The Importance of Issues for the Youth in Voter Decision Making: A Case Study among University Students in Malaysia

Sivamurugan Pandian

Abstract—In the 13th Malaysia's General Elections held in 2013, it was observed that large numbers of urban constituencies saw strongly decisive young voters (between 21-39 age group) determine the outcome in their favour. Also, the Elections Commission had approximated that 70% of some 4.2 million unregistered voters at the time were citizens aged between 21 and 40 years old. If they are not already considered an important form of political leverage, 450,000 young Malaysians turn 21 years old each year. Further compounding this fact were the 2.4 million new voters registered in 2012, which at the time constituted almost 30% of the entire voting population. This article discusses the importance of issues for the youth, with reference to the university students in Malaysia in their decision making on polling day.

Keywords—Malaysia, Youth, Issues, Voting Patterns, Elections.

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE are a myriad of factors which contribute to intellectual understanding when it comes to the assessments of elections results in democratic hinterlands. The prominent ones would usually feature age-party affiliations, gender-candidate selections, candidate-location suitability and even ideology-social class matchups. In the 13th Malaysian General Election held back in 5th of May 2013, it is crucial to note that there were huge numbers of urban constituencies had a strongly critical 'channels 4 and 5', voters between the ages of 21 and 39 years old. This is simply because these young voters have turned the election results in most urban constituencies in their favor. It is also an interesting fact that 70% of some 4.2 million unregistered voters with the Elections Commission were Malaysian citizens between the ages of 21 and 40 years old. In Malaysia, 450,000 young Malaysians turn 21 years old each year which indeed makes the young people as the most important form of political leverage that determines the political landscape of the nation. Besides that, it is also interesting to note that 2.4 million new voters have registered with the Elections Commission in 2012 whereby it is almost 30% of the total registered voters at the time.

To eliminate further ambiguity, this paper shall employ an age group demographic element in analyzing data obtained

Associate Professor Dr. Sivamurugan Pandian is with the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia (Phone: 604 653 3344; fax: 604 653 3860; e-mail: psiva@usm.my).

from a structured questionnaire whose details will be further explained in later sections. Significance of like-minded research becomes apparent when considering statistical evidence on the radically increasing amount of involvement of the university students in the campaigning and elections process.

The young voters are also known as 'Generation Y', referred to those who were born in the 1980s and 2000, also the tech-savvy age group. Most of them are fence-sitters; considered independent minded and their political loyalties are not fixed [1]. Some other studies conducted by various bodies also indicates that 48% of first time voters in Malaysia are fence sitters, a 'gray area' cohort whose role in the elections scenario is now well established, literally strong-arming both incumbent and opposition parties to adopt campaign strategies tailored to their more liberal, fair and non-communal version of politics.

According to the Asia Foundation, these emerging groups of young, motivated and knowledgeable voters are no longer predisposed in relating politics to the age old factors of religion or race. They are in fact, due to better exposure to different cultures and traditions, well-rounded and adequately informed on the importance of diversity. 71% of the voters in this cohort were reported to be in favour of a political party that was more multiracial and inclusive for all Malaysians, regardless of race or religion [2]. The group had clearly prioritized the national economy and a few other issues such as unemployment, inflation and security as their concerns and 60% of this particular cohort felt that the government at present is at its best in dealing with those matters. In general, the young voters were more interested in macro-issues which affected the entire Malaysian populace regardless of race or religion.

II. CONCEPT, THEORY AND RESEARCH MODEL

An elections analysis has never been complete without a focused study on voting behaviour and patterns. Previous studies were not entirely specific and had paid better attention in general to election results, party performance, campaign agendas and the issues involved [3]. There is still however a certain lack in research which focuses on the voters themselves and the external factors that had helped shape their corresponding voting behaviour, such as the issues that directly concerned them, voting factors, media influence, social media prevalence and the popularity element of the candidates involved. This section of the paper will seek to

conceptualize and define the major abstractions that are involved in this study. Among them are democracy and political participation, the definition of voting behaviour and the identification of behavioral voting models.

A. Democracy and Political Participation

Democracy as a political system now widely practiced, has in itself a conceptual variance that appeals differently to different factions. Such obscurity is a probable result of the many debates and arguments held over the years on the concepts, mechanism and processes of democratic governance interpreted via the perspective of these many governments themselves. Nevertheless, democracy in its most universal design is 'a form of governance that allows for the governed to choose their governors in line with a rather consensual line of politics.' This not only allows for the citizens of a particular democracy to course the directions of their own lives but to also have a powerful say in making and influencing political decisions. To allow for the creation of such fertile environment, it is inherently in the elected government's responsibility to provide proper space and infrastructure to its people so that their participation in the processes of governance and legislation is actively and effectively precipitated [4].

Political participation on the other hand may be characterized into aspects of form, frequency and quality. Today, time, money and civic skills considered as resources in a model of political participation [5]. When discussing form, there are two distinct categories which come to attention, which are the conventional and non-conventional dimensions. Conventional forms of political participation refer to involvement in political activities such as voting and campaigning during the elections whereas the non-conventional forms refer to political involvement such as protests, demonstrations, revolutions and flagrant displays of political hostility. The frequency aspect refers to how often an individual takes part directly or indirectly in any one political event, thus allowing the researcher to gauge the extent to which that individual is motivated to get involved. The final aspect evaluates the meaningfulness of an individual's commitment in or contribution to a political process, where his or her understanding and knowledge on political systems and the subsequent processes that ensue would become the main factors in determining the quality of political involvement.

As of late, the boom in information technology has encouraged better political participation in general. Easy accessibility to news, gossip and political debates may have initiated increased levels in the quality and frequency of an individual's political participation, via political blogs, Facebook statuses and Twitter texts that are constantly and instantly shared in acceptable and democratic mediums. It remains to be proven whether or not these packets of information have successfully deepened understanding about the political processes they illustrate.

Previous studies have highlighted a sense of variety in accentuating the factors that affect political participation. In comprehending such diversity, society is categorized into a few but discreet groups of political activity types. Among these are the 'inactive, the voting experts, the parochial participant, the societal activist, the campaigning groups and the full activist' [6]. The first category, better known as the inactive, simply refers to the ones who are never involved in any political activity whatsoever, for example those who can vote but have never registered to do so. The majority of individuals in this category are from the lower income group. The voting experts category refer to individuals who do vote in the elections but keep clear of any further involvement in any other political activity. Parochial participants on the other hand, refer to those who not only perform their dutiful obligations in voting but also regularly interact with the government on all levels. The societal activist may be said to be a group of individuals who busy themselves in a myriad of social service and community based work but find strict abhorrence in getting involved with any elections campaigns. The exact opposite may be said of the campaigning group category. Last but not least, the full activist category is home to individuals who like participating in any kind of political activity with a higher than usual rate of involvement, for example a Member of Parliament.

There are also present a host of other more subtle factors which exert considerable influence on communal involvement in general political processes with specific emphasis on class distinctions. The first of these factors is a strong urge for politicking. This urge may be a result of a dire need to wrest power and influence for the purpose of pursuing justice and fairness, a certain ideology or for other reasons, as in fighting corruption, preserving the environment and so on and so forth. Personality is also an important factor in this case, where motivation for political involvement could be an outcome of different personality types. For example extroverts who are seemingly better at socializing are more active in politics than are introverts. Social factors such as class, race and type of neighborhoods also play important roles in inducing political interest as there are certain social classes which are visibly more affected by certain government laws than are other social classes. Examples of such legislation are the Minimum Wage Act and Subsidy Rationalizations. The final factor would be socialization or an individual's political environment where the influence of various institutions on the individual is determined. Such institutionalization would include as factors the parents, family, media, peer groups and acquaintances at work.

B. Voting Behaviour

The definition of **voting behaviour** as according to Holland [7] is an attempt to perceive the essence of the voters in their considerations and decisions of whether to vote and who to vote for. Through comprehension of voting behaviour we may get a clearer picture as to why one votes and the factors which may have influenced that decision. This also helps make it possible to gauge the voter's perception on the election processes, including the institutions which are involved such as the Elections Commission, various political parties, the

candidates and even the issues which are usually capitalized in the campaigning process and by the media.

In simple terms, the voters may be characterized as consumers who make rational and irrational choices when purchasing items of their need. A rational consumer would consider multiple factors related to his or her purchase such as the price, quality, quantity and spending ability before buying an item. However, an irrational consumer would make the purchase without any of those considerations, rendering him or herself to current trends and probably even a lusty shopping attitude. With voting behaviours however, the voter as in the case of a rational consumer would make a decision after considering various functionalities in accordance with his or her own understanding and involvement in the political process and system. In better explaining voting factors, behavioral models such as the ones below will be exposed to scrutiny.

C. Behavioral Voting Models

A few models have been incorporated into previous studies that will now be explored in detail:

The **Sociological Model** illuminates the various social factors that have much influence on the voting behaviour of an individual such as class, academic qualifications, location, neighbourhood environment, health, age, gender and so on and so forth [8]. The individual which belongs in a certain grouping such as a religious community, for example, shall place his or her votes with a tinge of religious views or bias. Through this model, it will be easier to translate social conflicts via the outcome of ballot boxes as the position and social preferences of a voter will no doubt affect his or her voting behaviour.

The **Michigan Model** is named as such after being used in a study at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Centre where the research placed emphasis on long term partisan patterns. According to this model, an individual's social location or position will determine with who he or she interacts better with and eventually who the individual votes for. It may be observed in this model that an individual's political affiliations and interests are a function of upbringing and circumstance where the party which is currently supported has been supported for generations before [9]. In this matter, early political socialization or institutionalization is integral in shaping an individual's partisan tendencies.

The **Party Identification Model** pays attention to a party's staunch supporting voters on the basis of loyalty [10]. In this case, the voters have confidence in the party's stability and are prepared to support it and its cause no matter what the consequences would be. Even so, such loyalty may shift from its foundations if the party experiences major internal or external change. This model may appear complementary to the Michigan model especially when analysis revolves around early socialization in forming political inclinations.

The **Ideology Model/Media Dominance Model** illustrates the role the media plays in shaping the very fabric of politics in the eyes of the voter [11]. Via the media, various political opinions are formed through news coverage, positive and negative, and it is up to the voters to retrieve necessary information from a general source for personal consumption. However, voters who are untrusting of the conventional media outlets will take on partisan perspectives in their pursuit of news from alternative media sources, such as the social media for instance.

The **Rational Choice Model** views the voter as a rational individual who is fully capable of making proper decisions after careful observation of the matters involved. A rational voter will also evaluate the performance of the candidate and the party, rate the contents of an election manifesto and observe the track record of a party before deciding [12]. In shaping voting behaviour, this model places considerably more emphasis on individual choice as compared to the other models which are characteristically more collective in nature

III. REPRESENTATION, RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Various universities students participated in the research to determine the importance of issues for the youth in voter decision making. 615 respondents were selected from universities in Malaysia which includes from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM:105), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM:125), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM: 148), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS: 102) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS:135). There were 144 male, 469 female and 2 respondents of unknown gender (unstated). From the total amount of 615 people, 354 respondents were below the age of 20, 240 were between ages 21 and 24, 15 were between ages 25 and 30, 3 were between ages 31 and 35 and 1 was in the 41-45 age category. All in all, it may be observed that the distribution of voters who were not yet eligible to vote (will become first time voter for the 2018 General Elections) due to the age factor was prominent at 57.7%.

From the ethnic distributions element, it comprises 416 Malays, 59 Chinese, 37 Indian, 92 Others and 11 Unstated respondents. The observable majority in this study almost mirrored the national distribution with 67.6% while the second largest ethnic group was the 'Others' with 15%. The breakdown according to state of origin was that from a total of 615 respondents, 15.3% were from Sabah, 12% from Johor and 11.5% were from Sarawak. Perlis saw the least amount of respondents with only 1.1%. Geographically, 73.2% were from West Malaysia (Peninsula) whereas 26.8% were from the East (Sabah & Sarawak). In the Peninsula itself, the breakdown was 71.8% from the West Coast and the remaining 28.2% were from the East Coast. A total of 83 respondents had marked 'Yes' to having voted before whereas 531 respondents or 86.3% had marked 'No' further accentuating the first time voter phenomena mentioned above. In having registered as a voter, a total of 136 respondents or 22.1% had marked 'Yes' whereas 476 respondents or 77.4% had marked 'No.'

This study has also taken into account a few significant aspects in not only structuring the questionnaire but in also the discretionary analysis that follows after. Among these aspects taken into consideration were the background of the respondents (faculty, gender, age, voting status, voting

location, their perception on both their area representative and Member of Parliament), their perceptions on the implementation of government policies, political party leadership, sensitivity toward the issues that may affect the voting process and characteristics of an ideal leader. Though these aspects appear discrete, they are interrelated in articulating the young voter's perception on influential political issues and ideal leader characteristics.

As will further discussion dictate the lack of communal propriety among the university students, the distribution in Tables I and II as stated below highlights such an attribute in numerical detail. Overall it can be said that the students were well aware of the issues that affect the general voting population and they are also well informed on the attributes that make a good political leader. Yet again, macro issues such as the national economy and citizen welfare policies seem to have been in Barisan Nasional's favour though it scored low in issues concerning affirmative action and ethnic inequality.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF ISSUES IN VOTER DECISION MAKING

This section of the article deals with issues that might and probably will affect the voter in future elections. Table I lists down in descending order of frequency, the main issues that are predicted to impact the voters in future democratic processes. From the data obtained, the five main factors which affect the university students the most are 'general goods price increases, petrol price hikes, unemployment, a lack of unity and minimalized academic opportunities for the own race/ethnic members/quota system.

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF IMPORTANT ISSUES IN VOTER (STUDENT) DECISION MAKING

Issues	N	%	Issues (cont.)	N	%
General goods price hikes	285	46.3	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual basic rights	3	0.5
Petrol price hikes	91	14.8	Lawmaker (YB) service records	3	0.5
Unemployment	63	10.2	The Constitution	3	0.5
Lack of unity	33	5.4	Infrastructure	2	0.3
Crime and public safety	28	4.6	Social problems among the youth	2	0.3
Lack of academic opportunities for members of own race/ethnicity/ quota system	30	4.9	Land	1	0.2
PTPTN (National Higher Education Fund) loan abolishment issues	16	2.6	Lack of employment/ business opportunities for members of own race/ethnicity	1	0.2
Interracial conflict	13	2.1	Malay supremacy	1	0.2
Scholarships	11	1.8	Unstable politics	1	0.2
Underperforming national economy	7	1.1	Religion	1	0.2
Prime Minister's popularity	6	1.0	Crowding issues	1	0.2
Government and Service Tax (GST) implementation	4	0.7	**Total**	606	98.5

V. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL LEADER

The final part of this article shall revolve around what it takes for a winnable candidate to be widely accepted by all societal clusters, communities, ethnicity and gender. The Table II displays in descending order of frequency, the principal criteria that are integral in producing a winnable candidate. From the data obtained, they are in order of importance the attributes of being 'honest, ethical, credible, knowledgeable and authoritative.'

TABLE II
DISTRIBUTION OF CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL LEADER THAT IS IMPORTANT IN VOTER (STUDENT) DECISION MAKING

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics (cont.)	N	%
Honest	163	26.5	Responsible	3	0.5
Ethical	159	25.9	Hard willed	2	0.3
Good credibility	97	15.8	Able	1	0.2
Knowledgeable	68	11.1	Qualified	1	0.2
Authoritative	35	5.7	Energetic	1	0.2
Keeps promises	22	3.6	Young at heart	1	0.2
Trustworthy	20	3.3	Nationalistic	1	0.2
Good communication skills	11	1.8	Athletic	1	0.2
Preserves the integrity of the party	10	1.6	Sensitive to the problems of others	1	0.2
Transparent	5	0.8	Good at negotiations	1	0.2
No scandals	3	0.5	Considers him/herself inclusive in servitude	1	0.2
			Total	607	98.7

VI. CONCLUSION

The students today are no longer apprehensive in not only being critical about the ruling party, National Front (Barisan Nasional) administration, but also in expressing how they feel about the institutionalization of the state and its systems. There are a few among many government policies and actions which have lost significant popularity, especially policies which concern the welfare of the Malaysian population. However, the outstanding factor is the reduction of student trust and acceptance in the reliability of information transmitted by the mainstream media. It is as if the explanations and elaboration offered by the government on issues of citizen welfare have not been well received by the more intellectual and creative thinking students. With the rapid emergence of a strong alternative media source via the internet, this is an issue Barisan Nasional should place more emphasis on, especially when social media has lately taken on a primary role in shaping student perception.

There is also much to be improved on when it comes to interracial unity. Barisan Nasional should begin to design better and more far reaching campaigns and infrastructure in deepening general understanding on rather sensitive issues such as the affirmative action policies, the social contracts which are implicitly stated in the Constitution and other policies revolving around national unity such as the 1Malaysia concept. This is because students have also begun to openly display negative perceptions on the government's efforts in combating corruption. Such an issue should see refinement in

first obtaining information on the impressions given out so as to gauge if the level of effort is sufficient enough in inducing the proper perceptions.

Exemplary leadership characteristics are also one of the primary concerns of the students. An ideal leader to them is someone who is honest, highly ethical, very knowledgeable and authoritative. It is safe to say that the negatively tinted perception on Barisan Nasional brand of leadership at the moment needs to be reversed or at least adjusted to fit into those aforementioned highly positive characteristics. Finally, even though the negative perceptions of the university students on the Barisan Nasional administration were better emphasized during the course of this research as compared to student opinion before the emergence of social media, it was neither the case that they were satisfied with the opposition parties as well. Such perceptions should take priority as they may only be the result of dissatisfaction with Barisan Nasional's lackadaisical attitude on their proposed transformation plan. A more holistic and organized plan by Barisan Nasional would help in not only winning back its strong foundational support, but in also in accommodating the political necessities of a rapidly modernizing electronic society, where change is inevitable.

REFERENCES

[1] Sivamurugan Pandian, *"Generation Y' Voters May Decide The Outcome Of GE 13"*, The Star, 9 June 2012.

[2] Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, *The Youth Vote In GE 2013: Kingmakers In The Making?* Extracted from http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0652013.pdf, 2013.

[3] Mohd. Faisal Syam Abdol Hazis, Neilson Ilan Mersat & Ahi Sarok, *Tingkahlaku Pengundian Dalam Pilihan Raya Parlimen Sarawak. Kota Samarahan*, Malaysia : Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2012.

[4] Dahl, Robert, *Democracy And Its Critics,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

[5] Brady, E Henry; Verba, Sidney; Schlozman, Kay Lehman, *Beyond SES:A Resource Model of Politcal Participation,* American Political Science Review, Vol: 89:2, America: APSA, 1995.

[6] Mohd. Faisal Syam Abdol Hazis, Neilson Ilan Mersat & Ahi Sarok, *Tingkahlaku Pengundian Dalam Pilihan Raya Parlimen Sarawak. Kota Samarahan*, Malaysia : Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2002.

[7] Holland, Martin, *Electoral Behaviour In New Zealand*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[8] Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B. & Gaudet, H, *The People's Choice: How The Voter Makes Up His Mind In A Presidential Campaign,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.

[9] Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954.

[10] Bartels, Larry M, *"Partisanship and Voting Behavior 1952-1996",* American Journal Of Political Science: 44. USA: APSA, 2000.

[11] Abercrombie, Nicholas; Turner, Bryan S, *"The Dominant Ideology Thesis"*. The British Journal of Sociology. UK: BSA, 1978.

[12] Browning, G; Halcli, A; Webster, F, *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*. UK: Sage, 2000.