An Assessment of Determinants of Political Interests among University Students: A Case Study of Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Political interest among university students is important in shaping citizens and developing a responsible society. The realm of politics serves to shape perspective and students' aspirations for better civic participation. Despite students having a high level of participation in politics, evidence proves that youth are also less interested in political activity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the determinants of political interest among university students. The data for this study was gathered from a questionnaire distributed to the students of Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. The questionnaire consisted of items that looked into the students' demographic data, dependent variable such as political interests and items for independent variables such as social media, election and government performance. Findings showed that the determinants of social media, election and government performance have significant effects on the political interests of university students. The finding of this study contributes to the literature on political interest and also assists educators in drafting curricula for political studies.

Keywords - political interest, social media, election, government performance, SmartPLS

INTRODUCTION

Politics and nation-building are two concepts that are linked and cannot be separated. Political maturity among the people, including youth, contributes to the country's political, economic, and social stability. For the youth, their experience is critical and becomes a catalyst for determining and shaping the country's future. The youth should be given room and opportunity to contribute to the country. The Malaysian government's policy of setting the voting age as low as 18 in 2019 has seen the first batch of 18-year-olds cast their votes in the Johor state election held in March 2022 [53]. Leaving the decision to choose leaders in the hands of an 18-year-old is a new challenge for Malaysia. The situation becomes difficult when these youth have just finished school and are still naïve in politics and may not be ready to take on civil responsibilities. The situation will get worse if social media conveys information that is yet to be verified as true. The increase in young voters indicates young adults' high interest in general elections [29]. Therefore, political interest among university students is significant as it reflects their engagement with governance and involvement in shaping the future of their societies.

Political interest is a citizen's willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other

topics [33]. Studies found that political interest is important in characterising a responsible and democratic citizen ([46], [54]). Studies have shown that university students have a high level of online political engagement which is influenced among others by political interest ([54], [1]). However, past studies also found that youth are also less interested in political activity [37]. Since research on factors influencing political interest among universities is sparse, this study aims to investigate the determinants of political interests among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Interest

Political interest refers to an individual's tendency to care and get involved in political matters [3]. Political interest is considered the basis of a democratic political belief system and an identity that is achieved through individual development [46]. Starting from the cognitive dimension ([12], [42]), which is manifested through curiosity and concern, it leads to information-seeking and political participation [55]. Reference [15] looked at the initial dimensions of political interest slightly differently, starting with knowledge, then the emotional dimension, and finally, participation in political events.

In explaining the psychological aspects of interest, [41] has made an important distinction between situational interest and dispositional interest. The first refers to temporary interests triggered by environmental stimuli, such as political campaigns. With proper attention, this can develop into a dispositional interest, that is, a more lasting and independent feeling. Studies show that young people's interests are more inclined to situational interests and are more easily shaped by environmental stimuli. This is because repeated exposure to political triggers can encourage the development of a more lasting political interest [41]. In this context, the opportunity to vote early is a brilliant political trigger that helps solidify situational interest into more lasting feelings.

According to [30], political interest can change with age due to increased life experience and social responsibility. Events such as election campaigns can increase political interest among the people. A study [49] in 'Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America' shows that high political interest correlates with more active political involvement, such as participating in political campaigns. This argument also indirectly explains the decline in the participation of young people in Malaysia in today's politics [11], which is related to their knowledge and psychology towards politics.

Research on political interest among university students is also needed. They are important social agents capable of shaping the future political landscape [12]. Studies that measure their political interest can provide important insights into the willingness of younger generations to engage in the political process. Among educators and policy makers, it is hoped that they can develop strategies to guide citizens who are knowledgeable and actively involved in democratic governance and social welfare.

Social Media and Political Interest

Social media is also known as digital media or technology-driven media platforms [6], such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn, Zoom, Telegram, TikTok, Flickr, Reddit and blogs or personal blogs. This platform, which allows users to create, generate, edit and share their content, ideas, opinions, views and thoughts with other users who share a community of similar interests, has made access to information very easy and fast, bridging what was insurmountable before this i.e. distance and time barriers. Social media facilitate coordination between people, thereby potentially making it easier to organize collective action and political behaviour [58].

Social media trends of certain issues elevate and generate discourse around them at an unprecedented level. The youth, who are the highest users of social media, are able to engage their political interests as they do without leaving their comfort zone. Therefore, the concept of agenda setting applies to social media as much as it does to mainstream media, as it provides young people with valuable insight into the country's political landscape ahead of the current general election, particularly in the race for the presidency, legislature and the governor's seat [6].

The advent of social media has significantly increased political activity. It is difficult to imagine political activity in a democratic climate without the use of social media. Political parties, candidates and electoral bodies have used social media tools as a way to complement their efforts to reach a larger category of voters in their comfort zone and convenience. This is because social media is an interactive platform that allows everyone to interact and share content without the restrictions and established rules associated with the use of conventional mass media (mainly print, broadcast and outdoor/transit media). Social media allows politicians to receive instant feedback on policy actions, discuss policy proposals and gauge political discontent. Past study [58] suggests that politicians can use such feedback for policy improvement as well as for political surveillance.

However, a pre-registered meta-analysis of 76 studies (N = 442,136) revealed no evidence of any political learning on social media in observational studies, and a statistically significant but substantial increase in knowledge in experiments. Findings show that the contribution of social media towards more politically informed citizens is minimal [4]. Users should verify social media information about politics, political parties and their candidates before engaging with them to increase their legitimacy. It also recommends that political parties and candidates avoid spreading falsehoods in their election campaigns on social media [44] and then develop irrelevant interests among the youth.

There is much evidence that social media has an important effect on political interest, including reading blogs about current affairs or politics, writing texts on personal blogs about current affairs or politics, commenting or discussing current issues or politics on the Internet, or following politicians or political parties either on Twitter, Facebook or YouTube ([27], [6]). The use of political social media increases political engagement over time. Frequent use of social media among young people can function as an equalizer in terms of motivating political participation [27]. Reference [44] conducted a study that demonstrated the use of social media to increase civic awareness of politics, including political materials, voting behaviour, political content, news and stories. Attention to political news and the use of social media for political purposes has a positive effect on political interest. The more people use social media for political purposes, the more they pay attention to political news. Findings show not only a positive correlation, but also that attention to social media for political purposes can increase political interest and offline political participation over time [27]. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H_1: Social Media has a significant effect on Political Interest.

Election and Political Interest

Election is basically an organized process in which the people choose (vote) a person, to a position of public importance such as presidency, or a group of people to represent them in national or state assemblies [35]. Central to election is the electorate who makes up a specific population segment that is granted privileges and rights to take part in elections. Election is the essential feature that sets apart democratic government (democracy) from non-democratic ones such as monarchy and authoritarian. In order to elect a candidate for a position or political office, voters must essentially make a deliberate decision and cast ballots.

In a democracy, an election allows the electorate to choose the government that best suits their needs, wishes and aspirations. It provides the people i.e. the voters with the power to choose a government or bring it down. With such a power in mind, it helps to keep the government alert, ensuring it effectively administers and manage the business of the people in accordance with the desires of the majority of voters who have voted it into power, and out of power. In this sense, political parties that seek to form the next government or win the next election will understandably be motivated to fight for votes and come up with better policies and execution. More importantly, an election also acts as a form of legitimacy for a government [36]. Such is important to ensure smooth legal continuity or transition of power.

Yet, the quintessential question with an election is how much importance the people put into it as it is almost always rare to find an election in which 100 per cent of the electorate does turn up to vote. A turn-up of less than 70-80 per cent is common though. This inadvertently raises several questions; What drives the political interests of the people either to rise or decline? What causes the voters to skip the election? What motivates the majority

of the rest to turn up?

Factors that influence voters' political interests vary. They range from personality politics, patronage and ethnonationalism [7], party affiliation, education level, religion and economic status [51], gender, age, family income and regional affiliation [2], the general feeling an ethnic group [39], social identity, family voting, gender bias, ideology, and emotions [40] to the candidate's knowledge of local problems and the candidate's party [31]. In addition, factors such as social location, psychological dispositions, the procedures involved in voting, and events that occur at the time of each election also play a role [25]. In the meantime, while [32] identify only two factors i.e. high income and wealth, [47] identifies seven of them i.e. favours in exchange for votes, love for the party, an obligation to vote for the party that is favoured in the community, activities of an organisation that receives tax waivers, benefiting constituents, lack of employment creating dependency on political handouts, high illiteracy level and policing style facilitating homogeneous voting.

The findings of these studies notwithstanding, one can see that in general, the factors may vary from constituency to constituency, culture to culture, religion to religion and country to country. Some factors are related to personal reasons, while some other factors are related to the political parties that the candidates represent. These include sociology, demography, personality, personal background and psychology. These statements led to the proposition of the following hypothesis:

H_2: Election has a significant effect on Political Interest.

Government Performance and Political Interest

Previous studies conducted on the relationship between government performance and political interest have found trust as a very important indication of political interest in government performance. "Performance" indicates the result of activities that are carried out in relation to the purpose being pursued in achieving their purposes [16]. In one research conducted by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on Performance Based or Result Based Budgeting and Management found the performance of the government is very crucial in the electoral term as the report will be manipulated by the opposition as a dogfight [16].

Bad governance practices also influence voting turnout. Bribery, nepotism, money laundering, corruption and ineffective government affect electoral participation [52]. Political trust or system support is crucial in democratic political culture. The effect of corruption on attitude toward government depends on people's allegiance to the political party. The supporters of the government tend to evaluate the performance of the government positively. Meanwhile, [5] stated that corruption is a powerful determinant of political support across widely varying political, cultural, and economic contexts, it does not uniformly diminish support for political institutions across all segments of the electorate.

Reference [34] claim economic performance of the government contributes to the turnout, and how people vote. Two opinions based on literature: People under economic strain or hardship tend to go out and vote and are actively involved in political processes such as vote, protesting and lobbying because they blame the government. Meanwhile for second group they rather withdraw themselves from the political process and focus on how to face their difficulties alone. Share the same opinion on voters turnout in relevant to the economic performance of the government mobilization and withdrawal from voting is based on the assessment of the voters in the economic performance of the government [43]. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_3: Government Performance has a significant effect on Political Interest.

Research Framework

This study developed its conceptual framework based on the literature review. Fig. 1 shows the research framework for this study with the hypotheses to be tested.
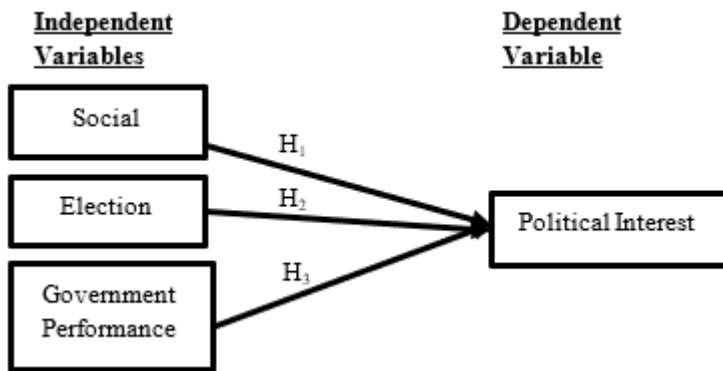
Fig. 1. Research Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative method where an online survey was administered to the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia students from March 2022 to September 2022. The survey questions were divided into two parts where Part A was the demographic data of the respondents and Part B consisted of 45 items which items were in the form of a Likert scale (format of responses: 1=strongly agree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree). Questions in Part B were divided into four sections comprising "Political Interest", "Social Media", "Election" and "Government Performance". A total of 5883 responses were received from the students of UiTM. The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for the demographic profiles and the proposed research framework of this study was later analysed using the partial least square method based on the structural equation modelling technique by using SmartPLS-4.0 version 4.1.0.0 since it does not require normality assumption [14]. The SmartPLS was employed to investigate the hypothesised relationship between the exogenous and the endogenous constructs [23].

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Analysis

A total of 5883 respondents participated in the survey. From the demographic profiles in Table 1, there were 26.5% and 73.5% of male and female respondents, respectively. A total of 92% of the whole respondents were between the age of 18-22. A total of 444 respondents or 7.5% were between the age of 23-27. Only 13 respondents were below 18 years of age and all the other thresholds comprised only 0.1% for each age group 28-32, 33-37 and age 38 and above. Students from all 14 branches of UiTM participated in the survey with the largest number of respondents from the Negeri Sembilan branch. The lowest number of respondents was from the state of Sabah with 142 respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Profiles

Variables	Items	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	1557	26.5
	Female	4326	73.5
Age	Below 18	13	0.2
	18-22	5412	92.0
	23-27	444	7.5
	28-32	7	0.1
	33-37	4	0.1

	38 and above	3	0.1
Branch	Johor	384	6.5
	Kedah	367	6.2
	Kelantan	510	8.7
	Melaka	264	4.5
	Negeri Sembilan	1667	28.3
	Pahang	171	2.9
	Perak	313	5.3
	Perlis	398	6.8
	Pulau Pinang	236	4.0
	Sabah	142	2.4
	Sarawak	147	2.5
	Selangor	576	9.8
	Shah Alam	252	4.3
	Terengganu	456	7.8

Source: SPSS Analysis Based on data collected in the year 2022

The inferential statistics started with the analysis of identifying the extreme cases known as outliers by using the Mahala nobis Distance. The data from the Mahala nobis Distance was later transformed into probability values which were later compared with 0.001 [20] and any cases with p-values less than 0.001 will be deleted being multivariate outliers. A total of 365 cases being outliers have been deleted and were excluded from further analysis.

Measurement Model Assessment

The data analysis in this study continued with a balance of 5518 cases using SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis involved a two-stage approach where the first stage is the testing of the measurement model to test the validity and reliability of the instruments ([45], [23]). The second stage is assessing the structural model to test the hypothesised relationships of this study. For the assessment of the measurement model, the measure of the reliability of the items is based on the values of indicator reliability, convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity. Loadings of items more than 0.5 show a good measurement of the latent construct [28] and from Table 2, the AVEs are acceptable since all measurements are > 0.5 [21]. A total of 22 items have been deleted for low loadings. Cronbach's alpha representing the internal consistency with values α>0.7 is acceptable ([38], [22]). From the same Table 2, all values of the Cronbach's alpha are above 0.7. The composite reliability should be >0.7 for it to be considered adequate consistency [19]. From the assessment of the measurement model, all the composite reliability values are >0.7 and are adequate.

Table 2. Assessment of Measurement Model

Variables	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Political Interest	PI1	0.670	0.814	0.871	0.575
	PI2	0.711			

	PI3	0.811			
	PI4	0.826			
	PI5	0.761			
Social Media	SM10	0.820	0.896	0.919	0.618
	SM11	0.714			
	SM12	0.813			
	SM13	0.813			
	SM4	0.725			
	SM7	0.813			
	SM8	0.797			
Election	EL1	0.659	0.726	0.830	0.552
	EL2	0.796			
	EL3	0.828			
	EL4	0.674			
Government Performance	GP3	0.669	0.847	0.877	0.507
	GP4	0.756			
	GP5	0.630			
	GP6	0.630			
	GP7	0.808			
	GP8	0.797			
	GP10	0.671			

Source: Smart PLS Analysis

The study also assessed the discriminant validity and the result using HTMT as suggested by [26] and updated by [17] is depicted in Table 3. All the values in Table 3 are ≤0.90 and these met the criterion. This confirmed that the measurement items are valid and reliable, and the measurement model of this study is depicted in Fig. 2.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity HTMT

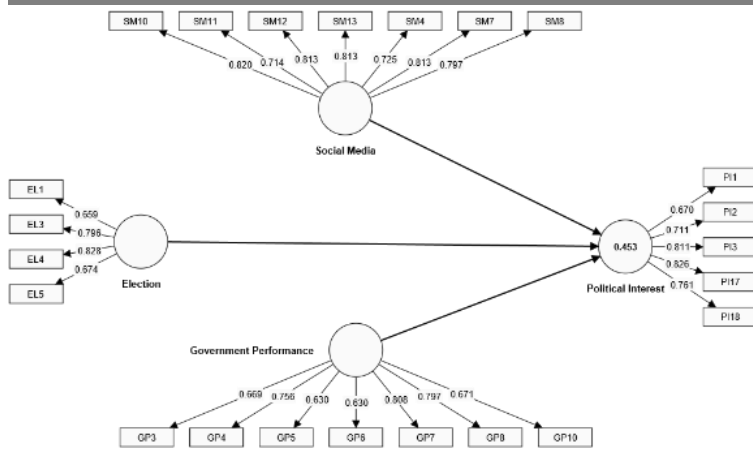|	Election	Government Performance	Political Interest	Social Media
Election				
Government Performance	0.430			
Political Interest	0.493	0.375		
Social Media	0.513	0.407	0.764	

Source: Smart PLS Analysis

Fig. 2. Measurement Model

Structural Model

Since the measures of the constructs were confirmed valid and reliable, the analysis proceeded with the second stage of evaluation of the hypothesised relationships between constructs. The variance inflation factor (VIF) score for each construct "Election" (1.291), "Government Performance" (1.300) and "Social Media" (1.338) was lower than the value of 5 indicating that there were no collinearity issues among the predictor constructs [24]. The R^2 value extracted will determine the proportion of variance in a latent endogenous variable. The R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1 and indicates that a higher value signifies a higher level of predictive accuracy [45]. The value of R^2 in this study was 0.453 which means that all predictors explained 45.3% of the variance in "Political Interest", which also means that there are other factors that will influence the endogenous "Political Interest". The study used bootstrapping procedures which can estimate the spread, shape and bias of the sampling distribution of the study and the result of the hypothesis testing of the direct effect is represented in Table 4 and the Structural Model is depicted in Figure 3.

Table 4. Direct Effect of Structural Model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	Std error	t-value	p-value	f^2	Decision
H_1	SM -> PI	0.580	0.011	50.937	0.000*	0.460	Supported
H_2	EL -> PI	0.109	0.012	9.422	0.000*	0.017	Supported
H_3	GP -> PI	0.080	0.012	6.808	0.000*	0.009	Supported

Notes: *p<0.05

Source: SmartPLS Analysis

In Table 4, "Social Media" has a significant effect on "Political Interest" (β=0.580, p<0.000) thereby providing support to H_1. This finding is consistent with earlier studies of [27]. "Election" also has a significant effect on "Political Interest" (β=0.109, p<0.000) also providing support to H_2. This could be due to various factors that influence voters' political interests, consistent with studies such as [7]. "Government Performance" also has a significant effect on "Political Interest" (β=0.080, p<0.000) which support H_3. This could be due to voters looking forward to seeing the result of activities that have been carried out in achieving the purpose as found by [16].

This study also extracted the Q^2 value to evaluate the prediction accuracy of Partial Least Squares (PLS) path models. As a rule of thumb, Q^2 values higher than 0, 0.25, and 0.5 depict small, medium, and large predictive relevance of the PLS path model [23]. In this study, the value of Q^2 is 0.452 which is higher than 0.25 and almost 0.5, indicating that the model has good predictability.
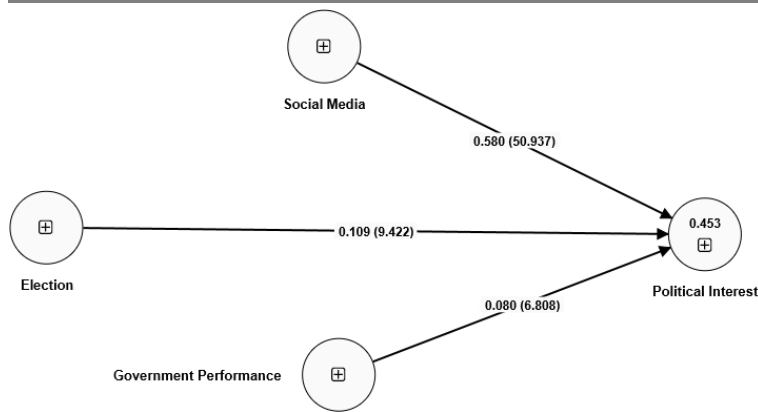
Fig. 3. Structural Model

CONCLUSION

Political interests among university students are profoundly influenced by social media, elections and government performance. Social media has been the platform for the dissemination of information regarding political information, enabling young electorate such as university students to choose and make informed decisions during elections. Abundance of information on political matters via social media will eventually create interest among university students particularly if any issues raised by politicians will affect them. The excitement of elections and the looking forward to seeing the output or results of elections will drive university students to be more interested and aware of politics. Government performance will also greatly influence political interest among university students.

The results of this study cannot be generalised since there might be other factors which will influence political interest among university students. It is recommended that a qualitative study should be conducted by interviewing university students about factors which may influence their political interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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