

SANDAKAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: CANDIDATE REPRESENTATION, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND VOTER DEMOGRAPHICS

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ABSTRACT This study briefly analyses the political landscape in Sandakan, Sabah. Three elements or aspects will be discussed: candidate representation in Sandakan, political parties, and voter demographics. This study aims to provide an understanding of how these three elements shape the political landscape in Sandakan. For research methodology, qualitative design was applied by analysing the primary and secondary sources. The findings show that these three elements are interconnected and significantly impact Sandakan's politics. This research is hoped to provide an understanding of the political landscape in Sandakan, with the possibility for more research to be conducted to promote accountable government and guarantee that the voices of Sandakan's people are heard.

Keywords: Sandakan, political landscape, voter demographic, candidate representation, political parties.

INTRODUCTION

With the inclusion of Sabah as a state of Malaysia in 1963, the political climate in Sandakan changed significantly. Sandakan has played a role in shaping the scene of Sabah, reflecting the state's intricate political dynamics and diverse socio-cultural fabric. Sandakan experienced changes in terms of the political landscape since Sabah joined the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak, and Singapore to form a Federation of Malaysia in 1963 while facing opposition from a group of people over the autonomy of Sabah. Following the proposal of the Federation of Malaysia, people in Sabah segregated and divided into notable categories; those who opposed the ideas of Malaysia because they worried about losing autonomy over Sabah; those who supported the ideas; some Sabahan that's who preferred British intervention in Sabah until they can rule Sabah on their own.

In the past, most of the research had focused on Sandakan as a parliament constituency. This study aims to fill in the gap and contribute to the knowledge regarding Sandakan's politics as a district. To help political actors decide upon which policy to implement to improve the well-being of people in Sandakan. This paper also aims to explore the evolving political landscape of Sandakan, exploring the political representatives or candidates in the parliament constituency, political parties, and voter demographics. This article is divided into three sections. The first section explains the political landscape and literature on candidate

representation, political parties and voter demographics. The second section explains the methodology used in the research. The final section analyses the political landscape in Sandakan from three different angles: candidate representation, political parties, and voter demographics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Landscape

Political landscape can be understood as the overall picture, political situation, or power dynamics within a state, country, or parliamentary constituency. Political landscape is also the outcome of the interactions of various political actors, political institutions, or ideologies in a specific area. Many elements or aspects must be examined to understand the political landscape, such as political parties, political representation, voting, and demographic behaviour. All these factors will somehow interact with each other and help shape political behaviour and the decision-making processes. In this research, several aspects will be studied, such as political candidates or representatives in Sandakan, political parties, voter demographics, and behaviour.

Candidate Representation

The aim for the constituency to vote and to have representatives or candidates is for these groups of people to represent and voice out the interests of their constituents (Crane, 1960). According to Shama (1976), representatives or candidates are important because political marketing involves knowing the attitudes, behaviours, and needs of the voters or supporters for the political parties to present the political candidates who can meet the needs of the voters and win over them, contributing to the success of their political party, especially in an election. It is a practice in many countries where, in an electorocracy, the population or the citizens presumably choose specific representatives who will act on their behalf in the decision-making process, and those who win the seat or are chosen will carry out one or more potential roles to represent the interests of their constituents (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017; Guinier, 2008). In the case of Sandakan or Malaysia, multiple groups of people can generally be divided based on their ages, ethnicity, and gender and each of these groups has different interests. By studying political candidates or representatives in Sandakan, we can gain insight into its political dynamics. Each political candidate will represent the interests of their political parties and align them with the interests of the constituency. This will show the voting pattern, especially for the candidate who remains in the seat after several elections. Each candidate who contested the election will have qualities or attributes that affect voters who are voting for them. Additionally, getting insights from political candidates in Sandakan will help to grasp the needs of people in Sandakan and their priorities, allowing the voters to shape the future of their constituency by participating effectively in the democratic process.

Political Parties

Political parties have been associated as part of democracy, both historically and logically (Pomper, 1992). According to Edmund Burke (as cited by Pomper, 1992), 'Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed'. This definition only provides a normative standard for one kind of party, but not the general description of parties, as added by Pomper (1992). In addition, a political party might be viewed similarly to other social institutions, representing an organisation's union combined with a role-based system (Yanai, 1999). From the point of view of Yanai (1999), it is easier to understand that political parties are almost like other social institutions with the allocation of specific roles or responsibilities within the organisation. Members of the political parties are usually ranked by their capabilities or experiences, but there were some other cases where the political parties were in favour of seniority. Yanai (1999) also discussed that parties regularly try to manage the sources that lead to instability in a democratic system, such as competitive elections and the factionalisation of the legislature. This is especially true because there might be chaos during the process of transferring power, which usually happens after the election and factionalisation within the legislature due to different interests or ideologies that will lead to instability within the institution. This is where the political parties will play their roles in ensuring that the power is transferred peacefully and forming unity between its members regardless of their differences. Lastly, political party is the most significant authority in the government in Malaysia; it is essential to the affiliation of the candidate with the party as it will affect the voter's preferences during the election (Kausar, Muzaffar & Saqib, 2019). Political parties are one of the essential elements within the political landscape, as they allow people to shape them by choosing their representatives while encouraging citizens to become active members and empowering the political participation of the area.

Voter Demographic

In the previous paragraphs, we briefly discussed the importance of analysing Sandakan's political candidates or representatives and parties to understand its political landscape. For this part, we will delve into Sandakan's voting demographic. The voter's demographic is a big topic as it involves several groups or categorisation of voters. According to the definition in Britannica Dictionary (n.d.), a voter is "a person who votes or who has the legal right to vote." In a democratic society, voting is the right of citizens. It allows every citizen, regardless of their religion or ethnicity, to choose their representatives and shape the direction of the government in their country. However, some countries have imposed laws that mandate a minimum age for voters. In Malaysia, for instance, the minimum voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years old. For an individual to be counted as a voter, he or she needs to register with the electoral authorities of their constituency or countries, and voters usually vote in the general election or by-election, depending on what has been practised in their countries.

Based on Merriam-Webster (n.d.), demographic means "the statistical characteristics of human populations (such as age or income) used especially to identify markets". In Malaysia, every parliament will have access to data containing the demographic of the voters in the area. Demographic data will usually divide their population according to ethnicity, age, income, or membership. This will help the political parties to conduct a survey or research before, during or after the election. Political actors need access to this information as it will help them construct better policies, manifestos or programs that will attract more citizens to become part of their organisation and support them during the election. Hua et al., (2021) reported that numerous studies had been conducted to find the correlation between socio-demographic factors and voting behaviour. Some research indicates that other demographics such as the age and gender of voters can influence the voter turnout. For example, Wolfinger & Rosenstone (1980) found out that men are more likely to vote than women, and as their age increases, their possibility to turn out for voting also increased by approximately 4.5%. It shows that examining the demographics can help people grasp the idea of the election's outcome, and representation matters for every group in the society, regardless of their numbers in the population. Analysing the demographics can also help political parties in identifying and knowing more about the voters.

METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on some changes in Sandakan's politics after independence. This study employs qualitative design, namely, document analysis. Regarding the sources for this study, the data are collected from secondary data, such as from the internet, books, articles, journals, news, existing research papers and reports published by government agencies such as the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM). The political landscape in Sandakan is then analysed through the input obtained from political candidates or representatives in Sandakan based on the parliament constituency: Sandakan, Batu Sapi and Libaran. This is followed by the discussion on political parties and the voter demographics in Sandakan, which included these three domains: gender, age and ethnicity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Candidate Representation in Sandakan's Parliament Constituency

A crucial component of the political landscape is political representatives and candidates. They are important in forming policies, speaking for voters' needs, and making choices that impact states and localities. Politicians generally contested for a variety of posts, including parliament constituency, state constituency or the seats in the political parties themselves. As a result, candidates and representatives play a crucial role in shaping the larger political landscape and the efficiency of political systems which is determined based on the primary group in the area.

Sandakan is made up of Beluran, Kinabatangan, Sandakan, Telupid and Tongod. However, this paper focuses only on Sandakan's district or Sandakan town. There are three

parliamentary constituencies in Sandakan: P184 (Libaran), P185 (Batu Sapi) and P186 (Sandakan). For state constituencies, it is listed in the table below:

Table 1 Parliament and State Constituencies in Sandakan

Parliament Constituency	State Constituency
P184 (Libaran)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gum-gum • Sg. Manila • Sg. Sibuga
P185 (Batu Sapi)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sekong • Karamunting
P186 (Sandakan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elopura • Tanjong Papat

Source: MySPR Semak (2023)

P184 Libaran entered the political arena in 1995, P185 Batu Sapi contested in 2004, and P186 Sandakan contested in 1969. If we look at the political representatives in these three Parliament Constituencies, we see that each area has its preferences for representation. Figure 1 shows the area of Sandakan’s constituencies in Sabah.

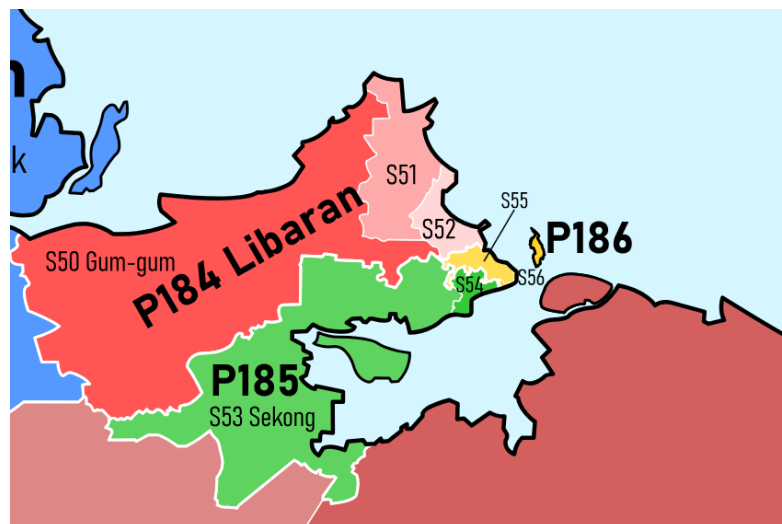


Figure 1 The Maps of Sandakan’s Area for the Three Constituencies in Sabah

Source: Wikipedia Contributors (2024)

Regarding candidate representation, one of the main points that usually surrounds candidate selection is the ethnic composition of the area. In Sabah, terms like Muslim *Bumiputra*, Non-Muslim *Bumiputras*, and Chinese are usually used to depict or categorize the population. *Muslim Bumiputra* is predominantly comprised of Muslim *Bajau*, *Sungai*, or *Bugis*. Non-Muslim *Bumiputras* are usually made up of the *Dusun*, *Kadazan*, or *Kadazandusun* communities, where most of them are Christian while some still follow animist beliefs. Lastly, the third group in Sandakan’s community is Chinese, who contributed to any changes or constants in the landscape of Sandakan’s politics. The dominant language of Chinese communities in Sandakan is *Hakka*, followed by Cantonese, Mandarin, English and others (Liao, 2018). The first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in Sandakan around 1860, and according to Liao (2018), they were the followers of the Taiping Rebellion. Each of these

communities has a unique voting pattern. The *Muslim Bumiputras* traditionally supported the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and other parties that coalition with Barisan Nasional (BN), supporting their goals of preserving the dominance of Muslims and Malay people in politics. Non-Muslim Bumiputras often supported or backed political parties that support the values of the non-Muslim Bumiputras and support Christian values, such as Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). Additionally, the emergence of Warisan that emphasized Sabahan's identity and autonomy has gained popularity among the Sabahan people, and not only among the Non-Muslim *Bumiputras* community. Regarding the Chinese community, the Chinese tend to vote for the parties usually known as the opposition parties, in this case, Democratic Action Party (DAP), that promote the minority's rights.

P186 Sandakan

P186 is the longest-sitting parliament constituency in Sandakan; since it was first contested for election in 1969, Chinese people have won seats in the legislature. The first representative for P186 Sandakan was a member of the Sabah Chinese Association (SCA) who contested in the 1969 Malaysian General Election and won the seat; Peter Lo Sui Yin also served as the second Chief Minister of Sabah, a post he held until 1974. Throughout the years, most of the candidates came from the Chinese communities. For example, *MySPRSemak* (n.d.) reported that in the 2013 general elections, two candidates were contested against each other; Liew Vui Keong (BN) and Wong Tien Fatt (DAP). In the 14th General Election, Wong Tien Fatt contested against Lim Ming Hoo (BN) and won with 19,094 votes as reported by *MySPRSemak* (n.d). The pattern of Chinese candidates contesting for Sandakan's constituency persisted until the most recent election, where Pakatan Harapan's candidate emerged victorious and has since served as Sandakan's representative. In the recent election, Vivian Wong Shir Yee (PH-DAP) won this seat with 16,673 votes, as she contested against several candidates, Alex Thien (Warisan), Lau Chi Keong @ Thomas Lau (GRS-SAPP), and three independent candidates. From the election results conducted in the past, it can be observed that candidate representation can affect the political landscape in Sandakan not only on the parliamentary level but also in Sandakan as a district. In the case of P186 Sandakan, there is a connection between candidates who contested in the election with demographic composition, highlighting the importance of ethnic identity in electoral politics.

P184 Libaran

To add, the second-longest parliament constituency in Sandakan is P184 Libaran, with three state constituencies under it, which had been under BN (UMNO) 's rules for a long time. The first political representative to hold this position at Libaran was Datuk Akbar Khan Abdulrahman. Then, Juslie Ajirol held the post for a long time, for which he contested under BN (UMNO) before Datuk Zakaria bin Mohd. Edris assumed the position in 2018 contested under BN (UMNO) before he joined the Gagasan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) in 2023. In the 15th General Election, Suhaimi Nasir (BN) won the seat at Libaran after contesting against Nordin Khani, Dr Peter Jr. Naintin, Haji Amdan, Jeffri from Pejuang and Sharif Bokrata. Based on the voter's structure provided by the website Department of Statistics Malaysia (n.d.), Libaran

comprises of 86.7% *Bumiputra*, 11% Chinese, 2.0% others, and the last group is Indian with 0.2%. While P186 Sandakan comprises the Chinese community, P184 Libaran comprises Sabah natives, or Malay. This explains why BN (UMNO) managed to hold this place under their rule since the first time this area was contested in the political arena of Sandakan. Suhaimi Nasir won the seat with 22,969 votes, followed by Peter Naintin from UPKO with 10,351 votes. Both candidates came from different political coalitions or parties. However, it shows that the population in Libaran's area preferred *Bumiputra* political representatives or candidates with the same background since Sabah natives mainly inhabited this area.

P185 Batu Sapi

P185 Batu Sapi was first contested in 2004. According to the DOSM (n.d.), the voter structure for this area was 75.9% *Bumiputra*, 22.1% Chinese and 1.7%, and Indians only made up 0.3% of the population. For P185 Batu Sapi, the candidates that contested for the seat of Batu Sapi were diverse regarding political parties and ethnicity, even when *Bumiputra* is the majority population for this constituency. Looking back through the past elections in 2004, Edmund Chong Ket Fah won the seat in the constituency unopposed before he contested under BN (PBS) against Chung Kwong Wing, an independent candidate, in 2008. BN (PBS) continued ruling this area when Tsen Thau Lin also contested under BN (PBS) in 2010 following the death of Edmund Ching Ket Fah. Surprisingly for Batu Sapi, PAS and STAR also contested for the seat in 2013, where Haji Hamzah became the representative from PAS and got 9,287 votes while Tsen Thau Lin got 13,085 votes. PAS is a political party focusing on Islamic Fundamentalism, while STAR is known as the Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku. It is surprising that both parties bravely sent their candidate to contest against BN for the seat of Batu Sapi, as this constituency has been under the ruling of BN since the first time it was contested. If we compare P185 Batu Sapi with P186 Sandakan and P184 Libaran, P185 Batu Sapi is unique in terms of having a variety of political candidates who contested in the election.

Based on the brief discussion on candidate representation for the three-parliament constituency in Sandakan's district, we can see that every parliamentary constituency in Sandakan has its preferences regarding voting or choosing candidates to become its representatives; it is like a pattern. Candidate representation influences the political landscape in Sandakan, and this is reflected through the act of choosing a candidate who possesses the same background or attributes as most of the population. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, candidates represented various political parties with varying backgrounds, including ethnicities. Their backgrounds deeply influence their strategies and appeal to voters, influencing them to vote for them. The populations of Sandakan comprise of various ethnic groups, and candidates with the same identities or cultural understanding may gain more support from the population. Every parliament constituency we discussed seeks representatives representing the area's demographics, indicating that citizens or people of each parliament constituency feel more included and empowered when the candidates who contested in an election support or recognise the needs of the communities. For instance, if the candidate wins the seat and the policy or any decision proposed benefits the primary group of the community,

it can influence politics in the future, in which the possibility of choosing the same candidate or another candidate with the same background as the previous candidate to guarantee the seat is higher. This leads to changes or consistency in Sandakan's political landscape.

Political Parties in Sandakan

Any political landscape would be complete by analysing the political parties that exist or are established in a particular area. The political party is an essential pillar that moulds or shapes public policy, representation, and governance, especially in Sabah, particularly in Sandakan. In this sense, one of the issues faced by the people in Sandakan is the lack of infrastructure and employment rates, and this is where the candidates or representatives from many political parties can provide solutions or ask for assistance from the government for handling this matter. Political parties, especially in the case of Sandakan, act as the 'voice' to the society or people in Sandakan and give voters a choice and a way to get involved in politics and the decision-making process at the state and national levels. Political parties also act as catalysts for political rivalry, directing elections and influencing public opinion. There are several political parties in Sandakan; most of the nationally significant political parties like Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Democratic Action Party (DAP), United Pasok Momogun Kadazan Organisation (UPKO), STAR known as the Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku, and Warisan are among the well-known ones in Sandakan. These parties frequently field candidates in local and national elections, vying for parliamentary seats and seats in the Sabah State Legislative Assembly.

The nature of political parties in Sandakan is a mix of Sabah-based regional parties and West Malaysian-based parties. Most prominent political party that advocate the issues of Sabah's autonomy is Warisan, before it was Parti Bersatu Sabah. Both political parties are Sabah-based regional political parties, while Warisan, formed in 2016 and led by Shafie Apdal, managed to secure seats in the House of Representatives and State Legislative Assembly even when it still can be considered a new political party as it formed less than 10 years. For PBS, historically, this political party also championed the rights of Sabahan in a way similar to that of Warisan. PBS was formed in 1985 by Joseph Pairin Kitingan, one of the politicians in Sabah. With that, this section will explain how political parties shape the political landscape in Sandakan by elucidating two views, which are the agenda of the political parties and the use of media by political parties to spread information. Alternatively, West Malaysian-based political parties had been in the ruling state or parliament constituency in Sandakan. For example, UMNO is a part of the BN coalition and has played a major role in Sabah's politics for a very long time, like what happened in Libaran. UMNO is known for their objectives in focusing on Malay-Muslim interests and usually aims at an area with many *Muslims*. One of the issues that have been raised is the usage of the slogan 'Sabah for Sabahan,' which has resulted in people rejecting the idea of UMNO and asking UMNO to leave Sabah due to the frustration by Sabahan towards the lack of attention paid to Sabah in general compared to Peninsular Malaysia (Ationg et al., 2021). The other West Malaysian-based political party in Sandakan is DAP, where it gained support from the Chinese community in Sandakan. Like UMNO, DAP has been rooted

in the parliamentary constituency of Sandakan currently, the seat is held by Vivian Wong Shir Yee.

Agenda of Political Parties

Before we discuss the agendas of political parties in detail, it is important to understand the issues involved in political mobilization. This helps political parties engage with their supporters. Three main issues in political mobilization revolved around a combination of religion, race, and developmental issues; however, for the past few months, the issue of development in several areas in Sandakan has been discussed widely, especially among social media users. Regardless of their race or religion, there is a strong demand among people in Sandakan for better conditions or improvement of the infrastructure and better public services. In January, Asmin (2024) from Sinar Harian wrote an article about the condition of the road that had been used to connect Telupid or other districts to Sandakan, which affects a lot of people, especially tourists. Other issues, such as religion or ethnicity, still exist and are discussed among the people, for instance, the usage of '*lain-lain*' and religious freedom in implementing Islamic law. Understanding this issue helps build stronger connections with their supporters, ensuring the mobilization efforts are relevant.

Every political party has its agenda, issues, or priorities that would be focused on and addressed, which can change the political landscape of the area. For example, Channel News Asia (2022) reported that according to the speech of Shafie Apdal, Sabahans must select local parties, considering that doing so would make it easier for them to meet the demands of Sabahans without going through the federal party hierarchy. In this context, Warisan's strategy to achieve their objective was to have a candidate to participate in the election; Alex Thien from Warisan contested the parliamentary seat in Sandakan. It is observed that, during an election campaign, political parties such as Warisan will use various means to convey the agenda or proposal through their candidate and get the support of the public. If the other political parties aim for more infrastructural development in Sandakan, then the political party will try to present their ideas initiating development in Sandakan through various platforms to attract voters and win the election. The details of programs or proposals from the political parties can help enhance the local economy and residents' quality of life. This can be seen when Vivian insisted on improving the basic infrastructure in Sandakan, such as water and electricity, to attract more investors to Sandakan (Fong, 2022). This is one of the political agendas of the political parties, to improve infrastructure. People in Sandakan who have the same opinion on the issue of basic infrastructure tend to vote for the political parties that present this idea. The election's outcome can influence Sandakan's political landscape in the big picture, depending on which party wins. Thus, the connection between the agenda of the political parties and the politics in Sandakan is evident. When political parties have urgent, important issues, it helps them win over the voters, and election outcomes will establish which political party has the authority to enact policies, ultimately affecting the region's development and the political landscape.

The use of Media by Political Parties

The previous paragraph discussed political parties' agendas and how they convey them in an election through the campaign. This section explains how the agenda helps shape Sandakan's political landscape, specifically through the use of media which is not limited to the election. In the current era, political parties can use both mass media and social media to reach their audience and share their agendas or proposals, not only during an election but also before and after it. Framing the issues faced by the people in Sandakan's district is necessary to gain and maintain the support of the people, or for the opposition party, it will be the chance to attract new voters. This can influence the public's perception of the policy that has been made, ultimately affecting the electoral outcomes in future elections. Moreover, media and messaging can help political parties build their members' image. It is usual for representatives to have their social media, which shows how they do their work as representatives. For example, political parties such as Parti Warisan Sandakan, UMNO Sandakan, and DAP Sandakan, have created Facebook pages to engage with their voters, where they can be regularly updated on their latest activities or programmes. Realizing that more people preferred to get more information through social media as anyone can easily access it, more political figures started to have accounts that helped them to communicate or build a public image for the voters' view. This method can help build a positive or negative perception between the voters or public with the political parties and their leaders, which may help to increase or decrease voter support. Overall, mass media and social media are powerful tools used by political parties and voters to shape Sandakan's political parties; they can influence public opinion, control their narrative on the ongoing situation, and build a positive image of the political parties that later shape the election's results in future and governance in Sandakan.

All in all, the agenda of political parties and media has become a crucial element used by political parties, which can affect the political landscape of Sandakan. Through their published agendas, the political parties present contrasting ideas, policies, and solutions to solve the most urgent problems in their constituency. These agendas work as a guide for governing, create a platform for public discourse, bring voters together and positively impact people's perceptions. Among other things, parties use media platforms and messaging strategies to cater their policies in a way that is appealing to the voting public. The parties can influence the public's opinion, mobilise supporters, and control the election outcomes in various ways, such as framing the issues faced by the voters, narrating their views, and shaping public perception negatively or positively. Parties use media platforms to spread or convey their message, strengthen the message they want to convey, and make the electorate see them as the best choice. On the other side, the media is a scrutiniser, and it reports the party programs as well, which can shape public opinion and make the parties accountable for their pledges and actions. This convergence of political party platforms, media, and messaging ultimately defines the course of governance, policy-making, and electoral outcomes in Sandakan, as it represents its citizenry's disparate interests, values, and dreams.

Voter Demographics

Understanding Sandakan's voter demographics is crucial in understanding the political climate of this dynamic area. With a varied population in terms of ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status, Sandakan offers a rich tapestry of voters with a range of priorities and points of view. A lot of factors such as gender, income, and education will have a significant impact on voting behaviour among voters, which will result in the election's outcome. It is fundamental to study the demographic variables that can help many political actors understand or find out which groups are actively engaged with politics, what issues are essential for them, and which political parties or candidates they are inclined to support. By examining voter demographics from age distribution, gender, and ethnicity, we can better understand Sandakan's political dynamics and the factors influencing democratic representation and participation. For this reason, three elements or pillars under demographics will be discussed in this section: gender, age, and ethnicity. Studying the number of males and females in Sandakan's district helps the government to identify the priorities and viewpoints of both genders, and it also helps to encourage males and females to be represented equally in the government. It is also essential to study the demographic of Sandakan in terms of age; people of different ages will have different priorities, especially those working and looking for better opportunities. They usually tend to choose a representative who can help to develop the economy and increase the employment rates, while other age groups have different views and priorities. Meanwhile, the last fundamental pillar that will be studied for this part is ethnicity. Ethnicity had been a central point in Sabahan's politics, and it can be seen through the names of the political parties established in Sabah and research published in the past. If we went through a book on Sabah's history, ethnic identity was used in identifying groups of people since the colonial administration.

Gender

Gender is essential in understanding Sandakan's political landscape as it will influence representation and public policy. Gender is usually related to the concept of representation; ensuring diversity in gender will help to reflect the variety of viewpoints and needs. In the Sandakan district, males comprise 51.5% of the population, while females are 48.5%. However, it does not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens. Still, it can be used to understand the political landscape of Sandakan.

Table 2 shows no significant differences in the numbers of males and females in all parliament constituencies. However, one of the issues that did not get attention in Sabah is the lack of female representatives, even when women made up a substantial portion of Sandakan's population or each parliamentary constituency. In the context of women, those involved in the decision-making process need to implement a policy that will help improve the conditions of women in Sandakan. Azizah (2002) mentioned that women could positively impact society by raising their children or giving awareness to people close to them, even though women might not hold formal political positions. Whether or not women are actively engaged in politics, they can still make an impact in the society through the policies or programmes that the government

has made to improve their life condition. This can directly or indirectly help political parties or candidates to maintain or get support from women in Sandakan, for which the same is applied to males too. During an election, voter turnout was one of the effects of gender disparities in political participation. Azizah (2002) added that ensuring women’s voices to be heard in the political process can prevent barriers hindering women from participating in politics. In short, it is crucial to pay attention to the gender disparities in Sandakan as it will influence Sandakan’s political landscape. By doing this, political parties or representatives can tackle many issues, such as policy priorities, political representation, and participation of women in Sandakan.

Table 2 Percentages of Males and Females in Sandakan Based on Parliament Constituencies.

Parliament Constituency	Male	Female
P184 (Libaran)	50.9%	49.1%
P185 (Batu Sapi)	52.2%	47.8%
P186 (Sandakan)	51.2%	48.8%

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.

Age

Age can be a factor that affects voter turnout in the election and influences any changes in Sandakan’s political landscape. According to Webster and Pierce (2019), their research indicates that voters of all ages will prefer to vote for a candidate closest to them. Webster and Pierce (2019) tried to examine how age similarity can be used as a significant reason for co-partisan candidates, and they concluded that people prefer to vote for political candidates who are closer to the voters in age. For this part, the age group will be divided into three categories based on the parliament constituencies: working adults, children and elderly.

Based on Table 3, it is noticed that more than half of the population is of working adult’s age. Therefore, they will have more power to decide the election outcome. However, the elderly and children should be considered, as every age group will have a variety of priorities and concerns that can influence their voting preferences and behaviour. For example, the working adults’ groups may prefer to vote for political parties or candidates that promise more job opportunities or economic development. In 2020, DAP Malaysia (2020) reported that Warisan Plus in Sandakan proposed five agendas in their manifesto for the 2020 Sabah state election: establishing a university and creating many job opportunities for people in Sandakan. Even if the previous manifestos were for state elections, it is still relevant in understanding how the age group can help influence the political landscape and the way political actors choose which issues should be prioritized. Also, studying age groups can help political parties to identify which medium to be used to reach and engage with voters. In this context, younger parties are more familiar with social media, whereas the elderly group will prefer other methods or platforms. In short, every age group in Sandakan should be considered when constructing a comprehensive policy that will bring positive outcomes to people, regardless of age. Political parties, policymakers, and representatives must understand Sandakan's age demographics. Appreciating the varied perspectives, voting behaviours, and policy implications among

different age groups can help governments create more effective and all-encompassing political plans and policies that would fulfil the needs of people of all ages.

Table 3 Age Group in Sandakan Based on Parliament Constituencies.

Parliament Constituency	Children	Working Adults	Elderly
P184 (Libaran)	27.8%	66.9%	5.3%
P185 (Batu Sapi)	23.5%	70.5%	5.9%
P186 (Sandakan)	24.4%	69.0%	6.6%

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.

Besides, the Undi18 also contributed to the change in voter demographics in Sandakan. Kasmani (2023) stated that youth engagement in politics is important for long-lasting democracy, and in the general election in 2022, 1.3 million voters aged between 18 – 21 years old, where the registered voters increased to 40%. At this age it is common for people at this age to use social media since it is easy for them to get access to it. Based on the research conducted by Kasmani (2023), due to the usage of social media, Syed Saddiq was the top choice when it comes to the favourite politicians among the respondents; it is not a surprise as he was active on social media and bringing up the issue that related with teenagers and young people. The research indicates that teenagers and young people spend most of their time on social media such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, and it can shape their political views and influence election outcomes. With them made up of most of the population, it also shaped the policy that will be implemented in future, where more youth-friendly policies will be prioritized to gain their support, such as in education sector, technological advancement and job opportunities. As in the case of Sandakan, the working adult population is more than 50% of the population for all three parliament constituencies; issues like job opportunities and development were the most concerning, and any political parties that paid attention to resolving this issue might end up getting the support from young people and teenagers. In conclusion, Undi18 has the potential to bring significant changes to Sandakan’s political landscape over time, affecting election results, political parties’ objectives or strategies during the elections and the political culture in Sandakan.

Ethnicity

Table 4 Ethnicity in Sandakan Based on Parliament Constituencies.

Parliament Constituency	Bumiputra	Chinese	Indian	Others
P184 (Libaran)	86.7%	11.0%	0.2%	2.0%
P185 (Batu Sapi)	75.9%	22.1%	0.3%	1.7%
P186 (Sandakan)	73.1%	25.0%	0.4%	1.5%

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.

There are multiple kinds of people in Sandakan such as the *Bumiputra* (local groups), Chinese, Indians, and more. In Sandakan and Malaysia, people's backgrounds can affect politics, such as

voting and their involvement. In both Sandakan and Malaysia, ethnicity often significantly influences politics, specifically voting patterns and political engagement. Political actors can use the data from any government agency to understand why some parliamentary constituencies preferred to have a political candidate with specific attributes to become their representatives or why some political parties only contested a candidate from a particular ethnicity. To add, studying the population from the ethnic perspective also helps researchers, political parties, and politicians find a way to unite people despite their different ethnicities. Yeo (2022) stated in his writings that Sandakan and Jesselton, under North Borneo, were divided by class, ethnicity, and religion. Surprisingly, it still becomes an issue not only in Sandakan but Sabah. Moreover, several political parties were established in Sabah have aimed to protect the rights of certain ethnicities, such as USNO, UNKO and UPKO. Dolah et al., (2018) wrote that establishing ethnic-based political parties sometimes resulted in conflicts and power struggles. However, there was also a coalition between some ethnic-based political parties that managed to unite two different political parties and work together in Sabah's politics. For Sandakan's district, since most of the population is *Bumiputra*, political parties may use this opportunity to gain more support and form a sense of belonging and solidarity with the *Bumiputra* communities to attract more voters. It can impact the landscape of politics in Sandakan as they form most of the population. At the same time, political actors should also protect the rights of minorities, taking care of their welfare to make sure that they also feel included.

Another point is the declining number of voters among the Chinese community and the increasing number of *Bumiputra* voters in Sandakan P186. In the 13th General Election, voter turnout was 53% out of 37,058 eligible voters, 49.29% out of 28,668 in the 14th General Election, and 44.2% out of 30,919 in the 15th General Election. The voter turnout for *Bumiputra* in this constituency has increased since 2013. Migration is one of many contributing factors, and it is not only happening to the Chinese population but basically to the people in Sandakan. Younger Chinese are moving out of Sandakan to get better opportunities, either in education or job opportunities. The issue of economic development in Sandakan was one of the issues voiced out during DAP's campaign on rejecting BN, as written by Govindasamy and Yew Meng (2018). An extra element is the increased *Bumiputra* population in Sandakan P186, which affected the demographic balance. Sandakan became more urbanized as young people moved into the centres looking for opportunities, particularly since it is known for its ecotourism, which attracts many tourists and visitors. Lee (2024) from *The Star* quoted Sandakan's MP urging tourism to step up the promotion of the district's attractions. It can help generate more income and develop the economy of people in Sandakan, indirectly attracting many people to move to the districts and changing the voter demographic in the future.

Understanding the needs and issues of each ethnicity in Sandakan will many political actors to create policies and programs that cater to the needs of all ethnic groups, promoting fair development and socio-economic opportunities. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that every ethnicity may have different aims and objectives. While recognizing the diversity of Sandakan's community is also essential, it is equally important to promote unity and solidarity among all residents of Sandakan, regardless of their backgrounds. Through highlighting shared values and common objectives among different ethnic groups in Sandakan, the gaps between them are

lessened. This would foster a sense of community and belonging, where people are standing together as one nation to develop Sandakan. To conclude, examining the demographics of ethnic groups in Sandakan can lead to two outcomes: merging their differences in ethnicity and helping to bring about development in Sandakan or using this as an agenda to gain more support from the major ethnic group. Both possess a powerful impact on Sandakan's political landscape.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the political landscape of Sandakan is complex and strongly influenced by its social, historical, and economic context. A thorough analysis of the candidate representation in Sandakan based on the parliamentary constituencies- Sandakan, Libaran and Batu Sapi – reveals that the various candidates from many political parties are representing their respective constituencies made up of diverse society. Additionally, the agenda of the political parties alongside their strategic use of social media possess a crucial role in shaping voters' perceptions and the public discourse, which is necessary for both voters and political parties. At last, an analysis of voter demographics offers important insight into the composition of electoral and voting patterns among voters in Sandakan. All these components create a dynamic and shift the landscape in Sandakan's politics, which can bring a huge impact or changes in Sabah's politics, too. Future research can examine the other elements that shaped Sandakan's political landscape.

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