

The 2022 Johor State Elections and the 15th General Election: Voter Age Dynamics and the Rural-urban Continuum

Khairul Syakirin Zulkifli*, Jean Why Sim, and Muhammad Ainul Hakim Norazmi

Policy and Research Division, Institut Masa Depan Malaysia, 192, Jalan Ara, Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the correlations between electoral outcomes and voting behavior in Johor during the 15th State Election, leading up to Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15). The analysis focuses on the relationship between age, ethnic majority constituencies, and the rural-urban continuum, using voting stream results to identify key patterns. The findings reveal that senior voters in Malay-majority constituencies, across all geographical areas, largely continued to support Barisan Nasional (BN) despite a gradual decline in their overall backing. In contrast, Perikatan Nasional (PN) emerged as an appealing alternative for youth voters, particularly in rural and semi-urban Malay-majority constituencies. Meanwhile, Pakatan Harapan (PH) retained dominance in mixed and Chinese-majority semi-urban and urban constituencies, although its support among senior voters declined compared to the 14th General Election (GE14). Overall, the election results, spanning from the state elections to GE15, demonstrate a strong relationship between partisanship and voter turnout. This finding highlights the intricate relationship between voter allegiance and turnout, shaped by demographic, geographical, and contemporary issues.

Keywords: 15th General Election, Johor, partisanship, state-election, voting behavior

INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 2022, the Johor State Election was held seven months before the 15th Malaysian Election (GE15), marking the fourth state election after the 14th General Election (GE14). According to Clause 23, Part Two of the Johor State Constitution 1895, the state is permitted to hold its elections independently of the federal election (Johor State Constitution, 1895/2008). Several states have held

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E-mail addresses:

khairul.syakirin@institutmasa.com (Khairul Syakirin Zulkifli)

sebastian.sim@institutmasa.com (Jean Why Sim)

ainul.hakim@institutmasa.com (Muhammad Ainul Hakim Norazmi)

* Corresponding author

elections separately since Malaysia's first general election, including Kelantan in 1974, Sarawak in 1979, Melaka in 2021, and Sabah in 1981 and 2020, among others. The primary reasons for holding the election were issues related to political stability and their potential impact on state economic development, as reported by mainstream media (Noh, 2022).

Although elections are conducted in accordance with constitutional provisions, they occur within a political framework dominated by parties that control key institutions. Azlan and Nadzri (2023) categorize Malaysia's dominant regimes, based on power-holding parties, as either semi-democratic (Case, 1993) or electoral authoritarian (Wong, 2018). In this context, power-holding parties in Malaysia exert considerable influence over elections, often restructuring the political landscape and undermining opposition mobilization efforts Azlan and Nadzri (2023). As the power holder in the Johor state government, Barisan Nasional (BN) opted to hold the election following the success of the 2021 Melaka state election, with the expectation that a lower voter turnout would work to its advantage.

The Johor State Election of 2021 holds significant importance in electoral analysis, as it marked the first election to implement two key reforms: reducing the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 and introducing Automatic Voter Registration (AVR). These changes are pivotal in the context of Malaysia's evolving electoral landscape. Moreover, the 2021 Johor election was

the final electoral contest before the 15th General Election (GE15), positioning it as a key indicator for political campaigns. Johor's historical and political significance is further underscored by its status as the birthplace of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysia's oldest political party. While UMNO experienced a poor performance in GE14, it subsequently regained momentum in the post-GE14 by-elections and during the Melaka State Election of 2021.

This article employs voting stream results to analyze voting patterns by age group in Johor. First, we categorized age groups based on score sheets and electoral roll data. We examined the electoral outcomes by considering ethnic majority seats and the rural-urban continuum. Lastly, we analyzed voter turnout rates across different age groups and applied partisanship theory to assess the factors influencing electoral performance in the Johor elections. The article aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on voting behavior in Malaysia through this approach.

Theoretical Framework

Converse (1976) posits that age is a significant predictor of election outcomes, with individuals more exposed to politics often developing a stronger attachment to political parties. Similarly, Dassonneville (2017) suggests that age influences electoral results in two primary ways: voter turnout and the level of partisanship, both of which follow a curvilinear relationship. Thus, age adds an additional layer of analysis

to understanding electoral outcomes, as it interacts with voting decisions and electoral changes. This interaction complements other established variables used to explain voting behavior, such as ethnic voting (Mohamad & Suffian, 2023; Vasil, 1980), socio-economic factors (Gomez & Jomo, 1997), geographical differences (Ostwald & Subhan, 2021), and the effects of ethnic structure and urbanization (Dettman & Pepinsky, 2023). Despite these multiple factors, the concept of ethnic voting, driven by identity politics, remains central to understanding voting behavior in Malaysia. Vasil (1980) highlights that since Malaysia's first general election, elections have been largely divided along ethnic lines, a point reinforced by Mohamad and Suffian (2023) in their post-GE15 analysis.

Normative patterns of voting behavior suggest that younger individuals tend to have lower voter turnout, while older voters are more likely to participate in elections (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2012). This trend aligns with Converse's (1969, 1976) foundational work on 'learning through exposure,' which posits that greater exposure to political processes over time leads to stronger partisan attachments (Converse, 1969). As a result, age is significantly linked to partisanship, with older individuals often displaying stronger political loyalties. Partisanship, in turn, serves as a motivator for voter turnout, with individuals more likely to vote in exchange for loyalty to or alignment with a political party's platform or ideologies. Furthermore, older voters tend to favor political parties

that align with conservative economic and authoritarian values. However, as Dassonneville (2017) notes, previous studies (Goerres, 2008; Tilley, 2005) have not consistently found strong correlations between age and these variables, indicating that the relationship between age, political ideology, and voter behavior remains complex and multifaceted.

Sudden increases in youth voter turnout have the potential to significantly disrupt the dominance of powerholder parties (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2018; Sloam & Henn, 2019). In Malaysia, Welsh (2018) asserts that youth have the capacity to act as change agents, prompting political parties to increasingly focus on engaging this demographic. Liow (2011) explores the role of the youth wing within Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), emphasizing that this group plays a critical role in political mobilization, including participation in demonstrations and other forms of civic engagement. Hed and Grasso (2020) further argue that youth are involved in conventional political activities, such as voting, and unconventional forms of political action, including petitions, boycotts, and protests. Moreover, young people in Malaysia have actively participated in social activism to highlight and address key socio-political issues, such as poverty, corruption, and institutional abuse (Ting & Ahmad, 2021). In the context of electoral behavior, Waikar (2020) suggests that the Barisan Nasional (BN) party's emphasis on Malay-Muslim supremacy was a key factor in its inability to

secure the support of younger voters during the 14th General Election (GE14), further illustrating the shifting political landscape influenced by youth engagement.

Another important variable considered in this article is the rural-urban continuum and ethnic voting. Previous analyses of rural-urban voting patterns suggest that opposition parties dominated urban areas between GE12 and GE14 (Ng et al., 2020). However, this framework overlooks certain urban constituencies, such as Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu, which Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) won in both GE14 and GE15. Additionally, Perikatan Nasional (PN) secured victories in urban seats such as Kangar, Alor Setar, Kuantan, and Gombak. Dettman and Pepinsky (2023) and E. Ong (2020) argue that while the rural-urban divide remains an important factor in analyzing Malaysian voting behavior, it must be considered in conjunction with the ethnic composition of constituencies. Furthermore, institutional factors, such as the nomination of competing candidates or parties and the effectiveness of electoral machinery, play a crucial role. These elements are deeply influenced by the ethnic composition or social structure of a constituency, reinforcing the centrality of identity politics in shaping electoral outcomes.

Partisanship refers to voters' long-standing psychological and social attachments toward political parties or objects (Dinas, 2017). Several factors influence the development of partisanship, including historical legacies (Peisakhin, 2012), public policies (Horowitz, 1989), class voting

(Evans & Tilley, 2017), early socialization (Bartels, 2002; Beck & Jennings, 1991; Green et al., 2002), religious affiliations (Green et al., 2002), and the effects of nation-building programs (Ostwald & Subhan, 2021). These factors suggest that older voters, with more extensive historical experience in democratic systems, tend to develop stronger partisan attachments. However, Dalton (2002) argues that partisanship has declined in recent times, a trend attributed to modernization, where increased educational attainment and cognitive mobilization among voters have reduced the influence of traditional party loyalties.

METHOD

Although the Election Commission (EC) of Malaysia's voting stream results data primarily offers information on voting districts and outcomes for each stream, it remains a valuable resource for analyzing voting patterns by age group. This data also provides insights into how urbanization and ethnic composition vary across constituencies (Hutchinson & Zhang, 2022). Johor, for instance, is divided into 949 voting districts, with an average of 17 districts per seat (Hutchinson & Zhang, 2022). The streams are numbered from one to twelve, as observed in both the Johor state elections and GE15, with the stream numbers adjusted based on voter age and the total number of voters within each constituency. Utilizing the average age of voters per lane and the rural-urban continuum, we have developed the following classification as in Table 1.

Table 1
Classification of voter's age and rural-urban continuum

Classification of voters	Rural	Semi-Urban	Urban
Senior	Lanes 1 & 2	Lanes 1 & 2	Lanes 1 & 2
Middle-Aged	Lanes 3	Lanes 3 & 4	Lanes 3 & 4
Youth	Lanes 4 above	Lanes 5 above	Lanes 5 above

Note. Classification: Senior = 50 years and above; Middle-aged = 36 to 49 years; Youth = 18 to 35 years old. This applies to electoral rolls in the 2022 state elections and GE15 in Johor

By comparing the electoral roll with the voting streams, we categorized voters by age based on their average age within each lane. We also considered the minimum and maximum ages of voters in each lane to establish the corresponding age ranges. Senior voters, typically aged 50 and above, were primarily found in lanes 1 and 2. This finding aligns with Khor’s (2015) and Khor and Chia’s (2020) study on voting patterns in Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) areas, which emphasized the prevalence of senior voters in these categories. This age group was represented across rural, semi-urban, and urban seats. Middle-aged voters, aged 36 to 49 years, were primarily assigned to lane 3 in rural areas and lanes 3 and 4 in semi-urban and urban constituencies. Youth voters, defined as those 35 years and younger, were assigned to lanes 4 and above in rural seats and lanes 5 and above in semi-urban and urban seats. While a small number of voters did not fit within these defined categories, their presence was minimal.

In this analysis, we focus on the contribution of each voting stream to the overall electoral outcomes achieved by political parties. By examining vote contributions across various streams, we

identify which lanes had the most significant impact on a party’s vote percentage. Using this method, we compared the voting stream results from GE12, the 2022 state election, and GE15 while analyzing the data across rural-urban divides and ethnic majority constituencies. The categorization of each constituency in Johor was based on the urbanization levels defined by Tindak Malaysia (n.d.). For ethnic categorization, the constituencies were classified as follows: High Malay Majority Seats (HMM) with more than 70% Malay voters, Medium Malay Majority Seats (MMM) with 60%–69% Malay voters, Low Malay Majority Seats (LMM) with 50%–59% Malay voters, Chinese Majority Seats (CM) with more than 50% Chinese voters, and Mixed Seats (Mix), where no single ethnic group makes up more than 50% of the voters.

RESULTS

The outcomes of the Johor state election in 2022 significantly differed from those of the GE15, diverging from Johor’s historical trend where state and parliamentary voting patterns had closely aligned since GE12 (Table 2). In the state election, Barisan Nasional (BN) secured a decisive victory, winning 40 out of 54 seats, a substantial increase from the 17

Table 2
Comparison of turnout in rural-urban and votes received (GE14-GE15)

Rural = 17 Seats		
GE14 Vote Received: BN: 139,629 = 52% PH: 111,013= 41% PN: 19,996 = 7% • <u>Rural Turnout: 74%</u> Party Won: BN: 13/17 PH: 4/17	2022 State Election Vote Received: BN: 128,261 = 58% PH: 28,296 = 13% PN: 64,448 = 29% • <u>Rural Turnout: 52%</u> Party Won: BN: 16/17 PN: 1/17	GE15 Vote Received: BN: 137,119 = 45% PH: 637,36 = 21% PN: 102,897=34% • <u>Rural Turnout: 74%</u> Party Won: BN: 12/17 PH: 2/17 PN: 3/17
Semi-Urban = 22 Seats		
GE14 Vote Received: BN: 181,506 = 41% PH: 221,583 = 50% PN: 40,235= 9% • <u>Semi-Urban Turnout: 76%</u> Party Won: BN: 6/22 PH: 15/22 PN (PAS): 1/22	2022 State Election Vote Received: BN: 197,741 = 49% PH: 105,513 = 26% PN: 99,540 = 25% • <u>Semi-Urban Turnout: 52%</u> Party Won: BN 18/22 PH: 3/22 PN:1/22	GE15 Vote Received: BN: 178,405 = 34% PH: 198,502 = 38% PN: 141,300 = 27% • <u>Semi-Urban Turnout: 76 %</u> Party Won: BN: 6/20 PH: 11/20 PN: 3/20
Urban = 17 Seats		
GE14 Vote Received: BN: 226,274 = 31% PH: 453,426 = 61% PN: 62,083 = 8% • <u>Urban Turnout: 72%</u> Party Won: PH: 17/17	2022 State Election Vote Received: BN: 244,744 = 37% PH: 275,581 =41% PN: 143,880 = 22% • <u>Urban Turnout: 45%</u> Party Won: BN:6/17 PH: 9/17 PN: 1/17	GE15 Vote Received: BN: 271,547= 26% PH: 536,739 = 51% PN: 252,435 = 24% • <u>Urban Turnout: 72%</u> Party Won: Urban GE15: PH: 15/17 PN: 2/17

Sources: Election Commission of Malaysia (2018, 2022a, 2022b)
Note. Only 54 out of the 56 seats were analyzed in GE15, as the Segamat parliamentary results were petitioned, affecting the N1 Buloh Kasap and N2 Jementah constituencies. These seats were excluded from the analysis due to the legal challenge surrounding the election results

seats it had won in GE14. Pakatan Harapan (PH) captured 13 seats, and Perikatan Nasional (PN) won 3 seats. BN’s popular vote rose to 43%, a 5% increase from GE14. Meanwhile, PH’s share of the popular vote plummeted from 53% in GE14 to 26% in the state election, while PN saw a significant increase in its vote share, rising from 8% to 24%. In contrast, during GE15, BN’s popular vote decreased to 31%, PH’s vote share surged from 26% to 42%, and PN’s vote share modestly increased by 2%.

The shift in vote shares from GE14 to GE15 highlights a clear correlation

between ethnic majority seats, the rural-urban continuum, and party performance. PH has maintained dominance in mixed and Chinese-majority urban seats in the state election and GE15. Meanwhile, BN, represented by UMNO, has retained a strong presence in Malay-majority rural constituencies. However, in rural and semi-urban Malay-majority seats, BN's vote share declined as PN's influence grew, especially in the state elections leading up to GE15. As reflected in the voting streams, voter turnout patterns showed consistency across age groups and rural-urban constituencies in GE15. A noticeable difference in voting patterns was observed in the state election, particularly in the rural-urban divide (Figure 1).

Popular Votes: Age Group and Rural-urban Seats

In both the state election and GE15, BN received more youth votes than PN and PH in rural seats (Figure 2). The percentage of youth votes for BN increased significantly, rising from 8% in GE12 to 18% in GE15.

However, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, BN's support among senior and middle-aged voters in rural seats gradually declined, dropping from 47% in GE12 to 23% in GE15. Despite controlling the state and Federal governments in 2021, BN's overall popular vote has remained stagnant since GE14.

BN's support in semi-urban seats has shown a decline across all age groups in GE15 compared to GE12, although the coalition had performed better in GE13. Notably, the percentage of senior voters supporting BN dropped significantly, from 47% in GE12 to 18% in GE15 (Figure 3). A similar decline was observed among middle-aged voters. Youth support for BN exhibited fluctuations, decreasing from 13% in GE14 to 10% in GE15. In contrast, PAS's partnership with Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) has led to substantial gains, particularly in the state elections and GE15. Support for PN among youth voters surged, increasing from 4% in GE14 to 12% in the state election and reaching 15% in GE15 (Figure 2).

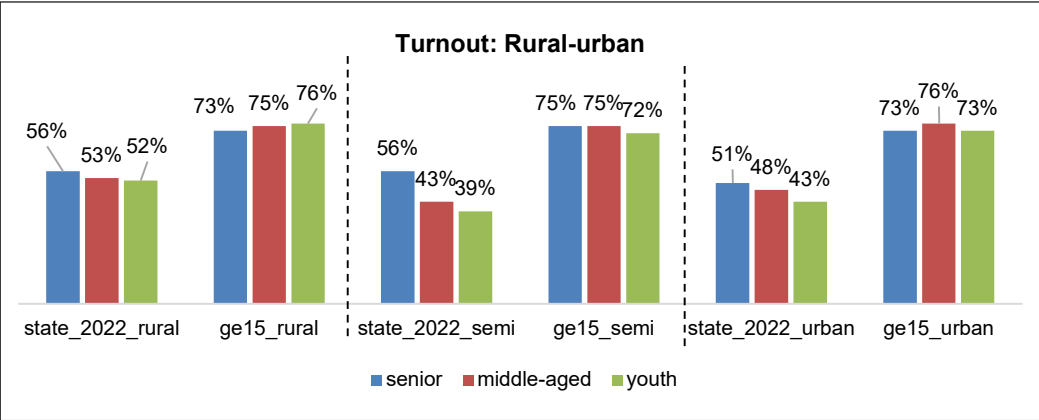


Figure 1. Voters' turnout by age and rural-urban continuum

PN’s popular vote, particularly based on PAS’s results, showed a notable increase in youth support in rural seats from GE12 to GE15. As illustrated in Figure 2, youth support for PN rose significantly from 2% in GE12 to 15% in GE15. Despite sharing similar political aspirations with BN, most senior and middle-aged voters remained hesitant to switch their allegiance. PAS, in particular, received minimal support from middle-aged voters in rural areas, with only a 5% increase in support from GE14 to GE15. Meanwhile, senior voter support for PAS rose by 7%.

Both BN and PN struggled in urban seats, where most constituencies are multiethnic with a Chinese majority. This posed a significant challenge for the conservative Malay Islamic party, as it failed to garner substantial support despite efforts from Chinese-based component parties, such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA),

Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan). Notably, BN’s vote share in GE12 sharply contrasted with PH’s vote share in the same election (Table 2). The percentage of senior citizens supporting BN in GE12 dropped drastically to just 10% by GE15. While PN saw increased support among younger and older voters in the state elections leading up to GE15, these gains did not substantially affect PH’s performance in the national election.

PH’s performance in rural seats was the weakest compared to its results in semi-urban and urban areas, primarily due to a lack of support from senior and middle-aged voters, except in GE14. The surge of senior voters supporting PH in GE14 was likely one of the key factors behind the party’s success in Johor (Figure 3). However, PH saw an increase in youth votes in GE15 compared to the state election, which might

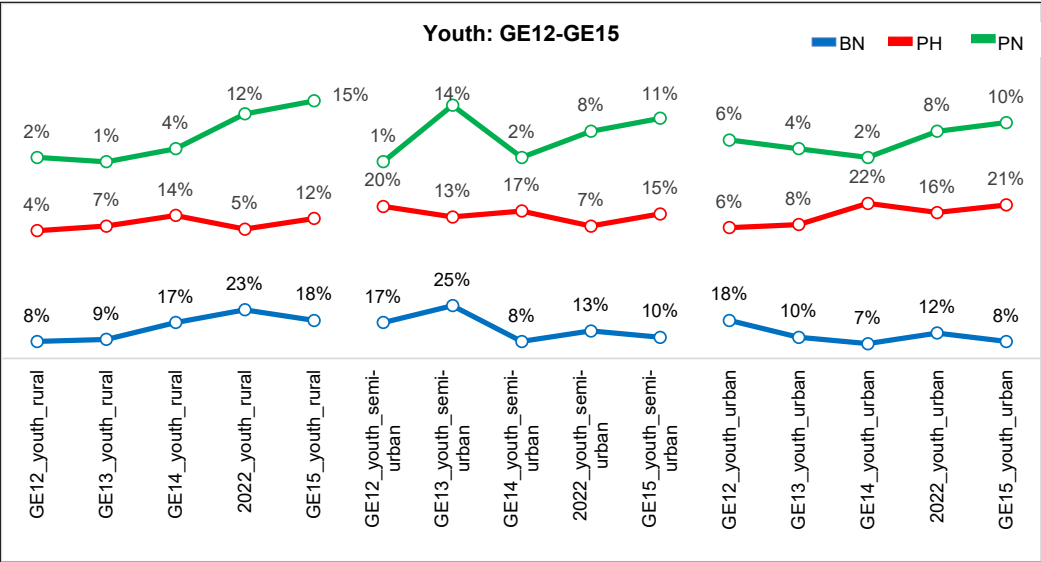


Figure 2. Youth voting patterns by rural-urban: GE12–GE15

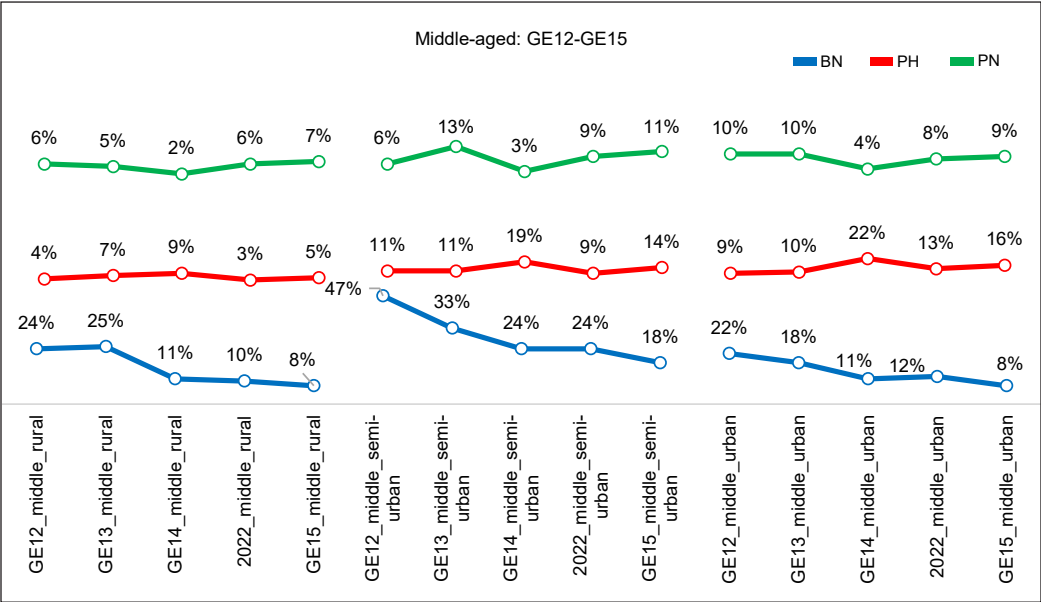


Figure 3. Middle-aged voting patterns by rural-urban: GE12–GE15

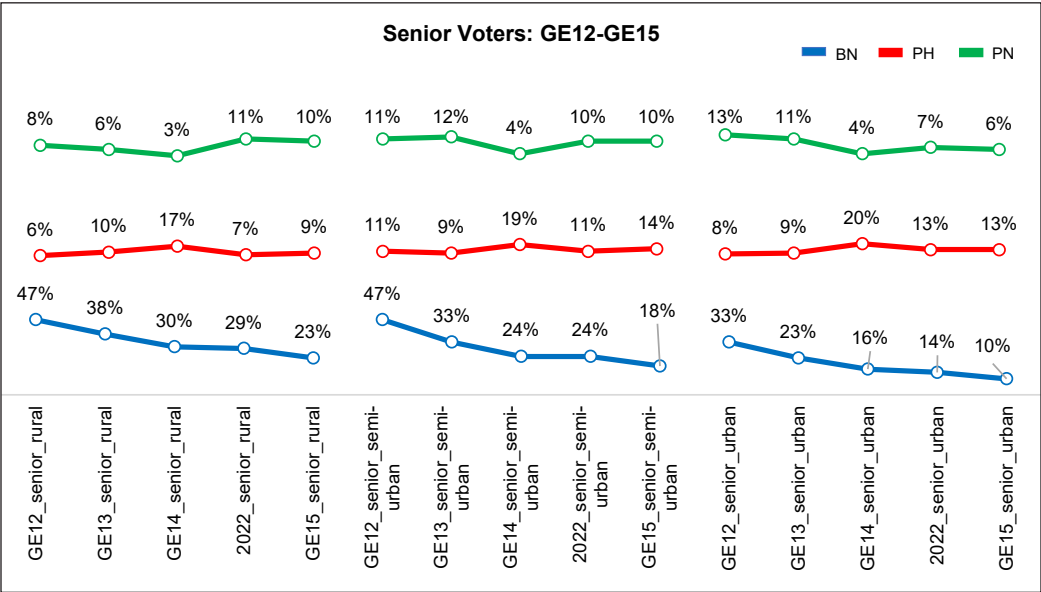


Figure 4. Senior votes voting patterns by rural-urban: GE12–GE15

have allowed the party to secure more seats if the election had coincided with GE15. PH also performed better in semi-urban seats during GE15 than in the state election, with support rising across all three age groups. Notably, youth support for PH increased substantially from 7% in the state election to 15% in GE15 (Figure 2).

In urban seats, PH maintained its established dominance, a trend that has been consistent since the urban electoral shift in GE12 and GE13 (Azlan & Majidillah, 2018; Fernando, 2013). Although PH made limited gains in Johor's urban seats from GE12 to GE13, which are predominantly Chinese and mixed ethnic-majority constituencies, the coalition's success in GE14 can be attributed to its ability to attract support across all age groups, which played a critical role in diminishing BN's dominance in the state election. Unfortunately, PH's support among senior and middle-aged voters has since waned, with its current vote share relying predominantly on youth support (Figure 2).

Popular Vote Based on Age in Ethnic Majority Seats

Based on the data presented in Figures 5 to 7, PH's support among middle-aged voters has shown a notable increase since GE12, particularly in low Malay majority seats, such as those located in semi-urban and urban areas. However, during the state election, low percentages of middle-aged voter support in semi-urban and urban Malay seats were recorded, which may have contributed to PH's losing several key seats to other coalitions. Notable losses include Larkin, Bukit Permai, Kempas, Permas, Mahkota, and Maharani, which were contested and ultimately won by different political alliances in GE14 and GE15. This pattern highlights the difficulty PH faced in consolidating middle-aged voter support in areas with a significant

Malay demographic, potentially limiting its overall electoral performance in these constituencies.

It is well established that senior voters in rural areas, predominantly Malay, tend to support BN, with UMNO enjoying significant popularity (Mohamad, 2015; Saravanamuttu, 2016). However, in Johor, BN saw a dramatic decline in support from this age group, losing over half of its senior voters from GE12 to GE15 (Figure 4). The number of elderly voters supporting BN in rural areas decreased, even in constituencies with a high percentage of Malay voters. With both BN and PH unable to increase their vote totals as in previous elections, the involvement of PN in the recent state election and GE15 likely played a key role in the realignment of senior and middle-aged voters.

The popular vote among young voters in rural-urban seats demonstrates fluctuating support patterns for PH and BN. Four years after the peak of PH's vote in GE14, the percentage of its youth votes in rural regions has remained steady at 12%. Notably, despite facing significant setbacks that impacted its performance in federal elections, BN gained some support among young voters in rural and semi-urban areas between GE14 and GE15. Meanwhile, PN's support dramatically increased, rising from 2% in rural areas to 13% in the state election and GE15 (Figure 4). This rise in support for PN likely influenced PH's vote share during the state election and decreased PH support in semi-urban areas.

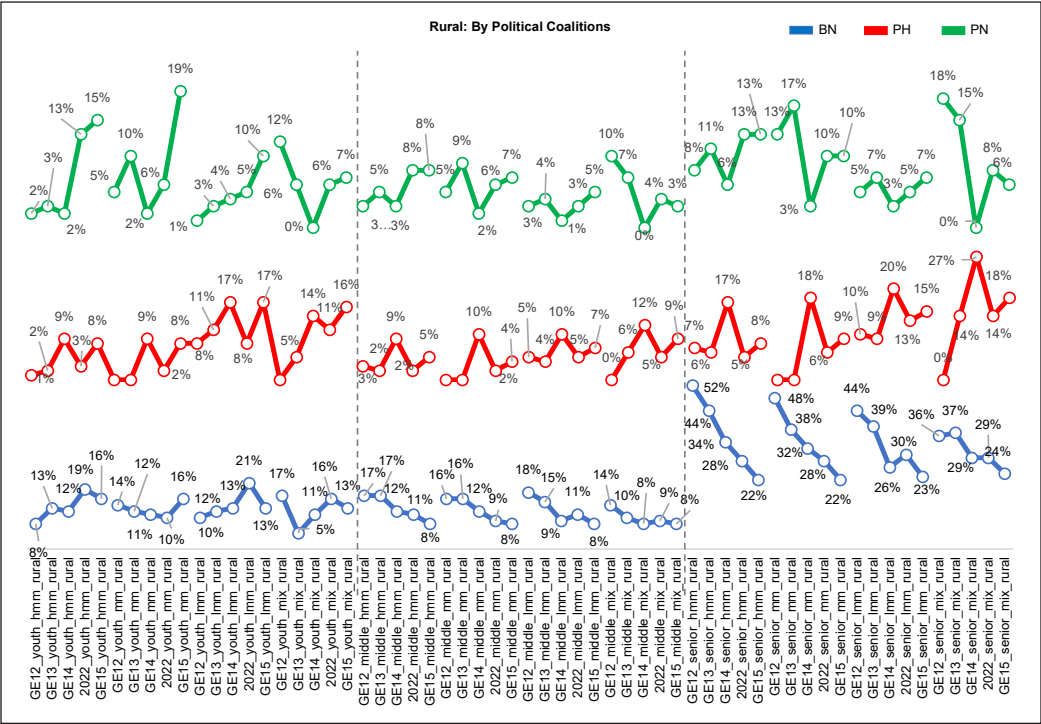


Figure 5. Rural voting patterns in ethnic majority seats: GE12–GE15

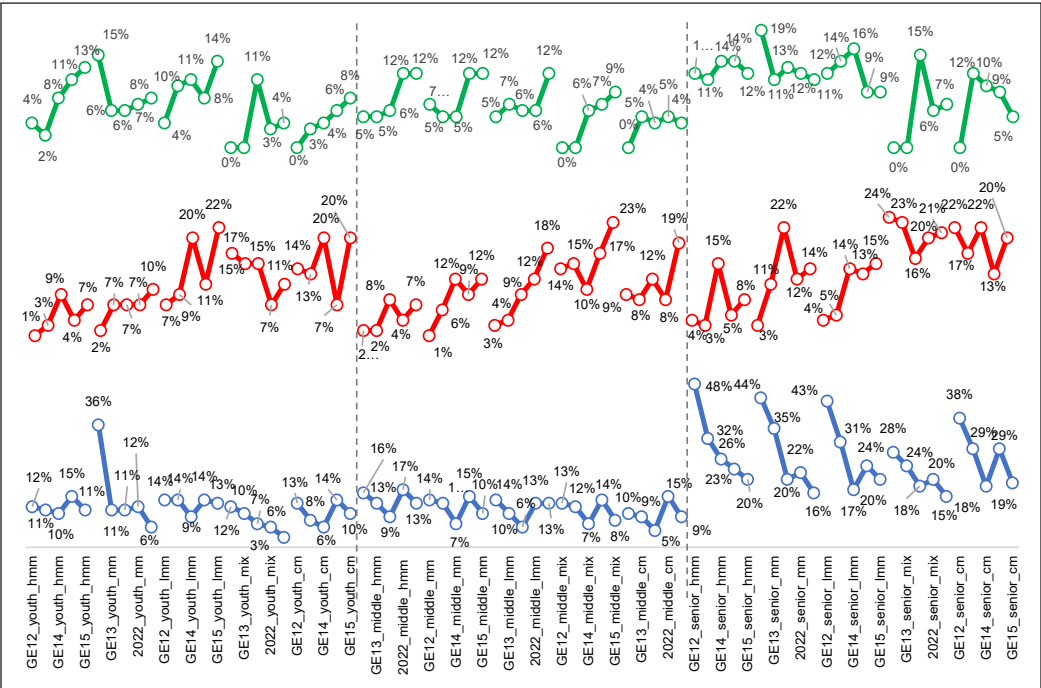


Figure 6. Semi-urban voting patterns in ethnic majority seats: GE12–GE15

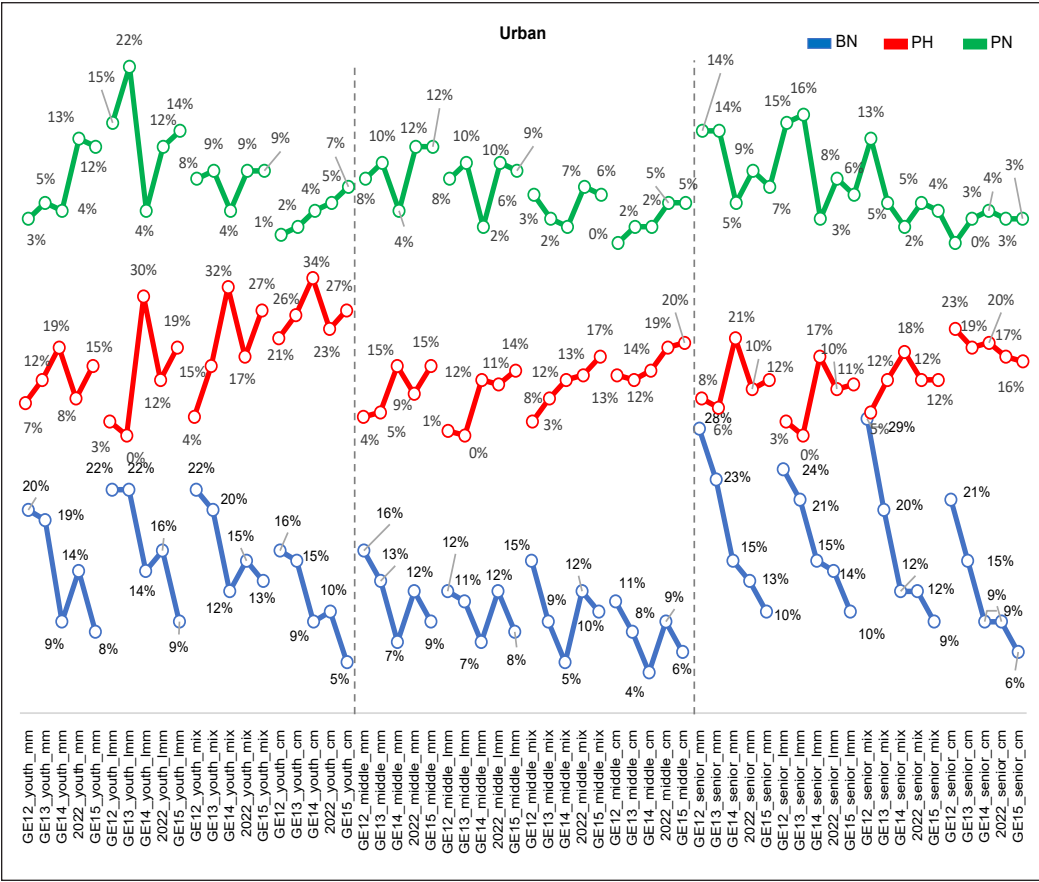


Figure 7. Urban voting patterns in ethnic majority seats: GE12–GE15

DISCUSSION

In the Johor State Election, BN adopted a campaign slogan similar to the one used in the Melaka 15th State Election: *Kestabilan Demi Kemakmuran Untuk Johor* (Stability for Johor’s Prosperity), PN tailored its message to the local context with the addition of *Demi Bangsa Johor* (For the Sake of Johoreans). PH used the tagline *Johor Bangkit: Maju, Bermanuah* (Johor Rise: Prosperity and Dignity). The manifesto clash between these two parties reflects the intensifying competition in

Malaysian electoral politics, particularly following PH’s ambitious promises in GE14 with their Book of Hope: Building the Nation, Fulfilling Hopes. This approach has led to a greater emphasis on how manifestos influence voter behavior. However, despite this focus, the impact of electoral manifestos on voting patterns in Malaysia remains empirically underexplored. In light of this, we examine three key elements of voter age dynamics in the Johor elections: ethnic composition, the rural-urban continuum, voter turnout, and partisanship.

Ethnic Composition and Rural-urban Seats

Following its loss of Johor to Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the 14th General Election (GE14), Barisan Nasional (BN) regained momentum and formed a stronger state government through the subsequent state election. However, the coalition's declining support in GE15 underscores the volatility of voter preferences. This volatility can be traced back to GE12, which marked a significant shift from Malaysia's traditionally dominant single-party system led by UMNO-BN. Several factors contribute to these changes in Malaysian voting behavior, including the rise of alternative social media (Idid, 2017; Tapsell, 2018), the role of media in democratization (Pepinsky, 2013), BN's failure to address pressing socio-economic issues (Nadzri, 2019), internal leadership conflicts (Welsh, 2016), and corruption scandals (Chin & Huat, 2009; Salleh, 2008).

In terms of the rural-urban continuum, the decline of BN as the dominant coalition in Johor after the GE12-GE14 period is particularly notable. Despite its historical significance in the state, BN's vote share in urban and rural areas and in ethnic-majority seats consistently declined. As illustrated in Table 2, BN's support in urban areas sharply declined, while its backing among middle-aged voters in rural areas remained relatively stable since GE12. However, in the post-GE14 period, BN's support in urban and semi-urban areas experienced further erosion, as shown in Figure 2. In rural constituencies, BN retained the highest level of youth support compared

to Perikatan Nasional (PN) and PH, but this support dropped from 23% in the state election to 18% in GE15. Despite various criticisms, BN could still secure youth votes in rural areas, a phenomenon likely influenced by the socialization process or parental voting behavior. These familial ties may help explain BN's continued support in rural constituencies. Furthermore, FELDA voters in rural regions, such as Kota Tinggi and Pengerang, which have large Malay populations (Pakiam, 2018), are often influenced by family voting traditions. The dominance of UMNO's women's wing in these areas, as noted by Rahman (2018), may have also helped BN resist the rising influence of PH and PN.

In contrast, in urban constituencies where the electorate is predominantly Chinese, the BN component party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), struggled to compete with PH's component parties, particularly the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Chin (2016) argues that "policies pursued by UMNO, such as the marginalization of non-Malays in education, politics, and the economy, and the increasing Islamization of the civil service, judiciary, and public life" (p. 172) have contributed to MCA's loss of support. Khalid and Loh (2016) contend that the electoral preferences of Chinese voters are also shaped by the influence of the 'Third Force,' or civil society, while Fee and Appudurai (2011) suggest that dissatisfaction with Bumiputera policies and the elitist privileges of UMNO have further eroded support for MCA. These factors

strengthened PH as a political coalition based on vertical ethnic cooperation in the economic, political, and institutional spheres. Furthermore, PH’s progressive policies made it the primary choice for non-Malay voters. Despite a reduction in support for PH in GE15 relative to GE12, the coalition managed to avoid a drastic drop in votes across rural, semi-urban, and urban constituencies compared to GE14.

As a conservative, Islamic, Malay-based coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN) has garnered substantial support in rural and semi-urban constituencies predominantly composed of Malay voters. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate that PN’s vote share has increased since GE12, particularly in Malay-majority seats in rural and semi-urban areas. This shift enabled the coalition to secure victories in constituencies such as Maharani, Bukit Pasir, and Endau, with a strong potential for additional gains if the election had been held concurrently with GE15. Additionally, PN succeeded in increasing its support among senior voters in these areas, likely at the expense of Pakatan Harapan (PH), as the reduction in senior voter support for Barisan Nasional (BN) was minimal. Nevertheless, PN continues to face challenges in competing in low-Malay majority, mixed, and Chinese-

majority constituencies in semi-urban and urban areas, a trend that has persisted since GE14.

However, an analysis of voting patterns along the rural-urban continuum only accounts for geographical factors influencing voter behavior. To gain deeper insights into the election results, we adopted K. M. Ong’s (2023) methodology of examining district-level voting outcomes in GE15 and the state elections to assess party performance comprehensively. By comparing parliamentary and state voting patterns since GE12 (Table 3), we observed that voters tend to align their choices across state and federal elections. The only notable deviation occurred in the 2022 state election and GE15, where divergent voting patterns were observed. This anomaly can be attributed to the different political contexts and timing of the elections, which likely contributed to voter alignment and turnout shifts, ultimately influencing party performance.

Turnout

Voter turnout in the 2018 Johor State Election was 74%, whereas only 59% of eligible voters participated in the 2022 election. An analysis of the rural-urban continuum (Figure 1) reveals that voter turnout was higher in rural areas across all

Table 3
State Vs. Parliamentary results (±%)

Election	GE12	GE13	GE14	GE15
State-Parliament	±1%	±1%	±1%	±7%*

Note. *Comparison of 2022 State Election with GE15

age groups—youth, middle-aged, and senior voters—compared to semi-urban and urban areas during the state elections. However, in the 15th General Election (GE15), the differences in turnout across age groups were minimal.

The 2020 Sabah State Election, held during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly contributed to the sharp rise in confirmed cases (Lim et al., 2021). This likely heightened public concern regarding the risk of contracting the virus at large in-person gatherings. Consequently, the fear of COVID-19 persisted even as the country transitioned into the endemic phase, deterring many from participating in the electoral process.

Furthermore, since the 14th General Election (GE14), the Election Commission of Malaysia has conducted eight state by-elections, five parliamentary elections, and four state elections, including the Johor State Election. The frequency of elections may have contributed to voter apathy, with some voters perceiving little impact from changes in state elections or by-elections. Therefore, the ongoing fear of COVID-19 and growing voter apathy likely contributed to the low turnout in the Johor State Election.

Young voters, who are generally more geographically mobile, may have contributed to the low turnout during the state election due to factors such as studying or working outside the state. The election timing coincided with the academic schedules of tertiary education institutions, making many students reluctant to return to their hometowns to vote because of

impending classes and exams. Additionally, the high transportation costs of traveling back home further discouraged youth participation. Their parents' voting behavior may have influenced some young voters who remained in their hometowns, and many chose not to vote. This aligns with the findings of Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014), who demonstrated the impact of parental decisions on their children's voting behavior. In contrast to the state election, many voters working in Singapore could not return to vote due to the border closures imposed by the Malaysian government as part of COVID-19 precautionary measures, further contributing to the low turnout (Yusof, 2022).

The reduced voter participation benefited parties with strong partisan support, extensive patronage networks, and deep local social ties, such as UMNO. These loyalists were highly motivated to cast their ballots for UMNO, regardless of the external circumstances. As a result, the election outcome clearly reflected the influence of this loyal base: out of 56 available seats, UMNO secured 40, PH won 13, and PN claimed the remaining three.

Partisan Strength

According to Schoultz's (2017) theory, the development of partisan loyalty within UMNO may experience weakening during times of crisis. This theoretical perspective aligns with Malaysia's current economic challenges and the recent national emergency declaration. Over the 14 years since the 12th General Election (GE12), the nation has

faced several critical events, including the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal, which implicated the leadership of Barisan Nasional (BN) in corruption allegations, the Sheraton Move, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pro-Pakatan Harapan (PH) supporters criticized the Sheraton Move as an act of “disloyalty” by BERSATU, which ultimately led to the collapse of the PH government. In the aftermath, Perikatan Nasional (PN)—a coalition comprising parties such as PAS, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), and Gerakan—emerged as a dominant political force for Malay-Muslim voters, challenging UMNO’s traditional dominance.

Ethno-religious issues further escalated during this period, as evidenced by protests surrounding Malaysia’s commitment to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute. These controversies amplified the salience of identity politics. Additionally, debates over Bumiputera rights and privileges were reignited following the Bumiputera Congress organized by the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MEA) in 2018, as well as the formation of Muafakat Nasional (MN), a coalition of Malay political parties.

A significant difference between GE12 and the 15th General Election (GE15) was the noticeable shift in electoral support from BN and PH to PN among young and middle-aged voters. Zhang and Hutchinson (2022) argue that PN has garnered substantial support from young voters, a trend reflected

in Figures 2 to 4, which illustrate a marked increase in youth votes for PN at the expense of both BN and PH. Specifically, Malay youth in rural and semi-urban constituencies demonstrated a significant shift toward PN during state elections and GE15. These patterns suggest that the process of partisan alignment, initiated during GE14, has accelerated due to the critical events outlined above. However, this process did not fully manifest during the state elections. Despite the lower voter turnout observed across all age groups and ethnicities, youth participation (despite being a larger demographic cohort compared to older voters) was notably lower than that of middle-aged and senior voters, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas (Figure 1).

The realignment of voters in Malay-majority rural and semi-urban constituencies toward PAS can be attributed to the party’s longstanding dualistic approach to political mobilization. According to Farish (2004), PAS employs a combination of bottom-up grassroots engagement and top-down strategies of indoctrination to foster a base of loyal voters and dedicated volunteers. This dual strategy has enabled PAS to establish a committed voter base, a highly organized party machinery, and an extensive networking system across Peninsular Malaysia. The party’s seasoned campaigners and effective strategic messaging further bolstered its electoral capacity, compensating for BERSATU’s relative deficiency in terms of machinery and volunteer mobilization for large-scale elections.

The dynamics influencing the Johor elections extended beyond the Islamic movement, with the Malay protector narrative playing a significant role. The synergy between PAS's Islamist ethos and BERSATU's advocacy for Malay rights posed a direct challenge to UMNO, which faced widespread criticism during this period. This intersection of Islamism and Malay-centric politics enabled PN to secure three seats in the Johor state elections. The coalition likely could gain additional seats if the state elections had occurred under the political conditions of the post-PH-BN federal government.

Muhyiddin Yassin's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic further reinforced PN's appeal among Malay-Muslim voters. His prominence as a political figure during this critical period enhanced PN's visibility and credibility. A survey conducted by the Merdeka Center (2020) revealed that Muhyiddin's approval rating was at the highest 69% and that he had support from 9 out of 10 Malays and Bumiputera respondents, which reflects his effective handling of the pandemic and his pivotal role in facilitating the voter alignment process.

A critical question arises whether UMNO could have performed better in the state election if voter turnout had been higher. Voting lanes 1 and 2, which historically contributed significantly to UMNO's support, did not increase turnout or backing for the party (Figures 2 to 4). A significant proportion of young voters in Malay-majority constituencies began

shifting their support toward PN before and after the pandemic. This shift may be influenced by various factors, including the strategic use of social media messaging, the political campaigns of PN post-Sheraton Move, Islamist indoctrination, and discontent with UMNO's corruption allegations.

This raises an important question: Why has a party with one of the most established electoral machinery, such as UMNO, struggled to influence young voters effectively? Studies by Mohamad and Zulkifli (2023) on Malay voters in Selangor suggest that the Malay electorate has increasingly distanced itself from UMNO due to the party's perceived inability to address socioeconomic issues and its shortcomings in governance. This trend has been exacerbated by the rise of PN, which has presented itself as a viable alternative for Malay voters. Despite this, UMNO and BN retain nostalgic support from certain segments of the electorate who continue to view the coalition as the traditional protector of the Malay community (Mohamad & Zulkifli, 2023).

Semi-urban constituencies illustrate the significant role of voter turnout, ethnic composition, and partisanship in shaping electoral outcomes. In comparison to rural constituencies—predominantly Malay-majority and dominated by Malay-based coalitions—variations in voter turnout have a relatively smaller impact on party performance in these rural areas. By contrast, semi-urban constituencies exhibit greater sensitivity to fluctuations in turnout, which

has a more pronounced effect on electoral outcomes. Urban constituencies, on the other hand, present a distinct dynamic: Pakatan Harapan (PH) has consistently excelled in these areas due to robust support from non-Malay voters. At the same time, Malay-based parties have yet to secure significant electoral success.

Structurally, the diverse ethnic compositions of semi-urban constituencies, which include four Chinese-majority (CM) seats, four high-Malay-majority (HMM) seats, seven Malay-majority (MM) seats, five low-Malay-majority (LMM) seats, and one mixed seat, make them pivotal in determining overall electoral outcomes. These constituencies allow any coalition or party to form a state government, as winning in semi-urban areas often proves critical. During the 15th General Election (GE15), PH secured 28 seats, 11 of which came from semi-urban constituencies, compared to 12 seats won in the preceding state election. The GE15 state election results suggest that UMNO-BN faces considerable challenges in achieving a comfortable majority to form a state government. This underscores the strategic importance of semi-urban constituencies in electoral calculations and highlights the need for parties to adapt their outreach strategies to these areas' demographic and political diversity. BN's performance in semi-urban constituencies during GE15 indicated that the party won two HMM seats, one LMM seat, and three MM seats but lost all Chinese-majority seats (where it had won two seats in the state election). In the state election, BN received

197,741 votes in semi-urban constituencies, but in GE15, it lost 19,336 votes. This reflects a 15% loss of its traditional support base, particularly among Malay voters, and suggests that the increased turnout in these constituencies during GE15 negatively impacted the party's performance.

An analysis of voting patterns across different age groups in Johor, framed within the context of partisanship theory, reveals several important implications. First, consistent with Dassonneville's (2017) and Converse's (1976) findings, a positive correlation exists between higher voter age and increased voter turnout, as observed in the 2022 Johor State Election. However, during the 15th General Election (GE15), voter turnout appeared relatively uniform across age groups. These findings suggest that voter turnout in Malaysia's electoral system is not determined solely by age but also by factors such as election timing, voter apathy, and geographical location. Furthermore, the decline in senior voter support for Barisan Nasional (BN), Malaysia's oldest political party, underscores the fluidity of partisanship. This shift indicates that voter allegiance can transition to other political parties, either temporarily or permanently. Notably, voter behavior appears to be influenced by economic rationality or psychological ties to a particular party and intrinsic motivations, including ethnic and religious values. These value-rational considerations often take precedence over historical party affiliations, reflecting Malaysia's dynamic and evolving nature of political allegiance.

CONCLUSION

This study identified significant variations in voter age and voting patterns across different demographic settings, which were reflected in distinct electoral outcomes in rural, urban, and ethnically majority constituencies. Notably, youth votes in Johor fluctuated in their support for Barisan Nasional (BN) in rural areas between GE14 and GE15. This trend suggests a unique process of alignment and dealignment that emerged during the political shifts and government changes between 2020 and 2022. The findings also highlighted that lower voter turnout tended to benefit parties with strong, long-term partisan support, such as UMNO-led BN, which relies on a base of loyal voters. Nevertheless, the impact of critical moments and the formation of alternative coalitions significantly reduced BN's vote share across all age categories, a pattern observable in both state elections and GE15.

The dynamics of voting patterns across age groups may become increasingly complex in the future, particularly in light of the recent cooperation between Pakatan Harapan (PH) and the UMNO-led BN. This alliance presents a potential ideological conflict, with UMNO's Malay-centric platform contrasting sharply with PH's multi-ethnic coalition framework. This ideological divergence has enabled Perikatan Nasional (PN) to position itself as the primary opposition, consolidating a substantial share of Malay votes. Moving forward, institutional and policy reforms implemented by any party or coalition to address voters' socio-economic concerns

could play a crucial role in shaping voter decisions, particularly during periods of political and economic uncertainty.

However, as this study relied primarily on secondary sources, such as voting streams and general election results, future research could strengthen these findings by incorporating sentiment analysis. Surveys and social media analytics could provide deeper insights into partisanship levels across specific voter categories, including age, education, gender, and income, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of Malaysia's evolving electoral landscape.

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