

Does Policies Matter in Voting Behaviour: Findings from Selected University Students in Malaysia

Sivamurugan Pandian

School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract: The Malaysian's 13th General Elections which took place on the 5th of May 2013 saw much decisive force exploding from the youth, determining the outcome in their favour. It has become a norm in all democracies around the world that the youth now become a force to be reckoned with in the political arena. In Southeast Asia, it can be observed taking place in countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Myanmar and Cambodia. In Malaysia, the majority of young voters are usually first time voters and below the age of 30. They also make up a large portion of the 'gray area voters' or more fondly known as the 'fence sitters'. This study shall seek to decipher the perceptions university students have on the implementation of government policies and how their voting behaviours correspond to such predispositions via a structured questionnaire followed by statistical interpretation. The dimensions that would be scrutinized include the issues that directly concerns them, voting factors, media influence, social media prevalence and the popularity element of the candidates involved.

Key words: Malaysia, youth, policies, voting patterns, elections, element

INTRODUCTION

The youth in all democracies around the world have now become a force to be reckoned with in the political arena (Bartels, 2008). This proves to be truer for Malaysia as well as other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Myanmar and Cambodia. The majority of young voters in Malaysia are usually first time voters and below the age of 30. They also make up a large portion of the 'gray area voters' or more fondly known by political analysts as the 'fence sitters.' Such volatility in decision could be negatively attributed to inadequate political experience and lack of information or positively taken as a heightened sense of articulacy of the Malaysian political tradition. The 13th General Elections which took place on the 5th of May 2013 saw much decisive force exploding from the voting channels 4 and 5 (young voters channels), determining the outcome in their favour. This article shall seek to decipher the perceptions university students have on the implementation of government policies and how their voting behaviours correspond to such predispositions.

The Asia Foundation claimed that 60% of this particular cohort felt that the government at present is at its best in dealing with those matters though there were an increased number of young voters who had become more concerned about rampant corruption, government spending, good governance and rising claims of cronyism. Also, 71% of these young voters believed in

the structuring of a party that was more multiracial and inclusive for all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity or religion. This cohort had appeared more eloquent and was able to articulate their political visions well, prioritizing national economic development and other macro-level issues such as unemployment, inflation and security as their main political concerns. This new intellectual, rational and information hungry brand of voters at first saw the Pakatan Rakyat (People Coalition) or PR comprising the opposition parties fulfills their quest for political participation as it catered to a wider, unrestricted audience. This study will seek to understand if PR still maintains its status as a party for the youth or if Barisan Nasional (National Front) or BN has redeemed itself since 2013 to accommodate the preferences of these 'fence sitters.'

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

During the Malaysia's 13th General Elections, political parties campaign has shifted and many attempts were made to win over the fence-sitters. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) Youth Chief, Khairy Jamaluddin stated that "there could be up to 40% of voters who have yet to make up their minds over who to vote for and the figure could go higher for younger voters, maybe even 50%". It is this group of voters who appear dubious of party affiliation or do not pay much attention to the institutionalization of political preferences

but stay sensitive to the issues and policies being discussed in the open political arena. Thus in the 2008 General Elections, the young voters had been responsible in causing a rational protest in shifting their votes toward the opposition parties, after having been dissatisfied with the BN's status quo themselves. Illustrating the significance of this predicament is the 5% difference popular vote in the total vote tally between the Barisan Nasional (47%) and the Pakatan Rakyat (52%) with an already mentioned channels 4 and 5 voter predominance.

This study will however seek to delve deeper into voter perception and observe the university student opinion on the implementation of government policies by the ruling party via a structured questionnaire followed by statistical interpretation. The dimensions that would be scrutinized include the issues that directly concerns them, voting factors, media influence, social media prevalence and the popularity element of the candidates involved.

Pillai (1974) had conducted his research on the 1974 General Elections by studying the voting patterns of the three largest ethnic groups in Malaysia which are the Malays, Chinese and the Indians. He confirmed a vast variety of factors that appealed to the different ethnicities in different ways. For example, ethnic Malay voters saw Tun Abdul Razak's legacy (Malaysia's Prime Minister between 1970-1976 who is also the current Prime Minister's father) as positive whereas the ethnic Chinese voters refused to play along with the opposition's confrontational mode of politics and the ethnic Indian voters on the other hand were in support of Malaysian Indian Congress's (MIC) new generation of leadership then. Hoong (1991) found that the ethnic and religious factors were biased toward the BN in the 1990 General Elections. The coalition among opposition parties such as Semangat 46, PAS, DAP and PBS had failed to confront BN due to certain racial and religious issues such as the threats issued toward the ethnic Malays and the Muslims. The height of chaos was when Tengku Razaleigh (former Vice President of ruling party's component party, UMNO who left the party after he lost his bid in 1987 against the President then, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad) was pictured on the cover page of a few selected newspapers wearing a headgear with a cross on it.

In similar perspective, reported that voters in Kelantan had been more attracted to spiritual and religious issues that were being actively propagated by PAS during the 1990 General Elections campaigning period. Though BN had better funding, a more systematized party machinery and stronger media support, they had failed to garner support in the state. Gomez (1996) had researched the 1995 General Elections and found that the ethnic Malay votes were unevenly

divided between one contingent of voters which was happy with the status quo and another which had serious dissatisfaction with a coterie of national economic development matters, markedly increasing social issues and a string of religious problems. The latter had then contributed a significant amount of votes to the opposition. Ethnic Chinese voters on the other hand had been momentarily impressed with the stable and organized economic development scheme at the time and decidedly rooted for the BN. Gomez also mentioned instances of vote-buying at a few constituencies in Kelantan and Terengganu with cash handouts as much as 500 and RM1000 offered to the voters.

Baharuddin and Noor (2013) research on the 'Young Voter Support Trends' showed that the younger voters had become more flexible and less inclined to be interested in political happenings but were more appreciative of leadership. They were more supportive of Datuk Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Abd. Razak (Prime Minister and BN Chairman) and his transformation program than Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's (Opposition leader and De Facto leader of People Justice Party) promised regime change. This study also proved the presence of a significant number of voters who were undecided at the time as they were of non-Malay ethnic origins and lived in the cities. Thus, the urban constituencies depended much on these fence-sitters. Subsequently, Maggini (2009) had observed student voting patterns in Italy and disproved the relevance of the 'Sociological Model' in describing voting trends as young voters had begun to vote based on personal preference instead of institutionalized party affiliations. The lines of difference between right and left wing prerogatives had also been blurred and were decidedly no longer focused on economic matters as they were before.

This study is better understood when relating the particular cohort to factors of proper democratic principles and types of political participation. There are several behavioral models which categorize the levels of political participation of the young voters that would enable the researcher to not only consider factors of better information dissemination via the internet and social media but also the adaptation of political parties to attract the support of these young voters. Among these are the Sociological Model, the Michigan Model, the Party Identification Model, the Ideology/Media Dominance Model and the Rational Choice Model. These categorization processes were also cross referenced with several interrelated indicator aspects that were incorporated into the questionnaire. They consisted of the basic background information of the respondents (faculty, age, voting status, voting location, perception on

both area representative and member of parliament), implementation of government policies, political party leadership, sensitivity toward issues that affect the voting process and characteristics of an ideal leader.

This study also focused on the perception and voting behaviour of students from a few Malaysian local universities and may be possibly used as a form of informative guidance for political parties in preparing for future elections in the country. With the prevalence of information technology in encouraging more inclusive political participation, whether it was only the conventional means of voting for a candidate of choice or the non-conventional means of taking part in protests, demonstrations and orchestrating revolutions, the young student voters seemed to have been full of conviction in the issues that they were concerned about. This group of young student voters was predominantly more concerned about the general issues which involved the political parties at both the national and local levels, instead of traditional ethnic comparatives as was the norm before. They were also more capable of expressing their political inclinations correctly. Though, the PR capitalized on such characteristics in its vagrant battles for equality and freedom of expression, 60% of this cohort thought that BN had fared rather well, needing only strategic improvements in its bid for better governance.

STUDENT PERCEPTION ON POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The primary data source for this study comprises 615 respondents 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), divided into proportions of 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 (first time voter for the 14th General Elections) due to the age factor was prominent at 57.7%.

Ethnic distribution saw 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 and 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 had taken into account some fairly significant aspects in not only structuring the questionnaire but in also the discretionary analysis that followed after. Among these aspects taken into consideration were the backgrounds of the respondents (faculty, gender, age, voting status, voting location, their perception on both their area representative and member of parliament), 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 very much interrelated in articulating the young voter perception. Table 1 shows the responses given with respect to policy implementation issues according to ethnicity. Further analyses replacing the ethnicity factor with gender and location in the state will follow. However, Table 1 is to be used as the main reference to responses given by the students in understanding the ethnic relations in the current national political arena.

As will further discussion dictate the lack of communal propensity among the university students, the distribution in Table 1 highlights such an attribute in numerical detail. Overall it can be said that the students accept the rate and quality of BN policy implementation strategies, though they do not seem to be overtly satisfied. Yet again, macro issues such as the national economy and citizen welfare policies seem to have been in BN's favour though, it scored low in issues concerning affirmative action and ethnic inequality.

The responses of the students were almost similar when it came to the topic of policy implementation. For one reason this is because personal judgment and bias were rather one sided toward BN as it is the norm that only the ruling government has jurisdiction in policy implementation. However, there were instances in support of the opposition as some policies had their beginnings from the opposition campaigns for the people. Overall, the level of policy implementation within the student

Table 1: Distribution of student perception according to ethnicity

Attributes	Malay (%)			Chinese (%)			Indian (%)			Others (%)		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
General elections in Malaysia are fair and democratic	22.1	28.3	17.1	0.8	7.1	1.6	1.6	3.2	1.1	4.7	6.3	3.9
BN has a good performance record in its service to the people	22.4	24.9	20.2	0.8	7.1	1.6	1.6	2.9	1.5	4.9	4.4	5.5
PR has a good performance record in its service to the people	15.8	13.5	38.2	2.6	1.8	5.2	1.3	1.5	3.2	1.1	4.1	9.7
The administration of the regional government should be placed under the state government	25.5	17.6	24.2	3.6	2.6	3.4	1.8	1.6	2.4	5.4	3.6	5.8
BN's national economic initiatives have been beneficial to Malaysia	39.3	10.9	16.7	2.9	2.6	4.1	2.9	0.6	2.1	9.1	1.9	3.7
BN expounds race based politics	29.3	19.3	18.5	6.0	1.1	2.4	3.7	0.6	1.6	6.3	3.7	4.9
PR expounds race based politics	25.5	17.7	23.6	2.6	2.4	4.6	2.4	1.5	2.1	5.5	3.1	6.2
The new Economic Model has successfully distributed wealth fairly among the many races	19.7	28.1	19.2	1.9	5.5	2.1	1.0	3.1	1.9	3.9	6.5	4.4
All Malaysians deserve equal rights irrespective of ethnicity or gender	43.6	19.8	4.2	8.8	0.5	0.3	5.0	0.6	0.3	13.6	0.8	0.5
The Federal Government has dealt with corruption successfully	4.9	47.1	15.6	0.5	7.8	1.3	0.3	3.9	1.8	0.6	9.4	4.9
Feel intimidated with the position of 'Malay Superiority' which restricts development of the non-Malay community	9.4	42.3	15.9	6.7	1.5	1.5	3.1	1.1	1.8	3.9	7.1	3.7
1Malaysia concept by Datuk Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Abd. Razak has brought him more support and confidence by the people	22.3	25.5	19.5	1.1	6.2	2.3	1.9	1.9	2.1	5.8	3.2	5.8
Datuk Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Abd. Razak's popularity has risen among the people	30.2	19.8	17.6	3.4	4.7	1.3	2.7	1.1	2.1	6.0	2.7	6.2
The alternative media plays an important role in influencing general voting patterns	54.9	5.4	7.3	8.6	0.0	1.0	4.1	1.1	0.8	10.2	1.3	3.4
The information and news in the alternative media is received and trusted better	33.3	16.4	17.9	4.5	1.9	3.2	3.2	1.3	1.3	6.3	3.1	5.4
The government has failed in controlling the rising prices of goods	48.9	9.9	8.4	7.5	0.6	1.5	4.5	0.6	0.6	10.7	2.1	2.1
The government should increase goods prices for economic stability	8.3	47.1	12.0	1.1	6.2	2.3	0.6	3.9	1.5	1.1	10.7	2.9
National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) should be abolished and education should be free	31.9	25.4	10.2	5.0	2.4	2.1	3.6	1.8	0.6	9.3	4.2	1.3
National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) should be retained to assist students	41.0	15.6	10.9	6.7	1.5	1.5	2.6	1.6	1.8	9.9	2.6	2.4
The government is unsuccessful in controlling rising property prices	47.8	7.3	12.3	7.1	0.5	1.8	4.1	3.0	9.0	10.1	1.9	2.9
The GST taxes do not burden the low and middle earning classes	10.9	34.0	22.8	0.6	5.8	3.1	0.5	3.2	2.3	2.1	5.7	7.1
BN's power sharing model is best for the stability of this nation	12.7	29.3	25.5	1.8	4.2	3.6	0.6	2.1	3.2	3.4	3.9	7.3
The government do not need to restrict the LGBT in Malaysia	16.6	24.7	25.7	3.1	3.7	2.6	0.8	2.3	2.6	3.6	4.7	6.5
Increasing petrol prices do not burden the people	6.2	41.9	19.3	2.1	3.4	4.1	1.5	2.8	1.8	2.1	6.5	6.0
Reductions in sugar subsidies will encourage the people to lead healthier lives	48.0	50.2	8.9	1.6	7.1	0.8	0.5	4.5	1.0	1.9	11.0	1.8

A: Agree; B: Disagree; C: Unsure

perspective was not satisfactory but they were impressed with the more isolated macro-level policies in effect. This shall be further examined in detail.

The ethnic Malay students as previously mentioned, were not entirely positive about the BN administration, especially in factors that involved clean and fair elections, equal rights for all citizens from all ethnic backgrounds, the BN service track record and trust in the mainstream media. They were also openly critical about subjects that involved the welfare of the people such as the rise in fuel prices, controls on rising property prices and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation. However, the ethnic Malay students were still strongly supportive of the government when it came to issues revolving around the handling of the national economy by BN and the necessity to maintain the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) student loan systems as it is. They also strongly agreed with BN's efforts in preserving the Malay Superiority status quo which offered much needed affirmative action policies to the Bumiputera citizens. Among the other issues which the ethnic Malay students supported BN policy implementations were the 1Malaysia concept and Najib's popularity whereas they were indifferent about the reductions in sugar subsidies issue.

The ethnic Chinese on the other hand, due to a possible existence of communal concerns, were rather negative toward the BN administration and its policy implementations, especially when it came to believing in the information distributed by the mainstream media, the lackadaisical attitude of the BN in terms of countering ethnic inequalities and even the communal power sharing system between the BN, MCA and the MIC. This could be due to an observable lack of representation of the Chinese politicians in the Parliament, leading to a natural culmination in distrust where the acclaimed power sharing system's credibility was no longer visible to the voter's understanding. They were also skeptical about the 1Malaysia concept, promoted by Najib, the government's efforts in controlling the rise in property prices, corruption and even reductions in sugar subsidies. However, the ethnic Chinese students were very positive in their opinion on how the national economy is managed and even wished the PTPTN student loans to be maintained as it is.

In similar perspective, the ethnic Indian students were apprehensive as well of the policy implementation routine undertaken by the BN. They were skeptical in the areas that emphasized Najib's popularity, the reduction in

sugar subsidies and the government's strategy in restricting LGBT movement. In perspective, the ethnic Indian university students were more positive than the ethnic Chinese students in the areas of the 1Malaysia concept and Najib's popularity status among the voting population. Parallel with the other two ethnicities, they also strongly supported policy initiatives by the BN administration with respect to national economic development. Students from the 'Others' ethnic group were however, rather balanced in their opinion on the government's policy implementation processes but responded that BN administration is still unfair on allocation of resources (affirmative action) and improper ethnic rights distribution (Malay superiority).

CONCLUSION

Further analyses according to gender and geographical propensity produced quite similar outcomes as depicted in Table 1 above. There was no positive or negative correlation between gender types or location within the country with the perception the students had on government policy implementation processes. Overall, BN retained its good impression though the politically motivated cohort had highlighted several areas of weakness that could do with some targeted improvement.

The study describes the university students today as less reserved in their opinions about the government and its opposition parties. They feel more included in the entire process, hence, increasing their level of political participation. Also, the prevalence of the alternative media and social media websites in the advancement of information technology has allowed for rapid information sharing and freedom of political expression. This may also be a byproduct of the fact that the more creative and intellectually inclined university students no longer rely on the mainstream media as a primary source of political information. BN's elaborations and explanations offered on citizen welfare and development policies on the mainstream media channels seem to be no longer well received by certain quarters of the masses or it does not reach the entire population which affects the outcome of such policies. Thus, BN should reconsider its indifference toward the alternative media scene.

Interracial unity is also a subject that must be addressed with better efficiency, clarity and humility. Affirmative action and the Malay Superiority dogmas have long incited recurring racist tendencies and unwarranted tension among the otherwise peace loving ethnicities. Thus, a deepening of understanding among the voter populations on the legibility of these laws and how they help to maintain fairness in the country in terms of equal opportunity and demographic proportion based privileges is much a necessity, very much something the

BN administration should be more focused on. The 1Malaysia concept as a response to such an interracial impasse now needs some new ingredients to remain sufficient. In fact, when considering the ethnic Chinese respondents in this study, the concept may even have added some flair to their preexisting distrust in BN policy implementations. At the end, it could be because of lack in information and explanations by the respected agencies.

The students are as mentioned in this study, attracted by and pay very close attention to the government's policy implementations and how these policies affect them, their families, ethnic groups and inter-ethnic relations. In their perspective, BN's performance has been exemplary since independence in measures of macro-level policy management such as the national economic agenda and general citizen welfare. However, when directly compared with the opposition's extremely secular and Western oriented policy moots, BN's moderate efforts at preserving the interracial harmony become underrated in the eyes of the students.

In conclusion, Najib's economic agenda and national development plans are better sounding and more robust in nature when compared with the opposition party's quest for human rights and equal treatment. Such perceptions are better protected or improved in preparation for the next Malaysian General Elections presumed to take place in 2018.

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