

SURVEY ON VOTERS' ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS REGARDING THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA DURING THE 1990 MALAYSIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN

by
SANKARAN RAMANATHAN & DR. BAHARUDDIN HAJI AZIZ
School of Mass Communication
Institut Teknologi MARA

A. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This survey of voters was conducted by a group of researchers from ITM in October 1990, beginning from the date of the nomination of candidates, starting from 6th October until 20th October, i.e. the election day. Each group was headed by a lecturer and assisted by 55 students who acted as research assistants.

During the preliminary planning on this project, 11 parliamentary constituencies were chosen as research areas and each group was assigned to obtain 100 respondents from each area with the aim to obtain at least 1100 respondents. However, only 1060 questionnaires were found to be completed (refer to Table One). This shows that the overall survey completion rate is 96.36% which is considered very satisfactory.

The constituencies selected and numbers of respondents are as stated below:

Arau, Perlis (103 respondents); *Sik, Kedah* (101 respondents); *Jelutong, Penang* (97 respondents); *Parit Buntar, Perak* (101 respondents); *Shah Alam, Selangor* (100 respondents); *Titiwangsa, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur* (117 respondents); *Ampang Jaya, Selangor* (61 respondents); *Jejebu, Negeri Sembilan* (80 respondents); *Johor Bahru, Johor* (100 respondents); *Bachok, Kelantan* (100 respondents); *Marang, Terengganu* (100 respondents).

Thus the research group had chosen one constituency from each Peninsular Malaysian State (including Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory) to represent all those states. The East Malaysian states (Sabah and Sarawak) were not included in the study for the purposes of this research.

The completed questionnaire forms were edited and subsequently manually coded. All the data from the coding sheet was later keyed-in into the computer at the ITM Statistics Center. Subsequent analysis was done through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme. The final step was to construct

cross-tabulation of specific variables. The tables presented in this chapter are a selection from the constructed cross-tabulation.

B. MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample breakdown indicates that 618 respondents (58.3%) are from the urban areas while 442 respondents (41.7%) are from the rural areas (*Table One*). Urban areas are Johor Bahru, Titiwangsa, Jelutong and Shah Alam, while Ampang Jaya and Bachok are the mixed areas. Arau, Sik, Parit Buntar, Jelebu and Marang are the rural areas.

From the racial aspect, 783 respondents (73.9%) are Malays, 171 respondents (16.1%) are Chinese, 93 respondents (8.8%) are Indians and 13 respondents (1.2%) are from other races (*Table Two*). *Table Three* indicates that respondents consist of voters from every age group, from 21 years old to 61 years and above. The majority of respondents are in the age group of 26 years to 30 years (244 respondents or 23%).

Table Four shows that 692 respondents (65.5%) are married, while 330 respondents (31.0%) are single and 38 respondents (3.6%) widows or widowers.

With regard to the respondents' academic level, *Table Five* shows the respondents are drawn from every academic group which ranges from those who are uneducated to respondents with post-graduate education. Half of the respondents (537 respondents or 50.7%) had secondary and college education.

Table Six shows that respondents are drawn from various employment categories including a small group (40 respondents or 3.8%) who are unemployed.

With regard to monthly income, *Table Seven* shows that respondents obtain different monthly incomes, from below RM 199 below to above RM 1400. However, a small group of respondents (168 respondents or 15.9%) did not answer this question.

From the above description it can be concluded that the sample of respondents for this study, has various characteristics in certain dimensions, especially from the demographic variable aspects. The sample therefore reflects the true situation that exists within the plural society in Peninsular Malaysia.

2. Election Information Source

Most of the respondents (599 respondents or 56.6%) mentioned that the newspaper is the most important source of information on the election (*Table Eight*). This situation is more evident among the respondents from towns such as Titiwangsa, Ampang Jaya and Shah Alam.

The second source of information is television (123 respondents or 11.6%) while friends are the third important source of information (114 respondents or 10.8%) and posters/banners are the fourth important source of information (109 respondents or 10.3%).

Radio's status as an important source of information on the election is low and only 39 respondents or 3.7% mentioned radio as the important source of information.

The status of relatives (32 respondents or 3.0%), neighbours (25 respondents or 2.4%) and lastly magazines (19 respondents or 1.8%) as important sources of information about the election is also low.

Overall it can be stated that mass media especially newspapers, television and posters/banners are more important than interpersonal channels such as friends, neighbours and relatives as important sources of information on the 1990 General Election.

3. Types of Information Which Influence the Voter's Choice

With regard to how far the mass media and interpersonal channels of communication have influenced the voters' choice, more than half the respondents stated that they were not directly influenced by the information that was channeled through the mass media. About 58.4% or 619 respondents (*Table Nine*) stated that they were not manipulated by mass media and interpersonal communication channels in making their voting decision.

The minority of respondents who were influenced by the media stated that information from newspapers did have an influence on their voting decision (17.8%), followed by information from television (9.9%).

The small group of respondents who listed interpersonal channels as having influenced them listed party activists, family members and colleagues as having influenced their voting decision.

Respondents from urban constituencies such as Shah Alam, Titiwangsa and Ampang Jaya were more influenced by the mass media when compared with respondents from rural constituencies. Between mass media and interpersonal communication it sees that the mass media are more powerful in influencing respondents' voter choice. Among the interpersonal channels, party activists play an important role compared to other channels like families, neighbours and friends.

4. Fairness of Political Reporting

There wasn't even a single constituency where respondents regarded political reporting by the mass media on the impending elections as fair and unbiased.

Most of the respondents (69.3% or more than 2/3) stated that political reports in the mass media are imbalanced. Respondents from constituencies where the ruling party (BN) is strong, generally felt that political reporting by national mass media is unfair.

For example in the Shah Alam and Titiwangsa constituencies where the ruling party is said to be strong, the majority of respondents agreed that the national mass media were unfair in their political reporting. Overall, only 24.1% of respondents stated that the mass media are fair and unbiased in their reports about the 1990 General Elections.

5. Attendance at Political Meetings (Ceramahs)

When the election approaches, every competing political party will organise certain meetings as discussion sessions, dialogues and conventional gatherings at certain halls or at the candidates' residences and party headquarters. The respondents were asked whether they had attended such political meetings.

Nearly 40% or 418 respondents said that they have attended such political meetings while 60.5% of the respondents said they have never attended any meeting (Table Eleven).

However it has to be emphasised that respondents who never attended any political meeting are aware of these meetings. The reason they didn't attend is because of time factors or official duty or they refused to attend the political meeting because they didn't want to be seen involved with certain parties.

6. The Role of Posters/Banners

Sticking posters at strategic places and erecting banners and buntings constitute one of the normal strategies practised by the political parties in their attempt to attract the public attention, especially for the prospective voters. Respondents in this research were asked regarding the places where they normally saw political parties posters and banners during the 1990 General Election.

Areas where posters and banners are usually to be seen is at streets and road sides (*Table Thirteen*). Almost half of the respondents constantly saw posters and banners displayed by the road side, whereas 17.1% of the respondents saw posters and banners at shops, while 9.4% saw them at lamps/telephone posts. Party headquarters (7.6%), and cars/lorries (4.1%) also became the spots where posters and banners were noticed by the respondents in this research.

7. The Role of Audio Cassettes

Similar to radio broadcasting as an important source concerning the 1990 general election which received low response (3.7%) among the respondents, audio cassettes also suffered the same result (6.8%) as shown by *Table Fourteen*. The main avenue for the respondents to listen to audio cassettes is at political meetings during dialogue sessions and talks, organized by the political parties before the 1990 General Election.

According to a small number of respondents, audio cassettes were also played at friends' homes, family homes and political party offices.

8. The Role of Video Tapes

The opportunity to view video tapes on political issues by respondents is low, as only about 3.5% or 38 respondents viewed video tapes (*Table Fifteen*). The vast majority of 1022 respondents (96.4%) in this research claimed that they never watched video tapes on political issues during the 1990 General Elections.

Places where the small number of respondents had the opportunity to view video tapes is during political meetings such as dialogue and talk sessions organized by political parties.

9. Factors Which Influence Voter Choice

There are certain reasons that influence each voter to vote for any candidate or party. In this research, respondents cited a few factors which were deemed important and tend to influence them in making their choice during the poll. They were asked to choose the most salient factor that influenced their choice during the poll (*Table Sixteen*).

From the suggested factors, five important factors are revealed. Firstly, the party's programme and policy, which 517 respondents (48.8%) chose and which included the socio-economic programme that is intended to develop the country. Secondly, the party's achievement or performance (174 respondents or 16.6%), including whether it previously has a good track record and is capable to bring improvements alongside with complete and effective development.

The candidate's leadership ability (17.7%) seems to be another of the important factors. The candidates must obtain high credibility before appearing as successful candidates in the 1990 General Election. Beside the three important factors, the candidate's personal characteristic (12.5%) which is related to personal attributes such as behaviour, attitude, etiquette, positive manners and tolerance, being humble but flexible also were regarded by respondents as important factors.

10. People Who Influence Voter Choice

The majority of 587 respondents (55.6%) stated that no specific group or party can influence their voting choice (*Table Seventeen*).

However about 189 respondents recognise local leaders as the influential group that influences their choice. Further, respondents chose the party leader as the influential person in their voter choice. Other parties that influence their voter choice are family members (76 respondents) and friends (14 respondents).

The table shows that mass media influence such as radio, television and newspaper are lower than the influence of interpersonal communication channels such as local leaders, families, friends etc. This table also shows that newspapers have higher influence compared to electronic media such as television and radio.

11. The Role of Independent Candidates

Table Eighteen shows most of the respondents agreed that independent candidates are wasting their time and energy and their role is not important (640 respondents or 43.4%). Only 186 respondents agreed that independent candidates have an important role while 234 respondents did not express any opinion on this issue.

12. Respondent's Interest in the General Election

Most of the respondents answered that they are highly interested (247 respondents or 23.3%), or interested (461 respondents or 43.4%) in the general election. The total number of respondents in these two categories is 708 respondents or 66.7% (*Table Nineteen*). The number of respondents with low interest in the general election is 186 or 17.5% while 166 respondents (15.6%) answered that they are not at all interested in the general elections.

13. Respondents' Sources of Information About Contesting Candidates

Table Twenty shows that **newspapers** constitute the most important source of information about candidates contesting in the general elections (611 respondents or 57.6%). Other important sources of information are **posters** (166 respondents or 15.7%) and **colleagues** (134 respondents or 12.7%). Sources of information about contesting candidates which are regarded as being less important by respondents are **neighbours, relatives, TV** and lastly **radio**.

14. Prediction on Majority Party

The prediction during the general election that the BN will get the majority of seats in the **Dewan Rakyat** was common among the respondents. About 63.4% or 672 respondents predicted that BN components parties will be given the mandate to establish a government in Malaysia in the election (*Table Twelve*).

However there is a small number of respondents especially from the constituencies representing opposition strongholds who stated that rival parties will win the majority. For example, in the Jelutong Parliamentary constituency which became a DAP stronghold, 13 respondents believed that the DAP will win the majority, while in Arau (9 respondents), Parit Buntar (13 respondents) and Shah Alam (11 respondents), the new **Semangat 46** party was regarded as being capable of winning the majority of seats in the **Dewan Rakyat**.

C. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey that are reported in this chapter show that **newspapers** are the most important sources of information about election, followed by **television**. Other media such as **posters** are part of the information sources which are important for the election. Other interpersonal channels such as friends, neighbours and relatives are not considered as important sources about the election.

Incidentally, the majority of the respondents stated that they were **not being influenced** by any source when deciding upon whom to vote for, either mass media or through any interpersonal communication.

Instead the survey revealed that factors such as the parties' policies and programmes, the record of success, leadership of the party and other candidate's characteristics are the main factors which determine their choice.

One of the reasons for this situation is because more than two-thirds of the respondents felt that the mass media are not being fair in their political reports especially during the campaign period. Besides, the majority of the respondents did not attend any of the political gatherings for they don't want to have any connection with any of the political parties.

The majority of the respondents didn't want to listen to the audio cassettes or video for the same reason. They also didn't believe the electronic media such as radio and television. By and large, the print media such as posters, newspapers and magazines have highest credibility among the majority of respondents.

Of those who influence the choice of voters, the majority of respondents think that there is no particular group of people who influence them. However a small number of respondents feel that local leaders and party activists are among those who influence them.

Finally, this research also shows that voters in Peninsular Malaysia are matured and can think for themselves rationally.

For example, the majority of voters are interested in the general election because they realise its importance in a democracy. In addition, the majority of respondents were able to forecast correctly which party won and secured the majority in the **Dewan Rakyat** during the 1990 general election. The majority of the respondents also stated that the independent candidates not only didn't play an important role, they were also wasting their time and effort, because the independent candidates seldom won a seat in a general election.

D. CONCLUSION

This survey strengthen, the findings of previous research especially the survey that was conducted in 1986 by a group of researchers from Institut Teknologi MARA. Both surveys show that the voters in Peninsular Malaysia made up their minds personally. Although there are existing interpersonal channels that can influence a small group of respondents, overall it can be said that mass media didn't have a strong influence upon the voters, particularly when they decide which candidate to vote for.