incomplete. ECI provides the vocabulary for that task, a framework grounded in ethnographic specificity yet portable enough to illuminate compressed publics beyond the small-state condition.

In this way, the contribution of the thesis offers a lens and approach through which the existing indices and understandings of democracy can be further enriched and enhanced. If democracy is to be understood with fidelity to lived experience, it must be reframed not only as an institutional arrangement but as an affective choreography

enacted daily under the gaze of others. That reframing - conceptual, empirical, methodological - constitutes the core contribution of this work.

6.3 Implications and Significance

The arguments advanced in this thesis extend beyond Malta and Singapore. They force a reconsideration of how democracy is conceptualised, measured, and contested in contexts where civic intimacy saturates public life. The implications are both theoretical and practical, and their significance lies precisely in unsettling comfortable assumptions about what democracy is and how it endures.

At the level of theory, the first implication is a recalibration of democratic vocabulary. Political science has tended to frame democracy through procedural guarantees - elections, rights, institutional checks - or through deliberative ideals of rational discourse in a civic sphere presumed to be buffered by anonymity. Such frameworks presume distance: citizens stand apart from one another and from the state, exercising choice from behind a veil of individuality. The Maltese and Singaporean ethnographies dismantle that assumption. In polities where “everyone knows everyone,” distance collapses. The citizen is never a solitary decision-maker but always an embodied participant, observed, interpreted, and judged by a dense network of acquaintances, colleagues, and kin. This collapse of anonymity alters the grammar of democracy itself: silence becomes speech, absence becomes presence, and neutrality acquires the force of opposition. The theoretical vocabulary that ignores these dynamics is not merely incomplete but misleading, for it mistakes what are in fact constitutive mechanisms of political life for incidental cultural quirks.

The second theoretical implication concerns the understanding of hybridity. Scholars have long used this term to describe regimes that combine authoritarian and democratic features, emphasising institutional blends: competitive elections coupled with media restriction, formal rights undermined by patronage, legal structures offset by informal coercion. What these accounts overlook is how hybridity is reproduced not only institutionally but bodily. The Maltese voter who dutifully attends a *festa* despite

quiet disillusionment, or the Singaporean who maintains civility in public while muttering criticisms in private, are not anomalies; they are the everyday enactments of hybridity. These acts are not empty gestures. They reproduce the system by ensuring that dissent remains invisible and that belonging appears uncontested. Hybridity persists not just because elites manipulate institutions but because citizens embody compliance through ritual, silence, and reputational anticipation. Recognising this shifts the explanatory lens: hybridity is not only a matter of institutional engineering but also of intimate choreography.

There are also implications for how symbolic power is theorised. Bourdieu described symbolic violence as domination misrecognised as natural, sustained through the internalisation of hierarchy. What the Maltese and Singaporean material shows is that in small, compressed societies, symbolic power is not just internalised but constantly displayed. Neutrality itself becomes conspicuous. Abstention from a ritual or deviation from civility is not merely a private stance but a public breach immediately legible to others. Symbolic violence is thus amplified by smallness, and domination is sustained not only through misrecognition but through reputational exposure. This recognition matters because it challenges the presumption that compliance in such settings is purely voluntary or cultural; instead, it is compelled by the structural impossibility of anonymity.

These theoretical interventions carry significance beyond academic debate; they bear directly on policy and practice. Global monitoring instruments such as Freedom House and V-Dem do not always fully encompass the experience of small states because they overlook the mechanisms such as reputational coercion and anticipatory obedience. As a result, countries like Malta appear more democratically robust than they are, while states such as Singapore seem more repressive than many citizens themselves perceive. These misreadings are not merely technical errors - they have material consequences. They influence how international institutions allocate resources, condition aid, and design governance reforms.

When Malta is celebrated for its electoral participation without acknowledging the reputational sanctions that compel turnout, European policymakers misinterpret the roots of its democratic fragility. Conversely, when Singapore is reduced to a caricature of authoritarian control without recognizing the affective attachments cultivated through housing, security, stability and civility, external reform agendas fail to engage the true mechanisms of compliance.

The distortions are evident within the data themselves. Between 2012 and 2024, Freedom House records show Malta's control-of-corruption score falling from 85 to 70, even as voter turnout remains above ninety percent - a divergence echoed in V-Dem's declining indicators for media freedom. Singapore's indices, by contrast, remain largely stable or modestly improved, while civil-liberty ratings persistently lag. Together, these trajectories quantify the paradox at the centre of this thesis: reputational compliance can sustain the outward vitality of democratic practice even as substantive accountability erodes.

The implication is both conceptually clear and politically consequential: efforts to strengthen democracy in small states must engage the reputational and embodied dimensions of political life, not merely recalibrate electoral rules or formal institutions.

The stakes are equally pressing for civil society. Advocacy strategies that fail to consider reputational costs risk reinforcing the very compliance they seek to challenge. In Malta, an activist who assumes that neutrality is a legitimate stance without stigma may be blindsided by how community networks punish abstention as betrayal. Mobilising citizens in such a context requires creating spaces where neutrality can be exercised without reputational damage. In Singapore, movements that frame dissent as punishable by acts such as POFMA overlook the fact that compliance is sustained as much by choreographed civility as by legislation. Here, affective repertoires - joy, pride, solidarity - can be mobilised to contest the disciplinary weight of civility scripts. The Pink Dot movement demonstrates how affect can be weaponised not to enforce silence but to create new publics of belonging. The implication is that activism must be as attentive

to the emotional and reputational infrastructures of civic life as it is to formal structures of power.

The dynamics identified in Malta and Singapore extend well beyond their borders, resonating across other micro-polities. In places such as Luxembourg, St. Lucia, and Tuvalu, the dense texture of social life renders political loyalties visible, reputationally traceable, and difficult to conceal. In Iceland, the post-crisis protests demonstrated how such reputational intimacy can swiftly transform into collective mobilisation when shared outrage reverberates through tightly knit networks. Small states, therefore, should not be regarded as anomalies but as laboratories in which the mechanisms of civic intimacy appear in intensified form. To overlook them is to forfeit a crucial vantage point on how democracy operates under conditions of scarcity - scarcity of anonymity, distance, and invisibility.

These dynamics, however, now exceed the geographical confines of small states. Digital publics increasingly reproduce many of the same social conditions that have long defined micro-polities. Social media architectures collapse distance, enforce continuous visibility, and generate reputational economies in which silence is construed as dissent and withdrawal from ritualised participation signals disloyalty. Hashtags, in this sense, function analogously to Maltese festas or Singapore's civility campaigns: they ritualise belonging, rendering absence conspicuous. The parallel here is not merely metaphorical but structural. Digital infrastructures are diffusing globally the same logics of embodied civic intimacy that once characterised small-scale societies.

Yet this extrapolation holds only under specific technological and social conditions. Digitally mediated civic intimacy depends on persistent identity, locally dense networks, and visibility structures that allow reputational sanctions to circulate and be traced to identifiable actors. Where anonymity, encryption, or ephemerality disrupt these linkages, the mechanism weakens: intimacy fragments, and reputational enforcement loses its coherence and force.

What was once a lived reality confined to small states is increasingly becoming the global democratic condition: participation under a panopticon, where legitimacy and belonging are negotiated through reputational sanction and affective circulation.

The implications of this transformation are profoundly ambivalent. Civic intimacy disciplines as much as it empowers. The same networks that sustain silence can, under conditions of shared outrage, amplify dissent. In Malta, mobilisation around the public inquiry into Jean Paul Sofia's death revealed how reputational economies can pivot from enforcing conformity to demanding accountability. In Singapore, the Pink Dot movement reclaims affective repertoires of joy and solidarity to contest the state's monopoly on civility. Intimacy, therefore, is neither inherently authoritarian nor inherently democratic. It is volatile - a field of struggle in which affect and reputation can generate both compliance and rupture. Recognising this ambivalence is essential for scholars and activists alike: civic intimacy must be understood not as a fixed attribute of social life but as a dynamic terrain where discipline and dissent continually intertwine.

Finally, the methodological stakes of these findings are significant. The Triangulated Validation Loop developed here demonstrates that discrepancies between indices, ethnography, and narrative are not noise but evidence. Instead of smoothing over these tensions, this approach treats them as productive, revealing what conventional tools cannot capture. The implication is that comparative politics should not aspire to eliminate methodological friction but to harness it. Indices reveal what is measurable; ethnography exposes what is lived; narratives interpret what is felt. Holding them together without resolution provides a fuller account of democracy than any single method can achieve. This has significance beyond small states: it models a way of studying politics that resists the temptation of closure and embraces the epistemological richness of friction.

The broader significance of the thesis is to reposition democracy itself as an embodied and intimate practice. This does not mean discarding institutions, rights, or elections. It means recognising that they are lived and sustained through bodies, reputations, and

fields of affect. The implication is that democracy cannot be understood or reformed without attending to these intimate dimensions. To overlook them is to risk mistaking performance for substance, compliance for consent, stability for legitimacy. By foregrounding embodied civic intimacy, this thesis equips scholars with a sharper analytic and policymakers with a more accurate diagnosis of how democracy functions under conditions of density and visibility. Its significance lies in demonstrating that what may appear as minor distortions in small states are in fact signals of a broader democratic condition: fragile, reputationally charged, and affectively sustained.

In sum, the implications of this thesis are not confined to the cases studied. They extend across small polities, into digital publics, and into the conceptual foundations of democratic theory. The significance lies in compelling recognition that democracy is not merely an institutional architecture but a lived choreography of presence, absence, and recognition under the gaze of others. What Malta and Singapore make visible is not their peculiarity but their diagnostic force. They expose democracy's intimate infrastructures, reminding us that law and ritual, right and reputation, ballot and body are never separable. The future of democratic theory depends on acknowledging these entanglements, for it is within them that compliance, contestation, and belonging are continuously made and unmade.

In the end, what small states make visible is that democracy, stripped of its ritual forms, too often serves as a superstructure that conceals exploitation and legitimises inequality - a reminder that the struggle for democracy is inseparable from the struggle against domination in all its guises.

6.4 Closing argument: Democracy as choreography, civic intimacy and domination in disguise

This thesis began with the premise that a lived, embodied and everyday experience of democracy must be studied not in its grand institutional forms but in the places where it is lived most intensely - and therefore most vulnerably. In compressed civic spaces, anonymity is scarce, silence is soaked in meaning, and reputation shapes the boundaries

of belonging. Malta and Singapore, despite their divergent histories, cultures, and regimes, have served as magnifying lenses on this condition. Their density brings into view what larger states conceal: that democracy depends less on constitutions, courts, or even elections than on the everyday negotiations through which citizens appear, withdraw, perform loyalty, or register dissent under the gaze of others.

The lesson is not parochial. Malta and Singapore reveal the operating system of democracy under conditions that are rapidly becoming global. Digital publics, urban intensification, and environmental crises compress civic life everywhere, collapsing the distance between citizen and spectator. What small states live as structure - intimacy, density, reputational exposure - is fast becoming the world's democratic horizon. To study them is to anticipate the future, for better and for worse.

The argument advanced here has three dimensions. Democracy must first be reimagined as choreography rather than architecture, as a fragile performance of civic intimacy rather than a static design of institutions. Second, ignoring this intimacy carries profound costs: compulsion mistaken for consent, civility for pluralism, stability for legitimacy. Third, the defence of democracy cannot be separated from resistance to domination in its most ordinary guises - clientelism disguised as community duty, civility enforced as civic virtue, silence rewarded as loyalty. To see democracy clearly is to face its complicity with the inequalities it claims to resist.

This perspective required a different methodological stance. The Triangulated Validation Loop treated divergences between indices, narratives, and ethnographies as findings, not errors. The point was to resist the sanitising impulse of comparative politics, which privileges neat coherence between scorecards and lived realities. Democracy does not yield such coherence; it is lived in contradiction. Malta combines extraordinary turnout with reputational coercion and elite capture. Singapore combines harsh constraints on expression with affective legitimacy rooted in stability and performance. To force these contradictions into either celebration or condemnation would be to betray the material. Friction, not clarity, is the truer account.

The cases themselves reveal how smallness intensifies both compliance and rupture. In Malta, the same village festa that enforces loyalty can become a platform for outrage when scandal erupts. In Singapore, rituals of civility that mute confrontation can be reclaimed by movements like Pink Dot, turning joy into dissent. Embodied civic intimacy is not inherently authoritarian or democratic; it is volatile, capable of coercion or liberation depending on how it is mobilised. Scholars who reduce small states to turnout statistics or regime labels miss this volatility entirely. Policymakers who mistake civility for cohesion or neutrality for indifference misdiagnose the political climate, underestimating both the risks of capture and the possibilities of rupture.

To capture this volatility, the thesis has introduced the vocabulary of Embodied Civic Intimacy. This lens shows why neutrality becomes conspicuous, why silence is politicised, why absence reads as betrayal. Without such a vocabulary, comparative politics lacks the tools to analyse how democracy is sustained or hollowed out in a compressed world.

But vocabulary alone is insufficient. The closing argument is a call to citizens, scholars, and policymakers to take seriously the ways democracy is lived, represented and experienced in the body. Citizens must recognize how reputational economies demand compliance through gesture and silence as much as through law. Scholars must resist the methodological comfort of indices that cannot register intimacy. Policymakers must acknowledge that reforms will fail if they ignore the affective and reputational infrastructures through which legitimacy is built or eroded. Otherwise, democracy risks becoming theatre: rituals of voting, ceremonies of civility, performances of consultation that mask deeper inequalities. Malta shows how clientelism corrodes institutions while rights remain intact. Singapore shows how civility conceals exclusion even as material welfare is delivered. Both warn that democracy, stripped of attention to intimacy, legitimizes domination instead of contesting it.

The limits of this study must also be acknowledged. Malta and Singapore are not the world. Their colonial inheritances, demographic scales, and geopolitical positions are unique. Yet precisely because they stretch the category of “small state,” they reveal

mechanisms of democracy that larger polities obscure. The insights are not universal but portable, because the condition of smallness is spreading digitally, socially, and ecologically. When social media carries reputational sanction, when density magnifies visibility, when crises compress dissent, the dynamics traced here will no longer be Maltese or Singaporean but planetary.

Nonetheless, several limitations remain.

The scope of empirical data was necessarily delimited. The study's ethnographic immersion and elite interviews offered rich, textured insight into the lived experience of democracy, but the sample size and composition clearly demonstrated an overrepresentation of elite, oppositional, and activist perspectives. As Chapter 4 acknowledges, many Singaporean informants were vocal critics of the PAP, while Maltese participants often occupied positions of cultural or intellectual prominence. Consequently, the analysis may under-represent more compliant, apolitical, or contented voices within these societies. Including non-elite, everyday citizens - for instance, service workers, homemakers, or younger digital publics - would have enriched the data, illuminating how ordinary individuals embody or negotiate democracy in their everyday lives.

While the study drew strength from a most-similar systems comparative design, it also faced structural asymmetries between the two cases. Fieldwork in Malta was more longitudinal and iterative, while Singaporean immersion occurred in a more concentrated timeframe under restrictive research conditions. These practical differences shaped the texture and depth of ethnographic evidence, inevitably tilting some analyses toward one case over the other. Future research could adopt a more balanced or longitudinal comparative strategy, extending field presence in both sites or incorporating additional small states to test the portability of the mechanisms identified here.

The research design, though intentionally interpretivist and pragmatist, imposes its own constraints. The interpretive paradigm privileges depth and contextual sensitivity at the

expense of generalisability. While the triangulated integration matrix mitigated this through cross-validation with democracy indices, the findings remain analytically suggestive rather than statistically representative. This is a necessary trade-off in interpretive research but nonetheless limits the claims that can be made about causality or scale.

The use of secondary quantitative indices (V-Dem, Freedom House) introduces potential validity limitations. As discussed in Chapter 3, these indices embed liberal-democratic assumptions that may mischaracterise hybrid or small-state contexts. While this thesis critically reinterpreted such measures, it remains dependent on their data architecture, which restricts full epistemic autonomy from their biases.

The temporal scope of the study, while historically informed, captures democracy as a moving target. The political, technological, and social landscapes of both Malta and Singapore continue to evolve rapidly, particularly under digital and geopolitical transformations. The dynamics of reputational sanction, visibility, and civic intimacy identified here may shift in meaning as new technologies alter how smallness and surveillance are experienced.

Finally, the researcher's positionality must be recognised as both strength and limitation. The reflexive stance adopted throughout - an "outsider-insider" perspective cultivated through immersion and comparative empathy - enriched the interpretation of civic intimacy and symbolic power. Yet this same positionality unavoidably shapes what could be seen, heard, and felt, especially in politically constrained environments where access and disclosure are circumscribed. The study's commitment to reflexivity does not dissolve but rather illuminates these asymmetries.

Taken together, these limitations do not undermine the study's contributions but clarify its parameters. The mechanisms of *Embodied Civic Intimacy* traced here are best understood as contextually grounded and theoretically generative rather than universally predictive. They invite further empirical testing across a wider range of cases - including digital and diasporic communities where smallness is reconstituted in virtual

space - and deeper engagement with non-elite perspectives that might confirm, complicate, or refute the patterns revealed here.

The stark truth is that democracy is never self-sustaining. Constitutions, courts, and elections provide formal scaffolding but not substance. Democracy lives - or dies - in the informal intimacies of presence, absence, and recognition. It flourishes when reputational economies enable accountability, when affective repertoires are reclaimed for solidarity, when bodies can gather without fear. It falters when those same mechanisms enforce silence, punish neutrality, and demand loyalty at the expense of dissent. To defend democracy is not merely to protect institutions but to contest the intimate infrastructures that sustain or corrode them.

From Malta and Singapore comes one enduring lesson: democracy is always on display, always reputationally charged, always lived under the gaze of others. To ignore this is to mistake shadow for substance. To face it is to grasp democracy in its most demanding form: fragile, embodied, everyday, volatile, and inseparable from the struggle against domination. That is the challenge this thesis leaves behind.

This research has reshaped my own understanding of democracy. I now see it less as an institutional framework and more as a sociological condition, one that values lived gestures above abstract scores and persons above statistics. To defend democracy is to affirm dignity, reputation, and the capacity to appear and speak without fear. In this sense, democracy is inseparable from the pursuit of social justice. The contribution of this work lies not in prescriptions but in insisting that justice must begin with attentiveness to the intimate textures of civic life, especially in small states where exclusion and inequality cut deepest.

My time in Singapore brought these arguments into sharp personal relief. Three months of immersion unsettled the expectations I carried with me, replacing suspicion with appreciation for the quiet civility, disciplined routines, and respectful diversity that shape its social life. What might be dismissed from afar as constraint revealed itself instead as a distinctive civic atmosphere - one that impressed on me how democracy is

lived not only through institutions and rights but also through the everyday textures of order, silence, and belonging. The experience left me with a sense of nostalgia for those understated solidarities, while crystallising the central lesson of this thesis: that democracy is never only a constitutional principle but always a mode of life, sustained through embodied intimacies and civic rhythms that bind people into community with all the tensions and compromises this entails.

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Appendix A. List of Indices

V-Dem Indices

Index	Variable Name / Code	Years Used	Relevance to Themes
V-Dem	e_ti_cpi (Corruption Perceptions Index)	2004–2024	Reveals how perceived corruption shapes trust, clientelism, and embodied compliance.
V-Dem	e_wbgi_cce (Control of Corruption Index)	2004–2024	Captures institutional integrity affecting reputational politics in small states.
V-Dem	v2clgencl (Gender Civil-Liberties Equality Index)	2004–2024	Shows gendered inequalities influencing embodied participation and civic visibility.
V-Dem	v2clpolcl (Political-Group Civil-Liberty Equality Index)	2004–2024	Measures unequal liberties shaping stratified access and hybrid governance.

V-Dem	v2clsocgrp (Social-Group Civil-Liberty Equality Index)	2004–2024	Indicates marginalisation of social groups within intimate civic spaces.
V-Dem	v2meslfcen (Media Self-Censorship Level Index)	2004–2024	Reflects anticipatory silence and affective discipline in public expression.
V-Dem	v2smgovsmcenprc (Govt Social-Media Censorship Index)	2004–2024	Captures state shaping of digital visibility, dissent, and reputational risk.
V-Dem	v2smorgviol (Social Media–Related Violence Index)	2004–2024	Signals online hostility reinforcing symbolic violence and civic intimidation.
V-Dem	v2x_civlib (Overall Civil Liberties Index)	2004–2024	Assesses substantive freedoms often misaligned with lived civic constraints.

V-Dem	v2x_cspart (Civil Society Participation Index)	2004–2024	Shows participation pressures where absence becomes reputationally consequential.
V-Dem	v2x_egal (Egalitarian Component Index)	2004–2024	Tracks structural inequalities shaping embodied experiences of belonging.
V-Dem	v2x_execorr (Executive Corruption Index)	2004–2024	Reveals executive dominance reinforcing clientelism and personalised politics.
V-Dem	v2x_frassoc_thick (Freedom of Ssocation Index)	2004–2024	Captures constraints on organising within dense, visibility-saturated communities.
V-Dem	v2x_freexp_altinf (Freedom of Expression & Information Index)	2004–2024	Indicates limits on speech tied to self-censorship and proximity.

V-Dem	v2x_jucon (Judicial Constraints on Executive Index)	2004–2024	Shows strength of institutional checks amid personalised power structures.
V-Dem	v2x_libdem (Liberal Democracy Index)	2004–2024	Benchmarks formal democracy often diverging from embodied lived realities.
V-Dem	v2xcs_ccsi (Core Civil Society Index)	2004–2024	Measures civil-society vibrancy shaped by intimate, relational pressure.
V-Dem	v2xel_frefair (Clean Elections Index)	2004–2024	Evaluates electoral integrity shaped by clientelist influence and visibility.
V-Dem	v2xlg_legcon (Legislative Constraints on Executive Index)	2004–2024	Represents formal oversight capacity amid hybrid governance practices.

V-Dem	v2xnp_client (Clientelism Index)	2004–2024	Tracks patronage logics embedded in everyday relational politics.
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Freedom House Indices

Index	Variable Name / Code	Years Used	Relevance to Themes
Freedom House	B1–B4 (Political Pluralism and Participation)	2024	Structural advantages and informal pressures distort fair political participation.
Freedom House	C1–C3 (Functioning of Government)	2024	Executive dominance and opacity weaken accountability and genuine oversight.
Freedom House	D1–D4 (Freedom of Expression and Belief)	2024	Media pressures and legal or informal constraints suppress open expression.

Freedom House	E1–E3 (Associational and Organizational Rights)	2024	Regulatory and social constraints hinder independent organising and mobilisation.
Freedom House	F2; F4 (Rule of Law)	2024	Unequal legal protections and selective enforcement undermine fair justice.

Appendix B. Interview Questions

1. How do you experience democracy in your everyday life? Are there particular situations, spaces, or relationships where this feels especially visible or invisible?
2. In your daily interactions, how does proximity - to decision-makers, social networks, or institutions - affect your sense of political belonging, influence, or exclusion?
3. Do you feel that your personal visibility in public or professional spaces influences your political choices, participation, or neutrality?
4. To what extent do you feel free to express political views, participate in civic activities, or challenge government decisions?
5. Do you believe all social groups have equal access to political participation and representation? If not, what structural or social barriers affect this?
6. In what ways do political elites, informal power brokers, or dense social ties influence policy outcomes, and how visible is this influence in everyday decision-making?
7. How would you describe the fairness and competitiveness of elections in your country, and what role does economic status or social visibility play in political engagement?
8. Are there moments, events, or rituals - such as festivals, commemorations, or public gatherings - where participation feels expected or unavoidable? How do these shape your sense of belonging, neutrality, or dissent?
9. Do you feel there are unspoken pressures, symbolic cues, or reputational expectations that encourage compliance or discourage open disagreement?

10. How does your country's government respond to criticism, protest, or dissent - through formal law, informal pressures, or symbolic gestures?
11. What role do digital platforms, independent media, and social networks play in shaping political debate and civic participation?
12. How do meritocratic or technocratic policies interact with democratic ideals in your country? Do they enable broader participation or primarily entrench elite influence?
13. How do you see the relationship between formal institutions and informal networks in shaping how decisions are made and justified?
14. How do cultural traditions or historical legacies - such as colonialism, religion, or migration - continue to influence your country's political system and citizens' expectations of democracy?
15. Finally, what does democracy mean to you personally, and do you feel the current political system reflects or challenges that vision?

Appendix C. Recruitment and Consent Forms

INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

TITLE OF STUDY¹

‘Lived Democracy in Small Island States: Sociopolitical Dynamics of Governance, Power, and Participation in Malta and Singapore’

INTRODUCTION

- You are being asked to participate in a research study on the quality and expression of democracy in Malta and Singapore.
- You are selected as a possible participant, since the main research targets of this study are individuals knowledgeable on democracy.
- You are kindly requested to read this form and ask any questions that you may have prior to agreeing to participate in this study.

SCOPE

The scope of this research study is to investigate the current quality and expressions of democracy in small island states.

METHODOLOGY

The research in this study shall be based interviewing a number of individuals who are knowledgeable about the democracy on their country of residence. This is the only fixed characteristic for research subjects.

The collected data will be followed by discourse analysis of the material collected and other secondary sources. The data collected through the interviews will be recorded and transcribed and used for analytical purpose in an attempt to answer the research questions that the study set out to explore.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

The benefits of participation include the widening of sociological knowledge about democracy in small island states, which can ultimately be of benefit to the political and academic community.

¹ Carried out in part fulfillment of the Mphil/Dphil at the University of Malta

RISKS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

A clear brief of the topic and method of research is given during the recruiting stage. The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to the participant. He/she may refuse to take part in the study at any time with no negative repercussions whatsoever. He/she has the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, he/she has the right to request that the interviewer not use any of the interview material.

All data collected will be stored securely on an encrypted hard drive, and will be solely accessed by the researcher, supervisor and examiners during all stages prior to final submission/publication. This data shall be retained until the final draft of the dissertation is completed, after which it will be deleted. This shall not be longer than 6 months following the interview. This shall be followed by an official communication confirming that the researcher doesn't withhold any information pertaining to the participant.

Participants who opt out of the study shall have any data relating to them deleted on receipt of an official notification confirming his/her withdrawal. This shall be followed by an official communication confirming that the researcher doesn't withhold any information pertaining to the participant.

You also have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by the researcher and/or supervisor before, during or after the research. You may contact the researcher via email, justin.attard.13@um.edu.mt, and/or the supervisor via email, godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt.

As research participant, you will have your rights safeguarded in accordance with data protection law and in particular the General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679, repealing Directive 95/46/EC) and national legislation that implements and further specifies the relevant provisions of said Regulation.

These include the right to obtain access to, rectify, and where applicable ask for the data concerning them to be erased.

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

'Lived Democracy in Small Island States: Sociopolitical Dynamics of Governance, Power, and Participation in Malta and Singapore'

CONSENT

By signing this form, I am confirming that participation in this study is on a voluntary basis, and I have read and understood the information provided by the researcher.

- ☐ By ticking this box, consent is being given in relation to the disclosure of my identity in publications related to this research.
- ☐ By ticking this box, consent is not being given in relation to the disclosure of my identity in publications related to this research.

RESEARCHER'S DETAILS

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Email: justin.attard.13@um.edu.mt

Participant's Name:

Date: _____

Participant's Signature:

Researcher's Name:

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature:

TITLU TAL-ISTUDJU²

‘Demokrazija f’Malta u Singapore: Studju Komparattiv u Kontemporanju ta’ Żewġ Stati ta’ Gzejjer Żgħar.’

INTRODUZZJONI

- Ġentilment qed tintalab biex tkun wieħed mill-partekipanti fi studju li qed jithejja dwar id-demokrazija f’Malta u F’Singapore.
- Ġejt ikkunsidrat/a bħala partekipant/a potenzjali hekk kif inti qed titqis fost dawk l-individwi nfurmati fuq id-demokrazija.
- Ġentilment qed tintalab taqra din il-formula u tistaqsi kwalunkwe mistoqsija li jista’ jkollok qabel ma tipproċedi sabiex tagħti l-kunsens tiegħek għal dan l-istudju.

SKOP

L-iskop ta’ din ir-riċerka hu li tanalizzza l-kunċetti tal-kwalita u l-espressjoni tad-demokrazija fi stati ta’ gzejjer żgħar.

METODOLOĠIJA

Ir-riċerka f’dan l-istudju għandha tkun ibbażata fuq intervisti ta’ numru ta’ individwi nfurmati fuq id-demokrazija f’pajjiżom. Din hija l-unika karatteristika fissa biex individwu jiġi / tiġi kkunsidrat/a bħala sugġett ta’ riċerka.

L-informazzjoni miġbura permezz tal-intervisti ser tiġi traskritta u użata għal skop analitiku f’attentat biex twieġeb il-mistoqsijiet tar-riċerka li l-istudju gie mfassal biex jesplora. Din għandha tkun segwita minn analiżi ta’ materjal miġbur minn sorsi oħra.

BENEFIĊĊJI TAL-PARTEĊIPAZZJONI

Permezz ta’ din ir-riċerka, wieħed jista’ jkabbar l-għarfien soċjologiku tiegħu dwar id-demokrazija fi stati ta’ gzejjer żgħar, li eventwalment jista’ jkun ta’ benefiċċju ikbar għall-komunità politika u akkademika.

² Studju mwettaq bħala parti mill-istudju dottorali fl-Università ta’ Malta.

RISKJI TAL-PARTEĊIPAZZJONI

M'hemm ebda riskju prevedibbli jew mistenni.

DRITTJIET TAL-PARTEĊIPANT

L-iskop u l-metodu tar-riċerka ser jingħata matul l-istudju tar-reklutaġġ. Id-deċiżjoni li wiehed jipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju hija kompletament f'idejn il-parteeipant. Hu / hi jista' jirrifjuta li jieħu sehem fl-istudju fi kwalunkwe ħin mingħajr ebda riperkussjonijiet. Hu / hi għandu d-dritt li ma jwieġeb l-ebda jew parti minn mistoqsija, kif ukoll li jirtira kompletament mill-intervista fi kwalunkwe punt matul il-proċess; barra minn hekk, hu / hi għandu d-dritt li jitleb li l-intervistatur ma juża l-ebda materjal tal-intervista.

L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura għandha tinħażen sew fuq encrypted hard drive, u tkun aċċessata biss mir-riċerkatur, jew mis-superviżur matul l-istudji kollha qabel is-sottomissjoni / pubblikazzjoni finali. Din l-informazzjoni għandha tinżamm sakemm jitlesta l-abbozz finali tad-dissertazzjoni, u wara dan jithassar. Dan m'għandux ikun itwal minn 6 xhur wara l-intervista. Dan għandu jkun segwit minn komunikazzjoni uffiċjali li tikkonferma li r-riċerkatur m'għadu jzomm l-ebda informazzjoni dwar il-parteeipant.

Il-parteeipanti li ma jagħżlux l-istudju għandu jkollhom kwalunkwe data li għandha x'taqsam magħhom imħassra malli tigi riċevuta notifika uffiċjali li tikkonferma l-irtirar tiegħu / tagħha. Dan għandu jkun segwit minn komunikazzjoni uffiċjali li tikkonferma li r-riċerkatur ma jzomm l-ebda informazzjoni dwar il-parteeipant.

Għandek id-dritt li tistaqsi mistoqsijiet dwar dan l-istudju u li ssaqsi mistoqsijiet lir-riċerkatur u / jew lis-superviżur qabel, matul jew wara r-riċerka. Tista' tikkuntattja lir-riċerkatur permezz ta' email, justin.attard.13@um.edu.mt, u / jew is-superviżur permezz ta' email, godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt.

Bħala parteeipant fir-riċerka, int se jkollok id-drittijiet tiegħek imharsa skont il-liġi dwar il-protezzjoni tad-data u b'mod partikolari r-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (UE 2016/679, li tħassar id-Direttiva 95/46 / KE) u l-liġi nazzjonali li tispeċifika aktar id-dispożizzjonijiet rilevanti tal-imsemmi regolament.

FORMULA TA' KUNSENS GHALL-PARTEĊIPANTI FIR-RIĊERKA

'Demokrazija f'Malta u Singapore: Studju Komparattiv u Kontemporanju ta' Żewġ Stati ta' Gżejjer Żgħar.'

KUNSENS

Bil-firma tiegħi, qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex inkun parti minn dan l-istudju fuq bażi volontarja, u li qrajt u fhimt l-informazzjoni mogħtija hawn fuq.

- ☐ Qed nimmarka din il-kaxxa biex nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li l-identità tiegħi tiġi żvelata fil-materjal ippubblikat.
- ☐ Qed nimmarka din il-kaxxa biex nikkonferma li mhux qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li l-identità tiegħi tiġi żvelata fil-materjal ippubblikat.

DETTALJI TAR-RIĊERKATUR

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Isem tal-Parteċipant:

Data: _____

Firma tal-Parteċipant:

Isem tar-Riċerkatur:

Data: _____

Firma tar-Riċerkatur:

Appendix D. Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Rationale of Embodied Civic Intimacy

Embodied Civic Intimacy (ECI) functions as a mid-range causal mechanism designed to elucidate how civic compliance and democratic subjectivity are generated within small, densely networked polities. As a theoretical construct, it explicitly frames this research as a scholarly contribution to political sociology, placing a distinct emphasis on the lived, everyday experience of democracy rather than mere procedural institutionalism. While the small island framework is essential, its primary role is to inform and justify the selection of Malta and Singapore as comparative critical-case studies, rather than functioning as the sole conceptual boundary of the theory.

ECI builds upon the structural scope conditions outlined by Baldacchino and Veenendaal's MITE framework—Monopoly, Intimacy, Totality, and Emigration—which demonstrate how structural smallness generates high interdependence, multiplex social ties, and an acute scarcity of anonymity. In such compressed settings, civic behaviour becomes continuously observable, social roles inevitably overlap across multiple domains, and cultural scripts tightly bind political participation to communal belonging.

At the theoretical core of ECI lies a sequential causal chain: proximity → visibility → affective activation → embodied compliance. Proximity necessitates repeated encounters; visibility renders individual gestures, silences, and absences publicly legible; affect attaches emotions such as pride, shame, loyalty, and fear to these moments of intervisibility; and embodied compliance ultimately results as individuals proactively anticipate reputational consequences.

This theoretical rationale is operationalised across the three core analytical dimensions of the thesis: the influence of elitism, the management of dissent by the state, and the navigation of civil society. To trace these dimensions, ECI

identifies four interlocking processes, which are supported by complementary measurement procedures detailed in Section 5.2.9. First, the visibility of absence ensures that non-participation or neutrality becomes highly conspicuous and socially disengaged. Second, anticipatory self-censorship acts as an internal regulator, whereby individuals—aware of elitist surveillance or state dissent management—silence themselves before any formal sanction occurs. Third, reputational sanctioning operates through informal social pressures rather than overt coercion, heavily impacting how citizens navigate civil society networks. Finally, symbolic participation emerges, where small, visible acts signal allegiance and unity even when substantive democratic engagement is minimal.

By drawing on Bourdieu, ECI refines the concept of symbolic power, framing reputation as a relationally enforced form of discipline rather than just an internalised habitus. Following Machin, it anchors embodied democracy directly in the sensory and affective saturation characteristic of compact civic ecologies. Furthermore, extending Hirschman, ECI exposes the limitations of the exit–voice–loyalty triad in small states; compliance emerges as a necessary fourth behavioural mode, and exit often amounts to social exile due to the relational finality of withdrawal.

Ultimately, ECI explains how hybridity reflects the intensification of democratic life produced by dense intervisibility. Compliance is sustained through the affective weight of being seen, the social risks of being misread, and the reputational consequences of absence. However, ECI's boundaries are also clear: its mechanisms weaken when structural foundations erode, such as when high anonymity blunts visibility, or when pluralist norms mitigate the affective costs of dissent. Through ECI, political sociology gains a powerful framework to examine how democracy is intimately lived and embodied.

Appendix E. List of Abbreviations

AI – Artificial Intelligence

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CGGI - Chandler Good Government Index

CLTPA – Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act

CPI – Corruption Perceptions Index

EC – European Commission

ECI – Embodied Civic Intimacy

EIP – Ethnic Integration Policy

EIU – Economist Intelligence Unit

EU – European Union

EU-27 – European Union 27 Member States

EUROSTAT – European Statistics

FHI – Freedom in the World Index

FICA - Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act

FOI – Freedom of Information

FREC - Faculty Research Ethics Committee (University of Malta)

GRC - Group Representation Constituency

GST – Goods and Services Tax (Singapore)

HDB – Housing & Development Board

HDI – Human Development Index

IMDA - InfoCOMM Media Development Authority

IPC – Institution of a Public Character

IPS - Institute of Policy Studies (National University of Singapore)

ISA – Internal Security Act

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

LKY – Lee Kuan Yew

MP – Member of Parliament

MRT – Mass Rapid Transit

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organisations

NIC – National Integration Council

NPR – Neutrality Penalty Ratio
NSO – National Statistics Office (Malta)
NS – National Service
NTU - Nanyang Technological University
NUS – National University of Singapore
PAP – People Action Party
PBS – Public Broadcasting Services
PDR – Participation Density Ratio
PL – Labour Party (Malta)
PMO – Prime Minister’s Office
PN – Nationalist Party (Malta)
POA – Public Order Act
POFMA - Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act
RC – Roman Catholic
RSF – Reporters Without Borders
RSIS - S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore)
SGI – Sustainable Governance Indicators
SKM – Singapore Kindness Movement
SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
TIM - Triangulated Integration Matrix
UK – United Kingdom
UoM – University of Malta
US – United States
V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy