

Youth Readiness to Vote: A Survey in Kuching, Sarawak.

Chai Shin Yi^{1*} , Muhammad Haiqal bin Moshidi² & Nur Syifaa' Fasihah binti Abdul Latif³

1,2,3 Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Campus

Corresponding author: chaisy@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

The number of youths eligible to vote in Malaysian elections has increased significantly since the lowering of voting age to 18 in 2019. This study was conducted to ascertain youth readiness in Kuching to vote. It was also intended to address the factors influencing Kuching youth's readiness to vote. A total of 304 respondents aged 15-40 years old answered the online survey. Consequently, the findings of this study found that only 65.5 per cent of respondents were ready to vote. Factors influencing this readiness included political knowledge, participation in social media, as well as parental and peer influences. These findings are crucial not only for academic but also for providing insights into where the youth stand, allowing the government to develop specific strategies to ensure the successful implementation of UNDI18. It is more important than ever that the youth play a crucial role in determining this nation's future.

Keywords: Youth voter; UNDI18; youth readiness; elections

INTRODUCTION

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Voting is a fundamental component in a democratic society. The expression of the people's will; whether they approve or oppose policies, or candidates, or political parties is essential in a nation's democratic process. Citizens are not

only bound by law to vote, but it is their responsibility to fulfil this civic duty. However, youth participation in the electoral process has been lacking globally. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that the different categorization of youth has contributed to a gap in identifying reasons behind this youth absenteeism in elections.

In Malaysia, youth is referred to as a person between the age of 15 and 30 years old. Prior to the amendment made on the Youth Societies and Youth Developments Act 2007 (Act 668) in 2019, youth covered those up to the age of 40. Subsequently, voting age was also lowered from 21 to 18. It was estimated that this move would bring an additional 7.8 million new voters to the electoral roll (Election Commission, 2018). As of August 2022, the Election Commission reported that a total of 21,113,234 Malaysians would be eligible to vote in the 15th General Election (GE15), with 5.4% (1,141,749) consisting of new voters aged 18 to 20 years of age (Utusan Malaysia, 2022). In fact, youth voter turnout during the last General Election was estimated to



have reached over 75%, almost matching the turnout for those in the 41 - 50 age bracket (Welsh, 2023). Meanwhile,

Having discussed this, youths are generally a targeted group during elections. At the same time, they also contribute as the largest group of unregistered voters. It is estimated that youths are two-thirds of the 3.8 million unregistered voters in Malaysia. With the lowering of voting age, this number is expected to rise considerably. Since youth make up such a large portion of our population, they are directly impacted positively and negatively by policy resolution in many aspects of life nowadays (Aliana, 2019). Moreover, the readiness of youth to vote can never be granted based on a presumption of lack of maturity or lack of intelligence (Saddiq, 2018). As a result, it raises the question on youth readiness to vote especially in the context of Sarawak with the upcoming state election. The Sarawak state government has maintained its definition of youth as those aged between 15 – 40 years old as indicated by the Ministry of Youth and Sports Sarawak, categorized into 3 groups namely; early youth (15 – 18 years old), middle youth (19 – 24 years old) and late youth (25 – 40 years old). This paper investigates the preparedness of youths in Sarawak to vote and the underlying factors contributing to their readiness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Readiness to vote

Readiness can be defined as a condition of preparation or ready for something. In many aspects, being prepared means having the abilities needed to deal with what lies ahead and to simultaneously learn from and contribute to what is happening. This combination of preparation and willingness to learn is essential for growth. It indicates that the youth have the abilities they will need to not just survive but also thrive in their next learning opportunity (Youth Development Insight, 2015). The youth's voice is the most important factor in a country's continuous development. It is also important to note that youth perceive politics as something only the elderly should do (Mpofu, 2012). As stated by File (2014), to ensure a high overall turnout, youth should vote.

According to Norshuhada et al. (2016), the majority of young people today embrace technology in all aspects of life. They are said to have complete faith in social media as a medium for bridging the gap between the people and the government,



particularly in terms of participation in decision-making and giving opinions. The youth have become the government's and opposition's main target in their pursuit of support. Therefore, readiness to vote means the youth know how to register as well as know about political issues (Hamzah, 2020).

Nowadays, many researchers found that youth are generally less passionate about politics than the older generations. Due to this, there exists a lack of understanding and knowledge which can cause lower participation in voting. In Malaysia, most youth find politics too complicated. In addition, many youths are unsure where to vote and what process is needed for registration. This has been found by The Malaysian Insight (2017), whereby out of those who were not registered to vote, 53% said they were too busy to register, while 30% felt their vote would be meaningless, and the remaining 17% did not know how to register. According to the Election Commission (2018), there are 3.8 million unregistered voters. It is estimated that from this figure, two-thirds are youths. Leong (2018) reported that youths were eager to vote in elections but did not register in time for the 2018 General Elections (GE2018) as it was not high in their list of priorities. Unfortunately, many youths do not believe their vote will result in significant government policies. Furthermore, youths generally do not think political officials are concerned with issues that affect them since there are an insufficient number of youth representatives in government.

Due to this indifference, youth turnout during elections have been low, not just in Malaysia but globally based on a study conducted by the 2018 United Nations Youth Assembly (). It was revealed that youth participation is relatively low in comparison to older citizens across the globe. This in turn makes one wonder if the youth are prepared to fulfill their civic duties.

Youth Political Knowledge

Political knowledge is critical for citizens and the general public of a democratic society. This is due to the fact that they must be aware of and understand how to respond to any political issues that arise in their country. However, a lack of civic knowledge among the general public, particularly youth, might be a factor in the appearance of spoiled votes in general elections (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Ensuring youths understand the political agenda and issues that faced by the country highly depend on their level of political understanding. To instill interest in voting, the youths



need to be politically literate, which means they should be aware of current issues, government policies, laws or decisions and how those things affect their future. A study conducted by Farudin (2021) in Malaysia showed that youth do not pay much attention to political knowledge.

Moreover, studies conducted in Western countries have found that lack of political knowledge is highly associated with low participation among youth in elections. In the UK for example, low voter turnout has been largely attributed by low political literacy and efficacy (Sloam, 2007). According to the concept of self-efficacy, one believes less in their abilities which results in them committing less of themselves in pursuing goals. In politics, this can be translated to citizens feeling disempowered when it comes to politics so they choose to disengage from politics. This is the result of citizens feeling as if their votes do not matter or make a difference to the election results. Hence, it is crucial to improve political literacy early especially among youth so that can help them translate such knowledge into actual political participation.

Social Media

Social media has quickly evolved into a medium for not only news but also political commentary and civic involvement (Rainie et al. 2012). Young people, in particular, are more likely to use social media for this purpose, posting their opinions and creating their own political content (Smith, 2009). However, Salman and Saad (2015) argued that youths in Malaysia do not actively engage in political discussions on social media. Instead, their study of 1182 youths between ages 18 to 25 revealed that youths use social media more for entertainment purposes rather than for political discussion.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that majority of social media users are indeed the youth and it can heavily influence them in many aspects of their life. For many young people, social media serves as their primary source of information. Political campaigns have found success using social media to reach their intended demographic (Gomez, 2014). Social media also is the place where participatory society, political consumerism and community involvement can be instilled (Ramli, 2012).



Family can also influence youth readiness to vote. For a number of reasons, family plays an important role in political participation (Memon, 2017). The most important feature is that it introduces youth to social and political ideals and norms, providing a rationale for involvement. Furthermore, it alters political structures and identities, allowing youngsters to better comprehend the political environment (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010).

Other than that, several studies have found an important relationship between political socialization and the major influence of family (Pancer, 2014; Stoker & Bowers, 2009; Beck & Jennings, 1982). It has been demonstrated that youth who live with their family have a greater propensity to vote, owing to the fact that parents have a powerful influence on their children's choice of candidate (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). It is more likely that the two generations (father-son) will talkabout the upcoming election topic (a short-term effect) and even go to polling station together (an election day effect) if they live together. In other words, a portion of the family involvement derives from the immediate social influence that comes from living with the offspring.

Peers

Lastly, friendships and participation in a peer group have a positive influence on political involvement. Common interests, social position, and age are other important factors for youth readiness to vote (Lee et al., 2013). Other than that, peer groups also develop social standards; moreover, belonging to a social network establishes valuable democratic and economic principles such as the exchange of commodities, services, and knowledge (Wattenberg, 2008). Plutzer (2002) further argued that young people will be less likely to vote if majority of people in their surroundings do not.

On the other hand, by using social media, peer influence effects could be employed to boost voter turnout. If they are engaged in politics, young people who are unaware of the problems facing the country may be enlightened through social media platforms and influenced by their peers. Young voters might not be able to tell fact from fiction on social media, but it might pique their curiosity about further investigation into the subjects being discussed. When examining young voting, it is important to take into



account this type of voter contagion' which can either have positive or negative effects on democracy and policy (Plutzer, 2002; Braha & Aguiar 2017).

In a nutshell, there are four reasons that can influence the readiness of the youth to vote. Additionally, Andolina et al., (2003) found that a crucial element is political participation and youth participation provided by peers. Plutzer (2002) affirmed that as a child grows older, peer groups, which may include friends, coworkers, partners, and other acquaintances, could become highly influential as parents lose influence over their children.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on youth readiness in Kuching to vote in the coming election. The survey was administered online for two weeks. Participation of this survey was promoted via social media, targeting youths in Kuching aged 15-40 years old. This range was chosen based on the Sarawak Ministry of Youth and Sport's definition of youth as those aged between 15-40 years, categorized into 3 groups namely; early youth (15-18 years old), middle youth (19-24 years old) and late youth (25-40 years old). A total of 304 participants answered the survey and all data were usable for this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 1, majority of the respondents were female at 53.9% and while the remaining 46.1% were male respondents. Using youth categories determined by the Sarawak Youth and Sports Ministry, more than half of the respondents (65.1%) were under the middle youth category, aged between 19 and 24 years old. The racial composition of the respondents is representative of the multi-ethnic society in Kuching, consisting of Malays (62.5%), Chinese (10.9%) and Iban (10.5%). This is also reflected in the religious affiliations of respondents, with majority being Muslims. Interestingly, more than three quarters of the respondents are registered voters (77%).



Table 1: Respondents Profile

| Description | Category | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Gender | Male | 140 | 46.1 |
| | Female | 164 | 53.9 |
| Age | 15-18 years old | 46 | 15.1 |
| | 19-24 years old | 198 | 65.1 |
| | 25-40 years old | 60 | 19.7 |
| Race | Iban | 32 | 10.5 |
| | Malay | 190 | 62.5 |
| | Chinese | 33 | 10.9 |
| | Bidayuh | 26 | 8.6 |
| | Melanau | 21 | 6.9 |
| | Kayan | 1 | 0.3 |
| | Kenyah | 1 | 0.3 |
| Religion | Muslim | 216 | 71.1 |
| - | Christian | 71 | 23.4 |
| | Buddhist | 13 | 4.3 |
| | Hindu | 4 | 1.3 |
| Occupation | Public Sector Employee | 53 | 17.4 |
| | Private Sector Employee | 55 | 18.1 |
| | Self-employed | 90 | 29.6 |
| | Student | 101 | 33.2 |
| | Unemployed | 5 | 1.6 |
| Registered voter | Yes | 234 | 77 |
| 2 | No | 70 | 23 |
| Readiness to vote | Yes | 199 | 65.5 |
| | No | 105 | 34.5 |

However, only 65.5% indicated readiness to vote in the next general election, with a mean score of 3.6 (Refer Table 2). Based on the Likert scale, this finding shows that the readiness of youth to vote in Kuching was at a moderate level. This finding is not surprising, considering majority of the respondents are aged between 19-24 years so it is assumed that they have had experience or time to integrate a habit of voting.

Table 2: Youth Readiness to vote

| | N | Mean |
|-------------------|-----|-------|
| Readiness to vote | 304 | 3.598 |

0.668



A simple linear regression was calculated to examine the influence of four independent variables: political knowledge, social media, family and peers on overall level of Kuching youth readiness to vote. Two independent variables; political knowledge and peers were overall influential on Kuching youth readiness to vote in Kuching (p<0.05). Political knowledge and peers was the main predictor of the overall level youth readiness to vote with mean score of 3.5 and 3.4 respectively (Refer Table 3). Political knowledge showed a strong positive correlation where the result has shown a 0.774 while peers scored 0.668 correlations.

In fact, all four variables showed a positive relationship with youth readiness to vote. According to the data, it can be inferred these four independent variables together explained 65.5% of the variance in the overall level of Kuching youth readiness to vote.

Variable Mean Sig. Pearson Correlation MPK 3.5 .000 0.774 MSM 3.3 .845 0.5233 MFM 3.2 .127 0.588

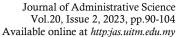
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Table 3: Mean, Significance and Correlation of each variable

3.4 MPK-Political Knowledge, MSM-Social Media, MFM-Family, MPRS-Peers

Based on previous study by Suksi (2011), by engaging in activities such as asking questions, paying close attention to their beliefs and viewpoints, distinguishing between things they believe in and their ideas, and developing competencies, youth will become more confident and prepared. This would result in a better decision making during the voting process. Moreover, according to Denver & Hands (1990), the knowledge and understanding of political structures and issues enable citizens to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Early exposure to political activities among children had positive impacts on their political efficacy when they reach voting age. This could imply that they understand how to respond to any political issues that arise in their country. Another study by Milner (2007) showed that political knowledge has been

MPRS





shown to influence the rate of beliefs held by an individual. This could explain that the youth would be able to decide their parties themselves.

As for the relationship between social media and the readiness of youth in Kuching to vote, a moderate positive correlation has been found in this analysis (0.523). A study by Bahtiar, Shamsu and Haslina (2017) showed similar results in that youth were more likely to use social media for political socialization, posting their opinions and creating their own political content that in turn increased their interest in politics.

Meanwhile, finding shows that there was a link between family and readiness of youth readiness to vote. A correlation of 0.588 indicated that there was a moderate positive correlation between the variables. This can be supported by Memon's (2017) discovery that for a number of reasons, the family plays an important role in political participation. It indicated that family involvement in politics could correlate with and influence youth voting readiness. As a result, family involvement in politics is critical since it influences youth participation. Similar conclusion was also drawn by Bhatti and Hansen (2012) that when a parent votes, other family members including youths would vote too. This argument is further supported by Barrett (2018) who pointed out that teenagers whose parents are engaged in political and social issues also have higher levels of such interest, and parents who participate in protests are more likely to have children who do the same.

In terms of peers' influence on youth readiness to vote, a correlation of 0.688 demonstrates that there is a moderate positive correlation. This positive association might be attributed to the fact that peers serve as a source of rivalry for adolescents, who use these peers to set the standard for accomplishment. The idea of peer pressure to fulfill a civic duty is very possible among eligible young voters (Andalina et al., 2003). At the same time, a study from Lee et al., (2013), found that common interests, social position, and age are other important factors for youth readiness to vote. This is due to the friendships and participation in a peer group having a positive effect on political involvement. Barrett (2018) considered peer connections as a crucial social factor to take into account since youth who feel a sense of solidarity with their peers are more likely to commit to political and civic goals and ideas. Membership in youth organizations and engagement in groups that provide forums for public speaking, debating, and community service are also linked to sustained political activity



To conclude, the main predictor for this study shows that political knowledge and peers influence the readiness of youth in Kuching to vote. The finding of this survey is essential to give political institutions an idea on how to engage the youth for the next election. Governments should not be the only ones responsible to promote political knowledge among youth. Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations need to do their part to raise public understanding of our democratic system, especially among the youth. To do this, social media must be fully utilized to create more awareness through production of educational and engaging content that promote youth political participation. The United States, for example, has always used social media and technology to reach out to the younger generation through movements such as "Rock the Vote" that feature appearances of celebrities who call for young people to vote.

In this age of artificial intelligence (AI), there is opportunity to leverage this technology for youth engagement. For example, AI-powered platforms can generate an individualized approach by analysing the user's interest, thereby making political information more interesting and engaging. At the same time, AI-powered gamification techniques can be used to create interactive and engaging platforms that educate young peopleAI algorithms can also monitor social media trends and analyse sentiments to the issues and opinions of young people. This is a beneficial tool for policymakers to come up with more targeted and effective strategies. Nonetheless, it is imperative to prioritise transparency, privacy and ethical use of AI in political engagement. Efforts need to be made to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access for the young population.

The role of young voters is imperative to shape the direction of Malaysia's future. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that the sample of respondents for this survey may not necessarily represent the entire Malaysian youth population. It does, however, give one a glimpse at the importance of inculcating political awareness and knowledge to citizens. After GE15, a new generation of young voters will emerge that need analysis. One could argue that the impacts of COVID-19 could create a generation of youth that would have a different perspective towards politics altogether.

No doubt, young people need to be convinced to vote, but we also need to know how to mobilize them to care about voting in general and voting for what matters to them. We must not let young citizens abstain from voting, especially for the first time,



because it could lead to a 'generational effect' described by Blais et al (2004) as a decrease of voter turnout due to the younger generation voters replacing older voters that possibly would create a generation that does not attach enough importance to the electoral process and eventually not participate in elections at all.

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