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Determinants of Voting Intentions Among Malaysian University Students: A Structural Equation Modeling approach

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Abstract

This study investigated the determinants of voting behavior among young Malaysian voters using the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The study aims to identify the contributing factors that influence young voters' voting behavior. Findings indicated that candidate perception, party perception, subjective norms, persuasion techniques, and social network engagement significantly influenced young voters' intentions. However, this study found that political awareness had no significant impact. The study's respondents were 422, aged 18 – 30, from Universiti Teknologi MARA through an online survey. This insight may aid in developing strategies to engage and mobilize young voters effectively.

Keywords: Voting Behavior, Young Voters, Malaysia, Political Engagement

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1.0 Introduction

The constitution amendment in July 2019 witnessed tremendous effects on the number of voters, and the increase in voters comes from young people or first-time voters. The latest general election was held in 2022, as this is the first time the Undi18 was effective since the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 2019. Although the Undi18 initiative lowered the voting age to 18, the youth remain politically apathetic. A study found that only 40 per cent of Malay youth intended to vote in General Election 15 (GE15) (Merdeka Center, 2022). This situation describes an alarming signal of youth and political participation.

Additionally, a study survey by the Ilham Centre revealed that nearly 90 per cent of voters aged 18 to 20 were unaware of current political developments. Many of them could not distinguish between Members of Parliament and state assembly members (The Straits Times, 2024). It highlights a significant gap in political knowledge among youth in Malaysia. Besides, the university students stated academic commitments as a factor for not voting in the 2023 state elections (Channel News Asia, 2023). As youth form a significant percentage of Malaysia's population and are motivated by the country's implementation of Undi18, this study intends to explore the behavioural intention to vote among young voters in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to identify the contributing factors influencing young voters' voting behaviour. This study aims to explore the relationship between candidate perception, party perception, subjective norms, persuading methods, awareness, and social network engagement to vote among young voters in Malaysia.

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A closer examination of the relationship between factors that influence youth and their behavioural intention to vote will offer more insights into reaping the democratic benefits of greater participation, political accountability, and establishing innovative mechanisms for the constructive engagement of youth in the formal political process.

2.0 Research Model

The intention to behave is assumed to be affected by a set of specified variables of the TRA and TPB. Even though many behaviour studies have been conducted by applying these two models, relatively few studies explore voting behaviour among young adults. Limited studies have been carried out to predict behaviour and behavioural change; the present study identifies the components in these models to predict young voters' voting behaviour. Predicting the behaviour of young voters is important because it can potentially increase voter turnout in the future. Consequently, to strengthen the current democratic system in Malaysia, young voters are the future leaders who will govern the country. Therefore, each of the models will be outlined in this section.

The TRA is widely used in medical studies to predict the user's behaviour in certain situations (Fryer et al., 2020; Khanna et al., 2009; Roberto et al., 2014). It is used to determine the behaviour of humans toward specific issues or circumstances. Behavioural intention is a determinant of performing the behaviour, and two (2) factors determine the intentions: an individual's attitude toward performing the behaviour and subjective norms. The individual's attitude toward performing the behaviour refers to the individual's feelings toward the behaviour, either positive or negative. For instance, relating to voting behaviour, a positive attitude would mean an individual feels favourable toward the behaviour of voting. The other determinant of TRA is subjective norms based on others, such as family, friends, or colleagues' perceptions of whether the behaviour is important. To illustrate, if the individual perceives that the family members believe voting is unimportant, their perception will lead to not voting (Glasford, 2008). Concerning voting behaviour, there is support for the predictive validity of TRA.

The possible obstacles include distance, which requires a long travel time, or difficulty travelling to the polling place. This model has been used for over 35 years and is continuously applied in studies across the field nowadays. Thus, it has provided strong support and is widely used in the current studies for the predictive validity of TPB to examine the prediction behaviour of the individual (Shukri et al., 2022; Sin & Rochelle, 2022; Tseng et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022).

2.1 Candidate perception

Candidates with strong communication skills are more successful at engaging and persuading voters because they can compellingly articulate their messages. It enhanced voter engagement by providing more memorable and appealing messages. Therefore, effective communication enhances the candidate's appeal and significantly boosts their chances of being voted in the elections (Sheafer, 2008; Sheafer et al., 2011). The candidate's personality traits, such as charisma, integrity, trustworthiness, and competence, significantly influence the voters. These traits are perceived favourably in shaping voter preferences and confidence (Falcão et al., 2023; Welsh, 2018). However, the unpleasant candidate with dark personality traits triggers adverse reactions from the voters, such as distrust, discomfort, or scepticism (Nai et al., 2023). It showed that the candidates' personality traits can influence how voters interpret candidate actions and statements, which can turn into different perceptions. Perceived integrity and candidates' leadership can significantly influence teenagers' intention to vote (Kasim et al., 2023). Hypothesis 1 has, therefore, been formed.

H1: Candidate perception has a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia.

2.2 Party perception

The party image is a critical factor in voters' perception and behaviour. The voter preferences have diversified, focusing more on governance quality, social justice, and performance than ethnicity or party loyalty (Falcão et al., 2023; Moten, 2011; Ong, 2020). A study by Washida (2023) found that the perceived injustice related to ethnic and religious representation by the party influenced voting behaviour. The corruption scandal and mismanagement shaped voter perception and behaviour in Malaysian politics. It is also supported by Welsh (2018) and Ong (2020) studies. The voters are more likely to support the political parties aligned with their local needs and interests (Ong, 2020).

Furthermore, Malaysian undergraduates' political preferences are influenced by their perceptions of party policies, especially those addressing youth concerns. The political parties that align with the aspirations of the youth are more likely to gain more support (Chang Yeow et al., 2024). Based on the existing literature, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Party perception has a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia

2.3 Subjective norms

Several empirical studies have examined the relationship between subjective norms and behavioural intention to vote among young voters. Becker (2023) highlighted that social norms such as social pressure from peers, family, or social groups significantly reinforce the intention to vote. This study found that social norms did not solely influence voting behaviour. However, it is supported by other factors. It is proven that positive voting behaviour can be influenced by social norms, voting rules, and regulations (Apffelstaedt et al., 2022; Becker, 2023). The perception of what others are doing, especially peers, is a powerful motivator that validates the act of voting (Gerber & Rogers, 2009; Hall, 2019; Nb & Hashim, 2017). Therefore, the current study proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: Subjective norms have a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia

2.4 Persuading methods

Voter mobilization and political campaigns are powerful strategies to increase voter turnout (Fieldhouse et al., 2022; Gerber & Rogers, 2009). The study proved that the digital marketing used by the political candidate or party can significantly affect individuals' preferences and voting choices. The contents and messages portrayed in the digital advertisement can change voter preferences and be tailored to the targeted groups (Coppock et al., 2022). The content should emphasize the importance of voting or highlighting endorsements from trusted figures, which is a more effective persuading method (Coppock et al., 2022; Hall, 2019). Besides digital use, the youth's engagement with the communities correlates to voting (Nb & Hashim, 2017). Based on the existing literature, it is hypothesized that:

H4: Persuading methods have a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia

2.5 Awareness

A study revealed that civic education is positively related to voting intentions among Nigerian voters. It is suggested that the more educated voters are about their civic rights and responsibilities, the stronger their voting intention (Otache et al., 2023). In the same vein, young voters were eager to cast their votes during the 14th general election in 2018, possibly due to their awareness of issues that arose and their findings through social media (Azmi & Chinnasamy, 2019). Political education and awareness significantly influence voter behaviour in the electoral process. Suttman-Lea and Merivaki (2023) emphasized the critical role of awareness and education among voters, significantly lessening misinformation-related worries. Based on the above premise, the current study proposed the following hypothesis:

H5: Awareness has a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia.

2.6 Social network engagement

Social networks or media have a significant role in influencing voter behaviour and have become crucial tools for political campaigns in the modern era. The effective use of social media can enhance the candidate's visibility and engagement and influence voter perceptions (Alhaimer, 2023). Social media can mobilize voters to increase voter intention and participation (Poy & Schüller, 2020). However, social media can also increase the risks by spreading misinformation that can significantly influence voting intentions (Cantarella et al., 2023). The participants on the social media platform can improve political engagement, discussion, and the sharing of information about upcoming elections among the voters. It is also a valuable channel for voters to learn about the procedures, candidates, and current issues that motivate them to vote (Poy & Schüller, 2020). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H6: Social Network Engagement has a positive and significant relationship with behavioural intention to vote among youth in Malaysia

3.0 Method

This is a quantitative study, and the instrument went through several processes, namely development of the instrument, expert validation, pre-test, and pilot test, before actual data collection. Before data collection, the questionnaire was submitted for ethical approval from the UiTM Research Management Centre. The convenience sampling method was used for the data collection and stratified based on the number of states in Malaysia. The study population was selected from respondents who fulfilled the following criteria: (1) studying at Universiti Teknologi MARA, (2) aged between 18 and 30. Based on the A-priori Sample Size Calculator for Structural Equation Models calculation, the minimum sample size of the study is 170 respondents. The questionnaire was distributed online among the students of Universiti Teknologi MARA. A total of 422 students participated in the online survey.

Once data collection was completed, the data was analyzed in Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Data cleaning was conducted to remove empty data sets and other issues, such as straight-lining and missing data. Then, the data was analyzed using SPSS for descriptive analysis and SmartPLS 3.3.3 for inferential analysis (Structural Equation Modeling).

4.0 Findings

4.1 Structural model analysis

4.1.1 Hypothesis model assessment

Table 1: Structural model assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	t	P	Result
H1	PTY à INT	3.311	0.001	Supported
H2	CDT à INT	2.494	0.013	Supported
H3	SBN à INT	4.966	0.000	Supported
H4	PSD à INT	4.997	0.000	Supported

H5	AWR à INT	1.122	0.262	Not Supported
H6	SNE à INT	2.973	0.003	Supported

A total of 6 hypotheses were formulated for the study. Upon completion of the measurement model, the structural model was produced using bootstrapping. Table 1 shows the results of the study. Five (5) hypotheses were supported; only one hypothesis was rejected – it was found that awareness has an insignificant relationship with Intention to Vote (H5: Not Supported, $t = 1.122$, $p > 0.05$). On the other hand, other hypotheses were accepted (H1: Supported, $t = 3.311$, $p < 0.000$; H2: Supported, $t = 2.494$, $p < 0.000$; H3: Supported, $t = 4.966$, $p < 0.000$; H4: Supported, $t = 4.997$, $p < 0.000$; H6: Supported, $t = 2.973$, $p < 0.000$).

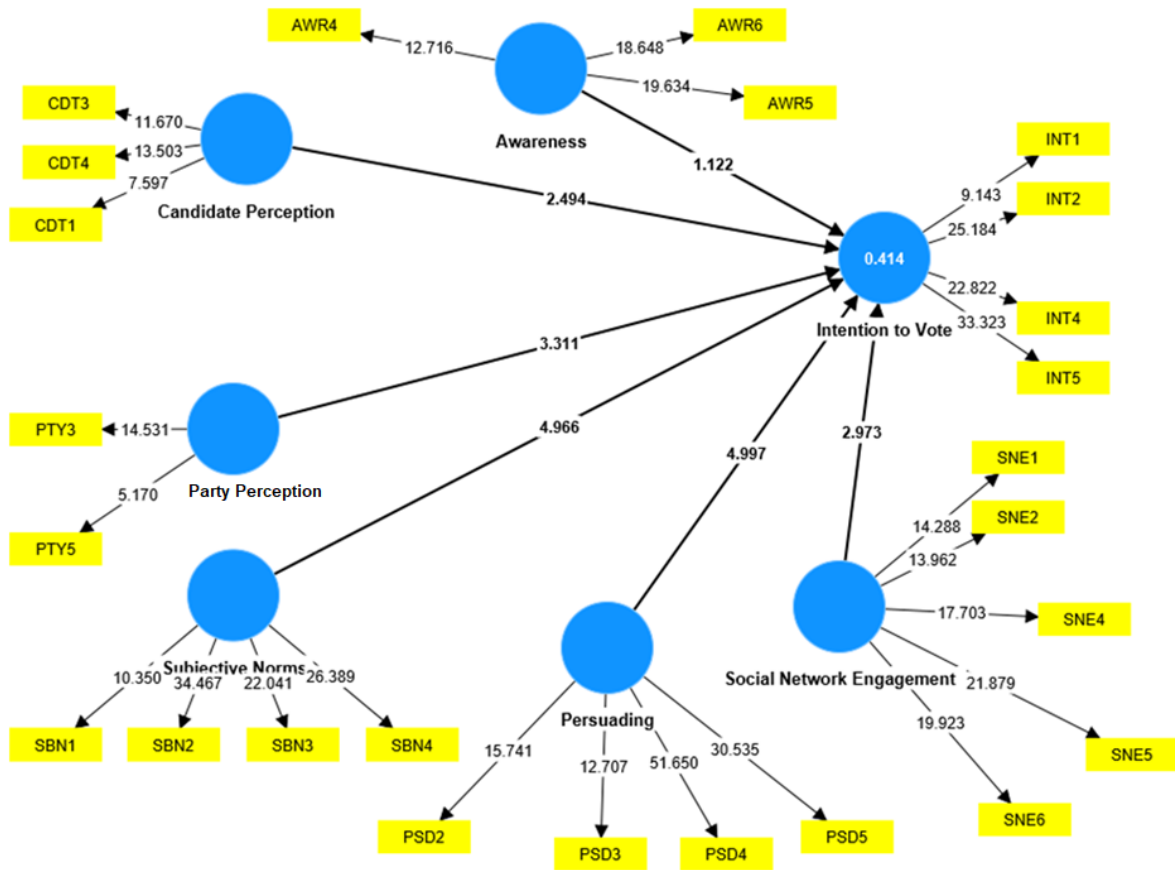


Fig. 1: A path diagram of structural equation model

4.1.2 Coefficient determination score

The Coefficient Determination Score determines the impact of exogenous variables (Candidate Perception, Party Perception, Persuading Methods, Subjective Norms, Awareness, Social Network Engagement) on the endogenous variables (Intention to Vote). R Square is more reliable than regular R Square for determining the impact of exogenous variables when comparing models with different numbers of variables, as suggested by Wherry (1931), Akossou and Palm (2013), and Karch (2020). Table 2 shows the Coefficient Determination Score of the study. An adjusted R-squared value of 0.406 indicated that the exogenous variables explained 40.6% of the variation in the endogenous variable.

Table 2: Coefficient determination score

Construct	R Square	R Square Adjusted	Decision	Source
Intention to Vote (INT)	0.414	0.406	Moderate	Hair et al. (2017)

4.1.3 Effect size

Table 3 shows the result of the effect size assessment for each relationship. It shows that all relationships produced a small effect size (f^2) ranging from 0.068 to 0.281. The relationship between PSD à INT produced the most significant effect size ($f^2 = 0.281$), while the relationship between AWR à INT produced the smallest effect size ($f^2 = 0.068$). Subsequently, Figure 1 below shows the final structural model of the study.

Table 3: Effect size

Hypothesis	f^2	Result	
H1	PTY → INT	0.142	Small
H2	CDT → INT	0.108	Small
H3	SBN → INT	0.266	Small
H4	PSD → INT	0.281	Small
H5	AWR → INT	0.068	Small
H6	SNE → INT	0.155	Small

4.0 Discussion

This study found a significant relationship between pre-election perception and intention to vote among young voters. Thus, it was consistent with Pandian's study (2014), which showed that students are more drawn to and focus closely on excellent leadership abilities. The candidate must display good leadership qualities to increase voter turnout and rebuild the party's confidence. These perceptions are better protected in preparation for the next general elections, as 'fence-sitters' among the youth are always uncertain and change accordingly. The political party's image and credibility also influence the vote, as Slomczynski and Shabad (2012) mentioned. Besides, it is agreed that the political party influences the people to vote (Satriadi et al., 2021). The study claimed that different people have distinct voting habits. Some voters are impacted by sociological elements like ethnicity, race, religion, and psychological factors, including recognizing political parties, candidates, and problems. It is consistent with this study that the respondents have various opinions regarding their preferred political party to be voted for, such as single-race party, multi-racial party, and preserving rights for the local communities. Therefore, performance and perception towards the political party and its candidates may influence the decision of young voters to vote.

Furthermore, this study showed that the individual's perception of the surroundings and important people to them significantly influences their intention to vote. It is consistent with the previous studies conducted by various authors such as Kasim et al. (2023), Bergan et al. (2022), Baber (2020), and Al-Mohammad (2017). These studies suggested that the social pressures from a close family member and friends greatly influenced young voters, including college students, to vote. The respondents of this study agreed that family members, friends, and lecturers are among the individuals who influence their intention to vote.

The methods used by politicians to attract voters influence young voters to vote. Most respondents agreed that social and electronic media information influences their perception of political parties. Alhaimer (2023) agreed that social media is an effective strategy to improve the engagement and influence of voters. It was found that engagement in social media through postings, comments, and interaction tends to build stronger relationships with the voters. Besides, the candidates who use social media to address the needs and concerns of their constituents can manipulate undecided voters. However, this study found that knowledge about politics and civic education did not influence young voters, especially public university students in Malaysia, to vote. Thus, this study is inconsistent with the findings from the previous studies, which showed increasing voting intention among young voters who have knowledge and understanding of political studies. Besides, this study showed that young voters use social media to gather, read, and share information related to politics. It found that social media is a very popular platform among the young generation in Malaysia for sharing, expressing opinions, and exchanging ideas and information on politics. This study is supported by the previous studies conducted by Zulkifli et al. (2021), Haque and Liza (2019), and Glover (2018).

5.0 Conclusion

The objective of the study is to identify the contributing factors that influence the intention to vote among young voters in Malaysia. It was found that candidate perception, party perception, subjective norms, persuading, and social network engagement have a significant relationship with the intention to vote among youth. The findings of this study were analyzed using the data gathered from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), aged between 18 and 30 years old, categorized as youth or young voters. The analysis showed that the study successfully confirmed discriminant validity and achieved measurement model assessment. Besides, this study found that five out of six hypotheses were supported, while awareness had an insignificant relationship with intention to vote, and H5 was not supported.

The objective of this study has been accomplished; however, several limitations have been identified and can be considered in future studies. The respondents of this study only covered one (1) public university student, which is UiTM, and these findings cannot be generalized to other public university students in Malaysia. Future researchers may focus on other public and private universities or colleges to diversify the factors influencing youth voting intention. Future studies should also focus on parametric analyses using specific sampling techniques and data analyses. Thus, advanced inferential statistical analyses provide broader perspectives on the behaviour of young voters' intention to vote.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The study on voting behaviour plays a vital role in strengthening democracy by informing the policy, increasing voter participation, and improving outreach efforts. By understanding the determinants that drive or deter voter engagement, the findings of this study provide valuable information to the various parties involved, such as the government, political parties, non-governmental organizations, and higher education institutions. This study provides insights into voting behaviour that help the government understand the driving factors towards political engagement among the citizens. Thus, policymakers can design policies fulfilling citizens' needs and concerns. This study enables the political parties to develop mobilization strategies by identifying the influencing factors to increase voters' participation, strategize their campaigns for future elections, and increase engagement with potential supporters. Non-governmental organizations can develop informal voter education initiatives for the targeted group to increase their motivation to vote. Programs. This study can also foster new knowledge and understanding to promote democratic engagement through research and innovative initiatives from the academicians.

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