INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE, 2007
VOL 15, NO 1, 1-14

General Election 2004: Empirical Validation of Voting Pattern in Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to test the effects of the politically related socio-economic issues, personality of the new Prime Minister and the perceived strength of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN), in influencing the outcomes of elections. It uses the data from the Star-IIUM Survey 2004 and the official election results of general election 2004 for the three northern states of Malaysia and applies the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The study found that the personal attributes of the Prime Minister, the strength of the ruling party and the campaign issues positively influenced the popular votes secured by the BN candidates.

Elections have always been an integral part of democratic polities. Democratic institutions thrive on the exercise of choice at regular intervals by the electorate. Political scientists and scholars agree that a close analysis of voting patterns bring to light the cross-currents – political, social and economic – which influence the behaviour of the voters. This study attempts to explain the factors that influenced voters' choice by focusing, among others, on socio-economic issues, party affiliation and political leadership. The study was conducted in the Northern states of Malaysia to examine the factors that influenced voters' choice during the general elections in March 2004.

A Review of the Empirical Literature

Elections have provided incentives to students of social sciences to identify the patterns and correlates of voting behaviour. Lazarsfeld

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and others in their study incorporated the influence of social groups and interpersonal communication by focusing on the reinforcing role that groups make on the individual voter.[1] Other studies, such as by Newman, analysed the influence of communication and the mass media on the voters.[2] Some studies found relationship between party affiliation and party loyalty arguing that voters vote for the party and are not bothered by candidates and issues.[3] There are scholars, however, who counter the above findings. They suggest that voters are concerned with issues rather than parties. To them, voters would choose the candidate who champion the issues considered important by them. Under such circumstances, campaign conduct and strategy play a dominant role in elections. Catt found a positive relationship between voter identification and campaign strategies.[4] The successful re-election campaign of Bill Clinton as President of the United States in 1996 is attributed to the market orientation of his campaign strategy when campaigners matched the ideals of the American Dream with the voter preferences.[5]

Earlier studies on Malaysian elections identified race as the factor that swayed the voters, but in later elections, religion and regionalism were considered important in shaping voters' choice.[6] Foreign policy and rallying around the national flag were important issues during the 1964 election, when Malaysia faced a series of small armed incursions resulting from Indonesia's policy of "Confrontation."[7] In contemporary times, the voting pattern is believed to be directly determined by voters' beliefs, opinions and perceptions toward the government's performance in addressing the socio-economic and political issues. These are in addition to the organisational strength of BN, and more importantly its leadership.[8] These factors require empirical validation which is attempted in this study.

Present Study

The general elections in Malaysia were held in March 2004 in which the ruling coalition, Barisan National (BN), captured unprecedented 90 per cent of the seats in Parliament and polled 64.4 per cent of the popular votes. The BN's success is attributed to many factors including the leadership of the newly installed Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who assumed office on October 31, 2003. Badawi was leading the party in the 2004 elections for the

first time. The economy was performing well, and the people in general held a positive opinion about the country moving in the right direction.

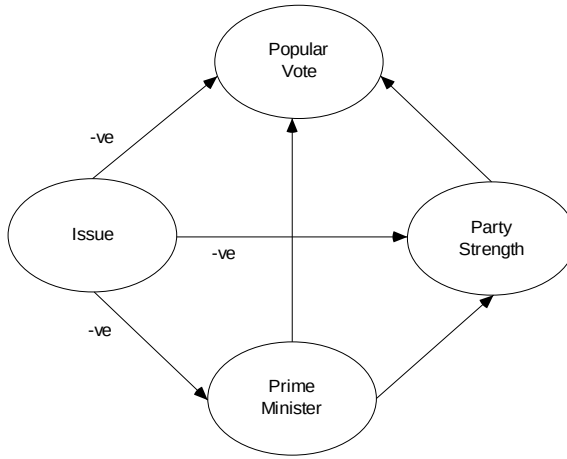
The opposition parties did not fare well during the 2004 election. The Islamic Party, Partai Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS, performed poorly by winning only 6 seats compared to 26 seats it won in 1999. PAS also won majority seats at the state level in 1999 and formed governments in Kelantan and Terengganu. The self-proclaimed Democratic Action Party (DAP) captured 12 parliamentary seats compared to only 10 seats in 1999. The opposition parties could not agree among themselves to form a united front to face the BN in 2004.[9]

The patterns of causal relationships for the popular votes obtained by the National Front candidates in the 2004 election is hypothesized in Figure 1. First, the popular vote for the ruling party depends on voters' views on the political, social and economic issues.[10] Such issues as the implementation of the National Service programme, the use of English in the teaching of science and mathematics, and the socio-economic well being as experienced by the voters, were raised during the election in order to undermine the popularity of the ruling party. Thus, popular vote was expected to be directly and negatively influenced by the multidimensional issue-related variable.

Second, the efficacy of the leadership of the incumbent party as perceived by the voters also affected outcome of the election in a direct manner. The perceptions toward the Prime Minister, which could be observed mainly in the form of voters' reactions toward his leadership characteristics, would directly determine the popular vote for BN candidates led by the Prime Minister. Third, the perceived strength of the government, which comprises several political parties, would likely influence the popular vote.

Meanwhile, the perceptions toward socio-economic issues may have negatively affected the strength of BN. This perceived strength is a composite of voters' opinion about the ability of the four major components of BN, namely, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) in leading and managing the country. This means that apart from their direct

Figure I: Popular Vote for the BN in the 2004 General Election: Hypothesized Model



negative effect on voting pattern, the perceived socio-economic issues exert their influences indirectly through the strength of the National Front. Similarly, it is reasonable to argue for causal relationship between the voters' perception toward the Prime Minister and the socio-economic issues. Possibly, the manner in which voters view the socio-political issues would negatively impinge on their perceptions toward the Prime Minister, which in turn would influence their voting behaviour.

The hypothesized causal relationships are considered stable over time. It is likely that the patterns of dependent relationship are consistent for several months, unless some extraordinary events occur and influence the determinants of voting behaviour. However, after a certain time lapse, the direction and magnitude of the relationship may change. For example, a major economic event may eventually redefine the socio-economic issues, perceived leadership and the strength of the ruling party. The model, therefore, is testable on a several-month time frame, within which the postulated directional influences are applicable.

The purpose of this study is to examine the efficacy of the hypothesized patterns of voting. More specifically, the study aims at establishing the indicators of voting patterns of the ruling political party, the BN, in the 2004 general election. It aims at testing the effects of the politically related socio-economic issues, characteristics of the new Prime Minister and the perceived strength of the ruling party in influencing the outcome of elections. In sum, the study seeks to statistically validate a theoretical model for the outcome of the 2004 election in selected constituencies.

Approach and Methodology

The data for this study is derived from face-to-face interview with voters at designated locations, and through questionnaires with close and open-ended questions. The questionnaire contained 205 items asking respondents' opinion on socio-economic issues and their evaluation of political leaders in the government as well as in the opposition. The questionnaire took about 45 minutes to be completed.

The Star-IIUM Survey 2004 involved a sample size of 1,511 respondents from all over the peninsula. To manage such a large scale study nation wide, proper procedures and parameters were observed to ensure the quality and reliability of data collected. The objective of this nation wide study, which was sponsored by the daily *Star* newspaper, was to find out the party that people would vote during the forthcoming election. This was the second time the *Star* sponsored such a study. The first survey was conducted in 1999.

For the purpose of this paper, a portion of the study was extracted, namely on the voters in the states of Kelantan, Tenggeranu and Kedah. The three states had predominantly Malays voters. The research question that we had in mind was the extent to which voters were influenced by the Prime Minister's leadership, party affiliation and issues in making their voting decision, such as "Would party affiliation be the dominant factor or would leadership and issues prevail?"

The respondents of the study were 301 voters, most of whom were Malays (86.4%); the sample also comprised 10.3% Chinese and 3.3% Indian voters. The voters were sampled from three states

of interest, Kedah (34.2%), Terengganu (35.5%) and Kelantan (30.3%). In each state, a sample of voters was selected from two state constituencies. The sample size was deemed adequate for the application of structural equation modeling (SEM).

The Variables

The instrument contained measures of perceived socio-economic issues, leadership characteristics of the Prime Minister, and the perceived strength of the Barisan Nasional (BN), the party in power. The perceived socio-economic issues were represented by four observed constructs, which were the perceptions towards (i) economic wellbeing (econ), (ii) socio-economic issues (social), (iii) UMNO-related issues (pol1), and (iv) the Chinese-based parties, the MCA and Gerakan-related issues (pol2). The items are worded in a manner that higher composite score on each construct represents socio-economic issues that question the credibility of the ruling party. The perceptions toward the Prime Minister comprised 10 variables (pma through pmj), each of which prompted the respondent to indicate his or her level of agreement. The strength of ruling party (BN) is a composite of respondents' score toward the strength of the four major components of the National Front since 1999. The data were subjected to a series of four principal component analysis and internal consistency analysis to determine the psychometric properties of the measures. A summary of the measurement characteristics of these exogenous variables is presented in Table 1.

It should be noted that the criterion measure of the study was the proportion of votes obtained by the candidates of the ruling party in their respective constituencies. The data were collected from the results of General Election 2004 as published in the Government Gazette.

Analytical Procedure

To arrive at the conclusion, structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied on the data. SEM, one of the highly versatile statistical tools, was used in this study to test whether the proposed voting pattern model was consistent with the data for several reasons. First, SEM facilitates the estimation of dependence relationships among the variables in the proposed model simultaneously. Second, it allows

for the assessment of both directional relationships, implying the likelihood of causal links, and non-directional relationships among the variables simultaneously. Third, SEM enables the identification of underlying non-observable constructs, the latent variable which were not measured directly in the study. This capability would substantially contribute to a theory building, because a theory generally aims at describing relationships among the latent variables. Finally, the ability of the SEM to extract latent variables on the basis of the observed covariance among the measured (manifest) variables permits the researcher to estimate the measurement error; hence, the reliability of the data.

Table 1: Results of Principal Component Analysis and Reliability Analysis

Measured Variables	Code	Number of Item	PVE*	Min	Max	Alp
Economic Well-Being	econ	3	63	.50	.73	.70
Socio-Economic Issues		12	56	-	-	-
Social Issues	social	4	-	.40	86	.60
UMNO Leadership	pol1	4	-	.72	.80	.80
Unity of Chinese parties	pol2	4	-	.66	.75	.68
The Characteristics of the Prime Minister	PL	10	48	.52	.70	.88
Strength of the NF	bn	4	74	.60	.96	.88

Note* PVE – Proportion of variance explained

The hypothesized model was estimated using the covariance matrix derived from the data. To evaluate the adequacy of the estimated models, i.e., its goodness of fit, the analysis used the conventionally accepted criteria.[11] Given that the model was substantially and methodologically "fit," it was revised when the need arose.

Model Specification

On the basis of the preceding framework, the study identified a model of interrelated dependence relationships. It contained 15 manifest variables. Two measurement models, each of which attempted to

extract a latent variable, were established in the specification. The first latent variable, labelled as *issues*, which would explain the variability in pol1, pol2, social and econ, was hypothesized to represent the voters' perceptions toward politically-related socio-economic issues. The second latent variable, the *PL*, represents the underlying factor for the 10 measured characteristics of the Prime Minister.

Model Evaluation

To estimate the hypothesized model, the study used AMOS 6.0 data-fitting programme.[12] The programme adopted the maximum likelihood estimation in generating estimates of the full-fledged SEM. In addition, since the programme analyzed covariance matrices, the estimation procedure satisfied the underlying statistical distribution theory, and thereby yielding dependable estimates.

Once the model was estimated, the study applied a set of measures to evaluate its goodness of fit. The measures, guided by the conventionally accepted criteria for deciding what constitutes good fit, assessed the (1) consistency of the hypothesized model with the empirical data, and (2) reasonableness of the estimates. The consistency of the model with the data was determined using four measures that reflected the overall model fit. The first measure was the minimum value of the discrepancy between the observed data and the hypothesized model divided by the degrees of freedom (CMIN/df). Arbuckle and Wothke point out that the CMIN/df with a value of less than 5 is considered acceptable.[13] The second index was the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). A value of RMSEA, approximating the discrepancy that could be expected in the population of less than 0.08, was judged reasonable for a fitting model. Third, the study examined the GFI, the adjusted goodness of fit index (which is analogous to the adjusted coefficient of determination in multiple regression) and, finally, the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), which compared the estimated model with the null-model. Each index ranges from approximately zero to 1, with values of 0.90 or more reflecting good fit of the model to the data.

The study also examined the magnitude and direction of individual parameter estimate to determine its reasonableness. This examination sought for offending estimates, such as negative error

variances and theoretically inconsistent coefficient, which could undermine the validity of the model.

The Assessment of the Voting Pattern Model of 2004 General Election

The assessment of the model fit is based on the results of the SEM on the data collected from a sample of 301 voters. Table 2 contains the indices for the assessment of the goodness of fit of the models.

Table 2: Fit Indices of the Model

Measures	Index
CMIN/df	3.10
RMSEA	0.08
GFI	0.89
TLI	0.84
Insignificant coefficients (2)	

Note: The model contains two underlying constructs (Issues and characteristics of the Prime Minister) and one manifest variable, the strength of the National Front.

The results suggested that the model did not fit the data adequately. The hypothesized model yielded an accepted level of discrepancy between the observed data and the hypothesized model divided by the degrees of freedom (CMIN=3.10). Moreover, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA =0.08) met the requirement set for a fitting model. The fitness of the model, on the other hand, was contaminated with two statistically insignificant coefficients (Figure 2). The relationship between issues and vbn (proportion of votes for the ruling party) was 0.01, while the PL-bn path coefficient was -.16. In addition, two of the fit indices fell short of the specified standards of model fit (GFI=0.89; TLI=0.84). The results indicated a need to revise the model.

The Revised Model of the 2004 General Election

The hypothesized model contained statistically insignificant causal links between (i) issues and vote for Barisan Nasional (vbn), (ii) the

characteristic of the Prime Minister (PL), and strength of Barisan Nasional (bn). On the basis of substantive reasoning, the revised model fixed these causal relationships to zero. Moreover, the model

Figure 2: General Election 2004: The Hypothesized Model

Note: the endogenous variable (vbn) indicates the percentage of popular vote for the National Front candidates.

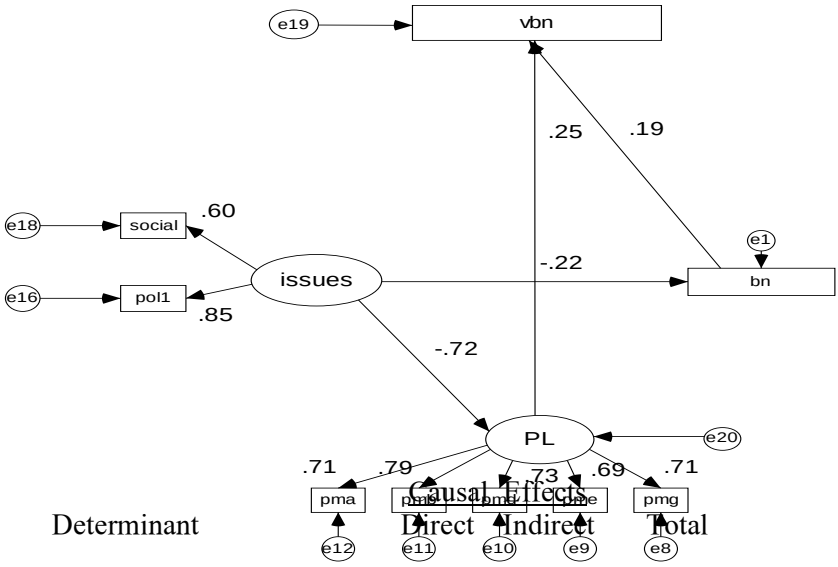
excluded (i) two manifest (pol2 and econ) and (ii) five of the PL-related variables, which were pmc, pmf, pmh, pmi and pmj to reduce the likelihood of multicollinearity and to derive a simpler solution.

The revised model produced acceptable consistency of the dependence relationships with the data. Clearly, the other four overall fit indices (CMIN/df=2.44; RMSEA=.069; GFI=0.96; TLI=0.94) supported the adequacy of fit. The revised model (Figure 3) is free from offending estimates.

The parameter estimates were statistically significant at 0.05 level and were of practical importance, since each standardized structural coefficient was larger than 0.1. The direct, indirect and total effects

on the proportion of popular votes for Barisan Nasional are summarised in Table 3. The data indicated that the determinant of popular vote (vbn) with the largest causal effect was the perceived

Figure 3: General Election 2004: The Revised Model



Causal Effects

Outcome	Determinant	Direct	Indirect	Total
Popular Vote (vbn)	Issues	-	-0.221	-0.221
	Prime Minister (PL)	0.247	-	0.247
	Party Strength (bn)	0.193	-	0.193

characteristics of the Prime Minister (0.25), which was entirely due to the direct effect. The next important determinant of popular vote was issues, with a total effect of -0.221, and entirely due to indirect effect. The perceived strength of the ruling party directly influenced the proportion of popular vote, with a total effect of 0.193.

Table 3: A Summary of Standardized Causal Effects of the Popular Vote of the National Front

The model estimation also indicated that the socio-economic issues significantly determined perceptions towards the Prime Minister (total effect = -0.717). Similarly, the socio-economic issues significantly influenced the manner in which the voters perceived the strength of Barisan Nasional on account of the attributes of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the Chairman of BN and Prime Minister. They saw the issues but these issues were evaluated through the personal characteristics of the Prime Minister. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was therefore a big factor in determining how and why the Malays voted for BN during the 2004 general election. Another reason why the voters chose BN was their perceived strength of the party, but this perception was indirect as it had to go through the perception of issues.

Conclusion

A total of 301 respondents from the predominantly Malay states of Kelantan, Tenggerenu, and Kedah were extracted from a total nation-wide study of 1,511 voters during the month of February in anticipation for the March 2004 general election. A Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied on the data. SEM is one of the highly versatile statistical tools used to test whether the proposed voting pattern model was consistent with the data.

Major findings:

a. The study yielded an empirical model that accounts for the outcome of the Malaysian General Election 2004.

b. The most important determinant of the popular votes (the percentage of votes obtained by BN) was the attributes of the Prime Minister, as perceived by the voters. They saw him through several attributes, among them being a religious person, sincere, caring, forward looking and eager to solve the national problems.

c. The strength of BN, as perceived by the voters, positively influenced the percentage of popular votes secured by its candidates.

d. Issues influenced the popular votes of BN indirectly. The relationship of issues was seen to be indirect via the strength of BN.

It seems that Malay voters saw leadership as an important factor in deciding the party of their choice in an election. The characteristics or attributes of leadership appeal to them and if the issues did, it would be seen to be influenced by the leadership factor.

Given the nature and availability of the data, the model accounted for only a limited number of "pocketbook issues" as perceived by the voters. In future, the inclusion of econometrically sound socio-economic predictor is in order. Future studies may also include voters from other races to understand the dynamics of Malaysian elections.

NOTES

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