

Anti-Politics Behaviour among Young Malaysian Chinese

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Abstract

Objective: The study investigated the anti-politics behaviour of Chinese youth in Malaysia.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 Chinese participants aged 18 to 40 in Malaysia. They were from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The interview questions included frequency of reading newspapers, and having political conversations with friends, parents and educators. They were also asked about their interest in political speeches, and political involvement. Thematic analysis was conducted for the 85,000-word interview transcript.

Results: The interview results revealed that the participants read newspaper articles and social media postings to confirm their pre-existing opinions on political issues. All the participants read Chinese newspapers because they were Chinese-educated, but only three participants were politically informed. The agents of political socialisation were their parents rather than peers and educators. Only one-third of the young Chinese participants read political news, and engaged in political conversations. They were likely to vote, hope for change, and believe that politics is a force for good. On the other hand, two-thirds of the participants were not interested in politics. The anti-politics behaviour was due to the politicians' negative behaviour and observations of dirty tactics in politics. Most of the participants exhibited non-participation without democracy, and there were few participants in the political participation category, whether negative evaluation or positive evaluation.

Conclusion: The study indicates that information black-out contributed to apathy of Chinese youth towards political participation and the disengagement may limit Chinese representation in the political structures of Malaysia in the future.

Keywords: Anti-democratic value; anti-politics; non-participatory; youth; ethnic Chinese; Malaysia.

السلوك المناهض للسياسة بين الشباب الماليزي الصيني

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ملخص

الأهداف: قامت الدراسة بالتحقيق في سلوك المقاومة السياسية للشباب الصيني في ماليزيا. المنهجية: تم إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة مع 21 مشاركا صينيا في ماليزيا تتراوح أعمارهم بين 18 و 40 عاما. وكانوا من خلفيات اقتصادية منخفضة. شملت أسئلة المقابلة تحقيقا في تردد قراءة الصحف، وإجراء محادثات سياسية مع الأصدقاء والآباء والمربين. تم سؤالهم أيضا عن اهتمامهم بخطب السياسيين ومشاركتهم السياسية. تم إجراء تحليل ثيماتي للنص الشفوي الذي بلغت كلماته 85,000.

النتائج: أظهرت نتائج المقابلات أن المشاركين يقرؤون مقالات الصحف ومشاركات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لتأكيد آرائهم السابقة بشأن القضايا السياسية. قرأ جميع المشاركين الصحف الصينية لأنهم تلقوا تعليمهم باللغة الصينية، ولكن كان هناك ثلاثة فقط منهم مستمعين للأخبار السياسية. كان والديهم هم وسطاء التنشئة السياسية بدلا من الأقران والمربين. فقط ثلث الشباب الصينيين الشباب قرأوا أخبارا سياسية وشاركوا في محادثات سياسية. كانوا عرضة للتصويت، ويأملون في التغيير، ويعتقدون أن السياسة هي قوة إيجابية. من ناحية أخرى، لم يكن لدى ثلاثة أرباع المشاركين اهتمام في السياسة. كان سلوك الرفض للسياسة يعود إلى سلوك السياسيين السلبي والمراقبات لتكتيكات فاحشة في السياسة. أظهر معظم المشاركين عدم المشاركة في غياب الديمقراطية، وكان هناك قليل من المشاركين في فئة المشاركة السياسية، كانت تقييما سلبيا أو إيجابيا. الخلاصة: تشير الدراسة إلى أن انقطاع المعلومات ساهم في تعزيز اللامبالاة لدى الشباب الصيني تجاه المشاركة السياسية، وقد يقوم هذا الانعزال بتقييد التمثيل الصيني في الهياكل السياسية في ماليزيا في المستقبل. الكلمات الدالة: معارضة للديمقراطية، معاداة للسياسة، شباب، صينيون من أصل ماليزي



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Introduction

Political apathy among youth is a phenomenon that is widespread in various parts of the world (Buckingham, 1999; Lam-Knott, 2018; Leung, 2006; Samsuddin et al., 2019). Youth disengagement from politics is often typified by the withdrawal from conventional political participation such as voting (Dahl et al., 2017; Flinders, 2018). To quote “youth is an important part of those latent reserves that are present in every society” to drive social and political change (Figgou & Chrysochoou, 2019, p. 11). There are studies that show that internet use improves online users’ political knowledge, and increases political participation in Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019) and China (Hyun & Kim, 2015). Malaysia has 89% internet penetration (Nain, 2021) but researchers have found political apathy, particularly among the young (Mohd Hed, 2020; Ting & Wan Ahmad, 2017).

Evidence of political apathy is the poor voter turnout. The historic low turnout in the state elections in 2021 and 2022 in Melaka (65.85%), Sarawak (60.67%) and Johore (50%) is a reliable gauge for a non-participatory tendency among Malaysian voters. This voter apathy is already expected given the Ipos (2021) survey results: 75% Malaysian respondents agreed that the “economy is rigged to the advantage of rich and powerful”, and 70% agreed that traditional parties and politicians do not care about people like them. The perception that politics is “dirty” and politicians place self-interest above those of their electorate are some factors that cause political apathy.

Among the youth, the disinterest in politics is due to various factors. There is a need to understand how the specific circumstances of political systems and cultures may cause youth to disengage from politics in order to understand how to mobilise them. Based on interviews with some university students, Koey (2020) reported that youth felt alienated from the mechanisms of existing democratic institutions and discourses. Deprivation of information about young political leaders is an issue with most of the 15 youths interviewed by Nathen et al. (2021). The political atmosphere in Malaysia does not encourage the flourishing of the freedom of media and expression. The politics of Malaysia takes place in the framework of a federal representative democratic constitutional monarchy. Yet there is an information black-out. The irony is that while Malaysians have access to information and they are connected to the rest of the world (including Western media), they do not get adequate quality information about the events and issues within their own country to make critical judgements. A free press has been posited to be a chief means to achieve a functioning, healthy democracy because censorship restricts the press from carrying out its function as a watchdog for corruption and other private and government action (Ambrey et al., 2015). Even alternative news media are controlled by media establishments which in turn are controlled by political parties. Few news media outlets represent citizen voices. One alternative newspaper, MalaysiaKini, is known to present alternative voices but subscription is needed to read most of the articles, and this restricts access to a majority of readers. More importantly, the restriction of freedom is keenly felt because their office was raided by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 2016 for alleged improper network use (MalaysiaKini, 2016). Because of the media environment and the narrow spectrum of information available to Malaysian citizens, they may not have political literacy to participate in politics.

Thus far, among the various groups in Malaysia, studies have identified the Chinese as the most politically disengaged (Ting & Wan Ahmad, 2017). Malays are more politically active and dominant in political conversations than Chinese and, as expected, the level of involvement is higher among males than females (Mohd Hed, 2020; Ting & Wan Ahmad, 2017). The political power of the Chinese is framed by the political structure and representation permitted by the Malay, the majority group. It does not augur well for the Chinese to be disenfranchised from politics because they would lose their political representation. The Chinese is a minority group though numerically large (22.8%); the Malay and Indigenous account for 69.9% of the Malaysian population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Surprising findings were obtained by Khoo et al. (2021), which is the Chinese participants’ internal political efficacy increased along with increase in expectations of the success of Bersih 5 (electoral reform movement) and the 14th General Election in 2018. In contrast, the association of these variables was weaker for the Malay. The perceived political efficacy is important for the Chinese to feel empowered about their political participation, such as exercising their right to vote. Khoo et al.’s (2021) findings indicate that there are factors that can coax the Chinese out of their political apathy but these are not well understood. “The Chinese’s political mobilization and bureaucratic participation in the governmental administration are important to be

studied in order to understand their political behaviour” (Lee, 2010, p. 21).

The objective of the study was to investigate the anti-politics behaviour of young Malaysians of Chinese descent from lower socio-economic background. The research questions are: (1) What are the indicators of political interest? (2) What are the reasons for interest or disinterest in politics? and (3) What is the link between anti-politics behaviour and evaluation of politics?

Literature review

Anti-politics and forms of political participation

This section presents the framework on anti-politics, and contextualizes political disengagement in the historical political movements and the current repressive media environment.

Beveridge and Featherstone (2021, p. 438) underline two meanings of anti-politics. The first meaning relates to the “eradication of ‘politics’, namely, contest, contingency and public realm”, through depoliticisation of public issues into a technical, bureaucratic problem. It initially refers to the development assistance through foreign aid which has sidestepped the origin of inequalities in favour of technical skills and input. The second meaning of anti-politics signifies the “ills of liberal democracies”, typically associated with “political disenchantment and mistrust of politicians”. In both definitions, anti-politics entail rejection of political participation, especially of the conventional types.

Anti-politics behaviour usually targets conventional political participation, that is, people are disengaged from institutional structures in the state such as voting, contacting public officials, political campaign and membership in a political party. It also includes abstinence from contestatory activities such as strike, petition and protest that target governmental institutions. On the other hand, there is a rise of grassroots participatory style of political participation characterised by citizens’ willingness to challenge authority, grounded on democratic ideals and values (Saunders 2014). The civic engagement of citizens in voluntary activities outside of the institutional space is termed as non-conventional participation. The mobilisation factor seems to be the growth in new social movement and advocacy networks (Weiss, 2020).

Political environment in Malaysia

This section explains the circumstances in Malaysia which engenders political disengagement. Malaysia has a relatively open-door policy when it comes to the access to online information, but the quality of information is lacking, compared to a developed and burgeoning democracy. Scholars have noted that “opposition and dissenting voices do not have access to the mainstream media” and has been made worse by the existence of restrictive laws such as the Printing Press Act (1984) and the Broadcasting Act (1987) which prevent political discussion that is overly critical to the government (Wok & Mohamad, 2016).

In addition, mergers and acquisitions among the mainstream media coalesced with political party interest and proxy ownership. The mainstream media, television and radio, is monopolised by the media conglomerate Media Prima Berhad which is partly owned by Gabungan Kesturi, an investment arm of the largest political party United Malays National Organisation or UMNO (Lee, 2018). The quest for control of Media Prima is relevant because it remains the first choice for news among Malaysians compared to another broadcaster with 53% use weekly. In 2019, the stakes in Media Prima shifted to Syed Mokhtar al-Bukhary (an ally of Mahathir Mohamad who was the fourth and seventh prime minister of Malaysia), who bought 32% of the total share; this made him the largest individual shareholder who also owns Utusan Malaysia, Kosmo and Malaysian Reserve (The Edge Markets, 2019).

The shift in Media Prima stakes reflects the drastic political change in Malaysia in 2018, when the opposition coalition led by Mahathir Mohamad defeated the Barisan Nasional coalition (of which UMNO is a major component party) in the 14th general election, and became the ruling government. The notion of what is opposition and dissenting voices in Media Prima news entities has taken a 180-degree turn. Public trust towards the news sources do not favour the Media Prima “brand” and it lost to All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator or ASTRO (Nain, 2021).

Nain’s (2021) comprehensive report on media consumption in Malaysia in 2021 submitted to the Reuters Institute in Oxford University identified an independent subscription-based Malaysiakini as top online newspaper. Hence, the alternative news in Malaysian media context is a false flag, because there are no meaningful differences in the spectrums of ideology and opinions available for citizens to make an informed and critical choice pertaining to issues of public interest.

The uncritical information and illiberal message are unlikely to encourage a positive belief in democracy and its principles.

Anti-politics thinking

To provide a background to the “idea” of anti-politics, a brief discussion of anti-political thinking in western philosophy is warranted. There is also an indigenous tradition of anti-politics occurring in the context of political, economic and cultural colonialism, where the colonial “state” was viewed as contrary to the democratic ideals of freedom and autonomy.

In Continental philosophy, the objection to the irrational nature of politics is well represented. Karl Marx, the 19th century philosopher, critiqued the failure of political machinery to contain the unregulated, free market mechanism responsible for curtailing human freedom and perpetuating crisis. He saw the political system as worthy of a radical termination, to be replaced by a system that eliminates hierarchy and free market. Marx, thus, qualifies as an anti-political thinker because “he is sceptical not of the specifically modern ideals of equality and democracy, but only of all modern institutions and non-oppositional spaces for politics as a rational medium” (Bohman, 1999, p. 242).

A century later, a German philosopher Martin Heidegger, echoed the scepticism of a possibility for a rational politics, arguing that democracy, as a system that normalises individual freedom and collective life in public space, was an idea that had no correspondence in modern reality, where forces larger than the individual such as the market and power, dominates. Heidegger too postulated a radical break from the existing system: “the only way out is the founding of a whole new way of life, which as an historical event not subject to rational evaluation” (Bohman, 1999, p. 243).

There was an anti-politics tradition steeped in democratic norms in the colonial Malaysian context. In a decade prior to the independence of the Federation of Malaya, there rose an oppositional, counter-establishment movement with the ideology of progressive, left-wing nationalism. Their opposition was directed against the machination of colonial state bureaucracy and its law which had limited the space for political participation. The movement curated a philosophy that was both democratic and anti-capitalist, inspired by the practical politics of anti-colonialism in Indonesia and India. It found its expression in manifestoes and pamphlets, one of which was *Perjuangan Kita* (Our Fight) penned by Burhanuddin Helmi in 1946. The pamphlet was analysed by Aljuneid (2012) who described it as a work that theorises the causes and forms of European rule and its effects on the Malay world. Burhanuddin Helmi identifies colonial state as anti-politics which uses the modus operandi of capitalist exploitation and direct domination of people. It hastened the “complete annihilation of indigenous philosophy”, and brought “inequalities” in terms of wealth and class. Through the logic of exploitation, Burhanuddin enjoined resistance as the final act, to return to the true nature of man who abhors exploitation and foreign rule. *Perjuangan Kita* accentuates the persuasion for democratic anti-politics that directs readers to a non-conventional participation within an oppressive political system.

In that sense, anti-politics took a liberating meaning, and mobilised awareness for change through participation, albeit in a repressive political system. However, anti-politics may take an illiberal turn if it is not accompanied by faith in democratic principles and norms. The fostering of democratic principles and norms is the responsibility of the democratic state, whose task in that respect is eroded by the elevation of factional interests over general citizens. In Malaysia, the inculcation of democratic norms is not directly enshrined as such, preferring the status quo catchphrases in race, religion and royalty, which were subsequently framed as “sensitive topics” and out of discussion. Such scenario is further complicated by the non-competitive media environment, whose priority is clouded by political allegiance.

Method of study

The descriptive study on the political behaviour involved semi-structured interviews with 21 young Malaysians of Chinese descent (referred to as P1 to P21). Purposive sampling was conducted to invite participants who fulfil the selection criteria which are Malaysians with either their father or mother who is of Chinese descent and aged 18-40. The National Youth Development Policy (NYDP) defined youth as individuals aged 15-40 in 1997. However, participants above 18 years old were selected so that they are of legal age to give their own consent for participation. The participants were mainly from the lower socio-economic background to understand how they may be marginalised in political participation because most

research on political behaviour focus on the middle class (e.g., Jesudason, 1996). The participants were living in Kuching area of Sarawak, an East Malaysian state located on Borneo Kalimantan.

Most of the participants were beginning their careers as indicated by their age (two 18-20 years old, 15 in their twenties, four in their thirties). There was a balance of gender (10 male, 11 female). There was a spread of education level (1 Primary Six, three Form Five, 13 Form Six or other certification, 7 degree) and religion (9 Christian, 10 Buddhist, 5 others). The participants were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, based on their parents' educational level and occupation. Two-thirds of their mothers did not work and the rest held clerical positions but there was one accountant. Their fathers' occupations included farmer, carpenter, construction worker, lorry driver, welder, salesperson, shipping clerk, tourist guide and factory supervisor. Some of the participants had moved up the social ladder as indicated by their jobs, namely, event manager, administrator, analyst, banker, nurse, customer service officer, promoter and preschool teacher but there were also furniture and construction workers among them. Two participants were not working, and 12 earned less than RM2000 per month and seven earned RM2000-RM4000 per month (1 USD = RM4.20). Individuals with household monthly incomes less than RM4850 are classified as the Bottom 40 and 16% of households are in this category (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020).

The semi-structured interview guide, formulated based on Botsch (2011) and Zhang and Yan (2014), consisted of the following questions:

- (1) Have you read the newspaper today? What about yesterday? The printed newspaper and the online newspaper.
- (2) When you read newspaper, what do you read about?
- (3) Do you talk about politics with your friends? If yes, give examples. If no, why?
- (4) Do most of your friends go to listen to political speeches?
- (5) Do you use social media to communicate with your friends? What types?
- (6) When you were in school, did any teacher talk about politics? If yes, give examples.
- (7) In college or university, did any lecturer talk about politics? If yes, give examples.
- (8) Did your parents talk about politics with you? If yes, give examples of topics.
- (9) Do your parents vote?
- (10) Do your parents go to listen to political speeches?
- (11) Are any of your family involved in politics? If yes, who?
- (12) Have you registered as a voter? If no, do you plan to?
- (13) Have you voted in the state or federal elections?
- (14) Are you interested in politics? Why?
- (15) Which political event do you find interesting?
- (16) Have you gone to listen to a political speech? Why?

Youths who fulfilled the selection criteria were informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation and confidentiality of responses. Participants who consented to participate in the study signed a written consent form before data collection. As the study was non-interventional, ethical review and approval were waived for this study. The interviews were conducted in the language preferred by participants: English, Chinese and Hakka (a Chinese dialect). The interviews were transcribed and translated to English for analysis.

Thematic analysis of the 85,000-word interview transcripts was conducted by the two researchers following Braun and Clarke's (2012) procedures. The researchers first familiarised themselves with the data, generalising the initial codes, looking for themes, revising potential themes, defining and naming the final themes, and producing the write-up or report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The themes do not simply emerge from the data, instead themes were constructed by the researchers through analysing, combining, comparing, and even graphically mapping how codes relate to one another. Discrepancies in coding by the two researchers were resolved through discussion. One particular point was deciding whether the participants were interested in politics, that is, the priority to give to the "yes" answer to a direct question at the beginning of the interview versus behaviours that suggested political disinterest. The researchers decided on the final wording for the themes included in this paper and ensured that there was no overlap between themes and sub-themes.

Results

Indicators of political interest

The interview results revealed that the participants read newspaper articles and social media postings to confirm their pre-existing opinions on political issues. All the participants read Chinese newspapers because they were Chinese-educated. Only one participant (P19) subscribed to online newspapers and accessed the articles directly from the newspaper websites. More participants read online newspapers than printed newspapers, but they consumed news spread through Facebook, WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, and Messenger. Our study revealed the greatest input into their political knowledge came from two West Malaysian newspapers, namely, *Sin Chew Daily* and *International Times*. The Sarawak-based Chinese newspaper (*See Hua Daily News*), *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, *China Press* and *Guang Ming Daily* have decidedly less influence because of their low popularity.

Table 1 summarises the political interest among the young Malaysian Chinese participants based on several indicators. The first indicator is exposure to political news. Only three participants (P9, P10 and P17) sought out political news to read but another seven participants said that they occasionally read news on election and political matters that pop up in social media. Incidental reading such as this cannot be considered political interest because of the transience of the news. Our interviews revealed that participants' statements that they "read newspapers" cannot be taken as political interest because a majority of them merely scanned the headlines. They were more interested in news on food, travel, entertainment and sensational events like accidents, robberies, floods, and earthquakes.

Table 1. Frequency and indicator of political interest among young Malaysian Chinese (N=21)

	Indicator of political interest	Number
Exposure to political news	Subscribe to online newspapers	1
	Read political news in newspapers daily	3
	Read political news spread in social media	7
	Read newspapers at least once in two days	10
Engagement in political conversations	Talking about politics (e.g., educators, parents)	6
	Passively listen to others talking about politics (e.g., educators, parents)	2
	Did not talk about politics with anyone	9
Influences on political interest	Parents	11
	Friends	9
	Educators	6

Another indicator of political interest is the regularity of reading newspapers. Even though they may not seek out political news to read, the headlines on political issues and events would at least register in their minds and they have some idea of it when the topics crop up in conversations later. Ten of them read the newspaper on the day of the interview and nine read the newspaper the day before. In other words, about half of the 21 participants had regular access to political news.

The final indicator of political interest was engagement in political conversations. Out of 21 participants, nine participants did not talk politics with anyone, showing disinterest. Two participants listened to either educators or parents talking about politics but did not contribute ideas, and they also expressed no interest in politics. Only six (29% of 21) participants actively participated in political conversations with educators, parents (P7, P17) and also friends (P5, P6, P9, P10). Talking politics with more people is linked to greater political interest.

The main influence on the participants' interest in politics is parents (11 participants), followed by friends (9 participants) and educators (6 participants). P20 felt safe to talk politics with her family because the subject matter was too sensitive and dark to talk with others. P18 said that his parents talked about politics with their friends in coffee shops, but he was not interested in politics because of his disappointment with politicians who make empty promises. All the participants' fathers voted but some of their mothers had not voted. Some of the participants had not voted although most of them had registered as voters.

As for friends, participants interested in politics (like P18 and P19) found like-minded friends. However, other participants kept silent when their friends engaged in political conversations. P11, in her thirties, did not feel safe to talk politics with friends and also did not know about their friends’ political activities. She left Instagram because politics is “very sensitive, cannot simply comment”. She was amazed by “youngsters now [who] dare to express their opinions” on social media.

Educators (teachers and lecturers) generally stayed clear of political talk. What they talked about, if any, were the functions of the government ministries, changes in ministers, and implementations of new policies. There was one news report of a headmaster who was believed to be transferred for allowing an opposition party politician to feature in a school event (Loone, 2017). The situation may change in the future with the prime minister of Malaysia making an announcement on 22 January 2022 that “teachers under the education ministry would be allowed to get involved in politics with immediate effect” (Ragu, 2022). However, there are other views that “politically active teachers will create tense environment” when teachers have different political ideologies (Ragu, 2022).

It can be surmised that the seemingly oppressive political environment in Malaysia has created a situation whereby only one-third of the young Chinese participants read political news, and engage in political conversations. The central influence on their political interest comes from parents, rather than friends and educators.

Reasons for youth interest in politics

The participants felt justified to be disengaged from politics because the politicians’ unbecoming behaviour and the collective negative mentality towards politics. Politicians are viewed as untrustworthy characters who make empty promises. P1 said that “politics is very dirty”, which is why he found it pointless to believe in their promise for development, such as in building highways and reducing taxes. Figure 1 presents the reasons for young Chinese to be interested or disinterested in politics.

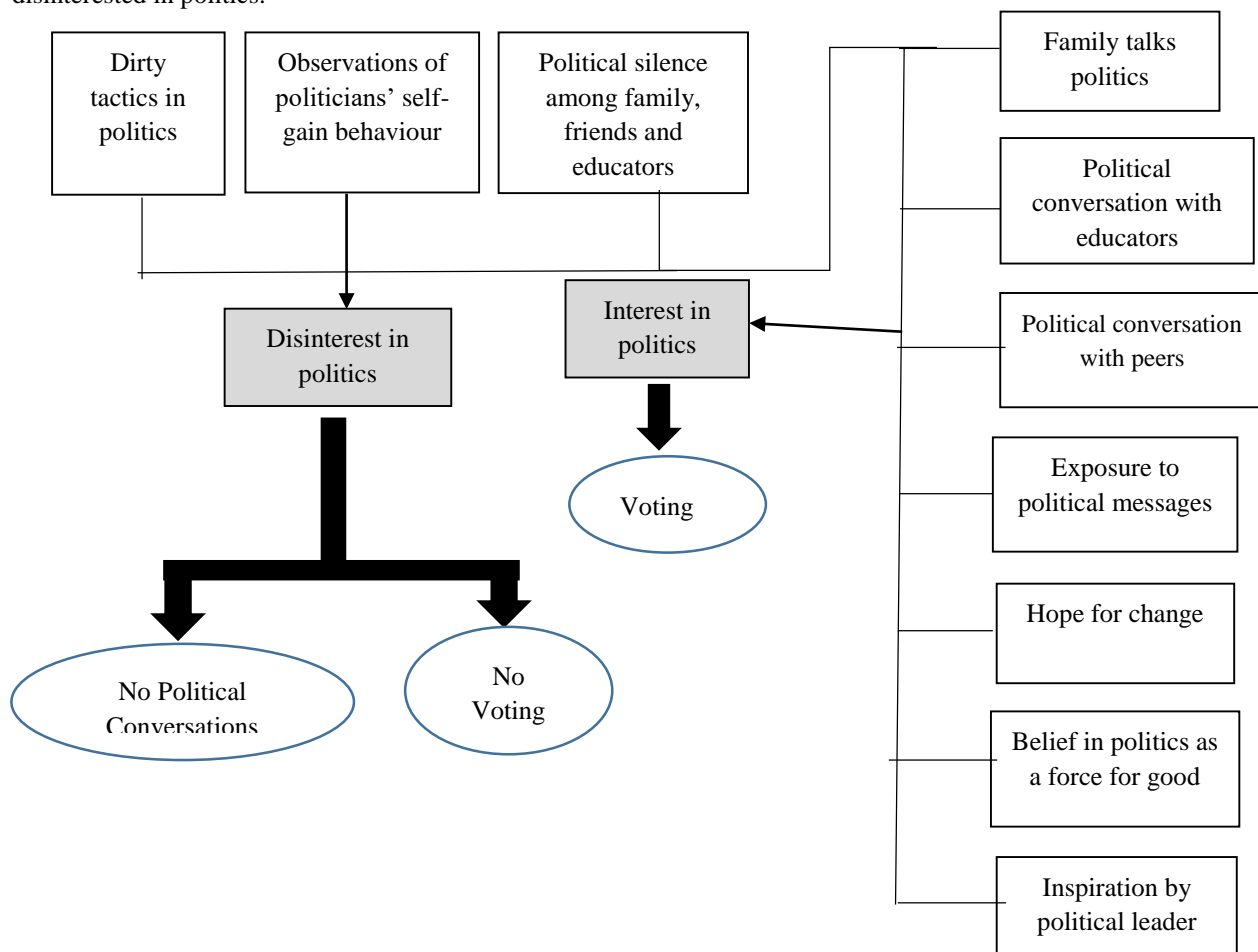


Figure 1: Reasons for young Chinese to be interested or disinterested in politics

Many of the young Chinese participants reported anti-politics behaviour because they had imbibed the collective negative mentality about politics. P13, a 35-year-old furniture worker, grew up without politics in her world. Her parents “did not have the time” to attend political talks, her friends would not “sit there to listen” to politics, and she herself found attending political talk “inconvenient”. Despite very little exposure, P13 associated the bad infrastructure like the “bridge [which is] in [a] bad condition” with the “corrupt” politicians who did nothing about it. They gave her no evidence to trust them. On the other hand, P18 reported a disinterest in politics despite being surrounded by parents, lecturers and friends who talked about policies, politics and elections respectively. Yet he was only interested in sensational news such as the Altantunya murder, the death of Teoh Beng Hock and 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal. P18 thought little of untrustworthy politicians, who tended to repair roads and streetlights during elections to garner votes. It seems that the influence of political socialisation agents is limited, and cannot override the collective negative mentality about politics.

This raises the question of why some of the young Chinese participants professed an interest in politics. In the case of P17, a sales promoter, it started with her parents who constantly complained about the rising cost of living and poor infrastructure. Her friends also constantly complained about the government and traffic problems. She did not become anti-politics. Instead, she habitually searched for local news on Malaysian politics like “the situation of the road” at her neighbourhood and watched videos uploaded by political parties. She exercised her civic right to vote in the hope for a better day (“at least we know life might be changed”). The signs for impending change spurred the interest of other participants like P7. He was invigorated to vote and bring about change:

Whoever wins the election or who become the government, is a new challenge for them and is also a new challenge for us to see how they do things to help the nation, to help the people as their elected ... we hope they can serve us better. (P7)

Being one who actively participated in political conversations with his parents and educators, P7 had enough information to compare the performance of the opposition-led state government and the ruling federal government. To P3, these were “transport” and “the country’s GDP”. P3 attributed his interest in politics to the possibility of change: “I think that if that person can manage well, we should let him go [win]”. Participants like P3 viewed casting of votes as a vehicle for political change.

Surprisingly, one participant (P10) viewed politics as a force for good. P10 was well-informed about politics, and read *The Star*, *MalaysiaKini* and *Kwong Fah* every day without fail. He also talked about politics with friends and families, watched political speeches in YouTube and attended political talks. He admitted that politics is “complicated” and “very risky” but believed that the elected representatives were there to work for the people. P10 said that politicians can “voice the citizen’s need”, and they can perform the check-and-balance by going “into the parliament to talk and debate about legislation”. He also said that citizens should be more involved to find out what the government and politicians are doing, and he even felt it is his duty as an informed citizen to share political news on social media to educate his fellow friends about what he believes to be the actual truth. P10 had certainly done his part to break down the anti-politics wall of his peers.

Evaluation of politics and political participation

The participants saw themselves having personal control over their own political views and their subsequent reactions. The participants’ rationalising framework is not typified in a predictable causation of (positive) views and (positive) participation. Hence, positive evaluation of politics does not necessarily translate into participation, and negative evaluation does not always lead to non-participation.

Figure 2 shows the quadrant to represent the young Chinese participants’ political behaviour on the axes of participation and evaluation of politics. Four participants’ political behaviour will be described to illustrate the four quadrants, in a clockwise direction.

P10 described in the previous section illustrates the case of youth who have positive evaluation of politics and active political participation. P10 is represented in the top right corner of the quadrant, and P10 is the exception among the Chinese youth.

P19 illustrates the case of youth who have positive evaluation of politics but do not have political participation (bottom right corner of quadrant, Figure 2). P19 was a shop attendant and came from a family where her father was a farmer and

her mother was a housemaid. Her parents were ardent supporters of a ruling political party and often attended their rallies and bought their merchandise. P19 disassociated herself from their enthusiasm as she saw those engagements as a “waste of time”, “I tell them I don’t [sic] interested ...”. Yet, P19 confessed that she was inspired by the party leader. She believed that he was responsible and a good candidate. However, P19 felt that it was pointless to vote because of the monopoly by the majority ethnic group, “No matter I vote or not also the same. The Malay will win”. P19 was brave to openly express this viewpoint which is talked behind closed doors in Chinese-only conversations.

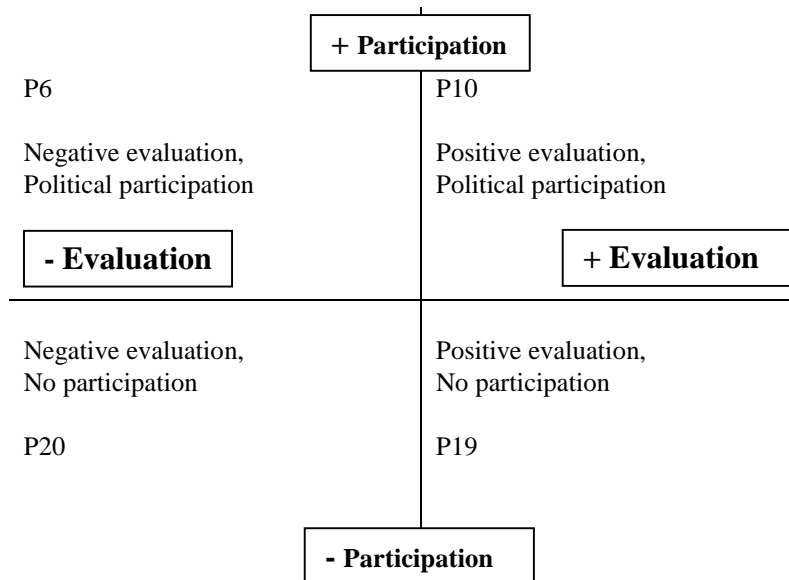


Figure 2: Quadrant representing political behaviour on the axes of participation and evaluation

Many of the Chinese youth have negative evaluations of politics which translate to non-participation, illustrated by P20 (bottom left corner of quadrant, Figure 2). P20 was a pre-school teacher, whose father worked in shipping. She claimed that she tolerated listening to friends talking about politics, but refused to be drawn emotionally into it, erecting a proverbial fortress that insulated her from getting absorbed in things political. She refused to attend any political talks, “I won’t go to their talk because I don’t want to participate, I also won’t promote to my friends, say which party good, this one I won’t”. Her reasoning for the total distancing is psychological, as she explained, “I think politics is sensitive and give me the feel of darkness, like about unknown thing, I like uncertainties so like unsafe. So, I won’t join”. This example indicated the entrenched negativity about politics tends to lead to a long-term, intractable disengagement.

Finally, the case of youth who have negative evaluation of politics and yet are actively involved in political activities is illustrated by P6 (top left right corner of quadrant). P6 was a degree holder working as a customer service bank officer, and his father was a factory manager. He was well-informed about politics through political conversations with family and friends, and read the Chinese press like Kwong Wah and Guang Ming Daily on a daily basis to keep abreast with current issues, domestically and internationally. He expressed critical views on the competence and credibility of politicians:

I forgot which minister mentioned that in the rape case, the rapist can marry the victim after he raped her. I just don’t understand how they can say things like that. Anyway, we can’t do anything. We understand that they are people who speaks without logic and we have no choice but to accept it. The only way to kick them out is via voting as only through voting we can change them or the federal government. (P6)

P6 also demonstrated familiarity with the Malaysian political culture which is personality-based; thus, when the personality was tainted, the image of the party and government is tainted as well. P6 had sufficient political knowledge to complain that “too many things are hidden” and “we can only have a little information from various sources”. His reaction was non-participation as a defensive reaction. P6 represents a small group of Chinese youth who are familiar with

democratic values such as civil duty, freedom of information and representative system but exhibit non-engagement with politics, ironically to demonstrate respect towards democracy and its values.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study found the presence of a strong anti-politics stance among the young Chinese Malaysians, and that anti-politics is a rational behaviour because the participants related the causes that motivate them to react in a particular way. In Weberian tradition, individual action is causally related to her/his internal self and can understand the intention underlying her/his action. Gerth and Mills (1997, p. 56) explain the rationalising framework prescribed in Weber's method: "Man can understand or attempt to understand his own intentions through introspection, and he may interpret the motives of other man's conduct in terms of their professed or ascribed intentions".

The study has succeeded in uncovering causes of disengagement from politics that predicts a decline in the political power of the Chinese in future. The Chinese youth are overpowered by the negative stereotypical view of "ministers" and "politicians" to the extent that they do not pay attention to other aspects of politics like democracy, citizenship, law and order, bureaucracy and public policy. They fail to see politics beyond the politicians' character and rationalise why it is reasonable for them to have an anti-politics stance. Their abstinence from voting, political conversations and even political news (for some) will cause the Chinese to lose even more political power and representation in the political structure of Malaysia.

The political disengagement of the Chinese youth seems to have stabilised to the extent that positive causes (socialisation, information literacy and personal belief) do not necessarily translate to positive participation. The anti-politics stance of a small proportion of the Chinese youth can be characterised as democracy without participation, that is, they are familiar with democratic values such as civil duty, freedom of information and representative system but exhibit non-engagement. Most of the Chinese youth were in the other category of anti-politics: non-participation without democracy. Political illiteracy is a classic case of ignorance leading to non-participation. A majority of the young Chinese Malaysians in the study reported distaste of reading political news and current affairs because such information only fuelled their existing perception that politics is corrupt and "dirty". By shunning information relating to politics, they are perpetuating their already limited knowledge on the matter. They see the check-and-balance mechanism as equally corrupt and destructive, and do not understand that the opposition is needed for democracy to function.

We argue that the illiberal non-participation is engendered by democratic systems with information black-out. They are not familiar with the media environment in the country that is skewed towards the establishment, and disregard the fact that the space for open discussion on "sensitive" matters in this country is very limited, rarely making their entrance into the mainstream public discourse. Lack of ability to differentiate the differing nature of spaces of politicisation, be it online, offline, or in civil space, reflects the consequence of information blackout in perpetuating ignorance and cementing non-engagement as the only rational choice. Ultimately, being "neutral" became a defence for non-participation, a deliberate act of withdrawing in the safest, illiberal way. Youth who are politically illiterate and disengaged are the most vulnerable to political manipulation and disinformation. Such youth is a powerful latent reserve who can be easily mobilised by politicians to effect political change (Figgou & Chrysochoou, 2019). Arshad and Khurram (2020) found that when the Pakistan government provided quality information on social media, it increased perceptions of transparency and trust, and citizens' online political participation. Future studies should investigate the impact of perceived access to information on the political behaviour of youth in political systems with different levels of press freedom. The insights will provide strategies on youth engagement.

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Availability of data and materials: The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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