

YOUNG VOTERS: TRENDS AND PREFERENCES IN THE NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

The 12th General Election in March 2008 had changed Malaysia's political landscape in significant ways. A series of unexpected events happened and for the first time in history, the ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN) failed to obtain the two third majority votes. This 'political tsunami' had influenced people from various backgrounds especially those in the political parties to probe further into the reasons behind the changes. After a series of 'post mortem' and discussions, political leaders now began to realise about the importance of moving out from their 'comfort zone' and responding immediately to the signals from the public. By ignoring people's voice particularly the young voters who made up more than forty percent of the total voters, political parties were digging their own graves. Thus, this paper was written in order to identify young voters' trends and preferences in choosing their candidates to represent them in the new political landscape. The findings of this research showed that young voters preferred to choose candidates based on their profile, images and personal characteristics, visions and missions as well educational backgrounds. Most importantly, the candidates must also be 'clean' in all aspects. Hopefully, the findings will provide political parties better understanding of the young voters' needs and wants in order to ensure their parties' survival since this group of voters is the deciding factor of the future Malaysian political landscape.

Keywords: by- election, young voters, candidate factor, Permatang Pasir

INTRODUCTION

Permatang Pasir (N11) by-election was held due to the demise of its Parliamentary member, Datuk Mohd. Hamdan Abdul Rahman from PAS, who passed away due to a heart attack at IJN Kuala Lumpur on 31 July 2009.

Permatang Pasir is a state assembly district in Permatang Pauh Parliamentary constituency whereby its Member of parliament is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. In this district,

there were 20, 397 registered voters in which the majority was the Malays (72.36%), followed by the Chinese (25.85%), and then the Indians (1.63%) and others (0.16%) (Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya,2009).

In the previous General Election (12th GE, 8 March 2008), Datuk Mohd. Hamdan who was the incumbent had managed to preserve his seat for three terms, beating the BN candidate, Ahmad Shahar Shuib with the majority votes of 5, 433 (PRK Permatang Pasir, 2009). The Permatang Pasir by-election on 25 August 2009 would witness the one-to-one competition between PAS candidate, Ustaz Salleh Man and BN candidate, Rohaizat Othman.

Having the experiences at several by-elections after the 12th General Election, BN once again tried to win the young voters at Permatang Pasir by-election held on 25 August 2009. BN came up with a list of possible candidates from UMNO including Permatang Pauh Division Vice Head, Abdul Rahim Man, its Youth Head, Mohd. Zaidi Mohd. Said, its Division Secretary, Rohaizat Othman and its ex-Deputy Head, Datuk Ahmad Saad.

Amongst the factors which were taken into consideration in naming the candidates comprised the candidates' backgrounds whereby he had to be a Permatang Pauh local, had to have good and interesting characteristics, had to be accepted by all levels of the community, had to be young and had to have many relatives in Permatang Pasir.

The puzzle of who should be BN's candidate was answered when UMNO's Deputy President, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who was also BN's Deputy Chair announced Rohaizat Othman, Permatang Pauh Division Secretary who was also a young *syarie* lawyer, was chosen as the party's candidate for Permatang Pasir by-election. His nomination was seen as befitting the criteria set by the party's supreme leader who accentuated on having a young candidate who was also a local and at the same time, a professional. Malaysia UMNO Information Head, Ahmad Maslan was confident that the young Rohaizat was able to perform brilliantly if he was chosen by the voters since he had diverse experience not only politically but also professionally as a *syarie* lawyer (Faizatul, 2009). Rohaizat was seen as one of UMNO and BN's young leaders in the new millennium which had the potential to attract young voters in the electoral district that contained almost 40% of young voters aged 21 to 40 (Fazli& Amin, 2009).

Hence, the objective of this survey was to investigate the trends and preferences of young voters in choosing the candidate that they trusted.

Hopefully, the findings will provide political parties with deeper understanding of the young voters' needs and wants in order to ensure their parties' survival since this group of voters is the deciding factor of the future Malaysian political landscape.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research design

The design of this study was descriptive non-experimental. Questionnaires were used to run a survey among the young voters.

Sampling design

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents but only 173 were returned. The ages of the respondents were from 21 to 40, the age range of young voters.

Research instrument

The questionnaire employed consisted of two sections. The first section was focused on the demographic data of the respondents. The second section was further divided into two parts with the first part consisting of three close ended questions meant to guide the respondents to further questions on factors that influenced the trends and preferences of young voters. The second part of the second section required the respondents to rank their responses from Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Not concerned (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1). For ease of quantification, the researchers used percentage to describe the findings. The high values (4 or 5 on a 1 to 5 Likert scale) can be interpreted as having strong agreement on the factors identified and low values (1 or 2) as having strong disagreement on the same factors. To quantify the researchers used the statistical procedure in counting the frequency of the responses.

Data analysis

The responses from the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0. The statistical procedures used were the descriptive statistics in obtaining percentage.

Significant events which led to Permatang Pasir by-election

Before looking at the factors which influence young voters' decision, it was timely to record the chronology of the surprising events which took place in the 12th General Election. These events were significant since it was the first time in history that BN recorded such an appalling performance.

BN leaders, past and present, treated the loss as a sign that voters were getting wiser in their evaluation and they also knew what they wanted from the government, resulting in BN's first time failure in obtaining two-third majority votes.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Gua Musang Parliamentary member, openly commented that BN was now facing numerous uncertainties and had to wake up from its sleep so that the voters' signal could be understood after the 12th General Election (BN harus muhasabah diri, 2008). The past Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid concluded that voters were not only wiser in their evaluation, they also requested transparency, truthfulness, better delivery and implementation of whatever being promised to them (BN harus muhasabah diri, 2008). He also suggested that BN's political strategies should seriously consider the people's issues and voices. His opinion was shared by BN's Head of Information Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd. Taib who also agreed that BN should focus more on people's needs and wants and that the members of BN should work harder to fulfil people's changing needs (BN harus muhasabah diri, 2008).

In the same vein, ex -Wanita UMNO leader, Tan Sri Aishah Ghani posited that whatever transpired in the General Election proved that voters today were more sensitive to current issues

which were directly related to their lives compared to before (BN harus muhasabah diri, 2008). A national historian, Datuk Professor Ramlah Adam expounded that BN's failure in obtaining the two-third majority votes was an obvious message of the people's disagreement towards certain government's policies which were seen as not fulfilling their needs but benefiting certain leaders only. She also felt that the voters' preferences to the opposition members who appeared to be better candidates, more experienced, more knowledgeable and better orators reflected the current young voters' stance which greatly differed from before (BN harus muhasabah diri, 2008). Other than that, voters also felt that BN's young candidates did not fulfil their aspiration resulting in them choosing other candidates from other parties.

Numerous analyses had been done by different parties to find the reasons for BN's untimely defeat and Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) huge winnings after the 12th General Election. Findings were discussed in order to look for the best approaches and to come up with appropriate guidelines so as to win the people who were now much wiser.

One of the findings indicated that BN had neglected to win the young voters' hearts while PR had been very clever in attracting these voters to support their mission. BN seemed to forget that young voters, especially in the urban areas were full of idealism and highly receptive towards current issues as well as political concerns. BN, especially UMNO should take heed of the various opinions and criticisms directed to them and take immediate actions by getting closer to this group of young voters so that the support from this group could be retained. It had to be remembered that the number of older generation or the veterans in UMNO was decreasing due to age factor and certainly support from the younger generation was needed to continue with the party's mission. If the widening gap between the leaders and this young group of voters was not addressed, there was a possibility that more electoral districts would fall to the opposition in the future general election and indirectly endangering the future of the ruling party.

After the 12th General Election, the issue of young voters was also the main concern after BN's loss in the Kuala Terengganu by-election on 17 January 2009 (BN kena õbelajarõ, 2009). Having more than 45% or 37,538 young voters under the age of 40 from the overall number of voters which was 80,325 in Kuala Terengganu Parliamentary constituency, it could not be denied that their votes had greatly facilitated the winning of PAS candidate, Mohd. Abdul Wahid Endut over BN candidate, Datuk Wan Ahmad Farid Wan Salleh (BN kena õbelajarõ, 2009). Other than the factor of young voters, candidate factor also contributed to BN's loss in the Kuala Terengganu by-election. A week-long survey conducted by Utusan Malaysia found that as many as 2,421 readers or 55.5% agreed that candidate factor was the main reason for BN's loss in Kuala Terengganu. A survey by Wanita UMNO Terengganu also concluded with similar findings when the majority of women voters rejected BN due to candidate factor (BN kena õbelajarõ, 2009).

After Kuala Terengganu by-election, BN seemed to learn from its past mistakes. Manek Urai, Kelantan by-election held on 14 July 2009 witnessed BN's serious efforts in winning the hearts of young voters. UMNO Kelantan's Vice Chair of Information Body, Senator Datuk Dr. Awang Adek Hussein claimed that 50% of voters in Manek Urai were young voters and BN must give more attention to this group in order to sustain the party's mission (Pengundi perlu berfikiran bijak, 2009). Other than this factor, candidate factor was another consideration that UMNO Kelantan should focus on. If the candidate chosen was not well-liked by the community

and he/she did not possess a clean image, chances for him/her to lose the election was higher; obviously candidate factor should be the main deliberation for all parties. However in the end, despite BN's confidence in winning the state assembly seat, it had to surrender to PAS candidate Mohd. Fauzi Abdullah who beat the BN candidate Tuan Aziz Tuan Mat with only 65 majorities in votes (Pengundi perlu berfikiran bijak, 2009). Nonetheless, BN leaders admitted that this loss was at least more dignified since efforts to get closer to the young voters had been proven to bear fruits.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

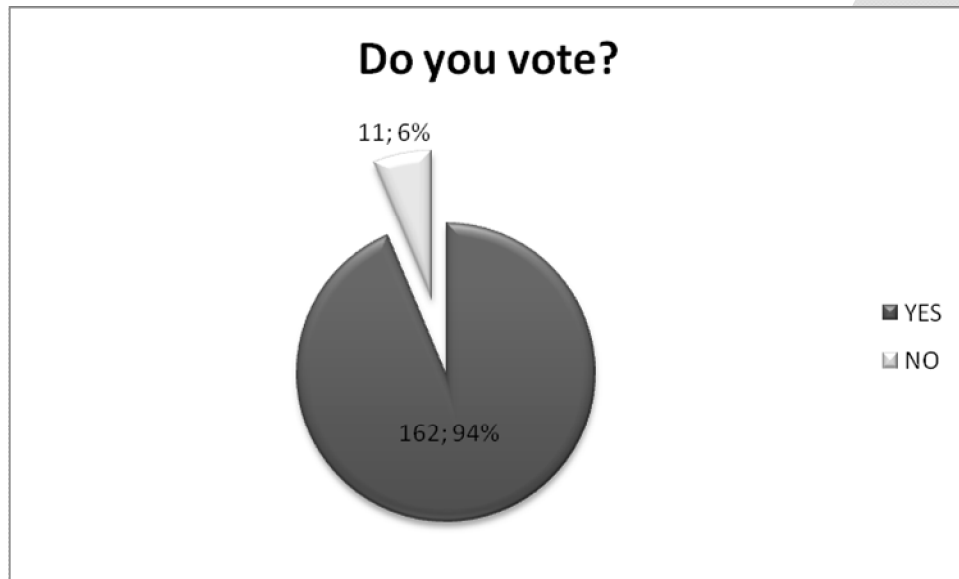


Figure 1 : Percentage of voters at Permatang Pasir by-election

The survey conducted at Permatang Pasir by-election involved 300 respondents who were young voters but only 173 respondents returned the questionnaires. From 173 respondents, 162 (94%) were registered voters while 11 respondents (6%) were unregistered and thus, failed to cast their votes.

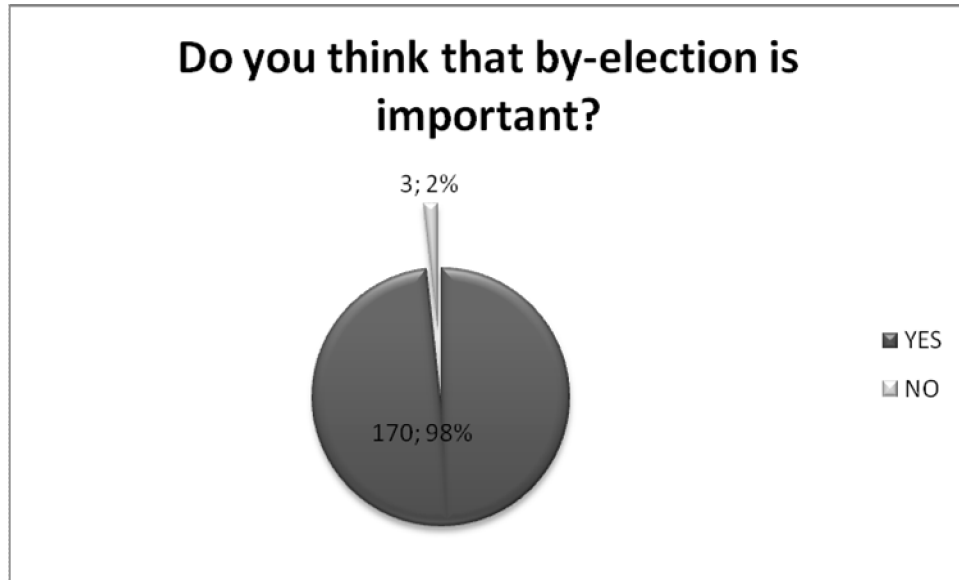


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who agreed that the by-election was significant

From the survey, 98% or 170 of the respondents agreed the by-election was significant to ensure the efficiency in the administration of the electoral district. Nevertheless, there were still 2% of the respondents who chose to disagree.

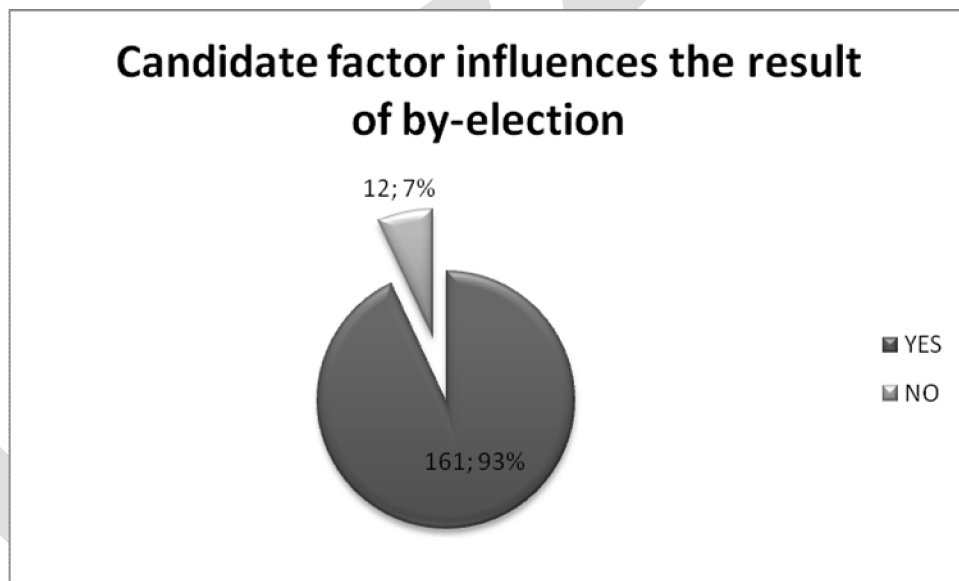


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who agreed that candidate factor influenced his/her winning in the by-election

As shown in figure 3, the majority of the respondents agreed that candidate factor influenced his/her winning in the by-election. Only 12 people or 7% of the respondents said otherwise.

For Figure 4 to Figure 11:

- 1= strongly disagree
- 2 = disagree
- 3= not concerned
- 4= agree
- 5 = strongly agree

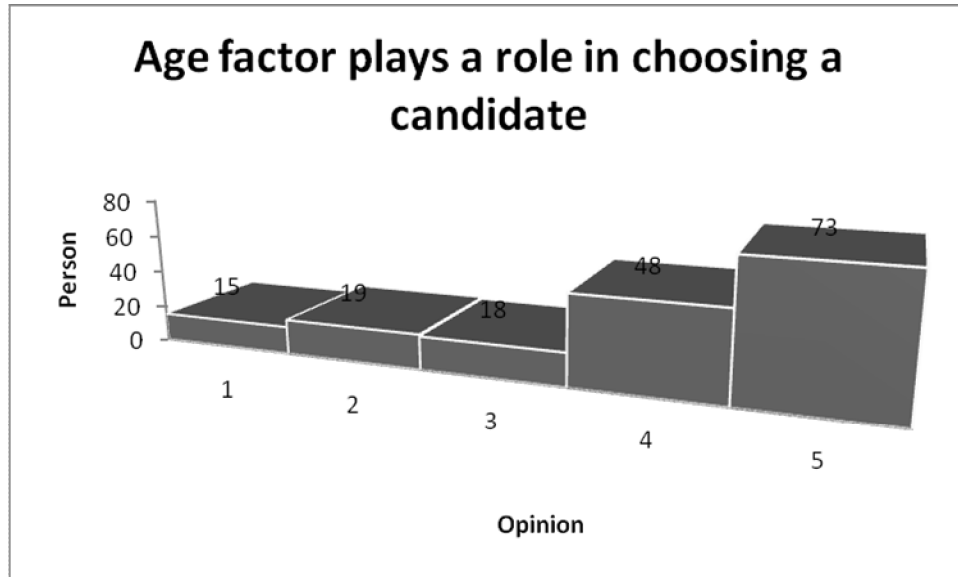


Figure 4: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that age factor played a role in choosing a candidate

Recently, many parties had deliberated that age factor should be considered as influential in choosing candidates to represent an electoral district. In view of this, this survey had included this question to be asked to the respondents at Permatang Pasir. The result was that 73 respondents gave the answer STRONGLY AGREE and 48 respondents said AGREE to the statement. Hence, 70% of the respondents actually supported the notion that age factor played a role in choosing candidates in an election.

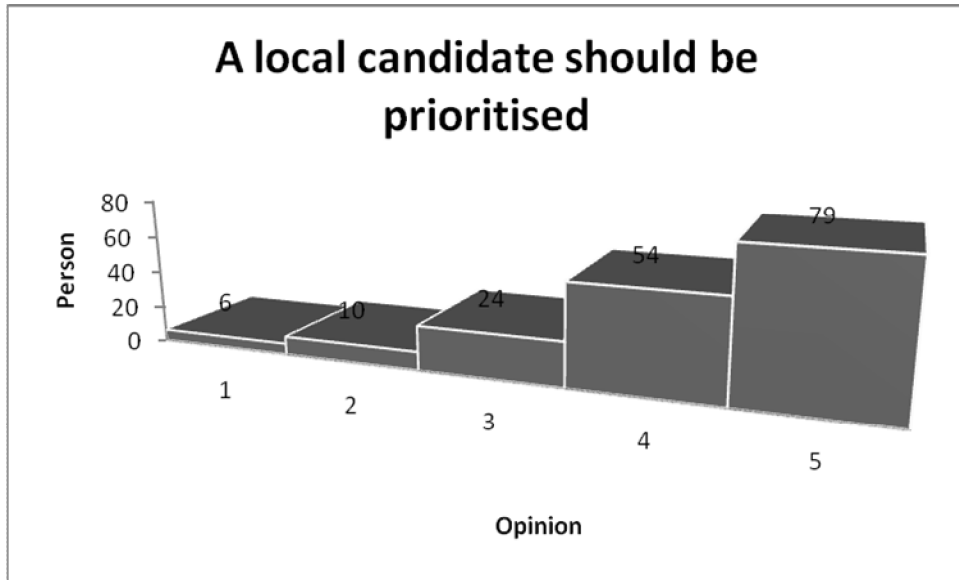


Figure 5: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that a local candidate should be prioritised

Figure 5 displayed the responses to the statement that a local candidate should be prioritised. Based on the survey, 77% of the respondents or 79 people stated that they STRONGLY AGREED and 54 AGREED that a local candidate should be prioritised as it was seen as a factor that could influence young voters. Hence, this finding should be significant to the contending parties so that they would consider local candidates as possible representatives in future elections.

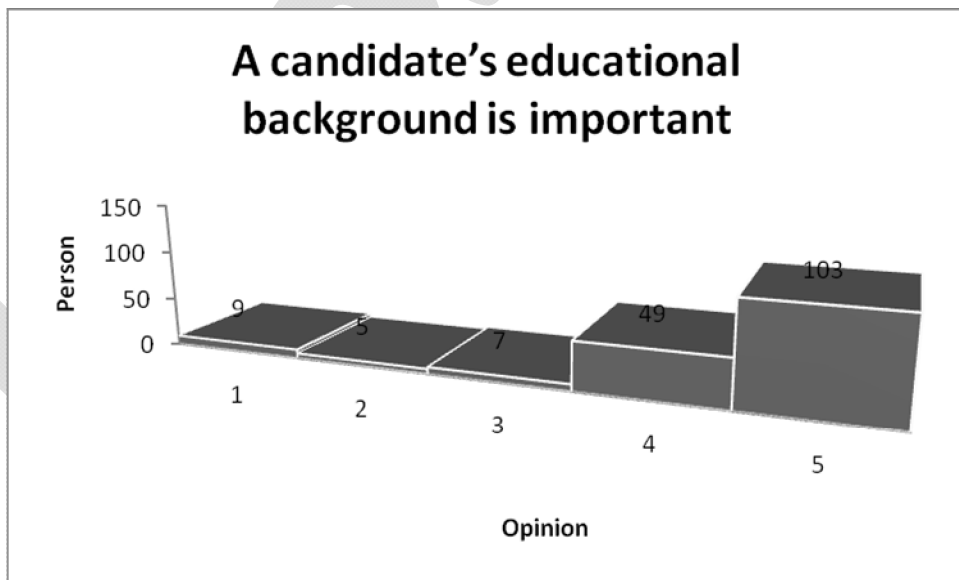


Figure 6: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that a candidate's educational background was important

Responding to the statement whether a candidate's educational background was important or not, it was seen that the majority of young voters (152 people or 88%) or more specifically 103 respondents stated STRONGLY AGREE and 49 respondents stated AGREE to the notion.

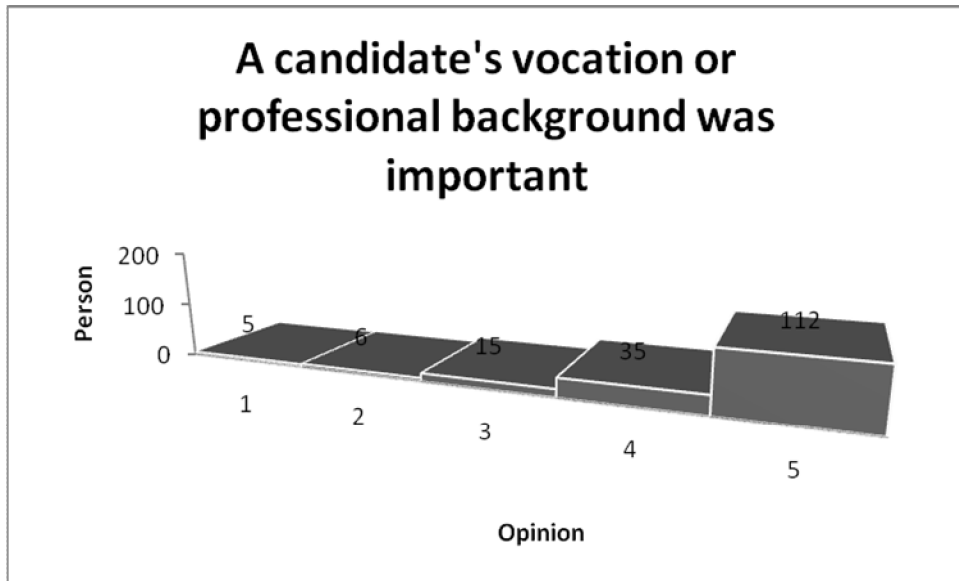


Figure 7: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that a candidate's vocation or professional background was important

Apart from educational background, a candidate's vocation or professional background was also proclaimed as important by the young voters. As embodied in figure 7, as many as 112 respondents STRONGLY AGREED and 30 respondents AGREED that a candidate's vocation or professional background influenced their preference to the candidate that they chose to represent them.

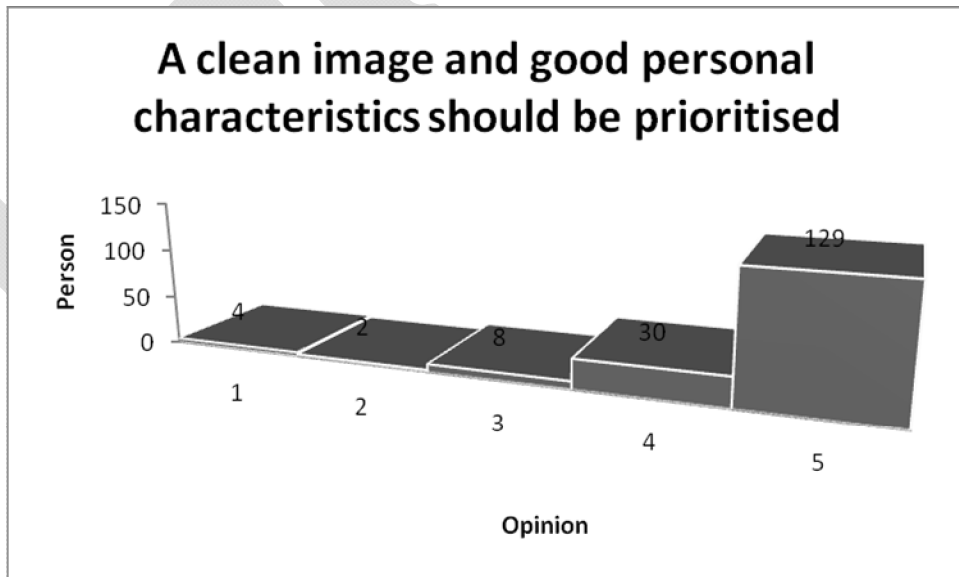


Figure 8: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that a clean image and good personal characteristics should be prioritised

Whether a clean image and good personal characteristics should be prioritised also influenced the trends and preferences of young voters. As illustrated in figure 8, as many as 129 respondents STRONGLY AGREED and 30 respondents AGREED with this factor. All in all, 92% of the respondents found this factor important.

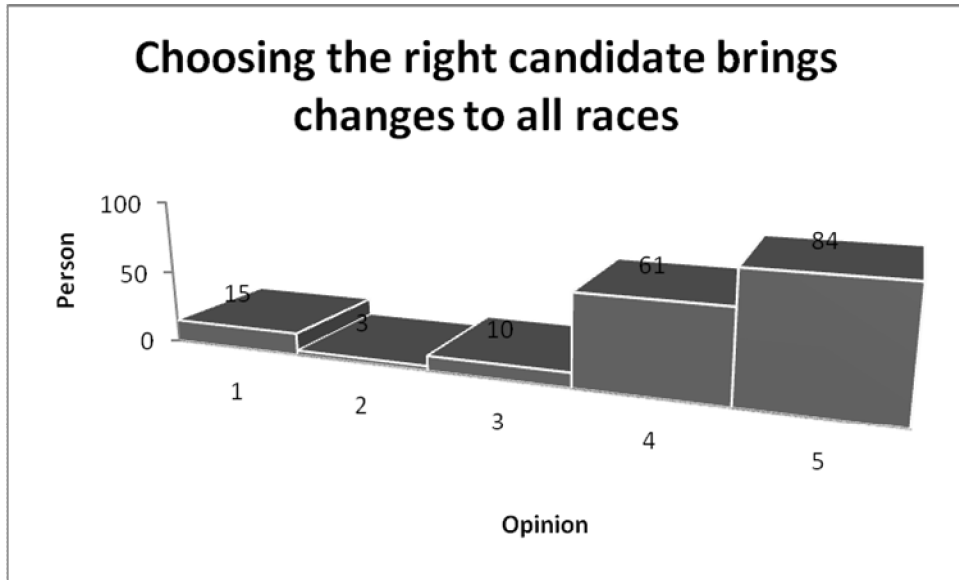


Figure 9 : Number of respondents who responded to the statement that choosing the right candidate brought changes to all races

Choosing the right candidate had high possibility of bringing about changes to all races. This was a factor which was taken into account by the young voters as shown by Figure 9 whereby 84 and 61 respondents which made up 84% of the total respondents, stated they STRONGLY AGREED and AGREED.

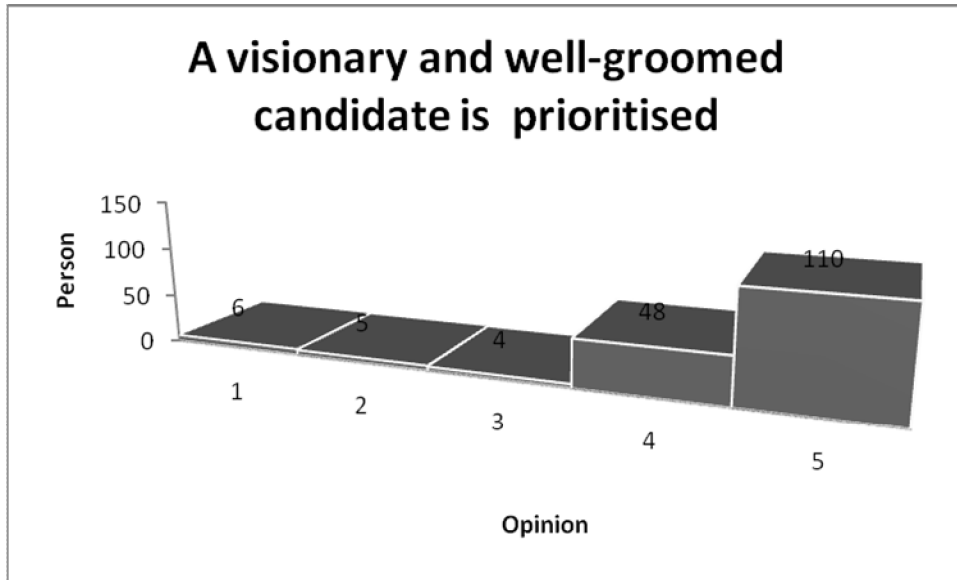


Figure 10 : Number of respondents who responded to the statement that a visionary and well-groomed candidate is prioritised

Furthermore, having a visionary and well-groomed candidate was also seen desirable by the young voters. As portrayed in Figure 10, as many as 110 and 48 respondents which represented 91% of the total number of respondents stated that this factor should be contemplated seriously by contending parties in order to ensure that the selected candidate managed to attain support from voters.

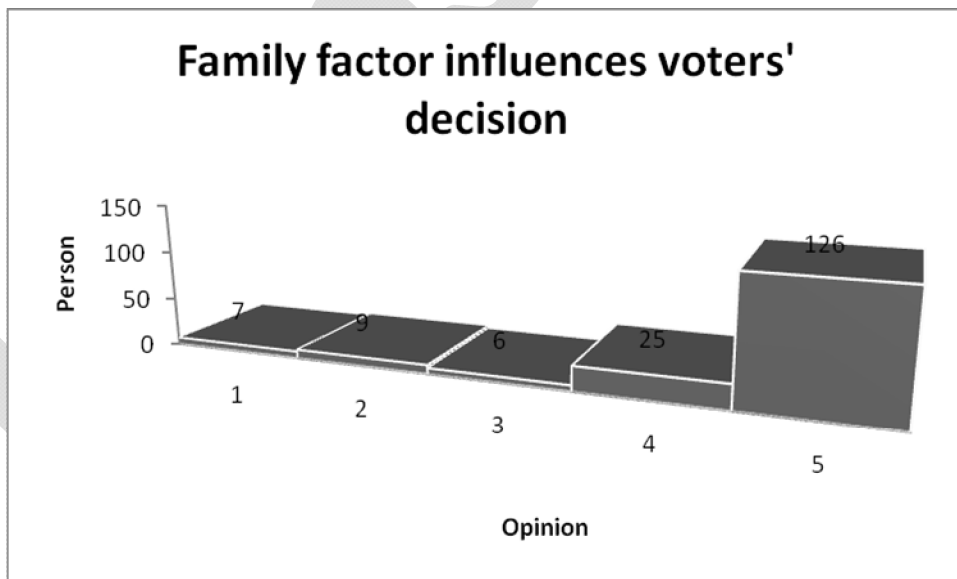


Figure 11: Number of respondents who responded to the statement that family factor influences voters' decision

Finally, family factor was also seen as influential in a voter's choice of candidate. From the survey, 126 respondents stated that they STRONGLY AGREED and 25 said that they

AGREED with this particular factor (Figure 11). Generally, the young voters' decisions were influenced by the family background and their political leanings. Hence, family factor left an effect on the voters' decision.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To sum up, BN's supreme leader had seen the necessity to choose candidates who were deemed suitable and were able to win the young voters' preference. Thus, candidates who were young, local, professional and generally accepted by the community were shortlisted. In this particular by-election, BN's candidate was seen to possess more specialities which could have helped him to win compared to PAS's candidate. Nonetheless, BN had overlooked the candidate factor which also included issues like clean image and personal characteristics. Consequently, again BN lost in Permatang Pasir by-election.

Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in his comments after the announcements of the result, also agreed that candidate factor had directly affected the contender, Rohaizat Othman who was involved in quite a number of personal issues (Fazli, 2009). Datuk Khoo Kay Kim, an academician, also posited that if only BN had chosen a candidate who was truly clean, there was a huge possibility that BN would win (Fazli, 2009). This possibility was higher since recently, Pakatan Rakyat was seen as rather incompetent in managing their responsibilities in the states that they were supposed to govern.

In Permatang Pasir by-election, the credibility of BN's candidate was already questioned even at the early stage of the process. Even in the party itself support to the named candidate was not as desired since another candidate who was seen as more befitting was not nominated. The background of the named candidate was not truly investigated. BN should have learnt from their loss at Kuala Terengganu's by-election earlier. If that was done, the mistake would have been rectified at Permatang Pasir.

Associate Professor Ahmad Nizamuddin Sulaiman, a Political Science lecturer at UKM purported that BN ought to create a special body to screen the candidates for elections especially for by-elections to ensure the party's survival particularly in the coming 13th General Election (Fazli, 2009). He further added that candidate issues were extremely important that if no proper attention was given to it, Pakatan Rakyat would be using them as weapons to attack the ruling party. BN had train itself to listen to the grassroots' voice since a candidate that was not preferred by the grassroots was normally unbeneficial to the party.

The lesson that should be learnt by contending parties who are involved in the general or by-election is that in the naming process, the most important factor to consider is the clean image of the candidate. Other than that, the grassroots' voice and their preference towards a certain candidate should always be considered by the leaders too. If an 'unclean' candidate is chosen, unwanted results might be obtained (Kamal, 2009).

Voters especially the Malays find it difficult to accept or support candidates who have personal problems or other undesirable cases. History has proven that BN had taken the wrong step by choosing the wrong candidates in the 2008 General Election and the other more recent by-elections (Muda, 2009).

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