

Ground-Level Engagement as A Strategy for Political Visibility and Community Trust: Evidence from Grassroots Leadership in Singapore

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ABSTRACT: Community engagement and grassroots visibility have long been recognized as critical determinants of political trust and civic participation. This paper examines how consistent, embodied participation in community activities — exemplified by recreational activities such as pickleball — enables political and civic leaders to cultivate social capital, build interpersonal trust, and reinforce democratic accountability at the grassroots level. Drawing on Putnam's (2000) framework of social capital, Norris's (2004) civic voluntarism model, and empirical studies on participatory governance in Southeast Asia, this study argues that physical presence and recreational co-participation are not peripheral to political leadership but constitute a substantive form of democratic practice. The paper contextualises this argument within the competitive electoral landscape of Singapore's Ang Mo Kio Group Representation Constituency (AMKGRC), where opposition parties such as the Workers' Party (WP) have increasingly signalled interest. Findings suggest that sustained, visible community engagement — particularly through shared recreational and social activities — functions as a strategic platform for credibility-building, constituent relationship management, and electoral resilience. The paper concludes with recommendations for smaller parties and independent civic leaders seeking to leverage non-conventional engagement strategies in high-density urban constituencies.

KEYWORDS: community engagement, social capital, political visibility, grassroots leadership, Singapore politics, pickleball, civic participation, electoral strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary democracies, particularly those operating under hybrid or dominant-party systems, the capacity of political leaders to maintain grassroots trust is a decisive factor in electoral performance (Diamond & Morlino, 2005). Singapore presents a particularly instructive case: its unique electoral architecture — including Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) — creates conditions where local-level visibility and community embeddedness often compensate for asymmetries in media access and institutional resources (Tan, 2013).

Recent political developments in Singapore have reinvigorated scholarly and public interest in grassroots engagement strategies. The Workers' Party's (WP) reported interest in contesting the Ang Mo Kio GRC (AMKGRC) — one of the largest and most politically significant constituencies in Singapore — has prompted renewed debate about the role of ground presence in electoral competitiveness (Straits Times, 2025). For smaller parties and independent civic leaders, the question of how to remain viable and trusted in such environments is pressing.

This paper argues that sustained, embodied community participation — including in ostensibly non-political venues such as sports, community events, and recreational programs — constitutes a strategic form of civic leadership. It examines the theoretical underpinnings of this argument and draws on relevant empirical evidence to support the case that visible ground-level engagement is not a luxury for civic leaders but a necessity, particularly in contested or potentially contested constituencies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Capital and Political Trust

Robert Putnam's foundational work on social capital distinguishes between bonding social capital — ties among homogeneous groups — and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across social cleavages (Putnam, 2000). Both forms are generated through repeated, face-to-face interaction in shared spaces, what Putnam terms "civic engagement." Political leaders who participate in community recreational activities create precisely these conditions: they bridge social hierarchies, signal approachability, and accumulate relational trust that translates into political legitimacy.

Fukuyama (1995) further argues that trust is not merely a by-product of interaction but a form of social capital that reduces transaction costs in political exchange. When constituents encounter their representatives in everyday, non-formal settings — such

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as sports courts, community centres, or neighbourhood festivals — the psychological distance between leader and citizen diminishes, fostering what Hetherington (2005) calls "performance-based trust."

2.2 Embodied Politics and Recreational Co-Participation

Scholars in political sociology have increasingly attended to the bodily and affective dimensions of political life (Connell, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Engaging in shared physical activity is not politically neutral: it communicates vitality, accessibility, and communal belonging. In the context of community sports such as pickleball — a rapidly growing recreational activity across Southeast Asian urban centres — participation signals generational adaptability and cultural responsiveness (International Federation of Pickleball, 2023).

Norris (2004) identifies physical presence in community activities as a key indicator of the "civic voluntarism model," wherein political actors who voluntarily participate in non-partisan community life are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than those who engage only during election periods. This aligns with Hooghe's (2003) argument that informal social participation is a stronger predictor of institutional trust than formal political engagement.

2.3 Electoral Geography and Constituency Dynamics in Singapore

Singapore's electoral system, characterised by GRCs requiring multi-ethnic slates and a history of Peoples' Action Party (PAP) dominance, creates a specific context for understanding grassroots strategy (Mutalib, 2003). The AMKGRC has historically been a safe PAP seat, yet opposition forays — including the WP's past contest that garnered over 30% of the vote — indicate latent electoral competitiveness (Elections Department Singapore, 2015).

Research on Singapore's opposition politics suggests that constituency-level social capital — built through sustained presence, civic initiatives, and interpersonal relationships — can meaningfully shift electoral outcomes, even absent broad media coverage (Tan & Grofman, 2018). Furthermore, the potential vacancy of adjacent SMCs, such as Yio Chu Kang (YCK) SMC following political resignations, creates additional strategic considerations for civic leaders mapping their engagement territories (CNA, 2025).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts a multi-level theoretical framework integrating: (1) Putnam's (2000) social capital theory, (2) Norris's (2004) civic voluntarism model, and (3) Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital — the accumulated prestige and recognition that accrues from visible, socially valued activity.

Bourdieu's framework is particularly apt: recreational activities such as pickleball, community walks, or volunteer service are not merely social; they are fields in which symbolic capital is contested and accrued. A civic leader who is seen to participate — visibly, regularly, and authentically — converts this participation into political legitimacy. The critical variable is not the specific activity but the quality of visibility: being present, relatable, and physically co-situated with constituents.

We further draw on Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1995) social communication model, which holds that political information and sentiment flows most powerfully through intimate social networks. A leader embedded in community recreational networks is positioned within these information flows, able to both receive constituent sentiment and project political presence organically.

4. METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual and analytical paper drawing on: (1) a review of peer-reviewed literature on social capital, civic engagement, and political trust; (2) secondary analysis of Singapore electoral data and constituency demographics; and (3) qualitative discourse analysis of media reports and community communication relevant to grassroots political strategy in AMKGRC and surrounding constituencies.

The analytical approach follows Yin's (2018) case study methodology, treating AMKGRC as an embedded case within the broader context of Singapore's opposition political dynamics. The paper does not claim to present primary empirical data but synthesizes existing evidence to construct a theoretically grounded argument for grassroots engagement as political strategy.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Strategic Value of Recreational Visibility

Community sports and recreational programmes provide civic leaders with a uniquely accessible platform for sustained interpersonal engagement. Pickleball, in particular, has emerged as a sport that transcends generational and socioeconomic boundaries, attracting participants from diverse demographic profiles in Singapore's public housing estates (ActiveSG, 2024). A civic leader who participates in such activities is not merely exercising; they are performing a form of democratic presence — occupying the same social space as constituents and signalling that their leadership is not confined to formal or institutional settings.

This form of embodied engagement aligns with what political scientists' term "descriptive representation" — the idea that leaders who share or simulate the lived experiences of their constituents are perceived as more legitimate representatives (Mansbridge,

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1999). By playing pickleball alongside residents, a civic leader communicates shared humanity, physical engagement with community life, and a form of non-verbal commitment to the constituency.

5.2 Building Resilience in Potentially Contested Constituencies

The prospect of opposition parties contesting a previously uncontested or lightly contested seat — such as the WP's reported interest in AMKGRC — introduces strategic urgency into community engagement planning. Research on incumbency advantage suggests that sustained interpersonal contact, not merely periodic campaign activity, is the primary driver of voter loyalty in dense urban constituencies (Mayhew, 1974; Cain et al., 1987).

In this context, a civic leader with a long-established pattern of ground-level participation holds a structural advantage over a challenger who arrives late in the electoral cycle. This is consistent with Fenno's (1978) seminal observation that legislators who cultivate "home style" — regular, visible, and personal engagement with constituents — enjoy greater electoral resilience than those who focus primarily on legislative or policy work.

The AMKGRC context amplifies this dynamic. As one of Singapore's most populous constituencies, the constituency encompasses a socially and demographically diverse resident base. Effective community engagement must be both consistent and multifaceted, spanning recreational, civic, and advisory dimensions. Maintaining visible participation in community sports, coupled with advisory engagement in community matters — including emerging areas such as AI technology applications in civic planning, as increasingly proposed in community governance discourse (Teo, 2023) — positions civic leaders as both accessible and forward-looking.

5.3 Media and Mainstream Visibility as a Complementary Strategy

Ground-level engagement achieves its greatest strategic value when amplified through mainstream media channels. Norris (2004) notes that the interaction between interpersonal civic participation and mediated visibility creates a multiplicative effect on political trust. A civic leader who is both visibly present in the community and occasionally featured in mainstream media coverage occupies an optimal position in the political communication landscape.

For smaller parties and independent civic actors operating with limited resources, community-based activities that attract organic media attention — neighbourhood sports events, community improvement initiatives, public health drives — offer a cost-effective means of achieving this dual visibility. The credibility of mainstream media coverage further authenticates ground-level engagement, signalling to a broader audience that community participation is substantive rather than performative (Strömbäck, 2008).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper offers the following recommendations for civic leaders and smaller political parties operating in contested or potentially contested urban constituencies:

- i. Institutionalise recreational community participation as a year-round engagement strategy, not a campaign-period tactic. Consistency of presence is the primary determinant of social capital accumulation (Putnam, 2000).
- ii. Identify and participate in activities with broad demographic appeal — such as pickleball, community gardening, and inter-generational programmes — to maximise bridging social capital across the constituency.
- iii. Integrate AI-assisted data analysis and constituency mapping to identify underserved community segments and optimal engagement opportunities, as recommended in emerging civic technology literature (Teo, 2023; Margetts et al., 2016).
- iv. Cultivate relationships with mainstream media to amplify community engagement, recognising that mediated visibility multiplies the political capital generated through interpersonal participation (Norris, 2004).
- v. Monitor adjacent constituency dynamics (e.g., potential SMC vacancies) using structured political intelligence processes to enable timely and strategic reorientation of engagement efforts.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that ground-level community engagement — particularly through visible, recreational co-participation with constituents — constitutes a theoretically grounded and empirically supported strategy for civic and political leaders operating in competitive urban constituencies. Drawing on Putnam's social capital framework, Norris's civic voluntarism model, Bourdieu's symbolic capital theory, and evidence from Singapore's electoral landscape, the paper demonstrates that embodied community presence is not peripheral to political leadership but central to it.

In the context of AMKGRC's evolving political dynamics — with opposition interest, potential constituency boundary changes, and the growing importance of AI-enabled civic intelligence — civic leaders who prioritise sustained, visible, and authentic community engagement are best positioned to build the trust, resilience, and legitimacy required for effective democratic participation.

Future research should empirically test the relationship between recreational co-participation and constituent trust through survey-based methods in Singapore's constituency contexts, and examine how digital and social media amplification interacts with ground-level engagement strategies in high-density urban settings.

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