



Voting Patterns: Evidence from the 2004 Malaysian General Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines voters' behavior and voting patterns as well as the factors influencing them using survey data of the electorate carried out in selected parliamentary and state constituencies during the 2004 Malaysian general elections. The findings from the study indicate that in the absence of major national issues, local issues pertaining to growing social problems such as urban poverty, inadequate housing, environmental degradation, petty crimes among youth, and drug abuse became more dominant. The issue of the establishment of an Islamic state also seemed to dominate the thinking of much of the non-Malay electorate and women.

Keywords: Voting Patterns, General Elections, Malaysian Politics, Electoral Trends

1. Introduction

Studies of Malaysian politics since 1998 indicate that important new political trends have emerged. Initially, this became evident during the 1999 general elections where there could be detected an ambivalence among the electorate in their support for the two main coalition parties in Malaysia, the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or National Front and the Opposition *Barisan Alternatif* (BA) or Alternative Front. The National Front coalition which has been ruling the Federal Government since Independence in 1957 (via its predecessor, the Alliance or *Perikatan*) comprises among others three political parties representing the three main ethnic groups namely the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The emergence of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious BA coalition suggested imminent and irrefragable changes - a harbinger of a more unified, democratic and egalitarian Malaysia (Gomez, 2004; Loh and Saravanamutlu, 2003). Previous by-elections results also seem to indicate that although the BN won in five of the seven by-elections, the BN has still not managed to retrieve overwhelming Malay support (Welsh, 2004). The Opposition remains a serious challenge to the ruling coalition party particularly in the urban non-Malay constituencies and rural Malay heartland. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the conduct of the 2004 general elections at federal and state levels, in particular, the political involvement of the electorates, voting patterns and voting behavior.

2. Methodology and Data

A survey was carried out as one of the means to obtain primary data on the involvement of the Malaysian electorates in politics and its related activities, important issues and their influence on voting behavior in the 2004 general elections. The survey was administered through a structured questionnaire that contains questions on the socio-economic and demographic status of the respondents, their involvement in political parties as well as participation in elections, opinions on important issues pertaining to the economy and politics of the day, both at the local and national levels. One thousand questionnaires were distributed a week before the polling date, out of which 671 forms were returned and the findings presented here are based on these completed questionnaires.

3. Background of Respondents

The profiles of respondents are shown in *Table 1*. Although 671 questionnaires were completed, there are variations in the proportion of respondents who did not answer a particular question. In terms of gender, the proportion of males in the sample was slightly larger than the females while the ethnic distribution was heavily skewed on one ethnic group - Malays. The data show quite an even distribution of the respondents by age groups except for those above 55 years, highest academic qualification, as well as across the states. The distribution by occupation also shows its biasness towards the professional and managerial jobs which was closely related to the respondents' academic qualification.

Respondents were asked about their political involvement and participation and its related activities and the results are shown in *Table 2*. The proportion of respondents who were members of a political party is slightly less than half compared to non-members. More than half of them had become members for a period of longer than 5 years (60%).

This indicates that their involvement in political parties had begun at quite a young age considering that about 65 percent of the respondents were 40 years or younger. *Table 2* also lists out the three main motivating factors which influenced the respondents to become members of a political party namely, personal awareness, influence of political leaders or events, and encouragement from family members and friends. It is interesting to note that almost 40 percent of the respondents claimed that their involvement in political parties were driven by personal awareness, and 70 percent of them who went out to vote felt that it was their duty to do so. This is indeed a good sign for the development of a democratic polity as voters believed that they could play a constructive role in the decision-making process of the country.

What is also interesting to observe is the fact that more than a third (35%) of the respondents were of the opinion that their involvement or membership in a political party were influenced by a particular event and/or leader. The last reason cited by the respondents may also help to explain the impact of a particular major event on the electoral politics of the country, as illustrated in the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 or the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister in 2003. In fact, it has been argued by many quarters that the appointment of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Mahathir's successor had significantly contributed to the landslide victory of UMNO-led Barisan Nasional in the March 2004 elections (Bowring, 2004). It was also contended that the Anwar issue which was overshadowed by the "feel good" factor generated by the pledges made by Abdullah to implement overdue reforms at the 2004 general elections had helped UMNO to win back the support of the Malay electorates which the party lost quite significantly in 1999 (Bowring, 2004). Although 87 percent of the respondents were registered voters, only 59 percent went out to vote in the 1999 general elections. Among those who went to the polls, responsibility as a citizen and the need to choose a good representative were the two main reasons that motivated them to vote. Meanwhile, the basis for not voting in the 1999 general elections were due either to the fact that they were not qualified to vote or were not registered voters at that point in time. A very high proportion of respondents (85%) stated their intention to vote in the 2004 general elections.

Table 3 shows that about 63 percent of the respondents stated that they would vote for the sake of their party while 32 percent would do so for a particular candidate. This would, in turn, mean that the party would be represented by an inappropriate choice of candidates. Slightly more than half of the respondents (55%) actually knew who their respective Member of Parliament (MP) was while the proportion who knew their elected State Assemblyman (ADUN) was much lower (38 %). Interestingly enough, there was not much variation in the proportion of respondents who thought that they had an effective Member of Parliament or State Assemblyman (57% and 51% respectively). The data indicate that social issue seems to be the most important current or topical issue in the 2004 general elections (32%), followed by issues related to politics (17%), Islam (13%) and economics (13%). The remaining 25 percent cited for the category 'Others' include issues pertaining to education, development and morality. As expected, issues pertaining to former Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, which dominated the 1999 general elections did not loom large or was not a critical issue in the last 2004 elections. The 'irrelevance' of the Anwar Ibrahim as an important electoral issue was reflected in the dismal performance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) which was formed at the height of *Reformasi* in 1998. Wan Azizah, Anwar's wife was the only PKR representative in the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) after she defeated a famous *ulama* candidate from UMNO in a very contentious election for the parliamentary seat (Bowring, 2004).

The data also reveal that 41 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the main function of the Opposition in the Malaysian political system was to act as a 'check and balance' on the ruling party. Almost 10 percent of the respondents believe that the role of the Opposition was to debate on policies formulated by the Government of the day while about six percent of them were of the opinion that the Opposition could actually provide an alternative view on the economic development of the country. Another five percent of the respondent saw the role of the Opposition as part and parcel of a democracy.

Opinions on selected issues were also obtained from the respondents as shown in *Table 4*. Almost 80 percent of the respondents agree that they needed representatives from the Opposition to help champion certain issues as well as interests of the community. However, about 40 percent of the respondents believe that Barisan Alternatif (BA) was not capable of challenging the credibility of Barisan Nasional (BN). From our interaction with the respondents, they generally agree that many of the problems associated with poor local governance could actually be resolved if rate-payers (voters) were given the right to elect their own local councilors. It is heartening to note that quite a number of respondents (70%) are of the opinion that local elections should be reinstated in Malaysia. The re-introduction of local elections is important in ensuring greater accountability and transparency amongst public officials which, in turn, will help promote efficient services and improve the quality of life for the local citizenry. In addition, the media which continues to report 'without fear or favor' on issues and problems pertaining to local government is key in promoting greater awareness about the importance of public accountability and transparency at the grassroots level. Quite a number of them claim that they had become more aware of the issues and problems pertaining to local governance as they felt that their quality of life had significantly been affected in recent years. In short, the lack of major national

issues in the last elections had contributed to the growing awareness and subsequently, more attention being paid to local issues by voters in urban areas.

As argued by many quarters including the Prime Minister himself, Islam was the most important 'national' issue in the 2004 general elections (Smith, 2004). However, it is interesting to note that the issue pertaining to Islam, namely *Islam Hadhari*, and the proposed establishment of a full-fledged Islamic state by PAS, did not dominate the election campaigns in constituencies or areas chosen for this survey. The responses to the two questions pertaining to Islam/Islamic state (see *Table 4*) were quite unexpected. Almost 50 percent of the respondents believe that the 'Islamic state' proposal by PAS should be supported by all parties. This helps to demonstrate that the Islamic state proposal had also succeeded in attracting the support of those residing outside the Malay heartlands, namely urban Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. What is even more interesting is that only 25 percent of the respondents believe that the establishment of an Islamic state would pose a threat to the racial harmony of the country despite the active campaign of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional government in warning Malaysians of the potential 'dangers' of living under the ultra-conservative PAS rule.

4. Voting Patterns

Voting patterns were examined across several selected background variables of the respondents. *Table 5* shows the proportion of voting participation of respondents in the 1999 general elections by party membership, gender, ethnicity, age, academic qualification, and occupation. The tumultuous (1997-98) East Asian financial crisis and the ensuing political upheaval which threatened the legitimacy of the Mahathir regime occurred prior to the 1999 general elections had a significant impact on the participation of the citizenry in the country's electoral process. As indicated in *Table 5*, 25 percent of party members did not cast their votes in that election as compared with 54 percent of non-party members. It was later reported that the decision of the Election Commission not to allow more than 680,000 new voters (mostly young people) to vote were to have serious implications on the outcome of the 1999 general elections.

The disenfranchisement of many new voters has also been reflected in the result of this survey in which more than 80 percent (83%) of those between the ages 21 to 30 did not cast their votes in the 1999 general elections. As shown in *Table 5* there is a major difference in the number of young voters aged 21 to 30 years who cast their votes as compared to those who are in the older category. Only 17 percent of those between 21 to 30 years old voted in the 1999 general elections as compared to almost 90 percent of those who are between 41 to 55 years old. The proportion of respondents who were members of political parties who voted in the 1999 general elections (75%) was much larger than those who were non-members (46%). *Table 5* also shows that a much higher proportion of males, Chinese, older respondents, self-employed and those with secondary education or less voted compared to their respective counterparts. It may thus be concluded that older Chinese male respondents seemed to believe that their participation in the electoral process would have an impact on the outcome of the elections. On the other hand, there is not much difference in the proportion of voters between Malays and Indians. It is also interesting to note that those with tertiary education were less inclined to cast their votes as compared to their counterparts with a secondary school education.

Table 6 shows the voting preference between the candidate and the party across the various selected variables. Although the proportion of respondents who voted for the party was larger than those who voted for the candidate across constituencies, party membership, gender, age, ethnicity, qualification and occupation, the results indicate that there are variations within some subgroups. Respondents of Kelantan registered the highest proportion of voters who voted for the party, followed by 'Others', Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan. Substantial difference is also observed between party members and non-members with the latter registering 41 percent in relation to voting for the candidate, which is almost double the proportion of respondents in the former category. There is not much variation in the proportion of respondents who voted for the party or the candidate across the different age groups, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. The proportion who voted for the party differs in academic qualification with 25 percent for certificate or diploma holders and 41 percent for those with at least a university degree.

Another interesting finding of the survey is on the issue of political efficacy of elected representatives. *Table 7* shows that almost half (46%) of the respondents in Selangor believe that their state assemblymen were not effective. More than 50 percent (53%) of the same respondents rated their MPs as not being effective (see *Table 8*). Perhaps, this sentiment would later influence the shift in the electoral support of many Malays from the Opposition to BN in both the urban and rural constituencies in the state of Selangor as reflected in the outcome of the last general elections when several PAS 'heavyweights' were defeated by those from the BN. There is no doubt that the performance record of elected MPs, particularly in urban areas, is important in determining the voters' support in the next elections. From *Table 7*, we can see that voters in Selangor who seem to be more critical of the performance of their representatives before the 2004 general elections were the professionals (almost 40%) and those who were more educated (more than 40%). This is not at all surprising as the more educated, middle-class professionals are generally perceived to be more 'politically' aware about important issues of the day as well as their rights and role in a democracy. It is also interesting to note that even though almost 80 percent of respondents in Kelantan (*Table 7*) were of the opinion that they had

effective state assemblymen/women, many were actually influenced to switch their support from PAS to UMNO, as reflected in the outcome of the 2004 general elections.

Respondents in general were positive about the role of the Opposition in Malaysia's political system. It is again interesting to note that older voters seemed to have a better understanding of and appreciation for the role of the Opposition in Malaysian politics and society. More than 94 percent of those aged 56 and above as compared with 72 percent of those below the age of 31 actually believed that representatives from the Opposition were needed to represent the interests of the community.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that apparently younger voters have less awareness of the role of the Opposition in a democracy and this helps to explain their stronger support for the UMNO-led BN candidates. The older voters, particularly senior citizens exhibited a more sympathetic understanding of the role of the Opposition than those in the younger age group and, correspondingly, they would also tend to be the most optimistic about the future role of BA in Malaysian politics and society.

The electoral theme of *Islam Hadhari* introduced by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in the UMNO/BN manifesto for the 2004 general elections aimed to promote a better understanding of role of Islam in the nation by being more inclusive and appealing. Thus, Islam Hadhari was deemed to be "non-Muslim-friendly", compared to PAS' version of an Islamic state. Hence, as Khadijah (2007) argued, Islam as a major campaign ploy was touted not only by PAS, but this was also strategically countered by UMNO with its own "brand" in the form of Islam Hadhari in order to win back the votes of disillusioned Malays and simultaneously attract the Chinese electorate alarmed by the prospect of the introduction of *hudud* law. As such, national issues such as the establishment of the Islamic state as proposed by PAS seemed to preoccupy the thinking of many Chinese voters as much as it did for some Malay voters. It is interesting, however, to note that the ideological differences between PAS and UMNO over the issue of the Islamic state received mixed responses from members of the Malay community and their non-Malay counterparts. As evident from the results of this survey, the Islamic state proposal did not have much influence ultimately on the thinking and subsequently, the voting preference of the electorate in Kelantan and elsewhere. It may be concluded that despite the fact that Islam was perceived as one of the most important national issues in the 2004 general elections, the shift in the voting preferences amongst the Malay electorate in Kelantan was not solely motivated either by the "progressive" UMNO brand of Islam or the "fundamentalist" type of Islam as propagated by PAS.

As expected, the growing "politicisation" of Islam in Malaysian politics and society seemed to concern many voters in the Chinese-dominated areas or constituencies. While almost all Malays would prefer a Muslim to be the number one leader of this country, a small proportion of the Malay respondents were fearful about the possibilities of living in an Islamic state. The study also shows that fewer women were supportive of the idea of an Islamic State than men. This could be because of the fear of strict restrictions and losing some kind of freedom that would affect their lives. However, more women than men were of the opinion that leaders in their respective constituencies were doing a fine job.

Therefore, in the absence of any significant issues at the national forefront amidst Abdullah's growing popularity and the concomitant "feel good" factor, Islam "by default" assumed a major prominence in the 2004 general elections, especially amongst the non-Malay electorate. The non-Malays were still reeling from the after-shock of electoral gains of PAS in the 1999 general elections and the party's subsequent triumphant mood as demonstrated by its 2004 manifesto on the establishment of an Islamic state. There was a real fear that the 2004 general elections might represent an advancement of the previous one, with PAS on steady course towards capturing more states and simultaneously increasing its share of the parliamentary seats, thus enabling it within a striking distance of forming the next federal government and the repercussions that emerge from it. By contrast, simply by reversing Mahathir's heavy industrialisation focus (in the quest to achieve Vision 2020) and shifting more emphasis towards rural development, Abdullah was able to effectuate a substantial Malay swing which went the other way at the previous general election. This had meant that Islam did not stand alone as an issue but was inextricably mixed with other political issues such the socio-economic status of the rural base.

However, Islam considered as a national issue was balanced with 'local' issues in certain constituencies. These include issues pertaining to growing social problems including drug abuse and petty crimes among youth in the local neighborhood. These problems, in turn, were believed to be associated closely with the problems of inadequate housing, urban poverty, environmental degradation, mismanagement and poor governance of the local councils, which accounts for emergence of a more vocal civil society in recent years. It cannot be overlooked, however, that the "convergence" of local and national issues could be referenced to the personality of the new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - the "Abdullah factor" which for the first time in Malaysia's electoral history propelled the popularity of the ruling coalition to unprecedented heights, as reflected particularly in the number of parliamentary seats won (91%). Abdullah's image and reputation for being, "Mr. Clean" which was carefully projected by the mainstream mass media succeeded in swaying erstwhile undecided voters to support him and the new administration in the hope that

badly needed institutional and systemic reforms from the Mahathir era could be implemented. In summary, Islam as a dominant electoral issue has to be seen in the wider context of personalised politics in relation to the appointment of Mahathir's successor as the new Prime Minister, *i.e.* Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Likewise, Abdullah's electoral pledges and promise to institute far-reaching reforms to combat corruption and promote efficiency in the delivery system struck a chord at the "heartstring" of local issues.

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Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Variable	Categories of Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	368	54.8
	Female	275	41.0
	Did not answer	28	4.2
Ethnicity	Malay	512	76.3
	Chinese	46	6.9
	Indian/Sikh	79	11.8
	Did not answer	34	5.1
Age	21 – 30 years	242	36.1
	31 – 40	181	27.0
	41 – 55	190	28.3
	56 and older	58	8.6
Constituency	Wilayah Persekutuan	173	25.8
	Selangor	231	34.4
	Kelantan	120	17.9
	Others	147	21.9
Academic Qualification	Secondary Education or less	223	33.2
	Diploma & Certificate	191	28.5
	Degree +	222	33.1
	Did not answer	35	5.2
Occupation	Professional/Managerial	240	35.8
	Sales & Services	55	8.2
	Housewife/Student/Unemployed	95	14.2
	Self-employed	54	8.0
	Did not answer	127	18.9

Table 2. Involvement in Politics and Elections(Percentage)

Item		Percentage
Membership of political party:	Yes	44.3
	No	55.7
Duration of membership:	< 1 year	14.9
	1-5 years	25.4
	6-10 years	20.7
	>10 years	39.0
Motivation to become a party member:	Personal awareness	38.7
	Family/friends	22.6
	Influence by political leader/event	34.8
	Others	3.8
Registered voter:	Yes	87.1
	No	12.9
Voted in 1999 General Elections:	Yes	58.7
	No	41.3
Reason for voting:	Responsibility	70.0
	To choose good representative	26.9
	Development progress	3.2
Reason for not voting:	Not qualified	57.1
	Unregistered voter	24.9
	Others	18.0
New voter:	Yes	28.8
	No	71.2
Will vote in 2004 General Elections:	Yes	84.7
	No	15.3

Table 3. Voting Patterns (Percentage)

Question		Percentage
When you voted, do you vote for the candidate or the party?	Candidate	31.9
	Party	63.3
	Don't know	4.8
Do you know who was elected as your MP in the 1999 elections?	Yes	55.4
	No	44.6
Do you know who was elected as your State Assemblyman in the 1999 elections?	Yes	38.3
	No	61.7
Do you think that you have an effective Member of Parliament?	Yes	57.4
	No	33.1
	Don't know	9.5
Do you think that you have an effective State Assemblyman?	Yes	51.2
	No	29.1
	Don't know	19.7
What are the most important current/topical issue in the 2004 elections?	Social	31.9
	Politics	16.5
	Islam	13.3
	Economics	12.7
	Others	25.6

Table 4. Opinions of Respondents on Selected Issues (Percentage)

Issue	Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
The government led by Barisan Nasional has succeeded in ensuring political stability and economic development of this country	67.8	23.1	9.2
The 'Islamic state' model as proposed by PAS should be supported by all parties	48.1	30.4	21.5
The 'Islamic state' issue is a threat to racial harmony and unity of the country	25.1	31.7	43.3
We need representatives from the Opposition parties in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies to represent the interests of the community	79.6	12.8	7.6
Local elections should be re-introduced in Malaysia	68.3	21.0	10.7
The Barisan Alternatif is not capable of challenging the credibility of the Barisan Nasional government/party	41.3	33.3	25.4
Only Muslims can be appointed as Prime Minister of this country	76.7	10.7	12.6

Table 5. Voting Participation in 1999 General Elections by Selected Variables(Percentage)

Variable		Voted	Did not vote
Party membership:	Yes	74.9	25.1
	No	45.9	54.1
Gender:	Male	62.7	37.3
	Female	52.6	47.4
Ethnicity:	Malay	57.3	42.7
	Chinese	69.6	30.4
	Indian	59.5	40.5
Age:	21 – 30	16.6	83.4
	31 – 40	78.8	21.2
	41 – 55	89.8	10.2
	56 +	85.3	14.7
Academic qualification:	Secondary & Below	63.5	36.5
	Certificate/Diploma	57.4	42.6
	Degree & Higher	53.6	46.4
Occupation:	Professional/Managerial	65.1	34.9
	Clerical	45.5	54.5
	Sales/Services	56.4	43.6
	Unemployed/Housewife/Student	51.1	48.9
	Self-employed	81.5	18.9

Table 6. Voting Preference by Selected Variables (Percentage)

		Voted for	
		Candidate	Party
Constituency:	Wilayah Persekutuan	41.5	58.5
	Selangor	37.8	62.2
	Kelantan	15.7	84.3
	Others	31.9	68.1
Party membership:	Yes	24.9	75.1
	No	40.7	59.3
Age:	21 – 30	35.1	64.9
	31 – 40	35.3	64.7
	41 – 55	30.6	69.4
	56+	29.4	70.6
Gender:	Male	34.5	65.5
	Female	32.3	67.7
Ethnicity:	Malay	32.0	68.0
	Chinese	43.5	56.5
	Indian	35.2	64.8
Academic qualification:	Secondary & below	32.9	67.1
	Certificate/Diploma	25.3	74.7
	Degree & higher	40.5	59.5
Occupation:	Professional/Management	33.9	66.1
	Clerical	33.7	66.3
	Sales/Services	50.0	50.0
	Unemployed/Housewife/Student	37.8	62.2
	Self-employed	29.4	70.6

Table 7. Effectiveness of State Assemblyman by Selected Variables(Percentage)

		Effective State Assemblyman	
		Yes	No
Constituency:	Wilayah Persekutuan	75.3	24.7
	Selangor	53.5	46.5
	Kelantan	79.8	20.2
	Others	58.5	41.5
Party membership:	Yes	68.3	31.7
	No	59.1	40.9
Age:	21 – 30	61.5	38.5
	31 – 40	65.4	34.6
	41 – 55	62.5	37.5
	56+	75.0	25.0
Gender:	Male	62.4	37.6
	Female	65.4	34.6
Ethnicity:	Malay	63.9	36.1
	Chinese	62.5	37.5
	Indian	59.4	40.6
Academic qualification:	Secondary & below	70.2	29.8
	Certificate/Diploma	66.7	33.3
	Degree & higher	57.1	42.9
Occupation:	Professional/Management	61.1	38.9
	Clerical	75.6	24.4
	Sales/Services	63.4	36.6
	Unemployed/Housewife/Student	63.4	36.6
	Self-employed	72.5	27.5

Table 8. Effectiveness of Member of Parliament by Selected Variables(Percentage)

		Effective Member of Parliament	
		Yes	No
Constituency:	Wilayah Persekutuan	80.3	19.7
	Selangor	47.4	52.6
	Kelantan	73.0	27.0
	Others	60.5	39.5
Party membership:	Yes	64.1	35.9
	No	62.2	37.8
Age:	21 – 30	67.0	33.0
	31 – 40	63.3	36.7
	41 – 55	59.0	41.0
	56+	63.6	36.4
Gender:	Male	59.7	40.3
	Female	68.6	31.4
Ethnicity:	Malay	65.1	34.9
	Chinese	65.1	34.9
	Indian	50.0	50.0
Academic qualification:	Secondary & below	69.8	30.2
	Certificate/Diploma	64.9	35.1
	Degree & higher	57.3	42.7
Occupation:	Professional/Management	61.6	38.4
	Clerical	75.8	24.2
	Sales/Services	71.2	28.8
	Unemployed/Housewife/Student	64.0	36.0
	Self-employed	54.0	46.0