Voting Behaviour in Malaysia: Locating the Sociological Determinants of Ethnicity, Middle Classes and Development Gains

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Abstract: Studying voting behavioural demands scholars to have a good grasp of the changing conceptual and theoretical frameworks as the societal changes are very dynamic. This study focuses on the changing voting patterns in a plural society of Malaysia in which ethnicity dominated the election outcome. Since the election in 2004 results at the state and national levels show that the concern for development agenda by the middle clasess across ethnic divide has redefined the political landscape. This study shows that development agenda could transform a plural society that ensured a flowering of democratic culture in the nation.

Key words: Voting behaviour · Ethnicity · Election · Middle class · Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Election in a plural society strengthens the ethnicised character of the nation. Horowitzs [1] argues that voters in a such society as Malaysia will vote their own ethnic group. Thus, national election day is 'an ethnic census' as the voters will votethe party and candidate along ethnic line. The discourses of ethnicity as primordial, essential and perennial in character are being contested by Barth [2] who proposed to study of ethnic boundary as ethnic groups interact and relate to one another in the larger society. As an individual need not necessarily interact and relate to pther individuals on the basis of an ethnic calculation, thus cross-cutting ties and relationship could develop across ethnic line. This study assumes that social change and transformation in the larger society could take place and influence the voting patterns in the society.

Research Objectives:

- To explore the early studies on voting behaviour.
- To study the influence of theoretical frameworks of etnicity, class and political culture on electoral study in Malaysia.
- To investigate the voting behaviour of pre-general election in Malaysia.

Literature Review

The Early Works on Voting Behaviour: Studies in the west before 1950's on voting behaviour focus mainly on 'Why does each party gets that numbers of vote' [3] [4]. The concern was with the level of votes obtained by each political party at a given election.

Such an analysis end up describing the general trend and the long term stability patterns of the votes' obtained. No field survey or attitudinal study for the individual reasons of voting were captured and if any field work was to be carried out, the focus would be on a local constituency rather than a national study.

Voters Are Volatile: Early studies in the west showed that party identification and voting cast were closely related and the pattern was rather stable. But voter studies in the 1960's indicated that voting behaviours were volatile [5] [6] [7]. This called for a need to study the changing influences on the voters. Due to the increasing unpredictability of the voting behaviours, various categories of floating voters were identified.

In England, cross-class voting category was identified as a voter's class location could no longer be depended on as the party identifier. While some voters were observed to be practicing a split-ticket voting choice as they voted in the Labour Party at the local constituency and Conservative for the Parliament.

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Other voters were grouped as swinging voters as they shifted their party loyalty from one party to the next in the current election on the basis of issues thought to be relevant to them.

Thus, the concerns of the early electoral studies undergo transformation from wanting only to know the number of votes each party obtained, to observing the pattern of voting, to locating the party identifier and the need to understand the social forces influencing the voters' choices.

The Study Approaches on Voting Behaviour: The Columbia and the Michigan models heavily influence the early approaches to studying how voters made up their mind. These two models are basically social deterministic in approach [8] [9]. These models assumed that voting behaviour is a consequence of one's social locations as it influences party identification and eventual voting behaviour.

Lazarsfeld [8] argues the social group that a person belongs to, be it defined in terms of class, ethnic, race, religion or whatever, determines whom one would vote for because during the political campaign these social groups would imbue their individual members with the accepted political ideology of that group.

However, contemporary research works on electoral studies tend to operate within the framework of the rational choice theory [10] [11] [12]. The keys issues of concerns of this analytical framework is to focus on the issues of government policy and program, economy and development performances, quality of life and societal well-being and etc. as the influences on the voting behaviours rather than that of group and party preferences; a calculation of short-term changes and gains. The assumption of this model is that the individual voters behave in a rational way when choosing to vote for a candidate and the political party. Notions of economic gains, group promotion and utility maximisation are thus used to explain their voting choices; a search for the best option.

From a post-modernism perspective, the group and utilitarian approaches of the Columbia, Michigan and the rational choice models need to take into account the religious and cultural capitals of the local community. Such an approach is similar to the discourse on political culture and modernization as discussed by Almond and Verba [13].

Though Almond and Sidney [13] [14] related their discourse on civic culture to modernity and democracy, yet they realised that individuals in such a society possess heterogeneous traits. The civic culture continuum begins with parochialism and ending with participation and its attainment was considered as the height of modernity and civilization. Thus the influences of religion, tradition and cultural way of life of the local community need to be scrutinised in order to understand the impacts on the behaviours of the voter.

The approaches taken on studying electoral behaviour revolve around the Columbia and the Michigan models which begin their analysis by focusing on the sociological factors. Later scholars [15] [16], with the introduction of computer and more advanced techniques of collecting and analyzing data, have managed to refine and extend these Columbia and Michigan model by concentrating on the voters and their surroundings rather than just the vote casted.

National Studies on Voting Behaviour: Studies in USA and UK follow closely the Michigan school where the links to party identification and socio-economic groupings such as class are often discussed. While in other countries, the social categories of ethnicity, religion, language and/or cultural differences were found to override class dimension as an influence on the voters.

Studies in Germany [17] create a wider conception of class grouping which are based not on capital ownership, occupation or income but lifestyles and attitudinal placement of the voters studied. It is found out that Norwegian voters are often shaped by three cross-cutting cleavages of class, culture and geography. In Canada, voting patterns are not predictable but the roles of socio-economic groupings based on region and religion have been important [18] [19], electoral studies traditionally linked political parties and groups identified by religion, class and ideology to voting choices. But when the two-party system starts discussing coalition partners in Holland, the Dutch voters scrutinised instead the economic situation and the policy specific of the parties contesting in the election rather issues of group interests.

In 1978 a shift in research focus could be identified. Studies on national election in Britian and Canada look instead into the attitudes of the voters during the campaign period and found out that their expectation about the election result would influence their voting decision [7].

Others study the roles of emotion in the decision making of the voters during the period of campaign. It is found out that election campaigning do influence voting decision as it stirs up anxiety and enthuasism among the

voters toward the contending candidates and parties [20] [21]. This social psychological approach to electoral studies would be able to strengthen the Columbus and Michigan models as it unravels how each individual perceives the situation rather than assuming a uniform view as before.

This short survey indicates that no uniform formula has been employed to understand and explain the social and psychological forces that influence voting behaviours. It is observed that various theoretical perspectives were employed and normally no one grand theory is being relied upon. What is most significant is that voting studies has moved from understanding voting cast to the voter itself, the factor influencing the voting choice and the level of analysis; whether at the individual, structural or the institutional level.

Theoretical Discourse on Malaysian Society: The main theoretical frameworks that influence research works on electoral study in Malaysian society are the significance of ethnicity, class analysis, middle classes and lifestyles, utilitarian maximization and the political culture approaches.

The Significance of Ethnicity: Earlier work by Maurice Freedman [22] in the 50's and even by later by writers such as Mohd Noor Nawawi [23] and Fatimah Daud [24] in the 90's, echoed the theme by Furnival [25] that Malaysia likes the East Indies of Burma and Indonesia 'is a plural society; they meet in the market place with no value consensus binding them and live in a polity but compartmentalized and separated'.

When Horowitz [1] begin his work on Malaysia, the significance of ethnicity is still there but more of an unstructured status system in which the Malay control the political sphere and the Chinese controlling the economy.

Voting choices and patterns under such a plural society reveal that "Party and society act on each other. Nowhere is the reciprocal relation between party and society more evident than in ethnic politics". Where ethnic loyalties are strong, parties tend to be organised along ethnic line [1].

The features of an ethnically divided society conspire to impede the development of the full range of social relations among ethnic groups and this affects its organizational structure in and out of politics. Occupational specialization, residential segregation, habits of endogamy, dietary customs, religious differences and all the other things that mark the boundaries between groups which tend to foster affinity and a sense of common interest with the groups. Communitarian aspect of ethnicity propels group members toward concentrated party loyalties and voting choices.

Politicians have created ethnic conflict. By appealing to electorates in ethnic terms, by making ethnic demands on government and by bolstering the influence of ethnically chauvinist elements within each group, parties that begin by merely mirroring ethnic divisions help to deepen and extend them.

An ethnically based party derives its support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group (or cluster of ethnic groups) and serves the interests of that group. The creation of parallel, exclusive political organisation is the first propensity of a divided polity.

Where conflict levels are high, however, ethnic parties reflect something more than mere blood affinity and a vague sense of common interest. That something is the mutual incompatibility of ethnic claims to power. Since the party aspires to control the state and in conflict-prone polities ethnic groups also attempt to exclude others from the state power, the emergence of ethnic parties and ethnic voting are thus an integral part of this political struggle.

Ethnic voting means simply voting for the party identified with the voter's own ethnic group, no matter who the individual candidates happen to be. It's the party and not the ethnic identification of the candidate that counts. In an ethnically divided society, voter turnouts went up because people went to the polls to register their affiliation with the same party they would ordinarily be affiliated with, given the ethnic basis of party politics.

Ethnic votes tend to drive out non-ethnic votes. Each group has its own party and that loyal group members will line up behind. Group members will not vote the party of the opposing ethnic group so as to solidify group support and sanctions tend to be applied to deviants. Deviants are not tolerated morally and be punished through being ostracised, abused, maligned or beaten.

Voter turnouts to vote for a candidate and political party at the national, state and local elections under such an ethnic concern would attain a quality of ethnic census. High rates of voter turnout would be recorded. Upsurges in voter turnout are the result of unusual interest in particular issues or the unusual attractiveness of particular candidates. Marginal voters, whose interest in

voting in the preceding election was stimulated by the existence of importance issues or attractive candidates, tend not to vote once those ephemeral circumstances have passed.

A central feature of the polarizing election-and to a lesser extent of all elections where parties are ethnically aligned-is the devotion of party efforts to mobilizing known supporters to turn out for the vote. The "known supporters" are known by their ethnicity and their distinguishing features, they are most readily mobilized by appeals to ethnic interests, threats and hatreds. Under such apprehension, the greater the collective danger to be expected, the greater would be the likelihood that politically apathetic group members will go to the polls.

In an ethnic party system, mobilizing known supporters and appealing to marginal voters is effectively the same thing, for there are virtually no uncommitted votes to be had on the other side of the ethnic boundary. What is uncertain is not how a voter will vote if he votes but whether a potential voter will vote.

Under such convergence of personal and group interests, apprehensions about the outcome made these elections tense and sometimes violent occasions. The campaign was interspersed with acts of potential violence and threats to the safety of leading politicians and parties; … feeling the brinks of violence is ever imminent.

The significance and determinant of ethnic consideration, *sui generius*, on electoral behaviours are thus beyond question.

Fluidity of Ethnic Identity: In the 80's Judith Nagata [26] [27] observes that there are oscillating identities among the sub-ethnic groupings in the Malay community, especially among the Indian and Chinese Muslims. These Malay sub-groups varies their identities as they relate to their own ethnic groups, the Malay community and the government; depending on the calculated gains to be obtained from such a relationship. The reason behind such ethnic oscillation was the calculation to avail themselves to the benefit from public resources allocated under the New Economy Policy implemented in the post ethnic riots of 1969 to the indigenous Malay and Bumiputera community.

The work by Judith Nagata is significant because it recognized that ethnic identity and loyalty are conceptual scheme that is fluid in nature; ethnic boundary can change [2].

Middle Classes as an Influence on Voting: In the 60's Michael Stenson [28] studied the Indians on the rubber estate and found out that ethnic consciousness overrode class consciousness in Peninsular Malaysia. Yet studies in the 90's observe that ethnicity as an influence on behavioural choices though still prevails but is secondary in nature as the development gains in the 1990's, increasing modernity and the emerging commercial ethos have created a fragmentary social classes in the Malaysia society [29] [30] [31] [32] [33].

According to Saravanamuttu [32], there are two types of political orientation among the middle classes. In the first type, their members have been active in championing various societal issues connected to social democracy, human rights and the environment, show greater awareness and concern for universalistic norms that mould a cross-cutting ethnic tie and thus provide an alternative discourse to the ethnic-centric perspective often associated with the Malaysian society.

In the second type, it is less clear. These middle classes often support the status quo politics because of their own economic well-being [49][50]. Sometimes, their middle class lifestyles which are linked to economic development and prosperity would predispose these middle class groups to support even authoritarian and undemocratic government. In this second type also sees the influence ethnicity in preventing a common political stance among the ethnic-based fractions of middle classes and thus forcing them to be apolitical, or turned to ethnic and cultural pursuits.

Though the observation above shows that the relationship of middle classes to voting choice is problematic, works by H. Crouch [34] and J.S. Kahn [35] conclude do not see the middle classes in Malaysia as possessing a discernible political direction. While Johan Saravanamuttu [31] argues that the middle class groups have been playing a distinctive role in Malaysian politics. But the works of Abdul Rahman Embong [33] [42] and Francis Loh [31] attempt to explain the political behaviours of these middle classes by turning to their distinctive life styles and consumerism observed among these groups rather than their class location as the determinant in their electoral choices. Thus the voters would choose candidate and political parties that deliver development and material gains above other calculations.

Searching for the Determinants in the Electoral Study: Works on Malaysian elections from K.J. Ratnam [36], R.S. Milne and D.K. Mauzy [37], G.P. Means [38] [39],

Ismail Kassim [40], Mohamad Abu Bakar [41] and others tend to focus on the importance of ethnicity, religion and development.

Later works by Abdul Rahman Embong [42], Francis Loh Kok Wah instead see the development of class, lifestyle and ethnicity as the matrix of potential influences where economy-development continuum is the thrust but at the time being influenced by ethnic-religious factor especially as one class location slide downward.

But to pin-point specifically the main theoretical approaches that would be able to explain satisfactory the trend of voting pattern in Malaysian general election is a bit foolhardy. The Columbia and the Michigan models have been utilised in understanding the voting outcomes especially the roles of ethnicity and, in the last decade, the emerging roles of the middle classes that place greater the considerations on material gains.

But the parochial tendencies of ethnicity and religion do come into the picture more so in times of perceived economic and political securities vis-α-vis the other ethnic communities. These parochial tendencies of ethnicity and religion do not behave as a constant factor as in times of economic and development [50] gains such parochialistic calculation loose its significance as material gains become paramount as an influence on their voting choices.

This means that any study on electoral behaviours in Malaysia needs not only to study the influences of social groupings of ethnic, religion and class but also to benchmark, prior to the election, the social transformation taking place in the society and the impact of the policy and the program of the governing political party as it affected the various ethnic, religious and class interests.

CONCLUSION

No single theory could be effectively depended on to explain the voting behaviours of the Malaysian voters. Material gains are the concern of all ethnic groups but the Malays desire the need to manage their cultural and religious ethos. Substantive rationality prevails among all ethnic groups but found to be strongest among the Malays. Formal rationality of gains is strong in all ethnic groups but relatively strongest among the Chinese. Though concern for ethnic gain is there but as an influence on voting behaviour it is found to secondary in nature.

This call for a redefinition of the theoretical framework on the significance of ethnicity as developed by Horowitz [1] in the 1970's as no ethnic group and society maintain its boundary. So too one should avoid being caught in the academic act of reifying social reality as relying on protest notes of the *Reformasi Movement* and marginalized groups might hide the actual 'blood pulses' of the ordinary voters.

Attempt to study electoral behaviour must be backed by community studies as whatever issues that were being articulated by the political leaders, the authority defined, may not necessary mean the issues of concerned to the laymen and the ordinary voters. Only then the saw-dust syndrome feared by Abdul Rahman Embong [42] could be avoided; data and findings not reflecting social reality due to methodological errors.

Predicting the Outcome of the 2004 General Election:
Analysing the 1999 general election of Malaysia, Bridget Welsh (2004) observes that many of the fundamentals of Malaysian politics have not changed. Ethnicity continues to be a major determinant of election strategies and outcomes. The focus of Malaysian politics remains centered with the Malay community and votes. The non-Malays voters become significant because of the division and tension within the Malay community. The middle classes, although larger and more complex, appear fickle, vacillating between protest and pragmatic-cum-material concerns.

Electoral victories are not won with manifestos or oratory but determined by the capacity and efficiency of the party organization and volume of knowledge of the structure and concerns of local communities.

Despite such a conclusion, Welsh [43] argues that a different political future can be expected in the post-Mahathir Mohamad era; regional differences, generational differences; *Barisan Alternatif* fostered political learning, personalities and local issues. Under such situations, democratic change will come definitely but gradually from the local level and grass-root below.

However, Welsh [43] points out that regional difference as an impact on the voters have deepened. The country can be divided into three regional areas of concerns; the rural and underdeveloped Malay belt of the north and east Peninsular Malaysia, the urbanized and developed west coast of Peninsular Malaysia and the local concerns of Sarawak and Sabah in East Malaysia. These regional differences would strongly influence electoral outcome.

The younger Malay generation, though the product of Mahathir's success story of bring modernity and development to the country [48], appears to be

disillusioned with the contemporary political scene, especially the moral order and the resistance to the dominance of the *Barisan Nasional* in particular. But the non-Malay youth was observed to remain with the *Barisan Nasional* as the commercial ethos possessed by their entrepreneurial community would place pragmatism as the prime concern.

The *Barisan Alternatif* might have experienced an up and down relationship among their coalition partners, especially between Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), but their political engagement had fostered political learning and left a positive significance imprint on the younger elite.

Post-Mahathir era might be more competitive electorally as more democratic spaces are opened within United Malay National Organization (UMNO). The in-coming new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, would create a power vacuum and thus, a weaker center within UMNO. This political transition would create uncertainty and UMNO might face more political erosion as it is being accentuated by the gradual decay of UMNO during the Mahathir era [34] [45] [46] [1]. The judiciary, bureaucracy, political parties and religious organization, including UMNO, became less independent and democratic. Under such scenarios, it is unlikely that Mahathir's appointed successor, as yet not elected within UMNO, will be able to quickly fill this power vacuum.

Under such an analysis, many parties including Loh [43] and Savaranamuttu [31] (2003) and not only Welsh [44], would predict that 'a new politics' is in the making and the end product will be a bigger democratic space and a civil society in Malaysia. The semi-democratic state under Mahathir Mohamad era would be reduced, if not changed, as PAS were predicted to spread its wing not only maintaining Kelantan and Terengganu but expanding their control of the state assemblies to Perlis, Kedah and Selangor while DAP-KeADILan alignment would be able to control the urban, mixed and non-Malay dominated constituencies.

The changing societal transformation that saw the emergence of the growing urban and civil middle classes, the maturing of political alignment among the opposition parties and the continuing rejection by the Malays, especially among the youth and the rural voters, of UMNO and the political uncertainty surrounding the ascension of Pak Lah to the Prime Ministership of Malaysia, all added to an erosion and a possible demise of the Barisan Nasional in power.

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