

Chapter 1

Public Administration in Singapore and Switzerland

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Introduction: Comparing Countries and Administrative Systems

“Both Singapore and Switzerland exist as extreme acts of political will,” declared former head of the Singapore civil service, Mr Lim Siong Guan, during a seminar in Zurich in May 2014. The ‘political will’ he was referring to, however, springs from different sources in both countries. When the Swiss describe themselves as a ‘*Willensnation*’, they refer to the unity of their nation by free will, the voluntary coming together of linguistically diverse cantons.¹ When Singaporeans talk about ‘political will’, however, they are referring to an ‘elite’ will² to achieve a set of predetermined objectives.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Singapore and Switzerland are politically and institutionally very different. One is a highly centralised state led by a single party and characterised by “top-down” governance, while the other is a highly decentralised state led by a coalition of political parties and characterised by “bottom-up” governance. Yet both Singapore and Switzerland have achieved high standards of public facilities and services, and have an effective civil service and high state capacities. Thus

¹Fossedal, Gregory A, *Direct Democracy in Switzerland*. Transaction Publishers, 2005.

²Yen-Ning, Pang, “Crisis Narratives in Political Discourse in Singapore”, 2005. <http://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/14442>. See also Tortajada, Cecilia, and Asit K. Biswas. *Asian Perspectives on Water Policy*. Routledge, 2013.

they are interesting cases for comparison using a most-different-systems design. This chapter seeks to pin down why two systems that are structurally so different work for their citizens. Using Scharpf's concept of "input" and "output" legitimacy, it argues that Switzerland is characterised by "input legitimacy", while Singapore is characterised by "output legitimacy".

Role of the administration in society

Public administration plays a crucial role in any society. The civil service keeps the state running and provides the facilities and services needed by citizens. It is here where a government's decisions and policies are implemented and executed. The way this is done as well as the relationship between the civil service, politicians and citizens, however, varies over time and between countries.

From the perspective of citizens, it is important that they are satisfied with the services provided by their civil service, that they trust in its efficiency and in its impartiality, and that they feel that the civil service is here for them and not the other way round. In Switzerland, despite recurrent claims for reforms and improvements, this is generally the way the civil service is perceived. In Switzerland, 76 percent of citizens reported having confidence in their national government in 2012,³ and comparative studies show that, on the local level, confidence is even higher than in other high-trust countries such as Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands.⁴ In Singapore, 67 percent of citizens reported high trust levels.⁵ According to the Asia Barometer, institutions such as the police, military, government, law courts and civil service enjoy high levels of public trust in Singapore.⁶ Notwithstanding this,

³OECD "Switzerland Fact Sheet", 2013. Accessed from http://www.oecd.org/gov/GAAG2013_CFS_CHE.pdf

⁴Deters, Bas, Michael Goldsmith, Andreas Ladner, Poul Erik Mouritzen and Lawrence E. Rose (2014). *Size and Local Democracy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

⁵"2013 Edelman Trust Barometer". *Edelman*. Accessed from <http://www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/trust-2013/>.

⁶"Public Governance and Public Trust — Part 2." www.cscollege.gov.sg, April 7, 2012. <https://www.cscollege.gov.sg/Knowledge/Pages/Public-Governance-and-Public-Trust-Part-2.aspx>

political commentators have noted the existence of ‘blurred lines’ between the civil service and politics in Singapore,⁷ with former civil servants frequently running for political office.

A second distinctive element is the recruitment of civil servants. Are they life-time bureaucrats with particular privileges or are they simple employees of the state without extensive additional benefits? Are civil servants recruited on the basis of merit, do they have to pass specific exams, or are they simply employed by different departments on the basis of their competences? Swiss civil servants can best be described as employees of the public sector, generally recruited by their hierarchical superiors in different departments and services.⁸ The civil service is open and based on merit or competencies. No special diplomas or entrance exams are required. Salaries and benefits do not differ considerably from the private sector other than being a bit higher in the lower brackets and considerably lower in the top brackets. In Singapore, the recruitment of most of its 60,000 civil servants is done by individual ministries as well. However, within the civil service exists a group of about 270 Administrative Officers who are rotated throughout different ministries and work closely with the political leadership to formulate policies.⁹ These ‘top-tier’ civil servants undergo a stringent selection procedure. Many of them are selected just after completing their ‘A’ levels, and given full scholarships to pursue their tertiary studies at prestigious universities in Singapore and around the world. In return, they are bonded to the civil service for a period of up to six years. Salaries in the Singapore civil service are also comparable with those in the private sector. However, the salaries of senior civil servants, known as Administrative Officers, are

⁷“Civil Service: Keeping It a Success Factor”. *TODAYonline*. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://m.todayonline.com/singapore/civil-service-keeping-it-success-factor>.

⁸Emery, Yves (2013). “Neue Politiken und Prozesse im Personalmanagement”, in: Ladner, Andreas, Jean-Loup Chappelet, Yves Emery, Peter Knoepfel, Luzius Mader, Nils Soguel und Frédéric Varone (Hrsg.). *Handbuch der öffentlichen Verwaltung in der Schweiz*. Zürich: NZZ libro. S. pp. 479–498.

⁹“The Singapore Public Service: A Development-Oriented Promotion System”. www.cscollege.gov.sg, December 11, 2013. <https://www.cscollege.gov.sg/Knowledge/Ethos/Ethos%20Issue%201,%202002/Pages/The%20Singapore%20Public%20Service%20A%20Development-Oriented%20Promotion%20System.aspx>

pegged to two-thirds the median salary among the top eight earners from six professions (bankers, lawyers, engineers, accountants, employees of MNCs and local manufacturers). This was justified on the grounds of attracting the best talent and avoiding corruption.

A third element concerns the functioning of the administration and more particularly its internal processes. Especially since the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) — the concept that ideas used in the private sector can be successful in the public sector — the question has been whether public administration functions according to prescriptions, rules and specific resources allocated to different activities or whether there are more output-oriented forms of steering using global budgeting and performance contracts. Although Switzerland started NPM reforms relatively late, they had quite an impact on the functioning of the civil service. Without leaving the traditional Weberian model of bureaucracy completely behind, new NPM-based forms of organising internal processes have considerably influenced the civil service. Similarly, NPM reforms in Singapore's civil service had an impact on the country's "developmental state" strategy emphasising national economic development based on state ownership and economic control. The NPM reforms introduced led to the privatisation of state enterprises, the contracting out of services, and the liberalisation of sectors such as finance, telecommunications and utilities.¹⁰

A final distinctive element is the relationship between administration and politics. Throughout the history of public administration there has been debates about whether the administration is really an independent body acting according to laws and regulations, or whether the administration is more closely linked to the political leaders or parties in power. In the latter case, a change of the party in power would automatically lead to a replacement of top-level civil servants with civil servants politically close to the new party in power. Additionally, the question of the autonomy of civil servants is often raised: do civil servants simply execute political decisions or do they also shape and influence them and become political actors themselves?

¹⁰Haque, M.S., "Governance and Bureaucracy in Singapore: Contemporary Reforms and Implications". *International Political Science Review* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 227–40. doi:10.1177/0192512104042314.

In this regard, the Swiss civil service is not political but politically influential. Other than for positions very close to the minister, party membership is not a decisive element for promotion and a new minister from a different party does not necessarily lead to top-level civil servants of his party. Civil servants, nowadays, are well-trained experts in their domains. Many solutions to complex problems have to be sought, and especially where international coordination is needed, this information gap tends to play into the hands of civil servants. In Singapore, the close relationship between politicians and civil servants and the frequent movement of civil servants into politics, accentuated by the fact that Singapore has been governed by the same party since 1959, has led to the perception that there is no clear distinction between political and administrative elites. Chan Heng Chee, a political scientist who later became Singapore's ambassador to the United States, conceptualised Singapore as an 'administrative state',¹¹ describing Singapore's style of government as one which emphasised "the elimination of politics" in favour of placing "trust in experts and expertise in planning and implementation"¹² although this is difficult to prove. In such a context, "senior bureaucrats... are regarded as the natural allies and successors to political leadership".¹³

Different state and administrative traditions

Governing from the bottom-up in Switzerland

Swiss public administration does not perfectly fit into the common European typologies of administrative systems and is sometimes called a hybrid containing elements of the Scandinavian, the Napoleonic and the Anglo-Saxon models.¹⁴ Characteristic elements are the strong decentralisation giving considerable discretion to the lower state units, the lack of a clear separation between the state and the private sector, and an accessible public service considered to be on eye-level with the citizens.

¹¹ Chan, Heng Chee, *Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?*. University of Singapore, Department of Political Science, 1975.

¹² Saw, Swee-Hock, and R.S. Bhathal, *Singapore Towards the Year 2000*. NUS Press, 1981.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kuhlmann, Sabine and Hellmut Wollmann (2014). Introduction to Comparative Public Administration. Administrative Systems and Reforms in Europe. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. p. 21.

The history of Swiss bottom-up nation building prevented the formation of a strong nation-state with a large and powerful administration.¹⁵ All the competences the national government and its administration possess today had to be transferred to them through the consent of the people and the cantons at the polls. The cantons jealously guarded their competences and, with them, their particularities in important domains such as education, health and many others, and only reluctantly accepted attempts to harmonise legislation for the whole country. They were, not astonishingly, particularly hesitant to grant the national government the right to levy tax on income and wealth as well as to collect value-added tax (VAT). The highest possible tax rates are written down in the Constitution and cannot be changed without the direct democratic consent of the cantons and the citizens. Where nationwide programs are needed, the national government is responsible for regulatory activities, while the implementation and execution of the programs remain in the hands of the lower units. Swiss federalism can thus best be described as a cooperative, leaving room for tailor-made solutions. The political system remains characterised by diversity, with far-reaching competences of the lower state units. There are considerably more civil servants working for the 26 cantons and the more than 2,300 municipalities and cities than there are for the national government.

The small size of many of the cantons, together with a larger number of very small municipalities, also hampered the formation of a large and strong state sector. Very much in line with the predominant doctrine of liberalism, and because of Switzerland's territorial organisation, a close cooperation with the private sector was inevitable. Especially on the local level, the outsourcing of specific tasks, such as road maintenance or the assessment of working permits, was practiced long before New Public Management asked for it. The main reason for this was the small size of most of the municipalities, resulting in their inability to run a large professional administration. The ratio of public

¹⁵Ladner, Andreas (2013). "Der Schweizer Staat, politisches Systems und Aufgabenerbringung", in: Ladner, Andreas, Jean-Loup Chappelet, Yves Emery, Peter Knoepfel, Luzius Mader, Nils Soguel und Frédéric Varone (Hrsg.). *Handbuch der öffentlichen Verwaltung in der Schweiz*. Zürich: NZZ libro. S. 23–46.

spending to gross national product (GNP) in Switzerland is comparatively low, not because services and facilities do not exist but because they are provided for in a mixed system together with the private sector and do not enter the state budget, similar to the compulsory health insurance or an important part of the old age pension scheme. In a similar vein, only very few politicians are full-time politicians. Most Members of Parliament fulfill their mandate on a part-time basis and usually have another professional engagement. This is even more so the case at the lower levels and it is commonly referred to as the “militia system” (*Milizsystem*). Apart from saving costs, the main advantage of such a system is that politicians do not lose touch with society and the private sector, and this is meant to bring politics closer to the people.

Another distinct characteristic is the autonomy of the lower-level units when it comes to their budget. In general, cantons and municipalities are responsible for their expenditures and have to cover them through their own income. The amount of transfers from the central government is rather low, but in exchange, they collect the larger part of the tax on income and wealth, which is the major tax in Switzerland. Here, they also set the tax rate which can vary considerably from one municipality to another and from one canton to another. As predicted by the theory of fiscal federalism, this puts pressure on the lower level units, the cantons and the municipalities, to provide their services efficiently and to cut unnecessary costs for the administration. An increase in expenditure due to overambitious projects or an inefficient administration is likely to cause an increase in the tax rate which then might lead to the loss of taxpayers if they choose to ‘vote with their feet’. Since opportunities are unequally distributed over the country and there are huge differences between the financial centers such as Zurich and Geneva and the mountainous areas in the Alps, there is a redistribution scheme which operates not only vertically from the central government to the poorer cantons, but also horizontally from the richer to the poorer cantons. It guarantees minimal standard living conditions for the disadvantaged areas.

In a nutshell, all the principles which can be found on the reform agenda of New Public Management — such as decentralisation, cooperation with the private sector, fiscal equivalence and citizen orientation — are not particularly new for Switzerland but rather the

result of bottom-up nation building and the lack of a strong central power or emperor in the past. Cultural diversity has led to the acceptance of pragmatic solutions, often combining elements of different schools and theories. Switzerland has neither a presidential nor a parliamentary system, it is a hybrid of both. It is neither a Scandinavian welfare state nor is it a liberal country like the United States. It fosters competition between the lower levels but it has an elaborate system of equalising differences. It promotes self-responsibility but it has an inclusive system of social security, old age pension, unemployment benefits and health insurance.

Governing from the top-down in Singapore

Like Switzerland, Singapore has been described as a ‘hybrid’ of various types of administrative traditions in the sense that it displays characteristics of the colonial-bureaucratic, the developmental, and the new public management ‘Southeast Asian’ models.¹⁶ Its colonial-bureaucratic heritage is evident in the way it has adopted the British model of parliamentary democracy and institutions such as the Public Service Commission, driven by principles such as meritocracy, efficiency and pragmatism. Civil servants are clearly subordinate to political leaders in accordance with Weberian principles. Singapore also adheres to the development administration model, in the sense that the Singapore public service was primarily responsible for the planning and implementation of Singapore’s long-term economic development. Singapore chose to do so by establishing government-linked companies and forming partnerships with investors. In this sense, new public management is also compatible with Singapore because market-based principles have been at the core of Singapore’s developmental strategy since independence. Features of NPM are present in key public service initiatives, such as PS21 (Public Service for the 21st Century), which emphasised innovation, greater ministerial autonomy and the importance

¹⁶Haque, M. Shamsul, “Theory and Practice of Public Administration in Southeast Asia: Traditions, Directions, and Impacts”. *International Journal of Public Administration* 30, no. 12–14 (November 9, 2007): 1297–1326. doi:10.1080/01900690701229434.

of attracting talent, but crucially did not question the leading role of the state.¹⁷ According to Martin Painter, “corporatisation and privatisation have been pursued, but not to the extent of undermining control of these corporations by the political and bureaucratic elites.” Unlike the other ‘Asian Tigers’, the Singapore government owns its biggest companies.¹⁸

Thus in Singapore, it is the state that is guided by the logic of pragmatism, rationality and efficiency. The description of Singapore being run like a corporation — “Singapore Inc” (used to refer to the combination of government and government-linked corporations) — remains in vogue; the government remains very much committed to fiscal prudence. Public spending in Singapore was a mere 14.2 percent of GDP in 2013,¹⁹ and limited welfare provisions mean that self-reliance is encouraged, with social assistance only offered as a last resort.

Therefore, the principles of New Public Management exist in Singapore and even predated the movement itself, but were precisely the product of a deliberate state strategy to seek partnerships with the private sector and embrace internationalisation at a time when poor countries looked at multinational corporations with much suspicion. However, Singapore has adopted the means and methods of NPM but not its fundamental assumption — that the private sector can do a better job than the state itself. Rather, Singapore prides itself on a careful blend of state-managed capitalism and indirect forms of control, guided foremost by the twin tenets of meritocracy and pragmatism.

Public administration in Singapore is very much characterised by the idea of merit-driven elite governance; both civil servants and politicians are selected on the basis of achievement criteria, and the public service actively competes with the private sector for the best

¹⁷McLaughlin, Kathleen, Ewan Ferlie, Professor and Head of Department the School of Management Ewan Ferlie, and Stephen Osborne P, *New Public Management: Current Trends and Future Prospects*. Routledge, 2005.

¹⁸“Whither Singapore Inc?” *The Economist*, November 28, 2002. <http://www.economist.com/node/1465814>.

¹⁹Singapore Budget 2014. http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2014/download/FY2014_Analysis_of_Revenue_and_Expenditure.pdf

talent.²⁰ Singapore's improbable economic success has often been attributed to the vision and foresight of its team of legendary first-generation leaders. Wedded to this is the belief that an equally talented and capable leadership is needed to sustain Singapore's economic miracle. To this end, a number of policies in Singapore are devoted to recruiting the best possible talents for civil service jobs, such as giving out prestigious government scholarships to finance the university education of top students, or paying competitive salaries to top civil service and political office holders that are pegged to that of the private sector. For example, meritocracy is taken to its logical end through the creation of the Management Associates Programme, the elite scheme within the Singapore civil service. The civil servants who are part of this programme are groomed to take on leadership positions in the civil service; they are rotated through different ministries in order to hone their management skills, and are occasionally 'seconded' out to other government-linked organisations or companies. They are also rigorously evaluated by their peers and superiors on a regular basis, using a rubric based on Shell's human resource methodology emphasising HAIR qualities — *helicopter* ability, power of *analysis*, their sense of *imagination* and their sense of *reality*.

Singapore and Switzerland: Similar in Output Legitimacy, Different in Input Legitimacy

The concepts of input and output legitimacy are very helpful in understanding the similarities and differences between the two countries. In 1970, using the case study of the European Union, Scharpf theorised democratic legitimacy in two dimensions, which he referred to as the 'inputs' and the 'outputs' of a political system. Alluding to Lincoln's famous assertion about democracy, Scharpf suggested that input legitimacy was political participation 'by' the people, while output legitimacy referred to effective governing 'for' the people. In other words, input legitimacy referred to the existence of 'mechanisms or procedures' that

²⁰Quah, Jon S.T., *Public Administration Singapore-Style*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2010.

linked political decisions with citizens' preferences, while output legitimacy referred to 'achieving the goals that citizens collectively care about'. Institutions had to 'work', 'perform', or be able to 'deliver the goods', because if democratic processes were not able to produce effective outcomes, democracy would be an 'empty ritual'.²¹

Other authors added that input legitimacy focused on democratic elements of decision making, emphasising consent and 'what to do' rather than on 'what to obtain',²² and the process of gaining citizen consent by making sure that their preferences were taken into account through participation channels.²³ Output legitimacy, on the other hand, focused on outcomes, or the "utilitarian/welfare-economics-oriented criterion of the best possible attempt to achieve a particular political goal".²⁴

In 1999, Scharpf clarified his definition by arguing that input legitimacy referred to the participatory quality of the process leading to laws and rules as ensured by the 'majoritarian' institutions of electoral representation, while output legitimacy was concerned with the problem-solving quality of the laws and rules, and was guaranteed by a range of institutional mechanisms. He found that both input and output legitimacy were necessary for democratic legitimisation, but stated that in the case of the EU, both forms of legitimacy were facing serious challenges.

The debate in the literature has also focused on the notion of a trade-off between 'input' and 'output' legitimacy, which has also been related to

²¹ Boedeltje, Mijke, and Juul Cornips, *Input and Output Legitimacy in Interactive Governance*. NIG Annual Work Conference 2004 Rotterdam, October 19, 2004. <http://repub.eur.nl/res/pub/1750/>

²² Beisheim, Marianne, and Klaus Dingwerth, "Procedural Legitimacy and Private Transnational Governance", 2008. http://www.edocs.fu-berlin.de/docs/receive/FUDOCS_document_00000000337.

²³ Lieberherr, Eva, "The Role of Throughput in the Input-Output Legitimacy Debate: Insights from Public and Private Governance Modes in the Swiss and". Accessed March 4, 2015. http://icpublicpolicy.web2.mezcalito.net/IMG/pdf/panel_39_s2_lieberherr.pdf.

²⁴ Wolf, Klaus Dieter, "Contextualizing Normative Standards for Legitimate Governance beyond the State". In *Participatory Governance*, edited by Jürgen R. Grote and Bernard Gbikpi, 35–50. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2002. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-663-11003-3_2.

the notion of the ‘democratic dilemma’²⁵ or the conflict between system capacity and citizen effectiveness as described by Dahl and Tufte.²⁶ An emphasis on output could lead to a ‘democratic deficit’ if citizens’ preferences were not taken into consideration. However, an emphasis on input could result in a lower output due to longer decision-making processes, or because citizens might not act in favour of the common good.²⁷ There are various ways to measure output legitimacy. At the core of the concept is the performance of a given government or of the political system as such.

Following Scharpf, there are three types of requirements for output-related democratic legitimacy: economic prosperity, realisation of the common good and prevention of tyranny.²⁸ The first requirement is quite easy to measure but falls only to some extent into the responsibility of the national government and its administration. Nevertheless, as we have seen, both Singapore and Switzerland constantly rank in the top group when it comes to the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.²⁹ According to other indicators which more directly capture government effectiveness and performance,³⁰ Switzerland and Singapore have performed remarkably well. They were ranked 5th and 7th worldwide on the Corruption Perception Index (2014), and 1st and 2nd worldwide in the Global Competitiveness Index.

²⁵Dahl, Robert A, “A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation”. *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 23–34. doi:10.2307/2151659.

²⁶Dahl, Robert Alan, and Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy*. Stanford University Press, 1973.

²⁷Lieberherr, Eva, “The Role of Throughput in the Input-Output Legitimacy Debate: Insights from Public and Private Governance Modes”. Accessed March 4, 2015. http://icpublicpolicy.web2.mezcalito.net/IMG/pdf/panel_39_s2_lieberherr.pdf.

²⁸Scharpf, F.W. (1970). *Demokratiethorie zwischen Utopie und Anpassung*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag.

²⁹See for example <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD/countries?display=default>. Accessed March 19, 2015.

³⁰Zweifel, Thomas D, *International Organizations and Democracy: Accountability, Politics, and Power*. Swiss Consulting Group, Inc., 2006.

Table 1: Corruption Perception Index (2014)

Country	Score	Rank
Singapore	84	7
Switzerland	86	5

Source: "How Corrupt Is Your Country?" Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/infographic>.

Table 2: Global Competitiveness Index (2014)

Country	Score	Rank
Singapore	5.6	2
Switzerland	5.7	1

Source: "Global Competitiveness Report 2014–2015". *World Economic Forum*. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-report-2014-2015/>.

The Worldwide Governance Indicators (2013) provides a more telling breakdown of different areas of governance: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. Here, Switzerland scored above the 90th percentile for all indicators, while Singapore scored above the 90th percentile for all indicators except Voice and Accountability, where it scored only in the 52nd percentile. Voice and Accountability measures the 'input' side of legitimacy, while the other five indicators measure the 'output' side of legitimacy. The rankings suggest that both countries are globally acknowledged to be models of good governance in terms of 'output' legitimacy. In terms of 'input' legitimacy, however, Switzerland is perceived to be more accountable to its citizens.

Rankings that explicitly take 'input legitimacy' indicators into account, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, illustrate a substantial gap between Singapore and Switzerland across

Table 3: Worldwide Governance Indicators (2013)

Country	Voice and Accountability	Political Stability	Government Effectiveness	Regulatory Quality	Rule of Law	Control of Corruption
Singapore	52.1	95.7	99.5	100	96.3	96.7
Switzerland	96.6	97.6	97.6	94.3	96.7	97.6

Source: "World Governance Indicators 2013". Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>.

Table 4: *The Economist Intelligence Unit* Democracy Index (2013)

Country	Electoral Process and Functioning						
	Rank	Score	Pluralism	Government	Political Participation	Political Culture	Civil Liberties
Singapore	80	5.89	4.33	7.14	3.89	6.88	7.35
Switzerland	7	9.09	9.58	9.29	7.78	9.38	9.41

Source: "Democracy Index 2013". *Economist Intelligence Unit*. Accessed March 4, 2015. http://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy0814.

indicators such as electoral process and political participation. The Democracy Index gave Singapore fairly high scores in terms of functioning government, political culture and civil liberties, but seemed to suggest that institutional factors were to account for the lack of citizen 'input' in the electoral and political process. A closer look at the methodology for the Democracy Index suggests that factors such as the limited presence of opposition members in Singapore's government as well as restrictions on the press and public demonstrations could have explained its score.

How to Bring the People in: Direct Democracy vs. Public Consultation

Indicators may be a useful guide, but they merely provide a one-dimensional and rather simplistic snapshot of input legitimacy in Singapore and Switzerland. If input legitimacy is "government by the people", the question is: To what extent are the citizens really able to make them heard and to influence their government's policies? Here, the two countries — as we will see in this section — build upon two completely different concepts: direct democracy in Switzerland and public consultation in Singapore.

Chart I: Forms of consultation

	Method of selection			
Public opinion	1. Self-selection	2. Non-random sample	3. Random sample	4. "Everyone"
A. Raw	1A. SLOPs	2A. Some polls	3A. Most polls	4. Referendum democracy
B. Refined	1B. Discussion groups	2B. Citizens' juries, etc.	3B. Deliberative polls	4B. 'Deliberation Day'

Source: Fishkin, James, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

(Note: SLOPs refer to 'Self-Selected Listener Opinion Poll'). Chart taken from Fishkin (2009)

Applying Fishkin's eight methods of Public Consultation (Fishkin, 2009)³¹ to Switzerland and Singapore illustrates the significant differences between both countries. While the practice of referendum democracy is highly ingrained in Switzerland, public consultation in Singapore generally relies on the practice of convening self-selected discussion groups or publishing public consultation papers regarding proposed policy changes on government websites for the public to respond to.

Direct democracy: Institutionalised public decision making in Switzerland

When people reflect on direct democracy in Switzerland, they usually only look at the tip of the iceberg, at referendums and initiatives on the national level. Of course, there have been some spectacular decisions that resulted from this process: when Swiss citizens refused to abolish the army in 1989, refused to join the European Economic Area in 1992, prohibited the construction of minarets in 2009, or refused to extend holidays to six weeks a year in 2012. However, the bulk of decisions take place at lower levels and they are, by far, not as spectacular. In his/her active political life, a Swiss citizen is called for up to 1500 decisions at the polls on a huge variety of questions. They concern smaller or larger adjustments of the constitution

³¹ Fishkin, James. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

and laws, new legislation, and very often, costly projects such as new tramways, parks, school buildings, museums, football grounds and such.

Most importantly, Swiss direct democracy has little to do with citizen participation as it is discussed in many other countries nowadays. Of course, it offers citizens additional possibilities to participate politically but it is, above all, about binding political decisions that have to be implemented. The government does not want to know what the people want; it is told what it has to do. For instance, the government wanted to join the European Economic Area but the people refused. Similarly, it did not want to prohibit the construction of minarets, but the citizens wanted such a ban and thus the Constitution was amended accordingly.

It is also important to state that direct democracy was not simply given to the citizens because the parties in power wanted to let them participate in the decision-making process. The concept has its origin in the French Revolution which emphasised the sovereignty of the people. As the prominent Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau has mentioned, the sovereignty of the people is best exercised directly and not through representatives in Parliament. Starting off with a very minimalistic Constitution in 1848, the mandatory referendum was the price to pay for getting a more ambitious constitution accepted, giving more competences to the central state. The initiative for a partial revision of the constitution granted in 1891 was also a means to safeguard the existing constitution in its totality. On a lower level, the ideas of the French Revolution fell on even more fertile grounds. Referendums and initiatives were introduced earlier and were met with already existing means of local self-government in the form of citizens' assemblies.

Often the question arises on whether Swiss direct democracy can be practised in other countries. It is not the place here to enter into this debate; however, it has to be kept in mind that direct democracy also has an impact on other elements of the political system. To prevent strong parties from obstructing the decisions of government and parliament by the means of a referendum, they have to be integrated into governmental responsibilities. This mechanism, at least to some extent, helps to explain Swiss multi-party government. Besides, following Lijphart, power sharing and consensus democracy is not uncommon for small and heterogeneous societies.³²

³²Lijphart, Arend, "The Southern European Examples of Democratization: Six Lessons for Latin America". *Government and Opposition* 25, no. 01 (January 1990): 68–84. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.1990.tb00747.x.

Direct democracy definitely changes the relationship between citizens, the state and its administration. It is not a question of “we” and “them” from the perspective of the citizens. Citizens are directly involved in the most important decisions, and such decisions, regardless of whether they are good or bad, right or wrong, have a very high legitimacy. For politicians and for the administration, direct democracy makes them — sometimes very painfully — aware that they are the agents and not the principal. For important projects, policymakers need the approval of the citizens and the same is true for important expenditures.

Probably most important is the direct link between direct democracy and the tax level which is particularly salient on the local level, and, to some extent, on the cantonal level. Municipalities have to cover most of the public expenditures with their own resources because there are — as we have seen — very little transfers from higher levels. Citizens are well aware that the costly projects might lead to a tax increase. Given the fact that they have the final say, they think twice before accepting a project. The government therefore needs good arguments to justify its projects. The citizens, on the other side, learn to take up responsibilities for their community. They often say ‘yes’ to spending money on new schools, sports facilities, tramways and parks even if they do not personally benefit from them, knowing that they are also likely to be dependent on the understanding and benevolence of others in time to come.

Ad-hoc public consultation in Singapore: A history of consultative exercises

Citizen participation in Singapore has often been characterised by ad-hoc public consultations but they are now increasingly formalised in the political process. Although governing in Singapore remains, by and large, a top-down process mainly controlled by politicians and bureaucrats, public feedback has increasingly been taken into account when making policy decisions, especially in recent years. This gradual evolution was facilitated by the rise of social media and the growth of civil society, enabling the expression of more diverse opinions on social and political issues. The Singapore government has made several notable and large-scale attempts to engage citizens through ground-up public consultations,

in tandem with conducting their own polls and opinion surveys. Such consultative exercises, such as *The Next Lap* in 1991, *Singapore 21* in 1999, and *Remaking Singapore* in 2003, tended to take place after critical periods in Singapore's history, such as political or economic crises.³³ A number of scholars have commented that such exercises were attempts to channel dissent and educate the public, without genuinely viewing citizens as equal partners. In particular, Garry Rodan argued that far from weakening the PAP state, participation enabled an expansion of the state; it promoted "co-option" rather than contestation, reinforcing regime stability; and it was circumscribed by certain limits. It could not, for example, 'undermine the government's standing'.³⁴

Past attempts at consultation were also shaped by the political context of the time — what Chan Heng Chee called an 'administrative state' characterised by PAP hegemony and devoid of 'real' politics.³⁵ It was also what Chua Beng Huat called a 'communitarian' state, with the government trying to maintain power by being the arbiter between different communities.³⁶ Within this context, consultation initiatives were also influenced by specific events. Firstly, the election results in 1984 which saw the end of the PAP monopoly in parliament preceded the setting up of the *Feedback Unit* in 1985. In 1987, Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) were set up to enable PAP MPs to play a more active role in questioning government policies.

Soon after the 1988 elections, the government set up the National Agenda, an intra-party attempt to better engage citizens. In 1989, a Cabinet sub-committee was tasked to develop a broad agenda, known as

³³ Kenneth Paul Tan, *Our Singapore Conversation: Telling National Stories*, in *Global-is-Asian*, October 2013.

³⁴ 'Singapore "Exceptionalism"? Authoritarian Rule and State Transformation' in Joseph Wong and Edward Friedman (editors), *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose* (New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 231–51). See also Chua, Beng Huat. "The Relative Autonomies of State and Civil Society in Singapore". *State-Society Relations in Singapore* (2000): 62–76.

³⁵ Chan, Heng Chee, *Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?*. Singapore: Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, 1975.

³⁶ Chua, Beng-Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. Vol. 10. Routledge, 2002.

The Next Lap, for Singapore's long-term development. It drew on the ideas put forth in the past by government and private groups.³⁷ In total, 1,000 people were consulted, culminating in a 160-page book, *The Next Lap*, that mapped out plans for the next 20 to 30 years.

In 1990, Goh Chok Tong became the second Prime Minister of Singapore. He promised a more consultative style of governance, and public consultation attempts under his leadership could be seen as an attempt to establish his credibility. This new inclusiveness was manifested in a variety of ways, such as the adoption of a national ideology known as the Shared Values,³⁸ and the setting up of the NCMP and NMP schemes³⁹ and Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs).⁴⁰ Such institutional innovations provided 'alternative voices' in Parliament while co-opting civil society groups and the public, thus reinforcing the PAP's political longevity. Moreover, institutions such as the GRC (Group Representation Constituencies) system and the Elected Presidency served to consolidate the PAP's hold on power while making symbolic appeals to 'inclusiveness'.

After the 1997 and 2001 elections, two public consultation attempts were launched: *Singapore 21* (S21)⁴¹ and *Remaking Singapore*, which consulted 6,000 people and 10,000 people respectively on competing visions for Singapore, and how to make Singapore less materialistic. Academics commented that these exercises appeared to have a pre-set agenda and appeared to be exercises in "pseudo-participation".⁴²

³⁷Tan, Lay Yuen. "The Next Lap." *National Library Board*. Accessed March 4, 2015. Accessed from http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_165_2004-12-23.html.

³⁸Lim, Tin Seng. "Shared Values." *National Library Board*, July 13, 2015. Accessed from http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_542_2004-12-18.html.

³⁹The NCMP (Non-Constituency Member of Parliament) scheme allowed the 'best losers' from opposition parties to enter the Parliament, while the NMP (Nominated Member of Parliament) scheme created a category of parliamentarians who were representatives of civil society organisations and other interest groups.

⁴⁰GPCs examine the policies, programmes and proposed legislation of a particular government ministry, provides the ministry with feedback and suggestions, and is consulted by the ministry on issues of public interest. They are backed by resource panels that members of the public are invited to join.

⁴¹Terence Lee, *Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (Oxon: Routledge), 2010, p. 89.

⁴²Ibid.

The most recent exercise, *Our Singapore Conversation* (OSC), was the most ambitious of such consultative initiatives. Convened in 2012, and headed by a group of civil servants determined to break away from the mould of the past, the OSC exercise was innovative in its own right and established useful innovations in public engagement. Involving more than 47,000 participants through dialogue sessions in seven languages and dialects, OSC was divided into two phases and a survey involving 4,000 respondents. Phase 1 was an ‘agenda-building’ phase focused on the question “What would you like to see in 2030?”. Phase 2 was focused on specific themes which were inductively drawn from the first phase, and involved certain ministries, such as the housing, education, manpower and transport ministries.

By using an open-ended format⁴³ and small focus-group discussions, the OSC avoided being just an exercise in testing or ‘rubber-stamping’ government agendas, and provided an additional instrument for ministries to include in their toolbox of public engagement. Moreover, although the OSC’s consideration to reach out to vulnerable and voiceless groups could be seen as legitimising the ‘silent majority’ concept, it could also be interpreted as contributing to the exercise’s democratic legitimacy in including previously-unheard groups.

However, the tangible contributions of the OSC notwithstanding, one must be careful not to overstate its impact. The OSC Committee was made up of Members of Parliament as well as selected members of civil society, with the exclusion of the opposition and other critical voices, casting doubt on its inclusiveness.⁴⁴ The Committee’s preference for self-selected focus groups as a method of engagement suggested that only people comfortable with this form of engagement would participate.

Besides the OSC and other public consultation exercises, individual ministries in Singapore have developed their own consultation processes to gather public feedback on proposed new legislation or amendments to existing legislation. These processes take place before new policies are rolled out. Consultation papers are published on government ministries’

⁴³As cited in an interview with Kenneth Paul Tan, 19 September 2013.

⁴⁴Tan, “Our Singapore Conversation: Telling National Stories.”

websites and interested parties are invited to submit written comments, ensuring that feedback from the public is taken into account — albeit in a non-binding way — during the policymaking process.

Therefore, while Switzerland has a formal and institutionalised form of public consultation in the form of direct democracy, Singapore is still experimenting with different ways of integrating public feedback into policy-making. Input legitimacy in Switzerland is high because citizens have the final say in policy-making, while in Singapore, despite the evolution of public consultation towards greater participation and inclusiveness, the government retains the final say.⁴⁵

Discussion

As small states with diverse populations, both Singapore and Switzerland face additional hurdles to balancing input and output legitimacy. Besides having to balance the needs of different groups within society, both governments have to negotiate the trade-offs between domestic and international demands. While in Switzerland, the referendum appears to be a handy political instrument to mediate between these groups, it is not without its limitations. The 2009 Swiss minaret referendum is only one out of a growing number of referendums championed by nationalist parties which have appeared to stigmatise a minority group using a perfectly legitimate political process. In recent years, much debate in Switzerland has focused on whether the fact that referendums are becoming increasingly nationalistic and taking place more often justifies reforms to the system of direct democracy. Some voices demand raising the threshold of the number of signatures needed to call a national referendum. More importantly, there are also demands to search for mechanisms (for example, a constitutional court) to declare proposals

⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, Singapore's constitution does have provisions for the use of referenda for specific purposes, such as constitutional amendments. A referendum was carried out only once in Singapore's history — to decide on the terms of merger with Malaysia in 1962. Even so, the referendum did not give citizens a choice on whether merger should take place — the vote was on how much autonomy Singapore would retain post-merger.

invalid when they infringe guaranteed international human rights and contradict the core values of the Swiss Federal Constitution.

Another feature of direct democracy is the fact that it appears to operate in a vacuum of presumed popular sovereignty. The underlying assumption is that the will of the people *is* the national interest. Unlike in Singapore, where diplomats are fond of saying that “domestic politics should stop at the water’s edge”,⁴⁶ foreign and defence policy is a fixture of Swiss referenda, from the numerous votes on European integration and the abolishment of military service to the proposed acquisition of 22 Gripen fighter aircraft. In recent years, however, there have been instances of conflict between Switzerland’s international obligations and the results of its domestic referenda. A good example is the Swiss immigration referendum in February 2014, which aimed to limit immigration through quotas. After it was accepted with a razor-thin margin of 0.3 percent, the European Union signalled that the existing and new collaborations it had with Switzerland, especially in the areas of research and education, could be adversely affected. The people had spoken, but they would also have to pay a price for their decision. In other words, high input legitimacy does not guarantee that the decision taken is a good one and that there will be no problems on the output side.

In Singapore, however, the non-binding nature of public consultation has given rise to doubts about how seriously the government takes public feedback into account. In the case of “Our Singapore Conversation”, the government took pains to emphasise that it was a ‘learning journey’, and the views expressed would inform policy reviews — but also that they would need to balance the ‘trade-offs’ between the needs of different groups, and also the challenges of staying competitive internationally. While general elections every five years act as a barometer of public satisfaction towards government policies, the power of individual citizens to decisively influence the outcome of specific policies remains limited.

The debate over input and output legitimacy has to be reframed as a debate between international and domestic demands. In many cases,

⁴⁶ Kausikan, Bilahari. “Lee Kuan Yew Played Chess, Not Draughts: Bilahari.” *Singapolitics*. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/mr-lee-kuan-yew-played-chess-not-draughts-bilahari>.

the bottom line of policy-making in Singapore remains the survival imperative: Singaporean policymakers often attribute the country's success to the fact that it is an open and trusted destination of international investment, and by that token, domestic demands (such as curbs on immigration, higher social spending or a minimum wage) which would have an impact on Singapore's international competitiveness would threaten the country's very survival. Output legitimacy — defined in terms of international economic relevance — would always take precedence over input legitimacy.

In Switzerland, although tensions between domestic and international pressures are keenly felt, the people's will is usually respected, with the consequence that the results of a popular vote often forms the starting point of subsequent international negotiations, as was the case with the immigration referendum. In rare cases of perceived crisis — notably when Switzerland was threatened by the United States over cases of suspected tax evasion — the Swiss government took the step of turning over account information to the USA, in possible violation of the country's bank secrecy laws.⁴⁷ No amount of popular sovereignty rhetoric could protect Switzerland from what was to be a long-drawn onslaught on its cherished ideal of banking secrecy. Small countries may have to accept that they may not always have the power to withstand international pressure, especially if there is also resistance this position within the country, as it was the case in Switzerland where the left was also fighting against banking secrecy.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, what author Catherine Lim calls a 'great affective divide', and more recently, a 'crisis of trust', continues to loom over the government-citizen relationship.⁴⁸ Social commentator Alex Au noted the persistence of a 'petitionary state',⁴⁹ in which citizens got into the habit of proposing 'wishlists' to a paternalistic government, rather than taking the initiative to effect social change on their own.

⁴⁷ "Swiss Banks to Divulge Names of Wealthy US Tax Avoiders, Pay Billions in Fines". Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://rt.com/business/swiss-banks-disclose-assets-196/>.

⁴⁸ "An Open Letter to the Prime Minister". *Catherinelim.sg*. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://catherinelim.sg/2014/06/07/an-open-letter-to-the-prime-minster/>.

⁴⁹ "The Conversation Isn't Getting Very Far." *Yawning Bread*. Accessed March 4, 2015. <https://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/the-conversation-isnt-getting-very-far/>.

In conclusion, while globally admired for their reliability and efficiency, decision-making in Singapore and Switzerland is guided by two different forces: one by the long-term vision of a strong government, the other by the collective will of its citizenry. Both are driven by close collaboration with the private sector, a highly pragmatic, results-driven work culture, and low levels of corruption. But in the long run, both systems will have to adapt to a changing international context. There is no iron law stating a trade-off between output and input legitimacy as the Swiss example shows, but to achieve and maintain high levels on both components of legitimacy in a globalised world is quite a challenge. Singapore will have to do more to systematically integrate citizen input into its policy process, while Switzerland has to make sure that its institutions of direct democracy can be reconciled with its international obligations, and are not taken hostage by domestic forces which may threaten its foundations.

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