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The Driving Factor for Stability of Voter Turnout in Southeast Asia: The Evidence from Malaysian and Indonesian Elections

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to describe voter participation (turnout) in South East Asia, particularly in Indonesian and Malaysian elections from 2004–2019, and the factors that cause stable participation. The participation of voters (turnout) in Malaysia's elections from 2004–2018 is 73.90–84%. The participation of voters in Indonesia's elections from 2004–2019 is 70.99–84.09%. This means that voter participation in the last three election periods was stable in both countries. This study shows that four factors cause stable participation: political awareness, rationality, political perceptions, and electoral orientation that is candidate-oriented. The theoretical implication of this study was to strengthen Timothy Feddersen and Alvaro Sandroni, and John G. Matsusaka's theory about voter political participation or voter behaviour on election day. The originality of this study is that there are special characteristics behind stable political participation in Indonesia and Malaysia. Methods of data collection in this study is based on literature study and analytical method uses the descriptive analysis method. This study also uses a political comparison approach to analyse data.

Keywords: General Election, Voter Participation, Civic Duty, Rational Behaviour, Candidate Orientation, Democracy

Introduction

A general election is a mechanism in choosing representatives of the people or political leaders in the political system of democracy. This mechanism is applied in many countries, including Southeast Asia. However, when it is applied, there is a difference in the results of voter participation: a 40–90% variation (See Table 1). This study shows an interesting phenomenon. It turns out that the participation of voters can be potentially “strength” as well as a democracy's weakness if the leadership process evaluation turns into a process of evaluating the political system.

Table 1: Percentage of Election Participation in Southeast Asia (2013–2017)

Country	Election Years	Participation in Election
Thailand	2014	46.79%
Cambodia	2013	68.49% / 69,5*
Singapore	2015	93.56%
Indonesia	2014	75.11%
Laos	2016	97.94%
Malaysia	2013	84.84%
Myanmar	2015	69.72%
Philippines	2016	81.95%
Timur Leste	2017	76.74%
Vietnam	2016	99.26%

Sources: (Thailand Saphaphuthan Ratsadon (House of Representatives), 2014) (Final Election Observation Report on Cambodia's 2013 National Election, 2013, p. 18)* (Kok, 2015) (Press Release Polling Day Voter Turnout – Singapore General Election 2015, 2015) (Aritonang, 2014) (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020) (Croissant & Lorenz, 2018, p. 127) (Timor-Leste Parliamentary Elections July 22, 2017, 2017, p. 40) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020).

General election participation in Southeast Asian democratic countries shows that it is still above 40%. The results signify the last three periods of election data. In Thailand, for example, the participation of voters in 2014 is 46.79%, whereas Cambodia has 68.49% of participation (See Table 1). The result of the two countries in each election demonstrates a decrease in the amount of participation from the last election. Participation in those countries indicates that a range of the public has an interest in exercising their rights in general elections, the results of which are increasingly visible when paired with voter participation in Singapore. Singapore, in 2015, has 90% participation in their election, and this took place in the last ten elections (Political Parties in Singapore, 2018). Consequently, some countries have remarkably high and medium results of voter participants.

Critics of this data show that voter participation is not the only indicator in a democracy. It can also be argued that the stable participation of voters can illustrate that neither the public nor the electorate is saturated with the political system. It is because voter participation is not requested daily, but once every few years. Moreover, the government spends a substantial amount of money in order for the election to take place. Thus, it has become an anomaly that voter participation is an interesting challenge in democracy. This system provides freedom in choosing politically, although political rights that have been granted are not always used by citizens.

What about the participation of voters in the Indonesian and Malaysian elections? Indonesia and Malaysia have interesting election experiences. This study compares voter participation in these two countries and analyses the driving factors of participation of voters as well. There are three reasons for choosing these two countries. First, they have a multi-party system. Second, the government is formed based on a coalition of political parties. Third, voters are comprised of various ethnicities (Hai, 2002).

Singapore is a country with stable political participation, but it has different characteristics from its neighbour's in Southeast Asia. One of them includes economic power. Additionally, the percentage of voter political participation is very high compared to Indonesia and Malaysia, which is the reason why Singapore was not analysed in this comparative study.

Literature Review

General elections and political participation are issues that have received much attention from political researchers (Lamprianou, 2013, p. 21) (Quiroga, & Cabello, 2018). The discussion about the first election (Alapuro, 2006) is an important aspect of understanding voter behavior in a country. Party identification is an important aspect of the 2009 election in South Africa (Kersting, 2009). Another study attempts to establish whether or not rainfall has a negative impact on voters (Ščepka et al., 2016). Research conducted in 2019 by Piotr Michalak (Michalak, 2019) uses the cartographic method to predict turnout by using demographic data. Mircea Comșa (Comșa, 2017) revealed

that the reduction in turnout by around 0.4% was caused by an increase in the migration rate of 1%. Pitri Yandri (Yandri, 2017) explains that there is a spatial correlation between a voter's vote and political participation.

Niels Nørgaard Kristensen and Trond Solhaug's research (Kristensen & Solhaug, 2016) concludes that there is a relationship between political identity and participation. The existence of political identity has consequences for the emergence of participation. Ivanenko KA's article (Ivanenko, 2013) analyses voter behavior models, which, according to him, require a new conceptual framework including a component of public opinion. Other studies (Acuña-Duarte, 2017) discuss that there is a relationship between the level of voter registration and economic background.

Thomas Tozer (Tozer, 2016) stated that incentives in the form of money are one alternative solution to increase the participation of young people to vote in elections. This method is better than the method of requiring the use of votes because this method does not interfere with freedom in elections. The right to vote or not remains protected without coercion. Iván M. Durán's study (Durán, 2018) illustrates television as a medium that can increase voter turnout. Víctor A. Hernández-Huerta (Hernández-Huerta, 2016) found that negative advertising did not affect turnout, especially in the case of Mexico in 2006. Elżbieta Bilska-Wodecka and Roman Matykowski (Bilska-Wodecka & Matykowski, 2015) have revealed that the Catholic Church influences turnout as well.

There are many other studies about participation in elections. Jeronimo Cortina and Brandon Rottinghaus examined the relationship between voting centers and voter participation (Cortina & Rottinghaus, 2019). Johanna M.M. Goertz and Kirill Chernomaz (Goertz & Chernomaz, 2019) conducted an experiment to test how constituents voted. Wesley H. Holliday and Eric Pacuit (Holliday & Pacuit, 2019) attempted to find a combination of electoral methods. Abbas Nargesian, Dariush Tahmasebi Aghbolaghi, and Yashar Dindar (Nargesian et al., 2014) analyzed political marketing (traditional or modern tools) on voter participation. Robert Bonifácio and Rafael Paulino (Bonifácio & Paulino, 2015) discuss whether there is a relationship between corruption and increasing voter participation in elections.

Kevin Curran (Curran, 2018) introduced an application for voting—a blockchain application. Micha Germann and Uwe Serdült (Germann & Serdült, 2014) analysed the application of internet voting in Switzerland, especially for expatriates. Adam Bonica (Bonica, 2016) initiated a scalable strategy whose focus was on providing information about the US political elite as a candidate in the election. If we analyse the description of the study of participation, we can conclude that the development of the study of political participation covers diverse scientific disciplines. This means that it is not limited to political science disciplines. Some innovations are working on being developed regarding the study of voter behaviour, although according to Simon HA (Stadelmann & Torgler, 2013), voter trust in political institutions is important.

Method

Methods of data collection in this study are based on the literature study (internet source, news, documents, report, book, academic journal) and presentation likewise analysis of data uses descriptive analysis method. The idea of this study is about the similarity of phenomena driven by different factors in each country. Theoretically, there are some explanations about the factors that can cause it. According to Timothy Feddersen and Alvaro Sandroni (Feddersen & Sandroni, 2006), one of the factors is voter consciousness. According to Feddersen and Sandroni, "Participation in large democratic elections is influenced by voters' sense of civic duty" (Feddersen & Sandroni, 2006, p. 1282). A comparative political approach, which is used in this study, is a way to study a foreign country based on its comparative politics approach (T. Lim, 2010, p. 3).

Another theory suggests that voters use their rights in politics because of the who they believe in. John G. Matsusaka states that voters will decide to use their rights because of what they believe in and the advantage that will be given in return. John G. Matsusaka states, "The key link is that a person's expected benefit from casting a decisive vote is increasing in her certainty that she is supporting the best candidate. As a result, the person is more

likely to vote as she/he is sure about which way to vote” (Matsusaka, 1995, p. 112). Therefore, the decision is very rational. The political choice is made based on the calculation of profit or loss, or what will be obtained. In other words, it is not just about going to the polls and utilizing the right to vote.

Elections in Southeast Asia

Elections in Southeast Asia have a unique dynamic. Every country has an electoral experience. Some countries are not democratic, but they still hold elections. The only country that does not hold elections is Brunei Darussalam (see Table 2) (Brunei Darussalam, 2020) (“Brunei Darussalam: Constitution and Politics,” 2020). Vietnam has held regular elections. In the 20th century, Vietnam held elections four times: in 2002, 2007, 2011, and 2016 (see Table 3). Political participation data shows voter participation in Vietnam is very high. According to Phil Robertson (Deputy Asia Director at Human Rights Watch), the general election in Vietnam is related to the strength of the Communist Party there (Lewis, 2016).

Table 2: Lowest Percentage of Election Participation in Southeast Asia in Last 20 Years (2000–2020)

Country	Election	Participation in Election
Thailand	2014	46.79%
Cambodia	2013	68.49%
Singapore	2011	93.18%
Indonesia	2009	70.99%
Laos	2016	97.94%
Malaysia	2004	73.90%
Myanmar	2015	69.72%
Philippines	2007	63.68%
Timur Leste	2017	76.74%
Vietnam	2002	98.85%
Brunei Darussalam	No Election	No Election

Source: (Thailand Saphaphuthan Ratsadon (House of Representatives), 2014) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020) (Timor-Leste Parliamentary Elections July 22, 2017, 2017) (“Brunei Darussalam: Constitution and Politics,” 2020) (Brunei Darussalam, 2020)

If we look at the data in Table 3, it can be seen that elections in Vietnam are held every five years. According to Martin Petty, in the 2016 general election, there were around 69 million registered voters (Petty, 2016). According to data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the number of registered voters is about 67.5 million. Voters who use their voting rights amount to 67 million (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020). According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) data, the number of registered voters is less than 67.5 million (Election for Vietnamese National Assembly, 2016). The 2016 general election was held on May 22 (Hong, 2016).

Table 3: Percentage of Election Participation in Vietnam in Last 20 Years (2000–2020)

State	Election Years	Participation in Election
Vietnam	2016	99.26%
Vietnam	2011	99.51%
Vietnam	2007	99.64%
Vietnam	2002	98.85%

Source: (South-Eastern Asia, 2020) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020)

Laos is a country with one political party (Stuart-Fox, 2007). This country is a communist social country. Elections in Laos show the phenomenon of a country with high political participation. Participation in this country is 95% more. Only Vietnam can match the turnout in the general election in Laos. Another country that can almost compete with Vietnam and Laos is Singapore (See Table 3 and 4). Participation in elections in Singapore is always above 90% (except in 1972) (See Table 4). The difference between Singapore and Vietnam and Laos is that Singapore has many political parties. Examples are the People’s Action Party, Workers’ Party, Justice Party; in

Singapore, they include the National Solidarity Party, People's Power Party, Peoples Voice, and other political parties (Political Parties in Singapore, 2018) (Lim, 2020) (Huat, 2007).

Cambodia is a country that is experiencing a young democracy (Strengthening Electoral Processes and Democratic Practices in Cambodia: Report on Forums on Elections and Democratic Space, 2011) (Roberts, 2002). The country held six general elections (1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018). Political participation in elections in this country fluctuates. The lowest voter turnout data is under 70% (2013). The highest voter turnout is more than 90% (1998). Timor-Leste is also a young democracy in Southeast Asia. The first parliamentary elections in the country were held in 2001, the second election in 2007, the third election in 2017, and the fourth in 2018 (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020). Elections in Timor-Leste are also held to elect a president every five years.

Table 4: Lowest Percentage of Election Participation in Vietnam, Laos, & Singapore in Last 20 Years (2000–2020)

Country	Election Years	Participation of Election
Vietnam	2002	98.85%
Laos	2016	97.94%
Singapore	2011	93.18%

Sources: (South-Eastern Asia, 2020) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020)

A very real test of democracy is in Myanmar. The data shows that elections have been conducted since 1956, but after that, there was a coup in 1962. The 2015 election was the one that received the most attention because it had offered hope of democratization in Myanmar when Aung San Suu Kyi had won. However, the military shadow in politics still remains (Aktar, 2020) (Ghoshal, 2013). Voter participation in 2015 is below 70%. Elections in Thailand in 2014 (February 2) show complex election cases (Searight, 2019) (Chalermphanupap, 2019) (Kongkirati, 2016) (Head, 2014). This general election was reported to take place in an atmosphere after the 2014 military coup (Editorial Staff, 2019a) (Editorial Staff, 2019b). Elections in the Philippines also experienced challenges (Manikas, 2004). Still, political participation in the 2016 and 2019 general elections is above 70%, likewise, in the presidential election.

Elections in Malaysia and Indonesia

General elections in Indonesia and Malaysia were held in different years. However, in 2004, both countries held elections in the same year. The last three elections in Malaysia were held in 2013, 2008, and 2004, while in Indonesia, they were held in 2014, 2009, and 2004. Malaysia held its election on May 5, 2013, and in Indonesia on April 9. Malaysia also held an election on May 9, 2018 (GE14) (Funston, 2018) (Nadzri, 2018) (GE 14 Results Overview, 2020). In 2019 (Lane, 2019) (Stott, 2019) (Fionna & Hutchinson, 2019), Indonesia held an election on April 17.

The election of Malaysia is known as Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia (PRU). In Indonesia, it is known as legislative elections (*Pemilihan Umum Legislatif*), and in 2019 turn into Concurrently Legislative and Presidential Election 2019 (*Pemilihan Umum Serentak Legislatif dan Presiden 2019*). This activity is carried out by an election organizer named Indonesia General Elections Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia*) (Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU), 2020). While in Malaysia, it is named Election Commission of Malaysia (*Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia*) (Official Portal of Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR), 2020). The election in Malaysia was held during 8:00 am–5:00 pm, and in Indonesia, 7:00 am–1:00 pm. The duration of the election in Malaysia is longer than the election in Indonesia (See Table 5).

Table 5: General Information about the General Elections in Malaysia (2013) and Indonesia (2014)

Information Identification	Malaysia	Indonesia
Name of the Election	Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia (PRU13)	Pemilihan Umum Legislatif
Date of Election	May 5, 2013	April 9, 2014
Number of Voters	13,268,002	185,826,024
Participation of Voters	11,257,147	139,573,927
Voting Place	8,245	545,803
Voting Room	25,337	2,160,000
Time of Election	8:00 am–5:00 pm	7:00 am–1:00 pm
Carried Out by	Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia	Komisi Pemilihan Umum RI
Number of Parties	23 political parties	15 political parties
Cost of Election	RM. 460.000.000	Rp. 15,62 Triliun (Billion)

Sources: (Portal Rasmi Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR), 2020) (Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU), 2020) (Mohd Sani, 2014) (Werdingasih, 2013) (Humas, 2019)

The number of voters in Indonesia is greater than the number of voters in Malaysia. In 2014, the number of voters in Indonesia was over 185 million. In Malaysia, there are 13 million voters with more than 25,000 voting rooms. These data were based on the election from 2013. Indonesia had more than two million voting rooms in 2014. With 15 political parties, the cost of an election in Indonesia is more or less 15,62 Trillion Rupiah (Humas, 2019).

Different Factors with The Same Impact

The participation of voters in Southeast Asian countries is more than 40%; some even reach 90%. Hence, it is likely that there is very high or medium participation in those countries. All of the above is dependent on voters' interest to use or not to use their rights in general elections. In Malaysia, in 2004, the participation of voters was 73.90%; in 2008, 75.99%; and in 2013, it reached 84.84%. It can be said that from 2004 to 2013, there was a rapid increase of about 2–8% (see Table 6 and Chart 1).

Table 6: Percentage of Voter Participation During 2004–2019 (Indonesia & Malaysia) in Last 20 Years (2000–2020)

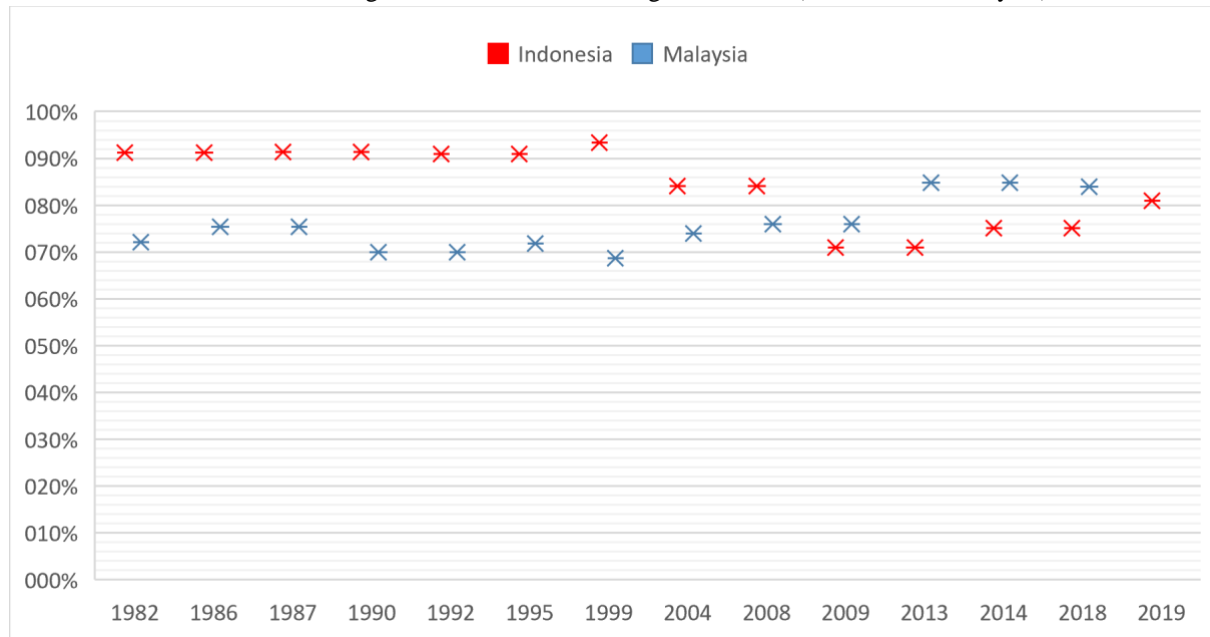
Election Year	Indonesia	Malaysia
2004	84.09%	73.90% 73,92%*
2008	-	75.99%
2009	70.99%	-
2013	-	84.84%
2014	75.11%	-
2018	-	84.+++%
2019	80.90%	-

Sources: (Moten & Mokhtar, 2006, p. 332)* (Aritonang, 2014) (Suth-Eastern Asia, 2020) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020)

The participation of voters in Indonesia's election in 2004 is 84.09%. In 2009, the amount decreased to 70.99%, which means there was a 12% reduction. In 2014, the amount of participation of voters increased to 75.11% (Editorial Staff, 2014). There was a 3.5% increase. So, the pattern of participation of voters in the last three elections is stable. In 2019, voter participation rose to 80.90%.

In general, the participation of voters in Indonesia and Malaysia's elections show a high interest of voters; the number of voters is stable and above 60%. This amount shows that there are times when voters do not want to exercise their rights in political choice, especially with the changes related to voters' interest in using suffrage. In other words, there is a driving factor for voters to use their suffrage.

Chart 1: Percentage of Voter Turnout During 2004–2019 (Indonesia & Malaysia)



Sources: (Moten & Mokhtar, 2006) (Aritonang, 2014) (South-Eastern Asia, 2020) (South-Eastern Asia Voter Turnout Database - Parliamentary Data for 11 Countries, 2020)

Typically, the first driving factor is the awareness of a citizen who thinks that choosing in elections is important in the political or democratic process. It is almost impossible for a voter to use his suffrage without awareness as a citizen who has suffrage. To choose a leader or a representative in a parliament democracy, voters should know that the election is a political mechanism. According to Timothy Feddersen and Alvaro Sandroni (Feddersen & Sandroni, 2006), there is a sense of civic duty. In Indonesia, these conditions are affected by political socialization, especially the message about the importance of participation of citizenship as voters in the general election. The government named Komisi Pemilihan Umum as an organizer of the election. In Indonesia and Malaysia, there is not a formal penalty if voters do not use their suffrage. As a result, voters are given the freedom to use or not to use their suffrage.

The second factor is the behaviour of voters' rational choice. Voters believe that their choice and the result of the election will provide an impact on their future lives, especially regarding development and economic interest. Theoretically, John G. Matsusaka (Matsusaka, 1995) explains that voters will decide to use their rights as voters because they believe in their choice and the benefits they will receive. This rational choice appears to be the characteristic of elections in Malaysia. Some studies show voters' behaviour in Malaysia to be the rational choice. For example, studies have been conducted by Junaidi Awang Besar, showing that "voting behaviour in the constituency of Pasir Mas, that the rational choice theory approach is more dominant than party identification theory and the model of sociology" (Besar, 2017, p. 97).

The third factor is the beliefs of political parties. Political parties are considered capable of instilling confidence in voters to carry out their campaign promises. Among the options of existing political parties, most political parties are considered capable of fulfilling their promises. A good track record of the party in several periods has dispelled doubts among voters that they will not be deceived by the promises of campaigns and programs that were already presented to them. In other words, perceptions of political parties have influenced political participation.

In PRU 13, Malay voters in Kedah (Malaysia) decided to choose UMNO-BN. It happened because UMNO-BN is considered to be more capable of providing better hope in the future (Mohd Nizar Sudin et al., 2016, p. 83) (Fionna, 2008). Thus, in Malaysia, the attitude of distrust of other parties has no impact on the emergence of voter apathy. Instead, voters are trying to improve their choices during the election; the voters go against political parties that

are incapable of fulfilling their promises and programs by choosing another party. The voters do not disapprove of the system by being apathetic and not using their voting rights in the election.

The fourth factor is the change of voter orientation that is based on their choice of the candidate's orientation. This phenomenon especially happens in Indonesia. This analysis is based on the result of the representative's election. Most voters have selected candidates, and some choose a party but not as many choices of candidates. This is the impact of voters who have the freedom to vote for parties or candidates on ballots. As a result of the proportional system with an open candidate list, the changes of selection in elections are not always identical to the changes of party choices, but there may also be a choice of candidates in the same party.

Conclusion

Most country in Southeast Asia has an electoral experience (Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines), including non-democratic countries (Laos, Vietnam), except Brunei Darussalam. General elections in Indonesia and Malaysia are interesting to observe because there are similarities among those countries. Those similarities are related to the participation of voters. The participation of voters in the Indonesian and Malaysian elections demonstrates the phenomenon of stable participation. In the last three elections, there was 70% of the participation of voters. The participation in Malaysia in 2018, 2013, 2008, and 2004 is 84.4%, 84.84%, 75.99%, and 73.90%. Meanwhile, the participation in Indonesia in 2019, 2014, 2009, and 2004 is 80.90%, 75.11%, 70.99%, and 84.09%. It can even reach up to the highest level at about 84%. These similarities are followed by driving factors: awareness as a citizen who thinks that participation in the political process is important in a democracy. In addition, Malaysia is the main driving factor that was influenced by rationality and political perspectives. In Indonesia, the main driving factor was influenced by changes in voter orientation that are based on the choice of the candidate's orientation.

Limitation and Further Studies

Studies have limitations on several things. First, the limitations of the scope of the state. Most Southeast Asian countries are democratic countries, but this study is limited to only two countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia. Second, local elections in Indonesia and Malaysia are not analysed in this study. Third, the explanation of why people do not exercise their right to vote in elections is also not analysed in this study. As an implication of the limitations of this study, there are some interesting questions to be investigated going forward. Are there differences in the number of voters participating in local and national elections? Is the difference significant? Why do these differences occur? If there is no difference in the number of voters participating in local and national elections, then the question is: Why is there no difference in participation among local and national elections?

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