ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Post 2008 Malaysia’s General Elections: A ‘Protest Vote’ Against Whom?

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ABSTRACT

The ‘protest vote’ theory by Hirschman (1970) and Barry (1974) indicates the emergence of a probability would occur when the entity of an organization or elections failed to place their trust, they would instead choose to ‘be silent-and-exit’. Voters may opt to not cast their votes and with that, relinquish their power and right in choosing their leader. Both these writers consider the behaviour or the voters as being irrational. Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan (2007) ironically in their research proved that such behaviour among the voters was in fact a calculated action of rationality. Voters decided whether or not to cast their votes and their decisions were made in a rational manner despite having individual and respective ‘social references’. This article intends to identify the situations in which protest voting exists and factors influencing the emergence of protest voting; with a focus on Permatang Pauh Parliament constituency, one of the 222 Parliament seats in Malaysia. The first part focuses on identifying the existence of protest voting in the Permatang Pauh Parliament through the percentage of voters who came out to cast their votes and the empirical data accumulated based on work during leisure time. The second part presents a discussion of factors identified and confirmed as the source of encouragement for the emergence of protest voting amongst the voters of Permatang Pauh.

Key words: Protest Vote, General Elections, Malaysia, National Front (Barisan Nasional), People Coalition (Pakatan Rakyat), Voting Behaviour.

Introduction

Protest voting refers to the negative reaction towards specific policies or the political party’s ‘natural’ failure in comparison with the positive attractions towards other parties (Heath et. al, 1985). The emergence of protest voting is seen as somewhat of irrational behaviour, and instead reflects a loss of thrust and faith in party politics, being closely related to negative situations (Kang, 2004). Studies on protest voting are frequently being carried out on situations comprising of two dominating parties in an area, so much so that when voters decide to stage a protest voting, they automatically turn to a third party or a party of minority stature which had previously received no form of support prior to this occasion. Voters attempt to move away from the fight between the two dominating parties by opting for the third party in the elections.

Nevertheless, protest voting is also apparent in a situation of solo domination by one single party. The election system which provides no advantage or opportunity to new parties in certain areas; the minority or new party is thus unable to compete with the traditional party (Kang, 2004). This is clearly obvious in Malaysia, whereby the domination of Barisan Nasional (BN), or National Front, since the nation’s independence, has been difficult and almost impossible to penetrate let alone break. However, in the case of Permatang Pauh, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), or People’s Justice Party, which was newly set up, displayed much capability in overthrowing BN since its debut in 1998. Clearly, there are factors underlying this victory, which require much research and evaluation by members of political sociology and political sciences.

This article intends to identify the situations in which protest voting exists and factors influencing the emergence of protest voting; with a focus on Permatang Pauh Parliament constituency, one of the 222 Parliament seats in Malaysia. It has no intentions to study the weaknesses or strengths of the elections system which influences the voters’ choice, but instead is focused on the sociological aspect of protest voting. To achieve this objective, this article has been divided into two parts. The first part focuses on identifying the existence of protest voting in the Permatang Pauh Parliament through the percentage of voters who came out to cast their votes and the empirical data accumulated based on work during leisure time. The second part presents a discussion of factors identified and confirmed as the source of encouragement for the emergence of protest voting amongst the voters of Permatang Pauh.

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The Existence of Protest Voting in the Permatang Pauh Area:

This article will show that the voting patterns in Permatang Pauh is indeed a sign of objection and reaction of dissatisfaction amongst the people towards the ruling style and leadership of BN. There are two methods in proving this, the first being to refer to the percentage of those who came out to vote; and the second being the evidence of empirical data gathered during the leisure work was being carried out.

Since 1969, the Permatang Pauh Parliament had been governed by Parti Perikatan, or the Alliance Party, (which then became Barisan Nasional). Only in 1978, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), or the Malaysian Islamic Party, through their candidate, Zabidi Ali, succeeded in clenching the win for the Permatang Pauh Parliament. However, in the election ensuing that, BN succeeded in reclaiming its power at the Permatang Pauh Parliament through the victory of Anwar Ibrahim, and this indirectly became his strong fort until he was imprisoned for the misuse of authority and power in 1998.

In 1999, Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail took over the reins from her husband, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as her husband had been imprisoned. Wan Azizah obtained 23,820 votes compared to her opponent from UMNO, Datuk Dr Ibrahim Daad who received only 14,743 votes. Five years after that, Wan Azizah upheld her seat but with a smaller majority of 590. She received 21,373 votes compared to her opponent’s 21,147 votes. In 2008, she defeated the ex- National Mosque Chief Cleric, Dato’ Pirdaus Ismail, who was also UMNO Youth Exco. The defeat was with a high majority of 13,388. Wan Azizah obtained 30,338 votes as opposed to Pirdaus who received merely 16,950 votes.

In 2004, the total number of registered voters in the Permatang Pauh Parliament was 58,459, and votes received were 38,563 (65.97%). The percentage of voters rose in 2008 with 82.06% casting their votes.

The increase in the percentage of those who came out to vote portrays a situation of protest which had been expressed rather openly through the elections. The analysis needs to focus on the hypothesis of current issues which has left many voters aloof while elections were well underway. This could be seen via issues of faith and trust towards the dominant party BN each time elections were held. Factors influencing the votes did not materialize when elections were going on, but rather a consequence or follow-up of events which had happened prior to the elections. Such events of national or local level require much analysis in order to provide an explanation of the increase in the number of voters who came out to vote and to find its link it with the emergence of protest voting. In fact, this explanation allows us the opportunity to re-evaluate the cause of such a wide gap of votes during the general elections in 2004 and 2008.

In 2004, the current issue at national level which attracted the voters’ interest was the election of Tun Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi who had just been sworn in as Prime Minister in succession to Tun Mahathir Mohamad at that time. The clean image portrayed by Tun Abdullah alongside the concept of Islam Hadari forced the voters of Permatang Pauh to be on a ‘sit-on-the-fence’ situation, and thus causing them to express their feelings and opinions by not casting their votes. Although Tun Abdullah clean image was a plus factor for any leader, yet it was not enough to win back the trust and faith of the voters towards the party. Seeing no other choice - PKR with its own various problems; Anwar Ibrahim still in prison, Wan Azizah’s leadership yet to be proven worthy, and the BN under the leadership of Tun Abdullah which had yet to be approved, the voters decided to not cast their votes (only 65.97% voted) and the difference in votes between PKR and BN was a mere 590 votes.

In accordance with the protest theory by Hirschman (1970) and Barry (1974), the emergence of a probability would occur when the entity of an organization or elections failed to place their trust, they would instead choose to ‘be silent-and-exit’. In this situation, voters opted to not cast their votes and with that, relinquish their power and right in choosing their leader. Both these writers consider the behaviour or the voters as being irrational. However, Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan (2007) in their research proved that such behaviour among the voters was in fact a calculated action of rationality. Voters decided whether or not to cast their votes and their decisions were made in a rational manner despite having individual and respective ‘social references’.

On the other hand, in 2008, when the percentage of voters increased to 82.6%, there is need to focus on the leadership crisis at national level which effected the private lives of the people in general, specifically the lives of the Permatang Pauh voters. During this year, Tun Abdullah had just submitted his resignation with various rumours and gossips surrounding the issues of corruption and misuse of power being the main attributions of his stepping down. Even though Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak persevered in regaining the people’s trust, his efforts were still of no avail. The Khairy Jamaludin issue, for instance, greatly influenced the voters of Permatang Pauh. 17% of the respondents stated this factor as one of the reasons they decided to partake in the protest voting. The economic factors such as the sudden surge in the price of goods, thus disrupting their daily lifestyle was also found to be another reason for the emergence of protest voting, with 27% voters listing this as their rationale in supporting the opposition. Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler (2000) based their study on how voters used the retrospective approach to evaluate the government’s ability in handling the economic issues. This retrospective approach allowed voters to critically assess the steps and economic policies of the ruling party in coming to a conclusion during elections.
The range in percentage of voters who cast their votes showed a big difference between the ears 2004 and 2008 respectively, portraying how a national current issue had great influence over the voters in Permatang Pauh. These two similar but unlike scenarios was the form of protest undertaken by the voters in line with the Hirschman theory. 2004 was the ‘be-silent-exit’ mode, whereas 2008 displayed the ‘stay-with-voice’ attitude instead. Both such scenarios clearly show that there was a process of deteriorating trust and faith amongst the voters towards the leadership of BN, yet it did not necessarily mean that the voters pledged full allegiance to PKR. Instead, it was more of a protest towards the dominant traditional party.

The influence of such profound issues in the 2004 and 2008 elections can be associated with the question of whether politics are to remain local or otherwise. Morgenstern and Swindle (2005) who based their studies on the relationship and link among the election system, candidate features, characteristics of a leader and federalism proved that issues at national level indeed had great effect and influence on the decisions made by the voters.

The second aspect which proved the existence of protest voting among the voters in the Permatang Pauh area was based on gathered empirical data. Anwar Ibrahim’s charismatic factor had long faded within the thought of the voters. This was clearly proven amongst the research findings that based on gender only 2.0% of male respondents and 3.5% of female respondents chose Anwar Ibrahim as their main cause for their continuance in voting for PKR; based on ethnicity (Malay 4.0%; Chinese 0.7% and Indians 0.5%), based on age (21-31 years 0.5%; 32-41 years 3.0%; 42-51 years 0.8%; 52-61 years 0.7% and 62 years and above 0.5%). This meagre percentage proved that Anwar Ibrahim’s influence no longer formed a significant factor in having any effects on the voters.

This was in fact a clash and opposing stem with the public sentiments which looked upon Anwar Ibrahim as the de-facto leader in the opposition leadership. The emergence of protest voting can be simply proven with the percentages of gender, ethnicity and age in their voting categories as a sign of protest and their views that the BN leaders were filled with pride and arrogance. For instance, based on gender, 12.8% of male voters considered their votes as protest votes towards the leadership of BN, with 8.8% of female voters sharing the same opinion. The BN leaders were also recognised by the voters as being proud and arrogant (male 7.7%; female 7.2%). Then, based on ethnicity, 16.8% (Malay); 2.8% (Chinese) and 1.5% (Indian) stated that their votes were protest votes. As in the age category, those of 21-31 years (2.8%), 32 till 41 years (13.5%), 42 till 51 years (2.8%), 52 till 61 years (1.5%) and 62 years and above (1.0%) also confirmed that their votes were purely that of protest votes.

Factors of Influence on Voters’ Preference:

This section will provide a deeper explanation on the protest voting situation in the Permatang Pauh area. It will recognise and determine several dominant factors which influence the behaviour of the voters.

First, the weakness of the BN machinery. According to research findings, as many as 24% of residents of the same locality stated that the BN machinery was not functional. No doubt well-equipped with various facilities and capital, the issues at hand lacked in gaining the interest amongst the voters. This setback caused BN’s directions as a dominant party in Malaysia to be questioned by the voters, with 54% believing in the assumption that BN would never succeed in regaining their seats lost in the 12th general elections. Ensuing BN’s weaknesses of BN. Grounding on the actions leading to the protest voting, it was the weakness of the BN machinery which led to the voters opting to not cast their votes for BN.

The disagreements and rough edges among the BN component parties were also seen as contributors to BN’s weaknesses by the Permatang Pauh voters, with 77% voters considering this as a weakness which needed to be handled and overcome if the people’s support was still required. If this was to persist, 54% of the respondents agreed that the people would continue to lose faith and trust in the BN. Although the grazing of politics and current political issues were still ongoing, only 30% of the respondents believed that the political situation was unstable, whereas a mere 14% were of the opinion that the people were living in a much tensed environment.

Furthermore, leadership factors also played an important role in influencing the voting pattern. BN’s leadership under Tun Abdullah was found to be weak and failed in fulfilling the leadership features desired by the people. After succeeding Tun Dr Mahathir as the country’s leader, the people attempted to make comparisons between Tun Abdullah and also Mahathir from the aspects of achievement, development, economy, and even self presentation of the leader himself. The residents of Permatang Pauh considered BN to be weak when faced with the 12th general elections and this brought about their decision to support the opposition instead. This was concurred by 53% of the respondents, whereas the remaining 47% simple stated
that they voted for the opposition not due to the weaknesses of BN but perhaps due to fear of the strength
possessions by the opposition itself.

Study results found that the main features desired by the residents of Permatang Pauh were of an individual
with a kind and sincere behaviour and mannerism. 17% supported this factor. Besides that, 16% stated that a
leader would have to possess and portray a self-image and family image which was good and sincere, as well as
having religious sentiments. Other aspects respectively centred on 14% supporting a candidate of calibre,
possessing strong leadership qualities as well as being part of a good, righteous and religious community.

A majority of today’s leaders have failed to fulfil or possess all of the qualities desired by the people. This
is clearly obvious with the constant misuse of power in hand so much so that it has brought about cases of
bribery amongst the leaders involved. In this issue, 20% of the Permatang Pauh residents are of the opinion that
most of the leaders today have used or are using to positions merely to boast and stylise themselves whilst 20% of
the residents also concur that the issue of misuse of power has led to bribery within the leadership circle. The
remaining 16% consider the practice of cronymism, 15% of the opinion that the leaders do not have the people
at their hearts, 11% feel that the leaders have simply ignored the interest of the people, and 7%, 6% and 5% respectively are of the concept that leaders portray acts of arrogance and roughness amongst the public, a very
laidback and ‘fooling around’ attitude, as well as unstable and insensitivity towards religious practices and beliefs. In this case, it cannot be denied that such features and qualities of a leader would be totally rejected as
not only will they mar and destroy their own self image but if chosen as a leader, they will do doubt drag and
drown the entire nation into their sea of negative aspects.

The leadership factor which influenced the voting pattern among the residents of Permatang Pauh can be
clearly associated and seen that the aspects of values and personality of the candidate still maintain a vital role in
voting. The aspects of ideology and fight for rights still lacked great urgency, instead issues of personality,
character and image have become the balancing scales in choosing a leader.

Conclusion:

The voting patterns in Permatang Pauh have clearly proven that there exists protest which is being mirrored
through the people’s votes during the elections. The total number who cast their votes play an important role,
thus indicating that there is a relationship or link between behaviour during elections and the number who cast
their ballots. However, further studies must be done via sociological perspective in order to prove that current
issues at national and local level are motivational factors in encouraging voters to cast their votes. Also, factors
moulding the emerging of protest voting done by voters are vital in confirming that voting was done not merely
as a sign of protest, but based on rational calculation among the voters.

Permatang Pauh itself is clear evidence that BN’s domination is constantly being challenged in the political
arena of Malaysia. Nevertheless, Permatang Pauh is not the licence of generalisation in analysing the
development of Malaysian politics on a holistic approach. However, it can be seen and adopted as a pioneer for
further research or studies on the Malaysian voters’ protest in the current political arena.

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