

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS READINESS OF YOUTH IN KUCHING, MALAYSIA: ARE THEY READY TO VOTE?

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1. INTRODUCTION

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 fulfill 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.

The United Nations defines youth as the age of 15-24 years old. While a similar definition is used in the United States, the youth policy categorized youths into 3 groups: early adolescence (under 14), middle adolescence (15-17), late adolescence, and early adulthood (18-24). Currently, the voting age in the United States is 18. Nonetheless, legislation has been proposed to lower the minimum local and national voting age to 16 years. Oosterhooff (2020) pointed out that teens in the United States can register to vote when they turn 18. Some states even allow teenagers as young as 16 to pre-register to vote, even though they cannot vote in an election until they are 18 years old (Morin, 2020).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, youth is referred to as a person between the age of 15 and 30 years old. Before 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, the 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 (Malaysian Election Commission, 2018). However, 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.

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 (Malaysian Election Commission, 2018). With the lowering of the 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 of youth readiness to vote for their preferred party especially in the context of Sarawak with the upcoming state election. This concept paper intends to propose a study focusing on

youths in Kuching. With an overall population of over 700,000 people and being the capital of Sarawak, this division will serve as a starting point. Once the feasibility of this study is established, it can be extended to a wider population thereby providing useful data to make recommendations on government approaches towards improving youth readiness to vote.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study is to identify whether Sarawakian youths are prepared to vote in the coming election, whether state or general election. The study suggests several research objectives be attained as follows: -

- a. To determine the level of Kuching youth readiness to vote.
- b. To identify the most influential factor that affects Kuching youth readiness to vote.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Youth Readiness to vote

Readiness can be defined as a condition of preparation or being 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 continued development. It is also important to note that the 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), most 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 older generations. Due to this, there exists a lack of understanding and knowledge which can cause lower participation in voting. For example, this problem has been shown in Austria where they conduct trial elections between youth aged between 16-17 and 18-21. The results show that Austrian new youth are less interested in politics compared to older voters (Zeglovits, 2013).

In Malaysia, most youths 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 of those who were not registered to vote, 53% said they were too busy to register, 30% said their vote would be meaningless, and 17% said they 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. A survey by 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, many youths generally do not think political officials are concerned with

their well-being and issues that affect them since there is an insufficient number of youth representatives in government.

3.2 Youth Political Knowledge

Political knowledge is critical for citizens and the public of a democratic society. This is because 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 public, particularly the youth, might be a factor in the appearance of spoiled votes in general elections (The Sun, 2017). Political knowledge among students is critical in ensuring that they comprehend the political agenda and problems that nations face (Nadia, 2012). This is because students are viewed as future potential human capital. As a result, people should be aware that the country's policy, law, rule, and regulations are created by politicians, and they must obey whatever the government of the day chooses. A study conducted by Farudin (2021) in Malaysia shows that youth do not pay much attention to political knowledge. Even though political information is frequently used as a synonym for political knowledge, knowledge seems to be something that goes beyond information (Grönlund & Milner, 2006).

3.3 Social Media

Social media has quickly evolved into a medium for not only news but also political commentary and civic involvement (Rainie, 2012). Young people are more likely to use social media for this purpose, posting their opinions and creating their political content (Smith, 2009). Thus, social media is where they get their political news, and it is also where they express their views. As social media is widely used nowadays, Nasarah (2019) stated that social media is one of the reasons that can influence youth. This is because it can help people who live far to keep updated on the current news in politics. Social media also is the place where participatory society, political consumerism, and community involvement can be instilled (Ramli, 2012). This has been proven by Suryana (2011) where both Indonesian and Malaysian youth received a large amount of information via television and the internet.

3.4 Family

For several reasons, the 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. For example, if parents consistently vote for the same political party, their children will eventually believe that "I am a member of X party" (Michael et al., 2010). Other than that, several studies have found an important relationship between political socialisation and the major influence of family (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin & Keeter, 2003). It has been demonstrated that youth who live with their family have a greater propensity to vote because parents have a powerful influence on their children's choice of candidate (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012).

3.5 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). Additionally, Andolina et al. (2003) found that a crucial element is a 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. This can show that youth usually get influenced by their peers about political issues. In a nutshell, four reasons can influence the readiness of the youth to vote.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this study, snowball sampling will be adapted to gather data. This is a sampling method wherein the existing subjects describe new subjects to a research study to recruit the samples needed for the study. This study uses a quantitative approach in the form of questionnaires. The total number of youths in Sarawak is 1,272,000 (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2021). Therefore, a sample size of 300 respondents is targeted for this study, based on Roscoe's Rule of Thumb (1975). This quantitative study intends to utilize statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. Hypothesis testing is a method of determining the relationship between our dependent variables: the readiness of Kuching youth to vote and our independent variables, political knowledge, social media, family, and peers. We will use Google Form to distribute the cross-sectional questionnaire. Since this study on Kuching youth, it will adapt the definition of youth based on the Ministry of Youth and Sports Sarawak which includes those aged between 15 and 40 years old. Furthermore, the respondents will be categorized into three groups which are early youth (15-18), middle youth (19-21), and late youth (25-40).

5. CONCLUSION

As reported by the Borneo Post Online (2021), Undi Sarawak has filed a lawsuit against the federal government for delaying the implementation of the Undi 18 Bill. This brings about the impression that the youths in Sarawak are ready to vote. However, the question remains on whether they are equipped with sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision come polling day. It is essential to find out youth perceptions on their readiness to vote. The findings from this study will be significant, not just for academia, but also to give insights on where the youth stands so that specific strategies can be adapted by the government to ensure the successful implementation of Undi18. It is imperative more than ever now that the youth play a pivotal role in determining this nation's future.

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