

Exploring the Implications of Undi18 (Vote18): Youth Empowerment and the Evolution of Malaysian Democracy

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Abstract:- Undi18 represents a significant milestone in Malaysian history, marked by the unanimous passage of the constitutional amendment on July 16 by 211 Members of Parliament (MPs). This historic success includes not only the lowering of the voting age to 18 but also the introduction of automatic voter registration and establishing 18 as the minimum age for Malaysian citizens to run for public office. These reforms are pivotal in shaping a young and vibrant democracy in Malaysia. This paper explores the implications of Undi18 and outlines the necessary steps to ensure harmony and peace in the nation. It delves into whether reducing the voting age will encourage greater participation of young people in politics and social discourse, as well as analyzing the advantages and drawbacks of granting voting rights to 18-year-olds. Additionally, the paper examines international experiences, focusing on the historical fight for voting rights and examining arguments both for and against extending voting rights to those aged 18 and below. Undi18 not only transforms the landscape of Malaysian democracy but also breathes life into youth empowerment. The paper investigates how Undi18 serves as a catalyst for youth empowerment and elevates Malaysia's position on the international stage. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper sheds light on the significance of Undi18 and its implications for Malaysian society. It provides valuable insights into the role of youth in shaping the future of democracy and fostering greater civic engagement and participation.

Keywords: Voting right, youth, empowerment, political participation.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, Is 'Undi18' (or Vote18), the idea of lowering the voting age to 18 years old is significant for Malaysia and globally? Let's look back at the history of the significant number '18' worldwide before discussing Undi18 in Malaysia. What age used to be considered old enough to vote? In the 1970s, many countries set the voting age at 21. However, it's now common to lower it to 18, which is seen as the age of adulthood. In most countries, there have been calls, particularly in the United States (US), to lower the voting age from 18 to 16. The argument is that 16 is the legal driving age, and many teenagers work and pay taxes by that age. For example, in California, voting at 16 could soon become a reality. Historically, before the Civil War in the US, federal laws didn't specify a legal voting age. In 1868, Congress passed the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution, granting white men (but not women or people of color) the right to vote at 21. Women gained the right in 1920, and people of color in the 1960s. The voting age remained 21 for about a century until the Vietnam War in the 1960s, when the military began drafting young men. This prompted a change in election law regarding the voting age. It was seen as unfair for an 18-year-old to be drafted and potentially die in war without being able to vote.

During the Vietnam War, protests prompted Congress to lower the voting age to 18. Although the idea had been discussed during World War II and the Korean War, no action was taken. It was the activism of the 1960s, with

movements like the Civil Rights movement, that pushed for changes including the elimination of racial discrimination in voting.

The Voting Rights Act of 1970 and the subsequent 26th Amendment in the United States marked a significant shift in electoral policy, lowering the voting age to 18 for all elections. This change was largely influenced by the Vietnam War and the recognition that individuals aged 18 were being drafted to serve in the military but were unable to vote in federal elections.

There has been discussion and some efforts to further lower the voting age in the United States, with proposals to allow 16-year-olds to vote. Although this idea has been introduced in Congress, widespread support has been lacking. However, there have been localized efforts to expand voting rights for younger individuals.

In San Francisco, for example, a proposition on the ballot in the November 2020 election sought to allow 16-year-olds to vote in local elections. Additionally, there has been a statewide effort in California to allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections or special elections if they will turn 18 by the general election. This was put to a vote as Proposition 18 in the November 2020 election.

These efforts reflect ongoing discussions about youth participation in the democratic process and the desire to engage younger generations in civic affairs. While changes to voting age laws may vary by jurisdiction and face differing levels of support, they underscore the importance of ensuring that all eligible individuals have the opportunity to participate in elections and have their voices heard in the political process.

Indeed, Great Britain's decision to lower the voting age in 1969 marked a significant milestone, setting a precedent for other Western democracies to follow suit. This decision triggered a cascade of similar reforms in countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and France, reflecting a global trend towards greater inclusion of younger citizens in the democratic process.

Japan, despite its unique cultural and political landscape, has also embraced this trend by lowering the minimum voting age from 20 to 18 in national referendums and passing a law to lower the age of adulthood to 18 from 20. These changes reflect a broader effort to encourage civic participation among young people and acknowledge their role in shaping the future of the country.

The concept of "Japan's Changing Generations" highlights a shift in societal attitudes and values among younger individuals, indicating a departure from traditional norms and a desire for change. While older generations may perceive this as resistance or a challenge to the established social order, it ultimately represents the emergence of a new Japan influenced by the realities of the global era.

In navigating modern politics, there is often tension between different generations, with each vying for influence and leadership. However, young people in Japan, who have grown up in an interconnected world, possess the knowledge and skills to engage effectively in contemporary political discourse, contributing to the ongoing evolution of Japanese society and governance.

The decision by the Maldives to lower the voting age to 18 represents a significant step towards promoting youth participation and inclusivity in the country's democratic process. However, despite this progressive move, challenges persist in ensuring that young people truly benefit from these changes. With nearly half of the Maldivian population being under the age of 25, a substantial portion of the electorate now could participate in elections and public referendums. This expanded franchise has the potential to amplify the voices of young people and shape the political landscape of the Maldives.

Yet, despite gaining the right to vote, many young Maldivians express frustration with the existing political system. They call for greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness from government institutions. There is a palpable sense of disillusionment with the perceived lack of meaningful change and progress, despite their participation in the electoral process.

Moreover, while young people may hope for a government that listens and responds to their concerns, there is a recognition that achieving substantive reforms requires more than just voting. It necessitates ongoing advocacy,

engagement, and activism to hold authorities accountable and push for the changes they desire, particularly in areas such as law enforcement and the legal system.

In essence, while lowering the voting age is a positive step toward empowering young citizens, it is only the beginning of a broader journey toward building a more responsive and accountable government. It underscores the importance of continued civic engagement and activism to drive meaningful change and address the aspirations of all Maldivian citizens, especially the youth.

The discussion around lowering the voting age to 16 has gained traction in many countries in recent years, with Austria being the first in Europe to grant 16-year-olds the right to vote. This move has prompted debates about youth engagement in the political process and the role of citizenship education in preparing young people for active participation in democracy. Advocates for lowering the voting age argue that 16-year-olds are affected by political decisions and should have a say in shaping their future. They point out that young people at this age can work, pay taxes, and take on other adult responsibilities, yet they are often excluded from decision-making processes. However, opponents raise concerns about the maturity and political knowledge of 16-year-olds, suggesting that they may not have the experience or understanding to make informed decisions. Additionally, some argue that lowering the voting age could lead to increased political manipulation or influence on young and impressionable voters.

Despite these debates, the issue of lowering the voting age is intertwined with broader demographic trends, such as aging populations in many countries. As societies age, there is a risk of democratic imbalance, with older generations exerting more influence while young people have less said in political matters.

In this context, the decision by Austria to grant voting rights to 16-year-olds has highlighted the potential for younger citizens to play a more active role in democracy. However, the effectiveness of such measures may depend on efforts to enhance citizenship education and promote political literacy among young people, ensuring they are equipped to participate meaningfully in the electoral process.

2. Findings and Discussion

2.1 Voting age trend in Asia

Smith (2012) highlights the significant challenge posed by population aging in both developed and developing countries, particularly in North America, Europe, and Asia. With increases in life expectancy and declines in fertility rates, these regions are experiencing unprecedented rates of population aging. The key challenge is to ensure income and health security for older individuals while maintaining affordability.

Asian countries face unique advantages and disadvantages in addressing population aging. On the one hand, they are aging more rapidly than Europe and North America, often at lower income levels and with less robust non-familial support systems in place. This presents challenges in providing adequate support for older adults.

However, Asian countries also have certain advantages when it comes to adapting public systems to address population aging. Compared to Europe and North America, there may be more flexibility and willingness to implement policy changes in Asia. This could be due to fewer entrenched interests and less resistance to change, allowing for more efficient adjustments to public systems.

Overall, Smith's analysis underscores the need for proactive measures to address population aging in Asia and other regions. This includes strengthening social safety nets, healthcare systems, and pension schemes to ensure the well-being of older populations while also considering the unique demographic and socioeconomic contexts of each country.

Smith (2012) emphasizes the critical importance of a comprehensive scientific data infrastructure to address the challenges of population aging effectively. He argues that across America, Europe, and Asia, there is a shared disadvantage in lacking such an infrastructure. This infrastructure would provide a common platform for monitoring key life domains at older ages, including work, economic resources, health status and healthcare, family dynamics, and cognition.

Without a robust data infrastructure, policymakers would be unable to monitor the simultaneous transitions occurring in these domains as individuals age. Furthermore, they would struggle to understand how these domains interact with and influence each other. This lack of understanding could lead to unforeseen consequences when implementing policies that focus on only one domain, neglecting the broader impact on other life outcomes.

Additionally, the absence of a common data infrastructure means that countries would miss out on opportunities to learn from each other's experiences in addressing population aging. By sharing insights into successful approaches and lessons learned from failures, countries could more effectively develop and implement policies to support aging populations. In summary, Smith underscores the necessity of investing in a comprehensive scientific data infrastructure to inform policymaking and address the multifaceted challenges of population aging across various life domains.

Lowering the legal age of majority to 18 would indeed grant youth in Taiwan the right to vote and marry at an earlier age. This has the potential to significantly impact Taiwanese society in several ways:

1. **Increased political engagement:** Granting the right to vote to 18-year-olds could lead to increased political engagement among younger generations. With the ability to participate in the democratic process at an earlier age, young people may become more interested and involved in politics, leading to a more diverse and representative political landscape.
2. **Shift in political priorities:** Younger voters often have different priorities and perspectives compared to older generations. Lowering the voting age could result in a shift in political priorities and policies, with more emphasis on issues that directly affect young people, such as education, employment, and social welfare.
3. **Impact on elections:** The inclusion of a larger number of younger voters could potentially influence the outcomes of elections. Political parties and candidates may need to adjust their strategies and platforms to appeal to this demographic group, potentially leading to changes in campaign tactics and policy proposals.
4. **Legal and societal implications:** Lowering the legal age of the majority would also have legal and societal implications beyond voting rights. It would impact laws related to marriage, contracts, property ownership, and other areas that currently have age restrictions. Additionally, it may lead to discussions and debates about the maturity and responsibility of individuals at the age of 18.

Overall, the proposed amendment has the potential to bring significant changes to Taiwanese society and the political landscape by empowering younger generations and increasing their participation in the democratic process. However, it may also raise questions and concerns about the implications of granting certain rights and responsibilities to individuals at a younger age. Currently, the legal age of majority in Taiwan is 20, a threshold established since the constitution's enactment in 1947. The legal age of majority signifies when an individual is considered mature enough to bear legal responsibilities for their actions and gains access to increased rights and responsibilities.

However, societal changes, improved education, and enhanced communication tools have empowered today's youth, making them more proactive and well-informed. Technology has played a crucial role in providing wider access to information and facilitating communication among young people.

In Taiwan, voting patterns often align with party identification and family backgrounds. Older voters, often affiliated with the Kuomintang (KMT), come from military families and have longstanding ties to the island. In contrast, Taiwanese youth tend to be more liberal-minded and value freedom of speech. However, party identification is often influenced by familial ties and upbringing, leading to a deep sense of loyalty to a particular party.

The amendment to lower the legal age of the majority could potentially shift voting dynamics in Taiwan, as younger voters bring different perspectives and priorities to the political arena. However, entrenched party loyalties and familial influences may still play a significant role in shaping voting behaviors among Taiwanese youth. It's noteworthy that while Singapore maintains a voting age of 21, many Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Brunei, allow voting at the age of 18. Indonesia stands out

with a lower voting age of 17, making it one of the lowest in Southeast Asia. However, any change to the voting age in these countries would require debate and approval through legislative processes.

2.2 'UNDI18' (VOTE18): How it begins?

In contrast, Malaysia's decision to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 marks a significant change. This decision, championed during the government of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, was supported by arguments that Malaysia's youth are politically literate and more aware of past political events. It is anticipated that this change will substantially increase Malaysia's voter base, potentially adding millions of young voters to the electoral roll. This increase is expected to be particularly significant, with about 3.8 million youth aged between 18 and 21 becoming eligible to vote in the 15th General Election on 19 November 2022, compared to approximately 15 million voters in the previous 14th General Election (GE14), 9 May 2018.

The voting reform in Malaysia, which allows 18-year-olds to stand for election and introduces automatic voter registration, represents a significant step towards enhancing democratic participation among the youth. This reform streamlines the voter registration process, making it more accessible for young citizens to engage in the electoral process as soon as they come of age.

By automatically adding eligible citizens to the electoral roll once they turn 18, Malaysia aims to increase its voter base substantially. Approximately 7.8 million people were added to the electoral roll through this initiative. The constitutional amendment required to implement these changes received overwhelming support in parliament, indicating broad bipartisan consensus on the importance of expanding democratic participation. However, while lowering the voting age is a positive step, it alone may not be sufficient to ensure increased youth engagement in politics. Political education and awareness campaigns are essential to empower young voters with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions and actively participate in the political arena.

Moreover, Malaysia faces the challenge of addressing the significant number of eligible voters, aged 21 and above, who have yet to register. With approximately 4.2 million unregistered voters in the country in 2023, efforts to encourage voter registration and civic engagement must be intensified alongside reforms to lower the voting age. In conclusion, while Malaysia's decision to lower the voting age is commendable, sustained efforts are needed to promote political education, increase voter registration, and cultivate a culture of democratic participation among all segments of society.

2.3 UNDI18: Are We Ready to Move Forward?

The decision to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in Malaysia is indeed expected to have significant implications for the country's political landscape:

- 1. Increase in Bumiputera voters:** Lowering the voting age results in an increase in the number of Bumiputera (indigenous Malay) voters in the new cohort of voters. This demographic shift could potentially influence the outcome of elections, possibly benefiting parties like Barisan Nasional (BN) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), although this outcome is not certain.
- 2. Intensified competition:** The influx of new voters leads to intensified competition between political parties. With a reduction in the number of safe seats, parties will have to work harder to secure votes and may need to adapt their strategies to appeal to younger voters.
- 3. Potential for cooperation:** The increased incentive for cooperation between political parties could be driven by the desire to maximize support among the newly enfranchised younger voters.
- 4. Global trend and human rights perspective:** Lowering the voting age aligns with global trends and human rights principles. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines 'children' as persons up to the age of 18, and Malaysia's Age of Majority Act 1971 sets 18 years old as the age of majority. Recognizing the potential and capability of individuals beyond age is essential, and denying the right to vote based solely on maturity is increasingly being challenged.

Youth participation in politics is widely recognized as a cornerstone of robust and enduring democracy, owing to their role as the driving force behind societal progress (Bakker & Vreese, 2011). However, there exists a pervasive concern globally regarding the level of engagement among young people in political affairs, with many demonstrating little interest and feeling disconnected from decisions that could significantly impact their lives (Skoric & Poor, 2013). This indifference toward civic engagement is reflected in declining participation rates, particularly among first-time voters (Mohamad *et al.*, 2018).

In Malaysia, despite the landmark 2018 election that marked the end of the ruling coalition's six-decade reign, youth participation experienced a marginal dip from 83% to 79% (Welsh, 2018). This trend hints at a growing disillusionment among young Malaysians with traditional political institutions and processes (Mohamad *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, social media has emerged as a pivotal platform for youth political engagement, offering them additional avenues to voice their opinions and interact with political figures (Wike *et al.*, 2022). Whether through passive actions like liking and retweeting political content or more active forms such as signing petitions and participating in protests, social media significantly influences youth political participation (Crepaz *et al.*, 2017).

The lowering of the voting age in Malaysia to 18 has led to a surge in first-time voters, with the 2022 General Election witnessing the addition of 1.3 million voters aged 18 to 21, substantially expanding the total number of registered voters. Despite this significant development, research on the utilization of social media for political engagement among Malaysian first-time voters remains limited (Mohammed *et al.*, 2018). Overall, the decision to lower the voting age reflects a recognition of evolving societal norms, global standards, and the importance of expanding political participation and representation. However, the actual impact on Malaysia's political landscape will depend on various factors, including voter turnout, party strategies, and the engagement of young voters in the political process. The inculcation of civic values at an early age through democratic participation is indeed a significant rationale for lowering the voting age to 18. By allowing young people to participate in the democratic process, they can learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, understand the importance of voting, and become actively engaged in shaping the future of their country.

The promise made by Pakatan Harapan (PH) to lower the voting age aligns with the broader goal of promoting inclusivity and democratic values in Malaysian society. It reflects a commitment to empowering citizens of all ages to participate meaningfully in the political process and contribute to the development of the nation. Furthermore, recognizing that every segment of society plays a role in shaping Malaysia's future underscores the importance of democratic participation from all individuals, regardless of their background or occupation. Whether they are farmers, students, businesspeople, or homemakers, every citizen has a stake in building a better Malaysia for themselves and future generations.

By fulfilling the promise to lower the voting age and promoting civic engagement among young people, Malaysia can foster a more vibrant and inclusive democracy where all voices are heard and valued. This can contribute to the creation of a stronger, more resilient society that works together towards common goals and shared prosperity. The perceived failure of the Malaysian education system to adequately prepare youth for civic and voter education has been a longstanding issue in the country. The quality of education plays a crucial role in shaping citizens' understanding of democratic processes, their civic responsibilities, and their ability to make informed decisions in elections.

Malaysia's ranking of third out of 9 countries in Asian countries for its education system, as reported by CEOWORLD magazine in 2023, highlights concern about the system's effectiveness in providing quality education and opportunities for its citizens. The criteria used to determine this ranking, including factors such as public education system quality, literacy rates, graduation rates, and government expenditure on education, offer insights into areas where improvement may be needed.

The shortcomings in the Malaysian education system, particularly regarding civic and voter education, contribute to challenges in fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. Without adequate preparation and resources dedicated to civic education, young people may lack the knowledge and skills needed to participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that involves reforms in the education curriculum, teacher training, and resource allocation. Incorporating civic education into the curriculum, providing training for educators on how to effectively teach civics and voter education, and increasing investment in educational resources are essential steps to empower youth to become active and responsible citizens. Furthermore, it's crucial for stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations,

It's crucial to address the reasons behind individuals' reluctance or disinterest in participating in the democratic process on a case-by-case basis, rather than generalizing it as a nationwide issue. Factors such as personal beliefs, values, socioeconomic status, and past experiences can all influence an individual's willingness to engage in political activities.

Regarding the implementation of Undi18 in Malaysia, it's commendable that efforts are being made to champion youth participation in the democratic process. Learning from examples like Australia's approach to civic education and voter engagement can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for promoting political awareness and participation from a young age.

The Australian National Electoral Education Center's initiative to introduce democracy education as early as age 7 and incorporate interactive activities into the curriculum demonstrates a proactive approach to nurturing a culture of civic responsibility and engagement among youth. By integrating democratic principles into various subjects and providing hands-on learning experiences, students can develop a deeper understanding of the importance of participating in the democratic process and making informed choices.

Implementing similar initiatives in Malaysia could help cultivate a generation of politically aware and active citizens who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute to the country's democratic development. By fostering a culture of civic engagement from an early age, Malaysia can empower its youth to play a meaningful role in shaping the future of the nation. There are several important considerations regarding the implementation of civic and voter education in Malaysia's education system:

- i. Balancing childhood enjoyment with civic education:** There may be concerns that introducing political education at a young age could detract from children's enjoyment of their childhood and teenage years. However, early exposure to civic education can instill important values of citizenship and responsibility from a young age, ultimately contributing to the development of competent and responsible youths.
- ii. Challenges in curriculum integration:** Introducing a new syllabus or module into the education system can be a complex and lengthy process, requiring approval and coordination from various stakeholders including the government, Ministry of Education, teachers, schools, parents, and students. It may also require additional resources and training for educators.
- iii. Importance of cooperation and support:** The success of implementing civic and voter education hinges on the cooperation and commitment of all involved parties. This includes not only government agencies and educational institutions but also civil society organizations, community leaders, and parents.
- iv. Avoiding politicization:** It's important to approach civic and voter education as a non-partisan issue aimed at promoting democratic values and active citizenship, rather than being linked to partisan politics. By keeping the focus on empowering citizens to make informed choices and participate meaningfully in the democratic process, the integrity and effectiveness of civic education can be maintained.
- v. Technical considerations for voter registration:** Implementing automatic voter registration, as part of Undi18, requires careful coordination with residential address data and comprehensive data integration. Ensuring the accuracy and integrity of voter registration processes is crucial for upholding the integrity of elections.

In conclusion, while there are challenges to implementing civic and voter education in Malaysia's education system, there is also a clear opportunity to empower future generations with the knowledge and skills needed to participate actively in democracy. With cooperation, commitment, and clear guidelines, Malaysia can work towards ensuring the success of Undi18 and fostering a culture of civic engagement among its youth.

What is the hurdle?

The crucial considerations for the rollout of an automated voter registration system, especially regarding Article 119(3) and the readiness of pertinent agencies to streamline data consolidation effectively.

- 1. Data Integration Hurdles:** The implementation of automatic voter registration necessitates seamless coordination among various agencies to ensure the accuracy and reliability of voter data. Challenges may arise in updating voter information, particularly concerning changes in residential addresses or other personal particulars.
- 2. Addressing Address Discrepancies:** It's imperative to rectify inconsistencies in voter addresses, such as outdated or incorrect information, to uphold the integrity of the electoral process. Initiatives to prompt individuals to update their identity card addresses, as mandated by Article 15 of the National Registration Regulations, are pivotal in this endeavor.
- 3. Youth Voter Enrollment:** Introducing mechanisms like the "reserve list," akin to Australia's approach, could facilitate youth voter enrollment in Malaysia. Permitting individuals as young as 16 to register as voters and automatically including them in the master electoral roll upon reaching 18 could promote early civic engagement and equip youth for their forthcoming roles as responsible citizens and leaders.
- 4. Collaborative Endeavors:** It's laudable that multiple government bodies, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education, I-Lead, and Malaysia Future Leaders School (MFLS), are taking proactive strides to groom youth for their civic duties. Cooperative ventures among these entities are vital in ensuring the successful execution of initiatives pertaining to civic and voter education.
- 5. Early Engagement Significance:** Offering youth avenues to partake in the democratic process from an early age can instill crucial values of citizenship, responsibility, and civic participation. By empowering youth to comprehend and exercise their rights, Malaysia can foster a cohort of well-informed and engaged citizens who contribute positively to the nation's advancement.

Overall, while challenges and complexities may loom in the implementation of automated voter registration and the enhancement of civic education, concerted efforts from government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations can pave the way for a more inclusive and participatory democracy in Malaysia. The responsibility of raising awareness about voter registration should not be solely placed on the Election Commission (EC) but should also involve non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, and other stakeholders. To this end, the EC and the government have launched various campaigns and programs, including an online voter registration platform introduced in July 2019, which received positive feedback, particularly from young voters.

Anticipating the implementation of Undi18 and automatic voter registration, amendments to Article 119(4) of the Federal Constitution have been passed by Parliament. The gazette of Undi18 and automatic voter registration signifies a significant step forward in expanding democratic participation, with these changes set to officially take effect on December 15, 2021.

Are the Youth Prepared?

The readiness of youths to participate in the democratic process varies among individuals and is influenced by various factors such as education, awareness, and personal values. While some youths may be eager and prepared to engage in voting and civic activities, others may require more encouragement and support to become actively involved.

Efforts have been made to enhance civic education and raise awareness among youths about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Initiatives such as Undi18, which lowers the voting age to 18, and automatic voter registration aim to make the electoral process more accessible and inclusive for young people. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on the level of engagement and readiness among youths themselves.

It's essential to continue promoting civic education and encouraging youths to participate in the democratic process. By providing opportunities for dialogue, education, and engagement, we can empower youths to make informed decisions and contribute positively to the development of society. Ultimately, the readiness of youths to participate in democracy is a collective effort that requires support from families, communities, educational institutions, and government agencies.

The understanding and awareness of Undi18 among Malaysian youths are indeed crucial, especially considering the increasing reliance on social media for news and information dissemination. A nationwide poll conducted by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research on 2023 sheds light on the perspectives of Malaysian youth regarding democracy, government effectiveness, and media influence.

The research reveals that Malaysian youths, who heavily rely on social media for news, express concerns about the prevalence of misinformation in the media landscape. A significant majority, totaling 89 percent, view the use of misinformation in the media to influence people's beliefs and opinions as either a 'major problem' (61 percent) or 'somewhat of a problem' (28 percent). Social media emerges as the primary source of political news for Malaysian youth, with 44 percent of respondents indicating it as the most helpful source for learning about political issues, followed by television and the internet.

Despite these concerns, the poll indicates that a combined majority of Malaysian youth perceive the current state of the country's democracy positively, with 65 percent rating it as either 'very good' (7 percent) or 'somewhat good' (58 percent). This perspective was captured shortly before the lowering of the voting age in Malaysia.

The survey methodology employed computer-assisted telephone interviews conducted by a call center in Selangor, Malaysia, from July 2 to July 8, 2023. The sample consisted of 1,208 respondents aged 18 to 35, representative of Malaysian citizens nationally, with access to cellphones or landlines. Data weighting was applied based on states, gender, age groups, and ethnicity, and the margin of error was plus or minus 2.82 percent at the mid-range with a confidence level of 95 percent. Despite a response rate of 14 percent falling outside accepted parameters, additional data checks did not reveal any bias associated with nonresponse.

This research underscores the importance of enhancing awareness and understanding of Undi18 among Malaysian youth, particularly in combating misinformation and fostering informed civic engagement. The research conducted by IRI underscores the significant role of social media as the primary source of political news for Malaysian youths. While this may not come as a surprise, it raises concerns about the level of awareness and understanding among youths regarding initiatives like Undi18. It would indeed be shocking if efforts to promote Undi18 were met with a lack of awareness among youths, effectively denying them the opportunity to exercise their right to vote and participate as responsible citizens.

Media literacy among youths is a critical issue, particularly in navigating the diverse landscape of social media platforms and discerning credible political information. Ensuring that youths have access to accurate and reliable information is essential in empowering them to make informed decisions and engage meaningfully in the democratic process. While the readiness of youths for Undi18 should not be automatically assumed, Malaysian youths have demonstrated enthusiasm and interest in political involvement. However, education and awareness efforts are necessary to guarantee their active engagement in the democratic system. The unique political landscape in Malaysia has fueled motivation among youths to effect change, and initiatives such as opening doors for youth representatives to participate in decision-making processes are commendable steps towards fostering youth participation. It's crucial to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of the government and other agencies in promoting youth engagement and facilitating initiatives like Undi18. By working collaboratively to enhance awareness, education, and opportunities for participation, Malaysia can empower its youth to play a meaningful role in shaping the future of the country.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has taken significant strides in youth empowerment, with active participation in various youth conferences and meetings championed by youth activists and movements nationwide. Youth empowerment became a central theme in the National Youth Policy, reflecting a global trend where the agenda for youth

empowerment was embraced by the United Nations in 1995, following the resolution of the First World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth in Lisbon in 1998.

Undi18 serves as a precursor to broader electoral and youth-related law reforms, embodying the essence of youth empowerment. It goes beyond merely promoting democracy; it epitomizes the spirit of empowering young people to actively engage in shaping their future. Rather than viewing youths as passive recipients waiting for instructions, it recognizes them as individuals capable of understanding their surroundings and making informed decisions.

The education system in Malaysia has played a crucial role in providing youths with knowledge and information for over a decade, fostering a culture of continuous learning. With proper guidance and freedom, Malaysian youths have emerged as a knowledgeable and courageous intellectual force within society. Their eagerness to learn and think critically contributes to their active participation in shaping the socio-political landscape of the nation.

It is imperative that youth empowerment initiatives are free from favoritism and ensure equal treatment for all participants. This approach fosters an environment where young people can think critically and fully appreciate the beauty of the democratic process. Genuine youth participation, engagement, and empowerment are vital components of a vibrant and inclusive society.

3.1 More Power to the Youth

Undi18 stands as a testament to Malaysia's unwavering commitment to involving young people in collective governance. The former 9th Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob's endorsement of Undi18 underscores the government's trust in youths and its drive to engage the younger generation in the nation's political and developmental processes. This move represents a crucial step towards expanding the democratic foundation and bolstering empowerment efforts. It transcends ethnic and territorial boundaries, tapping into the demographic strength of the youth cohort. Undi18 heralds a new era of youth empowerment in politics. Empowering youth requires granting them meaningful authority, responsibilities, and opportunities for genuine participation and decision-making.

3.2 Future Leadership Roles

It is widely acknowledged that youths are the leaders of tomorrow, prompting the government's eagerness to solicit their perspectives on politics and nation-building. However, mere rhetoric about youth involvement risks becoming a hollow platitude unless it is genuinely understood and effectively implemented. This raises questions about the willingness of politicians to engage constructively with youths from diverse backgrounds and professional disciplines.

This initiative marks the initial stride towards bridging the generational gap, enabling youths to participate actively and gain valuable experience. Ultimately, they will assume significant roles in mainstream politics and collaborate with political parties and non-governmental organizations that prioritize youth issues.

3.3 Challenges for Political Parties

Engaging and persuading newly eligible 18-year-old voters presents a multifaceted challenge for political parties. Simply outlining party objectives and agendas may not suffice to capture the attention of this demographic. Empowerment lies at the heart of the Undi18 discourse, underscoring the importance of youth civic and political engagement. However, allowing it to flourish without organized support from well-intentioned entities may not foster a conducive political ecosystem.

3.4 Preparation for Future Leadership

Early empowerment initiatives encourage young individuals to address pertinent social issues and take charge of their lives. By acting on their beliefs, values, and attitudes, they can enhance their access to resources and shape their consciousness. Undi18 plays a pivotal role in empowering young people to participate in the decision-making process and advocate for their interests. It empowers them to express their views and fosters independence and responsibility. Furthermore, electoral participation during early adulthood can shape long-term partisan

preferences and political engagement. While much attention has been paid to understanding young voters' preferences, empirical data on Undi18 voters in Sarawak remains scarce.

3.5 Overcoming Unfounded Fears

Politicians' unfamiliarity with 18-year-old voters may breed apprehension or reluctance to trust and engage with them. However, such apprehension contradicts the desire to secure their votes. Stereotypes depicting young voters as non-conformist troublemakers are outdated and hinder efforts to establish common ground and shared values. Understanding and addressing the expectations and frustrations of young voters is crucial for effective political communication.

3.6 Encouraging Participation

Encouraging youth participation is imperative for a vibrant democracy. Efforts to eliminate barriers to political engagement among young people should be prioritized, aiming to achieve participation levels comparable to the broader population. While voting is just one facet of youth engagement, it serves as a crucial avenue for young voices to be heard and influence decisions affecting their communities. Embracing dialogue and partnership with young voters is essential for expanding the democratic base and fostering inclusive development in politics and beyond.

The future of Malaysia's democracy and healthy political development faces challenges stemming from issues among youth. Despite a rise in young voters and increased participation in demonstrations and rallies, concerns persist regarding the maintenance of democratic principles. The pandemic has slowed down physical activism among youth, but they continue to express their political ideas and opinions through online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

An incident on March 27, 2021, highlighted the growing boldness of youth activists. Several protestors, primarily comprising members of political parties such as MUDA, DAP, AMANAH, and PSM, were called to meet with police for breaching COVID-19 safety protocols while protesting the delay of Undi18 in front of parliament. Many viewed this action as an attempt to intimidate youth activists, especially considering the lack of accountability for government officials and big corporations implicated in exacerbating COVID-19 cases.

Failure to address these issues threatens the essence of democracy and the values of Malaysian society. Urgent steps are needed to incorporate politics and law education into the Malaysian educational system as a formal and compulsory subject. While implementing such reforms may be challenging, it is crucial for preparing students to understand and engage with politics and democracy from a young age.

The ongoing dilemma of politicization in Malaysia must be addressed collectively by all responsible parties, including the government, schools, teachers, parents, NGOs, and the media. Genuine collaboration and cooperation are necessary to foster a democratic spirit and lead by example. Despite ideological differences, efforts should be made to achieve consensus for the nation's future and development.

As a Malaysian citizen and political science researcher observing from abroad, I believe Malaysia has the potential to perform better. While slogans and labels abound, true progress lies in the implementation and execution of policies by a clean and efficient government. Malaysia's success hinges on concerted efforts to overcome challenges and uphold democratic values for the betterment of the nation.

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