

## “Vote for me!”: A Content Analysis of News Reports Leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election Political Communication

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### ABSTRACT

The political tsunami that occurred on 8 March 2008 sent shock waves throughout Malaysia. It was an unexpected turn of events that many thought of as a dream or nightmare, depending on who was having the dream. Thus, this study looks into how the politicians from all parties used the media to convey messages across to the media consumers in order to influence the public to vote for them. Specifically, this study considers the issues that were raised by the politicians and picked up by the media. The investigation of the present study is undertaken using the theoretical framework of Agenda Setting. A quantitative analysis using Content Analysis is proposed to examine the issues that were brought up by the politicians and picked up by the Malaysian daily, *The Star*, as reflected in the news reports on the days leading to the general election.

**Keywords:** Agenda setting, elections, issues, Malaysia, media

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The political tsunami that took place on 8 March 2008 sent tremors throughout Malaysia and also to those interested in Malaysian politics. During the 2004 general election, the National Front, the ruling coalition known as *Barisan Nasional* won a landslide victory (*The Star*, 2004). However, they only managed to gain a simple majority in the 2008 election and lost control of five out of the 13 states in Malaysia to the Opposition, known as *Pakatan Rakyat* (*The Star*, 2008a). It was a startling event that many thought of as a dream or nightmare, depending on who was having the dream.

Mass media is believed to be one of the main avenues for consumers to attain information about the current political goings-on. The media play a vital role in the struggle for shaping the public agenda during the campaign period (Walgrave and Aelst, 2004). From the news coverage, voters could be influenced in their decision-making to vote for the representatives for the House of Representatives (federal level) and the State Legislative Assembly (state level).

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According to McCombs (2002), the news media have an enormous power in affecting the public through the nation's agenda which they set. Some significant public issues are focused on by the media to grab public attention. Mass media have been known for their powerful effects. Media can shape the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922); thus, having a direct and profound influence on their consumers. The news coverage on the politicians, incumbents, and political news prior to the election by the media would have a powerful effect on the consumers who voted during the 2008 election. The effects of news media could be translated into the results of the polls during the election.

Previous research has mostly concentrated on the effects of media on voting behaviour (Valenzuela and McCombs, 2007). However, the researchers in this study are more interested in the use of the mass media by the politicians to attract the voters to cast their votes for them. Therefore, this study examines how the politicians, whether the ruling, opposition party, or independent candidates, utilised the media to court potential voters to vote for them.

### *1.1 Brief History of the Political Scene in Malaysia*

Malaysia is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy framework. Its population consists of multi-ethnic groups with the main races being the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as well as a diverse group of indigenous people and the aborigines. The National Front, the ruling coalition, is known as the *Barisan Nasional* (BN). It comprises 14 component parties, with the main ones being *United Malay National Organisation* (UMNO), *Malaysia Chinese Association* (MCA), and *Malaysia Indians Congress* (MIC). *Barisan Nasional* was initiated by the *Alliance* (PERIKATAN) which was a political party established by the people of the Confederated Malay States to gain independence from British colonial rule. It was later institutionalised as *Barisan Nasional*. This party was not created based on ideology, but was created by the people to champion the people's struggle. The struggles of the component parties are communal-based in the sense that UMNO represents the Malays, MCA represents the Chinese, MIC represents the Indians, and other regional parties represent the minority ethnic groups. The political movement of *Barisan Nasional* is based on power sharing in the multi-ethnic society. The National Front has been in power since the nation's Independence in 1957 (Official Barisan Nasional 2008 Campaign Site, 2008). More often than not, *Barisan Nasional* has continued to enjoy an excellent record of election victories during the general election, except in the 1969 general election which led to a racial riot a day later (Barisan Nasional Pulau Pinang, 2005).

Conversely, the Opposition, known as *Pakatan Rakyat* (stands for *People's Alliance*) is formed by *People's Justice Party* (PKR), *Democratic Action Party* (DAP), and *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS) as its component parties. They pledge to uphold the rights and interests of all Malaysians. However, each component party has its own ideology. PKR promotes social justice and anti-corruption ideals; PAS aspires to establish Malaysia as a country based on Islamic legal theory, and DAP advocates for a free, democratic country, based on the principles of human rights, equality, social and economic justice.

## 1.2 The Media Scene

The media in Malaysia is governed by press laws such as Printing Presses and Publications Acts, the Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act, and Defamation Act that restrict the media from being transparent with the news published for media consumers (Yeoh and Ng, 2008). These laws have direct consequences on the individuals, reporters, editors, and media corporations (Yeoh and Ng, 2008). The Ministry of Home Affairs has the power to award, renew, and suspend operating licenses of media organisations (Yeoh and Ng, 2008).

The existence of multi-language print media caters to the multi-ethnic groups in Malaysia. Firdaus (2006) claims that the Malaysia media has been targeting audiences and creating niches based on ethnic lines and language. For instance, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian* and *KOSMO*, which are in the Malay language, cater to the Malays. Chinese language newspapers such as *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *Nan Yang Siang Pau*, *China Press*, and *Oriental Daily* cater to the Chinese, and *Tamil Nesan*, which is in Tamil, caters to the Indians. Firdaus (2006) found that respondents of the respective ethnic groups choose the vernacular newspapers as their most frequently read newspapers. English newspapers such as *The New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *The Sun*, and the *Malay Mail* cater to English literate urbanites. English papers are better accepted in large urban areas (Press Reference, 2009). As a result, media also highlight issues that are pertinent to their respective readers in order to relate to them.

Another factor contributing to the coverage of political news is ownership. The major media organisations in Malaysia are operated and governed by the major political parties through their investment arms. The media have become tools of the political wings to convey information regarding their ideologies and national policies. Media organisation such as Media Prima, which operates *New Straits Times*, *New Sunday Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Sunday Mail*, *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, *Harian Metro* and *Metro Ahad*, *TV3*, *8TV*, *NTV7*, *Fly F.M.*, *Hot F.M.*, and *One F.M.*, is a government-affiliated conglomerate (Yeoh and Ng, 2008). Moreover, Utusan Media (M) Sdn. Bhd., which publishes *Utusan Malaysia*, *KOSMO*, and other print publications, is also one of UMNO's investment arms (Yeoh and Ng, 2008). Besides, the Ministry of Information manages the national television and radio networks, *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) which consists of *TV1* and *TV2*, and 32 radio channels (Aliran, 1999; Bernama, 2008; RTM, 2008). In addition, *The Star*, *Sunday Star*, as well as *Star RFM* (98.8 F.M.), *Suria F.M.*, and *Red F.M.* are owned by MCA (Yeoh and Ng, 2008; Star RFM, 2008). MCA also has a stake in *Nanyang* daily and *China Press*. There are also parties associated with MIC which control the Tamil press such as *Tamil Nesan* (Yeoh and Ng, 2008).

The ownership of the traditional media by the political parties is viewed as a form of bias due to the influence of the politicians on the content of the news. The control of the mainstream media by the political parties has resulted in manipulative news in which the journalists and editors are seen to be distorting the reality to safeguard the interest of the proprietors (Cohen and Young, 1973). According to Tan (2006), the mainstream mass media

ownership that is slanted towards the ‘powers-that-be’ and parties which are closely connected to the media organisation is a disturbing trend.

On the other hand, there are also alternative media in Malaysia which are operated by other political parties, which are considered as left-wing groups. For example, DAP owns the publication of *Rocket*, and *Harakah* is owned by PAS. The new media, the Internet or World Wide Web, function as new channels for various parties, individuals, and groups to transmit messages about political issues. This can be done through online forums, blogs, and websites.

### 1.3 *The Star*

*The Star* is registered under Star Publications (M) Berhad, which was initially published as a regional newspaper in 1971 (*The Star*, 2008b). It was the first tabloid English daily and also a pioneer online newspapers or e-paper among Malaysian newspapers when it was launched on the World Wide Web in 1995 (*The Star*, 2008b). Besides providing news through the conventional and new media, *The Star* also ventured into other platforms such as *The Star Mobile* portals for Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and mobile phones, as well as Short Messaging Services (SMSes) for the latest news (*The Star*, 2008c). Over the years, the circulation and readership numbers of this publication have risen. As of 2008, *The Star* daily has a readership of 1.082 million (Nielsen Media Research, 2008) with a circulation of 304,904 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, Malaysia, 2008). Its *Sunday Star* has 1.022 million readers (Nielsen Media Research, 2008) with a circulation of 313,609 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, Malaysia, 2008). *The Star* daily and the *Sunday Star* have the highest readership and circulation numbers among all the English daily and weekly newspapers in the nation (Nielsen Media Research 2008; Audit Bureau of Circulations, Malaysia; 2008).

### 1.4 *General Election: Comparison between 2004 and 2008 Results*

Malaysia held its 12<sup>th</sup> General Election on 8 March 2008. It was considered as a watershed in the history of the nation as *Barisan Nasional* yielded the worst results when compared with the 2004 general election following Independence in 1957 (BBC, 2008; Kee, 2009; Tan and Ibrahim, 2008; Md. Nor, 2009). During the 2004 general election which was held on 21 March, *Barisan Nasional* easily secured a two-thirds majority and was able to return to power and form the federal government, led by the current Prime Minister’s predecessor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. There were 219 parliamentary seats and 505 state legislative seats contested during the 2004 general election. *Barisan Nasional* won victoriously with 90.4% of all the parliamentary seats contested. The Opposition then managed to win 20 parliamentary seats or 9.1%, and an independent candidate secured the remaining single seat. *Barisan Nasional* gained control in 12 out of 13 state legislatures with 89.7% seats captured during the 11<sup>th</sup> General Election (*The Star*, 2004).

However, *Pakatan Rakyat* won 82 seats (out of 222 seats in parliament) or 36.9% during the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election in March 2008 due to a significant swing of votes from the ruling coalition to the opposition. *Barisan Nasional* only managed to secure 63.1% or the remaining 140 parliamentary seats. *Barisan Nasional* gained power to form the government

with a simple majority, but failed to garner the crucial two-thirds majority in parliament which would enable them to pass amendments to the Malaysian Constitution easily. Additionally, the coalition also lost four states (i.e. Penang, Selangor, Kedah, and Perak), as well as failed to regain the confidence of the voters in Kelantan state. Altogether, *Pakatan Rakyat* gained control of five states, compared to only one during the 2004 general election. Furthermore, the unprecedented results of the 2008 election also included the failure of four cabinet ministers to retain their seats (*The Star*, 2008a).

According to Dr Bridget Welsh, an Associate Professor from Johns Hopkins University who had been following the campaign in a number of states in Malaysia, the momentous defeat of Malaysia's ruling coalition was a symbol of a rupture in the communalised political ties since the 1957 Independence (Kuppuswamy, 2008).

### **1.5 Limitations**

A limitation of this study is the scope of sample. In this study, the researchers only looked into one daily. Additionally, other forms of media such as the broadcast and new media were not used to investigate the issues brought up by the politicians and highlighted by the media. Therefore, this study cannot be used to extrapolate a generalisation of every single issue brought up by the politicians.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 News Media's Role of Agenda Setting**

Valenzuela and McCombs (2007) researched on the influence of news coverage of political candidates on vote choice based on the 2006 Mexican presidential election. The study also aimed to verify the applicability of the theory of agenda setting as a practical model in public communication research. The methodology employed was content analysis using the theoretical framework of agenda setting. They analysed the coverage of the election campaign by two national television networks. From the analysis, they arrived at several conclusions. First, a significant amount of coverage was given by both the television networks, *Televisa* and *TV Azteca* to the winning candidate, Felipe Calderón, compared to his main opponents, Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Roberto Madrazo. Second, the news coverage for López Obrador was set in a negative tone whereas the coverage given for Calderón and Madrazo was clearly more favourable. Regression analysis was performed to measure the effects of news content on voters' preference. Findings disclosed that the greater coverage and more favourable presentation of a candidate by the television networks generated a higher percentage of public support. Drawing from the results gathered, news media do indeed play a role in agenda setting by telling the people what to think of the political figures.

On the contrary, an analysis of agenda setting and press coverage in the 1999 Greek European elections was conducted by Harris *et al.* (2001). Their study yielded different findings. A content analysis was undertaken to examine six newspapers, manifestos of six parties, and press releases of two major parties. The results of the analysis were then contrasted with the public perceived opinions based on the public poll conducted prior to

the election campaign. Differences of agendas between the three agenda groups were recognised. They suggest that the public does not necessarily respond to the press agenda. However, there was one issue (international issues and foreign policy) which both the public and the press agenda shared a similar concern in. The highest aggregate for public and press agenda was 28.56% and 50, 299.15 cm<sup>2</sup> respectively. This shows that both the public and press view international issues and foreign policy very seriously as compared to other issues. This indicates a striking result in which agenda setting has its effect to some extent.

### ***2.2 Attribute Agenda of Painting Pictures in the Mind***

McCombs *et al.* (2000) explored the setting of attribute agenda by conducting empirical research on the 1996 Spanish general election. They hypothesised that the media attribute agenda influences the voters' attribute agenda. The study was based on agenda setting theory in which the aspects prominent in the mass media's picture of the world affects the salience of those aspects in the audiences' picture. They carried out the study to analyse the images of the three candidates during the general election; simultaneously, to investigate the two attributive dimensions (i.e. substantive and affective descriptions). Outcome of the quantitative research indicated that the attribute agenda of seven different mass media corresponded highly with the attribute agenda of the voters for each of the candidates. From the 21 tests of hypothesis, the median correlation was +.72. Additional examinations on the presentation of the three candidates prior to the election in seven news media were compared with the voters' descriptions of the candidates. Evidence of second-level agenda setting was derived from the comparison between attribute agenda of the media and public.

### ***2.3 Importance of the Study***

The current study is essential because it will contribute to existing literature on agenda setting of the media. Additionally, this study would give a better picture of the relationship between the news media and political figures. It could yield a clearer picture of the campaign strategies and political marketing used by the politicians in garnering support for election. The outcome of the study would generate a deeper insight into the role of the news media in elections, specifically for the local context as it analyses a local daily. This would benefit the press industry for it contributes to a increase in awareness over the media's power. Besides, it could also enhance knowledge in this field and serve as a reference to not only media, but also to researchers and scholars who are interested in the communication field.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### ***3.1 Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework for this study is Agenda Setting. The term, agenda setting, was coined by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 in their study of the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McQuail, 1994). The theory illustrates that the ranking of issues shown in the media correlates with the ranking of issues in which the public place great importance on. Severin and Tankard (1997) explained that the media

have the power to raise the salience of selected issues in the public's mind. Hence, the media definitely could exert noteworthy influence on media consumers. Cohen (1963) claimed that the news media may not directly affect the public on what to think, but the news media does influence the public on the topics that they think about.

Agenda setting operates on two chronological levels of influence, being known as object level and attribute level. In the communication process, these two levels serve the purpose for attention and comprehension (McCombs, 2006). At the attention level, agenda is constructed as a list of items or objects. The objects refer to issues picked up and focused on by the media to capture the attention of the public. The objects do not necessarily imply public issues; it could be political figures, political parties, activities, and even corporations. Every object has its own features or characteristics which define them. This is what is known as the second influence level of agenda setting: attributes. Attributes describing an object form the individuals' opinions or mindsets toward the objects. Likewise, when news media are reporting an object, they would highlight the attributes to help the people relate to the object. In news reporting, attributes of an object stressed by the media develop the agenda of attributes. Both the choice of agenda of objects for attention and agenda of attributes for understanding are powerful agenda setting roles (McCombs *et al.*, 1997). The evidence of a second level of agenda setting is proven through a study done in the 1976 American presidential primary elections conducted by Becker and McCombs (1978). A comparison between the description of the 11 competing Democrats candidates and the agenda of attributes representing them in *Newsweek* revealed that there was significant evidence of media influence (Becker and McCombs, 1978). Further, there was a close connection between the media and voters' agenda of attributes (Becker and McCombs, 1978). The second level of agenda setting also suggests that media influence the public on not only what issues to think about, but also on how the public think about an issue (Baran and Davis, 2005).

This study investigates the reporting of political news leading to the 8 March election, focusing on ways employed by the politicians to woo the public to vote for them. The window provided by the media as agenda setting agents would allow the politicians to send their messages to the public. It would also help to understand the practice of agenda setting through the issues brought up by the politicians and picked up by the media.

### **3.2 Content Analysis**

The investigation of this study is undertaken using content analysis. The reason for choosing the quantitative approach is to produce more explicit data collection as well as to make it easier for the researcher to aggregate, compare, and summarise data (Babbie, 2001). Content analysis is a systematic research procedure to examine the content of recorded information, as defined by Walizer and Wiener (1978, in Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). Such a quantitative instrumentation could assist researchers in obtaining greater precision (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). Moreover, content analysis is an established approach for such a study. According to Reason and García (2007), it has been employed extensively to study, specifically printed texts and communication media. Thus, it is very suitable for addressing the classic question of communications research: who says what, to whom, why, how and

with what effects (Babbie, 2001). In this study, interpretive content analysis is employed to consider the issues that are brought up by politicians and highlighted in the press as reflected in the news reports on the days leading to the general election.

### 3.3 Data

The corpus of the study was extracted from the *The Star*'s online news archive. The analysis specifically investigated the issues that were raised by the political figures in the news reports on the days leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> general election. The articles selected for analysis consisted of news contents in the main paper of *The Star*, *StarMetro* and *StarNorth* – those pages directly related to the nation's election and political issues, parties, events, and figures, from 13 February to 7 March 2008. This time period was selected because it was the allocated campaigning period for the 12<sup>th</sup> general election by the Election Commission. Newspaper articles were accessed from *The Star* online archive and downloaded to be stored and printed. *The Star* was chosen for analysis as the availability of online news archive allowed past news articles to be collected. Another reason was that *The Star* had the highest readership among all the English dailies with approximately 1.08 million readers (Nielsen Media Research, 2008).

The sampling method applied in this study was probability sampling to ensure the equal probability of each article to be selected for analysis in order to ensure a high level of representativeness. The two major advantages that are offered by probability sampling are (1) it is more representative of the population than other types of samples, and (2) allows for estimation of the accuracy or representativeness of the sample. Hence, this study could avoid personal bias in the sample selection. There were altogether 836 articles collected from the online news archive of *The Star*. The researchers used systematic random sampling with a random start as the type of sampling design. In view of the huge number of articles available and numerous issues appearing in each article, systematic random sampling was chosen. Additionally, this sampling type is preferred in mass media research as it saves time, resources, and effort, as compared to simple random sampling (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). In systematic random sampling, every  $n^{\text{th}}$  subject or unit or element is selected from the sample systematically. For this study, the sampling interval value was 4 in which all the articles in every 4<sup>th</sup> day of the campaigning period were chosen for analysis, with a random first unit that is the last day of the campaigning period. From the sampling design, this study considered all the articles on the six different dates, which were 16 February 2008, 20 February 2008, 24 February 2008, 28 February 2008, 3 March 2008, and 7 March 2008. There were 192 online news articles published on the dates mentioned. The sampling ratio was 1:4.35.

The analysis of the sample for this study included the media highlighted issues mentioned by all the political figures from *Barisan Nasional*, *Pakatan Rakyat*, and independent candidates or parties. The sample of 192 articles consisted of 155 articles regarding the issues discussed by *Barisan Nasional*, 34 articles concerning the issues raised by *Pakatan Rakyat*, and the remaining 3 articles discussed the issues brought up by the independent parties or candidates.

The articles were coded under 13 categories: *economy, social issues, politics, infrastructure, religion, history, race, education, national development, media, environment, health, and miscellaneous*. These issues were the major issues brought up by the politicians from different parties that were picked up by *The Star*. For *politics*, it was further divided into six sub-categories: *election, politicians, voters, parties, campaign, and controversies*. Political issues were divided into those categories due to its wide spectrum of politic issues that were highlighted in the media. The issues mentioned by the politicians in the form of active and/or passive voice in every article were considered. Therefore, there could be more than one issue in each article.

Pre-testing the categories of issues was conducted to measure the inter-coder reliability rate. This was to ensure that the categories of issues stated in the coding instructions were mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and reliable. Recommendation of a subsample of the data was between 10% and 25%, and this was re-analysed by independent coders in order to calculate an overall inter-coder reliability coefficient rate (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). Two coders analysed collectively 33.9% or 65 articles together in order to ensure a high value of inter-coder reliability. The co-efficient inter-coder reliability rate was calculated using Holsti's formula:

$$\frac{2A}{U1 + U2}$$

A	-	number of units agreed upon by the 2 coders
U1	-	number of units identified by coder 1
U2	-	number of units identified by coder 2

The calculated co-efficient reliability rate was 0.79. As the minimum satisfactory standard is 0.70 (Wimmer and Dominick 2006), it can be deduced that the two coders were able to examine the texts in a reliable manner. The computer software, Microsoft Excel, was used to analyse the data from the coding sheets for content analysis. Subsequently, descriptive statistics are illustrated in charts.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Percentage of News Coverage

The space given to the three parties in the newspaper varied. The *Barisan Nasional* was allocated 80.73% of space, while the *Pakatan Rakyat* party and the *Independent* candidates were only given 17.71% and 1.56% news coverage respectively (Figure 1).

The disparity in news coverage given to the three parties might give the impression to the reader that *Barisan Nasional* is the most influential party of the three parties. Thus, the readers might perceive that news on the other two parties should not be given more attention compared to news on the *Barisan Nasional* party.

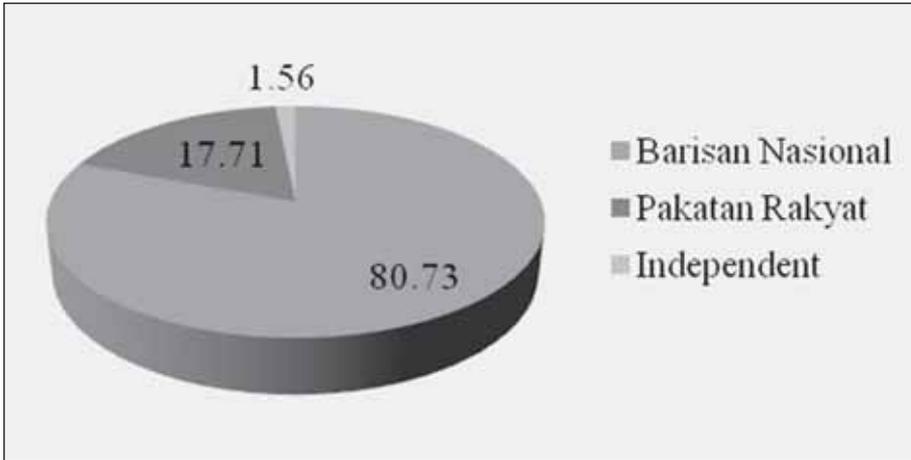


Figure 1. Percentage of news coverage for each party

**4.2 Issues Raised by Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Rakyat and the Independents**

Analysis of issues touched by the three different parties revealed that each party views the importance of certain issues differently. Of the 13 categories, news on *politics* about *Barisan Nasional* made up 68.20%, followed by news on *history* (7.03%), and news on *social issues* (5.96%) (Figure 2).

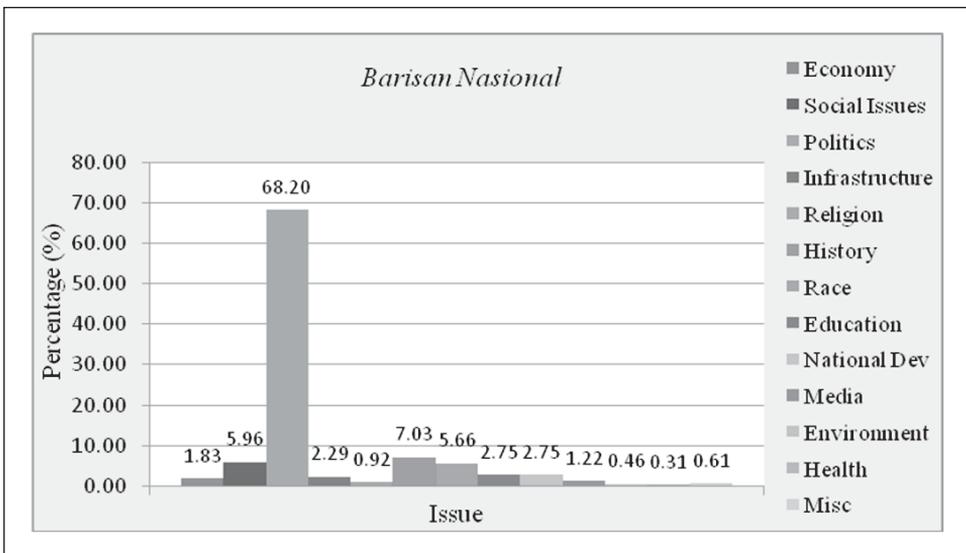
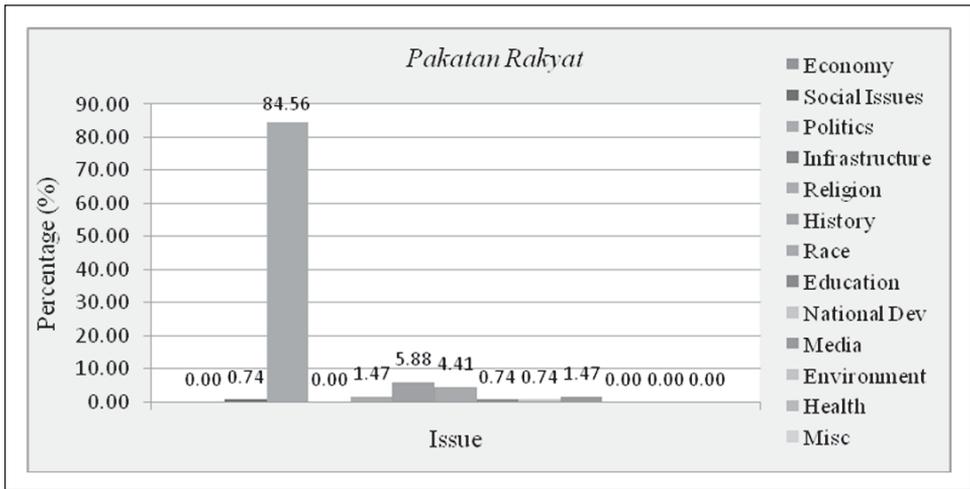


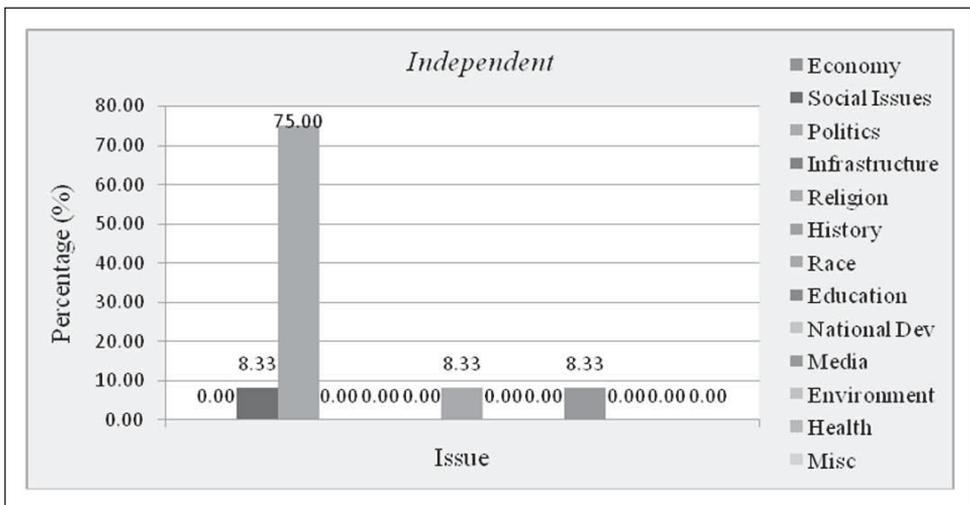
Figure 2. Issues brought up by *Barisan Nasional*

For *Pakatan Rakyat*, the top three issues were *politics* (84.56%), *history* (5.88%), and *race* (4.41%) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Issues brought up by *Pakatan Rakyat*

On the other hand, the three most important issues brought up by the *Independent* parties and candidates were *politics*, *social issues*, *race* and *media*. The *politics* issue constituted 75% and the latter three issues made up 8.33% respectively (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Issues brought up by the Independents

There were similarities and differences among the three parties, *Barisan Nasional*, *Pakatan Rakyat*, and the *Independent* parties, in the most important issues brought up by them. *Politics* was given the most emphasis by the three parties. This issue alone comprised more than 50% of all the issues covered during the days leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election. The observation that all three parties regarded politics as the most important issue could be due to the campaign and election season.

The second most important issue focused by both *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Rakyat* was *history* (7.03% for *Barisan Nasional* and 5.88% for *Pakatan Rakyat*). The third most important issue brought up by *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Rakyat* were *social issues* (5.96%) and *racial issues* (4.41%) respectively. Both *social* and *racial issues* were some of the main issues pertaining to Malaysians. Due to the pluralistic nature of Malaysia, the politicians conveyed their concern for ethnic equality to every facet of the society to woo the public to vote for them. A survey conducted prior to the election also revealed that the major issues that concerned Malaysians included social issues and crime, and ethnic equality (Merdeka Center, 2007). Thus, these issues were highlighted by the politicians during their campaigns.

4.2.1 Comparisons of Subcategories of Political Issues between *Barisan Nasional*, *Pakatan Rakyat*, and the *Independents*

In the subcategories of political issues, a comparison of the three parties revealed that each party had a different focus on the sub-categories (Figure 5).

Despite the difference in focus, some similarities can be found. Three parties emphasised politicians as the most prominent sub-category covered by the daily (29.37% for *Barisan*

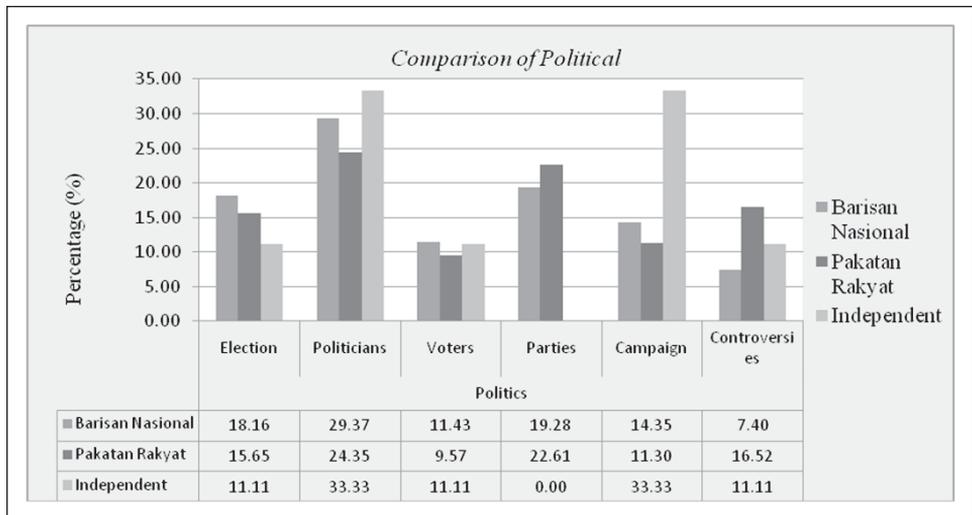


Figure 5. Comparisons of sub-categories of political issues between *Barisan Nasional*, *Pakatan Rakyat*, and the *Independents*

*Nasional*, 24.35% for *Pakatan Rakyat*, and 33.33% for the Independent party). It is notable that the Independent parties and candidates also placed a great deal of emphasis on campaign issues. The similarity might be to associate the candidates of the election to the electorate directly. Both the *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Rakyat* had the same focus on their two most highly covered subcategories, which were politicians and parties. For the third most salient sub-category, the election sub-category was given more prominence by *Barisan Nasional* as compared to *Pakatan Rakyat*, which focused more on the controversies sub-category. This could be attributed to the daily ownership. *The Star* comes under the Malaysian Chinese Association, a component party of *Barisan Nasional*. *The Star* ownership is related to MCA, a political party that is a component of the BN; the implication is that the content published by the daily could have been manipulated. For the controversies sub-category, *Barisan Nasional* had the lowest proportion of coverage as compared to the Opposition parties and the independent parties. This finding supports Cohen and Young (1973) who state that media act in the owners' interest or requirement, which complies with the manipulative model of news. Thus, the disparity in news coverage on controversies by the three parties is possible due to media ownership by one of the parties.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The agenda setting model is a powerful model in communication effect studies. The significance of agenda setting theory lies within the core proposition of transferring salience from one agenda to another agenda (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004). McCombs (2002) argued that media consumers learn about the degree of importance to be conferred for an issue based on the emphasis placed on it in the news. The findings from this study on the online news articles reported on the days leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> general election reinforce this suggestion as the political figures constantly used this daily as a channel to communicate with their electorates.

McCombs (2002) claimed that agenda setting plays its role through the pattern of coverage on issues over a period of time in which certain issues would be concentrated on, some would receive insubstantial coverage, and many are toned down or ignored totally. Over the campaigning period, evidence of a pattern in the coverage of the election fever is seen. Greater emphasis of coverage is given to *Barisan Nasional* as compared to the other two parties. The issues covered in the media that are given more prominence than the rest would be inferred as significant issues by the public and politicians (McQuail, 1994). The prominence of issues reported on *politics*, *history*, *race*, and *social* issues brought up by the politicians appeared to be equally important to the three parties, especially the *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Rakyat*. Hence, this re-affirms the notion that the degree of salience of an issue given in the media corresponds with the degree of importance on similar issues raised by the political figures.

The core idea within the theory is that media function as agenda setting agents to focus attention on certain objects – people, issue, or party – and to facilitate comprehension through the mechanism of featuring attributes and characteristics about the objects (Valenzuela and McCombs, 2007). Kiousis and McCombs (2004) claimed that the basic premise behind attribute agenda setting is that objects in the news have various traits and

characteristics which would form images that allow an object to be distinguished from another object. The two levels of influence under the agenda setting are apparent based on the findings. The first level of object agenda focuses on a subject of the news articles such as *politician, election, or party*. The second level of attribute agenda characterises the objects to transmit and incorporates information into people's mind. In the study, attributes create the public's perception of a candidate based on the candidate's personality and past performance, as covered by the daily. An instance of second level of agenda setting is an incumbent, who is planning to contest again in the same constituency. Wordings used to characterise the object of politicians such as "*making people happy is more satisfying than searching for money*" and "*solved more than 50% of the problems raised by the seat's electorates*" help to remind the voters that the politician is sincere, committed, and proactive in serving the community. Pictures of politicians being surrounded by people during the campaign show that the politicians are well-received by the crowd and also reflect that the politician is people-friendly. However, the outcome of the general election is contrary to the desired outcome of *Barisan Nasional*. The positive coverage (both visual and non-visual) of the said party and politicians did not translate to the expected victory as they lost control of four states and four cabinet ministers lost their seats (*The Star*, 2008a).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Results from the analysis show that there is a presence of agenda setting in the news reporting on the issues raised by politicians on the days leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> general election. The finding of this study is similar to the study of Valenzuela and McCombs (2007), which draws the conclusion that the media can transfer salience of the object agenda. Valenzuela and McCombs's study also extends agenda-setting effects to the behavioural sphere. Evidence of the important issue attributes form people's portrayal about an issue. The media is not only capable of telling us what to think about, but also how to think about an issue. Similarly, the presence of attribute agendas can be seen in both this study and the study by McCombs *et al.* (2000).

This study also reinforces the research conducted by Harris *et al.* (2001) that the public does not necessarily respond to the press agenda. The greatest coverage given to *Barisan Nasional* was responded in a negative relationship, which showed a reversal effect on its readers, who swung their votes to the opposition party. Differences of agendas between the public and politicians were also identified. The *Economy* issue, which was not the priority of politicians, was actually the most prominent issue in the eyes of the public (Merdeka Center, 2007).

Suggestion of conducting a regression analysis or including the reception analysis in examining the impacts of agenda setting from the viewpoint of the audience can be undertaken to improve and extend this study. The findings of this content analysis study using the framework of agenda setting suggest that agenda setting effects take place as a consequence of two levels of agenda setting. Past studies seldom discuss two levels of agenda setting, framing and priming components, as a whole. Thus, future studies should apply a model of agenda setting which incorporates all the components.

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