



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# YOUNG HEARTS AND MINDS

Understanding Malaysian  
Gen Z's Political Perspectives  
and Allegiances

James Chai

**ISEAS**  
YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Young Hearts and Minds: Understanding Malaysian Gen Z's Political Perspectives and Allegiances

James Chai

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The 15th general election (GE15) in Malaysia produced surprising results. The conservative coalition of PN emerged as the dark horse of the election, overtaking the longest-ruling coalition, BN, by a significant margin. The two largest coalitions post-GE15, PH and PN, represent ideological opposites, which may spell a polarized future for Malaysian youths. This paper intends to understand what happened to the youth votes and provide possible hypotheses for future trends.
- In West Malaysia, constituencies with a larger share of young voters (under 30 years old) registered a higher voter turnout rate. A majority of seats with 30 per cent or more of voters under 30 years old (considered “young” seats) were won by PN, followed by PH, and thirdly BN. This demonstrated PN’s relatively stronger hold on young seats in GE15. Discrepancies between pre-GE15 survey findings and actual results could be explained by the Shy PN factor—or PN-leaning voters’ reticence towards revealing their preference—and a swing from BN to PN.
- Of all voter groups, PN voters have shown the highest loyalty and affinity to their coalition of choice, largely led by PAS voters. This is followed by PH and then BN, where the latter has shown the lowest support durability and the highest likelihood of swing. Unsurprisingly, voters from the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum of PN and PH share a high degree of coldness towards each other, implying that a middle ground will be hard to reach between the two voter groups.



- Increasingly, a clean and Islamic government would become a feature that Malay youth voters would favour. PN currently fits this trend the best, although this may change depending on the political climate. BN had over the years lost its clean government credentials, especially with the criminal charges against its party leaders, whereas PH continues to struggle in shedding its image as being dominated by the Chinese community.
- PN and PH voters were almost equal in passive forms of political engagement such as following political news. However, PN consistently ranked higher in active political engagement and belief that their vote matters, which was probably what translated into a marginally higher voter turnout rate. Under all circumstances, BN voters were the least engaged, either actively or passively. In GE15, seats won by PN had a consistently higher median voter turnout rate than non-PN seats.

# Young Hearts and Minds: Understanding Malaysian Gen Z's Political Perspectives and Allegiances

James Chai<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

History books are filled with examples of angry youths, through fierce idealism and economic desperation, forcing through a change in the political landscape, either through protest, political participation and co-option or a peaceful or violent revolution. The self-immolation of a young and poor Mohamed Bouazizi, who exemplified the economic hardship of Tunisia's youth population, sparked an anti-government uprising that soon spread across the Arab World: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain.<sup>2</sup> Professor Mulderig of Boston University argued that the Arab Spring "could not have occurred without the ideological and numerical push of a huge mass of angry youth".<sup>3</sup> The most common protest profile was a young Arab aged 15 to 24, which represented approximately 20 per cent of the population in the region, resulting from years of high birth rates and prolonged lifespans.

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<sup>1</sup> James Chai is Visiting Fellow in the Malaysia Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> U. Abulof, "What Is the Arab Third Estate?", *Huffington Post*, 6 December 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/uriel-abulof/what-is-the-arab-third-es\\_b\\_832628.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/uriel-abulof/what-is-the-arab-third-es_b_832628.html)

<sup>3</sup> M.C. Mulderig, "An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring", Pardee Papers No. 16, April 2013, Boston University, <https://www.bu.edu/pardee/files/2013/04/Pardee-Paper-16.pdf>

An example like this was not uncommon. The 1968 student-led protest in Paris by the National Union of Students of France remains etched in the memories of the French today, as it moved more than 22 per cent of the population into action, bringing the economy to a standstill. In the same historic year, a coalition of students also ushered protests in Mexico, originating from excessive spending on the Olympics Games, which resulted in a tragic massacre and lasting political reforms.<sup>4</sup> The Iran Revolution in 1979 and the Velvet Revolution in 1989 were two other significant marks to show that youths and political change are not strangers.

However, Malaysia's youth story does not share the same history as these significant other cases. Other than a few isolated student protests at university, Malaysian youths have been widely considered as less engaged in politics, partly due to a small, registered voter group, and partly due to laws that discourage political participation among students and youths.<sup>5</sup> In the past, youth voters in Malaysia had consistently lower voter turnout rates than other cohorts. TindakMalaysia director Danesh Chacko offered two examples in Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14) in Sungai Rambai and Batu Lintang, where youths between 21 to 29 years old had a voter turnout rate that was 2–5 per cent lower than other cohorts.<sup>6</sup>

Behind the protests and movements in popular history, many democratic nations struggled to increase youth voter participation and turnout. Political scientists spent decades understanding this problem, attributing low turnout to higher voting costs such as voters being less informed about the voting process, navigating the balance between

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<sup>4</sup> Jesús Vargas Valdez, "Student Movement of 1968", in *Encyclopedia of Mexico* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 1379–82.

<sup>5</sup> Students were considered "out of character" when they engaged politically, as part of decades-long intellectual, physical, and political containment at universities. See M. Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> D. Chacko, "Dissecting Election Statistics", Tindak Malaysia, 1 July 2022, [https://www.academia.edu/82445306/Dissecting\\_Election\\_Statistics](https://www.academia.edu/82445306/Dissecting_Election_Statistics)

earning money and voting, and lacking time to vote in early careers and to plan ahead to vote.

Another common assumption of youth votes was that even if youths turned out at the same rate or higher than other age cohorts during elections, they were more likely to be liberal and progressive in their party or coalition choices. “If you are not a liberal at 25, you have no heart,” so the saying goes.<sup>7</sup> This was the case in the United States (US), where Pew Research in 2019 found that the next generation of voters will be “more liberal, more inclusive, and believes in government”.<sup>8</sup> A recent analysis also found that millennial voters in the United Kingdom and the US no longer broke “one of the oldest rules in politics”—the lifecycle effect—as that generation had maintained or grown in progressiveness, defying the conservative lean later in life, implying a staying preference for progressive choices.<sup>9</sup> This was similar in Malaysia as the common assumption was that young voters generally favour the politically progressive, multiracial bloc of Pakatan Harapan. An example of this was the Muar parliamentary seat in 2018 where there was a strong correlation between the age of voters and PH’s likelihood of victory in the district.

In 2019, Malaysia passed game-changing constitutional amendments to lower the voting age to 18 and allow for automatic voter registration (under the bill commonly called “Undi18”),<sup>10</sup> which created an influx of 5.8 million new voters into the system. There were 6.0 million voters between 18 to 29 years old, with the Gen Z population (18–24 years old) standing at approximately 3.5 million voters. This came at a time when

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<sup>7</sup> Quote Investigator, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/02/24/heart-head/>

<sup>8</sup> C. Itkowitz, “The Next Generation of Voters Is More Liberal, More Inclusive and Believes in the Government”, *Washington Post*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/17/next-generation-voters-are-more-liberal-more-inclusive-believe-government/>

<sup>9</sup> J. Burn-Murdoch, “Millennials Are Shattering the Oldest Rule in Politics”, *Financial Times*, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c361e372-769e-45cd-a063-f5c0a7767cf4>

<sup>10</sup> “Undi18” translates literally to “Vote at 18”.

coalitions were regarded as the most competitive in election history, with many analysts predicting that no coalition would obtain a clear majority.<sup>11</sup>

Voter turnout and voting choices of Malaysian youths became exceedingly important to understand.

After a brief explanation of the methodology, this paper will start by uncovering what happened in the 15th general election (GE15) that shocked many. We are particularly interested in the voter turnout and the voting choices of youths. The findings show that youths turned out to vote in droves, defying conventional beliefs, and many youths surprisingly preferred the most politically conservative choice, bucking the theoretical and international trend of youths preferring progressive choices. Then, this paper will look into three areas that shall be divided into their respective sections: I. Party choice and durability of support; II. Political orientation and priorities; III. Voter turnout and political engagement. For each of these sections, the paper shall also include an “Outlook” section to infer the future trajectory based on what we know now.

Understanding the youth vote in GE15 is not purely an exercise of election analysis. Instead, the growing polarization of Malaysian youths to the political extremes could provide hints of the future political character of the country and the region. The ideological and numerical force of Malaysian youths that was easily missed has now become too strong to ignore. After all, in any country, demographics are destiny.<sup>12</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

The primary tool for analysis in this paper is the profiles of voters supporting each major coalition—PN, PH, and BN. The identification of voters with their coalition of choice derives from the respondents’ self-proclaimed primary support for a particular coalition, when asked

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<sup>11</sup> List of key analysts’ predictions found here: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/644822>

<sup>12</sup> P. Elliott, “Are Demographics Destiny? Maybe Not, New Pew Numbers Suggest”, *TIME*, 30 June 2021, <https://time.com/6077158/pew-election-2020-report/>

the “Sunday question”: *If a General Election is held this Sunday, which coalition would you vote for?* A computer-assisted telephone survey was conducted nationwide on 5–30 September 2022, before GE15 was announced.<sup>13</sup> Two months after GE15, from 14 January 2023 to 10 February 2023, a series of focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews were conducted for select survey respondents to validate and elaborate on their earlier answers.

It is important to note that this paper does not intend to exhaustively cover all possible voter profiles for each coalition. Rather, it only describes the most common one as a directional tool for analysis. This is because the main purpose of this paper is to uncover the *differences* between the primary voter profile for each major coalition rather than develop a comprehensive account for each voter profile.

Importantly, this paper also precludes the East Malaysian voter profile due to a lack of space and resources. The diversity and uniqueness of East Malaysian politics meant additional and specific research (surveys and focus groups) would have to be carried out to gather nuances. Using the current constrained datasets would produce imperfect comparisons, and thus a wholesale exclusion is more justified here.

After developing the voter profiles for the coalitions, comparisons are made on Gen Zs’ political beliefs and actions. To do this, high-level GE15 results were used to complement the telephone surveys and focus group discussions (including interviews) as mentioned above.

## **WHAT HAPPENED IN GE15**

True to most predictions, Malaysia had its first hung parliament after all 15,677,567 votes (74 per cent voter turnout) were counted. However, most did not foresee the dark horse, the conservative National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional, PN), gaining 42 seats and emerging as the second-

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<sup>13</sup> The survey has a sample size of 805 respondents, nationally representative of gender, race and religion. The sampling method is a multistage design, with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.45$  per cent. The average call length was 17 minutes, covering 45 questions. A pilot survey involving 50 respondents was conducted before being rolled out nationwide to the sample respondents.

largest coalition with 74 seats, only 8 seats behind the first-placed progressive Coalition of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH).<sup>14</sup> Particularly, the Islamic party, Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS), within PN, became the largest party in parliament, whereas the longest-ruling Grand Old Party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), dissipated the most votes and seats to now rank only fifth largest. A “green wave” had swept Malaysia, it would seem.<sup>15</sup>

Being the two largest coalitions, PH and PN possessed the strongest bargaining power to negotiate with other coalitions, parties, and members of parliament (MPs) to form a government; this made BN and the East Malaysian coalition, the Sarawak Parties Alliance (Gabungan Parti Sarawak, GPS), potential kingmakers in the five-day horserace. Eventually, Anwar Ibrahim was announced as the tenth prime minister of Malaysia, leading a coalition of unlikely partners, consisting of his coalition, PH, and long-time rival, BN, as well as GPS, and other smaller coalitions and parties. The latest government and opposition composition at the time of writing is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Government and Opposition Composition for the 15th Parliament in Malaysia<sup>a</sup>**

<i>Government and Confidence and Supply</i>				<i>Opposition</i>			
<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>
PH	DAP	40	81	PN	PAS	49	74 <sup>b</sup>
	PKR	31			Bersatu	25	
	Amanah	8					
	UPKO	2					

<sup>14</sup> The inclinations of each coalition here refer to their political inclinations rather than their economic inclinations, where the differences are less stark.

<sup>15</sup> The colour green refers to the Islamic party PAS’s logo and flag colour, and thus is used to refer to a political shift towards a more conservative and religious direction.

BN	UMNO	26	30		
	MCA	2			
	MIC	1			
	PBRS	1			
GPS	PBB	14	23		
	PRS	5			
	SUPP	2			
	PDP	2			
GRS	Direct	4	6		
	PBS	1			
	PSTA	1			
Warisan			3		
Independents			2		
MUDA			1		
KDM			1		
PBM			1		
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>148</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74</b>

*Notes:*

- a. List of abbreviations: PH (Pakatan Harapan), BN (National Front), GPS (Sarawak Parties Alliance), GRS (Sabah People's Alliance), PN (National Alliance), DAP (Democratic Action Party), PKR (People's Justice Party), Amanah (National Trust Party), UPKO (United Progressive Kinabalu Organization), UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), PBRS (United Sabah People's Party), PBB (United Bumiputera Heritage Party), PRS (Sarawak People's Party), SUPP (Sarawak United People's Party), PDP (Progressive Democratic Party), PBS (United Sabah Party), PSTA (Homeland Solidarity Party), Warisan (Heritage Party), MUDA (Malaysian United Democratic Alliance), KDM (Social Democratic Harmony Party), PBM (Malaysian Nation Party), PAS (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party), Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party).
- b. Among the 74 seats won by PN, PAS's seats are overrepresented by 6 seats as Bersatu candidates in Kelantan (5 seats) and Terengganu (1 seat) contested under PAS's logo. Two independent candidates, from Arau and Maran, also contested under a PN ticket but joined PAS after GE15. All these seats are parked under PAS here for convenience.



In terms of the geography of victory of PN, BN, and PH in GE15 illustrated in Figure 1, it was still the case that PH was dominant in urban seats, whereas the most-rural areas were captured by PN voters. The stronghold of PN lies where PAS was traditionally powerful, i.e. the northern region of West Malaysia, namely Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah.

Figure 1 will become important in partially explaining the discrepancies in political engagement between different coalition voters later. Suffice it to say here that the PN voters, concentrated in rural areas, were able to mobilize for voter turnout and voting PN due to stronger communal ties normally absent in urban centres which favour PH. This has resulted in a median voter turnout that was consistently 1 per cent higher in PN seats than in non-PN seats.

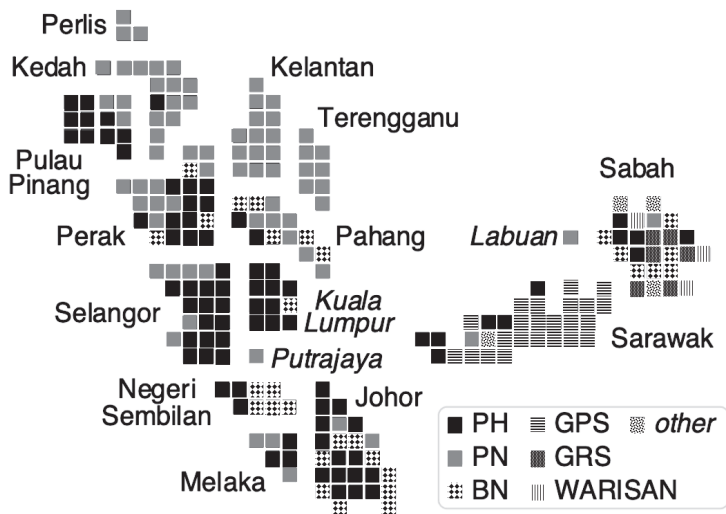
Looking specifically at the youth votes, the voting trend seemed to favour PN. We have estimated the rankings of coalitions based on the victors at the seats with 30 per cent or more voters aged 30 years old and below (under-30s). 81 seats met this criterion. As shown in Figure 2, PN won 33 seats (41 per cent), ranking first, before PH which won 19 seats (23 per cent), and third place went to BN, with only 10 seats (12 per cent).

This implied that PN led the youth votes, followed by PH, and lastly BN. It is not too far-fetched to say that PN has displayed relative dominance in the youth segment in GE15.

This result fell out of the expectations of many analysts, including us, as we had expected PN to rank third, behind PH and BN. Around two months before GE15, we asked youth respondents in a survey which party or coalition they would vote for assuming the general election was around the corner. PH+MUDA's electoral pact ranked highest, receiving 22 per cent of total respondents' first choice. This was followed closely by BN with 20.6 per cent, and lastly by PN's 11.9 per cent. As expected in most telephone surveys, almost half of the respondents (45.7 per cent) refused to answer or were unsure of their choice at the time of the survey. The result is shown in Figure 3.

The discrepancy between the survey findings and actual election results needs to be addressed. There are two possible hypotheses: The Shy PN factor and a BN swing.

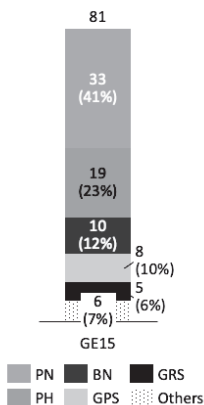
**Figure 1: Geography of Coalitions' Victory in GE15**



Source: Cmglee, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. (Colour legends modified by this author.)

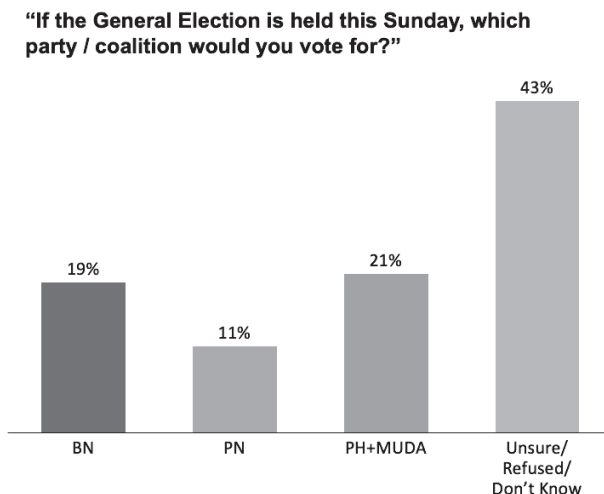
**Figure 2: Young Seats with 30 per cent or More Under-30s**

Young seats (30% or above of Under-30s)  
Share of seats by coalitions



Source: Author's computations from GE15 results and electoral roll.

**Figure 3: Pre-GE15 Coalition of Choice**



The Shy PN factor is most likely. Like Conservative voters in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, PN voters probably did not divulge their voting preference in surveys, resulting in a significant undercalculation of the coalition’s support levels. At the recruitment stage of the focus group discussion that followed the telephone survey, it was also two times harder to recruit PN supporters compared to PH (7 per cent vs 15 per cent success rate). A sizeable number of respondents who said they would vote for BN in the telephone survey turned out to be PN supporters in the focus group, indicating the classic Shy PN factor once again. When the moderator asked Malay respondents about the hesitancy of their peers in joining such a study, they attributed it to a general shyness (“*Malu la nak kongsi pasal politik*” or “So shy to share about politics”) and a lack of knowledge. They acknowledged that the latter reason was ironic as their Malay peers would readily share about politics on social media. This was consistent with our findings above that while PN supporters may not be confident about their knowledge (passive political engagement), they were more likely to share on social media (active political engagement); this phenomenon will be explained in the penultimate section of this paper.

In addition, or alternatively, a BN swing might also have occurred. In the survey, we asked youth respondents which coalition they would vote for if they had a hypothetical second vote. In this simulation, respondents were reminded that they could vote for the same coalition again. In Table 2, it was found that BN voters were the least loyal of the three coalitions; only 31 per cent of BN voters would vote for the same coalition. A higher percentage of them (33 per cent) would migrate to PN, which may be what happened in GE15. It is interesting to note that PN voters were most loyal, with slightly more than half (51 per cent) choosing to stay with the coalition, whereas PH+MUDA voters had the highest percentage of “Others/unspecified” (27 per cent), which mostly meant them not voting altogether, but that they were otherwise loyal. In terms of youth voter turnout in GE15, however, it was less surprising.

As it turned out, in GE15, the voter turnout (absolute) was higher than in previous elections (Figure 4), despite a generally more subdued climate during the campaigning period. It is surmised that the overall high voter turnout was driven by the participation of youth voters. In the top 30 seats with the highest share of young voters (highest percentage of voters below 30 years old, or under-30s), the turnout rate was almost equalled to the national average of 73 per cent, compared to the 30 seats with the lowest share of young voters, that had a lower turnout rate of 72 per cent. In West Malaysia, the percentage of under-30s was positively correlated with voter turnout in those seats (Pearson correlation of +0.382). The correlation was even stronger when comparing the percentage of 18–20-year-olds with voter turnout (Pearson correlation of +0.430). For instance, Sungai Buloh, which has the highest percentage of under-30s (37 per cent) had a voter turnout of 83 per cent, which was approximately 10 per cent higher than the national average.

Though defying the general youth vote literature, this was in line with our pre-GE15 survey findings.

On a general level, all youth voter groups, including fence-sitting voters, felt a great sense of voter efficacy, a duty to vote, and turnout likelihood.

Seventy-six per cent of respondents felt that voting makes a difference in how the country caters to the youths, indicating optimism that a government that cares for the youths will eventually alleviate youths’

**Table 2: First-Choice and Second-Choice Parties: Support Base and Potential Swing Votes<sup>a</sup>**

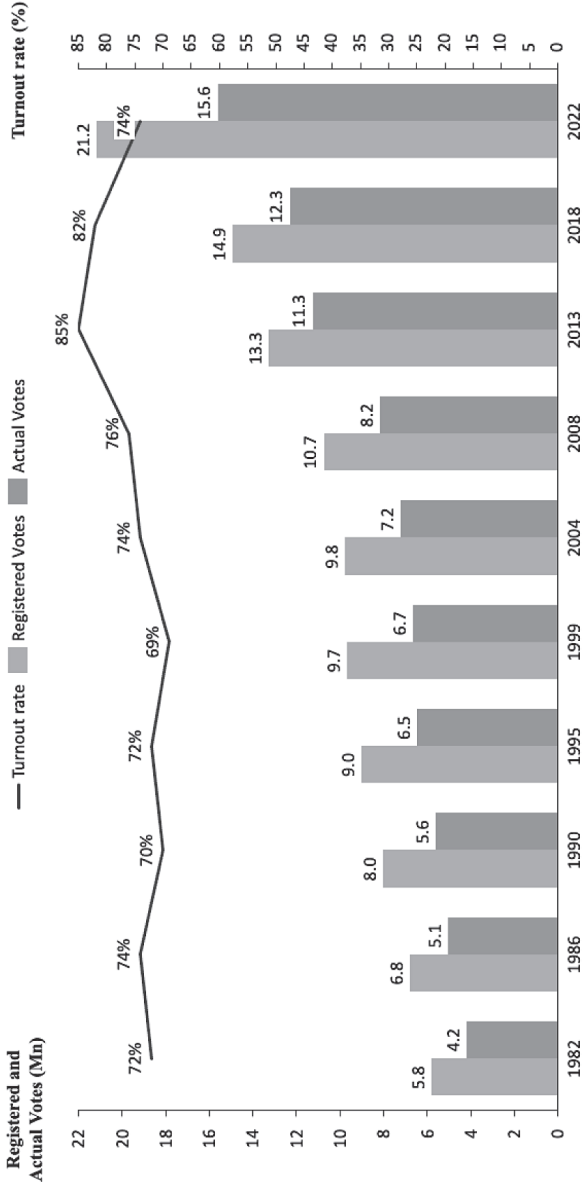
First-Choice Party/ Supporters	Second-Choice Party/Potential Swing Destination					Total
	%	BN	PN	PH+MUDA	Others/Unspecified	
BN		<b>31</b>	33	25	11	100
PN		34	<b>51</b>	6	9	100
PH+MUDA <sup>b</sup>		18	15	<b>40</b>	27	100

*Notes:*

a. Bold numbers represent the core supporter base; italicized numbers represent the potential swing vote; respondents who answered “Others/Unspecified” as their first choice and answered the same for their second choice are excluded from this analysis.

b. The swing propensity of PH+MUDA is calculated using the median of PH and MUDA’s swing to the respective swing destination. For instance, the 17.4 per cent swing propensity from PH+MUDA to BN is calculated using the median of PH’s swing to BN, 16.7 per cent, and MUDA’s swing to BN, at 18.1 per cent, giving 17.4 per cent. For instance, the 16.9 per cent propensity to swing from PH+MUDA to BN is calculated from the median of PH’s swing to BN, 20 per cent, and MUDA’s swing to BN.

**Figure 4: Overall Voter Turnout (Absolute), Registered Votes, and Turnout Rate in General Elections from 1982 to 2022**



Source: “Malaysia”, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/221/40>

predicaments. Additionally, 79 per cent of them felt that voting itself makes a difference in who wins. It should be unsurprising, therefore, that 79 per cent of respondents said that they were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to vote in GE15, as it was rooted in a deep sense of duty as a citizen, a sentiment shared by 89 per cent of the Gen Z respondents. This turned out to be similar to the pattern of youth voter turnout in GE15.

In GE15, youth voters turned out in large numbers to vote, defying traditional literature that found youth voter turnout rates to be consistently lower than that for other age cohorts. Furthermore, youth voters voted for PN on many occasions, defying survey and analysts’ expectations. The next few sections will examine the reasons for voting choice, political orientation, and voter turnout, with each containing a concluding outlook.

## **I. PARTY CHOICE: SPECTRUM OF LOYALTY**

Why did youth voters choose one coalition over the other?

Generally, youth respondents (53 per cent) choose a coalition because of the ideas and/or policies they represent. Since policy positions and discussions do not feature heavily in the mainstream discussion, we could only surmise “policy” to mean a general position that each coalition represented, i.e., PN as an advocate for a conservative Malay-Muslim country, and PH as a progressive, multiracial future.

The second-most popular reason for their coalition of choice is more diverse, where PH and BN voters choose their coalitions because “Others are worse”, and PN voters would choose the “Coalition” as the driving reason.

These findings were consistent with focus group discussions where PH voters did express a “lack of choice” in why they went for PH, in that they “don’t like other parties/coalitions”, and thus were more likely to stick to the choice for a while until a similarly credible, but sufficiently distinct, choice emerges as an alternative.

On the other hand, BN voters still believed their coalition had legacy benefits from governing since independence but were troubled with corrupt leadership (referring to the most recent party presidents Najib Razak and Ahmad Zahid Hamidi). Two respondents said:

BN ... is an experienced political coalition in Malaysia. They had lost [in GE14 and GE15] not because of the coalition but their leaders who perhaps had lost credibility among the voters of all races. Not because of the coalition. The coalition is still good. But for their [BN] leaders, perhaps PH and PN would not have won. *(19 years old, Male, Malay, 14 January 2023)*

BN lost for one reason: Rampant corruption ... Because of this one issue, many youths voted against BN to give a chance to another party. *(23 years old, Female, Malay, 14 January 2023)*

PN voters showed more tolerance for the make-up of the coalition and would not abandon the coalition for another simply because there was another partner they did not prefer, like Bersatu. In other words, a staunch PAS supporter would likely still vote for PN even if a Bersatu candidate was put up. This degree of loyalty and affinity, as elaborated below, is seen in one respondent's answer:

For me, like PH, I do not support them. But for me, I support their manifesto. They want to eliminate corruption in this country. Reducing government expenditure and reducing cabinet size. For instance, the Prime Minister [Anwar Ibrahim] had pledged to not take a salary—I agree with this decision. One more thing, with their manifesto now, they also want to empower the youths. That means I agree with their [PH's] manifesto, but I do not support them. *(19 years old, Male, Malay, 14 January 2023)*

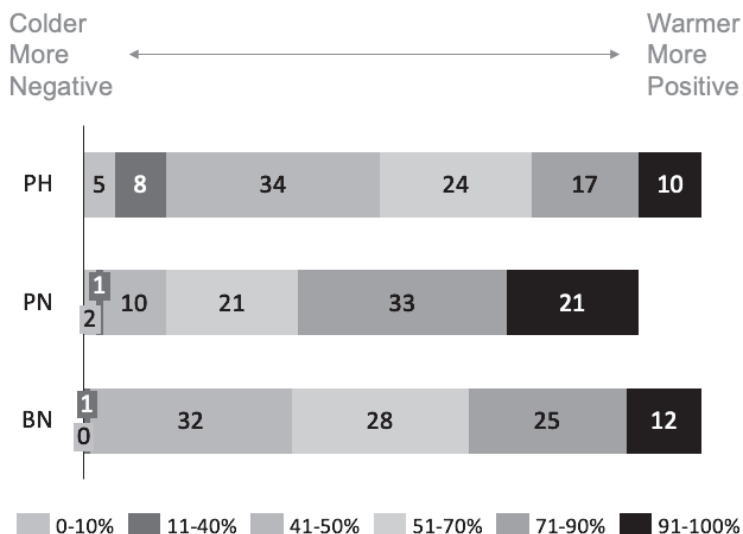
That means even though PN voters may agree with policies and actions by other coalitions, their support for PN would not be easily wavered, though this does not imply a permanent stance.

Relatedly, we also asked youth respondents to gauge how they *felt* about their chosen coalition and others on a thermometer of 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest). This was to help us assess the durability of their choices and the distance to an alternative.

Of all groups, PN voters have the highest affinity for their coalition, as shown in Figure 5. More than half (54 per cent) of them show warmth beyond 71 per cent, with 21 per cent of them showing extremely high



**Figure 5: Affinity Thermometer for the Coalition of Choice**

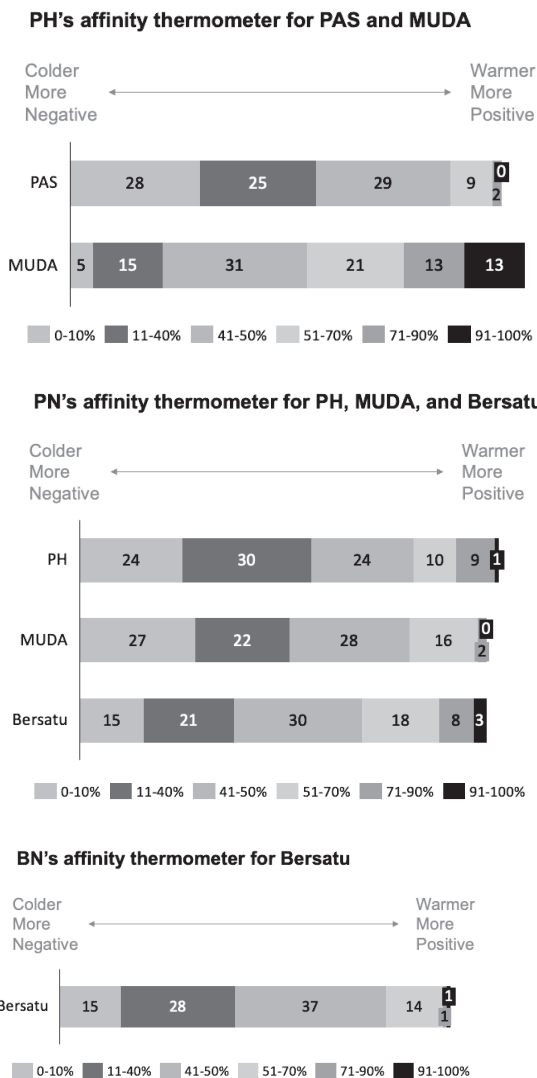


*Note:* Does not include respondents who answered “I don’t know” or “Refuse to answer”. In other words, PN supporters have the highest percentage of users who stated “I don’t know” or “Refuse to answer”, consistent with their general reticence.

warmth of above 91 per cent–100 per cent. It is noted here that PN’s affinity is dominated by the sentiments of PAS voters, whose loyalty is highest among all voter groups. This is compared to BN and PH supporters where the percentage of voters who show warmth beyond 71 per cent are only 39 per cent and 27 per cent respectively. Most BN and PH supporters prefer their coalition at a warmth slightly above average (51 per cent–70 per cent), signifying loyalty that is largely conditional upon performance.

In terms of how voters felt about other parties or coalitions, the most obvious tension exists between PAS, PH, and MUDA. As seen in Figure 6, around 28 per cent of PH+MUDA voters felt coldest towards PAS (0 per cent–10 per cent). Only 2 per cent of PH+MUDA voters rated PAS on the highly positive scale of 71–100 per cent. This was significantly worse

**Figure 6: Select Affinity Thermometer for Other Party or Coalitions**



*Note:* Does not include respondents who answered “I don’t know” or “Refuse to answer”.

than how the same voter group felt for BN and Bersatu. This feeling was reciprocated, where 24 per cent and 27 per cent of PAS/PN voters felt the coldest (0–10 per cent) for PH and MUDA respectively.

The tension between PAS and PH voters is more understandable as they sit on ideologically opposite ends. PH supporters use “moderate”, “hope”, “multiracial” and “multiculturalism” to describe PH, and employ opposite adjectives of “extreme”, “conservative” and “Islamic” to describe PN and PAS. The focus group respondents of PH supporters speak of their concern about an extremist trend led by PAS, while also acknowledging that there are little to no areas where they can see eye to eye. A recent example of a PAS-led government banning gambling licences in Kedah was brought up as an example of where the PH supporters disagree with PAS:

Kedah is closing Toto 4D [gambling outlets]. They are not renewing their business licences. They are stopping people from gambling. But hey, Lunar New Year is coming; everyone needs to play. [Gambling] is in our culture. I think an Islamic country will make the whole country less tolerant. We are not non-Muslims, so we don’t want to be controlled by Islamic law. *(22 years old, Male, Chinese, 14 January 2023)*

Another respondent spoke of her fear of an Islamic country governed by PAS:

We are a multiracial country. We can respect them, but just because we eat pork and drink alcohol doesn’t mean we disrespect others. Some Chinese don’t eat beef, but you don’t see us demanding that McDonald’s not sell beef. We chose to compromise and not sell pork. So, why can’t we tolerate each other? At the end of the day, if we become an Islamic country, it will be time for us to migrate. *(23 years old, Female, Chinese, 14 January 2023)*

On the other hand, PN supporters felt that PN’s performance during the COVID-19 period was good, and the Islamic nature of the coalition would give Muslims an “advantage” by making the country more

Islamic. Though their impression of PH is not inconvertible, they feel the dominance of non-Malays, primarily the Chinese in DAP, is something they could not accept. One focus group respondent talked about how PH “oppresses” the Malays, but when pressed for an example, she did not provide one, either because she could not pinpoint one or her statement was grounded more in sentiment than reality.

This is my personal opinion—PH oppresses the Malays. Most of the parties under PH are dominated by the Chinese. In my opinion, PH leaders are also without integrity. That’s my opinion, I’m sorry ... We see this in the fights on social media. For instance ... hard for me to explain, but that’s my personal opinion on PH.  
*(23 years old, Female, Malay, 14 January 2023)*

Relatedly, focus group respondents also pointed to how PH overpromised and underdelivered, referring mainly to the coalition’s administration in 2018–20. However, PN voters acknowledged that PH represented a diverse segment of society, and the latter even had a coalition partner in Sabah.

Importantly, the tension that exists between PN (chiefly PAS) and PH contributes to the polarization among youths today. Based on the findings here, it seems unlikely that both groups would compromise their ideologically opposing positions in the near term.

The tension between PAS and MUDA, on the other hand, is more obfuscating. The coldness PAS voters feel for MUDA seems to be rooted in either a lack of familiarity due to MUDA’s newness or perception of liberalism and urbanism that are misaligned with PAS supporters’ beliefs. This could explain the lack of support MUDA received in almost all the 6 constituencies it contested, winning only 1 with a thin margin of 1,345 votes. Even in its winning seat of Muar, helmed by party president Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, PN won most of the votes (6,097 votes vs MUDA’s 5,288 votes) and streams (20 out of 33 streams) representing the youngest voters in the area, helped mainly by youth voters in Malay-majority rural and semi-urban enclaves.

A few other brief observations are also worth making here. First, despite a low likelihood of swing, PN voters’ impression of BN is

generally neutral, with only 26 per cent of them giving a warmth below 40 per cent. This could be substantiated by focus group respondents' feedback where Malay respondents thought BN was experienced and still a good coalition but for corruption scandals that plagued its leaders.<sup>16</sup>

Second, not all PAS supporters share the same affinity for Bersatu despite being in the same coalition. About 15 per cent of PN voters (mainly PAS) rated Bersatu 0–10 per cent on the affinity scale, not far from the 15 per cent of BN supporters and 20 per cent of PH supporters who rated the same, indicating a shared coldness for the party infamous for high-profile defections and disloyalty. On the other end of the scale, only 11 per cent of PN supporters rated Bersatu positively between 71 per cent and 100 per cent.

Third, BN voters' positive affinity for Bersatu was the lowest among all the groups they rated. Only 3 per cent of BN voters rated a positive 71–100 per cent for Bersatu. This is likely due to a deep-seated resentment they felt for Bersatu, a splinter party from UMNO and its most direct competitor, that has taken its share of seats and grassroots operations and support.

Lastly, the mutual affinity between PH and MUDA voters is high. This should not be surprising considering the ideological similarity between the two groups of voters. However, this might also spell trouble in cooperation in the years to come as they will evidently compete for the same market of voters. The Muar example above shows that MUDA continues PH's struggle in failing to make inroads into rural and semi-urban Malay areas, thus reducing MUDA's value to PH.

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<sup>16</sup> One respondent said, "If it wasn't for [poor] leadership, maybe PH and PN would not have won [so many seats]." (*19 years old, Male, 14 January 2023*).

## **OUTLOOK**

1. *PN voters are likely to be loyal and feel most positively about its coalition.* No other voter group shares as much positive affinity for its coalition of choice. Though this does not preclude the possibility of a swing, PN voters are the least likely to do so compared to others. However, they are also the group that is hardest to read and understand, given their shyness in responding to opinion polls and focus groups.
2. *Tensions between PN (PAS) and PH+MUDA voters will likely persist.* Both groups share cold feelings for each other as they stand at ideological opposites, making it hard to reach compromises. As these two coalitions gain headway, it is likely to drive the country into a more polarized future.
3. *Support for BN and PH will likely stay the same if its leadership prevails.* BN's support will continue to dissipate if its leaders are perceived to be corrupt by the voters. Whereas PH's support shall remain stable for the foreseeable future until another moderate, multiracial coalition comes around.

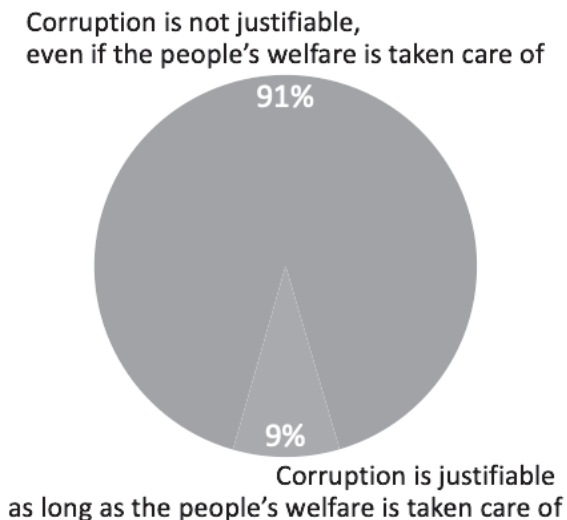
## **II. POLITICAL ORIENTATION: RELIGION GAINING PROMINENCE BUT RACE PERSISTS FOR ALL**

### *Economic Policy: Clean and Responsive Government*

The clearest signal that youth respondents have sent is that they want a government that is clean of corruption.

When asked if they could tolerate corruption in government if the people's welfare was taken care of anyway, 91 per cent of the youth respondents said they would not tolerate it under any circumstance (Figure 7). Only 9 per cent stated the opposite. There were no noticeable differences between each voter group on this question. Years of corruption in Malaysia have probably shaped the psyche of young Malaysians, reaching its nadir with the globally infamous 1Malaysia Development

**Figure 7: Tolerance for Corruption**



Berhad (1MDB), which was considered “the world’s biggest financial scandal”.<sup>17</sup> Focus group respondents found hope in the jailing of the former prime minister, Najib Razak, in 2022, as it revived their belief in the independence of public institutions. Gen Zs’ vehement belief in a clean government was also a contributing factor to BN’s dissipation in support, dropping to an all-time low with only 30 seats in parliament today.

The foundation for insisting on a clean government could be the recognition that corruption comes with a huge economic cost to society. When asked to state one policy area that matters most to the respondents, Gen Zs expectedly chose economic concerns as a priority. The economic concerns listed could be broken down to:

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<sup>17</sup> R. Ramesh, “1MDB: The Inside Story of the World’s Biggest Financial Scandal”, *The Guardian*, 28 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/28/1mdb-inside-story-worlds-biggest-financial-scandal-malaysia>

- Unemployment or job opportunities
- High cost of living or inflation
- Unfavourable economic outlook
- Social welfare assistance
- Low income or wages

Persistent cost pressure has made economic sentiments among ordinary Malaysians gloomier over the years. A declining real wage level also plays a part as consumers feel that their purchasing power has weakened. It goes without saying that any coalition that intends to win their support will have to present an economic plan that has a tangible and long-term positive effect on their livelihoods.

We asked Gen Zs to role play as a government to distribute RM100 to five fixed economic policy areas: education, healthcare, jobs, housing, and climate change. This would allow us to understand not only ranked importance but also the *degree* of importance. The findings show that education and healthcare matter most.

According to Figure 8, education carries the bulk of the distribution, with healthcare second by a small margin. To most Gen Zs, this makes sense as education is a prerequisite to a developed country, and the episode of COVID-19, with insufficient hospital beds and wards, reminded them of the importance of health. A few respondents consider education and health to be closely connected as a nation of good doctors must start with having high-quality education.

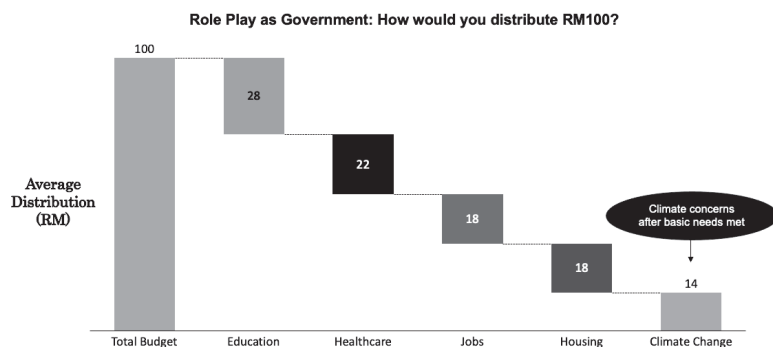
Interestingly, climate change, at RM14 or 14 per cent catered to it, ranked last, though the number is significant. The basic inference from this distribution method is that climate concerns only come in after basic needs have been fulfilled.

It is surmised that a more targeted off-election campaign that lays out education and healthcare plans for youths would attract their attention. Although it is good practice to roll out manifesto promises that touch on the areas that youths care for, it is important to do it frequently in a way that reaches them.

There were no ranking differences between each voter group. The only obvious difference was the weightage put in each bucket. Generally, PH voters would allocate to education and healthcare at a significantly



**Figure 8: Issues That Matter by Economic Areas in a Budget**



higher amount than PN and BN voters. Due to this, the allocation that PH reserved for climate change was far lower than other groups. Additionally, PH and BN voters would also put slightly more into jobs over housing, whereas PN voters would allocate to these two policy areas equally. However, the differences here are not significant enough to report nuanced differences.

### *Political Fault Lines: Religion Heightens, Race Persists*

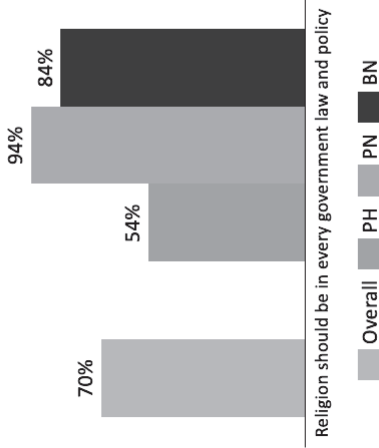
Political fault lines appeared when discussing the importance of religion in government.

The survey found that 70 per cent of respondents want a government where religion is part and parcel of all laws and policies (Figure 9). The remaining 30 per cent prefer religion and laws and policies to be kept separate. Granted, this feature has been something that only Malay respondents have preferred, though overwhelmingly. Given that Malay youths represent most of the population, that became the dominant feature that is required in government.

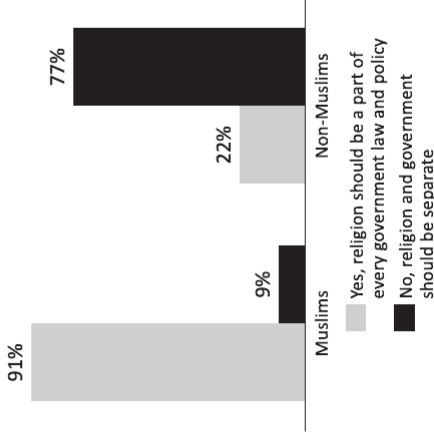
The majority view is largely carried by PN and BN supporters, which consist of mostly Malay voters. Ninety-four per cent of PN voters support religious and governmental harmony, closely followed by BN voters, where 84 per cent think the same. Only slightly more than half of PH supporters (54 per cent) feel the same way.

**Figure 9: Religion in Every Government Law and Policy, by Party and Religious Split**

**Religion in every government law and policy**



**Religion in every government law and policy**



In terms of the religious split, this follows a similar, albeit more exaggerated, divide. As expected, 91 per cent of Muslim respondents say they prefer Islam to be central in government laws and policies, whereas only 22 per cent of non-Muslims support this with the remaining 77 per cent opposed. In fact, to Muslims in the focus groups, this is a reality rather than a desire—Malaysian Muslims have long considered Malaysia an Islamic country and Islam as the official religion, whether this is true in law or not.

The preference for Islam as the heart of government is not surprising when we consider the identity youth respondents are most comfortable with. In the past, Malaysians had considered race their main identity. This has changed with the youths, where 67 per cent of Malay respondents now see themselves primarily as Muslims first. In contrast, Chinese respondents identify most strongly as a Gen Z (55 per cent), whereas Indian respondents still see themselves as Indian first (33 per cent).

Taken together, if anti-corruption and Islam are considered the primary features that the majority of voters prefer, PN has an advantage momentarily as they are deemed to be a clean and Islamic coalition. BN substantially lost its clean government credentials since 2018 after many of its leaders were charged in court, whereas PH as a multiracial coalition, do not have a strong Islamic image in the eyes of Malay voters, although its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, started his political career as an Islamic activist.

Notwithstanding, Muslim respondents' preference for Islam in government contains a degree of nuance. In the focus group discussions, Muslim respondents were at pains to emphasize the need for a government to cater to other races and religions despite regarding Islam as the official religion. This was conveyed repeatedly despite no non-Malays being present in the session, reducing elements of social desirability bias.

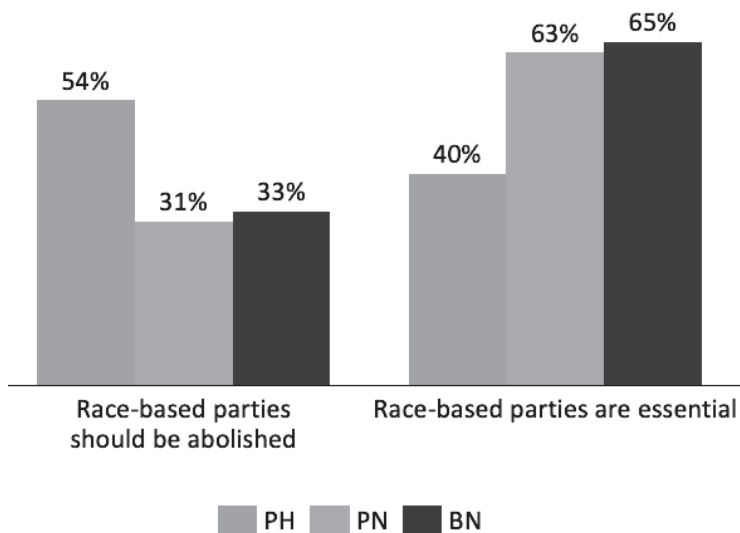
One respondent said, “An Islamic country does not take away the rights of other races. An Islamic country is not for Muslims only, but for every race and religion.” Another respondent said this “balanced” approach was “fair”.

Another key emphasis was on the *type* of Islam that Gen Zs wished to see. When asked to discuss the statement “Vote for BN and PH and you will go to hell”, Gen Z respondents strongly disagreed. Malay

respondents, in particular, said that a statement like this was wrong and no one but God had the right of determining heaven and hell. One respondent said that even though every coalition had its disagreements, no one held the moral high ground in politics. Every Gen Z in the focus group, without exception, considered the statement, commonly uttered by PAS leaders as a campaign narrative, insensitive and going overboard.

The emphasis on religion was not extended to race; rather, the former was almost seen as a replacement for the latter. When asked if they thought race-based parties like UMNO, MCA, and Bersatu ought to be abolished, 40 per cent of respondents thought so, with 55 per cent proffering its essence in society. Granted, PH voters were most in support of the abolishment (54 per cent in favour vs. 40 per cent), but the BN and PN voters who supported abolishment were also substantial, at 33 per cent and 31 per cent respectively (Figure 10). This was a significant shift from the previous generation that saw race-based parties as protectors. Thus, we can confidently say that Malaysia’s youths have made progress

**Figure 10: Abolishing Race-Based Parties**



in this area. In line with the shift of Malay respondents' self-identity as "Muslim first, Malay second", it is also anticipated that race-based parties would lose their lustre over time.

Be that as it may, it is likely that Gen Zs still has a ceiling to its progress on race, as many respondents emphasized the need to adhere to the Federal Constitution. This was done fatalistically for the non-Malays, especially in the special place of bumiputera-Malays in the country. Interestingly, all respondents, regardless of race and religion, felt that race ought to continue to play an important role in certain government policies.

In the survey questionnaire, we asked respondents which government policy should contain a racial dimension, and respondents were allowed to choose more than one. For respondents who chose "Race should not be a consideration in any policy", however, it was sensible that they did not pick any other option.

As shown in Table 3, the majority of youth respondents felt that race should still matter in policies relating to university, primary school, helping the poor, and employment. Race-based policies relating to university appeared top for every voter group: 67 per cent for BN voters, 63 per cent for PN voters, and almost half (47 per cent) for PH voters. Given the unwaning competitiveness for university places, preferences for privileging their respective groups will likely remain.

Around 30 per cent of largely Chinese and Indian respondents felt that race should never be a consideration in any government policy. Unsurprisingly, this was ranked highest for PH voters compared to the other voter groups, with 37 per cent choosing so. However, this number (37 per cent) is still surprisingly low for a group that has traditionally been seen as victims of race-based policies favouring the majority race. This is most probably contributed by the non-Malays' preference for race-based policies in areas where they traditionally retain an advantage, i.e., primary school and employment, either in response or independent of race-based policies that favour the majority.

While this same policy item ranked last for PN and BN voters, 17 per cent and 14 per cent respectively were a substantial number of voters, representing a gradual move away from having policies race-based.

**Table 3: Policies Where Race Should Matter**

<i>Rank</i>	<i>PN</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>BN</i>	<i>%</i>
1	University	63	University	47	University	67
2	Employment	55	Primary school	41	Primary school	61
3	Helping the poor	55	Helping the poor	39	Employment	60
4	Primary school	49	Employment	37	Helping the poor	57
5	Housing	40	Race should not be a consideration in any policy	37	Housing	54
6	Small businesses	38	Small businesses	30	Small businesses	42
7	Government projects	35	Housing	26	Government projects	40
8	Race should not be a consideration in any policy	17	Government projects	24	Race should not be a consideration in any policy	14

To summarize this section, PN and BN voters, which consist mainly of Malays, prefer a clean government that is guided by Islam, preferably a moderate version that ensures the rights of non-Muslims in the country. On the other hand, PH voters, mostly non-Malays, also prefer a clean government but one that emphasizes multiculturalism and keeps religion separate from laws and policies. A majority of PH voters and a substantial minority of PN and BN voters agree that race-based parties ought to be abolished, but they agree that racial considerations still play an important role in certain government policies.

## **OUTLOOK**

1. *A clean and Islamic government will increasingly become an important prerequisite for young Malay voters:* Almost all young Malay voters see the value of having a government that is guided by Islamic values, though a moderate one. This extends to their appreciation for a clean government, a value that is shared with other non-Malay youth voter groups.
2. *Race-based policies will likely persist given that the openness of all races towards a more egalitarian policy framework remains narrow:* Though non-Malays are more insistent on the abolishment of race-based parties, they are still less insistent on abolishing race in all policies. All races are similar in preferring that race still feature as a consideration in select policy areas, most notably in university, primary school, helping the poor, and employment.
3. *Coalitions that could advocate education and healthcare policies will likely have an upper hand compared to other issues:* By far, education and healthcare are regarded as the most important policy areas. Though these two portfolios have consistently received the highest funding in the annual government budget, they are not consistent areas of advocacy and campaigning by coalitions, making them under-tapped areas that may yield political returns.

### **III. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: PN VOTERS ARE ALWAYS-ON**

For this paper, we consider “political engagement” to contain both an active and a passive component. The latter refers to the consumption of political content and a general interest in politics, whereas the former refers to the practical actions taken as a result of that consumption and interest.

The passive political engagement of PH voters was comparable to PN voters, but PN voters were higher on the active political engagement scale. BN voters were the lowest on both types of political engagement. This nuanced difference provides a partial explanation of the marginal differences in voter turnout in the coalitions’ seats.

As seen in Figure 11, around 37 per cent of PH voters read the political news almost every day, and this is comparable to PN where 35 per cent of their supporters do the same. Only 24 per cent of BN voters do so, with most of them reading only a few times a week. When PN voters were asked how interested they were in politics, 46 per cent of them said they were “somewhat interested” to “very interested”, whereas a comparable 42 per cent of PH voters shared the same view. Once again, BN’s voters trailed behind, with only 33 per cent stating their interest.

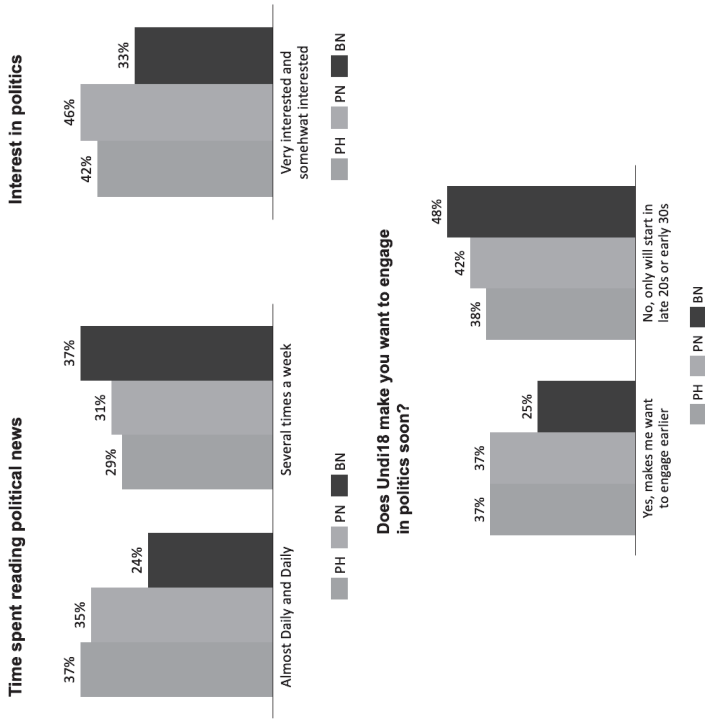
Interestingly, although most youth respondents used social media as their primary tool for reading political news, they were wary of the veracity of what they read. Focus group respondents stated that they would check the platform, writer, and content in question, besides verifying with other sources, before believing what they read. Like most users online, they were sensitive to fake news.

Since youth enfranchisement was recent, we also took the opportunity to ask Gen Zs, half of whom would not otherwise have the right to vote in GE15, if Undi18 changed their motivation to participate in politics. On this front, 37 per cent of PN and PH voters said that they would want to engage with politics early as a result. BN voters, on the other hand, followed a typical lifecycle wait, with 48 per cent preferring to only start engaging with politics seriously in their late twenties and early thirties.

However, this is where the similarities between PN and PH voters stop. Though both voter groups follow political news to a similar degree,



**Figure 11: Voter Breakdown for Reading Political News, Interest in Politics, and Undi18's Impact**



PN voters discuss and share political news significantly more than PH voters.

In the spectrum of daily political engagement of read-discuss-share, discuss and share are considered more demanding actions. As Figure 12 shows, 14 per cent of PN voters discuss the news, and 7 per cent share. This is compared to only 8 per cent of PH voters who discuss and 5 per cent who share. What is additionally interesting is that 46 per cent of PH voters said they have “never” shared political news, compared to a lower 33 per cent of PN voters who said the same. Notably, BN voters who discuss and share the news are higher and equal to PH. Taken in totality, it meant that though PH voters are among the most well-read voters, they are least likely to do anything beyond reading politics.

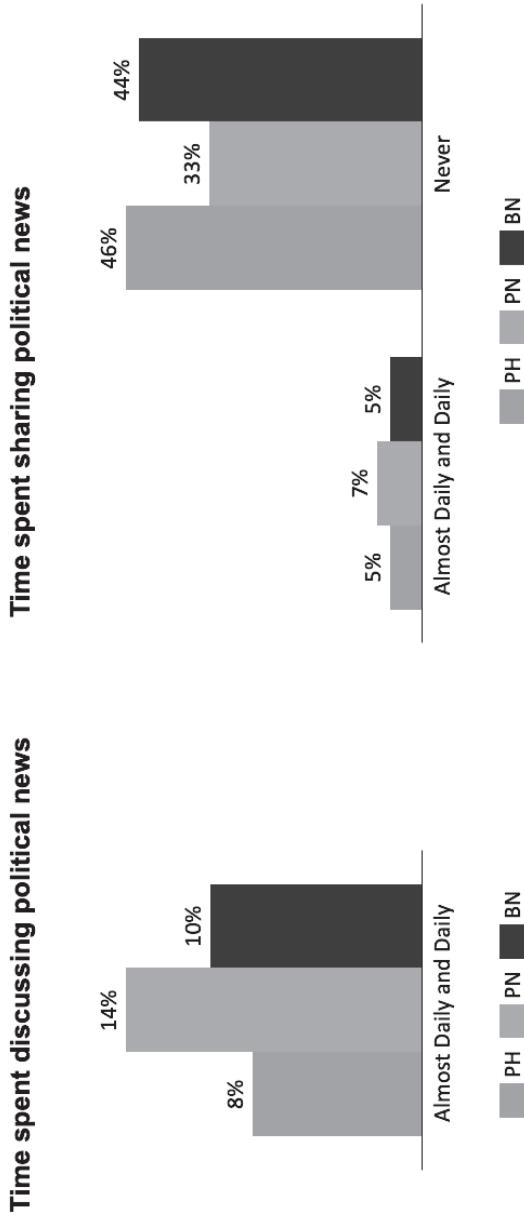
Furthermore, a similar pattern is observed when we asked respondents how much time they were willing to dedicate to community activities that included volunteering, charity, *gotong-royong* and others.<sup>18</sup> Twenty-one per cent of PN voters said they did them at least several times a week. This compares to 6 per cent of BN and PH voters. Interestingly, PH voters are highest in stating “never”, with 34 per cent stating so, compared to 22 per cent of BN voters and only 14 per cent of PN voters.

On the question of the type of community activities respondents were willing to participate in, it was evident, once again, that PN voters were the most willing to join *political* activities. Around 4 per cent of PN voters said they would canvass for votes, and even join a political party, in their spare time. This compares to a low 2 per cent of BN voters and a meagre 1 per cent of PH voters. While it is unsurprising that direct political party participation is low for all youth respondents, it is notable that PN’s action-oriented engagement is still the highest among all, making this voter group the most action-oriented one.

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<sup>18</sup> *Gotong-royong* is a unique community activity in Malaysia where communities gather to clean public areas.

*Figure 12: Voter Breakdown of Time Spent Discussing and Sharing Political News*



The explanation for this can be seen in Figure 1 (under the “What Happened in GE15” section above) which shows the location of victory for each coalition.

PN voters who live in rural areas often have closer communal ties with their neighbours and would organize volunteering, *gotong-royong*, and charity more frequently. The degree of visibility and familism between voters in the community is significantly higher than in urban areas. Adding PAS’s ability to funnel religious leaders for Islamic propaganda, which provides a framework for interaction, the communal tie in rural areas is much stronger, providing a crucial extension from community to politics.<sup>19</sup>

By conflating PAS’s political interest, the state government’s interests, and the community’s needs, voters in these areas were acquainted with politics at a young age and carried on by advancing the interest of the community, party, and state simultaneously, all with Islam as the central part of the political discourse.

This experience is more subdued or entirely absent in urban areas. Although urban dwellers live closer to each other and are more educated on political news, voters are more remote and rarely interact meaningfully the way rural dwellers do. There are fewer community events requiring the participation of all in the community, much less one that is conflated successfully with politics or other unifying themes. Even in well-organized urban areas, the demanding schedule of work takes away the opportunity for urban voters to engage in political and non-political activities beyond voting at the ballot box once every election.

PN voters’ political involvement on the ground provides voters with the confidence of understanding politics. When asked how they would rate themselves in a hypothetical political exam, 17 per cent of PN voters put themselves on the highest scale of 80–100 per cent. Only 8 per cent of

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<sup>19</sup> Azmil Tayeb, *Explaining PAS’s Dominance in Kelantan*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 17/2022 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

PH voters and 10 per cent of BN voters have the same confidence. This is despite the fact that the majority of Gen Z voters, regardless of coalition choices, were able to answer a subsequent political quiz correctly to a similar degree.

This difference between PN and non-PN voters' active political engagement, though minor, contributed to a consistently higher voter efficacy, duty, and turnout likelihood.

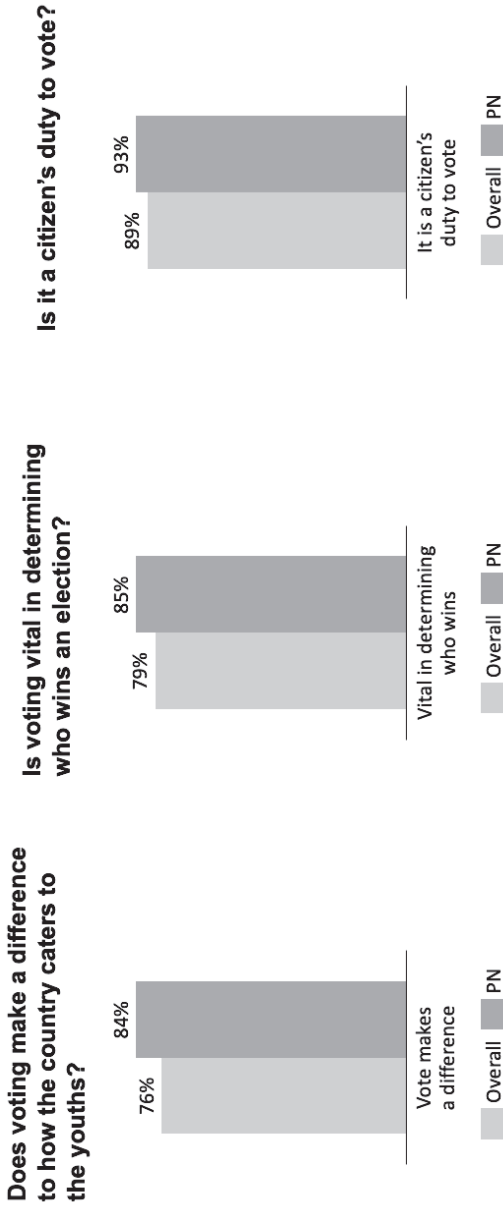
The percentage of PN voters who answered positively to the voter efficacy, duty, and turnout questions is consistently and noticeably higher than for the other voter groups, even though this difference is small.

On the question of whether voting makes a difference in how the country caters to youths, while the average was 76 per cent for all respondents, 84 per cent of PN voters answered affirmatively, as shown in Figure 13. On whether voting is vital to determine who wins, 85 per cent of PN voters believed so, much higher than the average of 79 per cent. On the duty to vote, 93 per cent of PN voters thought it a duty compared to the average of 89 per cent. Lastly, 92 per cent of PN voters said they were likely to turn out on election day, compared to the national average of 79 per cent.

Although these differences may not be substantial, they were nonetheless significant as PN was consistently ranked the top at a margin. This had a noticeable impact on GE15. In seats won by BN and PH, the median voter turnout was 76 per cent, whereas in seats that PN won, the median voter turnout was 1 per cent higher, at 77 per cent. Consistently higher active political engagement despite a moderate passive political engagement appears to be a defining characteristic of PN voters, which had a tangible turnout effect.

In summary, although voters of the three major coalitions did not differ in passive political engagement, where consumption of political goings-on and interest in politics was high, PN voters were more likely to actively engage with politics compared to voters of other coalitions. This could provide a partial explanation for the higher turnout intention and actual turnout rate of PN voters.

*Figure 13: Voter Efficacy and Duty by Comparing Overall to PN Voters*



## OUTLOOK

1. *PN voters will continue to have marginally higher voter turnout because of higher active political engagement:* Due to its more demanding nature, active political engagement (sharing, discussing, community activities) will lead to higher voter efficacy and a duty to vote, which contributes to higher voter turnout. In contrast, passive political engagement (interest and reading) will have less impact on voter turnout.
2. *PN voters' active political engagement will likely stay due to its concentration in rural areas with greater communal ties:* The greater familial and communal ties in rural areas contribute to higher active political engagement, and this will continue to keep PN voters turnout high.

## CONCLUSION

PN is on the ascendency with its supporters more engaged and warmer towards their coalition of choice, showing that the conservative wave is evident among youth voters. PH, however, still retains substantial traction and loyalty with its base, and will likely persist until another moderate, progressive coalition emerges and becomes a viable threat. The oldest governing coalition, BN, is on the decline, with falling loyalty among its supporters as its leaders are seen as corrupt despite its favourable governing legacy.

The youth group is the largest constituency that will likely grow in importance in the general elections to come. Its high turnout rate and concentration in certain seats will give it the largesse to flip the victors according to its desires, as it did in GE15. As youths go through the lifecycle of experiencing underemployment and a high cost of living, economic concerns will continue to have top-of-mind prominence, and parties that can lay a convincing plan will have the upper hand. Religion will gradually replace race as an important background consideration for Malay youths, but their support for PN should not be taken as permanent. Beyond PN's attempts to reach out to youths via TikTok during the

campaigning period of GE15, there has not been a concerted effort by the mainstream coalitions to reach out to them with offerings that matter most. What this research has shown is that despite their lack of confidence in political knowledge, Malaysian youths are aware of the goings-on in politics and have a reasoned opinion on how things should be. We can assume many things about the youths, but the last thing we should assume is that they are not watching.



## APPENDIX A

### Typography of Voter Groups

Voter profiles were generated, based on the findings described in the articles. These are listed in the table below.

An important caveat needs to be made: The voter profiles are generated from youth respondents' self-proclaimed leanings in the telephone surveys and focus group discussions, which may contain inaccuracies and misreporting. Thus, these voter profiles are best used as a heuristic device to understand the relative differences and broad characteristics of each youth voter group rather than an archetypal representation of voter profiles.

	<i>PN</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>BN</i>
<b>Reasons for Voting Choice</b>			
First reason for choosing a party or coalition	Ideas/policy	Ideas/policy	Ideas/policy
Second reason for choosing a party or coalition	Coalition	Others are worse	Others are worse
<b>Affinity Thermometer</b>			
Affinity to coalition of choice	High	Medium	Medium
Likelihood of swing	Low	Low	High
Outside of coalition of choice, warmest to ...	BN	MUDA	PN
Outside of coalition of choice, coldest to ...	MUDA/PH	PAS	Bersatu
<b>Policy Areas</b>			
Opposition to corruption	High	High	High
Religion should be a part of every law and policy	High	Low	High
General leaning	Conservative	Progressive	Pro-establishment

Political Engagement			
Read political news	High	High	Medium
Interested in politics	High	High	Medium
Undi18 impact on political engagement	Medium	Medium	Low
Discuss political news	High	Low	Medium
Share political news	Medium	Low	Low
Likelihood to <i>gotong-royong</i> <sup>a</sup>	High	Low	Low
Likelihood to canvass for political parties	Medium	Low	Low
Voting			
Voter efficacy: Makes a difference to how the country caters to youths	High	Medium	Medium
Voter efficacy: Vital to who wins the elections	High	Medium	High
Duty to vote	High	High	High
Likelihood to turnout	High	High	High

*Note:* a. *Gotong-royong* is a communal activity that typically involves cleaning up a community together.

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