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**Political Awareness and Behavior of Undi18 Cohort: Insights from a survey of
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia**

Wan Rohila Ganti¹, Shahidah Abdul Razak^{2*}, Ahmad Faiz Yaakob², Zulhilmi Yunus²

** Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Law and International Relations, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

² Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

rohilaganti@unisza.edu.my, shahidah056@uitm.edu.my, ahmad405@uitm.edu.my, zulhilmi@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +60176791249

Abstract

In 2019, Malaysian Parliament passed the UNDI18 Bill that lowered the voting age to 18 and introduced automatic voter registration, sparking debates on the political maturity of new voters. This study examines the political awareness, information sources, and voting preferences among 5,586 first-time voters from Universiti Teknologi MARA. Findings indicate that science students need to be more politically aware of social science peers, with social media as their primary information source. Malay students preferred Malay political leaders, suggesting a tendency towards ethnic-based political support. The study underscores the need for targeted educational initiatives to prepare young Malaysians for informed voting.

Keywords: UNDI 18, Malaysian youth, political awareness, political socialization

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1.0 Introduction

Youth political participation remains a prominent global concern. Given their influential perspectives, young people have become an essential focus for political parties (Mahéo et al., 2020). In Malaysia, youth political participation received much discussion after the Parliament of Malaysia passed the UNDI 18 Bill. The Bill lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and allowed automatic voter registration in 2020. Early engagement of youth is crucial in determining their future political involvement, as it indicates their participation as adults (Earl et al., 2017). Moreover, youth represent a dynamic force for societal change (Azis et al., 2020), and their current participation predicts their future engagement.

Although youth political participation has been extensively studied across different cultures, further research is still needed to enhance the understanding of youth political cognition (Mohamad et al., 2018). As highlighted by Zainon, Hashim, and Zulkifli (2017), there is a noticeable decline in youth political participation in Malaysia, despite being exposed to political issues on social media. Studies also found they have lack of political knowledge and weak political cognition which have led them to become victims of political propaganda on social media (Chinnasamy & Manaf, 2018; Waikar, 2020). In addition, their votes are expected to be easily influenced by their family. This worrying situation defeats the objectives of the UNDI18 Bill itself: to produce a mature and participative youth in a broader democratic spectrum.

The root problems of political apathy among youth are mainly caused by the absence of a systematic module or an attractive syllabus that directly touches on politics, democracy, and state affairs at the school level (Hamedan et al., 2019). Undeniably, a history subject is compulsory for all secondary school students to pass. However, students learn history for the sake of passing examinations. Mohamad, Dauda & Halim (2018) concluded that the history subject could have been more exciting and failed to achieve national goals. Moreover, research on youth and politics has predominantly focused on the impact of social media usage among the younger generation, voting factors and electoral turnout (Salman et al., 2017). No studies have examined youth perspective on ethnic politics and candidate choices. Therefore, this study filled the gap by examining the political awareness of the first-time voters in Malaysia, investigating their sources of political information, and confirming the relationship between their Malay ethnicity background studying in a Malay-based university and their political party and candidate choices.

2.0 Literature Review on Youth Political Awareness: Framework and Reviews of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework: The Theory of Political Participation

Political participation encompasses various political activities, such as gathering and sharing political information, engaging with politicians, participating in political campaigns, voting and influencing others to vote, and it incorporates both offline and online forms (Hamedan et al., 2019). Offline political participation refers to activities conducted in the physical world, such as attending political events and voting. Meanwhile, online political participation involves activities like signing petitions on the internet, acquiring political knowledge and information through social media, sending messages to political candidates or government officials on platforms like Facebook or Twitter, and leaving comments on candidate websites (Chinnasamy & Manaf, 2018). By examining online and offline political participation, this study recognizes that youth political participation cannot be solely explained by voting alone, as their engagement extends to various online and offline activities.

2.2 Political Socialization and sources of political information of the youth in Malaysia

Political socialization is the lifelong process through which individuals acquire their political beliefs. It involves transmitting political information from various socializing agents such as family, peers, education, media, and religious institutions. During this process, individuals develop their understanding of political ideologies and institutions, internalize political attitudes, and engage in political behaviors like voting. Shaping individuals' political socialization is a dynamic process influenced by factors such as family background, educational institution, peers, political events and issues, and social media exposure.

Literatures argue that parents and family influence the development of children's political orientations in two ways. Highly politicized parents are found to foster positive civic orientations that stimulate engagement in politics in their children. Being raised in a family actively involved in political activities and voluntary organizations and exposed to political activities, materials, and figures since childhood helps the children fashion that experience into their future political understanding. Parents and family, especially those from better income and better educated socio-economic backgrounds, become the source of political information that forms the chain of intergenerational transmission of political knowledge (Mahéo & Bélanger, 2020).

Family is consistently found to be the most impactful agent in recruiting new party activists. Exposure to political discussions over lunch and dinner, reading political reading materials, meeting political figures, and accompanying parents in political activities open an individual's eyes toward political party activism (Rebughini & Schiavo, 2023). Verba et al. (1995), for instance, demonstrated that, on average, Americans who grew up in homes where current events were discussed with parents become more involved in political activities in adulthood than others. Focusing on students' participation in anti-war in Israel in the eighties, Kudrnáč & Lyons (2017) found that these demonstrators were influenced by their parents' background, such as political activity, high-income earning, high social status, and high education level.

While most of the literature found parents and family as the influencers towards an individual's early exposure to politics, Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz (2013) and Ng (2016) found that an individual's education and knowledge shape one's political judgment. It indeed compensates for the inequalities in family socialization concerning political engagement. How do schools and universities influence an individual to become a party activist if the students' subjects and courses are unrelated to politics? (Rebughini & Schiavo 2023) posited that the specific features of the climate of the classroom, how students feel free to express their opinions and have them discussed and respected, the lectures and lecturers, the incorporation of class discussions, and the students' involvement in group projects underlie student attitudes towards social engagement and even political knowledge. Zooming into the relationship between courses taken and political efficacy, Kudrnáč & Lyons (2017) found that students majoring in social sciences positively affect political participation. This is supported by the findings of Mahéo & Bélanger (2020), which showed that students who concentrated their studies in biology, chemistry, engineering, and mathematics appear less inclined to participate politically, while those in the social sciences and humanities are more likely to vote and participate in other forms of political activity.

Some studies have found that parents play a significant role in paving the way for their children to enter politics. As children grow older, their political views and perceptions might change. 'Blood relationship' has prevented children from expressing disagreement during political discussions with their parents and family members. They want to protect the stability of social relations and avoid intergenerational conflicts between parents and children. Scarrow (2017) wrote about how children of political activists suffer in silence when compelled to agree with their parents' political worldview. Her respondents even pledged to allow their children to have their say, as they had suffered from being isolated, exhausted, and often very lonely and depressed.

Nowadays, meeting and socializing through online social media have been the majority's choice. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok provide a space for political party activists to communicate with a

broader community, attract users to their communities, encourage actions, and provide a space where users can dabble in activism (Rebughini & Schiavo, 2023). These social media accounts have been 'followed' by thousands of followers. They never meet but occasionally discuss political and social issues together, as there are friends who raise some political-related issues on their account timelines. The discussion over social media is slightly light but informative, so it captures many social media users to read and join the discussion. Sharing political statuses, political activities, infographics, and wise or mediocre statements by politicians allows social media users to receive current and updated news from their friends (Chinnasamy & Manaf, 2018; Waikar, 2020).

Contemporary political parties go online by encouraging their members and other supporters to function as online ambassadors. Parties and party leaders set up Twitter and Facebook accounts, update them frequently, and urge their supporters to rebroadcast them. Sorrow (2017) found that political parties have created newer and cheaper party membership forms through online ambassadors. These new comrades are mobilized to help spread party messages online. She exemplified the Pirate Party in Germany which has made internet-based forums to be joined by thousands of followers and Facebook groups as their organizational backbone and medium to send their organizational messages. Their ability to quickly build organizational strength through the internet sent a strong signal to other parties. The success of internet fundraising of popular U.S. presidential candidates such as Barack Obama in 2008 proves the undeniable power of social media in recruiting new activists, raising crowdfunding, and promoting political parties and their candidates (Ferrara et al., 2020).

Intensive exposure to political events like large-scale demonstrations, assassination or imprisonment of respected political figures, banning political organizations, controversial constitutional changes and other exogenous political shocks could catalyze individuals to become active in politics. Cohorts that grow up in a highly politicized context tend to become highly politicized in later life. In the context of age maturity, the political environment of people in their late teens and early twenties has a crucial formative influence on their ideological beliefs that could endure throughout the rest of their lives (Rebughini & Schiavo, 2023). However, Phan & Kloos (2023) mentioned that political events tend to be periodic rather than continuous and typically occur in bursts, which leads people to judge the same political events and issues differently within relatively short periods. Therefore, it was concluded that exposure to significant political events does not substantially impact one's political efficacy and could not pull out one's interest in politics.

2.3 Political party and candidate choices among Malay university students.

Ethnic identity politics argues that voters tend to vote for candidates with similar ethnic and religious identities. Understandably, politics revolves around race and religious lines, especially in the low-middle class demography. The Blacks in New Orleans always vote for the Black candidate, while the Whites in Florida would vote for Republicans (Eckstein et al., 2013). Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is a public university in Malaysia known for its focus on providing educational opportunities for Malay *Bumiputra* students. The university's admission policy is designed to prioritize and provide greater access to education for Malay *Bumiputra* students. UiTM's admission policy has historically been geared towards promoting educational opportunities for Malay *Bumiputra* students as part of Malaysia's affirmative action policies. This policy addresses historical socio-economic imbalances among different ethnic groups in the country, mainly benefiting the Malay *Bumiputra* community (Ibrahim, 2016).

Pandian's (2014) study of 615 university students in Malaysia showed that Malay students were positive toward Najib Tun Razak's political leadership, while Chinese and Indian students were pessimistic about Najib's administration. They were enthusiastic about Pakatan Rakyat's (opposition) leadership. Ting & Ahmad, (2021) and Mamat, Rahman & Abdullah (2015) found similar findings that Malay youths supported Malay leaders from the ruling government compared to their Chinese, Indian, and Sabah Sarawak counterparts. No studies were conducted on the leadership preference of UiTM students, thus shedding light on this gap.

3.0 Methodology

This research was conducted from 25 October to 15 November 2022 using a purposive sampling technique among students in thirty-four UiTM campuses nationwide to gauge their political awareness. The questionnaire consisted of five sections, namely the demographic background (8 items), sources of political information (13 items), political socialization (6 items), political perception (17 items), and the performance of political parties (10 items). The survey was carried out by providing Google Form links via email and WhatsApp messages to the authorities on the respective campuses. Of all 165,594 undergraduate UiTM students, only 5,586 have answered the survey. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistical Package 27 by examining their frequency, mean, and percentage.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

This section discussed findings based on the questionnaire that was distributed to respondents. There are 1,557 (26%) male and 4326 (74%) female students, and the UiTM Negeri Sembilan campus scored the highest responses (28.3%). Of all twenty-five faculties, the Faculty of Business and Management had the highest responses (1,273 respondents). Regarding the intention to vote in the fifteenth Malaysia general election on 19 November 2022, 78.11% would cast a vote. Meanwhile, 2.19% decided not to vote. The rest (19.7 %) were undecided.

4.1 Political Socialization and sources of political information of the youth in Malaysia

There are six items to examine the respondents' political socialization. Table 1 shows the percentage scored by respondents related to their political socialization.

Table 1. Respondents political socialization

Political socialization	Yes (%)	No (%)
My family always discusses politics	34	66
My family is actively involved in political party	27	73
My lecturer makes me politically literate	20	80
The courses/subjects I take in university make me politically literate	20	80
My friends always discuss politics.	44	56
I am actively involved in the student's association at the university	70	30

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it is evident that a significant proportion of respondents need more early political exposure within their households. The majority of families do not engage in political discussions at home. However, an intriguing finding emerged from the Chi-square test: respondents from politically active families tend to engage in political discourse with their peers outside lecture halls (significant effect at $\chi^2 = 13.298$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.01$). Interestingly, active involvement in student associations within the university context does not necessarily correlate with heightened political awareness (non-significant effect at $\chi^2 = 11.3641$, $df = 9$, $p > 0.238$). Predictably, students enrolled in the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (FSPPP) exhibit the highest levels of political literacy. This alignment can be attributed to the inherent focus of their coursework on politics and administration. Additionally, some respondents from this faculty reported receiving political education directly from their lecturers. The findings align with existing literature, which suggests that youth exposed to political discussions at home tend to be more politically aware. Furthermore, students enrolled in political-related subjects at the university demonstrate a deeper understanding of political matters. These variables drive them to engage in political conversations during leisure time, potentially influencing their peers on specific political issues—even individuals with limited political information desire to participate in elections for the first time.

In order to analyze respondent's sources of political information, thirteen items are asked in the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the sources of political information among respondents.

Table 2. Sources of political information

Sources of political information	Yes (%)	No (%)
Social media is the primary source of current issues (Facebook et al.).	96	4
I like to read online news portals related to current issues.	49	51
I follow social media accounts belonging to political leaders.	33	67
I trust political news on the internet.	78	22
I trust economic news on the internet.	56	44
I always watch live streaming made by political leaders.	28	72
Following the current political development is my utmost interest.	30	70
My friends on social media like to upload status updates on current issues.	71	29
I always respond to current issues that I read on social media.	53	47
I feel responsible for sharing current issues on my social media.	44	56
I follow 'WhatsApp' groups related to politics.	9	91
I like to share (forward) political information through WhatsApp/ Telegram.	12	78

This study corroborates the conclusions drawn by previous research, emphasizing that contemporary political, social, and economic information primarily flows through social media channels. Dynamic platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have supplanted traditional sources, such as newspapers, television, online news portals, and blogs. The prevalence of social media usage among respondents underscores their preference for accessing political and economic news online. Furthermore, most respondents trust the accuracy of news disseminated through these channels.

Notably, the respondents' online friends are the primary conduits for current affairs. This reliance on peer-shared information highlights the pivotal role of social networks in shaping individual perspectives on political, social, and economic issues. Despite this digital engagement, the respondents exhibit limited interest in political matters. They seldom engage with live streams produced by political leaders, abstain from following politicians' social media accounts, and express disinterest in joining WhatsApp groups related to politics. However, this trend raises concerns among political scientists. Social media platforms' unregulated and unverified nature makes them susceptible to misuse. Irresponsible actors exploit these channels to propagate hate speech, political slander, and misinformation through fake accounts. Given the respondents' relative lack of political knowledge, there is a risk that first-time voters may unwittingly fall victim to inaccurate information, potentially influencing their political decisions.

4.2 Political party and candidate choices among Malay university students.

There are thirteen political leaders representing various political parties with different political ideologies listed to gauge the respondents' party of their choice.

Table 3: Political party leader chosen by respondents

Political party leader	Tendency to vote (%)
Dato' Seri Ismail Sabri (UMNO)	25.82
Syed Saddiq bin Syed Abdul Rahman (MUDA)	16.71
Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	16.11
Khairy Jamaludin (UMNO)	12.61
Tan Sri Haji Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS)	7.9
Tun Mahathir Mohamed (Pejuang)	5.78
Nurul Izzah Anwar (PKR)	5.78
Dato' Seri Mohamad Hassan (Tok Mat) (UMNO)	5.32
Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (PPBM)	1.48
Dato' Seri Dr Zahid Hamidi (UMNO)	1.36
Hj Mohamad Sabu (Mat Sabu) (Amanah)	0.49
Lim Guan Eng (DAP)	0.17

The findings in Table 3 provide intriguing insights into the political leadership preferences among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). These observations align with the prevailing perception that UiTM students tend to rally behind leaders from the ruling government, given the shared ethos of Malay supremacy. Among the respondents, Ismail Sabri, the 9th Prime Minister of Malaysia, stands out as the most suitable candidate for re-election as the 10th Prime Minister. His popularity underscores the influence of current political dynamics on student preferences. Notably, other leaders from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), including Khairy Jamaluddin, Muhamad Hassan, and Zahid Hamidi, also enjoyed favor among the respondents.

Young voters exhibit a distinct lack of political sentiments, unlike their adult counterparts. Their decision-making process appears less influenced by ideological affiliations. Recent studies highlight the popularity of Muhyiddin Yassin (from the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, PPBM) among adult and veteran voters. Muhyiddin's leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic resonated as he steered the nation through challenging times. Interestingly, the former 4th Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who played a pivotal role in Malaysia's transformation during his 23-year administration, does not find favor among the respondents. Their perceived lack of direct interaction with Mahathir contributes to this outcome. A notable exception is the support the popular young leader, Syed Saddiq, garnered. Despite not being a leader of the ruling government, Saddiq consistently conveys the aspirations of the youth. His party, MUDA, which aptly translates to "young," may pose a formidable challenge in the upcoming Malaysia 15th General Election. In contrast, Lim Guan Eng from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) was selected by only three respondents. Understandably, DAP's political ideology contradicts UiTM's Malay supremacy spirit.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The research examines political socialization, sources of political information, and the relationship between political parties and candidate choices among Malay university students. Like their youth counterparts, overall findings showed that the respondents lack political interest. They received low political exposure at home, and only students taking social science courses showed some interest in politics. Still, they follow current political, economic, and social issues since the information is at their fingertips. They showed their appreciation of UMNO's contribution to the development of UiTM by choosing prominent UMNO leaders to be the future prime minister of Malaysia. The study recommends compulsory credited political-related courses to all UiTM students to make them aware of their political responsibility as a citizen of Malaysia.

While this study significantly contributes to various research perspectives, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, expanding the respondent pool to include individuals from other racial backgrounds and universities would enhance the richness of the findings. Secondly, this research predominantly relies on quantitative techniques. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the respondents' political literacy could be achieved through interviews using the Focus Group Discussion technique. Future research endeavors should explore these limitations to address gaps that need to be addressed by this study.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper helps policymakers, government officials, political observers, and general readers understand the political awareness of voters aged 18-21 (first-time voters) in Malaysia.

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