

PREDICTORS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN INTENTION TO VOTE AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Article history

Received date : 14-10-2025

Revised date : 15-10-2025

Accepted date : 10-11-2025

Published date : 16-11-2025

To cite this document:

Johari, N. F., Zulkifli, N., Mohamad Rosman, M. R., Wan Mohamad Noor, W. N. B., Hassan, M. S., Hussin, S. N. A., & Ahmad Afip, N. (2025). Predictors and gender differences in intention to vote among Malaysian undergraduate students. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 10 (78), 639 – 644.

Abstract: *This paper investigates predictors and gender differences in voting intention among Malaysian undergraduate students, building upon the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Data were collected from 422 students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) using a structured questionnaire that assessed six predictors: candidate perception, pre-election perception, subjective norms, persuading methods, awareness, and social network engagement. Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the levels of predictors and intention to vote, while an independent sample t-test examined the effect of gender. Findings revealed generally positive perceptions toward all predictors, with the highest mean recorded for candidate perception ($M=6.25$) and awareness ($M=5.9$). However, gender differences were statistically insignificant ($p>0.05$). These results, when compared with prior studies using structural equation modeling (SEM), reinforce the importance of socio-psychological and contextual factors in shaping youth voting intention.*

The findings contribute to understanding the political behaviour of Malaysian youth under the Undi18 policy and highlight implications for civic education and digital political literacy.

Keywords: *Voting intention, youth voters, gender, political engagement, Malaysia, Undi18*

Introduction

The voting behaviour of young citizens has become a growing area of concern in Malaysia's evolving democratic landscape. Following the 2019 constitutional amendment that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 under the Undi18 initiative, more than 6.2 million new voters were added to the electoral roll. Yet, despite this expansion, youth turnout during the 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022 was significantly lower than expected, with studies reporting that only about 40% of Malay youth expressed an intention to vote (Merdeka Center, 2022). This apathy reflects a complex intersection of awareness, political efficacy, and social influence. Research by Zulkifli et al. (2025) emphasized that while candidate perception, party image, and social engagement affect youth participation, a significant portion of young voters remain unaware of basic political structures and responsibilities.

Universiti students, in particular, play a vital role in shaping Malaysia's future democratic participation. However, many cite academic commitments, disinterest, and lack of exposure as reasons for abstaining (Channel News Asia, 2023). Understanding the psychological and social predictors of intention to vote is thus essential for designing interventions that strengthen civic engagement. This paper aims to (1) describe the levels of key predictors influencing voting intention, and (2) examine the gender differences in intention to vote among Malaysian undergraduates. By comparing the current descriptive results with earlier inferential models, this study extends the understanding of voting intention within Malaysia's youth context.

Problem Statement

Despite the implementation of the *Undi18* initiative and the addition of over six million new voters to Malaysia's electoral roll, youth voter turnout remains critically low. Studies indicate that only about 40% of Malay youth expressed an intention to vote during the 15th General Election (Merdeka Center, 2022), revealing a gap between political awareness and actual voting behaviour. While previous research highlights the importance of factors such as candidate perception, party image, and social engagement (Zulkifli et al., 2025), these predictors alone fail to explain why many politically aware youths remain disengaged from the electoral process. This inconsistency suggests the presence of unaddressed psychological and contextual factors — such as low political efficacy, ineffective persuasion methods, or weak subjective norms — that may inhibit the translation of awareness into voting intention. Therefore, there is a critical need to re-examine the predictors of voting intention among Malaysian undergraduates and explore whether gender differences contribute to variations in political engagement.

Literature Review

Voting intention has long been explained through the **Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)** and the **Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)**, which posit that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control collectively shape individual intentions (Ajzen, 1991). These theories provide a strong foundation for understanding political participation, yet their application to Malaysian youth remains underdeveloped. Many prior studies have treated predictors such as awareness, persuasion, and subjective norms in isolation rather than within

an integrated socio-psychological framework, leading to inconsistent findings (Glasford, 2008; Becker, 2023).

Candidate and party perception are central attitudinal factors influencing political behaviour. Positive candidate traits such as integrity, charisma, and credibility increase trust and engagement, while perceived corruption discourages participation (Sheafer, 2008; Idris & Hamid, 2021). Similarly, party perception—especially views on competence and fairness—shapes youth confidence in electoral outcomes (Moten, 2011; Ong, 2020). However, high candidate or party awareness does not necessarily translate into actual voting intention. Studies show that **political apathy, low efficacy, and disillusionment** can weaken the link between awareness and behaviour, suggesting that information alone is insufficient to drive participation (Fieldhouse et al., 2022; Cantarella et al., 2023).

Persuasion methods and social media engagement also yield mixed outcomes. Digital campaigns can increase visibility and mobilise young voters, yet overexposure to online political messaging may foster scepticism or fatigue, particularly when misinformation spreads unchecked (Coppock et al., 2022; Loh & Ibrahim, 2021). Thus, awareness and persuasion interact with credibility and trust—variables often missing from traditional behavioural models. This supports the need for re-examining awareness and persuasion as multidimensional constructs encompassing both *information* and *perceived authenticity*.

Subjective norms, referring to perceived social pressure from peers, family, and educators, are often powerful in collectivist contexts such as Malaysia (Gerber & Rogers, 2009). However, the strength of these norms depends on the political homogeneity of one's social network. For instance, if influential peers are politically disengaged, the same norms may instead discourage participation (Becker, 2023). Integrating subjective norms with other predictors can therefore reveal how social expectations and political culture interact in shaping youth intention to vote.

Gender and Voting Behaviour

Research on gendered political participation highlights persistent disparities in political interest, efficacy, and mobilisation. Globally, women are less likely to engage politically when faced with structural or cultural barriers (Choi, 2019). Within Malaysia, findings are mixed. Some studies indicate that female undergraduates exhibit higher civic awareness but lower political confidence (Loh & Ibrahim, 2021), while others suggest women's political engagement is shaped by familial expectations and traditional gender norms (Omar, 2019). Comparative studies in Southeast Asia reveal that cultural and religious values may moderate how women perceive their political roles and the credibility of male-dominated party systems (Sinpeng, 2020; White, 2024).

Recent analyses also show that female voters are more responsive to persuasive cues such as candidate empathy or social media authenticity, while male voters are more influenced by issue-based appeals and perceived political efficacy (Choi, 2019; KAS, 2021). These gendered dynamics underline the importance of including gender not only as a demographic control but as a moderating variable influencing how predictors like awareness, persuasion, and subjective norms affect intention to vote.

Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

Synthesising these insights reveals three key gaps. First, while TRA and TPB explain intention formation, their application to digital-era youth requires contextualisation through new

variables such as online engagement and misinformation. Second, predictors such as awareness and persuasion need to be treated as interdependent rather than separate, as their effectiveness depends on trust and efficacy. Third, gender remains an underexplored dimension in Malaysia's youth voting literature despite evidence of its moderating role in similar Asian contexts.

Based on these insights, the conceptual framework of this study integrates six predictors—Candidate Perception, Pre-Election Perception, Subjective Norms, Persuasion Methods, Awareness, and Social Network Engagement—as independent variables influencing Intention to Vote, with Gender as a moderating variable affecting the strength of these relationships.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using a structured online questionnaire. The population comprised Malaysian undergraduate students, with a final sample of 422 respondents from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Ethical clearance was obtained from UiTM's Research Management Centre. The instrument measured six independent variables—Candidate Perception (CDT), Pre-Election Perception (PTY), Subjective Norms (SBN), Persuading Methods (PSD), Awareness (AWR), and Social Network Engagement (SNE)—and one dependent variable, Intention to Vote (INT). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the level of each predictor. The reliability of constructs exceeded the 0.7 Cronbach alpha threshold. An independent sample t-test was performed to assess gender differences in intention to vote. These statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS Version 26.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 305 females (72.3%) and 117 males (27.7%) participated in the study, primarily aged 18–20 years (80.1%). Descriptive results revealed generally positive perceptions toward all predictors. Candidate perception achieved the highest mean ($M=6.25$), followed by awareness ($M=5.9$) and subjective norms ($M=6.03$). These findings align with Zulkifli et al. (2025), who found that candidate perception, party perception, subjective norms, persuasion, and social media engagement significantly influenced youth voting intention.

The independent sample t-test indicated no significant difference between male ($M=4.40$, $SD=1.14$) and female ($M=4.52$, $SD=0.90$) students in their intention to vote, $t(194.13) = -0.338$, $p = 0.736$. This suggests that gender does not significantly affect voting intention. In contrast, Zulkifli et al. (2025) found gender to have an indirect moderating effect within SEM modeling. Thus, gender differences may exist in complex, mediated relationships rather than direct effects.

When comparing the predictors, persuasive methods and social network engagement recorded moderate mean levels ($M=4.58$ and $M=4.6$ respectively), indicating that while students recognize the influence of digital campaigns, they remain cautious of political content. This pattern mirrors international findings where exposure to digital misinformation reduces trust but not necessarily participation (Cantarella et al., 2023). Overall, the results confirm that Malaysian youth exhibit awareness and civic responsibility, yet gender does not differentiate these attitudes.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding the predictors and gender dynamics of voting intention among Malaysian undergraduates. Consistent with prior findings, candidate perception, awareness, and subjective norms emerged as crucial predictors, while gender differences were statistically insignificant. The results imply that voter education and media literacy programs should target all youth regardless of gender, emphasizing integrity, transparency, and informed decision-making. Policymakers and educators should design integrated civic engagement programs through universities to sustain democratic participation under the Undi18 policy.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank all the respondents that participate in the studies. Also thanks to the Research Management Centre (RMC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan for the research grant under Special Interest Group (SIG).

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