

## Sarawak State Election 2016: A Survey on Chinese Voter Behaviour in Padungan (N9)

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the behaviour of Chinese voters in N9 Padungan during the recent 2016 Sarawak State Election. As an urban constituency with 92.8% Chinese voters, the BN has been trying to attract back the voters since it lost the seat to the opposition in 2006. Several reasons have been documented for this loss, including the failure of the SUPP to fight for the rights of the Chinese and issues on corruption as well as high cost of living. Under the new chief minister Adenan Satem, the BN has managed to attract support of the Chinese by reclaiming the 6 seats lost in 2011. However, the opposition still maintained its dominance in the N9 Padungan seat. Therefore, this study intended to identify the factors that influence the Chinese voters in their choice of candidates and reasons why the opposition is popular in this seat. Questionnaires were distributed and informal interviews conducted during the campaigning period, targeting voters in the N9 Padungan constituency. The findings of this survey identified several factors such as retrospective voting, candidate personality, party loyalty and issues as influential on voters' choice of candidate.*

*Keywords: Chinese voters, Sarawak, election 2016, Padungan,*

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### Introduction

The 11<sup>th</sup> Sarawak State Election 2016 (SSE2016) was held on 7 May 2016 after the state legislative assembly was dissolved a month prior. This election particularly caught the attention of the nation because in late 2015 the redelineation motion was approved to increase Sarawak's electoral districts, bringing the total number of seats to 82 from 71. The new constituencies included N13 Batu Kitang, N17 Stakan, N18 Seremba, N23 Bukit Semuja, N26 Gedong, N40 Kabong, N57 Tellian, N63 Bukit Goram, N66 Murum, N70 Samalaju and N78 Mulu.

The voting pattern amongst the Chinese community has been hard to ascertain. This was because in the past, especially prior to Sarawak State Election 2006, strong support was given to the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) under the Barisan Nasional (BN) but it seemed that in recent years, the Chinese have resorted to vote for the opposition. Indirectly, this sent a clear signal to SUPP that the Chinese voters in Sarawak had lost faith in them.

Areas which were lost by the SUPP during the last state election in 2011 (SSE2011) included Padungan, Pending, Batu Lintang, Batu Kawa, Kota Sentosa, Dudong, Repok, and

Meradong, where the Chinese community dominate. Based on those electoral results, it seemed that many of the Chinese have turned their back on SUPP and chose to vote for the opposition. In fact, even SUPP then party president and deputy chief minister George Chan lost his Piasau seat to DAP first-timer Ling Sie Kiong.

With the change in state leadership in 2014, current Chief Minister Adenan Satem has managed to pull in more support from the Chinese with his innovative policies which resulted in some victory for the SUPP in SSE2016. The party managed to win seven out of the 13 contested seats.

Nonetheless, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) still managed to maintain a strong foothold on several urban seats (albeit losing some), including the N9 Padungan with a population of 92.8% Chinese, which has been under the opposition since 2006. Therefore, this study intends to find out factors that influence the Chinese voters in N9 Padungan.

## Literature review

During an election, attracting support is vital and one way to do this is to draw links between candidates and potential voters. Political parties compete to inform voters about their leaders and candidates, the issues and where they stand on these issues. There are other factors that influence the voting preferences among voters such as candidate personality, party identification, and past performance of the party/candidate.

Party identification is an important factor whereby the voter will vote for a candidate based on the party the candidate represents. According to Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2004), party identification is associated with loyalty towards a political party. Once identification is formed, it is hard to change and such party identification will become stronger as the voter ages. Keulder (2010) found that party choice was largely the result of party identification and ethnic affiliation while Campbell, Converse, Miler and Stokes (1960) suggested that many American voters in the 1950s followed the footsteps of their parents in favouring certain political parties. In other words, party loyalty was something that was inherited from parents, and would be used to evaluate political events and finally make vote choices.

In addition to party identification, the role of issues also plays a particular factor to voters' preference. Elections allow citizens an opportunity to influence governmental decisions. In a democracy, it is assumed that the electorate will be able to affect government policies through selecting candidates based on their stance. This is called issue voting (Denver & Hands 1990, Campbell 1960). For example, in SSE2011 the opposition placed a lot of emphasis on issues of royalties and the hike of oil prices as well as land leases and corruption as a main source of campaign material. It was used to instil the feeling of dissatisfaction among the voters against the BN.

Meanwhile, a candidate's personality can also be a deciding factor for voters. This refers to the candidate's charisma in attracting a following. According to a study by Zaherawati, Zalian, Nazni, Mohd Zool and Kamaruzaman (2009) candidates and leaders who were charismatic managed to attract voters and support due to their ability to give fiery speeches as well as present a strong persona.

Studies by Fiorina (1980) and Campbell, Dettrey and Yin (2010) suggested that retrospective voting, which is voting based on the past performance of the candidate or party, was crucial in determining a voter's choice especially for those who are less informed and less interested. Voters would vote based on what they assessed to be, for example, the current economic conditions and whether the incumbent deserves to be blamed for poor economic indicators. In essence, the voter would pass judgement on the government as a whole, not policies or the candidate.

To conclude, previous studies have showed various factors that influence the voters' behaviour during an election. The factors were varied based on different issues, demographics, economic and political conditions and others.

### 3.0 Research methodology

A survey was carried out to obtain feedback from voters regarding their voting behaviour in N9 Padungan during SSE2016. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed during the campaigning period in various locations in the N9 Padungan area. Nonetheless, only 280 were returned completed and the findings here are presented based on these completed questionnaires. In this study, data collected would be presented through tables based on the Likert type scale using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Likert Scale used in the questionnaires is as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

Informal interviews were conducted with respondents during the campaigning period as well as polling day. Voters were interviewed based on their expected results of the election in N9 Padungan and their opinions regarding campaign strategies and issues put forward by the contesting parties.

## Findings

### *Background of respondents*

Table 1

*Profile of respondents*

Variable	Categories of Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	186	66.4
	Female	94	33.6
Age	21 – 30 years	106	37.9
	31 – 40	83	29.6
	41 – 50	35	12.5
	51 – 60	34	12.5
	61 and above	22	7.9
Education background	UPSR	3	1.1
	SRP/PMR	9	3.2
	SPM/STPM	173	61.8
	Diploma	48	17.1
	Undergraduate	26	9.3
	Postgraduate	19	6.8
	Others	2	0.7

Income (monthly)	RM1000 and below	42	15.0
	RM1001 – RM2000	93	33.2
	RM2001 – RM3000	56	20.0
	RM3001 – RM4000	21	7.5
	RM4001 – RM5000	36	12.9
	RM5000 and above	32	11.4

The background of respondents is represented in Table 1. In terms of gender, the proportion of male respondents was higher than that of female respondents, with 186 male and 94 female. As for their age group, majority of the respondents were those between the ages of 21 to 30. These respondents constituted 37.9% of the total respondents.

In terms of education background, majority (61.8%) of the respondents have SPM/STPM qualifications, followed by a total of 33.2% with higher education qualifications. This then affected the monthly income levels with 33.2% respondents earning between RM1001 – RM2000. This could be resonated by the fact that many of those living in N9 Padungan area consist of small business owners (tuck shops, coffee shops) and general workers.

### *Voting Preferences among Respondents*

The findings from this survey can be simplified based on Table 2. Out of the four factors that were examined, issues that were highlighted scored the highest mean of 3.92, followed by performance of the candidate/party with 3.84. Surprisingly, party loyalty scored the lowest mean of the four factors.

Table 2  
*Voting preferences findings*

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Candidate personality	3.47	.504
Party loyalty	3.24	.648
Past performance	3.84	.574
Issues	3.92	.576

\*N=280

According to the data collected, more than half of the respondents were likely to vote based on the candidate's personality. Based on Table 3, out of the 280 respondents 164 felt that the candidate's personality was essential in influencing their votes. From observation during the campaigning period, DAP candidate Wong King Wei was vocal and managed to attract a lot of spectators with his fiery speeches and sharp-tongued comments on current affairs faced by the state. In fact, most rallies organized by the opposition seemed to attract many people.

Table 3  
*Candidate personality*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	9	3.2
Disagree	8	2.9
Neutral	99	35.4
Agree	145	51.8
Strongly agree	19	6.8

\*N=280

Furthermore, in Table 4 it is shown that voters vote specifically for the candidate, without any regard for the party. During SSE2011, Wong was a newcomer in the political scene. He was nominated to contest in the Padungan seat over the then incumbent Dominique Ng of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Dissatisfied with the party's decision to drop his name for the Padungan constituency, Ng quit the party and contested as an independent candidate. Unfortunately, he only managed to garner 439 (2.65%) votes while Wong dominated with 11957 (72.3%) votes.

Table 4  
*Vote for the candidate (not the party).*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	7	2.5
Disagree	13	4.6
Neutral	93	33.2
Agree	132	47.1
Strongly agree	35	12.5

\*N=280

In SSE2016 Wong went up against BN-SUPP candidate Peter Pau Kiu Sing and State Reform Party (STAR) candidate Teo Kuang Kim but still managed to retain his seat with a majority vote of 4270. Even though there was a significant drop for Wong's majority in comparison with SSE2011 (7884 majority), Wong still managed to obtain 64.3% of the votes (The Star 2016). This showed a loyalty towards Wong as a candidate and not the party he represented. This is supported by referring to Table 2 in which party loyalty scored the lowest mean compared to the other factors with 3.24, indicating that respondents were somewhat indifferent when it came to party loyalty. In Table 5, there is a clear split between respondents regarding party loyalty.

Table 5  
*Loyal to the party*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	70	25.0
Disagree	18	6.4
Neutral	86	30.7
Agree	84	30.0
Strongly agree	22	7.9

\*N=280

At the same time, the drop in opposition's majority could also mean that voters were starting to feel torn on their choices of candidates. As a first timer, the BN-SUPP candidate still managed to obtain an impressive amount of votes despite not winning the seat. This could be due to the new BN Sarawak leadership under Chief Minister Adenan Satem for his new approach in administration and the policies he has changed in particular with regards to the Chinese community, for example, the recognition of United Examination Certificate (UEC) in 2015 (The Star, 2015a). UEC is a standardised test for Chinese independent secondary schools in Malaysia and being the first state in the country to endorse this qualification, it meant that UEC holders could work in the state's civil service and state legislative assembly. In addition to that, the chief minister had also called for the stop to labelling the Chinese community as *pendatang* (immigrants). He was quoted as saying that while the state's earlier Chinese community who came from China could be regarded as immigrants, the current generation should not be labelled as such anymore (The Star, 2015b).

Table 6 revealed that issues raised by the candidate or political party were a significant factor in influencing who voters would vote for. Out of the total 280 respondents, more than half disclosed that issues which were important in winning over their votes. This could be a reason why the BN managed to obtain more votes in the Padungan seat this time around because of Adenan’s approach towards pertinent issues.

Table 6  
*Issues affect vote*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	4	1.4
Disagree	7	2.5
Neutral	98	35.0
Agree	124	44.3
Strongly agree	47	16.8

\*N=280

Respondents also identified issues that they deemed were important and the findings are summarized in Table 7. Sufficient basic facilities and high cost of living score highest means with 4.02 and 4.00 respectively. During his tenure as chief minister, Adenan had abolished tolls, reduced assessment tax rate and electricity tariffs in the state to help alleviate high cost of living in the state.

Table 7  
*Issues that affect voter’s preference*

	Mean
Good basic facilities in my area affect who I vote for.	4.02
Infrastructure development in my area affects who I vote for.	3.98
High cost of living in my area affects who I vote for.	4.00
Social development affects my vote	3.82

At the same time, the opposition’s speeches during campaigning period highlighted several issues like corruption, high cost of living, equality, land lease, hike of oil prices etc could have sparked dissatisfaction among voters over the government’s performance thus far. This is evident in Table 2 whereby party’s past performance scored a mean of 3.84 making this factor a significant indicator for voters. Table 8 gives a more detailed figure. More than half of the respondents (65.3%) associated the party’s performance as influential in their choice of vote. Knowing this, the opposition was quick to use this strategy to cajole over more support towards them by pointing out the failures of the current ruling party.

Table 8  
*Party performance influences my vote*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	14	5.0
Disagree	4	1.4
Neutral	79	28.2
Agree	149	53.2
Strongly agree	34	12.1

\*N=280

## Conclusion

The results of SSE2016 in N9 Padungan signify that majority of the Chinese voters of chose their representative based on party loyalty and at the same time personality of the candidate. Nonetheless, judging by the findings of this study, it seemed that voters were influenced in their choices based on issues which were brought up and how the government handled them.

A deeper look at the numbers of total votes obtained by the opposition and BN between SSE2011 and SSE2016 shows a noticeable shift in voting preferences for the people of Padungan (Refer Table 9). During SSE2011, the DAP dominated the votes with 72.3% while BN-SUPP only acquired 24.6% of the votes. In this recent election, BN-SUPP managed to gather more support, with an increase of almost 10% in votes from the previous election.

Table 9  
*Results of N9 Padungan (SSE2011 & SSE2016)*

Party	SSE2011		SSE2016	
	Number of votes	Percentage (%)	Number of votes	Percentage (%)
BN-SUPP	4073	24.6	5062	34.7
DAP	11957	72.3	9332	63.9
Independent/STAR	439	2.65	116	0.8
Spoilt votes	69	0.42	92	0.6
Total	16538	100	14602	100
Majority	7884		4270	

Overall, the BN achieved significant results in SSE2016, winning 72 out of the 82 seats contested and having reclaimed six seats lost in 2011. The main factor that can be attributed to this victory would be the popularity of the new chief minister Adenan Satem who took over from Abdul Taib Mahmud in 2014. As mentioned in the previous section, when Adenan took over the reigns, he had made several promises and fulfilled them, garnering ample support for Sarawak BN. This could have been a tipping point for many urban Chinese voters to switch their votes.

It seems that the transition to a new chief minister who has taken many actions that have benefited the everyday life of the people has most certainly aided the BN in the elections. Although the four factors identified were indeed influential in SSE2016, issues seemed to be the most dominant factor. These issues, such as oil royalty, corruption, high cost of living, state autonomy and equality were addressed by Adenan shortly after he took over the state's administration. This not only improved his popularity but also advanced the BN's standing in the state. Had Adenan not taken over, it could be speculated that the BN would have been likely to lose more seats under the previous administration.

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