

The 2021 Melaka State Election to the 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15): A Reflection of Continuity or De-Realignment?

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Abstract

This paper examines the 15th Melaka State Election and its implications for Malaysia's evolving electoral realignment. Drawing on constituency-level, ethnic, and polling-lane data from the Election Commission (2008–2025), the analysis reveals how voter behaviour shifted across rural, semi-urban, and urban areas, particularly among Malay voters. Barisan Nasional (BN) achieved a decisive victory in the 2021 state election, winning 21 out of 28 seats amid low voter turnout, largely supported by older, rural Malay voters. However, by examining the state seats result through 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15) scoresheets, BN's dominance collapsed, retaining only four seats, while Perikatan Nasional (PN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH) gained 10 and 14, respectively. Polling-lane analysis indicates generational divergence: BN's support declined sharply in almost all polling lanes, whereas PN made significant inroads among youth, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. This trend reflects a broader partisan de-realignment process, wherein traditional UMNO-BN loyalties eroded, giving rise to new alignments centred on Malay-Muslim identity politics. The study finds that voter turnout patterns and demographic transitions particularly the expansion of the youth electorate under Undi18 during GE15 contributed to shifting political loyalties. While PH maintained urban dominance and Chinese-majority support. Overall, the Melaka case exemplifies a national trajectory of partisan de-realignment, shaped by generational change, identity-based politics, and declining trust in traditional party institutions.

Keywords: Melaka; 15th General Election; State Election; Dealignment; Realignment

Introduction

The 2021 Melaka State Election presents an important case for examining shifts in Malaysian voter behaviour following the 14th General Election (GE14) and in the lead-up to the 15th General Election (GE15). This inquiry centres on several key questions: How do these patterns compare with those in GE14? What factors explain the shifting voting patterns observed in the Melaka election, which was widely regarded as a 'critical election', as well as in GE15? Have voters remained loyal to the parties they supported in GE14, or has a process of realignment taken place? Finally, to what extent do the results of the Melaka state election reflect broader national political trends?

To address these questions, it is essential to examine the Melaka State Election within Malaysia's broader political history. Since gaining independence in 1957, the country has adopted a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy as its governing system. During this period, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, together with its forerunner, the Alliance (Perikatan), maintained

uninterrupted control at the Federal level until its unprecedented defeat in GE14. This long-standing political dominance was also reflected in Melaka, but was subsequently challenged with the emergence of three major coalitions in the state election leading up to GE15.

BN's long-standing electoral dominance was sustained by structural advantages under the first-past-the-post system,¹ the strength of its party machinery, control over media and financial resources,² patronage networks,³ and a development-oriented political agenda.⁴ However, its popular vote share began declining after 12th General Election (GE12), ending decades of consistent majority support since 1959 and culminating in the loss of the popular vote in 13th General Election (GE13). This erosion stemmed from formation of viable opposition coalitions,⁵ the proliferation of alternative and social media platforms,^{6,7} BN's inability to address pressing socio-economic issues,⁸ and persistent internal leadership crises⁹ consistent with the theory of partisan de-realignment,¹⁰ which posits that when established parties fail to adapt to policy challenges and shifting voter ideologies, they risk losing electoral support to emerging alternatives.

In this context, the 2021 Melaka State Election serves as a valuable case study. Although BN had lost federal power in GE14, it successfully regained control of the Melaka state government in 2021. Paradoxically, the coalition failed to win any parliamentary seats in Melaka during GE15. In addition, the GE15 results do not support the expectation that BN can secure a sufficient number of seats to win the state election. While state elections results do not always mirror national outcomes, the Melaka case illustrates how short-term factors, including economic conditions, government policy decisions, and elite political behaviour, can influence voter behaviour and reflect broader patterns of electoral change in Malaysia.

Application of Partisan De-Realignment Theory

The concept of partisan de-realignment remains under-theorised in explaining electoral change, despite its relevance in contexts where voter behaviour deviates from established patterns. It bridges discussions on partisanship, alignment, dealignment, and realignment. Partisanship, defined as a stable psychological attachment to a political party, is shaped by a range of social and political factors. Often rooted in early political socialisation, it acts as a perceptual filter through which voters interpret political developments, as highlighted by the Michigan School.^{11,12,13} Furthermore, modern partisanship is in decline, largely due to modernisation and the rise of cognitive mobilisation driven by higher education levels.¹⁴ However, it contends that education alone is insufficient to explain voter choice, drawing on electoral change in Britain.¹⁵

Dealignment refers to the long-term decline in party attachment, often triggered by performance failures, shifting ideologies, or the inability of parties to resolve key policy issues^{16,17,18} By contrast, realignment theory, developed in response to dealignment debates of the 1960s–1980s,¹⁹ suggests that weakening voter loyalty can also reflect structural changes in the role of political parties.²⁰ Dealignment emphasizes that socio-structural anchors of electoral behaviour are weakening, making voting patterns more volatile and influenced by short-term factors.²¹ Nevertheless, realignment theory shares the idea of shifting party loyalties but emphasizes that new and enduring party–voter linkages often emerge during critical junctures or periods of profound social, economic, or ideological transformation. These shifts are typically driven by leadership credibility, policy failures, or the realignment of social cleavages such as class, religion, or ethnicity.^{22,23} Moreover, it is also found that realigned voters are more open to voting for a variety of voters.²⁴

Culminating the dealignment and realignment thesis, this article, the term de-realignment is adopted to describe the Malaysian context, where weakening attachment to traditional parties (dealignment) occurs alongside the emergence of alternative political options (realignment) and also

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denotes that voters remain detached and no new stable pattern is able to replace the previous one.^{25,26}

However, it is best to note that in Malaysian electoral discourse, voter turnout also remains a significant variable in explaining the voting behaviour. The low voter turnout during the state election can partly be attributed to the mobility of young voters, many of whom were studying or employed outside their home state. The election period overlapped with the academic calendar of universities and colleges, resulting in students being unwilling or unable to return home to vote due to ongoing classes and examinations. Moreover, the financial burden of travel expenses further discouraged participation among this group. Among those who remained in their hometowns, parental voting patterns appeared to influence youth decisions, leading some to abstain from voting altogether, a dynamic consistent with findings on parental influence in electoral behaviour.²⁷

Methodology

The Election Commission's (EC) voting stream data, while primarily detailing voting districts and results, provides valuable insights into voting behaviour by age group, as well as variations in urbanization and ethnic composition across constituencies.²⁸ Each polling station contains multiple streams, numbered from one to eighteen since GE13. For this study, results from streams five and above were aggregated to capture the voting tendencies of younger cohorts. Although the data lacks precision due to lane assignments being based on voter numbers rather than standardized age groups, it remains useful for identifying age-based voting patterns and ethnic dynamics, particularly in rural areas.

This analysis examines how different voting streams contribute to party performance by assessing each stream's share of total votes. Through this approach, voting stream data from GE12, the 2021 state election, and GE15 were compared to evaluate rural–urban variations. The classification of Melaka constituencies follows the urbanization categories defined by Tindak Malaysia (n.d.).

Malaysian Context: Ethnicity, Loyalty, and Party Identity

In Malaysia, partisanship and alignment of support for certain political parties have historically been significantly influenced by ethnic affiliation,²⁹ religion,^{30,31} historical legitimacy or sense of nationalism,³² and generational shift,³³ and political patronage or clientelism.³⁴ The intensity of dealignment and realignment has always been influenced by the establishment of opposition coalitions,^{35,36} media influence,^{37,38} political history,^{39,40} and economic structures.^{41,42} By controlling media narratives as well as state resources and administrative machinery, the ruling government has maintained its political hegemony in Malaysia.⁴³

Partisanship in Malaysia is also deeply tied to political patronage. Malay loyalty to United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), touted to be rooted in a reciprocal expectation of protection in the nexus of political, economic, and cultural, and in exchange, the Malays would turn out and vote for UMNO.⁴⁴ This view is also highlights on ethnic-based loyalty and political legitimacy reciprocal relationship.^{45,46} UMNO's identity is closely linked to Malay nationalism, encapsulated in concepts such as *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy), traditional authority, and ethnic protectionism.⁴⁷ The party has effectively fostered anxiety about the political and economic strength of other ethnic groups, reinforcing support for ethnic-based partisanship to UMNO.^{48,49}

Meanwhile, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), a splinter party from UMNO, developed an alternative model of partisanship. While its electoral success has been uneven, especially before GE15, PAS has maintained strong loyalty among its base. that PAS's political success is argued to be attributed to its message to propagate Islam and restore its tenets and past glories.⁵⁰ This is

supported by mechanisms such as the *baiiah* oath among its elected representatives,⁵¹ and the religious legitimization of leadership decisions through *dalil* (religious justifications), particularly in Malay heartland states.⁵² Both UMNO and PAS have relied on efficient grassroots mobilisation, strong party wings, and volunteer networks to reinforce local loyalty and sustain partisanship.⁵³ In both cases, partisanship is not merely ideological but structurally embedded in identity, patronage, community networks, and religion.

The reaction of institutional emphasis on ethnicity and religion by Malay-Islamic political parties also affected how non-Malays vote. It is argued that “policies pursued by UMNO, such as the marginalization of non-Malays in education, politics, and the economy, and the increasing Islamization of the civil service, judiciary, and public life” have contributed to MCA’s loss of support, which would inevitably also implicate the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).⁵⁴ The partisan de-alignment motives for the non-Malays, especially the Chinese and Indian support for Pakatan Harapan (PH), reflect a convergence of ethno-political disenchantment, class-based grievances, and ideological commitment to governance reform. As discontent with Barisan Nasional’s corruption, ethnic inequality, and authoritarianism grew, Chinese Malaysians increasingly aligned with PH as the most viable agent of political transformation.^{55,56}

Malaysian Politics Since GE14

UMNO, a Malay-based party, has been the dominant force within the BN coalition since 1969.⁵⁷ Although UMNO reached its electoral peak in the 2004 General Election (GE11), its influence began to wane in GE12, when BN’s share of the popular vote dropped from 64% to 50% and it lost control of five states to the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR).⁵⁸ For the first time since 1959, BN failed to secure a two-thirds majority in Parliament. While BN managed to retain power and increase its seats in GE13, it did so with less than half of the popular vote by consolidating its support among Malay voters.^{59,60,61}

This trajectory culminated in the historic defeat of BN in GE14 by PH where the party only controlled Perlis and Pahang. The party’s position further deteriorated in GE15, securing only 30 parliamentary seats, a stark decline from its 61% share of the national vote in GE11 to 22% in GE15.⁶² In state seats, the party only won 26 seats, but it managed to position two chief ministers in Pahang and Perak through negotiations with PH despite having a minor presence in the two states. The party also failed to win any states in the 15th State Election involving six states, which secured only 19 seats out of 108 contested.

Despite ongoing corruption allegations,⁶³ UMNO began to regain traction among Malay voters between the 2019 Cameron Highlands and the 2020 Sabah State Elections. Initially, the post GE14 witnessed BN suffering consecutive by-election defeats, suggesting the public’s support for PH was still strong. However, the declining approval rating for PH,⁶⁴ and the formation of Muafakat Nasional (MN) with PAS in 2019 reinvigorated UMNO’s support base. This shift led to by-election victories in Cameron Highlands and Tanjung Piai, marking a resurgence in Malay-Muslim political consolidation.⁶⁵

Ethnic contestation intensified after PH’s victory in GE14, driven primarily by three developments: (1) the formation of Muafakat Nasional (MN), (2) the controversy surrounding the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and (3) the subsequent establishment of Perikatan Nasional (PN). Following PH’s electoral success, by-elections from Sungai Kandis (state) to Port Dickson (federal) between 2018 and 2019 prompted PAS and Barisan Nasional (BN) to avoid three-cornered contests and form an informal alliance, later known as MN.

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This strategic coordination delivered decisive victories in the Cameron Highlands (Federal), Semenyih (State), and Tanjung Piai (Federal) by-elections. Since GE14, PH has been increasingly portrayed as a Chinese-dominated government that neglects Malay rights and privileges.⁶⁶ The controversy over ICERD and the Rome Statute further fuelled fears that PH would adopt liberal principles, undermining Bumiputera privileges and promoting equal rights across ethnic groups.⁶⁷ This perception culminated in a large-scale rally jointly organized by UMNO, PAS, and right-wing Malay non-governmental organizations (NGOs).⁶⁸

This political realignment precipitated the ‘Sheraton Move’, which led to the collapse of the PH government. Muhyiddin Yassin, supported by BN, PAS, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), and several independent MPs, became the 8th Prime Minister.⁶⁹ The newly formed PN-BN coalition subsequently won the 2020 Sabah state election, held amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the election triggered a surge in daily cases from 16 to nearly 3,000,⁷⁰ drawing public backlash and the viral spread of the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* (Failed Government). Declining public confidence led to Muhyiddin’s resignation, and Ismail Sabri Yaakob of UMNO was appointed as Malaysia’s 9th Prime Minister. To ensure political stability, a Confidence and Supply Agreement (CSA) was signed between the ruling PN-BN coalition and the opposition PH bloc.

Melaka State Election 2021 and the 15th General Election (GE15)

However, the political transformation achieved in GE14 proved short-lived. Following PH’s brief tenure in both federal and state governments, voter sentiment began to shift once again, signalling the onset of partisan dealignment. The collapse of the PH government in 2020 and the subsequent realignments under the PN coalition fragmented voter loyalties that had initially converged around reformist narratives. In Melaka, this disillusionment was evident during the 2021 state election, where BN managed to reclaim power by capitalising on PH’s internal divisions and declining public confidence. The reduced voter turnout further reflected growing political apathy and uncertainty, particularly among urban and middle-ground voters who had previously supported PH.

These developments illustrate a short-term de-realignment process, where voters temporarily detach from established party loyalties due to political instability and leadership volatility rather than enduring ideological shifts. While PH’s initial success in GE14 represented a momentary realignment towards reformist ideals, its rapid erosion by GE15 underscores the fragility of this transformation. The oscillation between PH, BN, and PN across successive elections thus reveals a fluid and transactional voter behaviour pattern, where political allegiance is increasingly contingent on performance credibility, governance satisfaction, and coalition coherence rather than deep-seated partisan identification.

However, after only 22 months, PH’s rule collapsed due to defections by assemblymen such as Norhizam Hassan Baktee (Pengkalan Batu) and Muhammad Jailani Khamis (Rembia), who declared themselves independents and backed Perikatan Nasional (PN). The 2021 Melaka state election happened 14 months after the Sabah state election 2020. The election was triggered by a political crisis when four state assemblymen, including former Chief Minister Idris Haron, withdrew their support from the incumbent administration led by Sulaiman Md Ali.⁷¹ Idris, who was Chief Minister, was removed as UMNO division chief for Tangga Batu, leading to internal party conflicts that eventually led to his defection. In response, Sulaiman requested the dissolution of the state assembly to seek a renewed mandate or the state.⁷²

The election was the first to feature a tripartite contest between BN, PN, and PH. BN campaigned on the theme *Kestabilan Demi Kemakmuran* (Stability for Prosperity).⁷³ This slogan was carried into GE15. PH promoted *Maju Bersama Pakatan Harapan* (Progress with Pakatan Harapan),

while PN initially relied on Muhyiddin Yassin’s personal popularity before adopting PN Best: *Prihatin, Bersih, dan Stabil* (Caring, Clean, and Stable) in GE15. Due to public health concerns amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health imposed strict campaign restrictions during the Melaka election, including bans on mass rallies and door-to-door outreach. These restrictions however were relaxed by the time of GE15.

Result

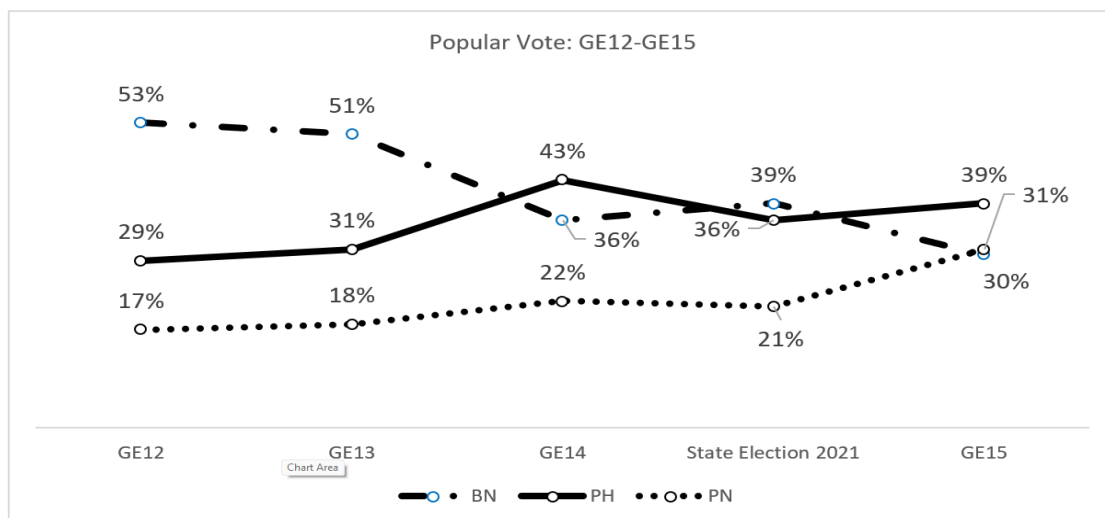
The 15th Melaka state election involved 482,549 eligible voters across 28 constituencies, an increase from 418,112 in GE14.⁷⁴ Following the implementation of *Undi18* and automatic voter registration, the number of registered voters rose significantly to 657,759 in GE15. Ethnically, Malays constituted the majority at 62%, followed by Chinese (23%), Indians (6%), and Others (2%).⁷⁵ Gender distribution was balanced, with an equal 50-50 male-to-female ratio.⁷⁶

Tindak Malaysia provided an alternative spatial classification of the constituencies, categorising them into 6 rural, 11 semi-urban, and 11 urban seats.⁷⁷ In terms of ethnic composition, 11 seats comprised 60%–69% Malay voters, four seats had 70%–79%, eight had 80%–90%, and five seats recorded less than 45% Malay voters. The rural constituencies were predominantly Malay-majority, alongside three Chinese-majority and two mixed-majority seats. A total of 112 candidates contested, with every seat witnessing multi-cornered fights involving at least three candidates.⁷⁸

Barisan Nasional (BN) secured a landslide victory, winning 21 out of 28 seats, an increase of 8 seats in the state election compared to its performance in GE14. The voter turnout stood at 65%, marking a 19% decline from GE14. This reduction aligns with typical turnout patterns observed in state-level elections and by-elections, in contrast to national general elections, and this was notably visible when the turnout reached 78% in GE15.

BN’s dominance was particularly evident in rural Malay-majority constituencies, where it captured 14 out of 15 seats. However, this success did not translate into sustained support in the subsequent GE15. A comparative analysis suggests that BN would have won only 4 of the same 28 seats had GE15 voting patterns been applied using the method proposed by Ong (2024).⁷⁹ In contrast, PH would have secured 14 seats, and 10 seats for Perikatan Nasional (PN).

Figure 1: Party’s popular votes in Melaka since GE12



Source: Election Commission 2008, 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022. (PN votes in GE12-GE13 was based on PAS and Gerakan, and in GE14 it was based on PAS, Gerakan, and Bersatu votes).

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As shown in Figure 1, BN’s popular vote in the 2021 state election stood at 39%, marking a 3% increase compared to GE14. However, its overall popular support declined to 30% in GE15, failing to recover the peak levels achieved in GE13 (51%) and GE12 (53%). PH also recorded a decrease in its popular vote share, dropping from 43% in GE14 (combined support for PKR, DAP, and Amanah) to 36% in the state election, before slightly improving to 39% in GE15. Meanwhile, PN’s overall popular vote increased from 21% (a combination of, PAS, BERSATU, GERAKAN) in the state election to 31% in GE15.

Table 2: Rural-Urban Voting Results Comparison (GE14-GE15)

AREA	ELECTION	BN VOTES	PH VOTES	PN VOTES	TURNOUT (AREA)	PARTY WON (BN/PH/PN)
Rural	GE14	29,666 (49%)	26,487 (44%)	4,722 (8%)	82%	BN: 5 PH: 1
	2021 State Election	37,208 (50%)	14,193 (19%)	22,417 (30%)	65%	BN: 6
	GE15	28,935 (39%)	19,932 (24%)	24,670 (34%)	70%	BN: 2 PH:1 PN: 1
SEMI-URBAN	GE14	31,879 (44%)	30,674 (42%)	10,211 (14%)	83%	BN: 7 PH: 4
	2021 State Election	37,831 (45%)	19,612 (24%)	25,945 (31%)	66%	BN: 9 PN: 2
	GE15	74,130 (34%)	71,898 (33%)	73,070 (33%)	74%	BN: 2 PH: 4 PN: 5
URBAN	GE14	44,274 (38%)	60,785 (52%)	12,820 (11%)	84%	BN: 1 PH: 10
	2021 State Election	44,030 (28%)	79,326 (50%)	33,910 (22%)	62%	BN: 6 PH: 5
	GE15	45,822 (22%)	105,223 (51%)	56,843 (27%)	76%	PH: 9 PN : 2

Source: Election Commission 2018, 2021, 2022.

Table 2 provides key insights into voting patterns based on the rural–urban divide. Overall, there was only a slight variation in voter turnout across different areas within the same election. However, when comparing GE14 and GE15, the state election recorded a significantly lower turnout. In terms of results, BN’s dominance in rural constituencies declined from 49% in GE14 to 39% in GE15, despite having secured almost all rural seats in the state election. PH improved its rural performance in GE15 (24%) compared to the state election (19%), yet remained below its GE14 level (44%). PN, drawing on PAS’s support base, steadily increased its share of the rural vote from 8% in GE14 to 34% in GE15.

BN dominated the rural areas in the state election, winning all six seats. However, under the GE15 scenario, it would only retain Asahan and Rim. PH is likely to recapture Machap Jaya from BN, a seat it won in GE14 but lost in the state election. Meanwhile, PN would strengthen its position in rural areas by securing three seats, compared to none in both GE14 and the state election.

In semi-urban areas, BN experienced the large decline in popular vote similar to rural areas, falling from 44% in GE14 to 34% in GE15, and would likely fail to secure only two seats out of 11 based on GE15 voting trends. Conversely, PH and PN registered significant gains compared to state election results, with projections suggesting they could win four and five seats, respectively, out of the 11 available.

In urban constituencies, PH is projected to regain all five seats it lost in the state election, maintaining a stable popular vote supported by higher voter turnout in GE15. Although PN did not make any significant impact in these areas previously, it is expected to win two out of the 11 available seats. PN’s urban vote share increased by 11% compared to GE14, though this largely translated into wasted votes with minimal seat gains. Meanwhile, BN, which had unexpectedly won six urban seats in the state election, would be unable to defend any of them under the GE15 scenario.

Table 3: Turnout Rate and Party Performance according to the Percentage of Malay Majority Seats GE14-GE15

Election	>80% Malay (8 Seats)	70%-79% Malay (4 Seats)	60%-69% Malay (11 Seats)	<45% Malay (5 Seats)
GE14	Vote Received: BN: 47,184 (50%) PH: 25,045 (27%) PN: 21,489 (23%) Total: 93,718 (83% turnout) Party Won: BN 8/8	Vote Received: BN: 20,524 (44%) PH: 19,683 (42%) PN: 6,476 (14%) Total: 46,683 (84% turnout) Party Won: BN 3/4, PH 1/4	Vote Received: BN: 64,377 (39%) PH: 81,653 (49%) PN: 21,074 (13%) Total: 167,104 (84% turnout) Party Won: BN 2/11, PH 9/11	Vote Received: BN: 24,233 (23%) PH: 76,928 (74%) PN: 3,342 (3%) Total: 104,503 (83% turnout) Party Won: PH 5/5
2021 State Election	Vote Received: BN: 35,973 (47%) PH: 12,482 (16%) PN: 28,384 (37%) Total: 76,839 (68% turnout) Party Won: BN 7/8, PN 1/8	Vote Received: BN: 19,725 (53%) PH: 9,149 (23%) PN: 8,625 (24%) Total: 37,499 (67% turnout) Party Won: BN 4/4	Vote Received: BN: 51,617 (41%) PH: 43,205 (35%) PN: 32,093 (25%) Total: 126,915 (65% turnout) Party Won: BN 9/11, PH 1/11, PN 1/11	Vote Received: BN: 15,426 (21%) PH: 49,621 (67%) PN: 8,629 (12%) Total: 73,676 (59% turnout) Party Won: BN 1/5, PH 4/5
GE15	Vote Received: BN: 40,902 (36%) PH: 19,752 (17%) PN: 53,051 (47%) Total: 113,705 (78% turnout) Party Won: BN 1/8, PN 7/8	Vote Received: BN: 15,645 (33%) PH: 13,974 (27%) PN: 18,195 (40%) Total: 46,683 (77% turnout) Party Won: BN 1/2, PN 1/2	Vote Received: BN: 67,543 (32%) PH: 82,105 (39%) PN: 59,830 (28%) Total: 167,104 (73% turnout) Party Won: BN 2/11, PH 9/11	Vote Received: BN: 19,434 (17%) PH: 79,366 (68%) PN: 17,967 (15%) Total: 104,503 (72% turnout) Party Won: PH 5/5

Source: Election Commission 2018, 2021, 2022.

Table 3 provides an alternative analytical perspective through the lens of ethnic majorities. In Malay-majority constituencies, BN’s dominance observed in GE14 declined substantially by the 2021 state election and further deteriorated in GE15. Although BN improved its performance in seats with over 70% Malay voters during the state election compared to GE14, it still experienced the steepest overall decline across all demographic categories. The most notable shift occurred in constituencies with 60%–69% Malay voters, where BN’s reduced support allowed PH to secure 9 out of 11 seats, mirroring its GE14 performance, while PN captured 7 out of 8 seats in constituencies with above 80% Malay majorities. PH successfully regained all Chinese-majority seats, replicating its GE14 results, reflecting the continuity of alignment established since GE12.

Polling Lane Analysis

Polling lane analysis offers valuable insights into alignment and dealignment in electoral behaviour. As noted by Khor (2015),⁸⁰ polling lanes are often segmented by age: lanes 1 and 2 typically comprise older voters, while lanes 3 and 4 include adult and younger voters. For this study, lanes 5 and above are designated as “youth lanes”. The dataset was analysed according to total voter turnout and classified

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into rural, semi-urban, and urban constituencies to assess geographic voting patterns.

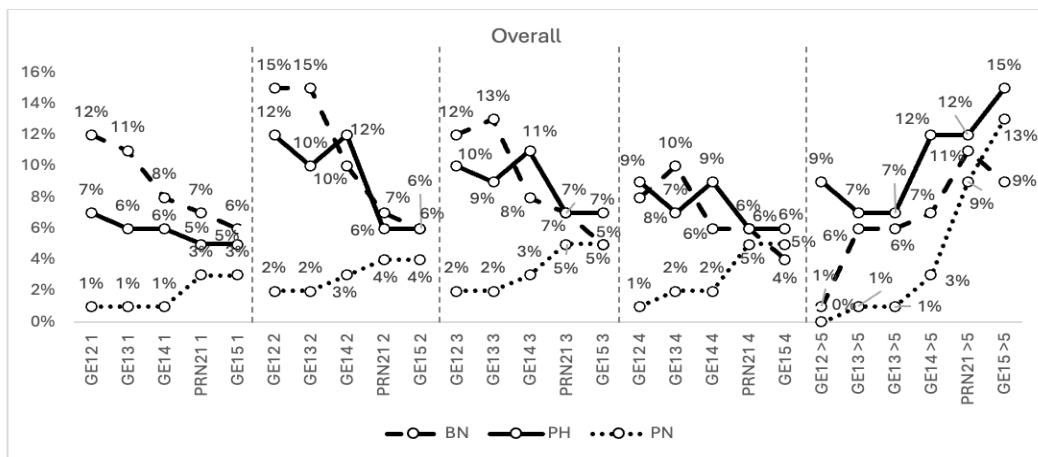


Figure 2: Overall results according to polling lanes.

Source: Election Commission 2018, 2021, 2022.

In the Malaysian context, UMNO’s traditional support base, often referred to as *pengundi putih* (white voters), has been historically strong in rural areas.^{81,82} This trend was evident from GE12 to GE14 but declined significantly by the GE15 state election. In the state election, BN won all six rural seats in the state election, primarily due to strong support from lanes 1 and 2. Notably, BN also received approximately 11% of votes from higher polling lanes (lanes 5 and above), indicating some appeal among newly registered and younger voters (Figure 2). However, BN’s support in these lanes was lower than PH and PN in GE15. Furthermore, in the state election and GE15, older voters (lanes 1 and 2) contributed around 12% of BN’s total vote share in rural areas, a significantly decline from 27% in GE12.

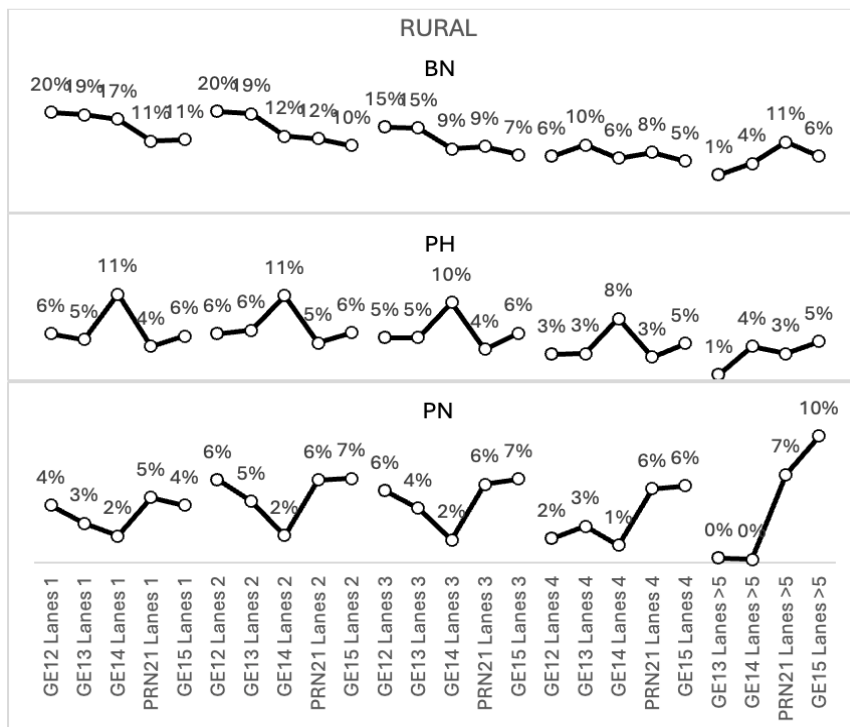


Figure 3: Polling Lane Results in Rural Seats GE12-GE15.

Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia 2008, 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022.

PH face challenges in increasing its vote share in rural constituencies, particularly across all the six seats. In the state election, the performance gap between PH and PN in these rural areas was highly differentiated with lower polling lanes. Both in the state election and GE15, PH registered a 2% increase in younger voters' support but lost significant support in lanes 2 to 3 from GE13 to GE15. In contrast, PN experienced a notable surge in youth-lane votes, rising from 7% in the state election to 10% in GE15 (Figure 3), indicating growing traction among younger rural voters. Interestingly, PN also gained 2% to 5% support from lower lanes (older voters), such as lanes 1 and 2.

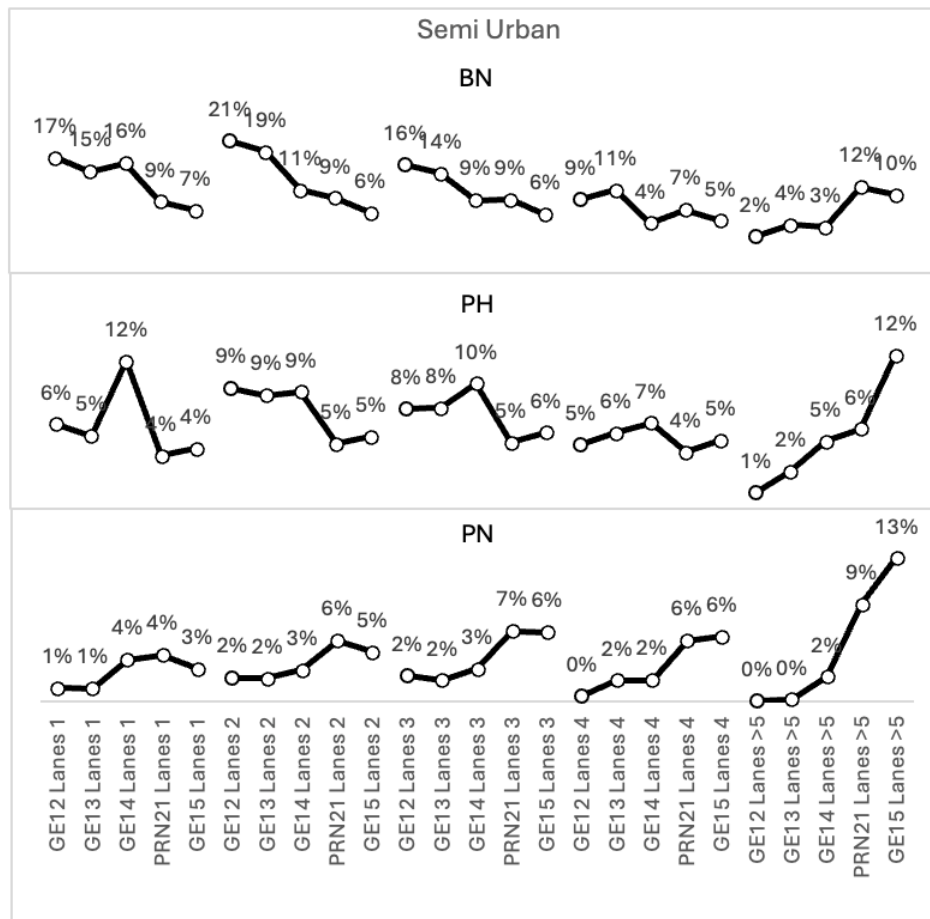


Figure 4: Polling Lane Results in Semi Urban Seats GE12-GE15
 Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia 2008, 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022.

Young voters in semi-urban constituencies also show similar decreasing trends for BN except in lanes >5 during the state election where it increased from 3% to 12%. Similar to rural voting trends, PN the highest younger voters where it received 13% vote, compared to UMNO's 10% and PH's 12% in GE15. PH performance in the GE15 showed significantly higher in higher lanes. It received notable dropped in lanes 1 and 2 from GE14 to the GE15.

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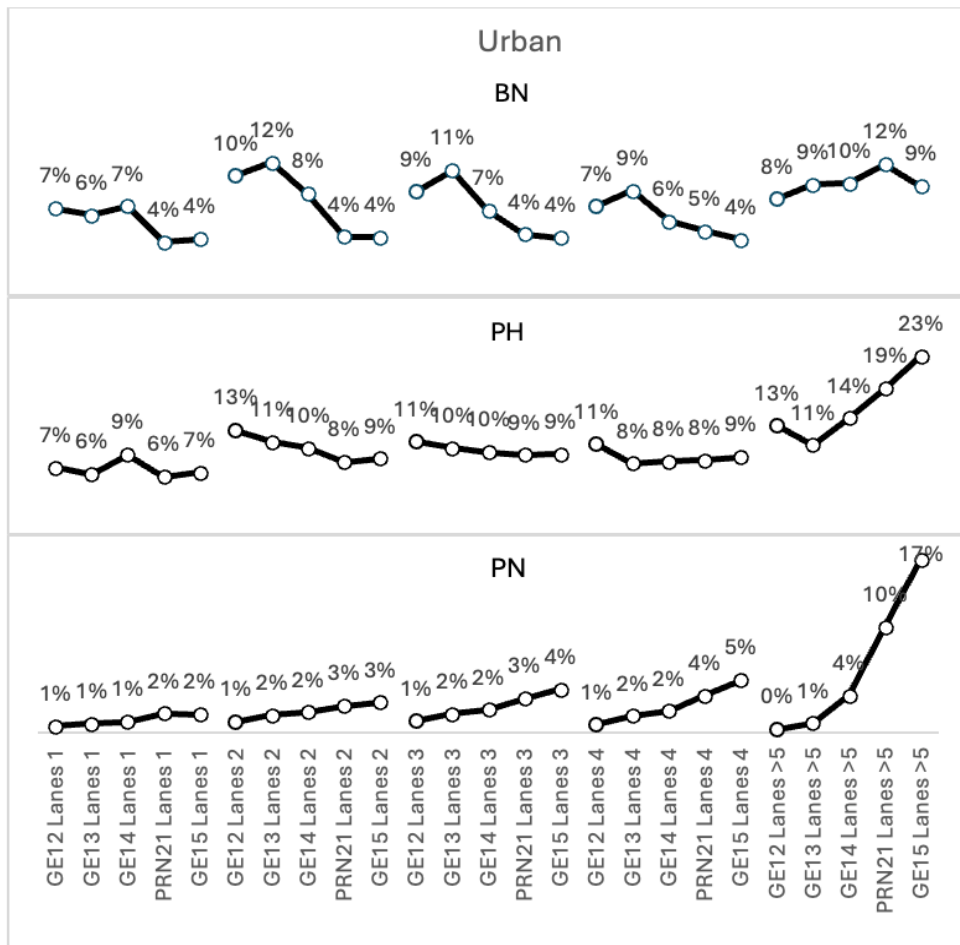


Figure 5: Polling lane results in urban seats.

Source: Election Commission 2008, 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022.

In urban constituencies, electoral competition among the three major coalitions was largely represented by Chinese-based parties: DAP (PH), MCA (BN), and Gerakan (PN), with the exceptions of BN in Pengkalan Batu and Amanah (PH) in Bukit Katil during the state election. While PH maintained dominance in all 10 out of 11 urban seats, its overall performance declined compared to GE14 and but nearly fully recovered in GE15. A marked decline in PH support was observed in polling lanes 1 to 3, which primarily consist of elderly and adult voters (Figure 5).

BN also experienced a decline in voter support across polling lanes 1 to 4 during the state election. Although support in lane 5 was typically younger voters, it showed a brief uptick, rising to 12%, it subsequently fell to 9% in GE15 (Figure 5). PN, drawing on its PAS voter base, recorded gradual increases across polling lanes since GE14 especially in lanes >5, but it's remained insufficient to challenge PH's urban dominance. BN secured five urban seats during the state election; however, lost four to PH and one to PN.

This shift aligns that highlight the demographic transition in urban areas, where the influx of Malay residents into formerly Chinese-majority constituencies is reshaping voting patterns.⁸³ Additionally, it is argues that the presence of lower-income Malays in urban centres, who rely on state assistance, contributes to residual support for BN in these areas.

Discussion

While variations in election outcomes can be attributed to differences in candidate profiles, campaign intensity, and party machinery, the data nonetheless reveal a significant shift. Historically, state and general election results held simultaneously exhibit a variance of approximately 7% due to three-cornered contests. However, this margin increased in GE15, as reflected in Table 3, reinforcing the argument that Malaysia’s electoral landscape is undergoing a substantive partisan realignment.

Table 3: The Average Different Percentage Parliament Vs. Dun Results (GE12-GE15)

Election	GE12	GE13	GE14	GE15
Average	4%	0%	7%	10%

Source: Election Commission. (2004). *Semakan keputusan pilihan raya* 2008, 2013, 2018, 2023.

The results suggest that a process of de-realignment occurred, particularly between GE14 and GE15. Although this trend had been visible since GE12, it reached its peak during GE14 when BN was defeated due to economic issues and corruption scandals (dealignment), combined with the rise of PH as a new political alternative (realignment). However, from GE14 to GE15, this de-realignment pattern weakened, especially among Malay voters. In GE15, majority of Malay voters appeared to reestablish their political choices based on core values and identity, choosing not to support BN or PH but instead PN.

The decline in voter turnout during the state election reflects political apathy and uncertainty linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly among less partisan voters. Historically, lower turnout tends to favour parties with strong organizational networks and loyal supporters. This was evident for UMNO, whose long-standing ties with its electorate ensured consistent backing. Polling lane data show that senior voters in lanes 1 and 2, representing older cohorts, provided the highest support for UMNO, especially in Malay-majority constituencies in state elections. GE15, however, revealed a different dynamic: turnout rose, yet UMNO failed to regain support, as many Malay voters shifted to PN, now seen as a credible Malay alternative. This shift marks a gradual partisan de-realignment among Malays, driven by generational change and shifting views of political legitimacy in the post-UMNO era. Voter turnout provides critical insight into the impact of partisan de-realignment on electoral outcomes, particularly in relation to voter age, underscoring the importance of polling lane analysis. Older voters tend to exhibit stronger partisan loyalty due to long-term alignment,⁸⁴ which historically benefited established parties such as BN and PAS. The lower turnout in the state election compared to GE15 suggests that the electorate was dominated by committed partisan voters, helping to explain the divergent results between the two contests. This phenomenon aligns with the assertion that older voters are capable of switching party loyalty, and that dealignment can occur even among well-established partisan groups.⁸⁵

The 2008 GE12 election marked the onset of a de-realignment among Malay voters away from both BN and PH. The shifting Malay voting patterns is arguably began before and continued after GE12, influenced by BN’s increasing allocation of ministry portfolios to non-Malays prior to the election, which generated dissatisfaction among Malay voters.⁸⁶ Conversely, after GE12, PH’s state government faced criticism from Malays over policies and statements perceived to undermine ethnoreligious and cultural interests. The contest for Malay votes intensified when PAS lost several Malay-majority seats to BN in GE13, prompting a strategic shift by PAS towards ethnic-religious conservatism, which created common ground with BN.⁸⁷ After the failure of Husam Musa’s “Road to Putrajaya” strategy, PAS returned to its Islamisation agenda, focusing on building a Muslim-only base party or coalition.⁸⁸ PAS’s modest seat decline from 23 in GE12 to 21 in GE13, was accompanied by

calls from the late PAS Dewan Ulama Chief Harun Taib to uphold Malay supremacy in the country.⁸⁹

Following GE14, the by-election results suggested that PH failed to fulfil Malay voters' expectations, particularly regarding the Malay-Islam position and socioeconomic concerns. This failure was exacerbated by ineffective communication and perceived insensitivity.^{90,91} Theoretically, this context encouraged de-realigned voters to return to BN, believing that the socioeconomic situation had deteriorated and that PH threatened their ethnocultural interests. Furthermore, the unmet electoral promises deepened ethnoreligious divisions among the electorate.⁹² These observations align with partisan de-realignment thesis, which posits that a party's failure to resolve key policy issues and to align with voters' ideological preferences directly influences electoral outcomes and voter loyalty.⁹³

Polling lane analysis highlights younger voters as a pivotal factor in determining electoral outcomes. This raises critical questions regarding the motivations behind youth voting behaviour. A recent study suggests that Malaysian youth voters display increased evaluative objectivity, with a preference for high-integrity candidates and support for national-level parties.⁹⁴ Given that partisan identification typically develops over time through socialization,⁹⁵ it remains uncertain whether younger voters base their decisions on inherited ethnic-based party loyalties or on rational evaluations of government performance. However, alignment among Malay youth in several majority seats plausibly be influenced by PN's campaign strategies and messaging during Muhyiddin's tenure as prime minister. The "critical times" of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with government initiatives and media exposure, likely fostered new political alignments among young Malays, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where PN outperformed PH and BN (Figures 3 and 4).

Conclusion

In Malaysia, the concept of partisanship remains a crucial framework for understanding voting behaviour and electoral change. While it was initially assumed that the partisan de-realignment observed during GE14 would be temporary, leading to a rebound of BN support among voters in polling lanes 1 and 2, the polling lane analysis offers a contrasting perspective. BN's performance in these lanes has steadily declined from GE12 through to GE15. The failure to meet voter expectations following GE14, driven by de-realignment away from UMNO, has fundamentally contributed to uncertainty in Malaysia's political coalitions. Unlike the earlier opposition coalition dynamics exemplified by Semangat 46 in the 1990 GE, the current tripartite coalition system has fragmented the electorate, particularly among Malay voters.

Although the 2021 Melaka snap state election does not perfectly mirror broader voting patterns, it provides a valuable lens to examine the electoral shifts evident in GE15. BN's electoral strength in Melaka remains anchored in rural constituencies and its loyal voter base, reflecting longstanding ethnic voting narratives. Meanwhile, PN has emerged as the principal alternative for Malay voters, positioning itself as the defender of Malay special rights, Islamic values, and socio-economic welfare, a strategy that proved successful in GE15. Early political engagement has facilitated the alignment of rural youth voters with both BN and PN, posing a significant challenge to PH in future elections. The introduction of undi18 and automatic voter registration has expanded the youth electorate, making them a critical voting bloc. Since GE12, Melaka's electorate has demonstrated a departure from traditional partisan loyalties towards alternative parties, indicating a reduction in partisan intensity and the emergence of partisan realignment driven by social cleavage demands.

Nevertheless, analysis on partisan de-realignment in Melaka can be improved by exploring the voting behaviour preference through sentiment surveys or interviews. Further improvement could be achieved by conducting in-depth comparative analyses with patterns observed in other states as well as it can also be improved through in-depth comparisons of the patterns with other states.

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