

## Civic Engagement of Young People in Malaysia

Shahidah Abdul Razak, Asmidar Lokman, Shawal Shahid  
Hamid@Hussain

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia  
Email: shahida056@uitm.edu.my, aslokman@uitm.edu.my, shawalhussain@uitm.edu.my

### Abstract

Voting is an act of political participation in a community. It starts with civic participation, which is the engagement between people in the community and the structure of the government. Several factors influence community participation, such as knowledge, decision-making skills, attitude, and values. As Malaysia has legislated the new law of 18 years as the minimum age to vote, in 2023, all 18-year-olds will perform their civic duties as citizens of this country by voting in the 15<sup>th</sup> General Election. However, the awareness of voting among young people still needs to improve; many are eligible voters but need to register due to their indifference towards voting responsibly. Many are reported as not being interested in voting. Past studies found that most respondents are aware of their voting responsibilities and actively participate in their communities. Their participation in the community is crucial. Based on the model of forming civic competence, this study aims to create awareness among new young voters about executing their civic responsibility in the community and assist the government in cultivating the value of civic participation among young people through voting. However, young people's knowledge and positive attitude towards civic participation needed to materialise into voting. This study identifies the factors that lead young people to get involved in civic engagement.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Civic Engagement, Knowledge, Skill, Voting

### Introduction

Voting is an act of political participation in a community. It starts with civic participation, which is the engagement between people in the community and the structure of the government. Several factors influence community participation, such as knowledge, decision-making skills, attitude, and values. As Malaysia has legislated the new age of 18 as the minimum age to vote, in 2023, all 18-year-olds will perform their civic duties as citizens of this country by voting in the 15<sup>th</sup> General Election. However, the awareness of voting among young people still needs to improve; many are eligible voters but need to register due to their indifference towards voting responsibly. Many are reported as not being interested in voting. Past studies found that most respondents are aware of their voting responsibilities and actively participate in their communities. Their participation in the community is crucial. Based on the model of forming civic competence, this study aims to create awareness among new young voters about executing their civic responsibility in the community and assist the government in cultivating the value of civic participation among young people through voting. However, young people's knowledge and positive attitude towards civic participation needed

to materialise into voting. This study identifies the factors that lead young people to get involved in civic engagement.

### **Statement of Problem**

The latest research in 2019 shows that young Malaysians are less likely to be involved in conventional politics, particularly voting and becoming members of political parties (Hed et al., 2020). Even with the introduction of an automated registered voting system, the latest development in the Johor State General Election 2022 demonstrates the need for more enthusiasm among youth in exercising their responsibility. The scenario is concerning because it demonstrates young people's disinterest in exercising their civic rights and responsibilities. With the new legislation passed by Parliament encouraging democratic values to flourish via Vote 18, civic participation is expected to catalyse young people to vote. Thus, firmer action should ensure young people's rights are not taken for granted. Voting is the expected outcome of young people's civic participation in a community. However, doubts have been cast by various parties in society on the ability of young people to make responsibly informed choices when they vote. With this, some questions arise: whether young people will turn out to vote responsibly or whether they are not doing their duty as citizens by refusing to vote. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian general election, about 1.5 million registered young voters failed to vote in the last Malaysian election. Therefore, the civic participation of young people will be investigated based on the civic competence theoretical framework of knowledge, attitude, and values. As a result, the survey was conducted among 18-21-year-olds to determine their capacity for civic participation, which eventually led to voting. This study is conducted to identify the level of civic engagement among young people and the potential factors influencing their civic engagement.

### **Literature Review**

As countries progress, their history of struggles to achieve the current prosperity, stability, and peace is often forgotten. Many are concerned that democracy is wavering with the disengagement of young people from civic and political activities. The apathy of young people led to indifference towards politics. A lower turnout of voters in elections and a lower number of registered voters have risen worldwide (Kitanova, 2020; Chauke, 2020; Marsuki et al., 2020). With apathy rising, the patriotic sense of young people is fading. Studies have shown that a low patriotic spirit among the younger generation has taken place in Malaysia and other countries, making patriotism a global issue (Hasnah et al., 2015). The difference in patriotism spirit can be seen between the colonial rule generation and the post-independence generation. The environment influences the difference. The gap in understanding and subscribing to patriotism posed a major challenge to Malaysia. Youth not participating civically in activities indicates a lack of patriotism. Patriotism is associated with the appreciation of national symbols and values on the one side versus beliefs in protecting the country from "outsiders" (Lay & Torney-Purta, 2001). Voting can be associated with patriotism as it establishes a government that can guard the country's sovereignty. Voting is considered an act that symbolises concern, care, and love for the safety and security of the nation.

### **Civic Engagement**

Scholars have defined civic engagement as having an interest in, paying attention to, or having knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or feelings about political or civic matters (Barret &

Brunton-Smith, 2014). The word "engagement" is translated as having a psychological effect rather than a behavioural one. Scholars used the words "participation" and "engagement" interchangeably in identifying the factors that contribute to civic engagement among youth. Civic engagement and participation are influenced by several factors, such as social factors such as family, education, peer groups, and mass media (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). Other than social factors, psychological factors—cognitive factors such as political and civic knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and social and cultural values—are also among the factors that contribute to political participation (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).

Meanwhile, Youniss et al. (2002) define civic engagement as the attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, and skills involved in promoting and improving the common good in society (Rossi et al., 2016). The other dimensions of civic engagement are political participation, social participation, cultural participation, and economic participation, all aimed at improving people's lives through cooperation between citizens and government (Glaeser et al., 2007). This study focuses on social participation, where young people's involvement in the community is examined, eventually leading to political participation materialised through voting. It is important because cooperation in the community is very important, as the government cannot develop independently. It needs the participation of its citizens. Higher participation indicates a higher level of patriotism among citizens. A clear indication of civic engagement would be the involvement of young people in various community-based activities that serve the wider population's needs. In an earlier study on Italian civic participation, Putnam (1993) found that civic engagement is an important precursor to political action. As time progresses, studies have shown that more and more young people are disengaging from society, particularly in politics (Crocetti et al., 2012).

### **Knowledge**

Civic education encompasses several important elements, such as learning or gaining knowledge of government, its functions, and the morally acceptable duties and responsibilities of citizenship (Collins English Dictionary, 2012). Education imparts knowledge of democratic values such as participation in government, promoting good governance, and a dramatic change of attitudes and actions towards good governance (Olayinka & Elijah, 2019). Several studies conducted on active citizenship found that knowledge contributes to civic participation. For example, the choice theory emphasises how individuals seek civic and political information based on their education, knowledge, and motivation. It is critical to use such information and efficacy to fit into social norms regarding participation. It also emphasised personal and group incentives for participation. Considering this theory, one way to encourage young people to vote is to offer civic education (Neuman & Neuman, 1986). Thus, education is an important element in promoting civic participation within society. Civic education in Malaysia is taught formally in schools, where children are exposed to the country's history and structure. A more subtle civic education takes place in the daily activities of schoolchildren. Activities such as singing the national anthem, hoisting the Malaysian flag during the assembly, reciting the *Rukun Negara*, or learning the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, instil patriotism in youth. Apart from formal and informal civic education, good quality education is undeniably necessary to make civic participation successful (Jurs, 2014). Providing good quality education recognises the importance of civic education, where the school is the agent of civic participation (Jurs, 2014).

One study identified education as the key to civic engagement and political participation, and on top of that, civic knowledge resulted in civic skills in interpreting political issues (Maiello

et al., 2003). Among the two, civic knowledge and civic skill, civic knowledge is a more dominant predictor than civic skill. Aside from that, knowledge is regarded as an important contributor to the success of democracy through democratic values such as political participation and trust in public life and public figures, and it can change attitudes on critical social issues (Coley & Sum, 2012; Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2004). The idea of knowledge as a driving factor for civic engagement was also emphasised by Hauser (2000), in which the educational factor was identified as a key factor concerning civic engagement and political participation (Maiello et al., 2003). One of the factors that young Indonesians avoided in anything political was discovered to be a lack of knowledge (Marsuki et al., 2020).

### **Skill**

Education, knowledge, and skills are interrelated. Education is a source of knowledge and knowledge-generated skills; as mentioned by Olayinka and Elijah (2019), civic education is a subject that provides knowledge and skills for the youth to enable them to perform their expected roles and participate in the process of democratization. Civic engagement skills depend on the knowledge acquired to engage in public life. School or university subjects (such as ethnic studies and women's studies) but also being involved with structured co-curricular activity (e.g., cultural awareness workshops, identity-based student organizations, and multicultural campus events) would give the students a diverse experience (Ostrander, 2004). Skill is another important factor in civic participation, where decision-making skill is key in guiding youth to vote. According to studies, psychosocial factors such as factions, race, traditional group, family loyalties, patronage, issue-oriented, and party loyalty are more important in deciding to vote. Besides that, kingship, caste, membership in a village faction, and family play an important role in voters' choices (Muhammad & Hasan, 2016). It means the motivation to vote lies within a person's community.

Meanwhile, in Australia, it was found that young Australians will commit to voting when it relates to social issues that they are involved in (Edwards, 2007; Winchester et al., 2016). It shows that youth are more engaged with civic participation by becoming active in the community. Feeling a sense of belonging to their community is very important in influencing their decision to vote. People need this civic skill to vote (Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

### **Attitude and Values**

Values are long-term beliefs that influence an actor's choice of available means to achieve a goal. Values, therefore, have a meaningful association with voting. It is because values are a lasting guide to achieving something he aspires to. These values include equality, freedom, national security, and world peace. Despite hundreds of values, all the different value types identified in the general theory of value contents and structure (Schwartz, 1992) may be relevant. Malaysia, being a country in the East, is rich in values. Values such as respect, tolerance, acceptance, and peacemaking are among them. However, the value of voting is strongly related to the ideological content of political discourse (Barnes & Schwartz, 1998). This may explain why young people shun voting, especially when voting involves electing politicians who are later found to be ineffective or corrupt. Values can come from a child's upbringing, where parents influence their children's perceptions and responses towards anything political (Marsuki et al., 2020). This study adopts the theoretical framework based on the theory of putting three components to civic participation.

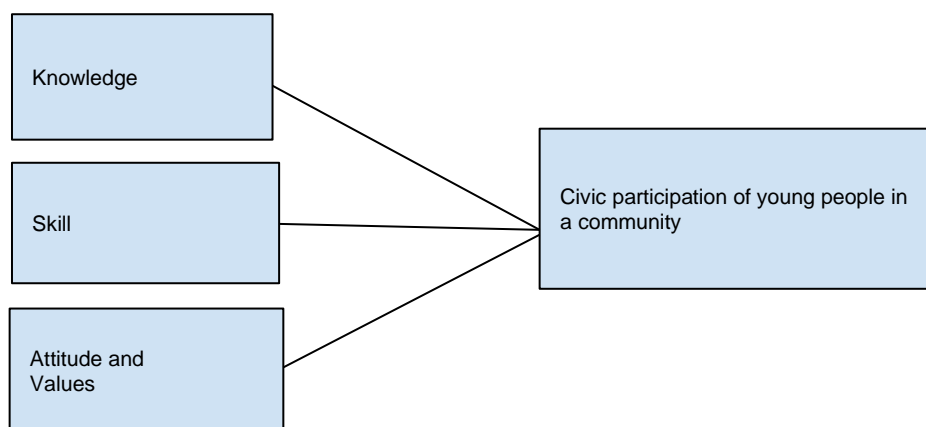


Figure 1. The Model of Forming Civic Competence  
Adapted from Jurs (2014)

### Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative method using a cross-sectional research design. It is designed to collect data at a specific time. This study is interested in identifying young people's knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values about voting as a part of their civic participation. Therefore, a survey is deployed to gather relevant data from the identified sample, the youth. Due to the large population, data was collected using cluster sampling. The respondents will represent young people aged 18–21, as this study cannot sample the entire population. The instrument used is the questionnaire developed based on the theoretical framework. The questionnaire consists of four sections: the demographic profile, civic participation, knowledge, skill, values, and attitudes. The data was collected through a Google Form distributed to identified respondents in the age pool. The data were collected within four days to reach the required sample size of 384. The number of respondents, however, reached 896. The data was analysed to find the mean for all variables stated. The mean is used to identify the central tendency of the variables tested.

### Results and Discussion

#### Demographic variables

The descriptive data for the respondents' profiles in this study is represented in Table 1. Out of 896 respondents, gender-wise, the majority was represented by 554 females (61.8%), whereas 346 (38.6%) were male. The age of respondents in this study are 18 years, 280 (31.4%), followed by 19 years, 366 (41%), 20 years, 145 (16.2%) and 21 years, 104 (11.6%). Respondents by race resulted to 746 (83.3%) Malays, 50 (5.6%) Indians, 46 (5.1%) Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak, 33 (3.7%) Chinese, 23 (2.5%) Others and 3 (0.3%) of Sikh. SPM represented the educational background of the respondents with 645 (721%), Diploma with 183(20.5%), Degree with 76 (8.5%), STPM with 32 (3.6%), Others with 29 (3.2%), STAM with 4 (0.4%) and Matriculation with 8 (0.9%).

Table 1

*Demographic characteristics*

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	346	38.6
Female	554	61.8
<b>Age</b>		
18 years old	280	31.4
19 years old	366	41
20 years old	145	16.2
21 years old	104	11.6
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	746	83.3
Indian	50	5.6
Chinese	33	3.7
Bumiputera Sabah Sarawak	46	5.1
Sikh	3	0.3
Others	22	2.5
<b>Education background</b>		
SPM	645	72.1
STPM	32	3.6
STAM	4	0.4
Matriculation	8	0.9
Diploma	183	20.5
Bachelor's Degree	76	8.5
Others	29	3.2

Table 2

*Mean values of variables*

Variables	Mean
Civic participation	3.58
Knowledge	4.56
Skill	3.66
Attitude and Values	4.37

The data analyzed indicates that young people positively react toward civic participation in their community, with a mean 3.58. The highest mean was shown in the knowledge of civic participation by most respondents, with a mean score of 4.56. Whereas the lowest mean score of 3.66 reflects that young people lack the skills in civic participation. However, young people have a positive attitude toward civic participation, as shown by the mean score of 4.37.

### Discussion

Literature on the response of Malaysian youth towards civic participation categorises them into two groups: apathetic and aware. The "aware" category represents the involvement of youth in civic participation, where good quality civic education contributes to this positive view of participation. Formal and informal civic participation education strengthened young people's perspectives on their duty to the nation. This category gives brighter hope that the nation's future is secured. However, the apathetic category is strongly represented by a high percentage of young people who need to be made aware of and are indifferent toward civic participation. The apathetic attitude toward civic participation posed a grave danger to the practise of democracy (Dahl et al., 2017) due to its requirement for the active involvement of the public in running the government. By being apathetic, people are not contributing to constructive idea sharing, giving feedback to the government, or showing concern for situations taking place in the country. When the young are reluctant to participate, many will only take responsibility for issues that matter to the country. It opens the possibility of creating a tyrannical leader who rules the country.

The result indicates the good quality of civic education offered by the schools in Malaysia. Currently, the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) under the Education Regulations (National Curriculum) 1997 offers a curriculum that encompasses knowledge, skills, norms, values, cultural elements, and beliefs to produce wholesome students. The curriculum emphasises the knowledge and skills needed to grow holistically. The KSSM framework includes the human element, where knowledge of democracy and citizenship is elaborated. The elements of norms and values are the ones expected to be instilled.

Despite civic participation, the results suggest that young people need to be better versed in participatory activities. The lack of skills may have affected the further involvement of young people in politics, as civic participation is the precursor to political participation. Having skills would lead to young people developing their democratic maturity. A study showed that it contributed to political participation among young people in the EU, where young people in established democracies are more likely to be politically active (Kitanova, 2020). One study

conducted by Saltmarsh (2005) mentions that the lack of emphasis on fundamental civic skills such as public problem-solving, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, community/coalition building, and organisational analysis in service-learning programmes (civic education programmes) has resulted in a low level of civic engagement. This finding supported what Dirksen, Austic, Gutierrez, and Krings (2015) found: the involvement of students in volunteer organisations outside of attending classes in college or university will influence them to engage themselves in policy-making (civic engagement), like voting. This is because volunteering can increase their confidence and commitment towards political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism (Dirksen et al., 2015). It has been demonstrated that the willingness of trained youth to commit themselves to volunteerism or services is positively related to our young people's willingness and preparation to pay their responsibility as voters, because exposure to decision-making and communication skills will eventually encourage them to vote. Civic skills are very important for them to carry out their civic responsibility.

A better response from the youth can still be salvaged by the attitudes and values that show high potential for youth civic participation and voting. Youth's positive attitudes and values can be cultivated further by genuinely encouraging them to participate in the policy-making process of the government. The overall result shows that it is not a lack of knowledge that becomes a barrier to civic participation and voting. However, the failure to convert knowledge into skill in civic participation has resulted in the low participation of youth in civic-related activities, which eventually leads to political participation in the form of voting. Many youths believe their lives have no connection to the government or politics; participating in either may be a waste of time and participating civically remains the same. However, they are open to regularly expressing discontent with the current system and the people managing it. To convert youths' responses into positive actions, the government must consider presenting a solid role model for the youth to relate to. With such data, universities can organise awareness campaigns among students to encourage them to vote. It can also serve as an insight for policymakers in strategising the approach to educating young people on the significance and responsibility of being citizens and voters. The general election on November 19, 2022, has proven the level of involvement of young people in voting, one of the most important civic engagements, as approximately 3.5 million new voters registered for the election. The election result is a first in Malaysian history where there is a hung parliament with no clear winner to form a government caused by the Undi18 voters, as claimed by some political observers (Manimaran, 2022).

Knowledge and attitude are two variables associated with civic engagement, and it is foreseeable that students require knowledge and education to cultivate the attitude. However, the skill requires experience and practice for them to be actively involved in the country's political process. It is necessary to explore more about how this skill can be indirectly associated with voting. The findings suggest that a lack of skill contributes to the lack of civic participation among youth in this country. As mentioned by the model, Jurs, Knowledge and skills, civic attitude, and values are very important in a social environment that can promote civic culture among youth. Educators and policymakers can use the study's results to prepare young people to get involved in the next general election as part of the policy-making process. Civic education should be strengthened through participation in curricular activity at the school and university levels. Exposure to democratic values such as tolerance and civic rights,



not to mention soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and many more can train young people to realise the importance of civic engagement.

### Conclusion

The ability of young people to actively participate in civic engagement is yet to be seen in its totality. With studies indicating positive participation by young people, the government is compelled to genuinely involve young people in decision-making, determining their fate as the nation's next generation.

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