

# PERSPECTIVE

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**Singapore** | 23 January 2020

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## **The Lowered Voting Age in Malaysia: Who Will Benefit?**

*Cassey Lee\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The recent lowering of voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18 will increase the number of new voters in the next general election, which has to be held by 2023, by close to 16 percent.
- The relatively higher share of Bumiputera voters in the new cohort of voters will likely be to the advantage of BN and PAS in GE15.
- Historically, the voter turnout rate tends to be lower amongst new voters. This could benefit the incumbent PH—though this is far from certain.
- The inundation of new voters will intensify competition between the parties, which will all experience a reduction in the number of safe seats going into GE15.
- With the lowering of the voting age, BN and PAS will have greater incentive to cooperate in GE15.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Political consensus on constitutional amendments can be difficult to achieve in the aftermath of regime change in democracies. Such a consensus took place in Malaysia in July 2019 when both the Dewan Rakyat (lower house) and Dewan Negara (upper house) voted to lower the country's voting age from 21 to 18. This was a remarkable event in that it had been only slightly more than a year after Pakatan Harapan (PH) defeated Barisan Nasional (BN) in the country's 14<sup>th</sup> general election (GE14). The political consensus on lowering the voting age could imply that both the PH and BN agree that this was the morally right decision to make. From a political perspective, however, it is possible that both the PH and BN expect to be the main beneficiary of the constitutional amendment. But given that elections are zero-sum contestations, both cannot be right. One party can only win at the expense of another.

## **RATIONALES FOR LOWERING THE VOTING AGE**

The lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 is uncontroversial in that it enlarges the political franchise for citizens. About 86 percent of countries in the world already have 18 years as the threshold voting age (**Table 1**). Many countries lowered their voting age from 21 to 18 after the 1960s. This is not surprising as a person at and above the age of 18 is often officially considered an adult. Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines 'children' as persons up to the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> From a legal perspective, Malaysia's Age of Majority Act 1971 sets 18 years old as the age of majority (adulthood threshold).

Another important rationale for lowering the voting age is the inculcation of civic values of democratic participation at an early age. Finally, in the case of Malaysia, lowering the voting age was an election promise that had been made by PH. Promise number 17 in PH's election manifesto (Book of Hope) states that "The Pakatan Harapan Government will lower the voting age limit to 18 years".

Two additional amendments accompanied the lowering of the voting age, namely, automatic registration of voters and a corresponding reduction in the age limit for electoral candidates. The automatic registration system for voters is scheduled to be implemented within two years, well before the next general election.

**Table 1: Voting Age Around the World**

Voting Age	No. Countries	% Share	Cumulative Share
16	11	4.62	4.62
17	7	2.94	7.56
18	205	86.13	93.70
19	1	0.42	94.12
20	2	0.84	94.96
21	11	4.62	99.58
25	1	0.42	100.00

Source: <https://batchgeo.com/map/voting-age>, Accessed 27 November 2019

### **IMPACT OF LOWER VOTING AGE ON SIZE OF ELECTORATE IN GE15 (2023)**

One of the immediate impacts of the lower voting age will be the significant increase in the size of the voter base. As voting usually takes place once every five years, a new cohort of voters covering a five-year age interval is added to the electoral roll. For example, based on population statistics, the number of new voters that were eligible to vote in GE14 was around 2.6 million or 14 percent of the number of voters.<sup>2</sup> The extent of the increase in the number of voters in GE15 will be larger than this as the lowering of the voting age will increase the five-year age cohort to a one-off eight-year age cohort. Young citizens with age ranging from 15 to 22 years in 2020 will be able to vote in the next general election if it is held 2023, as expected.

Based on official estimates, the voter base is expected to increase by 52.3 percent from 14.9 million voters (in GE14) to 22.7 million voters by 2023.<sup>3</sup> There are no official estimates of the incremental size of the newly franchised voters (18-21) for GE15. However, it is possible to derive a rough estimate of this by using secondary school enrolment statistics from 2018.<sup>4</sup> Conservative estimates for the various categories of voters in 2023 are presented in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2: Composition of Voters in 2023**

Voter Category	Number of Voters	Percent (%)
Registered Voters - Voted in GE14 (2018)*	12,299,514	55.3
Registered Voters - Did Not Vote in GE14 (2018)*	2,641,110	11.9
Unregistered Voters (2018)**	3,800,000	17.1
New Voters (Age 21-25 in 2023)***	2,185,294	9.8
New Voters (Age 18-20 in 2023)***	1,311,176	5.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>22,237,094</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Sources:

\* Media report: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-election-commission-voter-turnout-at-8232-higher-than-initial-76>, Accessed 20/12/19

\*\* Media report: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/482825>, Accessed 20/12/19

\*\*\* Author's estimate

Whilst it is true that the number of registered voters will increase by close to 50 percent by 2023, the actual number of voters participating in an election that is held in that year might be considerably lower. First, a big chunk of the increased registered voters (3.8 million) are voters that were already eligible (age-wise) to vote in GE14 but for some reason did not register to do so. As voting is not compulsory in Malaysia, the automatic registration of these voters may not necessarily convert them into active voters in GE15. Second, the newly franchised voters (age 18-20) will only account for an estimated 5.9 percent of total registered voters (**Table 2**). Third, not all voters aged between 18 and 25 will vote in GE15. In GE14, only 65.6 percent of eligible voters participated in the election whilst the voter turnout (percentage of registered voters that voted) was 82.3 percent. If the same rate of voter participation (65.6 percent) is assumed for the new voters, the number of voters participating in GE15 held in 2023 will increase by an estimated 19 percent – a figure significantly smaller than the 50 percent increase in the number of registered voters (**Table 3**).<sup>5</sup> New voters will make up about 15.7 percent of participating voters in GE15 (2023).

**Table 3: Participating Voters in GE15 (2023)**

Voter Category	Number of Participating Voters	Percent (%)
Previously Registered Voters that Voted in GE14*	12,299,514	84.3
New Voters (Age 21-25 in 2023)***	1,434,213	9.8
New Voters (Age 18-20 in 2023)***	860,528	5.9
Total	14,594,255	100.0

Sources:

\* Media report: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-election-commission-voter-turnout-at-8232-higher-than-initial-76>, Accessed 20/12/19

\*\* Media report: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/482825>, Accessed 20/12/19

\*\*\* Author's estimate – assuming voter participation of 65.6% based on GE14

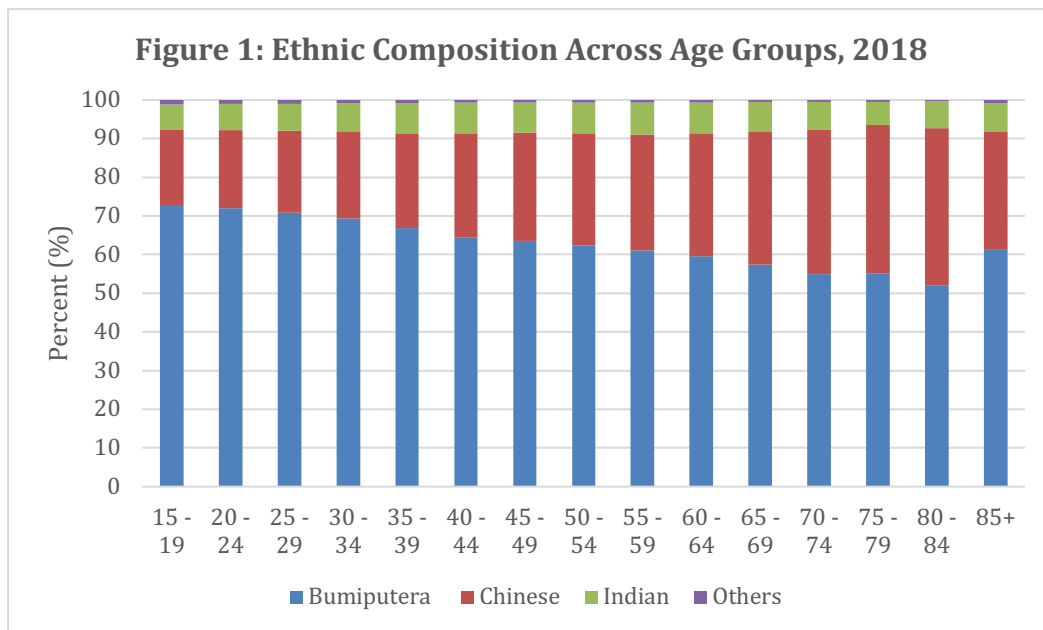
### **ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF LOWER VOTING AGE ON GE15 (2023)**

The lowering of the voting age, without question, will undoubtedly have a very significant impact on the next general election (GE15) which is scheduled to be held by 2023. This impact has several dimensions.

#### *Ethnic Composition of New Voters*

The impact of the lowering of voting age has also been discussed in terms of the ethnic composition of the voters. The Bumiputera's share of new voters (e.g. age group 18-25 in 2023) will be larger. For example, Bumiputera's share of citizens within the age group of 15-19 in 2018 is estimated to be 72.8 percent compared to 19.5 percent and 6.6 percent for Chinese and Indian, respectively. In fact, looking across age groups, the younger an age group is, the larger the proportion of Bumiputra voters (**Figure 1**). This is a long-term consequence of differences in birth rate between the ethnic groups.

What are the implications of this for GE15? Statistical evidence indicates that BN’s share of total votes is positively correlated with Bumiputera’s share of voters in the past three general elections.<sup>6</sup> Does this imply that the lowering of the voting age is likely to be advantageous to BN (and PAS)? The question can only be answered by analysing the voting patterns of the new (and younger) voters in general elections. The data to undertake such an analysis is available at the Election Commission but has not been made publicly available.



*Preferences of New Voters*

The choices of the new voters (aged between 14 and 21 years in 2019) will be determined by their preferences and behaviour, both of which are relatively unknown. There are some surveys that only capture this group partially. The Merdeka Center did carry out a survey on youths aged between 18 and 35 years in July 2019 on behalf of the International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights in Survey.<sup>7</sup> Only 68 percent of the respondents indicated they will very likely vote in GE15 and 85 percent have not made postings about political issues on social media. Economic performance was considered by the respondents (50 percent) to be the important priority of the government. Another survey that partially captured the new voter was the survey of internet users carried out by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 2018.<sup>8</sup> About 7.6 percent of the respondents were from the 15-19 age group. The survey indicated internet usage peaks for internet users in their 20s.

*Voter Turnout Amongst New Voters*

Many of the new voters in GE15 are currently still in the education system, ranging from secondary two (age 15 in 2020) to university (age 21 in 2020). When this group of students become eligible to vote in 2023, some of the youngest voters may still be in school (18-19 years old, secondary six), the majority in colleges (20-23 years old) whilst the oldest would

have 1-3 years of working experience. Research on the impact of lower voting age has indicated that voter turnout is often lower amongst newly-franchised and younger voters but such effects are mitigated when such voters live with their parents. In the case of Malaysia, the majority of new voters (20-25 years old) in GE15 are not likely to be living with parents - thus indicating a possible lower voter turnout. In previous elections, lower voter turnout tended to be advantageous to incumbent politicians from BN. As this is the first time that Malaysia has a “new” incumbent party (PH), the effect of a possible lower turnout by newly franchised voters is uncertain. In addition, research does indicate that young voters’ turnout at a given constituency tend to be higher when the competition is more balanced between contesting parties.

### *New Voters and Political Competition*

The inundation of new voters could intensify political competition, and parliamentary seats won marginally in the previous election (GE14) could be easily lost in GE15. In addition, seats that had been won in convincing landslides could become less safe and more contestable in the presence of large numbers of new voters in GE15. The impact on safe parliamentary seats in GE15 can be estimated by comparing the election margin in GE14 and the increase in the number of voters in each parliamentary constituency in GE15 (assumed to be held in 2023). The data on student enrolment at the district-level for 2018 can be used for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, the cohort of new voters able to vote in 2023 were of ages between 13 and 20 years with a significant portion of them (13-17 years old) in lower secondary schools (secondary one to five).<sup>10</sup> A new electorate size can be estimated if we assume that these students are eventually registered in the districts in which they were schooling in 2018.<sup>11</sup> If a “safe seat” is defined as one in which the margin of victory is more than one thousand votes, the number of safe seats for each political coalition can be estimated for GE14 and for GE15 if held in 2023. For GE15, a seat is no longer safe if the total number of new voters exceeds the margin of victory in GE14. In addition, estimates can be made for two scenarios, namely: (i) three-cornered competition between PH, BN and PAS; and (ii) a two-cornered competition between PH and a BN-PAS coalition. The results for Peninsular Malaysia are summarized in **Table 3**.

The lowering of the voting age will clearly intensify political competition in GE15. This is evident from the reduction in the number of safe seats for all political coalitions in GE15. Who will benefit more from increased political competition will depend on whether GE15 is a two- or three-cornered competition. In a two-cornered fight, in which BN and PAS jointly agree to field one candidate in each constituency, the margin of victory will be slimmer in more parliamentary constituencies. This can be seen from the reduction in the number of safe seats in GE15, irrespective of whether there will be a two- or three-cornered competition in the election.

**Table 4: Parliamentary Elections in Peninsular Malaysia  
– GE14, Counterfactual GE14 (CF) & GE15 (2023)**

Three-Cornered Competition	GE14	GE14		GE15	
	Total Seats	Safe Seats	%	Safe Seats	%
Pakatan Harapan (PH)	98	94	95.9	65	66.3
Barisan Nasional (BN)	49	40	81.6	15	30.6
Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)	18	17	94.4	5	27.8
	165	151		85	
Two-Cornered Competition	GE14-CF	GE14-CF		GE15	
	Total Seats	Safe Seats	%	Safe Seats	%
PH	69	65	94.2	44	63.8
BN + PAS	96	95	99.0	65	67.7
	165	160		109	

Source: Author's Estimates

The reductions in PH's percentage share of safe seats due to new voters are similar in both the three-cornered competition (95.9% → 66.3%) and two-cornered competition (94.2% → 63.8%) scenarios. For both BN and PAS, the incentive to cooperate is strengthened with the lowering of voting age. If BN and PAS fail to cooperate in GE15, the number of safe seats for both parties are likely to decline significantly.

## CONCLUSIONS

The lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 – which will increase the number of new voters by close to 16 percent - will have a significant impact on GE15. The increase in the share of Bumiputera voters will likely benefit BN and PAS, though a lower voter turnout could work to the advantage of the incumbent PH. Political competition will certainly intensify given the inundation of new voters. All political parties will see a decrease in their number of safe seats. Both BN and PAS will have greater incentive to cooperate in GE15 with the lowering of voting age. The lowering of voting age will incentivise political parties to initiate early interventions and programmes to endear themselves to the new voters before the GE15. Given the demographics of these voters, the loci of political contestations are likely to be the education system (secondary and college/university), youth employment (first three years of work experience) and youth mobility.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/faq.html>, Accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> This is based on 2017 population estimates for citizens in the age group 20-24 age group.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2019/07/dewan-rakyat-creates-history-passing-constitution-amendment-bill-through-bipartisanship/> - Accessed 27 July 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Each cohort of secondary school is estimated to be around 437,000 students.

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<sup>5</sup> This conservative estimate is based on the assumption that eligible voters that were not registered during GE14 will continue to abstain from voting in GE15 after they are automatically registered as voters.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix Figures 1a, 2a and 3a. The statistical analysis is available in Cassey Lee. (2019). “Economic Voting and the End of Dominant Party Rule in Malaysia”, in *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs and Late Surge*, edited by Francis Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun. Singapore: ISEAS.

<sup>7</sup> Source:

[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/malaysia\\_youth\\_national\\_survey\\_july\\_2019.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/malaysia_youth_national_survey_july_2019.pdf), Accessed 10/11/2019.

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/Internet-Users-Survey-2018.pdf>, Accessed 10/11/2019.

<sup>9</sup> A more accurate set of data is the population census which reports population distribution at the district level by different age-groups. Unfortunately, the most recent available population census is from 2010 which makes it outdated. The next population census which will be carried out in 2020 will provide more accurate estimates.

<sup>10</sup> The secondary school cohort covers only five of the eight year-cohorts of new voters in 2023. However, this number could be realistic if we assume that only 65 percent of registered voters will actually vote (as in GE14).

<sup>11</sup> This could be a realistic assumption due to automatic voter registration. Most of the new voters will likely to have been issued identity cards at age 12, a year before they enrolled in secondary schools.

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