Undi 18: Understanding the political participation of first-time Malay voters through social media

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ABSTRACT

With the voting age for Malaysians lowered from 21 to 18 effective December 2021, first-time voters’ political participation among Malaysia’s youth will be in the spotlight. This indicates that an additional 5.8 million voters aged between 18 and 21 are anticipated in Malaysia’s 2022 election. Appealing to young voters, who are digital natives, is a crucial factor in the 15th General Election campaign. As a highly personalized and individualized space, this study explores how these first-time voters use social media for political participation, interacting with politicians and expressing their political views and thoughts. Based on online interviews with 44 first-time Malay voters aged between 18 and 20 years old, this article investigates how these young, first-time voters engage in political expression and interact with politicians as well as their political participation behaviour through social media. Findings show that respondents mainly participate in low levels of online political participation. Although all participants agreed that political expression is crucial for democracy, many respondents are reluctant to share their political views online due to a lack of knowledge to discuss and debate politics. Facebook and Twitter emerged as the favorite platforms for political news due to the credibility of information, while Instagram and TikTok were the least favorite. Personalization of politics appears to work effectively for politicians who actively post on social media. Syed Saddiq, Muhyiddin Yassin and Najib Razak were the top favorite politicians among the respondents.

Keywords: Social media, politics, participation, expression, personalization, youth voters
INTRODUCTION

Youth involvement in politics is considered an essential feature of a healthy and long-lasting democracy. This is because they are the driving force behind society (Bakker & Vreese, 2011). However, there are concerns about youth political engagement all around the world due to their lack of interest in politics and how it contributes little to the decisions that could affect their life (Skoric & Poor, 2013). The youth are typically seen as being indifferent to civic engagement (Mohamad et al., 2018).

Numerous studies demonstrate that the voting rate for first-time voters is declining (Gümüs & Yılmaz, 2015). In Malaysia’s historic 2018 election, which overturned the ruling coalition’s 60-year rule for the first time, the participation rate among young people fell from 83% in 2013 to 79% (Welsh, 2018). These observations suggest that young people may be especially dissatisfied with the institutions of the representative government or even dislike politics (Mohamad et al., 2018).

Young people, however, are participating in politics on social media. Social media gives additional platforms for them to engage in political activity as well as a platform for their political expression and voice (Wike et al., 2022). They routinely share political topics and their political perspectives, including connecting with political figures (Mohamad et al., 2018). These exchanges range from passive engagements like retweeting or liking political messages to active engagements like signing petitions, taking part in boycotts, and attending demonstrations (Crepaz et al., 2017). These everyday political exchanges on social media may persuade more young people to vote in upcoming elections.

With the voting age in Malaysia decreased from 21 to 18 as of December 2021, it is critical that young people who are first-time voters to participate politically in the general election in 2022. The recent 2022 General Election saw an additional 1.3 million voters aged between 18 and 21. As a result, the country’s total number of registered voters increased by over 40%, from 15.8 million to 21.1 million (Lim, 2021). Few studies have been carried out to investigate how Malaysian first-time voters utilise social media to engage in, express, and communicate about politics (Mohammed et al., 2018). Thus, this article aims to gain insights into the political engagement of first-time Malay voters in Malaysia by examining their use of social media. Specifically, the study focuses on young adults aged 18–20 and investigates their political expressions, interactions with politicians, and their overall political participation behaviour through online interviews. By analysing their social media usage, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how first-time voters in Malaysia engage with politics and participate in the democratic process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political participation

The framework of this study is based on the concept of political participation, an essential component of a functioning democracy, with its success heavily reliant on citizens’ active participation in the political process. Scholars have recently investigated social media’s impact on young first-time voters’ political participation. Social media platforms enable greater political communication, mobilisation, and engagement. Young first-time voters can use social media to express their political opinions and participate in political debates, increasing their political knowledge and a sense of political efficacy (Lee & Xenos, 2022). Further, Internet-enabled communication has allowed citizens to engage in various political activities in digital environments, which may influence more conventional forms of political
activity offline (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Political engagement is described as interactions between and among regular citizens as well as with representatives of the government with the goal of influencing political outcomes (Knoll et al., 2020). Online political participation is described as using Internet tools to communicate with government officials and other citizens about their political interests (Hopp et al., 2020). Such participation includes low-level participation, such as sharing and liking political news, signing and sharing online petitions, and volunteering for political causes, or high-level participation, which includes emailing elected officials and making financial contributions to political organisations (Dozier et al., 2016).

Additionally, because political content is frequently “pushed” by social media friends, even to uninterested users, this has furthered the phenomena of unintentional or accidental exposure to political information (Tang & Lee, 2013). The majority of social media users use their social media feeds with the primary goal of being exposed to political content. In other words, most users, particularly the younger generation, use social media for entertainment but come across such information accidentally. This opens up the possibility that users’ accidental exposure to politics via social media may encourage them to become more active in political involvement (Lee & Xenos, 2022). It is important to note that political interest significantly impacts online political participation since it drives people to learn more (Khan et al., 2019).

**Political expression**

Political expression is acknowledged as a crucial democratic citizen activity to outline one’s political beliefs and as a stepping stone to subsequent political behaviours (Lane et al., 2022). It is regarded as an element of political involvement, defined as “realistic, doable acts that give citizens a sense of agency” (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). The political expression on social media is important to political participation because it allows individuals to share their thoughts and opinions on political issues with a broader audience beyond their immediate social circle. By expressing their political views on social media, individuals can engage with others who may have different perspectives, leading to important discussions and debates about political issues.

Young people may freely record and share their daily life on social media, which helps them build and strengthen their relationships. Using social media to stay in touch with close relationships, such as friends and family, might encourage political expression by giving people more opportunities and incentives to do so (Lee et al., 2020; Skoric et al., 2016). People who use social media primarily for relational purposes, where social life and politics are frequently linked, may be motivated to share their political opinions. This so-called “spillover process” of relational use of social media has resulted in the expression of political thoughts and ideas.

Since sharing personal information on social media has become routine, people can feel more at ease discussing politics. According to Swigger (2013), people who frequently reveal details about their social life online perceive fewer hurdles to disclosing more private information about themselves. Discussing one’s social life can encourage disclosing other information, such as opinions on controversial subjects.

However, in contrast to these findings, research also indicates that there may be a trend towards avoiding all political discussions on social media (Vraga et al., 2015). This line of research links political avoidance to “context collapse,” in which one’s many social networks on social media are consolidated into a single network (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). Context collapse on popular social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook may give young people anxiety over merged and unidentified audiences. There
is a higher chance that users will come across a range of political viewpoints when their online networks are made up of various ties from various social contexts (Lee et al., 2020). Thus, youths may self-censor due to these worries (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

**Personalization of politics**

Without the help of conventional mass media, social media offers politicians a more intimate platform for their political campaigns, allowing them to generate, and transmit content to constituents directly. As a result, the environment becomes more individualized, enabling the politician to become more independent and disassociated from their political party (Metz et al., 2020).

Social media enables each politician to advance a more individualized agenda and share a more personal, private, and non-party-focused viewpoint (Vergeer et al., 2013). Through the personalization of politics on social media, there are three content dimensions: private, emotional, and professional. While emotional personalization emphasises the politician's feelings on a personal level, private personalization can be defined as intimate knowledge about the private persona. Professional personalization, on the other hand, addresses attributes and individual activities connected to the official office. On social media, individual politicians tend to portray themselves as “ordinary” people, as emotional characters who share personal feelings and emotional narratives, hold individual qualities, and can independently carry out political tasks and actions (Bene, 2017; Metz et al., 2020).

As a result of these personalization trends, politics is becoming more individualized (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014), with more people choosing to vote for politicians and their ideas rather than for political parties and their programmes (McGregor et al., 2017). The lines between the political and the private, the public and the personal, are blurred because politicians now use a communications tool primarily designed to share private and personal information.

Nevertheless, the personalization of politics through social media has been shown to increase political participation among young people. Personalized political messages and content on social media can increase young adults’ political engagement. Individuals are more likely to engage in political discussions and share political content with their social networks when they receive personalized messages (Parmelee et al., 2022). Parmelee et al. (2022) found that successful personalization includes politicians participating in two-way conversations with followers which can increase young adults’ perceived relevance of political issues. In other words, young people are more likely to perceive politics as important and relevant if they receive content that is specifically tailored to their interests and values.

**METHODOLOGY**

Since the voting age for Malaysians has been lowered from 21 to 18, effective December 2021, the political participation of first-time voters among Malay youths in Malaysia in the 15th General Election is considered crucial. The Malay ethnic group is the largest and most politically dominant, and as such, the political participation of young Malay voters is of particular importance. There is a dearth of studies on young people’s patterns of political participation in Malaysia, specifically among young Malay voters. Studies have shown that young Malaysian voters are generally less politically active. Mohd Hed and Grasso (2020) found that young people in Malaysia are less likely to be politically active than their elders, which is not clearly attributable to the socio-demographic factors analysed. Another study by Ting and Wan Ahmad (2022) suggests that the youth disengagement from politics is due
to a closed political climate and the perception of politics as dirty and for the self-gain of politicians only.

Based on the framework of political participation, this study investigates social media interactions among first-time Malay voters aged 18–20. It looks into how first-time voters in Malaysia engage in political participation via social media, how does the personalization of politics through social media influence the political participation of first-time voters, and how do first-time voters use social media to express their political views?

Data was gathered through online interviews via Microsoft Teams and Zoom applications six months before the 15th General Election, from March 1 to May 31, 2022, where the participants were selected based on snowball sampling. In total, there were 44 participants aged 18–19 years old, consisting of 28 female and 16 male participants from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. All the participants were Malay, first-time voters and eligible to vote in the upcoming election.

They were informed about the study objectives and advised that participation was optional and that the interviews would be recorded. Those who accepted signed a consent form. The study adopted semi-structured, open-ended questions for the in-depth, online interviews lasting one to one and a half hours. Interview topics included participants’ interest in politics, their family background, how they participate in politics, how they interact with politicians on social media and how they express their political opinions. The interview data was transcribed for data analysis, and the transcripts were evaluated line by line to find essential themes. The researcher then categorised and linked comprehensive and specific examples of the primary themes and identified subthemes (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

FINDINGS

The study looks at how first-time Malay voters in Malaysia participate in politics via social media. Based on the framework of political participation, the study further explores how the personalization of politics through social media influences the political participation of first-time voters and how they use social media to express their political views. The in-depth online interviews revealed six dominant themes. Firstly, Malaysian politics are complex and in crisis; secondly, young people are constantly exposed to political information incidentally; thirdly, the political opinions and expressions of youth matter; fourth, the lack of political knowledge hinders political expression; fifth, Facebook and Twitter are the best platforms to acquire political information and expression; and lastly, personalized social media engagement makes politicians more relatable and credible.

Malaysian politics are complicated, and in crisis
Findings from the interview show that 25 out of 44 respondents said they are not interested in politics. Among the reasons given are that they found politics “complicated”, “confusing”, and “in crisis”. This could be attributed to the Malaysian political crises since Pakatan Harapan won the historic election in 2018, in which the opposition was voted into power for the first time in 60 years. The crisis worsened in early 2020 when several members changed party support, leading to the collapse of two successive coalition governments and the resignation of two Prime Ministers in less than 18 months. Respondents 7, 12, 15 and 20 described Malaysian politics as “burdensome”, “difficult to understand”, and “very confusing” due to incessant debates and arguments by politicians during those periods. Respondent 21 clearly stated that “foul play by politicians” makes her lose interest in politics.
Nope. For me, politics is something difficult to understand and complicated. This is because many people have different opinions and views on politics nowadays. (Respondent 7)

I don’t know because I am not very interested. Because what I see in politics is very confusing. So, I will not get involved or be interested in politics. However, I want to know about politics. (Respondent 12)

No, I don’t like getting involved with a burdensome political crisis. (Respondent 15)

No, I don’t consider myself interested in politics. This is because the arguments and debates between politicians make me not interested in political matters. (Respondent 20)

I am not interested. This is because, throughout these 18 years, I have only been exposed to issues of foul play by politicians who want to bring down other political parties. (Respondent 21)

Nineteen out of 44 respondents said they consider themselves interested in politics and would find political information on social media. Seventeen of them declared that they come from a family that is active in politics. They previously had participated in offline political activities such as becoming volunteers in political campaigns (Respondents 6 and 16), helping families distribute posters (Respondents 9 and 14), and setting up flags during political campaigns (Respondent 37).

Once, I volunteered to distribute posters during an election campaign. (Respondent 6)

I followed my dad to put up political posters in appropriate areas. (Respondent 9)

I was displaying campaign posters. I followed my father in an election campaign. (Respondent 14)

Yes, I have, and I started when I was little with my father, who was also involved in political work. Moreover, recently, I got involved by being one of the designers for a political party in my area. (Respondent 16)

So far, I have only ever helped my family in a political campaign, like putting flags on the side of the road. (Respondent 37)

These respondents who declared that they were interested in politics, and even those who said they were not, had participated in online political activities. Half of the respondents admitted that they had experienced online political participation, mostly low-level political participation such as sharing political information (Respondents 34, 37, 42), liking postings from political actors (Respondent 25), signing a petition (Respondent 24), or commenting on social media about politics. However, none of the respondents have been involved in high-level political participation, such as donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning or protesting.
Liking a political actor or cause-Yes and Sharing political information-Yes. (Respondent 42)

I once participated in a discussion by commenting on Facebook about the country’s political corruption. (Respondent 44)

Yes, I signed an online petition. I participated in it to choose who the country’s leader should be. (Respondent 24)

I am involved with political activities online, such as liking a political actor or cause. (Respondent 25)

I once shared information about politics via WhatsApp and Instagram status. (Respondent 34)

Regarding any post related to politics, I will like and comment on almost everything that has happened on social media. I will also share news related to politics if the news is hot all over social media. (Respondent 37)

Young people are constantly exposed to political information incidentally

Regardless of their interest in politics, all respondents encountered information about politics through social media. Even relatively uninterested users, such as Respondents 12 and 20, were incidentally exposed to political information. This phenomenon may occur only in social media, where people are unintentionally or accidentally exposed to public affairs content because such content is frequently “pushed” to them by their acquaintances (Knoll et al., 2020). Respondents 20 and 29, for example, explained how encountering news incidentally helped them to learn about the latest political development. Even Respondent 12, who is unhappy with political news appearing on her social media timeline, was still exposed to political issues. This incidental news exposure online can be positively related to a citizen’s political participation. This positive linkage is even more vital for those who rarely use the Internet for entertainment (Kim et al., 2013).

It’s there, but I don’t care and pass by. I skip and don’t watch it because I’m too lazy to learn about politics because I don’t even understand it. (Respondent 12)

I used to receive political-related information on my social media timeline. It can help me keep up with the latest political developments that I did not have time to follow. (Respondent 20)

I have received politically related information on my social media timeline, and for me, it is very helpful because it allows me to know the political information, and this is better for those who are less interested in politics and do not want to search for related political information. (Respondent 23)

It would be good if it appears on my social media timeline because from there, I will know about developments or issues happening around me and may be able to expand my knowledge about politics in Malaysia. (Respondent 29)
Despite their demur, all the respondents said that they would vote in the 2022 election. Even among respondents who confessed that they were not interested in politics, such as Respondents 7, 21, 28 and 34, viewed voting as their responsibility in choosing the right leader for the country and shaping the future of the country.

*I will vote because voting is mandatory for Malaysians now and because we need to choose our leaders who deserve to lead the country so that our country becomes more developed and peaceful.*

(Respondent 7)

*Yes, I will vote. This is so because of my responsibility as a citizen and the right given to me by the government to vote for the country’s success.*

(Respondent 21)

*Yes. Because as a citizen, I have the right and responsibility to determine the country’s future. By voting, I can elect qualified leaders and be able to maintain national peace and progress.*

(Respondent 28)

*I will vote in the next election. I will vote because it can help elect a more competent leader.*

(Respondent 34)

**Political opinions and expressions of the youth matter**

Although respondents show different degrees of interest in politics, they agreed on the importance of political expression. This emphasis on political expression can help shape how people understand their political opinions and self-concepts (Lane et al., 2019) as well as can serve as an essential precursor to traditional political participation (Shah et al., 2017). According to Respondent 2, political expression could help to create a “mature” society. Respondents 5 and 7 explained that political expression is their right, while Respondent 6 contended that the feedback and opinion from citizens could become input for the politicians. For these young people, political expression is vital to voicing dissent and contesting the status quo (Kwak et al., 2020).

*It is important to build a mature and strong country because it allows someone to solve national challenges in the current era of globalisation.*

(Respondent 2)

*Yes, because all Malaysians have the right to debate matters related to politics anywhere. They must be careful when speaking on social media because some parties are very sensitive.*

(Respondent 5)

*Someone needs to give their views or opinions because it is our right to speak about our opinions and views on politics.*

(Respondent 7)

*A person needs to give his opinion on social media because that opinion comes from the citizen, so with this perspective, he or she can help these politicians give something beneficial to the people.*

(Respondent 16)

Because social media allows people to record and share their daily lives and thoughts freely, it can facilitate the spread of political information from other users. People who use social media may be inspired to share their political opinions. This “spillover process” occurs on social media when relational use leads to political expression (Lee et al., 2020; Skoric et al., 2016). However, only ten respondents said they had expressed their political views on social media on various issues, as shown below.
Once through Instagram with a comment to change political parties in Kelantan and to promote development in Kelantan. (Respondent 2)

I used to give opinions related to politics on social media through Facebook. For example, when COVID-19 hit us, among those affected were students on campus, including the status of student fee refunds and the status of assistance that will be given to students. So I have given my views or opinions about that. (Respondent 16)

I once gave an opinion to improve the road system in Sabah on the Facebook platform. (Respondent 37)

Yes, it’s about the 1MDB corruption scandals. (Respondent 44)

**Lack of political knowledge hinders political expression**

One of the main reasons for the reluctance to express their political thought is that context collapse on social media creates barriers to political expression. As users are led to interact with different social circles that hold different attitudes and opinions (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012), the social risk one perceives in expressing unpopular or disputable opinions can increase. As a result, users self-censor their social media opinions (Lee et al., 2020). According to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), individuals constantly monitor their surroundings to determine whether their opinion aligns with the dominant opinion.

This is in line with the feedback of respondents who admitted that lacking the political knowledge to debate and discuss is the main reason for not expressing their views online. Respondent 10 clearly stated that she does not want to make uninformed comments fearing criticism from netizens. Respondents 6, 11, 21 and 35 also believed that it is not yet the time for them to debate about politics and that they would prefer to read and gain knowledge about political issues first.

I’m still new in this field of politics. There are many things I still need to learn, and there is still much to learn. (Respondent 6)

Nope. Because I am too young and have knowledge about politics, that is still shallow compared to those who are more mature. If we make a mistake by throwing words or opinions, it will harm us. (Respondent 10)

I won’t debate because my knowledge of politics is weak. I like to read other people’s opinions about politics, and from there, I can increase my knowledge. (Respondent 11)

Nope. Because I don’t want to engage in empty chats with only a little knowledge and ‘zero’ experience. (Respondent 21)

Nope. Because politics requires solid and up-to-date facts. Unfortunately, I am not a big fan of politics, and I don’t know about politics because my interest is not in that direction (Respondent 35)
Facebook and Twitter are the best platforms for political information and expression

When asked which platform is the best for political information and expression, respondents equally mentioned Twitter (20 respondents) and Facebook (20 respondents). Instagram and TikTok were the least mentioned, with two each. It is interesting that the respondents mentioned Facebook as the best platform to acquire political information and share political thoughts. This is due to Facebook’s characteristics, which are more open and persistently visible to a wide audience (Baym & Boyd, 2012). The publicness of expression should discourage people from posting their political views due to the concern over a potential disagreement (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). However, as explained by Respondents 7 and 16, their circle of friends on Facebook consists of more adults making it more credible for political debate and information.

Twitter has always been perceived as the go-to platform for political communication. The social surroundings of Twitter have always been perceived as more open-minded for political debate and expression (Kasmani, 2019). On Twitter, the posts and interactions of political elites, journalists, and the general public constitute an optimal political communication space, making it the best social environment for opinion expression (Lee et al., 2020; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017).

In my opinion, the best platform to give opinions among young people is through Twitter application, while for the elderly is through Facebook application. (Respondent 6)

The best social media platform is Facebook. Because it is more widely used by all groups of society, especially the elderly, so, it can be a platform for the community to give their views and opinions. (Respondent 7)

The best platform is Twitter because people who use Twitter are usually honest. (Respondent 12)

The best social media platform to give opinions is Facebook. Although we know that Facebook is primarily for older people, it is also a place where more knowledgeable people write about politics. (Respondent 16)

Nine respondents mentioned Instagram as the least suitable platform for political expression, 9 mentioned WhatsApp, while 5 others mentioned TikTok. Interestingly, two of these social media applications, namely Instagram and TikTok, which are supposedly the most popular among youths, are regarded as the least suitable for political expression and communication. One of the main reasons is that both applications are perceived as mainly for entertainment purposes, as mentioned by Respondents 6 and 19. As for WhatsApp, Respondents 39 and 7 found that expressing a political opinion on the messaging application is less effective as it is a closed platform, unlike social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

Instagram and TikTok. This is because the users of these two applications are using them for entertainment, not political purposes. (Respondent 6)

TikTok because it’s more to entertainment. (Respondent 19)
WhatsApp application. This is because, for me, the WhatsApp platform cannot be heard by any party because it is a closed messaging system. (Respondent 7)

WhatsApp is not relevant because WhatsApp is a personal social media where you don’t actually use it to chat with strangers. (Respondent 39)

Instagram because it is a platform to share photos. (Respondent 5)

Instagram because the platform is more geared towards content such as sharing photos, comments, videos and so on. (Respondent 17)

**Personalized social media engagement makes politicians more relatable and credible**

Social media creates a more personalized environment, allowing individual politicians to profile themselves independently from their political party. It allows politicians to bypass traditional mass media by creating and choosing content themselves (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). Hence, individualized messages, detached from their political parties, have the potential to be featured more prominently on social media (Vergeer et al., 2013).

When respondents were asked who their favorite politician was, Syed Saddiq came out top with 15 respondents, followed by Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin with six, Najib Razak with five and Khairy Jamaluddin with four. It is no surprise that Syed Saddiq leads as he is the most active on social media among politicians. He has almost 900 thousand followers on TikTok and 1.9 million on Instagram. Based on the feedback, respondents were mainly attracted to Syed Saddiq’s personalized political campaigning through his emotional and private postings. Respondents 5, 29, 33 and 41 remarked that Syed Saddiq’s postings of his initiatives in helping students and the people in his constituency won them over.

The politician I follow on social media is Syed Saddiq. This is because he often cares about the rights of teenagers and young people in addition to helping people in need, especially families or families who are less able and who need help. (Respondent 29)

His previous efforts went well, such as helping Malaysians involved in the flood disaster. He shared various photos and videos of their team helping provide flood relief, such as food, daily necessities, etc. He also gave tablets/laptops for FREE to less able students to help them study well. (Respondent 33)

The posting of YB Syed Saddiq that I like the most is when he posts about the distribution of laptops and tablets for families that need them in Muar during Ramadhan. (Respondent 41)

Respondents 33 and 38 were attracted to Syed Saddiq’s personality, while Respondents 5 and 22 appreciated that he actively shared content and postings to engage with his followers. This shows that Syed Saddiq’s social media personalization strategy is distinguished by the dynamics that increase the power of individual politicians in relation to parties and institutions, as well as more individualized, intimate, and lifestyle-based modes of interaction with politics (Bennett, 2012). This “individualization” of politics means that voter assessments of him improve based on personal characteristics, identity, and lifestyle (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014).
Yes. Because he often shares about the help or activities done, and it’s also nice to know about the current situation happening in the political world. (Respondent 5)

I follow Syed Saddiq on Twitter because he often shares about politics and also makes a lot of content about politics in the form of videos and posts on many social media. I like him because of the way he discusses exciting facts and is more open-minded. (Respondent 22)

I prefer political personalities who always keep their promises. I can give an example of a person I quite like. President MUDA, Syed Saddiq. (Respondent 33)

Syed Saddiq. This is because of his simple but neat personality. (Respondent 38)

From this perspective, personalization is one political adaptation that political actors undertake in an increasingly mediatized political realm that favors personal narratives over abstract policy discussions, heightening the politician’s need to cultivate and project his or her preferred individual “self” to the voting public (Farkas & Bene, 2021). This could explain why Najib Razak is still popular among first-time voters, although he has been convicted on seven corruption counts and sentenced up to 12 years in prison. Najib Razak, one of the most followed politicians on Facebook, with more than 4.5 million followers, is known to employ political humor in his postings, contributing to bonding between politicians and audiences (Kasmani, 2022). His political personalization seems to work in persuading voters to empathize with him. Respondents 10 and 37 said that from his social media postings, Najib appears calm in facing all the convictions against him. Additionally, Respondents 1 and 2 are impressed with his postings on helping less fortunate communities.

Helping the poor community and giving a little help to the community. (Respondent 1)

Datuk Najib Razak. During his tenure as Prime Minister, he was always concerned about the less fortunate by providing various assistance and systematically planning development. (Respondent 2)

I liked the posts by the former 6th Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Najib, especially at the beginning of his downfall. This is due to his maturity in the political world and his maturity to solve every crisis/accusation/slander thrown at him. He didn’t give up in searching for the real truth. (Respondent 10)

Dato’ Sri Najib, because he was calm enough to face all the accusations against him. His ‘Malu Apa Bossku’ is becoming more and more the talk of the public. (Respondent 37)

Like Syed Saddiq, the first-time voters gravitated towards Najib’s emotional and private postings. This is in line with a study by Kasmani (2022) that showed that Najib Razak’s personalized political campaigns through social media were able to reach and influence voters, particularly among the younger generations. As explained by Respondents 1, 2, 5 and 8, making jokes, using common speak, and using trendy digital culture references
helped Najib to connect with audiences who agreed on the substance and targets of the humor.

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\text{Dato’ Seri Najib Razak because he is very friendly, helps people and has a good personality.} \\
\text{(Respondent 1)}
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\[
\text{His post about ‘Malu Apa Boskuu’ and I think it is the most popular of his posting.} \\
\text{(Respondent 2)}
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\[
\text{I like posting about the help he did. There is no post that I do not like.} \\
\text{(Respondent 5)}
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\text{Eating with the community or in public places because it shows his friendliness with the local people.} \\
\text{(Respondent 8)}
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CONCLUSION

The study’s findings indicate that first-time Malay voters, who are predominantly youths, are generally less interested in politics and have no inclination to seek political news on social media. More than half of the respondents find the political turmoil engulfing Malaysia since 2019 too complicated, with some describing Malaysian politics as “confusing” and “in crisis.” This is consistent with previous research suggesting that young Malaysian voters are generally less politically active (Mohd Hed & Grasso, 2020) and perceive Malaysian politics as corrupt and motivated by politicians’ self-interest (Ting & Wan Ahmad, 2022).

The respondents however, still encounter political information incidentally as a byproduct of using social media for other purposes, such as entertainment and are involved in low-level online political participation (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). This raises the optimistic possibility that incidental exposure to politics through social media may stimulate users to engage in more active forms of political engagement, such as more directed uses of social media for political purposes and various other forms of political participation (Lee & Xenos, 2022).

This could also explain why some participants who are not interested in politics were still participating in low-level political activities on social media, such as sharing, liking and commenting about political issues and news. While all agree on the importance of expressing their political views as citizens, many would avoid doing so. Lack of knowledge on political issues is the main reason to avoid political talk on social media. This is related to social media context collapse, which creates barriers to political expression because users interact with different social circles with different attitudes and opinions (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). Therefore, participants avoid expressing an opinion that could be deemed unpopular or disputable. As a result, they self-censor their social media opinions (Fox & Holt, 2018) and are discouraged from posting their political views due to concerns about potential errors or disagreements (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017).

A random encounter with political news and content on social media also means respondents are exposed to politicians using social media for personalized political campaigns. The participants who were first-time voters gravitate towards politicians who are using social media to reach out to voters for a personalized campaign. Syed Saddiq, Najib Razak and Khairy Jamaluddin were mentioned as favorite politicians by the participants. These politicians use social media to create personalized content which attracts the youth and first-time voters who are not perusing traditional mass media or
following any political parties. Even those who admitted that they are not interested in politics were encountering and engaging with the content of politicians. It is interesting to highlight that participants chose Facebook and Twitter as the best platforms to get political information and express political opinions. In contrast, TikTok and Instagram were the least chosen platform because they are mainly for entertainment and are seen as less credible and suitable.

This study, however, only involved first-time voters in the Malay community. It is suggested that future studies involve youths from other ethnic communities who make up a significant number of voters in Malaysia. The Malaysian Election Commission reported that the final voter turnout for the recent 15th General Election was 73.89%, a decrease from the previous election at 82.32%. The decrease in voters' turnout is expected and still commendable considering the lowering of the voting age to 18 from 21 and automatic voter registration, which has led to the addition of 6.23 million new voters in the electoral roll, bringing to 21.17 million of the number of voters eligible to vote in the recent election.

It is unknown whether the participants had voted in the last election, although they had confessed that they would go out and vote regardless of their level of political interests. Social media undeniably plays an important role in keeping these youths cognizant of politics. Thus, it is crucial to see how these youth engage in politics after the election and how politics and political campaigns change and adapt to the social media environment.

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References


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