

**SPURIOUS MAJORITY:  
THE 'WRONG WINNER' RESULT  
IN THE THIRTEENTH GENERAL ELECTION  
OF MALAYSIA**

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**SPURIOUS MAJORITY:  
THE 'WRONG WINNER' RESULT  
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OF MALAYSIA**

by

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

DAP	Democratic Action Party
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
MPs	Members of Parliament
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
PAS	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PKR	People's Justice Party
SMDP	Single-member-district-plurality Electoral System
SPR	Election Commission of Malaysia
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

## GLOSSARY

Bias	The disparity between the total seats two main parties would win in a notional election, or the disparity between the actual electoral outcomes and the alternative ones, if they garner equal or reverse vote shares in the notional election thereof.
Competitive Authoritarianism	A type of political system that fuses the forms and features of electoral democracy and the authoritarian structures and powers of a strong state with broadly inclusive and minimally pluralistic, open, and competitive elections, even though such elections are usually tarnished by civil-liberties violations, electoral manipulations, and/or an uneven playing field.
Gerrymandering	A form of intentional boundary discrimination that is carried out via a constituency delimitation that favours a party in either the presence or absence of malapportionment so that its votes are more efficiently distributed due to favourable constituency boundaries, thus allowing it to win more seats than other parties.
Malapportionment	A form of intentional numerical discrimination that is carried out via a constituency delimitation that produces disparity in constituency sizes or the number of electorate per district, or discrepancy between each district's seat share and population share, therefore effectively inflates the vote values in smaller districts to the advantage of a party that is strong in such districts, and vice versa.
Polarisation of Voter Preferences	Comparatively small margin of total vote shares between the two main parties, coalitions, or alliances which shows that voter preferences are split almost equally between them, with neither of them a clear winner, and in a predominant party system, this is only possible in the presence of opposition cohesion which culminates in only two viable and real choices

on the ballots in spite of the presence of third parties and independent candidates.

Single-Member-District-Plurality Electoral System (SMDP)	A type of electoral system that operates at two levels: first, at the district level, electorate are allowed to cast a single vote for a candidate in a single-member territorial district, and the candidate with the most votes is then elected, regardless of whether it is by a majority or a plurality of votes; and second, at the national level, a party that has the highest number of members of parliament forms the government.
Spurious Majority/ 'Wrong Winner' Result/ 'Perverse' Result	The winning party, coalition, or alliance wins a parliamentary election by its victory in a majority of seats even though it gains a lower national vote share than another party, coalition, or alliance.
Third-party Votes	The votes gained by smaller parties which are a subset of minor parties that does not ally with, isolated by, and wedges between two main parties, coalitions, or alliances, whereby such votes may be enough or not insofar as harming those main parties, coalitions, or alliances.
Turnout	An active, conscious, and low-cost political behaviour episodically partook by voters who come out and cast their ballots in an election, and in the absence of such a behaviour, some electorate inactively engage in abstention.
Two-alliance System	The nexus of interparty competitive relationships encapsulated in their relative vote and seat shares that manifests at two levels: first, 'local bipartism' in which only two parties contest competitively at the district level; and second, 'national multipartism' but which has been dominated by two main alliances, each of which contains allied parties that avoid contesting against each other in the same districts and have the explicit intention of forming a long-lasting governmental alliance.

**MAJORITI PALSU: KEPUTUSAN ‘PEMENANG YANG SALAH’  
DALAM PILIHAN RAYA UMUM MALAYSIA YANG KETIGA BELAS**

**ABSTRAK**

Pada Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia yang Ketiga Belas 2013, perikatan pemerintah memenangi pilihan raya umum dengan memenangi kerusi majoriti mutlak di Dewan Rakyat, walaupun mereka hilang undi popular kepada perikatan pembangkang buat kali pertama. Keputusan ini dikenali sebagai ‘majoriti palsu’, keputusan ‘pemenang yang salah’, atau keputusan ‘tidak munasabah’ yang berlaku apabila sebuah parti, gabungan, atau perikatan memenangi pilihan raya umum walaupun hanya meraih undi keseluruhan yang kedua banyak. Kajian ini bermatlamat untuk, pertama sekali, menentukan faktor-faktor dan cara-cara faktor tersebut mengakibatkan majoriti palsu di Malaysia; dan kedua, menentukan kesan-kesan relatif antara faktor-faktor sistemik dan faktor-faktor langsung, dan antara faktor-faktor institusional dan faktor-faktor reaktif, terhadap keputusan ini. Kajian ini menggunakan penyelidikan kaedah campuran selari yang merangkumi kaedah kuantitatif dan kaedah kualitatif dalam pengumpulan data dan analisis data. Kaedah kuantitatif adalah berasaskan data berangka yang diperolehi daripada keputusan pilihan raya manakala kaedah kualitatif adalah berasaskan data naratif yang diperolehi melalui temuduga dengan ahli-ahli parlimen. Penemuan kajian bersepadu mengesahkan bahawa, pertama sekali, perikatan pemerintah memenangi kerusi majoriti mutlak terutamanya disebabkan oleh kelebihan besar diberikan oleh *malapportionment* dan *gerrymandering*, dan secara terhadnya disebabkan oleh autoritarianisme berdaya saing dan sistem *single-member-district-plurality*; kedua, sistem dua perikatan dan polarisasi pilihan pengundi merupakan punca-punca utama peratusan undi keseluruhan mereka adalah lebih rendah, manakala peratusan kehadiran

pengundi yang tinggi ialah punca sampingan; ketiga, pengaruh undi-undi yang diraih oleh parti ketiga dan calon bebas adalah amat kecil; akhirnya, keempat-empat kumpulan faktor memainkan peranan penting dalam menghasilkan majoriti palsu di Malaysia, walaupun cara-cara ini berlaku adalah amat berbeza bagi faktor yang berlainan.

**SPURIOUS MAJORITY: THE ‘WRONG WINNER’ RESULT  
IN THE THIRTEENTH GENERAL ELECTION OF MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

In the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013, the ruling alliance won the general election via their victory in a majority of seats, but unprecedentedly they lost the popular vote to the opposition alliance. Such a result is known as ‘spurious majority’, ‘wrong winner’ result, or ‘perverse’ result which occurs when the winning party, coalition, or alliance wins the election even though coming second in terms of their national vote share. This study aims to, first, determine the causal factors of, and examine the ways these causal factors engender, spurious majority in Malaysia; and second, find out the relative impacts between systemic factors and proximate factors, and between institutional factors and reactive factors, on such a result. To achieve these, this study uses the parallel mixed methods research that utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection and data analysis. The former method is based on numerical data derived from electoral outcomes, while the latter method is based on narrative data derived from interview accounts with members of parliament. The integrated findings of both methods show that, first, the ruling alliance’s victory in a majority of seats is primarily due to their strong lead given by malapportionment and gerrymandering and marginally due to competitive authoritarianism and the electoral system of single-member-district-plurality; second, their lower vote share is attributed to two-alliance system and polarisation of voter preferences to a great extent and high turnout to a lesser extent; thirdly, the effects of third-party votes are negligible; finally, all four groups of causal factors play a vital role in engendering spurious majority in Malaysia, even though in very different ways.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

In political sociology, the main problem of political order is the regulation of the struggle for power, and the underlying support of government is rather more imperative than its formal aspects (Broom & Selznick, 1973, p. 586). In Malaysia, the regulation of the struggle for power is in part undertaken, and the support of government is also determined to some extent, through general elections which have become “an established part of Malaysian political life” (Crouch, 1996, p. 114) as successive elections have been regularly held (Holík, 2011, p. 6; Weiss, 2015, p. 32) since independence and the expansion of the Federation of Malaya into Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> According to Rush (1992), democracy essentially revolves around elections as a means to elicit popular consent and determine the popular will (pp. 79-80). Scholars who have studied the Malaysian democracy, too, are inclined to adopt an instrumentalist view, even though a few of them are more pessimistic in comparison to Rush, concerning the roles of elections. For instance, some scholars assert that since the ruling alliance<sup>2</sup> has never been defeated at polls, elections presumably function as a ritualistic but useful means to legitimatise an authoritarian regime (Crouch, 1996, p. 114; Weiss, 2015, p. 32). This study is concerned with such a view as political legitimacy is fer-

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exception to this was in 1969 when polling in Sabah and Sarawak had been abruptly postponed due to the declaration of a state of emergency, ostensibly in response to the deadly ethnic riots in Peninsular Malaysia (Crouch, 1996, p. 114; Rachagan, 1993, pp. 16-17; Syed Farid, 1997, pp. 3-4; Tunku Mohar, 2006, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, ruling alliance refers to the National Front (previously known as the Alliance Party) which has persistently governed Malaysia at the federal level since independence (Ng, Rangel, Vaithilingam, & Pillay, 2015, p. 167; Ostwald, 2013, p. 522; Weiss, 2015, p. 33). Note that this study avoids the term of ruling ‘coalition’, which has been used frequently by scholars such as Khoo (2002, 2005), as Duverger (1951/1964) defines ‘coalition’ as ‘temporary agreement’ while ‘alliance’ as ‘lasting union’ (p. 331).

vently sought after and intensely contested electorally, even in illiberal representative democracies such as Malaysia. This is self-evident as the ruling alliance consistently justifies their uninterrupted hold on power with their colossal victories in elections. Given the limitations of an illiberal democracy, the ruling alliance is acutely aware that voting is the closest approximation to the expression of popular will (Sherman & Kolker, 1987, p. 209). Election is, after all, a social mechanism in aggregating a particular kind of preferences of a group of people (Dowse & Hughes, 1972, p. 322).

In the parliamentary democracy of Malaysia, these preferences or popular will are translated into legislative seats, and whichever party, coalition, or alliance that gains legislative majority by winning more than half of the total seats in the House of Representatives or Dewan Rakyat<sup>3</sup> wins the election. The ruling alliance has been able to secure either earned or manufactured majorities<sup>4</sup> in all general elections since independence until the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013 in which the ruling alliance unprecedentedly only manages to win via a spurious majority. Spurious majorities entail the attainment of seat majorities despite vote minorities in elections (Molina Vega, 1998, p. 55). They are also known as the ‘wrong winner’ results (Massicotte, 2007, pp. 253, 256; Newton-Farrelly, 2009, p. 471) or ‘perverse’ results (Blau, 2004, pp. 444-445). In this “most fiercely contested election in Malaysia's history” (Ng et al., 2015, p. 167), the ruling alliance garners only 47.38 per cent of

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, only mentioned as Dewan Rakyat. Following the tradition of the United Kingdom's asymmetrical bicameralism, the upper chamber of the Parliament of Malaysia, which is known as the Senate or Dewan Negara, is neither elected popularly or determine the formation of government, and as such is deemed irrelevant in this study.

<sup>4</sup> Earned majorities transpire when the winning party, coalition, or alliance wins both a majority of votes and seats, while manufactured majorities occur when a leading party in terms of votes obtains a majority of seats without a majority of votes (Siaroff, 2003, p. 145). In the latter, the winning party, coalition, or alliance loses the popular vote to a fragmented opposition, much like what occurred in the Third General Election of Malaysia in 1969, which remains the only time the ruling alliance wins via a manufactured majority.



popular vote, 3.49 per cent less than the opposition alliance,<sup>5</sup> yet is awarded with 59.91 per cent of legislative seats. Such a discrepancy between the total vote and seat shares for any party in any given election is known as observed disproportionality (Best & Zhirnov, 2015, p. 256), or alternatively as legislative or electoral disproportionality.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, a ‘wrong winner’ result seems to be an inevitable outcome of a distorted and biased process in the transfer of votes (i.e., the expression of popular will) into seats (i.e., the essence of representative democracy) in an election which engenders disproportionality. Historically, the Malaysian electoral system produces a high degree of disproportionality, thus poor in representation, particularly since the 1970s, and heavily violates the fairness principle (Croissant, 2002b, pp. 330, 360). This violation is an electoral bias which undermines representation as an ideal yet essential feature of modern democracy, and confirms Levitsky and Way’s (2010) claim that electoral contests in Malaysia are real and meaningful but essentially unfair and undemocratic (pp. 5-13).

Nonetheless, Siaroff (2003) empirically discovers that high disproportionality, as measured by the Loosemore-Hanby Index, is not the causal factor of spurious majorities (p. 150). Hence, it is false and rather oversimplified to attribute the ‘wrong winner’ results entirely to disproportionality. This prompts an urgency to carry out a more calibrated examination over the actual causal factors of spurious majorities, which have been differentiated into systemic factors and proximate factors by Siaroff

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, opposition alliance refers to the People’s Pact, which had been formed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 (Ufen, 2009, p. 618), and disintegrated on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015 when a component party declared that it had “ceased to exist” (Bedi, 2015). Unlike the ruling alliance, it is not legally registered as a single party (Weiss, 2015, p. 35).

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter, only mentioned as disproportionality. This is not to be confused with executive disproportionality, which Forestiere (2007) defines as the discrepancy between parties’ aggregated vote shares or legislative seat shares and cabinet seat shares (p. 167).

(2003, pp. 149-153). The former imply that spurious majorities are caused by large-scale and intricate configurations (i.e., the electoral system, party system, and polarisation of voter preferences<sup>7</sup>) whereas the latter suggest that spurious majorities are caused by more immediate and primary phenomena (i.e., malapportionment and gerrymandering). This study employs a two-pronged strategy so as to better understand the issue of spurious majority in Malaysia. First and foremost, this study relies on the valuable theoretical and methodological inputs from the works of political scientists<sup>8</sup> and electoral geographers<sup>9</sup> on this and related issues. Next, inspired by the critical work of Best and Zhirnov (2015), this study strives to segregate and examine the relative impacts of two groups of causal factors, namely the institutional factors and reactive factors (or behavioural factors as coined by the said scholars). The former have been rigorously studied by political scientists and electoral geographers while the latter have often been neglected. By doing so, this study attempts to reinvigorate the voting studies or vote analysis in the realm of political sociology as one of the key concerns in sociology has always been the studies of social behaviours. In short, this study undertakes a theoretical triangulation between political sociology, political science, and electoral geography.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that throughout this study, voter preferences exclusively refer to the electoral choices made by voters regarding their preferred candidates and/or parties on the ballots, and not their policy or issue preferences.

<sup>8</sup> Political sociologists have long relied upon the adaptation and acclimatisation of ideas first promulgated by political scientists in developing their own theories (Greer, 1969, p. 56).

<sup>9</sup> Even though Braungart and Braungart (2000) have neglected electoral geography as a potential discipline that has much to share with political sociology (p. 213), their key argument is unmistakable – political sociology has always been and will be benefited by relevant theoretical and methodological inputs from other disciplines, which should also include electoral geography, an important subfield of political geography within which vote studies is predominant (Leib & Quinton, 2011, p. 14).

The Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013 joins a short list of elections that produce spurious majorities, which are commonly found in the Commonwealth countries and countries that operate the single-member-district-plurality electoral system or SMDP<sup>10</sup> (Molina Vega, 1998, p. 55; Siaroff, 2003, pp. 146-147). Such a distorted and biased electoral outcome allows the ruling alliance to gain an absolute majority of seats in Dewan Rakyat in spite of the loss of popular vote to a united opposition alliance. Since the formation of parliamentary government depends upon legislative majority and the relative strength of legislative parties is determined by the composition of Dewan Rakyat, this controversially accords enormous legislative and executive powers and a tremendous upper hand in the political contests with other legislative parties to the ‘wrong winner’ – i.e., the party, coalition, or alliance which wins via a spurious majority. Subsequently, spurious majorities are said to be potentially harmful for raising the doubt of the legitimacy of government (Molina Vega, 1998, p. 55), even though it may not to the extent of threatening its grips on power. Incidentally, such a result shows that the ruling alliance fails to maintain its hegemony (Ahmad Fauzi & Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2014b, p. 2).

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

Political sociologists have consistently disregarded the issue of spurious majorities apparently due to two reasons. First, although the interdisciplinary political sociology<sup>11</sup> is primarily concerned with the dynamic relationships between society and politics (Braungart & Braungart, 2000, p. 197; Coser, 1966/1967, p. 1; Rush, 1992, p.

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, only mentioned as SMDP.

<sup>11</sup> Sartori (1969) contends that political sociology is indeed an interdisciplinary hybrid which strives to integrate social and political explanatory variables, and thus cannot be considered as a subfield of sociology (pp. 69-70).

8), the relationship between voting and electoral outcome tends to be highly influenced by an emphasis in the “social bases of politics” or “societal determination of political processes” (Hicks, Janoski, & Schwartz, 2005, p. 1). This paradigm motivates the scholars to view voting behaviour, voter preferences, and policy outcomes as variables dependent on social cleavages, and various approaches have been developed to explain the nature of such dependencies (Manza, Brooks, & Sauder, 2005, pp. 201-226). Hence, in political sociology, the issues of ‘perverse’ results and electoral biases in the vote-seat transfer have always been obscured, and are, for all intents and purposes, non-issues. Second, many political sociologists, e.g. Bendix and Lipset (1966/1967), are subscribing to the ontological view that there is a division of labour between the two disciplines, with political science seeks to study the impact of state on the society while political sociology strives to study the impact of society on the state (p. 26). Thus, these issues are viewed as ‘formal’ electoral processes which are either too narrow of their scopes, trivial, or subject matters in political science but not political sociology.<sup>12</sup>

The observations above are further aggravated by conspicuous absences in the electoral studies on Malaysia. On one hand, the concept of spurious majority as coined by Molina Vega (1998) has not been employed in the studies of the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013. On the other hand, unsurprisingly, the existing literature on the issue of electoral biases in the vote-seat transfer – i.e., disproportionality and bias<sup>13</sup> – in Malaysia is dominated by political scientists (see Brown, 2007, pp. 71-72;

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<sup>12</sup> This is in line with Lipset’s (1963/1973) observation that ‘political sociologists’ are inclined to view formal political institutions as peripheral and exerting little influence upon the society (p. 294).

<sup>13</sup> Scholars who have adopted the Brookes’ method typically use the term ‘bias’ to describe the propensity of disproportionality to work asymmetrically for different main parties in the vote-seat transfer, by amplifying and shrinking the seat share more disproportionately for one party than another. Hence, there are some delicate differences between the two concepts and the two are not interchangeable.

Croissant, 2002b, pp. 329-333; T. D. Lee, 2014; Lim, 2002a, pp. 126-127; Wong, 2013a, 2013b; Wong et al., 2010), jurists (see Rachagan, 1980, p. 255-258, 1993, p. 84-86), and political geographers (see Amer Saifude & Mohammad Redzuan, 2014), rather than political sociologists. Two notable weaknesses, however, become manifest in most of their works, save for the one by the last scholars mentioned. First and foremost, these works are plagued by a paradigm of institutional determinism,<sup>14</sup> which deems the institutional factors (i.e., the electoral systems, laws, and regulations) as the sole group of factors effecting the electoral outcomes. Yet, such a narrow, restrictive, and exclusive view implies the pessimistic nature of democracy by reducing elections into rational-mechanical-legal products and people into utterly helpless, meaningless, and passive beings. Next, scholars<sup>15</sup> are generally inclined in examining disproportionality in their studies without thoughtful considerations of its inherent weaknesses in accurately capturing the mechanical effects, in tandem with the psychological effects,<sup>16</sup> of the electoral institutions by ignoring the substantial degree of differences in the strategic behaviours of political actors<sup>17</sup> and the diverse sets of voter preferences (Best & Zhirnov, 2015, pp. 256-259). This misstep is exacerbated in cases of countries that use the extremely restrictive SMDP, such as Malaysia, as its winner-takes-all electoral formula effectively hinders the efforts of many candidates and small parties to gain representation because of its mechanical effect, and motivates the political actors to engage in strategic behaviours (Best & Zhirnov, 2015, pp. 256-257). In short,

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<sup>14</sup> See Best and Zhirnov (2015) for an overview of the domination of this paradigm in a wide range of electoral studies concerning disproportionality and strong criticisms against it.

<sup>15</sup> Since these issues have rarely attracted the attention of political sociologists, scholars in political science are particularly vulnerable to this misstep, as they tend to underestimate the interplay between electoral institutions and reactions towards it.

<sup>16</sup> Both mechanical and psychological effects are terms coined by Duverger (1951/1964) in his seminal Duverger's law that postulates the inclination of SMDP in producing a two-party system (pp. 216-228).

<sup>17</sup> Note that in this study, political actors exclusively refer to the groups of voters, candidates, and parties.

disproportionality and bias are not solely the inevitable products of institutional factors, and it is also pertinent to consider the effects of political actors' reactions towards these institutional factors. In this study, these reactions are collectively referred to as the reactive factors.

Therefore, an alternative approach is quintessential so as to better understand spurious majorities. Since it is extremely difficult to disentangle the mechanical and psychological effects of the electoral system, as asserted by Best and Zhirnov (2015, p. 264), it would be wise for this study to acknowledge and strive to understand the collective effects of both institutional factors and reactive factors. Pertaining to the systemic factors of spurious majorities, electoral system as an institutional factor is considered to be “insufficient” (Molina Vega, 1998, p. 55). As spurious majorities tend to occur in Western liberal democracies – which certainly do not include Malaysia – it appears that the potential roles of the political system as an institutional factor in engendering spurious majorities have been overlooked. Furthermore, Siaroff (2003) empirically discovers that party system and polarisation of voter preferences are also contributing towards the occurrence of spurious majorities. This study views both as the reactive factors as they have come under tremendous influences of the strategic behaviours of political actors. This also allows for the recognition and appreciation of the semi-autonomous nature of their behaviours.

Next, the proximate factors of spurious majorities are equivalent to the components of bias in this study. Despite criticisms of Blau (2001, 2004) and the alternative Soper-Rydon method (Blau, 2001, pp. 52-53), Brookes' method<sup>18</sup> has been used extensively in the studies of bias in British and New Zealand general elections<sup>19</sup> by both political scientists and political geographers (Borisjuk, Johnston, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2010; Brookes, 1959, 1960; Johnston, 1976, 2002; Johnston, Rossiter, & Pattie, 1999, 2006; Johnston, Borisjuk, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2012; Johnston, Rossiter, Pattie, & Dorling, 2002; Rossiter, et al., 1999). This method is lauded for its easily-understood metric in the form of legislative seats to express the bias and its usefulness in decomposing the bias into its generating factors so that their relative impacts can be assessed (Johnston et al., 1999, p. 375). The latter advantage is especially valuable as this study strives to understand the effects of both institutional and reactive factors on bias. The Brookes' method decomposes the sources of bias into two major categories, namely the size component and the distributional component (Johnston et al., 1999, p. 368). The size component is commonly further broken up into various subcomponents, most often encompassing malapportionment, abstention, and third-party votes. While Amer Saifude and Mohammad Redzuan (2014, pp. 42-44) decompose the bias into eight components, this study would instead follow the original Brookes' method to decompose it into only four components, i.e., three subcomponents of the size component and the distributional component. This is due to the need to segregate institutional factors (i.e., the malapportionment and distributional or gerrymandering

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<sup>18</sup> This method, which contains algebraic formulae, was first introduced by Brookes before subsequent adaptations by Mortimore (1992, as cited in Johnston, Rossiter, & Pattie, 1999, p. 368) and a group of scholars led by Johnston (since 1999).

<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom has continuously operated SMDP, and spurious majority occurred in 1951 general election while New Zealand had operated the same system until the electoral reform in 1996, and spurious majorities occurred in 1978 and 1981 general elections consecutively (Siaroff, 2003, pp. 146, 149, 155).

components) and reactive factors (i.e., the abstention or turnout and third-party-votes components) in order to understand the ways each group of factors effecting the bias.<sup>20</sup> In short, this study is ‘internally comparative’, as pointed out by Bendix et al. (1968/1973), to mean those scholarly works which deal with one empirical case by using a theory that derives from another, as this study examines the electoral processes in Malaysia using theories which have been developed over time in Western liberal democracies.

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

In comparison to the more frequent occurrences of spurious majority in New Zealand and Australia, the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013 produces the very first spurious majority enjoyed by one of the world’s most enduring ruling regimes. This rare electoral outcome is ‘awkward’ for two major reasons. First, the Malaysian competitive authoritarian regime’s reliance on spectacular electoral victories becomes shaky as the ruling alliance lost the popular vote for the first time since the Third General Election of Malaysia in 1969. Thus, the consistent gains of more than half of all valid votes nationwide by the ruling alliance in every election over the span of four decades have abruptly come to a halt. Second, spurious majority confirms the fear and criticisms of many that the electoral playing field is so remarkably uneven for both the ruling and opposition alliances to the extent that the ruling alliance wins a majority of seats<sup>21</sup> in Dewan Rakyat despite its loss of popular

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<sup>20</sup> Another obvious reason is the methodological mistakes of calculating the dubious components of ‘national electorate quota’ (ambiguity in its given definition does not help) and ‘minor party victories’ so as to add up with other components in order to obtain the total bias, when clearly both are absent in the context of Malaysia.

<sup>21</sup> Note that throughout this study, a majority of seats means more than half of all seats in Dewan Rakyat, i.e., 112 or more seats out of a total of 222 seats.



vote to the opposition alliance. In other words, the ruling alliance wins the general election with neither a majority of votes nor a plurality of votes.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that voter preferences have been skewed, resulting in the very disproportionate distribution of seats between the two main alliances in Dewan Rakyat.

Therefore, the key issue herein is the determination of the specific set of causal factors and the ways that lead to the ruling alliance's victory in a majority of seats even though they gain fewer votes than the opposition alliance. In order to grasp this issue, eight separate but interrelated causal factors which are categorised into four groups of causal factors – a pair in each group – are identified and scrutinised. The first two groups of causal factors below pertain to the large-scale and intricate configurations sustained by various groups of political actors. The first group of causal factors is the institutional systemic causal factors of spurious majority which include the political system and electoral system. The former is an institutional factor as it refers to the political institutions that directly or indirectly shape the electoral playing field in broad but important ways via various means. On the other hand, the latter is an institutional factor as it refers to the electoral institutions that govern the various aspects in the administration of elections.

The second group of causal factors is the reactive systematic causal factors of spurious majority that include the party system and polarisation of voter preferences. The former is a reactive factor because the historically fragmented opposition parties in Malaysia have made the strategic decisions to form firstly an electoral alliance and

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<sup>22</sup> A majority of votes means that a candidate, party, coalition, or alliance obtains the most votes by winning more than half of all valid votes in either a face-off or a multi-cornered contest, while a plurality of votes means that a candidate, party, coalition, or alliance obtains the most votes even though it wins less than half of all valid votes in a highly competitive multi-cornered contest.

later a parliamentary alliance since 2008, even though the electoral system, laws, and regulations do not overtly stipulate or encourage such alliances.<sup>23</sup> Besides, the ruling alliance has endured through time largely due to the overriding need for them to gain an absolute majority, or even a two-thirds majority, of seats in Dewan Rakyat despite their constant internal bickering. On the other hand, the latter is a reactive factor as the ‘wrong winner’ result hinges upon the strategic decisions of voters who are almost evenly split between those who aspire to preserve the political status quo and those who seek to transform it. They could have voted overwhelmingly for one of the two alliances so as to produce a landslide victory, or rather a substantial portion of them could have split their votes by casting the ballots in favour of the third parties and independent candidates. The various alternative sets of voter preferences demonstrate that voters are in part autonomous and self-interested.

The next two groups of causal factors are related to the more immediate and primary phenomena that exert varying levels of influences on electoral outcomes. The third group of causal factors is the institutional proximate causal factors of spurious majority comprising malapportionment and gerrymandering. Both are the institutional factors as they are closely related to the biased constituency re-delineation by election or boundary commission. Many scholars have rightly studied either malapportionment, gerrymandering, or both as they invariably reward the ruling alliance with amplified seat shares to the detriment of all opposition parties from one election to another. The amplified seat share of the ruling alliance is known as either the ‘winner’s bonus’<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. the Societies Act 1966 evidently remains vague pertaining to the registration of a political coalition or alliance comprising multiple officially-registered political parties. As such, the ruling alliance remains the only officially-registered political coalition or alliance in Malaysia.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically such a bonus may also be enjoyed by the runner-up party, even though the third parties are invariably not entitled to it (Borisjuk et al., 2010, p. 733).

(Borisjuk et al., 2010, p. 733; Johnston et al., 2002, p. 134; Newton-Farrelly, 2009, p. 472), ‘winner’s bias’ (Taylor & Johnston, 1979, pp. 392-396), ‘big party bias’ (Lim, 2002b, p. 180), ‘big-party bonus’ (Lim, 2002a, p. 127),<sup>25</sup> ‘distortion effect’ (Ng et al., 2015, p. 170), and ‘majority-forming bonus’ (Rae, 1971, p. 74). However, institutional factors alone may not sufficiently explain the varying degrees of such ‘winner’s bonuses’, particularly as many electoral contests are fought on the same electoral map between the reviews of constituency boundaries. Therefore, it is crucial to concurrently examine the possible effects of the fourth group of causal factors – i.e., the reactive proximate causal factors encompassing turnout and third-party votes – in engendering spurious majority. Both are reactive factors as they are closely associated with the strategic decisions of voters, party leaders, and candidates. The examination of ‘bias’ comprising these two groups of causal factors is far superior to the examination of ‘disproportionality’ since ‘bias’ can be decomposed into its generating factors. This is very appealing due to two reasons – first, it allows for the assessment of their relative impacts, that, in turn, helps to determine the relative impacts between institutional factors and reactive factors; second, it helps to ascertain the beneficiary and victim – i.e., the alliance that is favoured or disfavoured – of each generating factor of ‘bias’ and the total ‘bias’.

It is highly plausible that the causal factors above do not exert similar level of influences on spurious majority in Malaysia, and it is fairly certain that the more and most influential causal factors engender this spurious majority in very different, albeit interrelated, ways. Besides, it is also crucial to determine the relative impacts between

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<sup>25</sup> The unique party system in Malaysia renders both terms by Lim to be imprecise since minor parties within the ruling alliance may also enjoy such a bias, while medium parties both within and without the ruling alliance, though much larger than the aforementioned, may not enjoy it.

the contrasting groups of causal factors. On one hand, the relative impacts between systemic factors and proximate factors are rather murky as a number of causal factors in both groups are intertwined. For instance, the electoral system in the former group is closely related to malapportionment and gerrymandering in the latter group. On the other hand, the relative impacts between institutional factors and reactive factors have been eclipsed by the dominance of either the paradigm of institutional determinism or the paradigm of the ‘social bases of politics’. These confusions certainly require clarifications. There is a strong desire to get to the bottom of spurious majority in Malaysia as it does not only threaten to misrepresent voter preferences, but may also undermine the legitimacy of the electoral system, government, and regime in the eyes of the population, skew the political contests unfairly in favour of the ruling alliance, and erode the consolidation of democracy in Malaysia.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study is concerned with the following questions:

1. Which are the causal factors of, and how these causal factors engender, the ‘spurious majority’, ‘wrong winner’ result, or ‘perverse’ result in the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013?
2. What are the relative impacts between systemic factors and proximate factors, and between institutional factors and reactive factors, on the ‘spurious majority’, ‘wrong winner’ result, or ‘perverse’ result in the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013?

## **1.5 Research Objectives**

This study has the following objectives:

1. To determine the causal factors of, and examine the ways these causal factors engender, the ‘spurious majority’, ‘wrong winner’ result, or ‘perverse’ result in the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013.
2. To determine the relative impacts between systemic factors and proximate factors, and between institutional factors and reactive factors, on the ‘spurious majority’, ‘wrong winner’ result, or ‘perverse’ result in the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant due to the following three rationales.

First of all, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to examine spurious majorities in political sociology. This study does not dispute the productiveness or appropriateness of the predominant paradigm of “social bases of politics” or “societal determination of political processes” (Hicks et al., 2005, p. 1) in political sociology. Rather, this study seeks to strike a delicate balance between this paradigm and the paradigm of institutional determinism<sup>26</sup> by cherishing the key propositions of both, namely the recognition that politics (i.e., electoral outcomes and political legitimacy) is greatly affected by society (i.e., reactive factors such as voter

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<sup>26</sup> In his study of the party system and representation of social groups, Lipset (1963/1973) found both paradigms to be unsatisfactory on their own (p. 278).

turnout, voter preferences, and party system) in the former, and the acknowledgment of the profound roles of institutional factors (i.e., the political system, electoral system, and constituency re-delineation) in the latter. Moreover, this study rejects the idea that spurious majorities are ‘formal’ electoral processes which are either too narrow of their scopes, trivial, or subject matters in political science but not political sociology. It is a matter of grave concern for the voter preferences to be viewed as the popular will of Malaysians, especially when other forms of political participation (e.g. demonstrations and political discussions in both print and electronic media) may be severely restricted in Malaysia. Therefore, although voting is deemed as “the least active form of political participation” by Rush (1992, p. 115), it does play a somewhat meaningful role as it is both literally and figuratively the only game in town for ordinary Malaysians (Weiss, 2015, p. 42). Spurious majorities are a pertinent issue in political sociology simply because they may threaten representation as a vital feature of modern democracy and legitimacy of the electoral system, government, and regime.

Secondly, this study represents the first attempt to use the concept of spurious majority in the electoral studies on the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013. The use of such a concept facilitates the efforts of scholars in better understanding the peculiarity of the electoral contest and outcome of this general election vis-à-vis all past general elections. Moreover, by identifying the types of legislative majority enjoyed by the ruling alliance over the years, one may gain valuable insights into the developments of political system and party system in Malaysia, and presumptively allow scholars to assess the types of legislative majority, and thus the natures of electoral victory for any winning party, coalition, or alliance in the subsequent general elections to be held in the future. The variation of the types of legislative majority from

one election to another relies on the variation of systemic factors (in particular the reactive systemic causal factors as the Malaysian electoral system is largely stable over the years without significant changes) and proximate factors.

Lastly, this study seeks to further our understanding of the roles, operations, and impacts of electoral processes in competitive authoritarian regimes. Even though Malaysia is not a liberal democracy (Khondker, 1996, p. 74; Mahathir, 1995, p. 46), and is widely recognised as an authoritarian regime operating competitive elections with varying degrees of opposition from one election to another (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 33-34), most Malaysians have come to embrace some of the basic ideals of liberal democracy, most notably the regularly-held elections in order to express their popular will in a Schumpeterian sense of democracy.<sup>27</sup> The view that election is simply a manipulative legitimating device by the conflict theorists (Sherman & Kolker, 1987, p. 12) fails to elucidate the probable reasons of consistent high turnout in competitive authoritarian regimes, where turnout is not compulsory or forced, and people generally realise the limitations of illiberal democracy. This study argues that precisely because of the repressive nature of such regimes that permit only a limited extent of political participation, voting is seen as the most widespread, pragmatic, and legitimate way for people to express their will. Thus, voter preferences should be respected. Yet, skewed vote-seat transfers have consistently misrepresented voter preferences in favour of the ruling alliance, thereby diminishing the legitimacy of the electoral system, government, and regime. This is further aggravated by the occurrence of a spurious majority which

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<sup>27</sup> Schumpeter (1942/1976) promotes a minimalist or proceduralist definition of democracy by stating that democracy is the institutional arrangement in which individuals obtain the power to make political decisions through the means of competition or struggle for the people's vote (p. 269). See also Urbinati (2011, pp. 37-39) and Syed Ahmad (2002, p. 77) for further discussions.

indicates that a growing and substantial segment of population no longer supports the ruling alliance.

### **1.7 Scope of the Study**

Since Malaysia operates a centralised or an asymmetrical federal system (Clark et al., 2013, p. 686), this study focuses on the general election at the federal level, as it is here that most are at stake for all political actors. Thus, although the ruling alliance has outsmarted the opposition alliance in the Thirteenth State Election of Perak in 2013 via a spurious majority too, this study views general election as the most representative of the popular will of most, if not all, Malaysians. On the other hand, this study adopts, in Blau's term (2001, p. 47), the 'single-election approach' by looking exclusively at the Thirteenth General Election of Malaysia in 2013. The rationale of doing so has less to do with Blau's (2001, p. 47) criticisms over the alternative 'multi-election approach' than this study's goal to examine the causal factors and the ways that lead to spurious majority in Malaysia, which has only occurred for the first time in this general election.

### **1.8 Limitation of the Study**

There are three major limitations of this study.

Firstly, the quantitative method in this study is entirely based on voting study or vote analysis – i.e., quantitative analysis on numerical data derived from electoral outcomes. One of most basic assumptions in any voting study or vote analysis is to view voter preferences as synonymous with their party preferences. Nonetheless, this



dubious assumption risks underestimating or overlooking the fact that a segment of voters makes their electoral choices, not so much based on the candidates' affiliated parties, but rather their personal preferences over the candidates' characteristics and backgrounds. This study does not intend to dispute such a fact. Yet, since Malaysia has a robustly institutionalised party system (Weiss, 2015, p. 25), citizens' assessments of candidates are feasible based on their affiliated parties' programs and performances, rather than simply their own personalities or primordial appeals (Payne, 2007, p. 150). Thus, candidates' party affiliations provide substantial information pertaining to their ideological or programmatic preferences (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007, p. 157; Payne, 2007, p. 150), and facilitate political participation of citizens who have little time and political information (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995, p. 3). Moreover, party affiliations on the ballots significantly enhance or reduce the electoral prospects of candidates, especially since many of them are unbeknown to voters as they either are political novices or keep a low profile in the national politics. Besides, ballots in Malaysia are designed in such a way that highlights the candidates' party affiliation.

Secondly, the quantitative analysis is 'incomplete' in the sense that it does not cover the examination of one of the institutional systemic causal factors – i.e., political system or, in the case of Malaysia, competitive authoritarianism. This is mostly due to the lack of relevant and precise quantitative measures rooted in vote analysis that can accurately uncover the complex relationship between competitive authoritarianism and spurious majority, particularly since many scholars who examine authoritarianism tend to rely on either content analysis, historical analysis, observations, interviews, some, or all of the above. They may include some brief numerical data or analyses in their studies, but these tend to be minimal and not comprehensive enough to cover

most, if not all, aspects of authoritarianism. This predicament is exacerbated by three challenges – first, there are diverging views pertaining to the aspects or features of authoritarianism; second, different authoritarian regimes may employ diverse means in preserving and strengthening their grips on power, albeit with varying levels of effectiveness; and third, spurious majority has never occurred in a modern competitive authoritarian regime in Asia, thus scholars are understandably ill-prepared in carrying out a quantitative analysis on the causal relationship between the two. The inclusion of this causal factor in this study is prompted by the narrative data that either explicitly or implicitly show some causal relationships between the two, even though it has been decided from the outset that a quantitative analysis on this causal factor is omitted from this study due to the predicament and challenges above.

Thirdly, the qualitative analysis is skewed towards narratives of the victims of spurious majority as a great majority – except one – of participants are members of parliament (MPs)<sup>28</sup> from the opposition alliance. The primary reason for this to occur is because they have more motivations to express their takes on, and woes related to, spurious majority in Malaysia. In contrast, the beneficiaries of spurious majority may find the concept of spurious majority inconvenient as it inevitably raises doubts on the legitimacy of the electoral outcome. As the powers that be, they actually have very few incentives to agree to an interview. Besides, as stressed by the only participant who is the beneficiary of spurious majority, the ruling alliance wins the election within the constitutional framework of the Westminster parliamentary system, thus they are very likely to feel that there is very little need or significance in studying spurious majority. Furthermore, many of the beneficiaries of spurious majority are ministers,

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<sup>28</sup> Hereafter, only mentioned as MP or MPs.

deputy ministers, and/or party leaders with heavy responsibilities and tight schedules.<sup>29</sup> Another important concern is that a scholarly interview may be less appealing than a journalist's interview as self-interest may prompt many MPs to agree to the latter for the sake of valuable news coverage. Nevertheless, MPs are still very important sources of narrative data who have firsthand knowledge of, and strong stakes in, spurious majority in Malaysia.

## **1.9 Chapterisation of the Study**

There are five chapters in this study, namely Chapter 1: Introduction, Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework, Chapter 3: Research Methodology, Chapter 4: Data Analyses, and Chapter 5: Meta-inference and Discussion. The first chapter provides an overview that outlines the key information of this study. Then, Chapter 2 details the reviews of scholarly works pertaining to the concepts and issues that are both pertinent and vital to this study, before discussing the operationalisation of various key concepts and a conceptual framework. Afterwards, Chapter 3 addresses and elucidates the research design of this study by tackling the relevant philosophical, methodological, and technical issues arising from the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Next, Chapter 4 begins with the quantitative analysis on each causal factor of spurious majority (except the institutional systemic causal factor of political system) based on numerical data derived from electoral outcomes, followed by the qualitative analysis based on narrative data derived from interview accounts. In each analysis, the levels of influences of these causal factors on spurious majority, and the ways they engender spurious majority, are determined and explained. Finally,

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<sup>29</sup> One of the deputy ministers from the ruling alliance politely turns down the researcher's invitation for an interview as "time is a constraint" and due to "heavy responsibilities".

Chapter 5 concludes with a meta-inference that aims to integrate findings from the separate data analyses above before highlighting a few major takeaways from these integrated findings. Besides, a few vital paradigmatic, methodological, and attitudinal issues arising from the research findings are explicated concisely, followed by a few recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Democratic Representation in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes**

Democratic representation is a contentious issue in competitive authoritarian regimes like Malaysia. Many scholars have devoted their studies of Malaysia to the intertwined ethnic representation and party representation, particularly in the studies on constituency re-delineation.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this study only looks at party representation in line with the vote-seat paradigm – one of the dominant paradigms in the studies of democratic representation<sup>31</sup> – pioneered by Rae (1971) for the following rationales.

First of all, the vote-seat paradigm excels by simplistically (but pragmatically) conceiving citizen preferences as voter preferences which are explicitly expressed via party votes in order to overcome the empirical and normative challenges inherent in any such studies (Powell, 2004, pp. 274-275, 291-292). Voter preferences are deemed as the most pragmatic way in understanding the aggregated citizens' opinions due to Schattschneider's (1942/2004) 'law of the imperfect political mobilisation of interests' as voters are inevitably torn by the diversity of their own interests (p. 33). This is despite Schedler's (2006) view of the authoritarian distortions in the formation and expression of popular preferences (p. 8) precisely because firstly, voting is indeed the most widespread, pragmatic, and legitimate way for people to express their preferences

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<sup>30</sup> Studies of the intertwined ethnic and party representations in Malaysia may devote specific attentions to constituency re-delineation or not – e.g. see Brown (2007) and H. G. Lee (2013) for the former; see Khoo (2002, p. 61) and Puthuchery (2005) for the latter.

<sup>31</sup> The alternative – issue-congruence paradigm – is not appropriate in the context of Malaysia due to the high level of legislative party disciplines that strongly discourage any dissenting views and votes, which Powell (2004) argues is prevalent in most parliamentary systems (p. 284).

in competitive authoritarian regimes; and secondly, votes and electoral outcomes are not falsified despite electoral irregularities in Malaysia (Holík, 2011, p. 6). Besides, this paradigm views the vote-seat proportionality as the standard of desirable representation since elections authoritatively reveal the aggregated concerns and opinions of citizens (Powell, 2004, pp. 279, 281).<sup>32</sup> Second, some scholars affirm unequivocally that representation cannot be dissociated from party. For instance, Duverger (1951/1964) argues that parties intervene in the relationships between public opinions and its expression in parliament, and the nature of such an intervention is both complicated and intertwined (p. 372). Likewise, Wessels (2011) claims that parliaments are the crucial institutions that induce representation, yet this representation's only model is party democracy (pp. 97-98).<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, since representation is shaped by the interactions between voter preferences, electoral systems, and party systems (Powell, 2004, p. 279), it is vital to grasp their complex relationships. Electoral outcomes are determined, to some extent, by electoral rules and practices, which itself is depended on the adoption of a particular understanding of democracy (Katz, 2005, p. 17). Representation in Malaysia is rested upon the majoritarian vision which aims to represent a majority of voters, and has been institutionalised through the majoritarian electoral systems (Wessels, 2011, p. 99).<sup>34</sup> SMDP accentuates the geographical localisation of opinions by problematically turning a national opinion into a local opinion via representation of such an opinion in

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<sup>32</sup> Hence Powell (2004) views this paradigm as essentially focusing on the 'procedural' representation (p. 274). See his work too on the flaws of this paradigm (pp. 280-282, 292).

<sup>33</sup> See also Schattschneider (1942/2004, p. 1) and Blais (1999, pp. 5-6). M. Ong (1987) goes even further by declaring that the rise of modern political parties has undermined the roles of Parliament of Malaysia (pp. 7-22).

<sup>34</sup> This vision contradicts the proportional vision that aims to represent as many voters as possible, and has been institutionalised through the proportional representation electoral systems (Wessels, 2011, p. 99). One of the variations of majoritarian electoral systems is SMDP (Clark et al., 2013, p. 543).