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First-Time Voters: Relationship of Political Knowledge towards Political Participation Readiness in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between political knowledge and participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia by using a quantitative survey. A sample of 547 respondents was selected through simple random sampling across five geographic zones. The study found significant positive relationships between democracy information, election information, political party information, and political participation readiness. Higher awareness of democratic principles and election processes correlates with greater participation readiness. Additionally, understanding political parties is crucial for fostering active participation. Future research suggested examining socio-economic and educational influences on political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia.

Keywords: political knowledge; first-time voters; political participation readiness, lowering voting age

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1.0 Introduction

Political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, where citizens, especially first-time voters have the power to influence public policy and the direction of their country through various forms of engagement (Iskhakova et al., 2020). However, the decision to participate in elections, particularly for first-time voters that influenced by a range of factors, including political knowledge (Shamir et al., 2023). Political knowledge refers to an individual's understanding of political systems, key issues, institutional functions, and the roles played by various political actors (Cassel & Lo, 1997). Previous research has consistently shown that individuals with higher levels of political knowledge are more likely to participate in elections and other forms of political activity. Political knowledge provides first-time voters with the confidence to make informed choices, thereby increasing their willingness to engage in the democratic process (Intyaswati & Venus, 2021).

In Malaysia, first-time voters are typically individuals aged 18, following the implementation of the lowered voting age policy in 2019 (Weiss, 2022). Political knowledge, in this context, serves as a key determinant of whether these potential voters feel prepared and motivated to cast their ballots. Although well-informed individuals are generally more confident in their political decisions, greater political knowledge does not necessarily translate into active participation (Siang Ling & Puyok, 2024). When voters are not adequately informed

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about how the democratic process functions, the platforms and ideologies of political parties, or the details of the electoral process, they feel overwhelmed and uncertain about their choices. This uncertainty can translate into a reluctance to participate in politics (Tonge et al., 2021). Addressing these informational gaps is crucial for enhancing electoral participation among first-time voters. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between political knowledge and political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Political Knowledge and political participation among first-time voters in Malaysia

Political knowledge plays a crucial role in driving political participation among first-time voters in Malaysia. As the country continues to experience demographic shifts and political reforms, understanding how political knowledge influences voter behaviour is essential for promoting a more engaged electorate (Khairunisa'a & Junaidi, 2020). In Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-party landscape, political knowledge helps new voters navigate the complexities of the electoral process. It enables them to make informed decisions about which parties or candidates align with their values and interests (Othman et al., 2022). The rise of digital media has transformed how political information is disseminated and consumed. Social media platforms and online news sources offer unprecedented access to political information (Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2022) such as about democratic system information, election, and political party information (Iskhakova et al., 2020).

2.2 Democracy information and political participation among first-time voters in Malaysia

In Malaysia, where the political landscape is characterized by a diverse range of parties and issues, knowledge about democratic values and processes helps first-time voters make informed decisions. Democracy information, which includes understanding how elections work, the importance of voting rights, and the functions of various political institutions, is crucial for fostering active participation (Naveed, 2020). When individuals understand how their participation can influence policy decisions and contribute to societal change, they are more likely to engage actively.

Political knowledge, especially an understanding of the Federal Constitution, is pivotal in driving political participation among first-time voters in Malaysia (Yi et al., 2023). The Federal Constitution, as the supreme law of the land, outlines the fundamental principles of governance, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the structure of the government. For first-time voters, grasping these constitutional elements enhances their engagement and understanding of the political process (Azwar & Nie, 2022).

2.3 Election Information and political participation among first time Voters in Malaysia

Political knowledge, particularly information about elections, plays a critical role in influencing the political participation of first-time voters in Malaysia. Election information encompasses a wide range of details, including the electoral system, voting procedures, key dates, and the candidates and parties involved (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman, 2021). For first-time voters, familiarity with these aspects is crucial for fostering a sense of competence and confidence in their ability to participate in the democratic process.

In Malaysia, the electoral system is characterized by involving both federal and state elections, various types of constituencies, and a range of candidates and parties. First-time voters who understand the specifics of the system, such as the difference between parliamentary and state elections or the process for casting a ballot, are better prepared to navigate the electoral landscape. This knowledge helps reduce uncertainties and potential barriers to participation, such as confusion over where and how to vote (Azwar & Nie, 2022).

2.4 Political party information and political participation among first time Voters in Malaysia

Political party information plays a critical role in influencing the political participation of first-time voters in Malaysia. Understanding the roles, platforms, and policies of political parties is essential for new voters to make informed decisions and engage actively in the electoral process (Warren, 2020).

In Malaysia, the political landscape is characterized by a wide array of parties, each with distinct ideologies, policies, and leadership. For first-time voters, who may be unfamiliar with this complexity, knowledge about political parties helps them navigate their choices and understand how their vote can impact the political landscape (Othman et al., 2022). Information about party platforms, including their positions on economic, social, and governance issues, is crucial for voters to align their preferences with parties that reflect their values and interests. This information allows first-time voters to evaluate the credibility and feasibility of party promises and to make informed choices based on the parties' track records and policy agendas (Ellyanis et al., 2020). For instance, knowing how a party has addressed past issues and its proposed solutions for current challenges can significantly influence voter preferences (Sentiment, 2021). In summary, political party information drives political participation among first-time voters in Malaysia by providing them with the tools to make informed electoral decisions (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between political knowledge and political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia. A sample size of 547 respondents was selected using a simple random sampling technique. To ensure respondents represent the first-time voters' population in Malaysia, the geography of Malaysia is divided into five

zones, namely the Western Zone (n=167) involving the States of Selangor, and Kuala Lumpur and the Eastern Zone (n=64) covering the States of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. Meanwhile, the North Zone (n=106) involves the States of Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Penang, while the Southern Zone (n=70) covers the States of Johor, Melaka, and Negeri Sembilan. For, the Borneo Zone (n=140) is the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Each state in each selected zone also represents urban and rural areas.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Descriptive analysis of political knowledge among first-time voters in Malaysia

This section provides a descriptive analysis of the level of political knowledge among first-time voters in Malaysia, based on a survey using a 7-point Likert scale. The analysis covers various aspects of political knowledge, including democracy information, election information, political party information, voting awareness, and voting readiness. The descriptive analysis of democracy information (Table 1) reveals that the mean scores range from 5.08 to 5.88 across the seven items. The total mean score for democracy information is 5.30 (SD = 1.734), indicating that respondents have a moderate to high level of knowledge about democracy.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of Democracy Information (Azwar & Nie, 2022)

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Malaysia gained independence on 31 August 1957.	1	7	5.42	1.781
Malaysia is a country that practices a parliamentary democracy system	1	7	5.20	1.795
Malaysia practices a Constitutional Monarchy with His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as the Head of State.	1	7	5.78	1.594
In Malaysia, Parliament is the highest legislative institution in the country that enacts laws.	1	7	5.31	1.757
The Malaysian Parliament consists of His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Senate, and the House of Representatives.	1	7	5.46	1.702
The House of Representatives consists of 222 Members of Parliament who are elected during the General Election.	1	7	5.08	1.851
The political party that wins the majority of seats will form the Federal Government to govern the country.	1	7	5.88	1.655
Total	1	7	5.30	1.734

In the category of election information (Table 2), mean scores range from 5.50 to 5.99, with an overall mean of 5.75 (SD = 1.618). This suggests that respondents possess a relatively high level of knowledge regarding election processes and details.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of Election Information (Azwar & Nie, 2022)

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The Election Commission is the official body that manages the election process in Malaysia.	1	7	5.82	1.550
The minimum voting age in Malaysia has been lowered from 21 years to 18 years.	1	7	5.99	1.550
Voter registration for 18-year-olds is automatic.	1	7	5.89	1.605
A General Election is held when the Parliament or State Legislative Assembly is dissolved or automatically dissolved after a 5-year term.	1	7	5.75	1.653
A By-Election occurs to fill a vacancy in the Parliament or State Legislative Assembly due to the death, resignation, or annulment of an election result by the election court.	1	7	5.53	1.676
A State Election occurs to fill a vacancy in the State Legislative Assembly due to a declaration of loss of confidence in the Chief Minister/Menteri Besar's leadership.	1	7	5.77	1.574
The candidate nomination session is one of the election processes.	1	7	5.50	1.721
Total	1	7	5.75	1.618

The analysis of political party information (Table 3) shows mean scores ranging from 4.45 to 5.40, with a total mean of 4.93 (SD = 2.111). This indicates that respondents have a moderate level of knowledge about political parties, though it is lower compared to their knowledge of democracy and elections.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of Political Party Information (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman, 2021)

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I know the component parties of Barisan Nasional (BN).	1	7	5.40	1.902
I know the component parties of Pakatan Harapan (PH).	1	7	5.23	2.014
I know the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) is a component party of BN.	1	7	5.33	1.990
I know the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is a component party of BN.	1	7	4.56	2.223
I know the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) is a component party of BN.	1	7	4.45	2.195
I know Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) is a component party of PH.	1	7	4.93	2.156
I know Democratic Action Party (DAP) is a component party of PH.	1	7	4.83	2.181
I know that Parti MUDA is a component party of PH.	1	7	4.70	2.229
Total	1	7	4.93	2.111

The findings on voting awareness (Table 4) indicate that mean scores are considerably lower, ranging from 2.35 to 2.72, with an overall mean of 2.64 (SD = 0.642). This reflects a generally low level of awareness among first-time voters about the significance and responsibilities associated with voting.

Table 4. Descriptive Analysis of Voting Awareness (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman, 2021)

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I'm aware that voting is the responsibility of Malaysian citizens.	1	7	2.35	.847
I'm aware that the eligible voting age in Malaysia is 18 years and above.	1	7	2.72	.582
I'm aware that voter registration for 18-year-olds is automatic.	1	7	2.67	.611
I'm aware that I need to check my status as a registered voter with the Election Commission.	1	7	2.70	.602
I'm aware that voting can bring changes to the country's political system.	1	7	2.69	.614
I'm aware that every five (5) years, Malaysia goes through the General Election (PRU) process.	1	7	2.71	.595
Total	1	7	2.64	.642

The descriptive analysis of voting readiness (Table 5) shows that the mean scores are uniformly low, ranging from 2.45 to 2.52, with a total mean of 2.48 (SD = 0.729). This suggests that first-time voters do not feel adequately prepared or confident about participating in the voting process.

Table 5. Descriptive Analysis of Voting Readiness (Mohd Dzaki, 2022)

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I'm ready to choose a representative for the State Legislative Assembly (ADUN) in my voting district on election day.	1	7	2.52	.714
I'm ready to choose a representative for the House of Representatives (Member of Parliament) in my voting district on election day.	1	7	2.48	.727
I'm ready to vote during the State Election (PRN).	1	7	2.45	.746
I'm ready to vote during a By-Election (PRK).	1	7	2.47	.724
I'm ready to vote during the General Election (PRU).	1	7	2.48	.734
Total	1	7	2.48	.729

4.2 Analysis of the correlation between Political Knowledge and political participation readiness among First-time Voters in Malaysia

The correlation analysis between political knowledge and political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia (Table 6) reveals significant relationships across several dimensions of political knowledge. Table 6 shows the Correlation Analysis of Democracy Information, Election Information, Political Party Information, and Political Participation Readiness.

Table 6. Correlation Analysis Democracy Information, Election Information, Political Party Information, & Political Participation (Pallant 2016)

	Democracy Information	Election Information	Political Party Information	Political Participation Readiness
Democracy Information	1	.742**	.468**	.433**
Election Information	.742**	1	.533**	.476**
Political Party Information	.468**	.533**	1	.343**
Political Participation Readiness	.433**	.476**	.343**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This study reported that a moderate positive correlation exists between democracy information and voting readiness and a strong positive correlation is observed between election information and voting readiness. However, the analysis shows a weaker but still positive correlation between knowledge of political parties and voting readiness. This implies that while knowledge of political parties contributes to readiness, it is not as influential as understanding democracy and elections.

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the political knowledge of political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia.

5.1 Level of Political Knowledge

The descriptive analysis indicates that first-time voters in Malaysia generally possess a moderate to high level of political knowledge, particularly regarding democracy and election processes (Iskhakova et al., 2020). The highest mean scores were observed in areas related to democratic principles, such as understanding that democracy is the best form of government and recognizing the power of voters to change the government. However, there are notable deficiencies in their knowledge of political parties and the specifics of party ideologies. This suggests that while these young voters are well-informed about the fundamental aspects of the political system, they may not be as familiar with the nuances of party politics, which could influence their voting decisions (Tajuddin et al., 2023).

5.2 Political Participation Readiness

The findings of this study contradict to previous study which claimed that first-time voters possess high political participation readiness (Ismail et al., 2023). This study reported that the readiness of first-time voters to participate in the electoral process appears to be less developed. The lower mean scores in voting awareness and readiness highlight a gap between knowing about political processes and feeling prepared to engage in them. This gap may stem from a lack of confidence or understanding of the practical aspects of voting, such as where and how to vote and social sanction towards young people that leads to the rejection sensitive individuals who are less engaged in politics (Bäck & Gustafsson, 2019).

5.3 Correlation between Political Knowledge and Participation Readiness

The correlation analysis further underscores the importance of political knowledge in fostering political participation readiness. A strong positive correlation was found between political knowledge and political participation readiness. This study reported first-time voters who are more informed about how elections work are also more likely to feel prepared to participate in politics (Yi et al., 2023). Similarly, a moderate correlation between knowledge of democratic and political participation readiness indicates that understanding the value of democracy enhances a voter's readiness to participate in politics. However, the weaker correlation between knowledge of political parties and readiness due to many negative comments, criticism, and political satire spread that affects low political interest among first-time voters in Malaysia (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman 2021).

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendation

The study examined the relationships between political knowledge towards political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia. Descriptive analysis showed varying levels of means across the different constructs, indicating the diverse levels of political knowledge and political participation readiness. The correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between these variables. Notably, democracy information was strongly correlated with both election information and political participation readiness. This suggests that individuals who are more informed about democracy tend to also be more informed about elections and are more ready to participate in political activities. Additionally, the strong correlation between political party information and political participation readiness underscores the importance of party information in mobilizing citizens toward active political participation. Future research could explore these relationships further and consider the role of other factors such as socio-economic status and education in influencing political participation readiness among first-time voters in Malaysia.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study advances political communication by shedding light on the political knowledge and participation readiness of first-time voters in Malaysia. It reveals that while these voters understand democratic principles well, there are gaps in their knowledge about political parties and practical voting procedures. The research offers valuable insights for improving voter engagement strategies and fostering informed and prepared voters, thus contributing to a more robust democratic process.

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