

# To Vote or Abstain from Voting: Young Voters after the Implementation of *Undi18* Roslizawati Taib & Benny Thomas Vivian

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to determine how lowering the voting age affects electoral outcomes, especially in countries that are still in transition to a mature democratic phase. Political maturity and knowledge can influence political participation and electoral outcomes. People with a better understanding of politics are more likely to recognise the importance of political participation. They understand that their actions can have a significant impact on society and are more likely to take an active role in shaping their communities and influencing government policy. However, whether young people are impacted by their parents' political decisions is debatable. The results of the 2022 Johor State General Election showed that *Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia* or MUDA, a youth-based party won only one out of the six parliamentary seats it contested while *Barisan Nasional* (BN) won a two-thirds majority. BN's success in the 2022 Johor State General Election may be linked to a relationship between age and political party of choice.

**Keywords:** Voting Age, Elections, Political Maturity, Participation, Vote

## Introduction

Many countries have lowered the voting age to 18 or below. These include developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Western Europe, the United States, Germany, Canada, France, and Australia, which lowered the voting age to 18 in the 1970s (Omondi, 2017). India, Pakistan, New Zealand, and all countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia followed suit in the 1980s, but it remains difficult to justify. Malaysia is one of the countries that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. It was first implemented in the Johor State General Election (GE) in February 2022 with the approval of the Federal Government (Strangio, 2022). This is in line with the demands of the people who want the voting age to be lowered from 21 to 18 by the

end of 2021. Young people who turn 18 will be automatically registered with the Election Commission of Malaysia (EC).

The plan appears to have met with a positive response from all parties, showing that Malaysians are ready for political maturity, which begins at the age of 18 rather than 21. However, there are still many issues to be addressed before full implementation, as the EC must deal with a wide range of issues that require careful planning (Hill and Hupe, 2014). Individuals with a strong understanding of politics are more likely to be informed about current issues and candidates and are better equipped to make informed decisions when it comes to voting and supporting political causes. Political maturity can help individuals overcome their apathy or cynicism towards the political process. When people understand that they can make a difference with their actions, they are more likely to participate in political activities such as attending rallies, contacting elected officials, or organising protests. However, youths are most influenced by their parents when they vote for the first time (Lee, 2020).

Under the Youth Societies and Youth Development (Amendment) Bill 2019, the age category of youths is between 15 to 30 years. The explanation for the age reform is that the government wants to make it easier for young people to participate in strengthening their roles and responsibilities in the country. In fact, the number of youths that were previously considered minorities has increased to 15.1 million, representing 46.64 percent of the country's total population (DOSM. n.d.). In fact, by 2030, the number of youths in Malaysia would have increased to a point where they would form most of the population. All the demands and voices of young people fighting for their fate and rights are often dismissed as insignificant, and this situation must change. This is because young people are starting to take risks by getting directly or indirectly involved in national politics (Razak, 2019).

The same dilemma will arise in Malaysian politics. Young people will participate in Malaysian politics, including those who want to change the conservative government. This is because young people are constantly challenging the opinions of conservative leaders. Western liberalism's definition of freedom is inconsistent and irrelevant in Malaysia. What is worrying is the declining number of young people aged 21 and above who exercise their right to vote in the general elections. Young people's involvement in government policy should consider stakeholder perspectives for long-term impact. Therefore, there is a need to give them more opportunities to understand the meaning of democracy in Malaysia. Involving young people in civic education can become an indirect form of training to practice the importance of democracy before they can participate in national politics (Dassonneville et al., 2012).

When examining the factors that cause most individuals, especially young people, to not vote, the application of rational choice theory shows that the voter's decision whether to vote depends on rational thinking. The quality and competence of the candidate determines voters' intentions. If the reasonable appraisal of the candidate is poor, people will try not to vote and vice versa. Based on the results of the general elections and by-elections between 2008 and 2018, the number of young voters had increased year after year. This observation contends that the outcome of the recent election would be a surprise given the political instability in Malaysia. However, leadership is not the only factor that influence voter participation.

Although the government's efforts to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 have been implemented since 2021, the likelihood of young voters achieving the desired result is low. This contrasts with what they must give up including their time, job, and the cost of getting

to the polling station. Their political participation is viewed as ineffective in influencing electoral outcomes because they are labelled a minority by society. As a result, refusal to vote is considered one of the most popular alternatives when weighed against the moral obligation youths must fulfil (Mackie, 2010). The cost and time incurred to participate in voting (rational factors) are considered dominant determinants of whether a young person will vote or not (Feddersen, 2004). The connection between these two variables is undeniable. However, some people may continue to vote despite the losses they have to bear to make sure the best government is elected. Thus, moral duty (ethical and moral factors) cannot be ignored, even if it may not be the primary motivation for someone to vote.

The lowering of the voting age limit, which will lead to non-passive political participation, especially among the younger generation, is likely to change Malaysia's political landscape, even though election results have recently been seen as less uncertain. Will the idea of lowering the voting age create a moral awareness of the responsibility given and borne by youths to ensure the stability and sustainability of the democratic system as it continues to be practised in Malaysia, and will major changes be evident as the election season dawns? Or is it a paradox that has no impact on their moral consciousness because other things in life such as family, time, expenses, and others take precedence (Downs, 1957). This, of course, becomes clear when one examines the data released by the Election Commission of Malaysia on the results of the state general elections. The percentage of young people who voted in the 2008 and 2013 general elections had increased significantly, giving rise to the term "youth tsunami".

The issue of freedom of participation and speech is enshrined in Article 10(1)(a) of the Federal Constitution. Yet, the meaning of democracy is not understood when there are still many government-imposed constraints and limitations on participation. As a result, government transparency in creating good politics or good governance is not viewed positively, but on the contrary. Moreover, the issues of cronyism, corruption, and nepotism are still widespread. If space is not given to youths, it is to be feared that the protests of a handful of young people will tarnish the context of democracy itself. With the 1998 changes and the conclusion of the 12th General Election in 2008, Malaysians expected the emergence of a new political wave. This can be attributed to the growth of young people during this period who were vocal and bold in expressing their aspirations.

When young people staged a great march to protest the decision to fire the former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim, their political activity was considered radical at that time. Many Anwar's supporters were young people, mainly university students. Simultaneously, new media that were more technical had evolved to convey information and serve as a channel of communication. The introduction of new terminology among individuals involved in new media, e.g., cybertroopers, was regarded as one of the signals that young people were beginning to play a major role in transforming the country's political environment. Although some researchers have discussed new political issues related to the social transformation of Malaysians shortly after the Reformasi Movement in 1998 with a new political landscape, few of them have attempted to explore the possibility that the political mobilisation and greater opportunities brought about by the lowering of the voting age for young people may also encourage them to participate in the elections. At the age of 18, young people become more independent and less reliant on the opinion and influence of their parents. There is no denying that the influence of parents is still present. However, when young people leave their parents, this attitude may change (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### **Political Maturity and the Process of Socialisation**

Numerous studies around the world have shown that young people vote more than older people in elections, even in mature democracies (Fieldhouse et al., 2007, pp. 797–822; Highton & Raymond, 2001, pp. 202-209; Phelps, 2004, pp. 238–248; Sloam, 2007, pp. 548-567; Wass, 2007b). The significant positive relationship between young people's participation in elections and age is related to adult role theory, which states that the level of individual engagement increases with age and the maturity level of a person who performs their duties as an adult individual (Abramson et al., 1998; Highton & Raymond, 2001; Raymond & Steven, 1980).

This is because, in addition to the social and psychological variables (Gordon, 2008) that are thought to encourage people to engage in politics directly or indirectly, young people's knowledge of the need to vote is also an important factor influencing their engagement or participation. To enable young people to engage politically and establish democracy as the main foundation, the education system, which is considered quite traditional and refers to teachers as the repository of all knowledge, should be changed to include young people's creative and critical thinking in decision-making in all areas (Gramsci, 1971). This democratic culture allows for debate on any topic instead of relying solely on professors without any comment or discussion.

Sociological issues related to the role and influence of parents also have implications for young people's political participation, including voting behaviour. Berelson, et al. (1954) noted that most were men who relied on other family members for political knowledge. Despite the contribution that globalisation makes to young people's political consciousness, the political knowledge that the authorities try to impart will be increasingly limited in today's world where nations are beset by pandemics. On the other hand, non-formal education by parents based on past experiences will influence the way parents teach their children. This will also affect how young people think about politics (Berelson et al., 1954, pp. ix).

The availability of information on international political violence involving young people around the world increases political maturity. This medium is useful for the rapid transmission and reception of information. However, it is not impossible that this medium also serves as a catalyst for political violence if political desires are not fulfilled. Therefore, to prevent radicalism from turning into violence, the government as a policy maker needs to understand the root cause of the problem. This shows that the government cannot ignore the youth when making decisions. The government must address this local problem before it manifests by developing a formula that can meet and satisfy the needs of this group.

Political maturity may be observed in a student's personal experience such as in the school setting. It is thought that the culture of fear of instructors and dread of stepping out to share and discuss ideas will, to some extent, soften young people's mature way of thinking as they get older. As such, political maturity will be attained later in life. According to a poll performed by the Election Commission of Malaysia (EC, 1999), most secondary school students already understood the importance of voting. The work that needs to be done should be focused on how the results made on the ballot paper represent their political maturity.

A recent study looking at the phenomenon in Germany, Finland, and Texas, which exhibit similar voting behaviour, appears to contradict previous studies. Current findings

showed that voter turnout decreases as a person ages, especially in the years after the voting age is reached (Bhatti et al., 2012, pp. 380-406; Konzelmann et al., 2012, pp. 250–261). When two related variables, namely first-time voters, are associated with each other, a negative relationship emerges. This highlights the need for future research that considers the social dynamics that connect individuals at an early age to develop maturity.

The overall decline in voter turnout among young people in the United States is related to a lack of resources, which is ultimately linked to their lack of interest in politics (Raymond & Steven, 1980). One reason for the lack of resources is young people's lack of understanding of the voting process, such as how to fill in the ballot paper, how and where to stand in line and wait their turn, how to register to vote, and so on, which will be communicated to them at the polling station (McDonald, 2008). According to Ansolabehere and Konisky (2006), increased geographical mobility is also a factor that discouraged young people from voting (Highton, 2000, pp. 109–121; McDonald, 2008).

### The Johor State General Election 2022: The Overview

The Johor State General Election held on 12 March 2022 aimed to strengthen the position of the existing Johor State Government following the death of its previous *Menteri Besar* Datuk Seri Osman Sapian on 21 December 2021. Political instability in Johor arose from the *Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri* (ADUN) seats held by the ruling party *Perikatan Nasional* (PN), which previously held 29 seats, and the opposition party *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), which previously held 27 seats. After the death of the previous *Menteri Besar Johor*, support for PN dropped to 28 seats, while PH maintained 27 seats. The unstable state administration in Johor encouraged the idea of calling for a general election before the existence of other parties.

According to Table 1, the Election Commission of Malaysia (EC) released a statement that 2,597,742 people will vote in the Johor State General Election. The total number is made up of ordinary voters (2,574,835 people), early voters (22,531 people), and absent/out-of-town voters (376 people) (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2022). This election marked the first time that 18- to 20-year-olds were eligible to vote. In the actual election held on 12 March 2022, 54.92 percent of Johor residents cast their votes, or 1,426,573 people (Muhamad, 2022). The percentage was lower than predicted, but it did not rule out the possibility that security and health issues may have affected the statistics. According to Vote18 (*Undi18*) automatic voter registration, a total of 749,731 voters aged 18 and above were eligible to vote in the Johor State General Election, an increase of almost 28 percent or a total of 2,539,606 people compared to 1.8 million votes cast in the 14th General Election (GE-14) (Abdul Malik, 2022).

**Table 1: Predicted Number of Voters in the Johor State General Election 2022**

No	Male	Female	Total
1	89,372	83,805	173,177 (6.7%)
2	290,893	276,875	567,768 (21.9%)
3	286,702	274,042	560,744 (21.6%)
4	229,201	224,531	453,732 (17.5%)
5	188,529	191,163	379,692 (14.6%)
6	133,121	142,954	276,075 (10.6%)
7	60,853	70,704	131,557 (5.1%)
8	18,230	27,343	45,573 (1.8%)
9	4022	5,402	9,424 (0.4%)



<b>TOTAL</b>	1,300,923	1,296,819	<b>2,597,742</b>
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*Adapted and modified from: Election Commission of Malaysia Website, 2022*

What was interesting about the election results was that BN won a simple majority of more than 50 percent, a two-thirds majority. BN won 40 of the 56 seats in the Johor State General Election. The opposition party, PH, won 11 seats, followed by PN with three seats, MUDA with one seat, and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) with one seat. The number of seats won by the competing parties is shown in Table 2. Regarding voting for the party that represents the voice of the youth such as MUDA, winning only one of six contested seats is an indication that more effort is needed.

**Table 2: Breakdown of Votes in the Puteri Wangsa (N.41) State Assembly (DUN), Johor State General Election 2022**

No	Party	Total (Vote)
1	<i>Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia</i> (MUDA) (Amira Aisya Abd. Aziz)	22,884
2	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (Ng Yew Aik)	15,770
3	<i>Perikatan Nasional</i> (Loh Kah Yong)	8,957
4	<i>Parti Bangsa Malaysia</i> (Steven Choong) - election deposit forfeited	2,471
5	<i>Parti Pejuang Tanah Air</i> (Dr. Khairil Anwar Razali) - election deposit forfeited	2,468
6	BEBAS (Adzrin bin Adam) - election deposit forfeited	398
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52,948</b>

*Adapted and modified from: Election Commission of Malaysia Website 2022*

Three of the contesting parties forfeited their election deposits when they failed to get 1/8th or 12.5 percent of the total votes cast. When the mandate was given by the people of the Puteri Wangsa state constituency to MUDA's party candidate Amira Aisya, who is also the party's Secretary-General, her electoral success was regarded a tremendous honour. Mazlan Bujang from *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (BERSATU) previously held the Puteri Wangsa state constituency in the 14th General Election. Even more surprising was the success of MUDA's party candidate in the ADUN election, with most of the votes coming from Channels 1 and 2, which were dedicated channels for senior citizens, while there was less support and votes from the youths. However, the lack of votes from the youth channels may be related to poor voter turnout among young people.

**Table 3: Breakdown of Votes in the Skudai (N.48) State Assembly (DUN), Johor State General Election 2022**

No	Party	Total (Vote)
1	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i> (Pakatan Harapan)	26,359
2	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (Lim Soon Hai)	12,416
3	<i>Perikatan Nasional</i> (Khoo Kong Ek)	6,258
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>45,033</b>

*Adapted and modified from: Election Commission of Malaysia Website, 2022*

The breakdown of votes in the Skudai State Assembly (Table 3), an urban region, revealed a fierce battle led by *Pakatan Harapan*-Democratic Action Party's (DAP) candidate, Marina Ibrahim, who received a majority of 13,943 votes. Marina's popularity, because of her political activity in DAP, was comparable to that of Young Syefura Othman (DUN Ketari), Zairil Khir Johari, and Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud.

### **Vote18 (Undi18) and Young People's Political Participation**

The increased number of young voters had an impact on the election results. The increase in the number of young voters across the country totalled to 5,718,760 people. All of them were 18 years or older on 31 December 2021 and were automatically registered as new voters. This number represented 17.5 percent of Malaysia's total population at the end of 2021 (32.7 million people) who had registered as voters for the general election.

**Table 4: Results of the Johor State General Election (GE) 2022**

No	Party	Seats
1	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (BN)	40
2	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i> (PH)	11
3	<i>Perikatan Nasional</i> (PN)	3
4	<i>Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia</i> (MUDA)	1
5	<i>Parti Keadilan Rakyat</i> (PKR)	1
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>56</b>

*Adapted and modified from: Election Commission of Malaysia Website 2022*

Although the effectiveness of the implementation of *Vote18 (Undi18)* is insufficient to make a thorough explanation based solely on the results of the Johor State General Election in March 2022, the situation appears to be a fresh indication that all party apparatuses should work together to teach and raise awareness among young people about their role in politics. The recent by-elections have also left young people with the impression that their participation is insignificant and has no impact on change. This is exacerbated by the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which limited people's ability to travel and perform their responsibilities.

The young people's lack of understanding of the need to vote in the state assembly general elections may be due to these circumstances. Although this section of the population was aware of their right to vote (EC, 2003), most young people did not understand the significance of voting to elect the administration of the state government for the next five years. This is because people in Johor will only vote for parliamentary seats in the general election. Young people's lack of understanding of the introduction of *Undi18* may have contributed to this exception. In Malaysia, most 18-year-olds are school leavers who work part-time after completing their secondary school education. Their desire to vote are suppressed as there are no funds or allocations for them to vote. As a result, people need to assess what incentives would compensate them for the losses they would have to suffer if they went to vote, and they may have to choose to leave their jobs just to vote. Even though *Undi18* was introduced and approved by most Malaysians, the percentage of young people who voted in the 2022 Johor State General Election was low. The situation becomes even clearer when the percentage of votes is broken down by age category as in Table 5.

**Table 5: Proportion of Eligible Young Voters Under 30 Years Old (%)**

Name of the State Constituency	Aged 18 – 20 (%)	Aged 21 – 29 (%)	Result
1. Tenang	5.13	18.22	BN
2. Bukit Kepong	5.07	19.03	PN
3. Parit Raja	7.43	23.69	BN
4. Machap	6.77	23.29	BN
5. Puteri Wangsa	9.89	26.87	MUDA
6. Kemelah	6.82	23.3	BN
7. Bukit Pasir	7.15	23.01	BN
8. Simpang Jeram	6.81	23.58	PH

9. Parit Yaani	7.55	25.71	BN
10. Panti	7.78	23.79	BN
11. Pasir Raja	7.33	24.57	BN
12. Tiram	10.04	27.5	BN
13. Permas Jaya	7.02	23.51	PH
14. Permas	8.68	25.66	BN
15. Kota Iskandar	9.4	27.45	BN
16. Bukit Batu	8.23	24.86	PH

*Adapted and modified from: Tindak Malaysia 2022 (Astro Awani, 2022)*

The Tiram State Constituency (N.40) had the largest proportion of voters aged 18 to 20 years, with 10.04 percent, and the proportion of voters aged 21 to 29 years, with 27.5 percent.

**Table 6: The Percentage of Eligible Young Voters Under 30 Years Old by Ethnic Group Across 15 State Constituencies in Johor**

No.	Name of the State Constituency	Classification	Malay (%)	Chinese (%)	Indian (%)	Result
1.	Kemelah	Sub Urban	57.85	34.28	6.01	BN
2.	Bukit Pasir	Sub Urban	68.61	26.97	3.68	BN
3.	Simpang Jeram	Urban	51.96	45.45	2.03	Amanah-PH
4.	Parit Yaani	Sub Urban	58.26	39.95	0.85	BN
5.	Parit Raja	Sub Urban	78.25	17.26	2.54	BN
6.	Machap	Sub Urban	68.78	25.54	4.63	BN
7.	Panti	Sub Urban	81.34	12.47	3.93	BN
8.	Pasir Raja	Rural	72.52	17.42	7.2	BN
9.	Tiram	Urban	69.43	19.07	7.61	BN
10.	Puteri Wangsa	Urban	38.06	53.25	7.34	MUDA
11.	Johor Jaya	Urban	48.07	40.89	6.78	DAP (PH)
12.	Permas	Urban	62.69	24.97	7.58	BN
13.	Kota Iskandar	Urban	53.74	32.56	11.84	BN
14.	Bukit Permai	Sub Urban	60.86	26.18	11.72	BN
15.	Bukit Batu	Sub Urban	48.74	40.94	8.91	PKR (PH)

*Adapted and modified from: Tindak Malaysia 2022 (Astro Awani, 2022)*

The result shows that the opposition (i.e., PKR and MUDA) won in urban state constituencies, such as in Simpang Jeram, Puteri Wangsa, and Johor Jaya, where the number of Malay and Chinese voters were almost similar. A similar outcome was observed for PH in suburban areas such as Bukit Batu, where there were roughly equal numbers of Malay and Chinese voters. In this case, higher participation of young voters was reflected in areas where there was a smaller difference in the proportion of Malay and Chinese voters and a 50-50 chance of winning by BN or the opposition. As predicted, BN had a stronghold in urban and suburban areas with Malay majority as most young voters were Malay. The largest number of votes cast by young people revealed that their votes were split between BN and other parties such as MUDA, DAP, and Amanah which won three state constituencies.

## Discussion and Conclusion



From the results of the study, it can be concluded that youth participation in all sectors was high. Although the government had lowered the voting age to encourage political participation among young Malaysians, the traditional political influence that has frequently placed young people in a minor policy making role has ramifications on the number of young voters at the elections. Furthermore, the maturity of the group to make decisions and determine their political direction is still limited by the influence of the surrounding community, especially by their parents. Based on the result of the Johor State General Election, various connotations can be made. However, the results of the Johor State General Election showed how strong the internal influence is in deciding what youths should state on their ballot papers. Moreover, the paradigm shift in youth participation in elections can be attributed to the way information is packaged and disseminated through social media. Information about the choice of political parties and current issues can be passed on by their parents, or they can access it directly through the internet on various platforms.

The lowering of the voting age in Malaysia to 18 has affected the number of voters who participated in the Johor State General Election. Although the voting results of this group were still influenced by the thoughts and beliefs of their parents, it has created a new platform for young voters aged 18 to 20 to familiarise themselves with the voting process and change unfavourable perceptions that the voting process is complicated and unpleasant. Education that familiarises young people with the democratic and electoral process in the country should be provided as early as possible so that youths who will vote for the first time in the next election are ready to fulfil their obligation with a full sense of responsibility (Ghani, M. S. A., 2019). However, it remains unclear whether the strata factor is a significant factor in young people's decision to vote in the upcoming election.

Future researchers can thus fill in the gaps by investigating whether strata influence young people's voting decisions in future general elections. However, young people's voting decisions are influenced by their environment, especially by their parents who trust local BN politicians who are successful and competent in running their respective districts. As a result, the BN party obtained most of the votes in both rural and urban areas. The split in Malaysian political parties will have a significant impact on the participation of Malaysian youths as voters in the general elections. It will increase their political participation to ensure that Malaysia's political viability is focused on the name of democracy.

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