

How was General Election 15 Framed in Malaysian Media: Exploring the Role of Framing and Political Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The 15th General Election (GE15) marked a critical moment in Malaysia's political landscape, with mass media playing an important role in shaping electoral discourse. This study examines how selected Malaysian mainstream and independent media outlets framed key political issues during GE15, with a particular attention to corruption, governance, youth participation, and coalition politics. Using qualitative content analysis methodology, this research examines 11 purposively selected news articles published during the election period and the immediate post-election phase to capture key framing moments. By comparing these different types of media, the study shows the different viewpoints through which voters received political information. The findings suggest tendencies in framing practices rather than generalizable patterns. Comparatively, mainstream media outlets tended to emphasize themes related to political stability, continuity, and leadership competence, which aligned with established political narratives, while independent media more frequently highlighted accountability, governance failures, and necessity political change in portraying GE15. Youth participation, amplified by the implementation of the Undi18 amendments, was commonly framed as a transformative electoral force. However, these narratives often lacked detailed discussion. Furthermore, post-election reporting reflected uncertainties surrounding coalition-building and democratic governance in a divided political environment. In conclusion, this study contributes exploratory insights into how media ownership and editorial orientation may shape strategic political narratives during elections, while acknowledging the limitations of a small qualitative sample size.

Keywords: *Alternative media, election, GE15, mainstream media, politics.*

INTRODUCTION

The 15th General Election (GE15) marked an important turning point in Malaysia's political history, resulting in a hung parliament situation and public debate surrounding governance, corruption, leadership, and political reform. During this period, mass media play a crucial role in shaping how political events are interpreted by the public through processes of selection, emphasis, and narrative construction (Entman, 1993). Other than just reporting electoral outcomes, news media also structure political meaning by prioritising certain issues and perspectives while excluding others. Although digital platforms and social media have become increasingly influential in politics, news media remain key agenda-setters during general elections, especially through ongoing coverage, editorial framing, and narrative continuity

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(McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Zulkifli et al., 2024). In this context, the role of news media is especially significant due to the country's diverse media system and long-standing links between media ownership and political power (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Md Subre et al., 2023). According to Yong et al. (2024) and Yong et al. (2024), mainstream media outlets tend to emphasise narratives of political stability and leadership competence, whereas independent media are more likely to adopt critical perspectives highlighting accountability, reform, and citizen participation.

Existing research on the 15th General Election (GE15) has expanded rapidly, with many studies focusing on voter behaviour, campaign strategies, social media usage, and online political mobilisation (Kah Wei, 2024; Liang & Tiung, 2024). However, less attention has been given to how political narratives are constructed within news articles themselves, particularly in relation to differences in media ownership models. While previous research has studied the presence of various election-related themes, fewer studies have systematically examined how these themes are framed and assembled into political narratives across mainstream and independent news outlets.

Political narratives also play a role in elections by organising political events, individuals, and issues into storylines that guide public understanding (Rzyska, 2023). These narratives are linked to media framing, as frames act as the building blocks through which narratives are constructed and sustained (Entman, 1993; Zaklama, 2025). In election reporting, mainstream media are often associated with close political affiliation (Rosli & Sani, 2021) and focus on stability-oriented narratives that legitimize existing power structures. While independent media, on the other hand, tend to promote alternative narratives, for example, accountability or reform narratives that challenge dominant interpretations (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Yong et al., 2024). Among the independent media operating with critical perspectives are Malaysiakini, the Malaysian Insider, and Malaysia Today that put mainstream media under the close scrutiny of the public (Ghazali et al., 2019).

Within this political climate, it is the aim of this paper to explore how Malaysian news media framed GE15 using framing theory and political narratives. This study is relevant considering that many of the existing studies on media coverage of GE15 focus on campaign strategies, voter behavior, social media usage, or platform-specific analyses, such as TikTok. Less attention has been given to how political narratives and framing differ across media ownership, especially between mainstream and independent news outlets. Additionally, while existing research has documented the prevalence of election-related themes, fewer studies have closely examined how these themes are narratively constructed, emphasized, or downplayed within selected news texts. Given Malaysia's diverse and politically influenced media ecosystem, this gap is important to address. Understanding how framing and political narratives operate across different media types offers insight into how electoral meanings are shaped.

This study, therefore, addresses this gap by using an exploratory qualitative approach on 11 news articles related to GE15 published during the official election period and the immediate post-election phase in November 2022. The articles were drawn from four Malaysian news agencies representing mainstream and independent media. While the sample size may be relatively small in identifying broader framing tendencies, the analysis is vital to qualitatively unveil how different news outlets defined key political issues, attributed responsibility to political individuals, and promoted specific interpretations of leadership, accountability, and political change during GE15. Notably, by comparing media outlets with different ownership models, the

study seeks to illustrate how ownership may shape the construction of political narratives in relation to stability-oriented narratives in mainstream media and accountability-oriented narratives in independent media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Framing and Political Communication

Framing theory is a key concept in understanding how the media influence public opinion about politics. Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) remains one of the most important works on this topic, arguing that news content is shaped by ownership interests and the power structures that support them. According to their propaganda model, the media do not simply report facts neutrally but frame issues in ways that often protect political and corporate elites. This theory remains highly relevant today, especially in contexts like Malaysia, where political and media interests often overlap.

Zaklama (2025) explains that framing means highlighting certain parts of reality while ignoring others, which guides how audiences understand and discuss an issue. Framing is not only about what is said, but also about what is left out. This selectivity can shape public understanding of elections by focusing attention on topics like leadership trust, party stability, or economic progress, while downplaying corruption or policy failures that might harm powerful actors.

Zulkifli et al. (2024) emphasize that language choice, tone, and even visual elements like headlines and photos are powerful framing tools. As suggested by Ghazali et al. (2022), framing in the form of words, images, phrases, and videos is used to convey messages and information. Headlines can be written in ways that make an issue look more dramatic or urgent, which helps capture readers' attention and attract clicks (Zulkifli et al., 2024). However, this can sometimes limit public debate by oversimplifying complex policy matters. For example, Malaysian mainstream media have often used headlines to focus on sensational conflicts or controversies between candidates rather than offering in-depth discussion of economic or governance issues (Md Subre et al., 2023).

Globally, similar patterns have been observed in other countries where state-aligned or elite-owned media shape electoral narratives through selective framing. For instance, Rzyaska (2023) discusses how framing is also used in education and policy debates, showing its broad relevance in controlling public discourse. In Malaysia, this dynamic is especially significant during general elections when control over the narrative can directly influence voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

The role of framing is not limited to text alone. Visual framing, such as the use of specific images, video clips, or layout, also affects how stories are received (Yong et al., 2024). For example, photos that show leaders surrounded by crowds or youth voters at rallies can amplify frames of popularity and trust, while unflattering images can weaken a candidate's public image. Yong et al. (2025) show that visual choices during GE15 were carefully aligned with broader narratives about stability, unity, or calls for reform.

Framing research has also highlighted that audiences do not always passively accept frames but can interpret, challenge, or reshape them through discussions, especially online (Zaklama, 2025). This aspect has become increasingly relevant as the public gains access to

diverse news sources and interactive platforms. However, the power of mainstream narratives still strongly shapes what issues get attention and how they are talked about in public debate.

Mainstream Media and Ownership Influence

Mainstream media ownership has long shaped how political news is produced and presented in Malaysia. Yong et al. (2024, 2025) show that major outlets such as The Star and Berita Harian often align their election coverage with the interests of ruling coalitions and the business groups connected to them. Liang and Tiung (2024) highlight that during GE15, The Star consistently used language and frames that supported stability and continuity, while *Free Malaysia Today* presented more diverse views. This pattern reflects Zaklama's (2025) idea of 'supportive' or 'protective' frames, which highlight positive traits of ruling leaders and downplay competing voices or controversies.

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) book *Manufacturing Consent* explains that media ownership structures and close ties to powerful stakeholders limit the press's freedom to challenge dominant interests. In Malaysia, laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) have long given the government tools to control publishing licenses, shaping editorial choices and encouraging self-censorship (Md Subre et al., 2023). Ng (2024) adds that framing in mainstream news can directly influence how first-time voters understand politics and form opinions about trust and leadership.

During previous elections, the mainstream press often emphasised ruling party strengths while framing the opposition as disorganised or risky (Yong et al., 2024, 2025). In GE15, similar trends continued. Liang and Tiung (2024) and Kah Wei (2024) both found that The Star focused its stories on party unity, economic promises, and strong leadership traits. Meanwhile, more critical topics such as corruption allegations or internal conflicts were often pushed aside or softened to protect the image of ruling coalitions.

Despite the growth of social media, mainstream outlets still hold a strong influence, especially among older voters and rural communities who rely heavily on traditional news brands for trusted information (Mamat et al., 2022). However, Azwar and Kho (2022) show that young Malaysians increasingly turn to platforms like Twitter to look for alternative information and viewpoints when they feel mainstream coverage is too narrow.

Taib and Vivian (2024) point out that passive resistance and distrust of mainstream political narratives have grown, especially among young and first-time voters who seek more independent sources. Md Subre et al. (2023) also show that new platforms like TikTok played an active role in shaping young voters' perceptions during GE15, competing with traditional framing by mainstream outlets. Instagram and Facebook also contributed to the personalised campaign of politicians by focusing on individual politicians to influence voters, leading up to GE14 (Ghazali et al., 2019).

These findings confirm that while mainstream media still shape dominant narratives through ownership ties and editorial control, alternative and digital channels are slowly challenging this monopoly. This study builds on these insights by comparing how different ownership models influenced news frames during GE15 and how these frames shaped voter understanding.

The Rise of Independent Media

In recent years, Malaysia's media landscape has shifted with the steady growth of independent and digital news platforms. Outlets like MalaysiaKini and Malay Mail have become important spaces for critical reporting that challenge the dominance of mainstream media (Yong et al., 2024, 2025). These independent outlets are known for using responsibility and morality frames to highlight corruption, governance failures, and political accountability as systemic issues rather than isolated scandals.

Recent limited studies also show how digital-first platforms have become trusted sources for young and first-time voters. Ng (2024) found that first-time voters often rely on independent news sites to verify claims made by mainstream outlets or politicians. This trust is partly driven by the perception that independent platforms have fewer ownership ties to ruling coalitions and are more willing to challenge official narratives.

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Md Subre et al. (2023) highlight that digital platforms like TikTok have become a powerful extension of independent reporting. Many independent journalists and citizen creators use TikTok to break down news stories, share commentary, and counter biased mainstream frames in ways that attract younger voters. This overlaps with the trend of 'edutainment', where information and entertainment are blended to make political content more shareable (Anuar et al., 2025).

Azwar and Kho (2022) also found that young Malaysians increasingly turn to social media and independent sites to actively search for political information, showing that audience trust in legacy media is no longer guaranteed. Mamat et al. (2022) similarly note that while mass media remain a key source for older demographics and students, young voters now balance that with digital channels to form their own views.

Political Narratives and Media Framing.

Political narratives are storylines through which political events, actors, and issues are organised and presented to readers in a particular way. Instead of reporting isolated facts, political narratives link causes, consequences, moral judgments, and solutions that shape how audiences interpret political situations (Entman, 1993; Rzycka, 2023). In election contexts, narratives usually revolve around themes such as stability, reform, accountability or corruption, providing audiences with simplified interpretive frameworks for complex political processes.

Media framing and political narratives are closely connected. Framing involves the selection and emphasis of certain issues while excluding others. Political narratives combine these frames into broader, structured storylines that guide public understanding (Entman, 1993; Zaklama, 2025). Frames operate as the building blocks of narratives by determining which individuals are portrayed as responsible and which issues are prioritised.

In the context of general elections, media narratives are powerful because they help define what is at stake and how voters should interpret political competition. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model highlights how media ownership and organization's policies shape dominant narratives that tend to protect political and economic elites. According to Yong et al. (2024, 2025), mainstream media often promote narratives of stability and continuity that legitimise existing power structures, while independent media are more likely to promote alternative narratives (stories) that focus on accountability, reform, and critique. Analysing political narratives helps explain how mainstream and independent outlets constructed divergent interpretations of leadership, corruption, youth participation, and coalition politics, which are important in shaping public discourse during a highly contested electoral period.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used media framing theory to examine how Malaysian media constructed meanings around the 15th General Election (GE15). This theoretical perspective provides analytical tools for understanding how media outlets select, emphasise, and organise political information in ways that shape public interpretation of electoral events.

Media framing theory explains how media outlets influence audience understanding by selecting certain issues and making them more important in news reporting (Entman, 1993). Framing involves defining problems, identifying causes and making judgments. Through framing, the media report political events and structure how these events are interpreted. In election coverage, framing plays an important role in shaping voters' perceptions of political individuals and issues. Frames can emphasise leadership competence, political stability, reform, or conflict (Zaklama, 2025). In the Malaysian context, framing has been shown to operate through headlines, tone, word choice, and visual elements, and all these tend to guide audience attention and interpretation (Zulkifli et al., 2024; Ghazali et al., 2022).

Framing is also linked to ownership in media houses. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) Manufacturing Consent model argues that media ownership, advertising dependence, and political affiliations control reporting practices, resulting in frames that tend to protect elite interests. This perspective is relevant in Malaysia, where mainstream media outlets have historically maintained close ties with political and economic elites, influencing how electoral issues are presented (Md Subre et al., 2023; Yong et al., 2024). As opposed to this, independent media are often linked with the construction of alternative political narratives, for example, accountability or reform narratives, which challenge the stability-oriented narratives that are usually promoted by mainstream media.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, exploratory content analysis in order to examine how selected Malaysian media outlets framed political narratives during GE15. Qualitative content analysis is suitable for examining media framing and political narratives, as frames and narratives are not usually obviously stated, but to really study the patterns of languages, thematic emphasis and texts.

A total of 11 news articles were examined from four Malaysian news outlets representing different media ownership. The Star and The Edge Malaysia were selected representing the mainstream media, while the other two were independent media, MalaysiaKini and Malay Mail.

This comparative design allows for an exploratory analysis of how framing and political narratives differ across media types during GE15.

Since framing and political narratives are not directly observable, the aforementioned theoretical concepts were put into analytical categories. These categories make it possible to identify how frames and narratives are constructed within the articles and how they differ across these media outlets (Esaiasson et al., 2017).

Material

The material is a set of 11 English-language news articles published during the GE15 period in 2022. The unit of analysis is the entire news article, including headlines, leads, and main body text. Articles were selected from four Malaysian news outlets, namely The Star, The Edge Malaysia, MalaysiaKini, and Malay Mail. These outlets were chosen due to their prominence in Malaysia's media landscape and differing ownership structures, as well as editorial preferences. These criteria would allow for different perspectives to be uncovered across the political spectrum, while identifying similarities in the way news was covered (Liang & Tiung, 2024).

Articles were also selected because of their relevance to GE15 and their detailed discussion of electoral issues such as leadership, governance, corruption, youth participation, and coalition politics. While the sample size is limited, it is appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study focusing on framing analysis.

Data Collection

The articles were collected through purposive sampling and were published during the election period and the immediate post-election phase to capture key framing moments. No attempt was made to assess political bias quantitatively. However, differences in framing are interpreted in relation to media ownership and editorial positioning, as discussed in the theoretical framework.

All selected articles met predefined inclusion criteria. Articles were included if they focused substantively on GE15 rather than mentioning it in passing, exceeded 500 words to allow for in-depth framing analysis and addressed at least one core electoral issue such as governance, corruption, leadership, youth participation, or coalition politics. Even though the articles varied in reporting style, all contained enough narrative structure and thematic emphasis to allow identification of framing patterns. Differences in tone and presentation are treated as part of the analytical findings.

Despite variation of journalistic style and editorial tone, all articles met the methodological requirements for framing analysis because each article contained clear narrative structures, identifiable themes, and evaluative language that qualify for the identification of dominant frames. This material was suitable for qualitative framing analysis, as frames are typically embedded in narrative emphasis. (Entman, 1993; Esaiasson et al., 2017). This is consistent with Entman's (1993) argument that frames are often embedded implicitly within narrative emphasis.

Data Analysis Process

The analysis was conducted in stages, using thematic identification, in which key themes were identified through an initial reading of the articles. Themes such as corruption, governance and

youth participation were noted as recurring and central to the coverage of GE15. Next, language and narrative construction where the language and tone used in the articles were analyzed to understand how media outlets framed their narratives. Frames were also identified deductively, based on framing theory, with a focus on problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation (Entman, 1993).

Methodological Limitations

This paper is limited in its small sample size and English news stories. The analysis highlights framing tendencies within the selected articles, but it does not claim to represent all Malaysian media coverage of GE15. Therefore, future research could expand the dataset and include multilingual news.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability in this study is conveyed by explaining how the data were selected and analysed. The inclusion criteria for the news articles are stated explicitly, and the same analytical approach was applied to all articles. Key concepts such as media framing and political narratives are defined in advance and applied consistently throughout the analysis, which helps reduce subjective interpretation and enables replication of the study (Esaiaasson et al., 2017). An audit trail was also maintained and discussed with a co-researcher to confirm findings were based on systematic data interpretation rather than human biases.

Next, validity is ensured by maintaining a close connection between the theoretical framework and the analytical categories used in the study. The framing categories and narrative themes are obtained from established theory, ensuring that the analysis examines what it intends to study (Entman, 1993). It is important to note that the findings of this research are not meant to be generalised, but rather to provide exploratory insights into how selected Malaysian media outlets framed GE15.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the qualitative content analysis of 11 selected Malaysian news articles reporting on the 15th General Election (GE15). The aim was to understand how mass media framed political narratives, shaped public discourse on key issues, and addressed the electoral process, especially in a media environment increasingly shaped by social media. The analysis focused on identifying framing moves in headlines, news leads, and language patterns within the articles. Attention was given to how political individuals were described, which issues were prioritized, and how responsibility and evaluation were assigned. Frames were identified through repeated reading of the texts, instead of through automated software.

Dominant Frames and Narrative Techniques

According to Entman's (1993) framing approach, this analysis examines how news articles defined key political issues, attributed responsibility, and promoted particular interpretations of GE15 outcomes. It focuses on framing tools such as headlines, news leads, choice of language, and individuals' representation in order to identify dominant political narratives in mainstream and independent media.

In mainstream media coverage, leadership was framed through an emphasis on continuity and political stability. This framing can usually be seen in headlines and opening paragraphs that foreground coalition negotiations, governance experience, and the need for orderly transition. However, independent media framed leadership through an accountability-oriented narrative by prioritising evaluative language related to integrity, reform, and political responsibility, particularly when discussing corruption allegations and leadership credibility.

In The Star news, leadership was framed as a stabilizing force through repeated emphasis on experience, continuity, and economic management. For instance, the headline “*Surveys: Barisan has edge in GE15*” (Rahimy, 2022) defines the election as a contest best resolved through proven leadership. The article attributes responsibility for national stability to the ruling coalition while downplaying systemic governance issues, reflecting what Entman (1993) describes as problem definition and causal interpretation within framing.

A common narrative technique was to highlight leadership qualities. For example, articles about Ismail Sabri often presented him as a reliable and steady caretaker (Zainul & Chester, 2022). This suggests neutral or positive words, and rarely mentioned issues like corruption or party conflicts unless these were blamed on other parties. On the other hand, independent outlets such as MalaysiaKini and Malay Mail focused more on uncertainty and the possibility of political change. They framed GE15 as a historic chance for voters to end old political habits (Over 85pct of postal ballots returned in GE15, 2023; Ong, 2022). These reports often used questioning and critical language. For example, they described the election as ‘peculiar’ or ‘fragmented’ (Ong, 2022) and discussed how young first-time voters could play a key role.

The findings also show that headlines and opening paragraphs in both mainstream and independent news often use dramatic or sensational elements to attract readers. This supports Zulkifli et al. (2024) ’s point that editorial choices, like tone and headline style, strongly shape how audiences see political news. For example, The Star often covered clashes between parties or strong statements by politicians, such as ‘TikTok took down 1,126 provocative videos after GE15’ (Junaid, 2022). Even though this style helped draw attention, it sometimes left less room for detailed reporting on policy issues.

Thematic Focus on Key Election Issues

The analysis found that news coverage across all outlets focused on a few main issues: corruption, governance, youth participation, and coalition building.

a. Corruption and Governance:

Mainstream newspapers suggest a tendency towards corruption as single cases linked to certain politicians, rather than as a bigger problem within the system. In contrast, independent media described corruption as part of a wider governance failure. Yong et al.’s (2025) found that independent outlets often use responsibility and morality frames to explain corruption in a broader context. Corruption was framed differently depending on media ownership. In mainstream media, corruption-related issues are often contextualised within broader institutional processes, reducing emphasis on individual responsibility. But independent media framed corruption as a central moral and political problem by explicitly attributing responsibility to political actors and linking corruption narratives to demands for reform and transparency.

b. Youth Participation:

The topics of Undi18 and Automatic Voter Registration (AVR), within the limited sample, were covered as big changes for Malaysia’s voting population. Many headlines and images showed young voters as a force for change, but sometimes the coverage only focused on voter numbers without deeper discussion about what young people actually want from policies. This supports Anuar et al. (2025)'s point that youth engagement now largely depends on digital strategies that blend information and entertainment, often called ‘edutainment’.

Youth participation was framed differently in media outlets. Mainstream media tend to portray youth engagement as symbolic of democratic enthusiasm. On the other hand, independent media framed youth as political agents demanding accountability and systemic reform.

c. Coalition Dynamics:

The issue of forming a coalition government and the risk of a ‘hung parliament’ came up often in the news. The Edge Malaysia and Commonwealth Roundtable highlighted the political risks and the need for stable agreements between parties (Wong, 2023). Independent outlets used this topic to question how elite leaders make deals behind closed doors and the lack of open, clear power-sharing processes.

Divergence Between Mainstream and Independent Outlets

Comparing coverage side by side shows clear editorial contrasts. As shown in Table 1, The Star focused on the practical impact of social media, highlighting the removal of provocative TikTok videos (Junaid, 2022). MalaysiaKini, meanwhile, ran stories on how postal ballots and new voter groups could shift power balances (Over 85pct of postal ballots returned in GE15, 2023). This divergence supports Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) assertion in *Manufacturing Consent* that media ownership can systematically influence what gets published and how it is framed. Outlets linked to established business or political interests tended to downplay systemic criticisms that might threaten those interests.

Table 1: Comparison of framing patterns between mainstream and independent outlets

Aspect	Mainstream Outlets (The Star, The Edge Malaysia)	Independent Outlets (MalaysiaKini, Malay Mail)
Tone	Neutral to positive for ruling parties	Critical, investigative
Frames	Stability, economic management, continuity	Accountability, moral responsibility, youth power
Issue Focus	Leadership qualities, unity messages	Corruption as systemic, youth as agents of change
Social media	Warnings about fake news and provocative content	Analysis of social media as a tool for activism

Interplay Between Mass Media and Social Media

A special feature of GE15 was how news stories did not stay only in newspapers or on TV but spread widely through social media. Wahab and Abdullah (2025) show that Bernama’s Twitter account used the same frames of national unity and stability that appeared in its printed news,

showing that official news outlets adjust their messages for digital platforms too. At the same time, many articles explained how platforms like TikTok became another arena for controlling what voters see and believe. Politicians and parties used short videos and popular hashtags to skip traditional news filters and reach young voters directly with fun and eye-catching content (Anuar et al., 2025; Junaid, 2022). However, some news reports also warned about the danger of fake news spreading online. For example, Shah and Iskandar (2022) reminded people to be careful about believing everything they see during the election period.

This shows that mass media and social media worked together but in different ways. While mainstream news used familiar framing styles, social media helped spread messages faster and let people share and comment easily. This mix made some frames stronger but pushed others aside. It also showed that voters need good media skills and fact-checking habits to deal with so much information. Overall, these findings suggest that media ownership plays a significant role in shaping political narratives during GE15, with mainstream media favouring stability-oriented frames and independent media advancing alternative narratives centred on accountability and reform.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Malaysian news agencies played a significant role in shaping how voters understood key issues during the 15th General Election (GE15). By using consistent framing strategies, narrative techniques, and cross-platform amplification, both mainstream and independent media influenced public opinion in different ways.

Mainstream outlets such as The Star and The Edge Malaysia favored frames of stability and continuity, aligning their coverage with the interests of ruling coalitions and their own ownership structures. Headlines, language, and visuals often worked together to promote an image of steady leadership while downplaying sensitive topics like systemic corruption. This reflects the patterns described by Herman and Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent model, which explains how media owned by powerful interests tend to protect those interests through careful framing.

In contrast, independent platforms like MalaysiaKini and Malay Mail offered frames that highlighted uncertainty, change, and accountability. They were more likely to present corruption as a wider governance issue and to frame youth participation as a sign of political renewal. These findings support Yong et al. (2024, 2025), who show that independent media use more critical and morality-driven frames to challenge dominant narratives.

Another important insight is the thematic focus on issues like corruption, youth voting, and coalition-building. While all outlets reported on these topics, their depth and framing differed. Mainstream news kept the discussion factual but narrow, whereas independent outlets added more context and critique, especially when covering coalition deals and elite negotiations (Wong, 2023). Youth participation was another clear example of this divide: while Undi18 and AVR were widely reported, independent sources pushed the conversation further by questioning whether young voters' policy interests were truly addressed.

Finally, the interplay between mass media and social media shaped how quickly and widely these frames spread. Traditional news content was shared on platforms like Twitter, where official agencies like Bernama adapted their unity and stability frames for digital feeds

(Wahab & Abdullah, 2025). Meanwhile, TikTok and other social media spaces gave political actors new ways to reach young voters directly through short videos and trending content (Anuar et al., 2025). This blend of 'edutainment' and direct outreach created new challenges, including the spread of misinformation (Shah & Iskandar, 2022), reinforcing the need for better media literacy and fact-checking skills among voters.

These findings demonstrate that Malaysia's media landscape is changing but still shaped by long-standing structural influences. Mainstream media continue to serve elite interests, while independent and digital channels provide alternative spaces for debate and participation. The coexistence of these narratives means that voters are exposed to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, versions of the same election events.

Limitation and Recommendations

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size of 11 articles and its focus on English-language coverage from selected Malaysian media outlets. As a result, the findings may not fully illustrate the breadth of media narratives across different languages and contexts. Therefore, future studies should account for analysing more articles, covering diverse languages, and comparing different election periods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the media shape political narratives over time. Additionally, it is also recommended that educators and policymakers promote stronger media literacy skills, so voters can critically evaluate political information they see online or in the news. Journalists should continue to give fair and balanced election coverage to help the public make informed choices in the upcoming election.

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