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To cite this article: Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin & Nabighah Azrun (2025) Barriers to youth political participation: insights from Malaysia's lowered voting age policy (Undi18) in the 15th General Election, Cogent Social Sciences, 11:1, 2491710, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2025.2491710](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2491710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2491710>



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Published online: 01 May 2025.



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Barriers to youth political participation: insights from Malaysia's lowered voting age policy (Undi18) in the 15th General Election

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, Malaysia implemented the Undi18 policy, lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 and enabling younger candidates to contest in federal and state elections. The 15th General Election (GE-15) provided the first significant opportunity to assess the policy's impact on youth political participation. This study employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with 20 first-time voters in Johor and Selangor, and two key stakeholders. The findings indicate that while Undi18 has generated interest among young voters, significant barriers remain, including insufficient political education, limited access to reliable information, and gaps in democratic citizenship skills. Despite enthusiasm for participation, many young voters expressed uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities in the political process. The study highlights the need for comprehensive political education to foster effective youth engagement. Addressing informational and educational gaps can enhance the success of policies like Undi18. These findings contribute to the broader literature on youth political participation by proposing targeted interventions to overcome identified challenges, offering actionable insights for policymakers to better engage youth in politics and ensuring the long-term success of electoral reforms like Undi18.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 August 2024
Revised 11 March 2025
Accepted 4 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Young voter; Undi18; Malaysia; General Election-15; political participation

SUBJECTS

Political behavior and participation; public opinion; Asian politics; regulatory policy

Introduction

Amidst an era characterised by swift information dissemination and significant political landscape shifts, young people's preparedness for effective political engagement remains a pivotal concern for contemporary democracies (Collin & McCormack, 2020; Kitanova, 2020). Whether referred to as youth civic engagement, youth political involvement, youth political mobilisation or youth political empowerment, in essence, youth political participation is the active involvement of young individuals in political processes and activities (Collin et al., 2008; Kitanova, 2020). It emphasises their participation in democratic decision-making, policy development, electoral processes, community engagement, and advocacy for political and social change (Foa et al., 2020; Saggars et al., 2004). As a controversial topic debated by politicians and policymakers, the involvement of young people in politics has rapidly gained in popularity in recent years, with several countries, including Malaysia in 2019, starting to involve this group in democracy development, especially by lowering the voting age.

It is seen as an integral part of the international agenda in the context of child development and human rights to lower the voting age, as it aims to ensure that young people can participate in the decisions that affect their lives, foster their sense of agency, civic responsibility, and promote a more democratic and inclusive society. Implementing the voting age policy in the context of the Malaysian General Election-15 (GE-15) has sparked significant interest among researchers, yet there still needs to be a more comprehensive exploration and understanding of its implications. Despite the debate

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surrounding whether young people in Malaysia are ready to participate actively in politics, it is necessary to clarify the impact of the Undi18 policy after GE-15 and the barriers that may hinder young voters from participating and engaging in politics.

Previous studies have touched upon controversies surrounding the appropriate age for political involvement and concerns regarding young individuals' maturity and knowledge levels (Asia Centre, 2022; C. Lee, 2020; Mohamad Noor & Awang Besar, 2020; Mohd Nizah & Mohd Sharif, 2020). However, existing literature primarily consists of theoretical discussions, with empirical investigations predominantly confined to systematic literature reviews (e.g. Mohd Nizah & Mohd Sharif, 2020) and quantitative studies utilising survey instruments (e.g. Mohamad Noor & Awang Besar, 2020). These sources often address the perception that young voters possess the readiness to vote but exhibit limited political literacy. Notably, more empirical academic literature needs to examine the Undi18 policy's impact on young voters' civic engagement after GE-15.

Based on the problem stated above, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Undi18 policy in the context of the GE-15 in Malaysia, as this event witnessed the first implementation results of Undi18. This research will address the following questions: What is the impact of the Undi18 Policy on political participation and engagement among young voters? According to participants' perceptions, how effective has lowering the voting age been in engaging young individuals in the democratic process? How do young people acquire the knowledge and competencies needed to effectively exercise democratic citizenship? Are there any challenges associated with lowering the voting age policy that may affect the political participation and engagement of young voters?

This research aims to contribute to the broader debates surrounding effective youth electoral participation by comprehensively examining the contexts, challenges, and stakeholders involved. At its core, this study seeks to shed light on the preparedness of young individuals for active political engagement while also addressing the context of the GE-15. Using GE-15 as a model to examine youth engagement in the electoral process, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights to both local and global discussions about improving youth engagement. The research methodology employs an inductive and explanatory approach, utilising qualitative interviews with young voters and relevant stakeholders. Thematic analysis techniques are applied to identify the key themes from participant interviews. By assessing the effectiveness of the Undi18 policy, this study not only contributes to the existing literature but also provides valuable insights for enhancing policy. It aims to foster the development of politically literate individuals in Malaysia and cultivate a well-informed population capable of active democratic citizenship.

The subsequent sections provide a comprehensive literature review, offering explanatory frameworks for understanding youth political participation in Malaysia, followed by an outline of the methodology employed. Drawing on insights from participant data and relevant previous studies, the final section presents the interview results and proposes potential policy recommendations. The conclusion summarizes the overall discussion, recaps the main findings, and highlights key analyses.

Literature review

Genesis of Undi18: development and implementation

Malaysia has adopted a parliamentary democratic system and constitutional monarchy since achieving independence on 31 August 1957 (Musolf, 2019). Within this

parliamentary democratic system, elections are the primary mechanism for determining the country's government direction. They provide qualified citizens with the right and opportunity to select and vote for candidates running as representatives to Parliament (Lim, 2002). When discussing the eligibility of citizens to vote, the range of voting age varies across countries. In Southeast Asian nations, the voting age is generally between 17 and 21, where there has been a growing momentum in Asia for lowering the voting age to 18 due to factors such as youth empowerment, global trends and comparisons, and democratic principles of progressives (Asia Centre, 2022).

In the specific context of Malaysia, the minimum voting age was set at 21 years old (C. Lee, 2020). This age requirement was founded on the belief that individuals should attain a certain level of maturity and life experience before exercising their democratic right to vote. The rationale behind this previous voting

age policy lies in the assumption that individuals aged 21 and above are better equipped to make informed decisions separate from external influences and responsibly exercise their voting rights (Abdul Mutalib, 2008). However, this age requirement does not align with the legal age of adulthood in Malaysia, which is 18 years old (Undang-Undang Malaysia, 2023). Despite some individuals agreeing on 21 as the minimum voting age, debates regarding the eligibility age for voting rights have emerged in Malaysia. Supporters of lowering the voting age argue that young people should be able to participate in decisions that affect their country (Ghulam Khan, 2022). Conversely, opponents contend that young individuals may be unable to make informed decisions and view the move to lower the voting age as a strategy to gain support for specific politicians or groups (Malaysianow, 2022).

A significant feature in Malaysia's political landscape is the dominance of politicians and political parties of the old generation. It can be linked to the Malaysian culture that emphasises respecting elders and authority figures. Indirectly, this creates an environment where young people do not feel encouraged to express their political views, as their views are considered disrespectful or against the norms of society (I. A. Ismail et al., 2016). AUKU 1975's amendment reflects this dynamic by limiting and violating the fundamental rights of students, primarily young people, to free speech and association. The violation of these rights contradicts international agreements such as the UN IECSR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and the UN-CRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), which emphasise access to academic freedom, political participation, and freedom of expression for youth (Mohd Puad et al., 2012). In essence, AUKU has limited the participation of students in politics. Therefore, it has created limited opportunities for youth representation and engagement to participate in political discussions actively.

The voting age policy reform

The UNDI18 organisation movement is a dynamic youth movement in Malaysia that successfully advocated for an amendment to Article 119(1) of the Federal Constitution, where their relentless efforts lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 for the first time in history (Undi18, 2022, p. 6). Students initiated the movement in 2016 under the Malaysian Students' Global Alliance, gaining access to a vast network of student and youth organisations in Malaysia and abroad (Undi18, 2022). They highlight the importance of lowering the voting age in the larger debate about young people's civic rights. With a memorandum presented to former Prime Minister Najib Razak in April 2017, the UNDI18 organisation launched its advocacy efforts, marking a crucial step in its advocacy journey towards lowering the voting age (Undi18, 2022). Ultimately, the movement gained more traction and support from former Minister of Youth and Sports Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, who pivotally advocated for a constitutional amendment (M. L. Weiss, 2022). Having gained unanimous approval in both chambers of Parliament, the Constitutional Amendment became the first to achieve 100% approval in history (Mohamad Noor & Awang Besar, 2020; Undi18, 2022).

In September 2019, the Undi18 Bill was officially gazetted into law with the approval of Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (His Majesty King) of Malaysia. However, there were challenges when the Election Commission and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Law and Parliament postponed the implementation of the Constitution (Amendment) Act 2019 to September 2022 compared to the planned date of July 2021 (Undi18, 2022). A lawsuit was filed by Undi18 Organisation to challenge the decision of the government to postpone the constitutional amendment's implementation (Undi18, 2022). The Kuching High Court issued a ruling stating that the Federal government is obligated to enable youth participation in voting by the end of 31 December 2021. The judge determined that the EC had acted 'illegally' and 'irrationally' by postponing the implementation of the Federal Constitution amendment, which aims to lower the voting age (Azmi, 2021). Finally, in December 2021, the Malaysian government successfully amended its constitution to lower the minimum voting age and enable automatic voter registration.

Regarding GE-15, 21.1 million voters were registered, with 6.9 million constituting new voters. This marked the most significant number of registered voters in electoral history (Malaysianow, 2022). Approximately 16% of these new voters belonged to the 18–20 age group, a primary demographic targeted by several political parties in the GE (Malaysianow, 2022; Solhi & Nizam, 2022). With their substantial numbers and potential impact on electoral outcomes, these young voters have the capacity to

influence the political trajectories of participating candidates. Consequently, voting patterns in Malaysia are expected to transform as the preferences and tendencies of the youth differ from those of older voters (Mat Ali & Yusoff, 2022). In this regard, it can be said that AUKU amendment in 2018 and this policy reform recognise that the youth cohort possesses the significant potential to shape the country's geopolitical landscape (Malaysianow, 2022). However, there has been extensive discussion and debate in Malaysia about lowering the voting age for young people and involving them in politics. It identifies the complex challenges and opportunities that shape youth political participation and identifies the rights and role of the young generation in national development (Wan Abdul Ghapar et al., 2021).

Unveiling the advantages of lowering the voting age

Increase representation

Research and scholarship have argued that lowering the voting age can give young people a direct voice in politics, thereby increasing the representation of the youth demographic as a whole and creating a more inclusive democracy (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Hart et al., 2020). Achieving this goal aligns with international commitments and policies that underscore the importance of youth involvement in democratic processes. As the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines, young people can express their opinions and participate in political processes that directly affect them. Therefore, lower voting ages can be viewed as fulfilling this commitment and enabling them to participate in national decision-making (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, several international organisations also advocate the inclusion of young people in political discourse, highlighting their perspectives and contributions. As the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) emphasises, young people have the potential to shape societies positively through their active participation in politics (WPAY, 2010).

In addition to fulfilling the obligations under international agreements, nations also leverage their youth population's innovative ideas, fresh perspectives, and creative energies by allowing them to participate in electoral processes. Considering the Malaysian context, certain scholars (Undi18, 2022; M. L. Weiss, 2022) argue that young people can make informed decisions, and those decisions can have a profound impact on shaping their lives through policy decisions that are made in their interests. Throughout the decades, along with the globalisation of the times and the development of technology, youth political attitudes and behaviours have evolved beyond simple linear patterns to reflect complex contextualisation (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Mohd Sani, 2014). Young people in Malaysia, especially those educated, become increasingly involved in the political system and actively participate in social media conversations about politics (M. M. Ismail et al., 2021). Moreover, when considering the impact of other countries, Bhatti et al. (2012) found that young adults over 18 votes more than older 20s and 21s in Denmark. Additionally, Gomez (2014) and Ohme and Vreese (2020) emphasise that social media exposure has emerged as a significant avenue for political information and decision-making among youth.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that young adults are more eager to engage in politics than their older counterparts, challenging the widely held belief that political involvement and interest increase linearly with age (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Hart et al., 2020). Advocates for lowering the voting age put forward a further reason to support their stance; doing so could potentially boost political participation. In nations where voting is not compulsory, proponents contend that decreasing the minimum voting age might raise voter turnout by establishing lifelong habits and interests in civic engagement among the young. This could be a promising approach to curbing the widespread decline in voter turnout observed in many established democracies, as highlighted in previous research (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Dezelan, 2023). Therefore, reducing the voting age can stimulate broader political engagement by attracting enthusiastic and newly enfranchised voters into the electorate.

Long-term civic and political engagement

By lowering the voting age, young people may become more interested in civic life and more inclined to participate in politics for an extended period. Dezelan (2023) and Sloam (2016) argue that when voters participate in the election process and other political activities, it creates and develops a sense of civic responsibility, encouraging them to contribute to society while actively increasing awareness of

their politics. According to these research, young individuals who have reached the age of 18 are more likely to participate in political activities such as political discussions, meetings, and protests. These findings show the potential benefits of granting young people the right to vote and encouraging participation in the democratic process. The researchers also discovered that people who vote early tend to continue voting in the future.

Simultaneously, Cowley and Denver (2004) emphasise that lowering the voting age could encourage a habit of political participation among young people, perhaps leading to lifelong dedication to the democratic process. This phenomenon, known as the 'vote early, vote often' effect, suggests that individuals who vote at a young age are more likely to establish a habit of voting consistently in the future (Cowley & Denver, 2004, p. 59). In essence, the premise is that voting at a young age strengthens the habit of voting, resulting in continuous participation in the political system. Research has shown that the 'vote early, vote often' phenomenon is supported by various studies. Highton and Wolfinger (2001) examined the voting behavior of young Americans and found that those who voted in their first eligible election were more likely to continue participating in future elections.

This pattern suggests that people who vote early establish a habit of civic engagement and are more likely to continue voting in future elections. Additionally, Blais & Loewen, 2011 study found that individuals who voted in their first election were more likely to continue voting in subsequent elections, demonstrating the positive influence of early voting on long-term electoral participation. Eichhorn and Bergh (2021) determined that young people in Scotland who became eligible to vote earlier were likelier to participate in subsequent elections than those who gained eligibility later. These studies offer empirical evidence supporting the argument that encouraging young individuals to vote early can enhance the probability of sustained engagement and participation in elections throughout their lives and increase their involvement in future elections.

Challenging boundaries: exploring the risks of lowering the voting age

Manipulation and influence

Reducing the minimum voting age might render young voters more susceptible to manipulation and unwarranted influence exerted by political parties, interest groups, and social media. This carries the potential for targeted messaging and exploiting their relatively limited experience and knowledge, posing a notable risk (Carvalho et al., 2023). Foa et al. (2020) observed that young people experience feelings of disillusionment and disconnection from established political systems and institutions, and they often possess limited knowledge and comprehension of political mechanisms, including processes, parties, and candidates (Leininger et al., 2022). Due to this situation, young voters are more vulnerable to believing and sharing misleading content and often support radical political alternatives, and they tend to vote like their parents (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). Therefore, lowering the voting age may be problematic and ultimately ineffective in increasing political engagement (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021).

Considering this situation and the Malaysian case study, Razali and Abdul Hani (2022) contend that Malaysia's democracy has faced challenges because of the radicalisation of young and first-time voters on social media platforms. Political parties used TikTok extensively during the 15th General Election (GE-15) as their primary battleground, exemplifying a negative trend among youth voters for the first time. As social media influencers lure youth voters into the electoral conflict, they are perceived as exacerbating hate speech and discriminatory attitudes and practices, thereby compromising Malaysia's prospects for a moderate democracy. Moreover, Asia Center (2020) argues that political disinformation should be considered when analysing Malaysian elections. Based on the analysis by T. H. Lee (2022) and Razali and Abdul Hani (2022) on the 15th General Election, a growing concern is revealed regarding the various types of disinformation (Asia Centre, 2022) and widespread manipulative tendencies of politicians, primarily through the tactics of political parties' cyber troopers.

Maturity and informed decision-making

Opponents of reducing the voting age claim that young citizens may not possess the requisite level of maturity, life experience, or comprehension of intricate political issues to exercise the right to vote at an

earlier stage judiciously. These critics worry that superficial considerations may sway young voters, or they may not wholly grasp the ramifications of their decisions. The challenges individuals face at age 18 - a stage that entails a number of complexities related to early life and decision-making (Kamaludin, 2022). This observation is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where 18-year-olds have recently concluded their SPM examinations. While it is acknowledged that some countries allow 16-year-olds to participate in elections, Malaysia's circumstances differ, as this concept is relatively novel and needs more specific electoral education for this cohort. Malaysia, with over six decades of independence, operates within a multifaceted democratic framework, posing difficulties for this demographic to assert significant influence (Kamaludin, 2022). In consequence, few in this group developed voting habits, while many developed nonvoting habits.

Discussions regarding the potential impact of lowering the voting age also incorporate normative perspectives on the involvement of young people in politics and the democratic framework. Empirical evidence suggests that young individuals exhibit lower levels of voter turnout, engagement in election campaigns, and involvement in political party memberships (Silbaugh, 2020; Wagner et al., 2012). According to Franklin (2020), the atmosphere surrounding young voters can be characterised by a busy lifestyle, such as working or pursuing higher education, where they may not prioritise voting skills due to a lack of time and often reside with peers of comparable age, which can limit the influence of family members in voting behaviour. Nevertheless, this situation raises the question of how political maturity can be achieved without experience. According to Wegemer and Vandell (2020), young voters lacking political maturity and experience will likely become more engaged in the political process as they gain experience. It is evident from this research that experience, political maturity, and engagement constitute a cycle of development among young voters. This motivates them to become more engaged in political activities, resulting in further experience and maturity. In the context of Malaysia's GE-15, the impact of lowering the voting age to 18 remains a topic of conflicting expectations, containing both positive and negative outcomes. There is, however, a significant study gap in estimating these possible advantages and risks.

Research design and methodology

We adopt an interpretivist approach, drawing on its underlying 'relativist' ontological perspective that posits 'reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings and that there is no single shared reality' (Ryan, 2018, p. 9) and this choice allows 'researchers to treat the context of the research and its situation as unique considering the given circumstances associated as well as participants involved' (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 42). Since young voters' political participation is bound up in the debate and discourse surrounding GE-15 and how political education plays a role during GE-15 is still unwritten, these imply that the potential way to analyse the presence and use of both analyses is to ask those actors. Thus, a qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate method for analysing complex social phenomena, such as lowering the voting age. The research was able to understand the complexity of outcomes resulting from lowering voting ages, which are multifaceted and go beyond simple numerical data analysis. Through qualitative methods, a more holistic analysis of the complex outcomes can be achieved, examining how the policy affects the development of young individuals as active and democratic citizens. The choice of GE-15 as a case study in this research was primarily driven by the opportunity it presents to assess the effectiveness of the Undi18 policy. GE-15, which took place in November 2022, is a crucial milestone and the initial indicator to determine whether the policy has achieved its intended outcomes or faced challenges and shortcomings.

The sample involved in this study comprised 18–20-year-old first-time voters, primarily from Selangor and Johor, as these two states had the highest number of young voters during the 15th General Election (Dzulkifly, 2022). The UNDI18 organisation, is selected as the key stakeholder in the political education process prior to the GE-15. It combines snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Snowball sampling was utilised to recruit young voters in both states, as it can be challenging to find willing participants in the 18–20 age range who are open to discussing political matters with the researcher. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that young voters may have social connections with peers

and colleagues. It can provide useful and contextualised information related to the research goals while expanding the sample size (Jelasity et al., 2007).

In order to facilitate detailed and case-oriented analysis, this qualitative approach utilises small sample sizes (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Consequently, a reasonable target for this study included 20 young voters from the regions of Johor and Selangor to ensure a mix of urban and rural contexts, and these states had the highest number of young voters in GE-15. There was a wide range of educational attainment levels among the participants, both with and without formal education. Furthermore, an equal number of men and women participated. Additionally, there are two stakeholders who provided political education for young voters in GE-15 adding practical insights. Their expertise sheds light on challenges and informs effective strategies to engage youth in politics. Given the limitations of probability sampling in qualitative research, it is essential to acknowledge that the resulting sample may not fully represent Malaysia's young voters, which should be considered a necessary limitation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data are collected using an online semi-structured interview format with selected participants and analysed using an inductive technique, beginning with an exploration of how young voters form political attitudes. Subsequently, we interpreted and identified themes within the data, aiming to elucidate the challenges participants face to political education to equip young voters with political knowledge and civic skills. As qualitative approaches can be very complex, we use thematic analysis to strengthen the analytical process of the data in this project, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). We employ Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, which outlines a comprehensive approach to conducting thematic analysis. Next, we coded and organised the transcribed content as a follow-up using NVivo, a specialized qualitative analysis software. The creation of nodes such as 'voting age', 'challenges', and 'knowledge' allowed us to represent distinct ideas, concepts, or themes derived from the data. The identified themes have illuminated recurring patterns concerning young individuals' involvement in the electoral process and the realm of elections, interpreting their acquisition of knowledge and skills in exercising democratic citizenship. Furthermore, it is important that the researcher also determine whether there are hidden assumptions, ideas, or ideologies underlying the data that might influence its interpretation (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397). It is the objective of this study to understand better how young voters view politics, its processes, and the factors that influence their perception of politics.

Ethical considerations

The involvement of individuals in data collection within research practice has led to increasing complexity in ethical considerations. Researcher must 'deal with a range of ethical issues such as gender-related level of personal disclosure; relationships between readability and questions about authenticity and credibility' (Israel & Hay, 2006, p. 7). Thus, in interviewing and interpreting findings, the researchers adhere to a high ethical standard by consistently obtaining consent from participants, explaining the objectives and methods to them, and considering their perspectives at every step (Kaiser, 2009). Prior to commencing the research fieldwork, the Bristol University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) thoroughly examined and approved our ethics application form (approval code 15226, 22/05/2023). The nature of this study presented ethical considerations due to the personal and potentially sensitive nature of political views among participants. Exploring the fundamental comprehension of politics among young voters holds promise for enhancing political education requirements at the school level, and the data gathered from participants can inform the development of the Undi18 policy. Consequently, meticulous attention was devoted to the collection of data and the dissemination of research findings to avoid any potential problems in the future (Vasileiou et al., 2018). In addition, written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interview session, following which a copy of the information sheet describing the purpose and identity of the researchers and how the data would be used was distributed to them.

Findings and discussions

Perspectives on the voting age policy reform

One of the research objectives is to examine participants' perspectives on lowering the voting age. As such, they were initially queried about their viewpoints on the efficacy of lowering the voting age in

fostering the engagement of young individuals in democratic processes. All interviewees unanimously conveyed their belief that the policy reform pertaining to the voting age led to heightened awareness, interest, and active involvement among young individuals in democratic affairs. They opined that reducing the voting age yielded positive outcomes, contributing to increased political participation and interest among young voters and notable changes in this demographic's voting behaviour and overall civic engagement. In terms of political participation and interest, all participants acknowledged that the alteration in the voting age policy represents the government's endeavour to ensure equal rights and freedom of expression. A significant proportion of the participants articulated that they now possess greater political awareness, intensifying their inclination to engage in electoral processes. Notably, the response provided by Participant 14 serves as a particularly illustrative example:

Previously, I held some scepticism regarding political matters; I lacked knowledge about different political parties, voting procedures, and even the structure of the government itself. However, my perspective began to shift when we experienced the MCO for the first time. This period gave me a tangible experience of how government policies directly affected students, including myself. (Male, 20 years old, Selangor)

Regarding voting behaviour and civic engagement, many respondents posited that reducing the voting age renders young individuals more inclined to participate in electoral processes. Most participants feel that lowering the voting age empowers them and includes them in the democratic process, motivating them to participate more actively in civic activities. In essence, this policy reform catalyses their direct engagement in the political process, nurturing their transformation into proactive citizens. For example, Participant 16 expressed:

Based on my observations, it appears that in GE-15, there was a large number of people, predominantly comprising young individuals. This could be due to their strong support for the new policy or enthusiasm for casting their first vote. They are particularly excited about this opportunity. (Male, 20 years old, Selangor)

In a parallel vein, Participant 9 expressed the following viewpoint:

The recent general election significantly captured the attention of young voters, prompting them to participate in voting actively. The newfound excitement arose from the fact that individuals aged 18 and above were now eligible to cast their ballots, and social media videos further heightened their enthusiasm to exercise their voting rights. (Male, 20 years old, Johor)

Additionally, he included that:

Some friends have been actively engaged in political activities and joined activist groups after policy reform, and I see some of them also have expressed assertive stances on political matters through their active presence on social media platforms. (Male, 20 years old, Johor)

Although the need to lower the voting age was acknowledged, numerous participants felt skeptical about voting age policy reform, drawing from their personal experiences. A considerable amount of data indicated participants' concerns regarding the efficacy of lowering the voting age to 18. They harbour doubts that this reduction in age may not have much influence because of social and cultural factors. Participant 10 made a general remark, stating:

There have been instances where some friends expressed a genuine desire to participate, but their parents dissuaded them, considering us too young at the time, merely 18 and not yet 19 or 20. Thus, it is conceivable that other young voters might encounter similar circumstances. (Female, 18 years old, Selangor)

Exhibiting a higher degree of critical evaluation compared to Participant 10, Participant 17 offered additional insights concerning the impact of the lowering voting age policy on the behaviour of young voters in the contemporary technology era. He strongly emphasised that young voters often possess strong beliefs and ideals, and they may express their opinions and preferences with enthusiasm and fervour, which can sometimes be perceived as aggressive. Moreover, the lack of political education provided by the government exacerbates this situation, which the other thirteen participants also support:

The abundance of political posts discrediting one another can fuel aggression among young people. Youthful exuberance may lead them to believe in slander and act based on their emotions readily. Perhaps, this is due to the lack of exposure and knowledge regarding politics. (Male, 19 years old, Johor)

Participant 20 and Participant 4 articulated their stance that the newly implemented voting age policy fails to engage young voters in the democratic process effectively. They attributed this perception to one primary reason. They highlighted the educational background among young voters, emphasising that individuals who discontinue their studies after high school tend to exhibit a lack of political awareness, leading to reduced participation in democratic affairs. Participant 20 conveyed her viewpoint:

Due to my busy work schedule, I often feel isolated despite my efforts to learn and study about politics. Moreover, being 20 years old myself, let alone 18, I recognise that I may lack the maturity and comprehensive knowledge required for optimal political engagement. (Female, 20 years old, Selangor).

Very similarly, Participant 4 said:

They are unprepared, especially considering the recent general election, where racial sentiments, swearing, and insults were prevalent. These factors may dominate the thinking of 18-year-old voters, mainly since it is their first time participating in the electoral process. As I said earlier, to address this, if we want them to engage responsibly, they should possess critical thinking skills or be exposed to community activities, where they can get all these if they choose to pursue further education. (Male, 20 years old, Johor).

Meanwhile, eight out of twenty participants appear less enthusiastic about participating actively in the electoral process. Nevertheless, they opt to cast their votes in GE-15 based on external influences, such as pressure from family and friends, indicating an insufficient understanding of political issues or the electoral process, as others influenced them but didn't fully comprehend the significance of their voting. Participant 1 said:

It is okay not to vote because it won't change anything. (Female, 19 years old, Selangor)

It was discovered that it is likely that this apathy is rooted in genuine information gaps among young voters. The participants' lack of confidence in voting's impact may be due to a limited understanding of how the political system works and the potential influence of their vote. Participants expressing apathy suggested that learning more might make them feel more engaged and knowledgeable. In the next section, knowledge will be discussed as a barrier.

Young voter's acquisition of political knowledge

Given the absence of adequate political education for young voters, it becomes imperative for this research to explore the avenues through which young individuals acquire the essential knowledge and competencies required for active engagement in the democratic process. Utilising the inquiry, 'How do you acquire political knowledge?' As a foundational point, the subsequent follow-up questions revealed the existence of two primary themes, family and social media, which contribute significantly to the acquisition of political knowledge among young individuals.

Family

The gathered data indicated that 11 participants acquired political knowledge and early exposure primarily from their families, particularly their fathers. Within the context of Malaysian cultural norms, the notion of strong family bonds and intergenerational support holds significant importance, especially for individuals who are 18 years old, as they are often perceived as still requiring family assistance (Dorall, 2020). The data shows a trend that family plays a significant role in shaping the political awareness of participants. Some of the responses include:

My family has always been accustomed to discussing politics. We have a political background. So, from there, I gained awareness. (Participant 14)

Furthermore, some participants highlighted that those discussions within families led to the sharing of accessible and easy-to-understand information. This accessibility indirectly contributed to their political engagement. Participant 15 expressed:

My family is the one that gives me a lot of information. They always discuss things, and make me easy to understand, especially when we're all together. (Female, 20 years old, Selangor).

Based on the answers above, many participants indicated that they engage in regular political discussions with their family members, especially parents or older siblings, which exposes them to various political perspectives and issues.

Social media

Based on the findings, most participants still engage in political conversations with their parents or family members. Nonetheless, despite these debates, young people use social media to complement their political knowledge. Most of the participants emphasised that social media offers young voters exposure to democratic principles, as many individuals share posts related to politics such as Fahmi Reza, thus aiding those who are less informed in political matters.

The study found that the prevalent reason behind participants' frequent use of social media is to access political information. During the GE-15 period, 13 participants primarily utilised TikTok as their primary medium, while a larger number preferred Twitter for acquiring political information. Answers include:

Participant 20: ...when it comes to controversial matters like this, Twitter is usually more up-to-date. So, I mostly read about it on Twitter. (Female, 20 years old, Selangor).

Participant 6: The one that influences me the most is probably TikTok because a lot of information and manifestos are shared there. (Female, 19, Johor).

Based on the participant's responses, the data indicate that viral issues circulating on social media platforms stimulate political discussions among young individuals. These trends effectively prompt them to actively seek information and engage in discussions related to political matters. This is reinforced by Ohme and Vreese (2020) assertion that the media's role in political socialisation is potentially more influential as it combines informative usage with social network elements, leading to a personalised media consumption pattern.

The participants expressed that they acquired a substantial amount of political knowledge through discussions with their parents and political content shared on social media. However, the study also identified the presence of individual agency patterns in political participation and engagement among the participants. Among the answer is:

Participant 4: Because young voters are known as Gen Z, and Gen Z tends to prioritise their feelings and thought processes. While they may listen to what their parents say, in the end, they prioritise their thoughts first. (Male, 20 years old, Johor).

The response above align with Pickard's (2019) statement that young people's political engagement involves 'more DIO (Do-It-Ourselves) forms of political participation. Sixteen participants indicated that they evaluate and critically assess the information received from family and social media before making any decisions or determining their patterns of political involvement. This analysis reveals a fascinating interplay between generational change and young voters' individualisation of political repertoires. A combination of technological advancements and globalisation has shaped the attitudes of young voters (Gen Z) (Charalambous, 2023). As opposed to earlier generations, youths emphasise personal experiences and feelings when forming political opinions, reducing reliance on family or peers (J. Weiss, 2020). As described above, social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok are crucial in individualising political preferences where the algorithms personalise content, creating echo chambers reinforcing existing views and forming unique political identities. This personalisation empowers young voters in political decision-making, further fueling individualised political repertoires.

Youth vote: unraveling challenges

This section's findings are critical to the study. In analysing the impact of lowering the voting age, it is important to examine youth's challenges in actively participating in democratisation. Based on the question, 'What were the main obstacles participants encountered in participating actively and being well-informed during GE-15?', two themes emerged: education barriers and information scarcity. Several sub-themes have been identified to delve deeper into the data nuances and offer a more comprehensive portrayal of the research outcomes. Under the main theme of 'Educational Barrier', three sub-themes

emerged, namely the absence of political education in schools, information disparity: university students vs. non-pursuers, and insufficient support for stakeholders. Additionally, the theme of 'Information Scarcity' was subdivided into two sub-themes: insufficient platform to access information' and misinformation and manipulation of information.

Educational barrier

As discussed, preliminary studies before GE15 revealed that young voters face difficulties acquiring formal political education due to the Malaysian education system. The lack of political knowledge and understanding among young people makes them unable to participate in democracy actively. The lack of political knowledge among young people impedes informed decision-making in democracies. Without understanding candidates' positions and policies, they may feel disengaged from the electoral process and make fewer meaningful contributions, thereby reducing their participation. (Mohd Nizah & Mohd Sharif, 2020; Wan Abdul Ghapar et al., 2021). The study identified two prominent barriers impeding the active participation and engagement of young voters in the democratic process: 1) the absence of political education in schools, and 2) information disparity between university students and non-pursuers. Respondents acknowledged that these barriers hindered their comprehension of Malaysia's political system. Additionally, they faced challenges in critically analysing political issues, policies, and arguments.

The absence of political education in schools

In order to delve deeper into the correlation between political knowledge and the engagement of young voters in electoral processes and civic activities, the study inquired about the provisions of modules or voter education by high schools aimed at cultivating informed voters among young individuals. The collected data unveiled a notable absence of dedicated subjects or specific curricula focusing on government operations, electoral processes, and civic rights and responsibilities among young voters. Participants mentioned that history and civic education subjects briefly touched on certain aspects of the Malaysian government and democracy, but these topics were not comprehensive.

Consequently, the participants exhibited a limited level of political knowledge, which could contribute to their lack of interest in engaging in the electoral process, as they may not fully grasp the significance of their involvement in the democratic process. The participants' limited level of political knowledge may have dual significance in empowerment and legitimacy within the democratic process. As young voters may not fully comprehend the importance of their involvement in shaping political decisions, they may feel disempowered, and this could contribute to political apathy among youth, as they may not perceive their participation as impactful. Participant 17 shared his experience in school:

During that period, I did not have the opportunity to receive thorough explanations from teachers regarding these matters, and certain information was also lacking. The teacher's instruction on voting and the necessary actions was also not extensive. So how does the government think this policy will engage and enhance our perspectives in politics and democracy if we do not have sufficient exposure to politics in school? (Male, 19 years old, Johor)

Participant 20 encountered a similar problem as Participant 17, experiencing inadequate political education, which consequently led to reduced interest in actively participating in the democratic process and voting:

...for me, the content covered in the history syllabus is insufficient as it only provides the fundamental concepts of democracy and elections. It does not fully address the reasons behind voting, leaving us somewhat uncertain about these aspects...and this lack of comprehensive information contributes to my reluctance to seek further knowledge and involve actively in the electoral process. (Female, 20 years old, Selangor)

Moreover, it is noteworthy that this issue is interconnected with another challenge, wherein certain participants reported that their school's teachers did not prioritise these crucial modules. While five participants agreed that the history subject and civic education adequately equip young voters with critical thinking skills, most of the participants held differing perceptions, as stated by Participant 14:

Right now, they kind of talk about politics in history class, but it's just a quick intro. It would be cool if they could dive deeper into it. ... in civics class, the teacher does not always show up, and sometimes we do other stuff or just homework.

According to the data presented above, the insufficiencies within the education system emerged as a hindrance to cultivating informed and responsible citizenship among young voters. This obstacle fosters an increased dependency on peer influence and social media as determinants of voting decisions. Consequently, this overreliance gives rise to a dearth of independent and informed decision-making, potentially resulting in voting choices driven more by peer pressure and social media trends rather than a comprehensive understanding of political matters and candidate qualifications. As the Campbell (2008) study found, political education equips young voters with the skills they need to make informed decisions by teaching them about the political process, critical thinking, and different perspectives.

Moreover, participant 17 provided insights into his experiences, drawing from interactions within his circle of friends:

...when they decide to vote, they just follow their friends who further their studies in the university in making the choices. Their peers influence them, and they do not even have their vote choice.

This further corroborates Cook's (2013) reservations regarding the potential development of young individuals as democratic citizens upon lowering the voting age to 18. This study recognises that inadequate political knowledge and limited independence could render young voters more susceptible to manipulation, leading them to accept the majority view uncritically. This barrier acknowledges the role of parental mechanisms and school-based socialisation, as mentioned before in shaping young voters' political attitudes. While these influences may promote intergenerational stability in political values, the effects can vary based on other factors like peer pressure and social media trends.

Information disparity: university students vs. non-pursuers

Amidst problems in the education system, participants were strongly worried about who was not going to further their education. Information disparity was recognised as an educational barrier. Most of the participants stated that young voters who do not continue their education beyond school miss out on political education opportunities provided by stakeholders within the university setting. Participant 4's experience (Male, 20years old, Johor) highlights the disparity in university students' access to information about politics and democracy:

Young people who go to university already have a head start, whether they're doing diploma, foundation, matric, or whatever. At least in the university, they get the minimum foundation to start thinking critically and making their own choices.

Similarly, Participant 5 (Male, 20years old, Selangor) also expressed worries about the unequal distribution of political knowledge and information, which may lead to contrasting levels of political awareness and engagement among these two groups:

...for me, I got into politics early because my dad always talked about it, and then I went to university. So, I totally get it, like what it means to vote at 18 and how elections work. But I guess, in general, most young voters do not really know unless they go to university and catch up on all the election stuff.

This assertion is substantiated by the interviews conducted with multiple participants who opted not to pursue higher education. Several participants encountered challenges in responding to the questions posed and demonstrated a diminished interest in political matters. One such example can be observed in the interview dialogue with Participant 18:

I went to vote, but it felt like I had no clue what I was doing. I don't even like this political stuff. I just followed what someone told me to do. (Male, 19 years old, Johor, Waiter)

Similarly Participant 2:

Honestly, I don't really know much about all this stuff...all I know more about the government is vaccines. So, I have no idea what to say about it. (Male, 19, Selangor, Hotel staff).

Participants 4 and 5 answers confirmed Mahadee et al. (2020) statement that educated youth are aware of and closely follow current political developments. Furthermore, university core subjects such as Malaysian Nationality, Malaysian Studies, and Ethnic Relations regularly foster discussions and solicit

comments on contemporary issues, encompassing both domestic and international spheres (Johar et al., 2022). The academic environment within universities can significantly impact the ideological development of educated youth (Johar et al., 2022; Mahadee et al., 2020). Aside from academic programs and courses, campus activism plays a significant role in ideological development. Five participants support the notion that universities influence youth's ideologies through educational experiences and interactions with professors and peers. Participant 17 expressed:

My buddies at university went around sticking posters and roamed the whole campus, sort of inviting everyone to go and vote. I think that's why more young people here turned out to vote. (Male, 19 years old, Johor)

Therefore, inadequate political education at the secondary school level hinders the development of democratic and well-informed citizens among all youth. Responses from Participants 18 and 2 similarly suggest their limited awareness and preparedness to actively engage in the electoral process due to inadequate political education. These findings align with the research conducted by Hui (2022), which revealed that the proportion of politically literate young individuals in Malaysia remains relatively low.

Insufficient support from stakeholders

This point shifts the focus from young voters to stakeholders with the goal of making youth political literacy education successful in an informal setting. The Undi18 Organization and activists, such as Fahmi Reza, have also asserted that university authorities have obstructed their educational modules and programs. These institutional barriers hinder their efforts to engage young voters and increase political participation. It was found that Fahmi Reza faced interruptions while conducting democracy classes at multiple universities, including Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi MARA. During these democracy sessions, Fahmi encountered police interference upon the instructions of the university authorities, leading to his expulsion from the premises (Fahmi, 2022). Despite the challenges, Fahmi Reza remained determined to conduct his democracy classes at eateries or public spaces, indicating that young individuals devoted around 2 hours in restaurants or on the streets to enhance their understanding of democracy and the political system. Similarly, Undi18 encounters a comparable challenge, as articulated by a spokesperson representing this organisation:

The initial hurdle we encountered was devising a program to gain access to universities. This party displayed significant scepticism during our attempts to approach them. While private universities posed no issues, government universities presented certain challenges...they expressed a preference for the political education of young voters to be facilitated by the Electoral Commission. (Undi18 Organisation spokesperson)

Additionally, he noted that only collaboration with government departments can positively impact their initiatives:

So, the programs we collaborate with the Ministry of Youth and Sports (KBS) do not encounter any obstacles because the government directly manages them. However, if it's our own organisation trying to enter public universities, that's where we face challenges. (Undi18 Organisation spokesperson)

Based on the above two answers, it is apparent that stakeholders faced challenges in providing young voters with political knowledge. These challenges could undermine the development of informed and engaged citizens, undermining democracy and young people's participation in governance. Interestingly, Maszlee Malik, former Minister of Education, views the university's activities as restricting and lowering young people's intellectual level (Malik, 2022). The lack of supportive institutions also raises concerns about the purpose of public engagement in elections. When institutions fail to provide adequate support for stakeholders to support youth participation in the democratic process, it may hinder young individuals' ability to engage in politics actively. This lack of support could reduce enthusiasm and motivation among young voters, impacting the overall effectiveness of public engagement in the electoral process.

Information scarcity

When questioned about their acquisition of political knowledge and information, all participants identified the lack of information as a prevalent challenge they encountered during GE-15. In further

exploration of their primary considerations in selecting information sources, eight out of twenty participants pointed to the deficiency in the information or political knowledge platforms as the main hindrance to becoming informed voters. Participant 1 expression was very typical among interviewees:

It's challenging for me that I couldn't find many platforms that really expose stuff about voting, democracy, and all that... and the ones I found were biased. (Female, 19 years old, Selangor).

Participant 2 added:

I have been reading a lot online, but it is challenging because there is so much content that's filled with false information, manipulation, and stuff like that. (Male, 19 years old, Selangor)

The recurring and prominent subjects of discussion pertained to insufficient access to information and the prevalence of misinformation and manipulation. Therefore, the theme of 'information scarcity' emerged as another theme during the coding process.

Insufficient platform to access information

The scarcity of reliable and comprehensive information posed a significant challenge for the participants in acquiring political knowledge. This information access gap was evident in the lack of dedicated platforms to provide credible political education. As observed, there has been a surge in social media accounts to fill this gap and disseminate political knowledge to young voters in Malaysia. However, most participants expressed concerns over the limited reliability of information available through sources such as social media and websites. The rise of biased content and limited platforms has further complicated the task of obtaining accurate political information.

In Malaysia, internet users express doubts about the credibility of the information they encountered online (Asia Centre, 2022). All the participants struggle to find reliable information and feel slightly disengaged from the political process. Feeling uninformed or overwhelmed by misinformation, 9 participants have low interest in the electoral process or other civic activities, leading to lower overall political engagement. Participants identified the influence of political parties as the reason they lack the information they should have as knowledgeable voters. Participant 5 said:

...the last GE had a lot of negativities going on. The problem is, that there are not enough accounts discussing actual political facts; instead, there are more of them attacking each other. It is like no one is talking about the real stuff related to democracy and politics. (Male, 20 years old, Selangor)

Participant 9 added:

They are not really focused on encouraging young people to vote or explaining what voting and democracy are about. Instead, they are more into promoting the goodness of a particular political party. (Male, 20 years old, Johor)

Some of the participants cited this lack of information access as a reason for their lack of political awareness. Their lack of familiarity with key political issues and policies makes it difficult for them to engage in meaningful discussions or participate in political debates.

Very similarly, Participant 20 expressed:

Even though I try to learn and study about politics, I feel like the access to information is still limited... and I don't really know how to talk or have a conversation about political stuff. (Female, 20 years old, Selangor).

This finding agrees with the study conducted by Derksen et al. (2018), which found that a decline in youth participation and engagement in politics can be attributed to a lack of accessibility to reliable information. The interviews revealed that this challenge impeded participants' ability to make informed decisions and effectively participate in the democratic process. As a result of this information deficit, youth may not make informed choices, participate less in politics, or hold extreme political beliefs, which may have far-reaching consequences for democracy and the representation of youth interests (Dermoddy et al., 2010).

Misinformation and manipulation of information

As reviewed, misinformation is seen as a challenge in the GE-15, where misinformation or biased content dominates the available information landscape. In response, participant 5 expressed support:

Most of these political parties' content is about trying to bring others down. When they do that, it gets negative, with loads of false information, insults, bad-mouthing other politicians. (Male, 20 years old, Selangor).

During the GE-15 election, it can be observed that there are numerous political factions from all sides, employing extreme rhetoric and substantial financial resources to mobilise influential social media celebrities who wield significant influence (Razali & Abdul Hani, 2022). Political disinformation propagation in Malaysia has evolved progressively, evolving with technological advancements (Asia Centre, 2022). Misinformation and manipulation were mentioned by sixteen participants as difficulties young voters face in distinguishing accurate information. Participant 5 stated:

Well, if we look at who creates such content or videos, political parties hire quite a few influencers from TikTok. That is why their viewership is high, even though sometimes their content may include false information or other negative aspects. (Male, 20 years old, Selangor).

Participant 5 answers implied that the prevalence of negative content, disinformation campaigns, and information manipulation by politicians could create an environment where not only young voters but youth as a whole may struggle to access reliable and unbiased information, leading to potential challenges in making well-informed decisions. Observationally, a situation like this can significantly impact a youth's political participation and attitudes. When young individuals are consistently exposed to negative messaging, false information, or manipulative tactics by politicians or political groups, it can create an environment of confusion and scepticism among young voters (Dezelan, 2023). Conflicting information may make it difficult for them to discern the truth, which can reduce their engagement and trust in politics.

The answer given by Participant 5 reflected Carvalho et al. (2023) statement that negative information can keep individuals from voting if it harms their trust in politics and politicians. When discussing the dimensions of trust in political involvement, it is important to emphasise the importance of trust in politicians. In this regard, voters' trust in political leaders influences their participation and support of policies. Young voters were more likely to disengage from the political process if they were exposed to misleading or false information online. This phenomenon, known as 'information manipulation', can engender distrust and thus lead to apathy and disengagement, affecting democratic participation, especially among young voters (Carvalho et al., 2023). However, Perry (2021) asserts that democracy encourages informed scepticism to ensure effective governance and citizen engagement. Participant 18 stated:

It is the same for all parties; some talk about their party positively, while others criticise and attack others using social media. From there, we can see the negative impact of how they divide our communities; even though they claim to represent Islamic ideologies, they are dividing our nation. (Male, 19 years old, Johor)

Notably, when hatred and racist information overload, fast-paced media environments overwhelm participants with negative political information. This phenomenon generates apathy among most participants who perceive the political arena as rife with animosity and conflict, leading them to adopt an attitude of indifference. Participant 13 expressed her feeling:

...due to the political bickering and divisive nature of politics, it makes the youth feel disinterested in voting and reluctant to choose anyone to support. (Female, 19 years old, Johor)

Participant 7 expressed similar sentiments:

There was too much bickering, and they constantly attacked each other; for example, one party undermined another party, one said this, and the other said that. It is inconsistent, and as young voters, we find it puzzling if the elections are genuine. (Female, 20 years old, Johor)

It appears from the above answers that this makes it difficult for participants to be active in politics. Observed trends in Malaysia's political landscape indicate more extensive attacks on young voters' perceptions than healthy political competition. The use of religious and racist sentiments by political actors

to attract youth raises concerns regarding the authenticity of constructive discourse and the potential manipulation of voters' sentiments (Razali & Abdul Hani, 2022). Approximately eight out of twenty participants believe that young voters will turn out less at the next election if this situation continues.

Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth exploration of youth political participation in Malaysia within the context of the Undi18 policy, shedding light on both the opportunities and challenges that accompany lowering the voting age. This study underscores the critical role of political education in fostering informed and engaged young voters. Limited access to reliable political information and insufficient educational programs emerged as significant barriers, suggesting that reforms like Undi18 must be complemented by robust civic education initiatives. These findings indicate that while lowering the voting age is a step toward democratization, its success hinges on equipping young people with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary for meaningful participation. Moreover, the research highlights the evolving nature of youth political engagement. Young voters are not passive recipients of political information; instead, they are active agents forming individualized political identities. The interplay of factors such as political socialization, post-modernization, and globalization, facilitated by social media, has personalized political preferences and empowered youth to move beyond traditional ideologies - young voters align their choices with their unique perspectives, thereby feeling a stronger sense of ownership in the political process.

The study also emphasizes the importance of contextualizing youth political participation within Malaysia's unique socio-cultural landscape. While many theories of youth engagement have emerged from Western contexts, their application in developing countries like Malaysia requires careful consideration. Parental influence remains a dominant factor in shaping political attitudes, especially within the framework of sensitive issues such as race and religion that pervade Malaysian politics. This dynamic differs significantly from Western experiences, suggesting that strategies to enhance youth participation must be tailored to local realities. As Malaysia navigates its democratic evolution, it faces the challenge of integrating Western-inspired reforms with its socio-political context. The nation's journey toward fostering an engaged youth electorate reflects broader efforts to balance modern democratic principles with traditional influences. Moving forward, educational institutions and policymakers must collaborate to create supportive environments that empower young voters, ensuring that policies like Undi18 translate into meaningful democratic participation. In summary, this research not only expands the discourse on youth political participation but also highlights actionable pathways for strengthening democratic engagement among young people in Malaysia. By addressing the identified challenges, particularly in education and information access, Malaysia can foster a generation of informed, active citizens who contribute to the nation's democratic growth and stability.

Acknowledgments

Methodology, N.A.; Formal analysis, N.A.; Investigation, N.A.; Resources, N.A.; Writing original draft, N.A.; Writing, review & editing, M.I.S.S. and N.A.; Supervision, M.I.S.S.; Project administration, M.I.S.S.; Funding acquisition, M.I.S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Authors' contributions

CRedit: **Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin**: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Nabighah Azrun**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The APC of this article was supported by the Durham University Institutional Open Access

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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