



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i3/5643>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i3/5643

**Received:** 17 Feb 2019, **Revised:** 09 March 2019, **Accepted:** 30 March 2019

**Published Online:** 03 April 2019

**In-Text Citation:** (Nizah & Bakar, 2019)

**To Cite this Article:** Nizah, M. A. M., & Bakar, A. R. A. (2019). WhatsApp Election in Malaysia: Assessing the Impact of Instant Messaging on Malaysia's 14th General Election. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(3), 132–146.

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**Vol. 9, No. 3, 2019, Pg. 132 - 146**

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## WhatsApp Election in Malaysia: Assessing the Impact of Instant Messaging on Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> General Election

Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah

Centre for Core Studies & Faculty of Leadership & Management  
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia  
Email: azmirnizah@usim.edu.my

Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar

Department of Journalism, Universti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar Campus, 31900 Kampar, Perak,  
Malaysia

### Abstract

Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> general election, which was held on 9<sup>th</sup> Mei 2018, become the "the father of all elections" as it evidenced the collapsed of 60 years of Barisan Nasional ruling era. While for Pakatan Harapan, becoming government is beyond their wildest dream, is now a reality. This article aims to identify and explain how social media plays major factor in influencing electorate to make their decision and it is based on the lacked of research conducted in this area. Previous research on voting behavior mainly focusing on ethnicity, party identification, leadership, class analysis, middle class, political cultures and other approaches. But in this article we would like to see different angle of voting behavior by focusing on social media mainly WhatsApp users on how they influence in previous Malaysia 14<sup>th</sup> General Election. Furthermore, it is evidenced that WhatsApp political and agenda setting contents plays major role as compared to Facebook political and agenda setting content in influencing citizen to change the government as a resulted in the election outcome.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Election, Political Behaviour, Electoral Campaigning, Malaysia*

### Introduction

The 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election (GE14) came with stunning results. Barisan Nasional (BN), the longest governing party defeated hugely in majority of parliamentary seats, while lost another five states to opposition party namely Pakatan Harapan (PH) (formerly known as Pakatan Rakyat), while one state fall onto Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS). Malaysia recorded few historic events including the changing of government in most democratic ways through electoral

process without any violent events. It also displayed that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was re-elected as Prime Minister for second time, thus making him the oldest Prime Minister in the world at the age of 93. Interestingly, his appointment was sanctioned by 71 per cent of young electorate aged between 21 to 49 years old.

If we go back to past history, the phenomenon of social media began in the new millennium approximately in 2003 starting with the Myspace. Then followed by other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the most sought by many people in the world which is WhatsApp (Hamid & Rahman, 2018). Basically, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and so on normally used by citizens to share their views and opinions but somehow there are some part of the citizens actively used the social media to shares opinions, views and news related to politics by showing their support towards the political party or ideology that they have supported. For instance in US presidential election in 2008, Obama's campaign recognized as a prominent innovator in the use of information and communication technologies entirely and it's consider to be the first national campaign that used the new media technologies and internet besides overshadowed the traditional media (Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2012). This changes eventually lead to the social media revolution not only in United States election campaign but also affected in Malaysia election landscape (Sern & Zauddin, 2014), and addition to that the social media revolution has transformed Malaysian political landscape since 2008 election until the previous general election in 2018. In contrast, previous scholars reports that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube does not necessarily translate into electoral success (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Leng Ho, 2012; Miller & Ko, 2015) but its importance has been identified when BN lost two-thirds majority in the 2008 polls and continues declined in 2013 election result (Alyaa Azhar, 2013; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010; Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, Muhammad Shamshinor Abdul Azzis, & Mohd Azri Ibrahim, 2016; Weiss, 2013). Furthermore, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter become an essential applications today as many of citizen's have these apps for live update events and photo sharing. Interestingly, every netizens seems eagerly posting photos of their daily schedules, menus of their foods, video of attending events and many more as course to show off luxuries and to express opinions on political topics happening in the country especially before or during the GE14 (Chinnasamy & Abdul, 2018).

Social media has been recognized as the major contributing factor for such result. Due to its exponential growth, social media which recorded about 800 000 Facebook users in 2008 is sky jump to 22 million in 2018 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2018). Meanwhile, according to Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the number of active users in Malaysia crossed the 20.1 million mark in 2015, on the back of a 72.2% broadband penetration rate, and an estimated 16.8 million are also active social media users (Amirudin Abdul Wahab, 2016) whilst 18.3% of the internet users shared their political view online. National data also shows almost 18 million citizen uses smartphones. Due to this statement, its tally with the previous facts that the root cause of the phenomenon is the smartphone penetration that drives more users to access the Internet than ever (Amirudin Abdul Wahab, 2016). Besides, social networking sites are built with micro blogging technology that supports blogging activity with smaller sizes of word posts and their users-friendly features invite wide usage among millennial (Yusop & Sumari, 2013). Furthermore the emergence of concept such as e-participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Grönlund & Wakabi, 2015; Vicente & Novo, 2014); cyber democracy (Chun & Cho, 2012); digital democracy (Hyun, 2012); and also

“Netizens” will become another proof on how importance the social media plays their roles in political participations in our country. All these concepts actually have led the pave of Internet to be used as an important tool during the political campaigns especially in recent 14<sup>th</sup> General Election in Malaysia. This situation paves for Instant Messaging (IM) application to take place as social media.

Thus, the numbers of WhatsApp users may extremely surpass the number of Facebook users, which may become the significant contributor in electoral campaigning strategies. This is due to simple calculation that, each smartphone users may at least have three different WhatsApp group. According to Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, A.L.Levy, & Nielsen (2017), 51 per cent of their samples uses WhatsApp thus making Malaysia the world’s largest users (Bernama, 2017) while report from Kantar TNS (2017) found out that 77% of samples use WhatsApp in their daily routines. Addition to that, based on the research conducted by Norshuhada Shiratuddin et al., (2016) stated that, there are seven major social media tools used by the respondents (Generation Y), which are WhatsApp, Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Instagram, and also Twitter. Interestingly, WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular tools used by the respondents (Generation Y), where more than 50% from the total of 1029 respondents use them frequently. Because most of previous research very much focusing on the impact of Facebook (Chang & Tham, 2016; Leng Ho, 2012) and Twitter (Faizal Kasmani, Sabran, & Adzrah Ramle, 2014; Rosyidah Muhamad, 2015) on electoral results, this study however will discuss on the impact of WhatsApp on elections outcome. Therefore, this study is to embark the influencing factor of WhatsApp in political marketing and party campaigning strategy in the wake of GE 14.

### **Changing of Media Landscape**

Regarded as semi democratic country (Weiss, 2013), media which subsequently alleged controlled by previous regime through mainstream media ( print, online, television and outdoor), significantly gave to the rise of alternative media, such as blogs, news online media and social media. This is due to anti-regime sentiment and presumed political liberalization (Pepinsky, 2013) perception among citizens. The steep declining of circulations of mainstream newspaper such as Malay-language *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* with 30 per cent drop, while English-language newspaper New Straits Times suffered with 41.6 per cent drop from 2012 (Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, 2017; Zulkifli Sulong, 2017) become the evidence on how online news media is the other choice of Malaysian, at least those who are categorized as middle class and those in living in the urban and sub urban areas. This situation may also be further viewed and understand from the Freedom House and Reporter Without Borders reports as on Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1 Index of Press Freedom in Malaysia (Freedom House)**

Index	2004-2005	2008-2009	2010-2011	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017
World Rating	69	65	64	63	64	65	67	69
World Ranking	154 <sup>th</sup>	141 <sup>st</sup>	141 <sup>st</sup>	144 <sup>th</sup>	141 <sup>st</sup>	142 <sup>nd</sup>	149 <sup>th</sup>	151 <sup>st</sup>
Press Freedom	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free

Source: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org) Note: 0- Most Free, 100=Least Free

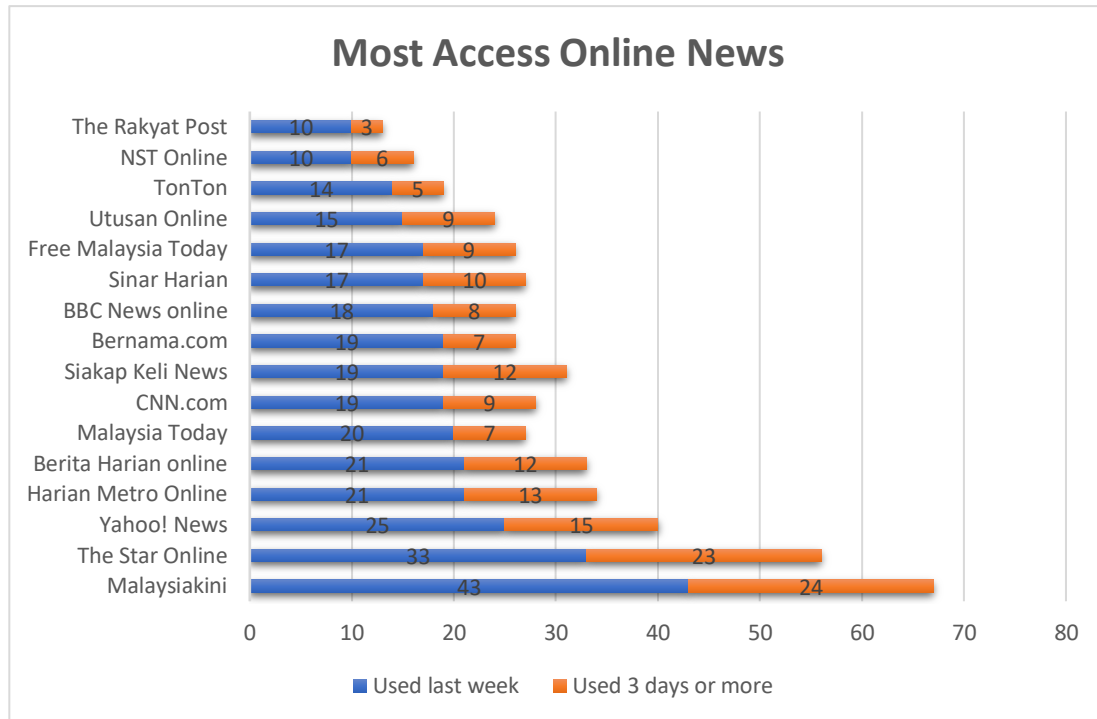
Table 1 evidenced the continues decline of press freedom in Malaysia. This repercussion is based on the perception that mainstream media is either governing party owned or state-owned business entity. However, the further declining in terms of world rating and world ranking should be address intensely by newly sanction government. Otherwise, current government may put themselves at risk in the next election times.

**Table 2 Index of Press Freedom in Malaysia (Reporter Without Borders)**

Index	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2010	2012	2013-2015	2016	2017	2018
World Score	39.83	33	22.25	41	39.5	50.75	56	42.73	46.57	46.89	47.81
World Ranking	122 <sup>th</sup>	113	92	124	132	141	122	147	146	144	145
Press Freedom	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free	Not Free

Source: [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org) Note: 0-15- Good; 15.01-25: Fairly Good; 25.01-35: Problematic; 35.01-55: Bad; 55.01-100: Very Bad

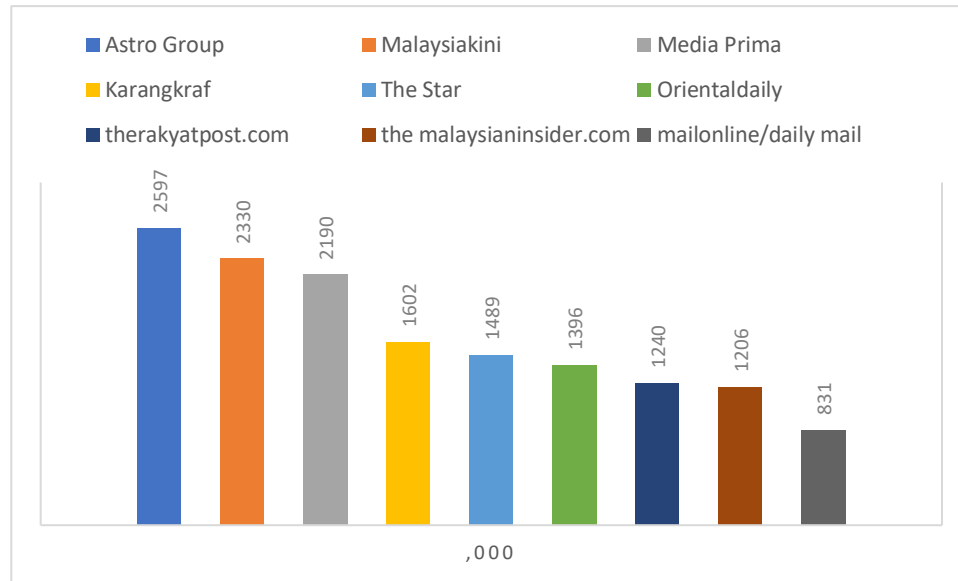
Because online news sites are not covered by the restrictive Printing Presses and Publications Act, thus these sites are deemed to be more independent and critical on the political and public issues. Data from Reuters (Newman et al., 2017) in Figure 1 further given remarkable indication on the penetration of news site such as *Malaysiakini*, *Berita Harian* online, *Bernama.com* and few others.



**Figure 1 Most Access Online News Sites in 2015**

Reports on Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2017) found that an alternative online media become the most visited page by Malaysian. It is deem the medium of choice for mobile users which has been estimated 89.4 per cent of Malaysian consumer (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2017). Further analysis confirmed the trend that exist among Malaysian.





**Figure 2 Top Tagged Web Properties from Mobile**

comScore (2017) with Malaysian Digital Association's (MDA) had published another report on July 2017 on user's penetration of country's top sites which returned to *Malaysiakini* became second most visited sites besides Astro Group application. Figure 2 depicted the data.

In 12<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE12) 2008, new media through blogs, party websites, Facebook, news portal and Youtube has been credited as a source of information and political marketing for opposition to counter a much wider pro-government mainstream media. Democratic Action Party (DAP) and BN established its Youtube channel in the wake of 2008 election, while PAS created its channel in 2009. In terms of Facebook, only Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) started its Facebook account after 2008 general election. With regards to Twitter, Anwar Ibrahim was the only politician who had Twitter account before 2008 election. However, the above scenario was tremendously change with regards to social media as 2013 general election approaching. The Malaysian Communications Multimedia Commission (MCMC) then declared on monitoring and controlling social media usage for any abuses and seditious postings to ensure GE13 is smooth and harmony during the election (Bernama, 2013). It is evidenced the utmost important of BN to ensure the prescribed truth by controlling information to voters, and it also showed the importance of social media in electoral results. Even in the difficult environment, the opposition coalition known as *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) or People's Alliance managed to capture 82 parliamentary seats, which then denied the two third majority of BN. This led to most observers concluded that internet access and penetration become one of the contributing factors to the increasing victories of opposition parties in GE12 election. Former Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi then acknowledged of BN misjudgment on information and election campaigns which they neglect the power of internet and social media. Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also admitted as the spreading growths of social media not only obtain

greater openness, but it could be a double-edged sword for his UMNO party. In fact, it was the beginning era of "*Internet of things*" and it was absolutely the most influential communication tool among urban, younger voters and internet savvy voters (Maznah, 2008).

In 13<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE13) 2013, the political landscape is change steadily. In the wake of GE13, social media users have been increases multifold as compare to GE12. Statistics showed that the ruling coalition party is well ahead in social media numbers (Gomez, 2014) and thus dubbed as social media election (Yvonne Lim, 2013). GE13 also billed as "the mother of all elections" because it pinnacles to the contestants due to GE12 which has been resulted as "political tsunami". Distinctive with GE12, GE13 then showed an extensive use of online videos to spread the message. Videos comprised of political rallies attendance, either overwhelming or serious lack of attendance, clips of parties and candidates, political parodies and satire, incidents occurred, scenes on nomination and polling day, and news reports are freely available and widespread to voters. Similarly, like GE12, in GE13, BN has muscled its political power and resources with posters, banners and billboards along federal and state roads, so do as along highways. Reports estimates the total of RM264 million is spend for online marketing and advertising space (Zurairi, 2013) which is five times more than it did previously. The total expenditure for advertising blitz was 531 million as reported by international media buying agency Vizeum Media (Malay Mail, 2013).

As it turned out, BN performance is worse than GE12 despite having spent huge amount of money on advertising and online political marketing. BN strategy on negative campaigning through its mainstream media, internet-based services and social media did make PR went to extreme measures as portrays themselves as 'victim' and use social media as counter-frame to BN muscled might. PR not only denying BN to its two-third majority but strengthen Selangor and Pulau Pinang legislative assembly seats instead. This may explain why BN loose miserably in GE13.

#### **Instant Messaging and Social Media Role and its Impact on GE 14's Electoral Outcome**

Despite probably spending huge amount of money online and offline, to improve BN presence in the lead up for 14<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE14) in 2018, BN however could not measure the downward of voter's support. Scholars and political scientist often refuses to give their prediction in the wake of GE14. AWANI channel, a paid satellite television owned by All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator (ASTRO) turned to be a favorite's news channel as compare to Malaysia 'official' television broadcaster Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) with 31 per cent viewed AWANI to 22 per cent viewed RTM. TV3 News aired by TV3 channel of Media Prima still top the ranking with 48 per cent (Newman et al., 2017). However, RTM and TV3 is in fact, a free-on-air broadcaster. As earlier reports confirmed, television is still a source of trust news in Malaysia (Zurairi Ar, 2018) but it does not necessarily translate into votes. AWANI tend to portray it centralist as compared to RTM and TV3 that often portrays and perceived as BN and UMNO 'official news'.

Given experience on GE13 and impact showed by online news portal, BN had launch a 'pop up' strategy in any online websites, including news portal. With 'tagline' *Hebatkan Negaraku*, BN expected it may lure more voters in achieving new mandate in GE14. However, the GE14 results came out with wildest opposition can dream about, with PH thumping BN both of parliamentary seats and popular votes. Table 3 summarized comparative election results of GE13 and GE14.



**Table 3 Comparative Results of Malaysia's General Election on 2013 and 2018**

Party Contested	GE13		GE14		
	Barisan Nasional (BN)	Pakatan Rakyat (PR)	Barisan Nasional (BN)	Pakatan Harapan (PR)	Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS)
Parliamentary Seats Won	133	89	79	121	18
Votes Count	5366997	4147014	4078928	5795954	2039722
Votes Percentage	48.55%	37.51%	33.35%	47.39%	16.69%
Popular Votes	5237699	5623984	3794827	5767390	1933435
Popular Votes Percentage	47.38%	50.87%	32%	49.54%	16%

*Total Parliamentary seats is 222. 112 seats needed for simple majority counts.*

However, understanding the contributing factors for such results is matter most. Domestic issues and scandals, party leadership, economic factors, and social media has been long regarded as contributing factors to voters in making their decision. Alas, due to higher internet penetration and social media usage, social media thus becoming the underpinning enablers in casting ballot. Previous research confirmed social media predictive power remains elusive (Gomez, 2014) over power structure, incumbent advantage, access to resources, politicization of ethnicity and Islam, and electoral irregularities, but GE14 results explains otherwise.

The ability of social media is transcend space and it is an efficient tool to reach out to first time young voters who eschew the standard Malaysian campaign fare of rallies and walkabout (Najwa Abdullah & Amalina Anuar, 2018). Additional to that, in a study conducted by Pew Research Center (Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, & Sidney Verba, 2012; Shirley Li, 2014) found that almost 25 percent of 2,253 political survey respondents in social media argue that debating, discussing or sharing views on political issues with other people on social network are something "very important" or "quite important" to them. According to Norshuhada Shiratuddin et al., (2016), all the views from the youth by using social media are desirably be recorded and must be considered before the government want to make any action or taken in the development of the country. Apart from requesting their voices to be heard, they also want this platform (social media) to be the important channel for them to engage and dealing with the government when it comes to the public policy making. It's to show how important the social media to play their role among the youth in nowadays political environment.

Another research done by Fui Kui Soong the CEO of think tank Centre for Strategic Engagement, despite losing its first ever election, Barisan Nasional still remains the most popular choice among the poorest constituencies in Malaysia. Based on the statistics in the last election showed that some 40% out of 79 parliamentary seats that Barisan had won in the recent general election are of the lowest median household income quartile- and consider the poorest 25% of constituencies (The Star Online, 2018). Looking at the data released by the Department of the

Statistics, those in the lowest quartile are those constituencies including Bagan Datuk, Mersing and Baling, in which the median household incomes between RM2, 208 and RM 3,612.

Moreover Mohd Azizuddin (2014) claimed that roughly 60.7% of Malaysia are internet users in 2012 where there was a huge increase of 300% of internet penetration level in Malaysia since the election in 2008. In other views, Kemp (2012) reported that almost 90% of Malaysian Internet users have registered into social media accounts. Muniandy & Muniandy (2013) then verified that Malaysian netizens views social network sites 14 billion times every month, with YouTube accounted for 67% of all online videos viewed in Malaysia. Despite the fact of false news spreading in these online platforms, the social media is still one that political leaders used to upload their speech and activities for campaigning (Sara Chinnasamy, 2018). In contrast to the olden days, campaigning was done through walking door-to-door meetings or wandering in the market to talk about themselves or party and even putting out poster and waving flags, even rally talks are held at night to attract crowd to them. The emergence of the social media mainly WhatsApp and others created another dimension of campaign by all the politicians and the political parties in the last general election. Furthermore, WhatsApp is a tool that is effective to reach the crowd other than Facebook and Twitter, with its simple function of forwarding message and even video, but it's also turned into channel for fake news (Mei Mei Chu, 2018). In fact, in this 14th election, messaging service WhatsApp is considered the most dominant and effective messaging tools to reach the audience. People easily get messages and videos on the election campaign almost every day and share with their friends, family, colleague, or even community chat groups. Nevertheless, the existence of the new media also as a result of the development of the internet has made the media a democratic agent of information (Ali Salman, Mohd Azul Mohamad Salleh, Mohammad Agus Yusoff, & Mohd Yusof Hj Abdullah, 2018).

It is clear to conclude that since 2008 the using of new media such as blogs, party websites and alternative news portal and YouTube began and setting new way of campaigning to lure votes for competing party. For example, the online news such as Malaysiakini become a hit by providing with independent and perceived as reliable election information to all the voters and at the same time they manage to provide few public forum as a platform to discuss and criticized on political issues. At the same time, other website managed by Raja Petra Kamarudin's (Malaysia Today), or (Screenshot) by Jeff Oi also played a critical role and view in disseminating stories or issues about the previous Barisan Nasional government and its leaders (Willnat, Wong, Tamam, & Aw, 2013). All these sites gains many visitors due to their reports on scandals, irregularities and also corruptions based on the leaked official documents by the previous Barisan Nasional leaders. Interestingly many of those sites created by the independent citizens, there are also sites started by the senior journalist who bothered under the authoritarian media environment such as Printing Press Act (1984), Broadcasting Act (1987) and Communication and Multimedia Act (1998) and sought of pure air for their liberal thought. The existence of these sites and portals created an alternative platform for the opposition during that period of time to penetrate and lure the support from the public. Due to the least of dominant by the ruling party, all these portals and sites become an instant hit for the opposition leaders to disseminate their views and ideas to the public without fear. Furthermore, all these sites and portal were instrumental in convincing the public especially the Malaysian urban middle class to turn against the Barisan Nasional ruling party and express their anger and protest by voting for the opposition leaders.

According to the government statistics compiled by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2017) indicated that the highest internet penetration was in the Klang Valley area, which places the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, at 71%. This is followed by the most developed state in Malaysia, that is, Selangor (71%), and at the administrative capital, Putrajaya (89%). As expected internet penetration is still relatively low in other less populated states such as Sabah (43%) and Sarawak (41%), situated in east Malaysia (Saodah Wok & Shafizan Mohamed, 2017).

While in 2013 the using of social media such as Facebooks, and Twitter marks the trend and yet the current in 2018 the using of WhatsApp become more influential in keeping important political issues in the past few years and will become more significant in coming years ahead. These new media or social media have also enlarged the restrictive public sphere of traditional media, allowing more alternative voices and views to emerge. Furthermore, the usage of internet which is the most common used of media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the strength to influence the public opinion especially on the issues of politics and elections but may result in some bias situation, therefore affecting the voting trend in the end. Hence, the social media can be said as a double edged of swords with its pros and cons. As voters, we must be always be mindful when it comes to the news related to the politics no matter where the sources it comes whether from newspaper, blogs, Facebook, twitter or other social media. It is in fact, the time for voters to be wise and get wise.

## Conclusion

Social Media in Malaysia has been an important tool used by the political parties and politicians in disseminating the views on many political issues since 2008 general elections. Furthermore, it is also increasingly popular and emerging as important information sources among the public. The Malaysia 12<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE12) is the turning point for Malaysia political history when Barisan Nasional unable to maintain their two-third of the majority seats in the house of representative, where Barisan Nasional also lost few states to the opposition (Pepinsky, 2009). The climax can be seen in the last general election when Barisan Nasional the dominant political party in Malaysia lost their first ever general elections after 61 years due to their failure to dominating the political issues in the social media. Even though Barisan Nasional failed to dominate the social media but they still popular among the sub-urban and rural areas by dominating the traditional media such as television (Suhaimi Saahar, Ismail Sualman, & Mohd Adnan Hashim, 2017). The creation of Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp for example, has brought new dimension of innovation in the digital technologies to spark a great information sharing wave since Google was introduced in 1998 (Alejandro, 2010). The use WhatsApp in election campaign became major factor in Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> general election, but it will definitely creeping out other countries like India, which predicted will be the biggest WhatsApp election in the world (Rishi Iyengar, 2019). India has almost 800 million eligible voters, which makes WhatsApp will be the easiest and the cheapest mode of communication to reach and disseminate information to the voter in a big scale in India, whereby Malaysia are now facing the same. Hoax messages, abuse comments and misinformation to the voters will be the major challenges to politicians in dealing with WhatsApp. On a positive note, WhatsApp become the most influential mode of communications and become the major roles in political marketing, as well as promoting political participation in the next Malaysia 15<sup>th</sup> general election. There is no doubt that, WhatsApp has played major roles in 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysia general election political marketing and campaigning, but it

also hope that political parties, and users to be more responsible, mature and constructive when posting or sharing anything political materials to elude any undesirable consequences that may harm its national stability and unity.

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