

## Malaysian 14th General Election: Young Voters & Rising Political Participation

Sara Chinnasamy\*

The University Technology Mara (UiTM)

Norminaliza Mohamed Azmi

The University Technology Mara (UiTM)

### Abstract

The 14th General Election (GE14) was the most exciting general election ever had by Malaysian's ever since its independence in 1957. The high participation of young voters or better known as the 'Kingmaker' which made up 41% of the total voters was the main reason for the topple of Barisan Nasional (BN) government that have administrated the nation for the last 60 years. Given the influence of awareness towards electoral issues and the political knowledge, this paper aims to understand the young voters' participation during election. Guided by Michael Foucault work on theory of power, this paper examined how voters rely on technology to educate themselves on the election issues that become a concern for them before exercising their power by determining and selecting their preferred government. The findings of the data were collected through focus group discussions, involving twelve (12) informants which consist of Malay, Chinese and Indian voters, aged between 21 to 39 years old. From the findings, issues relating to 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), Goods and Service Tax (GST), high cost of living, and National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) had grabbed their attention. Their concerns towards these issues were caused by the economy impact that it has on their daily lives. Influenced by their heavy reliance on social media as a source of information which was easily accessible through smart phones further motivated them to cast their votes despite of their depth of knowledge on electoral processes. Nevertheless, both Government and the Election Commission have a vital role to play in drawing young voters' attention whilst engaging and educating them for the next General Election.

**Keywords:** Malaysia; General Election; Barisan Nasional (BN); Young Voters; Participation.



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### 1. Introduction

Voting is a civil responsibility which needs to be fulfilled by every citizen of a nation in order to maintain its democracy. Voting reflects a common and effective democratic process which expresses the will of the public, their acceptance or rejection towards a political agenda, candidate or the political party (Javaid and Elahi, 2014). Malaysia throughout its independence had experience fourteen (14) General Election, with the recent 14<sup>th</sup> General Election was carried out on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 which had demonstrated a major power transition when the Barisan Nasional (BN) government that has been governing Malaysia for the past 60 years was overthrown by Pakatan Harapan (PH), a group of political alliance made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Bersatu Pribumi (PPBM), Parti Amanah Rakyat (PAN) and Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Research among youth in America, Canada and Britain by scholars such as Soule (2001); (Phelps, 2006); Milner (2007) and Reynolds (2009) found that the young voters turn up during the election were very low due to poor political knowledge as these youngsters tend to distance themselves from politics. The findings also showed a link between voters' political participation and their political knowledge. Throughout years, studies had proven that the participation continue to decline as the voters felt distance due to the lack of attention received from the policymakers. However, the scenario is quite the opposite for Malaysian young voters. Back in June 2017, 1,566,562 out of 14,622,640 i.e. 11% of the registered voters were young voters under the age of 29 (Periasamy, 2018). These young individuals belong to 'Generation Y' or also known as the 'Millennials', referring to those who were born between 1980 - 2000 and well-versed in technological advancement as well as having a heavy reliance on the internet for information (Pandian, 2014). To be eligible to vote during the election, an individual must be Malaysian citizen of 21 years old and must reside in the constituency that they wish to be registered apart from being unrestricted or prohibited by law in force (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, 2018). The participation of these youngsters is important to determine the discourse of Malaysia's administration.

In their ongoing effort to increase young voters' participation in General Election, the Election Commission has gone all out in attracting and encouraging voters to cast their votes by using various awareness campaign through social media platform, electronic media such as TV, radio and not forgetting roadshow campaign. For the competing political parties, RM450 million was spent on political campaigning purposes during the 2018 election as an effort to attract the young and first-time voters to carry out their responsibilities compared to the previous 2013 General Election which was RM400 million (Rahim et al., 2017). Political campaigning and advertising during the Malaysian General Election is not a new thing as it have been utilized since 1999. Since then, it has been practiced

by both government and the opposition in disbursing their political agenda to the public. As a result of these aggressive campaigning, the recent General Election saw 83% of the 278,590 registered voters have fulfilled their voting responsibilities (Zanariah, 2018). Out of this number, 41% consist of young voters making them the dominant age group. With this finding, we noted that Malaysian young voters are eager to cast their votes during the GE14 which might be contributed by their awareness towards issues that arises during the election and knowledge on the election processes.

### 1.1. Voting Engagement Amongst Youth

Voting is seen as a gateway of youth engagement. It is an 'habitual process' according to Kawashima-ginsberg *et al.* (2016) which saw that if an individual had participated in electoral activities since young, they are most likely to keep continuing such act. Voting is importance amongst youth as their opinion on political situation matters, plus their thoughts and participation allows the possibility of electoral impact. The findings above has been explained by (Reddy and Smith, 1973) whereby youngsters who participated voluntarily were aware of their civic obligation which led them to actively seeks for information. According to Sprabary (2015), parents have a major influence over their children involvement in politics. Should the parents are not interested in politics, it is most likely that their offspring will also pay less attention to issues related to politics. Lochocki (2010) stated that young voters' engagement in politics have evolved significantly from merely forming interest group or voting to participating in protest, boycotting and even persuading others to sign petition. Therefore, getting these youngsters to pay attention towards politics requires them to be aware of the ongoing political issues around them apart from having at least basic political knowledge.

Awareness according to Merriam-Webster is synonym with the knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists (Awareness | Definition of Awareness by Merriam-Webster, n.d). Patgiri (2015) explained that political awareness sparks political consciousness of the public on various political phenomena and it is an important tool for democracy to be successful. Professor Tan Sri Ibrahim Abu Shah issued his statement in The Star, commenting on the importance of voting education and its meaning in a democratic society (Ariff, 2017). According to him, political literacy is important to rein in those who have reached the eligible age to register as voters. The public should be aware that the act of voting is apolitical in nature whereby educating the public using campaign drive is a suitable approach to encourage youngsters to participate during election. However, this act should not fall on the responsibility solely to the government. Instead, civil societies and non-governmental organizations have a role to play in inculcating awareness about the system.

According to Chinnasamy (2018), the public actively created a new political culture during the twelve (12) general election by participating online to discuss their political woes on issues such as lagging economic indicators, rising inflation and inequality, ethnic and religious tensions, endemic violent crime, plunging academic standards, and a host of corruption charges (Weiss, 2008) which then led them to engaged with others who share the same view, persuading them to join rallies such as Coalition for Free & Fair Elections (Bersih). Since then, media especially online platform had played extensive role as a medium that disseminated the information to the public. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram become a source of information especially for the young voters apart from relying on traditional media such as television, radio or newspaper. During the thirteenth General Election, our young voters have shifted their focus to neutral topics such as peace promotion, nation stability, racial unity apart from plaguing issues such as, kleptocracy, cronyism, economic concerns, and unemployment (Rahim *et al.*, 2017). Despite the shift of their political concern, young voters still have high dependency on social media as their source of information.

#### 1.1.1. Young Voters Participation

Participation is an action or state of taking part in something. According to Britannica.com, the rate of electoral participation is subjected to factors such as the type of electoral system, the social groupings to which voters belong, the voters' personalities and beliefs, their places of residence, and a host of other idiosyncratic factors (Election - Participation in elections | Britannica.com, n.d). Politically, participation explains the active role played by the public such as volunteering in campaigns, actively learning about political candidates and issues, and engaging in local political practices (Dudash, 2007). In terms of voting participation, the number of turnouts is a crucial indicator of citizens' participation in the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout shows the vitality of democracy, whilst low turnout is associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process (Abdurashid, 2016). Through political campaigns, voters will obtain the information they need to make their political decision. Therefore, to channel the information which can grab voters' attention, political parties will design their campaigns based on their political objective apart from educating voters of the party's political policy. Political knowledge also has a significant impact on the likelihood of voting (Larcinese, 2005). This knowledge is contributed not only by the education that the voters received but also the information that the audience received from media.

Although Malaysian youngsters are excited to participate in election, some of them were uninterested with the local political scene due to aggressive political advertisement and campaigns as they felt that such campaign are harassing their privacy which had forced them to digest political manifestos (Maher, 2018). This statement is supported by reports from online news portal and independent news portal which were published before the election such as *The Star Online* (Yimie, 2018) and *Free Malaysia Today* (Tan, 2018) whereby youngsters were less interested in the political quarrel between the competing political parties. They also believed that their votes will not make any difference as their life will still continue to stay the same despite whoever won the election. Yang Razali Kassim in his RSIS Monograph found that the decisive role of the younger generation continued in the aftermath of

the 13th General Election which had alter the future direction of Malaysian politics whereby the turnout of young voters during general elections indicates a new political awakening within the population. As an outcome, the opinion of young voters begins to assert Malaysian political direction (S Rajaratnam School Of International Studies, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that the 2018 General Election had shown the domination of the Generation Y which is known as the 'fence-sitters'. These youngsters are fickle minded whereby they desire for freedom of speech, open during interaction and demand for up-to-date information (Ahmad *et al.*, 2016). Their support is usually short-term basis as they tend to evaluate a political party based on their performance in overcoming an issue or honoring the promises made before the election (Rahim *et al.*, 2017). This statement is supported by Chinnasamy (2016) on her previous study whereby young voters will consider the party policies, leaders' attitudes, and current issues that are debated before the election prior to decision making. Through voting, individuals transform themselves into an active participant and this involvement is crucial in the context of socio-political activities (Salman *et al.*, 2017).

The determination of youngster in election participation is visible during the 14th General Election. Even for those who are residing overseas especially the young voters, their eagerness to participate during the general election had encouraged them to fly back to Malaysia. Mainstream media also reported on efforts made to travel back to Malaysia such as crowd funding and even individuals offering to sponsor the oversea voters on their traveling cost which had went viral through social media (Sheila, 2018). These travelling voters will serve as a 'messenger', holding up another responsibility of bringing back with them other Malaysians' ballot paper (Sukumaran, 2018). Upon their arrival, these ballot paper will then be pass on to another 'messenger' to be delivered to its designated voting station. For the local voters who are residing in another state, campaigns such as #PulangMengundi and #CarPoolGE14 were amongst the initiative initiated by netizens to assist those who faced obstacle in returning home during the election (Sekaran, 2018). According to the statistics of voters turn out based on their age category which was obtained from a live telecast by Astro Awani, 40.94% of GE14 voters were between the ages of 21 to 39 years old, followed by voters between the ages of 40 to 59 years old at 38.61%. The elderly made up of 20.44% of the turnout. A report by Bernama (2018) stated that Selangor has the highest number of 2,415,074 voters who were eligible to vote.

There are many factors which may motivate a person to vote. It can either be a belief that a person who vote is a responsible citizen or they are succumbs to the pressure received from their family or acquaintance. According to Harder and Krosnick (2008) on their psychological analysis of young voters found that the voting ability of a person was related to their capacity to understand the political scenario which was guided by their awareness and knowledge. Based on this finding, it strengthens the present researchers' claim that the Malaysian's young voters participated through guidance of their awareness and voting knowledge. Other factors that had influenced the young voters' decision were their social class position and social capital. The declining voter's turnout amongst British youngsters according to Phelps (2006) was because they are disconnected from the political class despite initiatives by the government to re-engage with the citizens, including revising the electoral procedures and an increasing allocation in the postal voting. In the Malaysian context however, a voter's social status or wealth is not an indicator to their political participation. Instead, their focus was more on economic issues such as unemployment issues among youth, the need for a better life. They also wanted a nation that is free from corruption, misinformation and racial politics (S Rajaratnam School Of International Studies, 2014).

Over the years, there has been an ongoing argument if these youngsters were the decision-maker during the election as debated by Periasamy (2018); Chinnasamy (2016); and Mahmood (2017). Nevertheless, factors such as the voter's social profile must be taken into consideration. Based on the previous studies conducted from the last general election and evidence from developed western countries, the younger generation low political involvement in politics was driven by their comfortable lifestyle and they care less about issues related to politics. According to a survey conducted by Pandian (2014), he found that youngsters nowadays are less reserved in their political opinions. They are more critical and cynical in expressing their democratic opinion and most importantly, it is found that these youngsters will search for information from various sources instead of trusting and relying on information transmitted by the mainstream media. Nazrin (2013) also concluded that Gen Y is difficult to persuade, cynical and skeptical compared to older voters. Young voters play a significant role in changing the course of a nation which was proven during the 2008 US Presidential (Mahmood, 2017).

Being politically aware is important for a voter to make their decision during the election. Kuotsu (2016) stated that political awareness has a significant role in explaining variation in political participation, whereby voters must at least have a minimum understanding on the political system and scenario. Their awareness is influenced by the information that they obtained from various sources such as access to political information, exposure to media and political education. Scholars explained that political awareness is resulted from the severity of political information exposure including voters' intellectual ability to retain and organize the encountered information apart from their motivation in order to obtain and comprehend the political information. An individual awareness begins with a slow build-up of information about their surroundings according to Riemer and Haines (2008) instead of a static state which can be turned on and off. Even before beginning an actual communication process, the person who wishes to convey the message must feel that the receiver is capable of receiving and responding.

### 1.1.2. Malaysia's 14th General Election

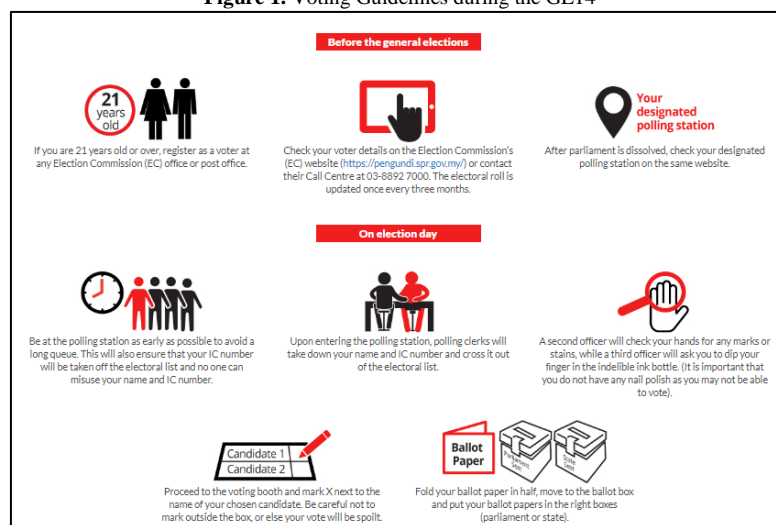
Malaysian General Election 2018 or known as GE14 was held on Wednesday, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018. Electoral system is vital for Malaysia political system according to Hai (2002) as it exerts an essential and independent effect on electoral outcomes. Malaysia adopted a Westminster parliamentary model upon its independence in 1957 whereby

the government is elected through a first-past-the-post, or simple majority system (The Straits Times, 2018). In total, there are 55 registered political parties in Malaysia according to SPR (2018). From this number, these political parties later form a coalition into three (3) major political parties which compete during GE14 namely: Barisan Nasional (BN), Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS). This general election created a history whereby for the first time ever, four (4) political parties formed an alliance called 'Pakatan Harapan (PH)' made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Bersatu Pribumi (PPBM), Parti Amanah Rakyat (PAN) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), in which they have competed under the ticket of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Ngah, 2018).

Upon the dissolution of the 13th Parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2018, there are 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat and 505 seats in 12 out of the 13 State Legislative Assemblies of Malaysia at stake. Election must be held within 60 days upon the dissolution of the Parliament. Once the competing candidates have been officially announced, they can now begin their election campaign which consists of posters installation, talks, distribution pamphlets and even house-to-house campaigns. These activities will be discontinued on the midnight before the polling day. The Election Commission of Malaysia (EC) or known in Malay as SPR were given the sole mandate to conduct elections. The body was established on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1957 in accordance with Article 114 in the Federal Constitution. Their three (3) main functions were to conduct studies and delineations of Parliamentary and State Election Divisions each not less than eight (8) years, conducting voters' registration and review apart from carrying out general elections and by-elections in the event of a vacancy.

Despite being an independent electoral management body, they are not spared from bias allegations. When the announcement of the election date was made by the election commission on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2018 which falls on Wednesday (9<sup>th</sup> May 2018), there have been many speculations and dissatisfaction from the public which further questions the credibility of the EC as highlighted by the local mainstream newspaper such as Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian (Suruhanjaya, 2018). In reference to the public negative view towards EC, a study by Yusof *et al.* (2015) found that majority of the respondents disagreed that the EC gave equal treatment to all political parties in Malaysia and they were not convinced with the EC leadership. Knowing of the negative perception that the public have towards them, EC has denied all the allegations against them and they even try to improve in providing sufficient information to the public. Mainstream media is then utilized as means to reach the public in effort to inform and educate them on electoral processes. As an example, the infographic which was taken from The Star (2018) below shows the voting progress to educate the public especially first time voters.

Figure 1. Voting Guidelines during the GE14



Registered voters or even those who have yet to register but wishes to get more information about the voting procedures and requirement can always refer to the Election Commission website at <http://www.spr.gov.my/>. Prior to the Election Day, voters who are 21 years old and above who have yet to register themselves as a voter may do so by submitting their application directly to the EC offices and post office nationwide. For those who are residing overseas, they may approach the Malaysian embassy, High Commission & Consulate General Abroad. Most importantly, before the election day voters are advised to check on their details online to ensure that they are aware of the location of their polling station. GE14 is said to be to most exciting general election for Malaysia as for the first time in 61 years, the opposition has won their seats in a simple majority to form a new government.

During the heat of an election, competing political parties will conduct various tactics and techniques to draw voters' attention. Political parties tend to spend a lucrative amount of money on their campaign with the purpose of disseminating information towards the public, aimed to educate and draw their attention towards a certain political agenda. A political campaign is designed to be informational with emotional content to attract and create informed, engaged, and participatory voters. Holler (2004) explained that election campaigns have the potential in influencing voting behavior and electoral outcomes by focusing on a set of election agenda. Nadeau *et al.* (2008) agreed that these campaigns allow for a systematic and organized diffusion of information, penetration, and outcome during the voting campaigns which contains a variety of information instead of focusing on a certain issue. Therefore, voters awareness towards these campaigns will stir their interest in paying attention towards the election process (Rahim *et al.*, 2017).

In Malaysia, political campaigns during the reign of Barisan Nasional (BN) government were usually covered by the mainstream media such as RTM and Media Prima. To compete, Pakatan Harapan (PH) which is the political alliance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Bersatu Pribumi (PPBM), Parti Amanah Rakyat (PAN) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) conducted their campaign using the social media platform and roadshow campaigns. Before social media became an important communication medium, politicians utilize blogging as a method to approach the public. This method offers the public an explanation directly from the politician themselves and the public have the opportunity to weight the information that they received for themselves. No doubt, political strategies are vital during the political campaign as it plays a role to determine who wins and who loses. Television was once perceived as the most utilized distribution method and has a high influence on the audience, however, political parties are now turning their way into utilizing social media as it is faster, cheaper, time efficient and has wider audience coverage (Haveles, 2016).

Back in 2008, Barisan Nasional which was the ruling government at that time had underestimated the effectiveness of social media as their political campaign platform and doubt the effect that it had influenced the voter's behavior since they are fully utilizing communication medium such as television and newspaper (Davari *et al.*, 2014). This opportunity is then utilized by the opposition party to spread their political policy to the public since they didn't receive fair coverage from the mainstream media at that time. As a result, they manage to attract the public attention who are looking for another alternative for their political consideration. Learning from their mistake, the previous 13<sup>th</sup> General Election marked the beginning of Malaysia's 'first social media election' (Gomez, 2014). Active social media involvement to engage with the public was done through blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other online platforms (Nazrin, 2013). The usage of social media to spread information during general election campaigns according to Morain (2016) became increasingly important in addition to the usage of electronic media such as television in disseminating political information to the audience, especially those in the rural areas. Corrigan-Brown and Wilkes (2014) concluded that media exposure has a direct effect on voter's engagement whereby engaged audience was more socially and politically aware. Their dependency on media effects and encourages their participation in social change whereby the higher their media exposure, it is more likely that they will participate in casting their votes.

Another method of political campaigning conducted by political parties in Malaysia during each election was the road tour. Road tours were used to connect with the public especially those who stayed in the rural area and they were not something new in the world. In Malaysia, stump speeches are practically used by every politician during the election campaign. Stump speech refers to political candidate's standard speech which are delivered during political campaign by "stumping" for themselves or for other candidates (Robert, n.d). For both BN and PH, road tour and stump speech are part of their effort to approach the public especially those in the rural area. Pakatan Harapan (PH), through their 'Jelajah Pakatan Harapan (PH)' which was conducted nationwide has taken the advantage of the advancement of internet by streaming their political campaigns 'live' through social media such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube which allows Malaysians, especially those who are living abroad to follow the campaign closely as reported by few independent news portal (Ghazali, 2018).

Figure 2. GE14's Campaign Posters and Road Shows



## 1.2. Dependency on Media for Information

Media is an important socializing agent in keeping and maintaining interactive communication throughout the entire political campaign. Many scholars have recognized the role which media plays in the acquisition of political knowledge and its association with political awareness (Jerit *et al.*, 2006). The audience rely on the media to provide them with information for decision making process. The same applies to political parties and also the election commission as they too rely on media to disseminate their agenda. For political parties, their intention is to spread their political policy whilst the election commission, is to encourage the public to participate in the voting process.

Study by Javaid and Elahi (2014) found that people rely on information provided by the media to fulfill their curiosity and acquiring definite ends. People rely on medium that fulfill their needs the most. As an example, those in the rural area who are illiterate will depend on electronic media such as television/radio broadcast for information whereas those who find reading is convenient then can refer to the newspaper. With the evolvement of Internet,

people now are relying on social media as a platform which provides information that suit all needs. With the usage of smartphone, they may opt to watch, listen and even read the 'information'. Therefore, the voters in Malaysia are flooded with choice of information sources. The emerge of independent news portal (INP) such as *Malaysiakini.com* according to Chinnasamy (2018) shows that voters prefers and rely on online media due to the lack of credibility of the traditional media apart from being offered with alternative news source. Since the twelve (12) general election, the evolution of INP have changed the landscape of newsgathering in Malaysia whereby the public are able to evaluate the news that they received as INP tends to publish their news without taking any sides neither from the mainstream media nor the political owned newspaper such as *Suara Keadilan* and *Roket Kini*.

Political knowledge is a valuable tool in a democracy. By having the knowledge on voting and politics, it allows voters to form a stable and consistent opinion which enable them to translate their opinions into meaningful forms of political participation (Jerit *et al.*, 2006). The advancement of internet and communication technology has allowed voters to become well-educated with information, apart from the fact that most of them received a tertiary education which later enables them to become a world-class social news reader (Nazrin, 2013). Voters who are informed is a crucial element of democracy which allows them to express their preferences and elect their representatives. As mentioned by Larcinese (2005), political knowledge had increased the propensity of citizens to vote whereby education have a vast impact on political knowledge apart from the important role that media coverage played in increasing voters' knowledge.

### 1.3. Problem Statement

With the history of voters turn out during the twelve and the thirteen General Election, Election Commission have continually increase their aggressiveness through the voting awareness campaigns, considering there's still a high number of young voters as of at January 2018 that have yet to register themselves as a voter in order to participate in the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election (Nazrin, 2013). Realizing the heavy reliance and dependency that young voters had over online technology, these awareness campaigns were expanded to social media platform apart from using the electronic and printed media. As a result of this aggressive campaigning, GE14 was recorded as the highest voter turnout in Malaysia whereby 41% of them were among young voters. With the strong evidence on the high numbers of young voters during GE14, this paper will investigate what drives these young voters to participate during the polling day. We will analyze their motivation factor based on the issues that arise during GE14 which may have grabbed young voters' attention such as political manifesto's or economic concern which they obtained from their preferred sources of information i.e. television, newspaper, radio, social media etc. We will look if there is any similar concern faced by the voters from GE12 to GE14 and how extensive media play their role in influencing the public to participate during election. In addition, we may determine if the election awareness campaign has successfully reached the intended audience. Apart from evaluating their awareness, we will also assess their voting knowledge by evaluating the respondents' knowledge on political and electoral processes. Upon identifying voters' awareness towards election campaign and their knowledge, this study may then conclude if these two factors had encouraged young voters' participation during the election.

### 1.4. Research Objectives

This study was conducted to examine the level of voters' awareness and their knowledge of voting and to determine if it affects voter's participation during the election. The objectives of this study are as below:

RO 1: To identify political issues that the young voters are aware during the Malaysian GE14.

RO 2: To explore young voters' knowledge on the general election processes

RO 3: To investigate what drives the young voters' participation during the election.

### 1.5. Conceptual Framework

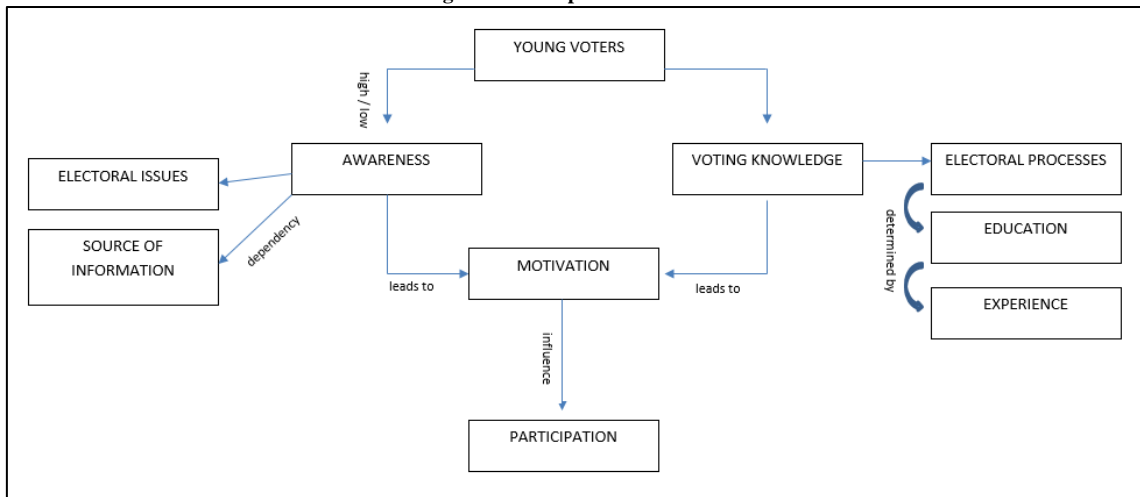
This paper using Michael Foucault's work on theory of power. Power as characterized by Foucault is an activation of political technologies which relates to social body (Jerit *et al.*, 2006). For Foucault, both power and knowledge are interrelated entities whereby knowledge is always an exercise of power and power is always a function of knowledge. Making political decision requires a voter to be equipped with sufficient knowledge so they can determine the best choice that suits them. Power as explained by Foucault refers to strategies that are produced through the concatenation of the power relations that exist throughout society, wherever people interact. Hence, when they communicate amongst themselves, either verbally between friends or through social media, we may deem that these voters are strategizing the power relation. Even our act to influence other people is also considered as 'power'. Therefore, power in the context of this study refers to the young voters who are making their decision by exercising their civil rights to determine the course of this nation.

In addition, the term 'technology of self' which occurred frequently in Foucault's work was also highlighted in this study. The term refers to governing of the people in modern social and political systems (Gomez, 2014). For these young voters, having political awareness and knowledge will have an implication over their action. Driven by their motivation, online technology is being used to search for information to satisfy their curiosity before exercising their votes as means to punish the previous Barisan Nasional (BN) administration. Through this theory, we are trying to prove that having exposure to issues and knowledge allows voters to exercise their power by voting as they have the opportunity to decide and even change the government.

The argument of voters' awareness, knowledge and voters' participation will be available through the lens of Foucault's work. A conceptual framework as coined by John (n.d) in his website stated that a framework explains the main study either graphically or narratively. Since theoretical framework is not something that are 'visible' in

literature, thus researchers are required to review their readings and their findings to ensure relevance to their studies (Labaree, n.d). In order to ease the understanding, the following framework has been designed which will help in guiding the study.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework



The framework above describes the intended flow of the young voters' participation. Depending on the informants' awareness and voting knowledge, they will rely on the usage of technology to gather sources of information that suits their beliefs. Upon the influence by their motivation, we will analyze if their participation implements the 'power' that they held by making their political decision is indeed influence should there be any lacking in either one of these elements.

### 1.6. Methodology

Focus group discussion was used as a method to gather data from respondents who were the young voters that have participated during the previous GE14. The informants were required to share their opinion and thoughts which required them to elaborate and explain their answers in detail. Another advantages of conducting focus group discussion according to Acocella (2012) is that it is easy to organize and it requires inexpensive technique. A well-designed focus groups will take at least 1 to 2 hours to conduct with participation between 6 and 12 respondents. For the purpose of this study, the researchers had decided to select twelve (12) informants consist of four (4) Malays, four (4) Chinese and (4) Indian voters aged between 21 to 39 years old for data collection purposes. Another requirement needed for this study is, they must also be a voter in Selangor. As an exploratory study, other characteristics were not taken into consideration, as the researchers' objective was to understand what drives the youth to vote and not to compare the informants' respond.

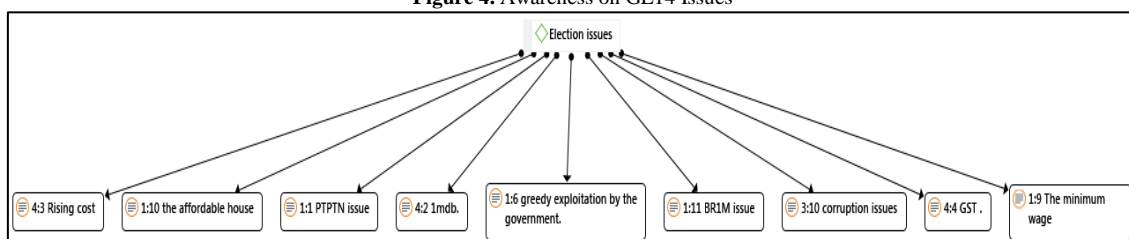
### 1.7. Findings

The findings from the focus group discussions were divided into three parts based on the research objectives. In addition, the feedbacks were categorized in accordance to the respondents' awareness, voting knowledge and their motivation to participate. The data collection was gathered from 3 focus group discussions which were conducted from 11 November 2018 until 17 November 2018. Apart from being selected based on the required criteria i.e. young voters and voted in Selangor, the candidates above were selected based on their willingness to share their voting experience and also suggested constructive feedback (Sargeant, 2012). They also commonly shared their opinion which derived the following category and theme based from the focus group discussion on their awareness, voting knowledge and participation.

In answering the research objective one (RO1), which is to understand the political issues that the voters are aware off during election, few themes were derived under the category of awareness. Most of the informants highlighted on the awareness of election issues, sources they are getting the information from and their view on the voting awareness campaign.

#### I. Informants Awareness on General Election's Issues

Figure 4. Awareness on GE14 Issues



There were many issues surrounding the air during the general election which becomes a concern for the respondents and influence their voting decision. Based on the feedback received from the focus group discussions, below are the issues highlighted by the informants which are a concern for them. The following issues have empowered them for political decision making during the GE14.

### a. Malaysian Development Berhad (1MDB)

When 1MDB was initially set up, it was intended to attract foreign investment. Not much information about this organization was being made known to the public, except that it was a government investment company that purchased privately owned power plants and planning a new financial district in Kuala Lumpur (Adam *et al.*, 2018). The scandal went public when Sarawak Report, a website that was set up by Claire Rewcastle Brown exposed this for the first time which Jeff Sessions, US General Attorney described it as 'kleptocracy at its worst' (Joseph, 2017). The unrest amongst the public begin when the previous administration failed to provide their justification towards the allegation. In addition, those who act as the 'whistleblower' on this issue were either arrested or charged in court, thus making the public more curious.

Throughout the focus group discussion, informants N1, N8, N10 and N12 had explained that the 1MDB scandal was one of the issues that have grabbed their attention. According to informant N1, the scandal of 1MDB has made her questioned the leadership of the previous government as she felt that the current high cost of living was due to this scandal. For informant N7, the inefficiency of the previous BN government in curbing the 1MDB scandal has spike the curiosity among the public.

Below are the comments of four informants with regards to the 1MDB scandal:

*"The hot issue was the 1MDB" (N1)*

*"It was the 1MDB" (N8)*

*"1MDB was the major factor which attracted us to decide" (N10)*

*"Facebook had updated many issues including 1MDB" (N12)*

From the above observation, the informants have paid more interest towards issue that has economic impact on their lives. They felt that the 1MDB scandal has made them lost faith in the previous government especially on how things were administrated. They felt that the previous administrative were trying to cover up the facts about 1MDB, especially on the audit report when the previous BN government had announced that the report was classified as an official secret (The Star Online, 2016) and the public were left in the dark, which have made them dissatisfied and demanded to know more. The biasness of the mainstream media during the previous administration has led them to sea for other sources such as social media and the independent news portal such as *Malaysiakini.com*. Based on their findings, they believed that the 1MDB scandal was among the reason for their hardship.

### b. Goods and Service Tax (GST)

The issue of Goods and Service Tax (GST) was the second issue that the informants were concerned of. Ever since the implementation of GST on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015, Malaysian's including the lower income earner were required to bear tax costs in their daily items which have led to the increase of price of the household goods (Charissa, 2018). Despite being an important resource to fund Malaysia's growth, many citizens were unhappy with how the GST proceeds were managed and begin to demand how the funds were being managed although the previous government assured that it was being used for the betterment of the nation.

For informant N1, the implementation of GST has made her to question on how the tax revenue were being managed by the previous government. According to N1, despite the high tax collection, Malaysia is still facing economic turbulence and high in debt. For informant N3, the implementation of GST has added extra cost on her spending. She was unsatisfied that despite paying for GST, the price of the goods keeps hiking up. The same view was also shared with informant N11 who felt that GST has contributed to the high price of goods.

The feedbacks from the three informants on the GST issue are as below:

*"GST should have increase the GDP by 40 billion! Yet, why had the financial problem? Even our debt had increased" (N1)*

*"When they said wanted to demolish the GST, I thought we have future in the tax" (N3)*

*"All the good prices have gone up due to the implementation of GST" (N11)*

Respondents were dissatisfied that they are required to pay GST but have no idea what their taxes were used on. Thus, when Pakatan Harapan (PH) announced the abolishment of GST in their manifesto if they were given the mandate to govern Malaysia (Hwok-Aun, 2018), it had attracted the attention of young voters as they believed that there was an option to solve their concern. The informants also felt that the mismanagement from the previous administration had caused a burden on them in which they required to pay high price even for their basic household necessities. The former government's act of concealing the truth and manipulation on the mainstream media had caused the public to lose faith in them. As a result, the people tsunami occurred, and the public demanded for a new government.

### c. Improvement of Living Condition

The need for a better living improvement was another concern highlighted by the informants during the discussion. According to informant N2, she was interested on the promises of the minimum wage of RM1500 and the affordable housing scheme offered to the low and middle-income earners. Low cost housing development has not met their target since the Third Malaysia Plan and the hike in the housing price in Malaysia made it difficult for youngsters who have just graduated and starting their career to afford a house (Samad *et al.*, 2016). In addition, informant N2 also suggested that the handing out of BR1M (Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia) should be maintained by



the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government towards the elderly as they did not have any source of income and the give out will help to them to live a better life. Upon taking over the government, Bernama (2018a) reported that the PH government has decided to maintain the handout to the B40 group and it has been re-branded to Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH). For informant N12, he believed that improvement on the current education and health care benefits is necessary to be implemented.

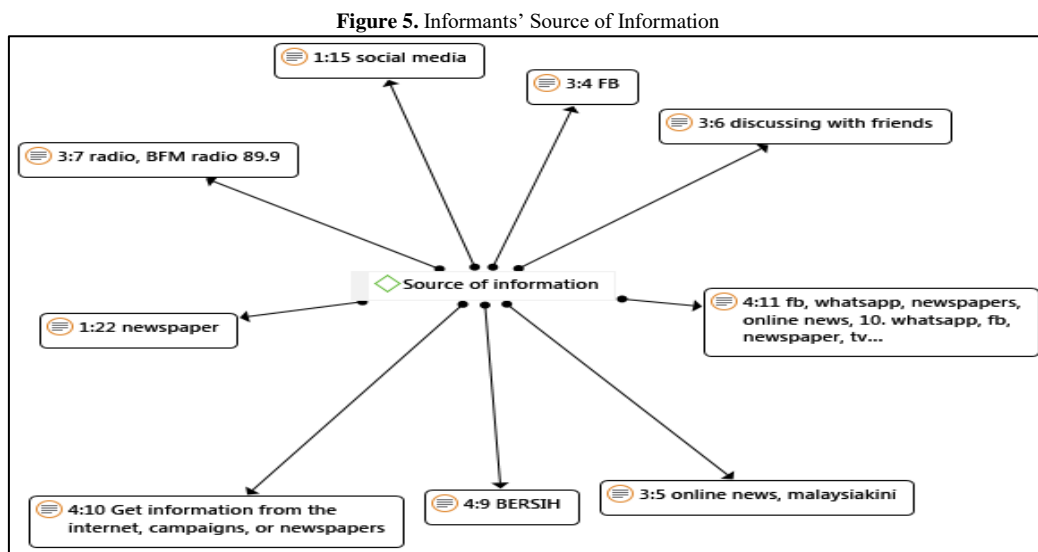
**d. PTPTN**

National Higher Education Fund Corporation or PTPTN is an authority responsible for giving out study loans to Malaysian students who are pursuing their tertiary education. Upon completion of their studies, these students are required to make arrangement for the repayment of their study loans within the period of six months' time. However, with the slow economy and the rise of unemployment, many graduates were still struggling in finding a job with a decent salary to make their end-meet and felt that PTPTN has become a burden for them. Ever since the previous general election, the PTPTN loan repayment has become part of the political issue. As part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) scheme to attract the public attention especially the young voters, they have pledged to extend the repayment period for the borrower until their monthly income had reached RM4, 000.00 per month. According to the informant N1, the pledge made by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) towards the issue of PTPTN in their manifesto had influenced her voting decision as this issue has an economic impact on her despite she was not very keen in paying attention towards other political issues that arise during the general election. She explained her view on PTPTN as below:

*"I'm not interested on politics at all. Yet, when they highlighted on PTPTN issue, I think... I should vote"*

**II. 'Technology of self' as source of information**

Along with technological advancement, the public nowadays are exposed to various sources of information which even allows them to choose and decide how they prefer to receive their information. They can decide either to watch, listen or even read the information, all through their smartphones as a part of technology of self activities. To understand the informants' source of information, the researcher has asked 'what source do you normally rely on?' The question requires the informants to disclose their preferences in getting their political information before making their decision. Figure 5 as below showed the informants source of information that the researcher has gathered during the focus group discussion. In general, the researcher found that the informants have a high reliance to social media platform as their source of information.



Seven out of twelve informants explained that they will refer to Facebook to search and gather more details about the issues that they are concern on. According to informant N7, information from social media platform is easily assessable through phone and it suits her busy working schedule. While, fo informant N3, her dependency on social media for information requires her to read the information thoroughly before absorbing and considering the information. It also requires the individual's own judgement to determine what is best for them upon receiving the information.

Below some of the informants comments:

*"The main source, I always referred is social media" (N1)*

*"Usually, we received information from the Facebook because that's the platform we always check on political updates" (N4)*

*"Getting the information through FB" (N5)*

Apart from relying on Facebook, other communication platforms were also being considered by the respondents. Informant N7 for example explained that he will get his information from listening to radio before having discussions with his friends about issues that he finds interesting. For informant N9, N10 and N11, newspaper and online news platform were among their preferred source of information. They further added that they also rely on information that they received from Whatsapp application. Informant N2 added that she also received

her information from political pamphlets that were handed out to her whereas informant N12 claims that campaigns by BERSIH gave him information as well.

As we live in the era of technology, social media has become the most preferred source for the young voters to search for information in making their decision. The availability of smart phones and accessibility of Internet even in the rural area has made it easier for the public to search for issues that concerns them. However, we need to put in mind that when we were served with various information, our decision will be based on our own judgement, influenced by the information that we received. Based on the focus group responses, we can see that the informants rely heavily to their social media to get their information. The reliance to social media as a source of information is not something new in Malaysian politics (Leong, 2015). Plus, social media has been proven as an effective medium to reach the public especially in the spreading of political campaign (Gomez, 2014). Apart from relying on social media sources, the respondents also referred to independent news portal (INP) namely *Malaysiakini.com*, *WhatsApp* application and even other electronic media such as radio and television. Therefore, the convenience of obtaining information from social media has benefited the young voters in their political decision-making process. Nevertheless, we are responsible to weight the information and to determine the truth of the information as conducted by informant N1 in which she will verify her curiosity toward an issue by referring to few sources. From the discussions, the researcher also noted that the respondents also referring to independent news portal (INP) as their source apart from relying on mainstream media such as printed newspaper and radio. They were also discussed about election issues with their friends as mentioned by informant N7.

### III. Voting Awareness

The informants were asked to give their feedback on the voting awareness campaigns that have been conducted either by the Election Commissioner (EC) and other political actors. They were asked *'how do you find the voting awareness campaign?'* and the researcher noted that there was mixed feedback received from the respondents with regards to their view on the voting campaigns. For informants N1 and N2 for example, they felt that the voting awareness campaigns will assist in educating the public especially those who are not politically active. The same views were also shared by informant N10 and N12 whereby they even suggested that the awareness campaigns should also be emphasis through online platform to attract youngsters. Informants N5 and N8 however felt that the voting awareness campaign was unnecessary as most of the young voters nowadays were exposed and politically educated accordingly, claiming that even without the awareness campaign, they will still participate during the election day to fulfill their civil responsibility as a voter.

Below are some of the responses gathered from the informants:

Figure 6. Comments on Voting Awareness Campaign

Informants	Responses
1	<i>"Political campaigns are important element for voting."</i>
2	<i>"Political campaigns are the best platform for us to get the latest political information. At the same time, we need to do some research"</i>
5	<i>"They wanted to vote for making new changes including those from oversea"</i>
8	<i>"It doesn't make much difference about the campaigns since people are aware that they need to carry out their duty as a citizen."</i>

They were then asked to suggest what would they do to attract voters' awareness towards politics, informant N1 and N2 suggested to educate the youngsters on the formation of a new government so that they are aware of their voting responsibility. Informant N3 suggested to implement the need of the youth as part of a *'reward'* in order to grab their attention. Informant N8 claimed that *'a visible government'* is important to attract the young voters' attention. They need to *'show'* that they are around for the public whilst informant N12 suggested that since the youngsters were concerned much on education and medication benefit and the current government could implement these benefits in their campaign.

On the other hand, in answering the research question (RO2) two which is to analyze voters' knowledge on the general election process, informants had evaluated the voting knowledge through their understanding on general election process and their view on election flow. For the informants, voting awareness campaign was important to ensure that the public were constantly aware about their civil duties. In my opinion, the campaign must be catchy and attractive to grab the young voters' attention apart from being easily available through various medium such as through online, electronic and even printed medium. Hence, the Election Commissioner is required to be more creative and they are required to beef up their effort in educating the public.

### I. Knowledge on General Election Process

To analyze the informants' knowledge on Malaysia's electoral process, they were asked to describe the general election processes and flow apart from giving their feedback or voting experience in which the researcher has received mixed feedback from the respondents. When they were asked to explain and elaborate on *'general election'* process that they know off, eight of the informants admitted that they do not know the flow of the general election

processes whilst the remaining four informants have the basic knowledge of the flow. This feedback is aligned with the findings by Clark (2017) whereby the increase of political transparency, openness and responsiveness will increase one's political knowledge. I wish to emphasize that there is a need to implement voter education so that the public know the election flow in Malaysia. Election Commission through Akademi Pilihan Raya could come up with ways to educate the public by conducting awareness campaign.

The informants were then asked to share their thoughts or comment on the previous election flow. For informant N1, there were still flaws in election course based on her own experience of having her name automatically register as a voter when she has not even submitted her application. She was also concerned with the issue of boundary review in which she claimed that her husband was made to vote at another place despite he had updated his residential address with EC for the last five years. For informant N2, she was hoping that EC could improve the election flow during the polling day by suggesting that sufficient voting lane were prepared for the elderly and those who are disabled. The similar view was also shared by informant N9 and N10 who felt that a dedicated waiting space should be provided for the elderly and the disabled whilst waiting for their turn to vote. For informant N3, she felt that the election timeline could be shortened to prevent provocation. For informant N4, her concern was on the 'black out' incident and 'phantom voters' which was reported during the past GE13. As for informant N7, N8 and N12, they felt that the election was conducted smoothly whilst informant N5 and N6, they do not wish to comment further.

It is notable that not every one of the informants have in-depth knowledge on electoral processes, which might be caused of their lack of interest of politics, lack of voting education and low voting experience. Despite being less knowledgeable in electoral processes, the researcher found that lack of knowledge did not influence their decision to participate during election as they were driven by other motivation. Issues such as phantom voters and electoral glitch in every election may seem as a normal issue which needs to be look into, but it can damage the EC credibility as an independent body which governs the whole election process. With the experience from the past election, there is a need for EC to repair their tarnished reputation to gain back the public trust. The public needs to be reassured that EC is an independent body and will remain the same despite which ever government is administrating Malaysia. Constant improvement and monitoring need to be conducted by the election commissioner to ensure smooth and transparent election. Based on the experience and the suggestion highlighted by the informants, there are still room for improvement. For start, the voters will be eager to participate if the election were conducted in a systematic manner, efficient and fast. For example, shorter waiting period and sufficient voting lanes. In view to technological advancement, EC could also consider the usage of electronic voting machine to speed up the voting processes.

In addition, research objectives three (RO3) looking at what drives young voters' participation during the election. Informants pointed argument on voting motivation.

## I. Voting 'Power' as Motivation

According to Sides *et al.* (2011) people tend to participate politically due to their self-interest. To participate, they must first be motivated to vote and share their opinion. To determine what drives voters to participate during the election, the researcher had asked the respondents to 'explain their voting motivation'.

Informant N1 stated that she was motivated to vote as she felt that her rights as a citizen were violated due to the poor leadership of the previous administration. Her views are also agreed by informants N2 and N3, who felt that voters need to exercise their voting rights in choosing a government that will take care the needs of the public. For informants N4, N6 and N9, their responsibility to exercise the voting rights were their main motivation factor. For informants N5, N7, N8, N10, N11 and N12, their motivation were to elect a new government as they have lost faith in the previous administration.

Below are some of the comments given by the informants:

*"I feel that my rights have been taken. Let's be the 'whistle blower' and that's the reason why I drove to fulfill my rights as a citizen and also as a voter" (N1)*

*"What motivates us to vote is to make changes. This is our responsibilities" (N4)*

*"It's time for us to change the government. Too many things were hidden from us. We should have new government" (N8)*

When they were asked 'if a vote can make a difference', all of them agreed with the statement. While, informant N7 added that previously, the public have been mocked with the statement that nothing will change in Malaysia's government which had led the previous administration to be too complaisant. However, the previous GE14 has proved otherwise.

Finally, the respondents were asked to suggest 'what can be done to attract young voters to be more politically involved?'.  
 Informants N1, N2, N3, N4, N7, N8, and N10 have suggested few ideas which could be considered in the attempt to draw the young voters to be more politically involved. Informant N1 suggested for debate or political forum in a casual manner were to be conducted so the youngsters could voice out their constructive feedback or argument. In my opinion, this could be implemented even though political debate is not common in Malaysia political scene. The suggestion was supported by N6 who believed that youngsters nowadays were more politically informed. Informant N3 and N4 suggested to introduce political education to secondary and university students so they would have an early exposure which can spark their interest towards politics and educate them on the importance of voting.

For informant N10, he suggested for the government to consider implementing a policy that benefits the youngsters in their manifesto. This includes the education and medical incentives proposed by informant N12. For

informant N8 however, he suggested that the government were to consider the young voters when they initiate any policy. According to him, the re-implementation of the Sales and Service Tax (SST) on the online gaming services have a large impact on gamers like him, thus he wished that such implementation was being made known to them. For informant N3, offering incentive to youngsters who shown interest in political leadership should be considered.

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Informant N8 commented on the voting age in Malaysia which was in line with the government decision to lower the voting age to 18 years old in the next general election Anis (2018). Based on his experience, this action will be effective to attract the young voters as more youngsters are eager to vote, but they were unable to do so as they are still underage. Lastly, informant N10 highlighted that media must ensure that they are transparent as the young voters are depending on the information that they received to make their decision. As such, media has a vital role in influencing these youngsters in carrying out their civil duties.

Based from the informants' feedbacks, most of the respondents are determined for a new government, which is one of the reason that influence their voting participation. Based from the discussion, the respondents felt that their lack of confidence in the previous administration has driven them to vote and utilize their right as a citizen. Therefore, it can be concluded that their desire for a new government had motivated them to participate during the polling day. As mentioned by informant N3, election is like a 'trial and error'. Should the voters dissatisfied with the performance of the new government, they have the opportunity to change or re-elect a new government again during the next election. Another reason which had motivated their participation was the realization of their duty as a citizen. Most of the informants are well aware that through voting, they are exercising an important obligation as a citizen of Malaysia. The informants are aware of the 'power' that they possessed upon casting their votes. This is proven when they have all agreed that one vote can make a difference which we may relate to the high Selangor young voter turnout during GE14 (Bernama, 2018). Finally, the informants were asked to suggest ways to attract the young voters, in which they have emphasized on the voting education implementation as part of voters' engagement. The exposure or awareness towards political processes should be implemented to youngsters from an early stage to ensure active participation from the next generation.

## 1.8. Conclusion

This study has proven that awareness; despite of high or low equipped, will have an influence over the young voters' participation during the polling day. Technological advancement has allowed young voters to choose their preference on how they wish to receive the information i.e. by reading, by watching or by listening which can be done at the convenience of their smartphones. However, the public is required to have a better judgement over the information that they received. Therefore, a valid source such as from the election commissioner website will always be a valid reference for the public. As for their voting knowledge, it is proven that it does not have a strong influence on the respondents over their voting participation despite previous studies have proven the vitalness of knowledge towards voters' decision making. Nevertheless, the voters are still eager to participate in the election as they are called to exercise their duty as a responsible citizen. Even so, voting knowledge remain an important predictor of an individual's probability of voting. Educating the public on electoral processes should be a priority if they wish to ensure a higher voter turnout in the next GE15. With this new given mandate, the new government chosen by the people has a lot to be implemented as what have been expected from them. They must always realize that if the people can elect a new government, the same fate can also happen on them should they failed to carry out their duty. Thus, issues such as corruption and abuse of power needs to be overcome to instill the trust of the people.

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