

## The Impacts of Undi 18 on Political Participation, Awareness and Readiness

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### ABSTRACT

The implementation of Undi18 on December 15, 2021, added an estimated 5.8 million new voters aged 18 and older to Malaysia's political landscape. While some see this as a timely move to introduce young people to civic responsibility and encourage active participation, others argue that 18-year-olds are too immature and have low awareness with only 29.03% of the youth participating in the political socialization domain. Consequently, it is crucial to assess the level of awareness and readiness among young people and their readiness to actively engage as voters. This study aimed to assess the level of youth awareness and readiness towards Undi18, examine the extent of their political participation, and analyse factors influencing their awareness and readiness. The study was conducted in Kuching, Sarikei, and Sri Aman, with 585 first-time voters aged 18 to 20 years surveyed via a questionnaire and 30 respondents in focus group discussions. The study found that parental involvement, political experience, social media exposure, educational exposure, and perception of and relationships with politicians were the five main factors influencing youth political participation and awareness and readiness towards Undi18. Geographical factors did not affect the level of awareness and readiness regarding Undi18. Despite the majority of respondents being aware of Undi18 and ready to participate as voters, a significant number were not prepared for higher forms of political participation.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study highlights that while youth exhibit heightened awareness and readiness to participate in voting, their involvement often remains limited to this stage. Therefore, a recommendation for educational reform is proposed, emphasizing the incorporation of political subjects and curriculum.

## 1. Introduction

In the Pakatan Harapan's (PH) "Book of Hope," it is stated that the coalition is committed to lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 years old. This proposal was initially included in the manifesto during the campaign for the 14th General Election (GE14). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent administration under Perikatan Nasional (PN) postponed the implementation of Undi18 before the 15th General Election (GE15), then opted an automatic voter registration system on December 31, 2021 (Zolkiply, 2021). Anand (2021) estimated that approximately 1.2 million voters between the ages of 18 and 20 would be affected by this policy. According to Lee and Serena (2021), lowering the voting age to 18 years old offers various advantages. Firstly, it has the potential to boost political participation among the youth. The government believes that reducing the voting age would motivate young individuals to engage in addressing crucial national issues and problems. Consequently, participation in political discourse may influence political beliefs, values, and attitudes. Secondly, the reduction in the voting age could prompt young people to voice their opinions. Exercising their voting rights enables youth to foster a sense of autonomy and responsibility. The government contends that voting will contribute to enhancing the patriotism of young individuals over time. Additionally, lowering the voting age promotes substantial voter participation, serving as a strategy aimed at increasing involvement among voters.

Various Members of Parliament (MPs) have responded differently to this policy, with some expressing support. Consequently, the number of eligible voters has surged to 22.5 million, significantly impacting political parties. However, opinions vary regarding the political maturity of 18-year-olds. According to Abdullah's (2020) report in 2020, 62.7% of young people decline political engagement, perceiving it as a complex process. This situation underscores the central concern of the study: assessing the awareness and readiness of Sarawak's youth across different demographic groups regarding the implementation of Undi 18 and their political participation. The study focused on the 18- to 20-year-old age group, as they are the demographic most affected by the policy. Youth, as defined by the Malaysian Inter-Parliamentary Union, includes individuals aged 15 to 30 (Hasnan, 2019). Throughout the research, several factors influencing youth awareness and readiness in the three districts were identified. Parental involvement, political experience, exposure to social media and education, as well as perceptions of and relationships with politicians emerged as key determinants affecting youth political participation. The focus group discussions revealed that while respondents were knowledgeable about Undi 18 and willing to participate as voters, a significant portion were not inclined to engage in more advanced forms of political involvement, such as running for office or collaborating with political figures to advocate for specific causes.

## 2. Literature Review

Wike and Castillo (2018) initiated a cross-national survey, investigating civic involvement in 14 countries with a young voting age. Their findings underscored the heightened awareness among young people about democratic rights and their potential to effect change through voting. The primary motivators for youth political participation included concerns about healthcare, poverty, and education. Notably, in countries like Australia, where youth have been aware of their democratic rights since 1971, there remains an enduring interest in politics despite a general trend of disengagement from political parties.