

Voter's Acceptance and Preferences of Candidates in Sarawak Election 2016: A Case Study of Jemoreng and Daro Constituencies

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Abstract: The Sarawak Election 2016 saw a rare practice where active and performing incumbents of Jemoreng and Daro were denied candidatures in the National Front team to contest the election. This study aims at investigating acceptance of voters on new candidates, their perception on the incumbents, and identifying their preferences of ideal candidates. The instruments for primary data collection are structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed and forty semi structured interviews were conducted. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. The Cronbach's Alpha levels for the overall constructs range from 0.7108 to 0.9029 proved that the scores obtained from the instruments were reliable. The acceptable and preferred candidates were perceived by voters, among others as people-friendly, high morale, easily available or being seen, concerned for people, experienced, and highly able to bring *vox populi* to the government. The voter's perceptions on the incumbents are positive, and still winnable. The incumbents has demonstrated incontestable demeanor putting self-interest aside, party politics first, and share common values of professionalism, and team spirit for the *amor patriae* of Sarawak, *Land of the Hornbills*.

1 INTRODUCTION

An election is a crucial moment in the life of democracies. It is a political process to determine the ruling government and provide the opportunity for the people to select the best candidates to the office in the legislative assemblies, and eventually to run the government. Elections in Malaysia are held at two levels; the federal level and the state level. The federal level is the parliamentary election to choose federal representatives for the Dewan Rakyat or Lower House of Parliament. The state election enables the people to choose representatives in the State Legislative Assembly. There is no election at the local government level.

The parliamentary elections and the state elections in Malaysia, except for Sarawak run concurrently in every five years. Sarawak is enjoying the political privilege of a separate election at the state level that no other states in Malaysia ever do. The ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional, abbreviated as BN) candidates were contesting in all

the 82 seats, of which eleven (11) are new constituencies with new faces representing the BN.

In liberal democracies, access to power is gained by winning elections (Louw, 2010). Politicians and political parties went entirely out to influence, convince or even induce voters to support and vote for them. Politicians even focus on their image, identity, personality, and capabilities to garner support. Money and other incentives like the announcement of projects or programs to benefit the people are also common baits to lure voters. According to Gramsci, in order to retain power, hegemony or dominant political supremacy has to be built (Gramsci, 1971). In the process, the people need to naturally accept the dominant group's leadership, moral codes, and practices. In Malaysia, discourses or even sermons and talks in mosques or other places of worship are typical strategies for campaigning. The official and mainstream media helps build consent, legitimacy, and spread support for the dominant BN. Elections in Malaysia and the Sarawak Election 2016 were not discharged entirely from this style or mode of the election campaign.

1.1 Problem Statement

Problem Statement The usual candidacy practice by BN was allowing incumbents who are active, fit and winnable to stay re-nominated to be contested in the election. The Sarawak Election 2016 saw an unusual shift in this pattern of behavior by removing incumbents and planting new candidates for the coalition. This sudden practice can be unsafe or hazardous and may lead to unpopular votes. In quintessence, the Jemoreng and Daro constituencies are considered safe with the incumbents. While election campaigns have great influence and impact on the election results, the voter's acceptance of the new candidates and voter's perception on the incumbents are crucial for winning the election, requiring in-depth empirical investigations.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study is primarily to find out the people's acceptance on new BN candidates during the campaigning period from 25th April, after the nomination process until 6th May, 2016, before polling on 7th May, 2016. The specific objectives on candidacy issues were to investigate the level of voter's acceptance on the new BN candidates, to seek voter's perception on the incumbents, and to identify the voter's preferences of their candidates.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Politics is a decision-making process and the struggle to gain access to decision-making positions and resources that could be used to further one's interests (Louw, 2010). The recently dissolved government must be seen strong and effective to reflect the continuous capability to rule the state and to win the mandate of the people.

2.1 Ethno-political Landscape

Generally, the Sarawak political landscape shows the diverse demographic ethnicity sharing political power in an alliance of the ruling coalition in the national front (BN) as against the very vocal but powerless oppositions. Sarawak has a headcount of 2.6 million people, making up 9% of Malaysia's population.

Compared to its Peninsular counterpart, Sarawak is very diverse comprising over 40 sub-ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, culture and lifestyle. These various ethnicities are broadly

categorised into 6 groups which are Iban (30%), Malay (24%), Chinese (24%), Bidayuh (8%), Orang Ulu (7%) and Melanau (5%). Apart from the Malays and Chinese, the other mentioned ethnic groups are indigenous people who are also categorized as *Bumiputeras*.

The unique acronym *Perpaduan dalam Kepelbagaian* or translated 'unity in diversity' is indeed the undisputed formula for the ruling government's hegemony. The local native ethnic groups are mostly members of *Bersatu Pesaka Bumiputera* (PBB), *Parti Rakyat Sarawak* (PRS), and Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). The United People's Party (UPP) and Sarawak National Party (SNAP) are multi-racial entities, while Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) although multi-racial is entirely Chinese-based. Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDS Baru) and Parti Tenaga Rakyat Sarawak (TERAS) are entirely Dayak-based political parties.

2.2 The Ruling Coalition

The local BN component parties officially consist of PBB, SUPP, PRS, and SPDP which are all local-based political parties. UPP and TERAS which are splinters from SUPP and SPDP are not in the coalition, but BN-friendly. The incumbent elected representatives from UPP and TERAS were treated as BN direct candidates and allowed to use BN symbols in Sarawak Election 2016. They were given the option to resign or quit their position in the party before election and may choose to join any coalition partners after winning the election.

2.3 The Opposition Front

The opposition parties in Sarawak currently holding seats in the State Legislative Assembly are the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Other opposition parties that do not have any seats in the House include the newly formed Parti Amanah Negara (PAN), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and smaller state-centric parties such as the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), State Reform Party (STAR), and Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak Baru (PBDS Baru). The Oppositions Front in the Sarawak Legislative assembly is headed by a representative from DAP.

The opposition front was indeed facing an uphill battle. The recent Sarawak's re-delineation exercise saw the increased number of state constituencies from seventy-one (71) to eighty-two (82) seats. Out of the eleven (11) new seats, ten (10) are categorized

as rural or semi-rural seats, of which traditionally are BN strongholds.

The strength of the opposition partners, DAP and PKR, is the urban seats. Apart from trying to penetrate the rural constituencies, another challenge for the opposition is to evade multi-cornered fights. The new opposition coalition consists of DAP, PKR and the newly formed Pakatan Harapan (PAN), as PAS and SNAP remain standalone or detached. Until there is a consensus in the opposition front to ensure straight fight against BN in every constituency, a fragmented opposition is unlikely to win the polls. The BN, on the other hand, has claimed that the conflicting seat allocation between the component parties has been resolved.

2.4 Comparative Advantage

The BN Ruling Coalition has comparative advantages over the Opposition Front over the provision of the 2016 National Budget which was termed by the oppositions as “*Sarawak Election Budget*” where the allocations of funds for development in the pretext “*Politics of Development*” were geared to lure for voters.

The BN election manifesto focuses on fifteen (15) points. The fifteen points are among others, upholding the rights of Sarawak and its people, improving the welfare of the less fortunate, creating job opportunities, affordable housing for low and middle income group, land matters, technical and vocational education, and industrialize the state through manufacturing, tourism and rural transformation (Barisan Nasional Sarawak, undated).

The Chinese factor is also appealing to the people especially the urban Chinese where BN top leader looks at race issue differently from his predecessor. The present leadership promotes equality by disapproving the Chinese as *pendatang* or immigrant, and the state government to recognize the United Examination Certificate (UEC) which are popular qualification amongst the Chinese.

2.4 Voter's Behavior

The 2008 and 2013 general elections have seen how the urban voters have favored changes by voting new political parties other than BN. A change in social status would favor a new political outlook. The early study in “The People's Choice” acknowledged that social characteristics determine political preference and a person think, politically, as he is socially mobile (Lazarsfeld & Berelson, 1986). Not many studies have been done in Malaysia on

social mobility and political behavior. Ratnam's writing way back in 1965 forwarded the idea of communalism in Malaysian politics. Later studies re-echoed the same concern that there is communal determinism in the choice of parties (Ratnam & Milne, 1967). Hussin Mutalib has also posed the idea of religion influencing communalism (Mutalib, 1990).

One of the indications that incumbent would return to power lies on voters who are confident that the government would restore peace and stability for the future of the state and their families (Weschle, 2014). It would be a challenging proposition for the opposition parties to gain a strong foothold on the state if the voters were confident of the state and their family under the present BN government. General optimism continues to prevail among the voters in Sarawak on the future of the country and the future well-being of their family. The level of optimism is far higher than in some countries. Given this scenario, the incumbent party has a high level of probability to be returned to power (Idid, 2016).

3 METHODOLOGY

The study involves both quantitative and qualitative approached. A structured questionnaire will be distributed to respondents with sample size based on the Roscoe's rules of thumb. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to obtain information to support the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics will be analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20.

Four hundred (400) questionnaires were distributed equally in the two constituencies with two hundred (200) sets in each. The distribution was made on random basis to cover extensively the wards or polling areas and villages in the respective constituencies.

The returned questionnaires were 172 out of 200 or 86% for Jemoreng, and 170 out 200 or 85% for Daro. The responses to questionnaires were in the third-quarter percentile, and this shows that the respondents are also active and contribute positively to the study. A total number of 40 respondents in each constituency were interviewed. Therefore, all together there are 342 returned questionnaires for quantitative data analysis and 80 structured interviews to support the analysis.

4 DEMOGRAPHICS

Majority of the respondents in both constituencies are Melanau. Other ethnics are Malay, Iban and Chinese. Further demographic break-up of the entire respondents in this study are segregated into the following categories; gender, age group, economic activities, educational background, and their monthly income.

The heads of households who are normally males are targeted as respondents, but in this study females who are also registered voters comprised 46.78% of the respondents. There are 182 males compared to 160 females. The females particularly in Jemoreng make about 50.58% of the respondents compared to 42.94% from Daro.

Their age range from 25 to 71 years of age, and about 54.9% for both genders are in the age cohort of between 35 to 54 years of age. Table 4.3 shows the distribution of respondents' age according to category by study areas. In terms of age category, 79% of them fall under the labour force age group, whilst only 11.70% are in the older age cohort. This indicates that two-third of them are still in the active working population group. The overall mean age of respondents is 48.64 years old.

About 30% of respondents for the study are self-employed involving in agricultural activities, petty trading, operating sundry grocery stores, and running small business with the highest (37%) percentage shown in Daro. Jemoreng recorded higher percentage of respondents engaged with public sector at 29 per cent compared to Daro at 23%. On the overall, slightly more than one-quarter (26%) is employed in the public sector, and about 18% were employed with private sectors. Majority of those from the private sector are working in low skilled jobs such as laborers, general workers, welders, drivers, and plantation workers.

The distribution of educational attainment of respondents in the study reveal that slightly more than a quarter (28%) of the respondents are poorly educated, only attained primary level education. Those with secondary level education comprised 56%, while the remaining 16% had attained diploma and tertiary education.

Across the two study areas, Daro had slightly lower percentages of respondents who only had primary level, only 18.8% compared to Jemoreng at 37%. Daro had the largest number of respondents with secondary level and tertiary education at 64% and 17% respectively. Overall, literacy level is at 84%.

The distribution of respondents' incomes is made at RM1000 interval. The respondent's income are inconsistent. On overall among income earners, a

large percentage (38%) are earning between RM1001 to RM2000 per month, followed by 33% in the earning in the category of RM1000 and less. Jemoreng has more than a third (38%) of its respondents earning monthly income about RM1000 and below, while Daro have 29% of its respondents earning income under this category. The respondents' income is concentrated in the region of RM3000 and below, and this is reported by 88% of the respondents.

5 VOTER'S ACCEPTANCE OF NEW CANDIDATES

The researchers seek to investigate the voters' acceptance level on new candidates in each constituencies based on the perceived five features namely, (i) personal attributes of candidates, (ii) capabilities on addressing people's needs and development, (iii) community viewpoints, (iv) communication attributes, and (v) qualification and experience. Table 1 below shows the scores of voter's acceptance level on the New Candidate Jemoreng (NCJ) and New Candidate Daro (NCD) based on the five features.

Table 1: Voter's acceptance of new candidates

Features	Jemoreng [%]					Daro [%]						
	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total
Personal Attributes												
Integrity	3.49	19.19	16.28	47.09	13.95	100	2.35	0.59	31.18	33.53	32.35	100
Personality	7.56	49.42	23.84	12.21	6.98	100	0	10.59	35.88	24.71	28.82	100
Perceived Capability												
Addressing needs	8.72	15.7	49.42	16.86	9.3	100	2.35	4.71	42.94	26.47	23.53	100
Development	2.33	22.09	23.84	37.21	14.53	100	0	7.06	40.59	27.65	24.71	100
Community View-Points												
'concern' for people	3.49	23.26	43.6	24.42	5.23	100	2.35	8.24	20.59	45.88	22.94	100
'being seen' in public	21.51	42.44	12.79	10.47	12.79	100	0	9.41	12.35	49.41	28.82	100
Communication Skill												
Language	9.88	20.93	33.14	22.67	13.37	100	2.35	4.71	22.94	37.65	32.35	100
Articulation	8.72	26.74	21.51	41.98	11.05	100	0	7.06	24.12	38.24	30.59	100
Interaction	22.09	27.33	23.84	18.6	8.14	100	0	5.88	25.29	43.53	25.29	100
Education and Experience												
Qualification	0.58	12.21	26.74	39.53	20.93	100	0	4.71	18.82	36.47	40	100
Experience	2.33	8.14	20.93	43.02	25.58	100	0	9.41	23.53	32.94	34.12	100

5.1 Personal Attributes

First component is regarding the known personal attributes of candidates to the respondents which comprised of two points; integrity and self-carriage. For NCD, there was high feedback on integrity at 65%, while NCJ recorded feedback of 60%. The other personality aspect, self-carriage or in Malay 'pembawaan diri' is the attributes of friendliness, openness, accessibility, affability, and cordiality. NCD scored positive feedback of 53% while NCJ recorded reverse feedback at 56.98%.

The interviews with respondents revealed that NCD is well-liked by the people in his constituency. One respondent was quoted as saying (translated), "...a very good, friendly, smart District Officer. He

left the Daro District Office with many legacies and projects for the people to remember him. He has great leadership quality, and you will find him an asset as your representative”.

Another respondent was also quoted positively saying, *“...new candidate has his plan during this campaign. He is very independent. He has leadership in himself, and he knows what to do. He will go far in politics”.*

Related to the above statement of independence and leadership issues, the researcher has proven the statement as fair and accurate. Based on a personal interview with NCD himself, he found that after the first week of campaign he has fully covered his entire constituency in Daro District. Also, he has extensively systematized his campaign in other longhouses: Rh Gitai at Sg Iilas, Rh Nyait at Stubah under Meradong District, all seven longhouses in Passin under Matu District, and all eight longhouses in Sg Lengan under Sibuh District.

On the other side, NCJ is seen as less independent. A respondent from Matu, who is a professional coming home for the election, challenged the leadership qualities in NCJ comparing him to NCD. NCJ was perceived to rely heavily on party's machinery, particularly the facilities like logistics and operation room provided at the premises of a senior Member of Parliament P207 Igan. The NCJ was also praised by the people in his constituency although many of them have not known him yet. Many respondents are of the same opinion as said by one from Kpg Tian, Matu referring NCJ as, *“... (NCJ-mentioned name) is a qualified candidate for the election. He is very friendly, and we believe he can look after the rights of the citizen”.* Three respondents at Matu Bazaar said that they have heard a lot about NCJ but have not seen him. However, they are fully aware that NCJ is capable of championing their needs and welfare. Another respondent who has not met NCJ was saying in Malay (translated), *“I saw him (mentioned name) as a spiritual leader, though I have not known him closer. We are always looking forward to the best from him”.*

5.2 Perceived Capability

Regarding capability, related to perceived ability to voice the needs of people in their constituency, almost half (49.42%) of the respondents from Jemoreng are undecided or would rather *“wait and see”* compared to Daro at 42.94%. The feedback on the perceived capability to voice the needs of people for NCJ is 26.29 % compared to NCD at 50%. Therefore, the voters from Daro were more confident with their candidate's ability to voice their needs.

On the capability to bring up development to the area, both candidates are seen as being capable. Positive feedback for both Jemoreng and Daro were at 51 percent and 52 percent respectively. Both NCJ and NCD have proven good service records in their respective positions.

5.3 Community View-points

There was contrast feedbacks on community viewpoints on the new BN candidates. With regards to *‘concern for people,’* 43.6% of the respondents from Jemoreng choose sitting on the fence or somewhat undecided, compared to Daro recorded positive feedback at 68%. The Jemoreng voters are not able to judge NCJ on this aspect as they have not seen him around in the local community. One respondent was quoted as saying *“...until we see him deliver, we judge. It is too early now, although we are quite positive that he will be able to deliver”.*

On the other hand, the Daro voters are more confident with NCD as he has been a public figure in Daro, and has been seen with the community in official functions while serving the district. It is still fresh in the mind of voters. One respondent has proudly mentioned about NCD as *“...he was an icon for Daro, and is going to be great in a different capacity.”*

5.4 Communication Skill

Both candidates, are competent in all the languages spoken in their constituencies. However, NCD is reckoned to be better and well-versed in Iban language and communicate effectively in all the longhouses during the campaign period. A group of five Iban respondents in an interview acknowledged the Iban language competency of NCD at the recent meet the people sessions at (*Rumah*) Rh. Dawi, Rh. Brinau, Rh. Johntan, Rh. Jantai, and (*Nanga*) Ng. Semah. The session led by NCD in Iban language was very smooth and effective. No feedback on the candidate's proficiency in Iban language was obtained for NCJ.

On articulation of issues or the act of giving utterance or expression on current issues by the new candidates, their scores are highly positive. Both candidates are deemed or perceived to be excellent in bringing and expressing issues to the people.

On interaction through personal communication, NCD scored high positive feedback of 68.82% while NCJ garnered negative feedback of 49.42%. The reasons for low interaction with the people by NCJ, among others are likely due to his *‘absences’* in the community before the election, and that his previous

job is not at all related to the constituency, giving him no room for interaction with the people.

5.5 Education and Working Experience

Examining the educational background of the respondents is important (Cochrane, 1979). Education background had multiple effects on the access to information, market opportunities, non-market efficiency, attitudes, behavior patterns, and status. The reasonable assumption is that the respondent's educational level would influence the decision of voters to vote for or against the candidate.

Education and working experience scored almost the same feedback for both NCJ and NCD. Voters from both constituencies are well-informed of their academic qualification and working experience. Both NCJ and NCD have their post-graduate academic qualification and local people in their constituency. Their scores on qualifications are on the high side of 60.46% for NCJ and 76.47% NCD. The voters of Jemoreng are not well-informed of NCJ's doctorate credential as he scored lower compared to NCD who holds a master's degree. On their working experience, NCJ and NCD scored 68.60% and 67.06% respectively. NCJ was with the Sarawak State Religious Department before attachment to the Perlis State Islamic Council as Mufti. NCD has been with the state service all the while, formerly as District Officer Daro and subsequently as Senior Executive in Sarawak Economic Development Corporation. Both candidates have sound senior-position working experience in the professional and managerial group in the Malaysian civil service.

6 PERCEPTIONS ON THE INCUMBENTS

For the incumbents, given the chance with BN tickets, both Candidates could still win the election. Unless, they switch over to opposition or as an independent candidate, there is less or otherwise no chance of winning. An Iban respondent from Ilas area at the Igan Ferry was quoted referring to Jemoreng incumbent a very humble representative, very good individual, and has served the people well.

Another respondent from the same area was also quoted in local dialect as saying that it will be very difficult if they do not vote for the government side because they will lose all the assistances from the

government, and considering also that they still have a number of children in schools. To him, they do not seem to have any choice but to vote for the previous government.

A member of focus group in Kampong Igan relates his past experience in the election of the 1987 that incumbent could not win when he is not in the BN. This respondent reveals that even the one who was popular, and who has been the chief minister in the past has also lost the election in the opposition. The ex-Chief Minister under the flagship of PERMAS (Sarawak Malaysian People's Association) was defeated at N24 Matu-Daro. This was also proven in the Sarawak Election 2016 when the incumbent of Kedup who challenged the BN Coalition at N23 Bukit Semuja was heavily defeated to BN with only 1,196 votes to 5,769 (Utusan Borneo, 8th May, 2016).

The incumbent of Daro was also a favorite candidate, and given the chance he could also win the election. A good number of respondents were satisfied with the services he has rendered during his tenure as the people's representative.

Loyalty to BN is the weightage for both candidates. On overall, 63% gave positive feedback claiming that they will vote for BN no matter who the candidate is. To them the candidate was chosen by BN top leaders, and on their part they must be loyal to their leader. Loyalty to BN leadership is a fact predominant in the rural setting where the ruling BN government is as if their only life, bread and butter. The loyalty to BN government in Jemoreng and Daro is at 53% and 64% respectively. Hence, researchers conclude that as long as the loyalty to BN is high, any candidate representing BN in the rural setting is always winnable. In Sarawak, it is very safe for the BN coalition to change their candidates although the incumbents are winnable.

7 PREFERENCES OF CANDIDATES

It is obvious that voters are also selective on their preferred candidates. Amongst their favorites of preferred candidates are those who are well-qualified with professional and managerial experience, ability to bring *vox populi* (voices of the people) to the government, people friendly and accessible in time of needs, and having a very high concern for the people in the constituencies.

Voter's preferred candidate must also be seen with the people, and will always be there with the people in time of need. Having known the candidates earlier prior to election has its own advantages as the candidate no longer needs

introduction. The case of NCD and NCJ in this election demonstrates the importance of being known earlier and being seen around with the electorates. Past contributions to the community especially of NCD are undeniably an *acta non verba* (deeds, not words) that counts for him winning the election.

Despite all the good qualities of the candidates, a plenty of voters also vote for the party (BN) of which the candidate is attached. By *ipso facto*, this group of voters put trust in the strength of the party and its leadership. The legacy of the BN government bringing development, security, and socio-economic benefits to people from all walks of life has created this scenario possible

8 CONCLUSIONS

Removing the incumbents who are still active and winnable is a great challenge. It is an acid test for both new candidates to show that they are good enough to succeed and to tell the incumbents that it's time for them to give way. Unexpectedly, the process of change has gone smooth in Jemoreng and Daro with NCJ and NCD tested successfully on the polling day.

The implication shows the precedence were set for future leaders especially in Sarawak to replace incumbents irrespective of them having good performances. The BN top leaders can consider replacing any incumbent in the future elections when their report card indicates the diminishing performances, medically unfit or when they are thought of lesser winnable.

From this study, it shows that the incumbents of Jemoreng and Daro are two special individuals, not only showing high degree of loyalty to the instruction of top leader but also possess an incontestable demeanor by putting self-interest aside, party politics first, and all of their sacrifices are for *amor patriae*, Sarawak - The *Land of the Hornbills*.

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