

# By-Election N.20 Sungai Bakap and Malaysian Politics After Ge15: Competition, Dynamics and Implications

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**Abstract:** The political situation and by-elections in Malaysia after the 15th General Election (GE15) have become a crucial barometer for the stability and legitimacy of the Unity Government formed by the cooperation between Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH). The by-election for state constituency N.20 Sungai Bakap in Penang is particularly significant because it reversed expectations that the PKR candidate, backed by the Unity Government, would capture the seat from PAS, and instead produced an enlarged majority for Perikatan Nasional (PN). This article analyses the Sungai Bakap by-election as a critical case for understanding post-GE15 political dynamics, focusing on Chinese voter behaviour, the shifting support of young Malay voters and the fragility of the UMNO–PH coalition. The analysis is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) How did economic issues and the cost-of-living shape Chinese voting behaviour in Sungai Bakap? (RQ2) How did tensions within the UMNO–PH partnership affect Malay youth support patterns? (RQ3) To what extent are the concepts of protest voting and civil disobedience useful for explaining voter behaviour in this by-election? Empirically, the article relies on a mixed-methods case study design combining official Election Commission (EC) data, field observation, media content and semi-structured interviews with party activists and former party members. Theoretically, it draws on retrospective economic voting, protest/anti-incumbent voting and ethnic bloc voting/party–ethnic linkage. The findings show that: (i) Chinese voters engaged in a form of economic protest voting that resembles civil disobedience at the ballot box; (ii) Malay youths increasingly defected from UMNO and PKR towards PAS due to coalition mismanagement and perceived arrogance of key leaders; and (iii) the “green wave” narrative is less relevant for Chinese voters, who instead prioritised economic and local service delivery issues. The article concludes by discussing the implications for GE16 and for understanding coalition politics and ethnic voting in contemporary Malaysia.

**Keywords:** by-elections; Unity Government; retrospective economic voting; protest voting; ethnic bloc voting.

## Introduction

The 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022 reshaped Malaysian politics by producing a hung parliament and leading to the formation of a Unity Government led by Pakatan Harapan (PH) in cooperation with mainly Barisan Nasional (BN) but also Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan

Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Parti Warisan Sabah (WARISAN). While this arrangement resolved the immediate deadlock, it also intensified long-standing ethno-political tensions and raised questions about the durability of coalition-based governance, particularly among young voters shaped by ethnic, religious and economic grievances.

This article examines the Sungai Bakap by-election as a critical case to understand the evolving dynamics of Malaysian politics after GE15, especially the behaviour of Chinese voters and young Malay voters in a mixed constituency historically associated with DAP dominance at the parliamentary level.

The analysis is structured around three research questions:

RQ1: How did economic issues and the cost of living shape Chinese voting behaviour in the N.20 Sungai Bakap by-election?

RQ2: How did tensions within the UMNO–PH partnership affect Malay youth support patterns?

RQ3: In the context of the Sungai Bakap by-election, to what extent are the concepts of protest voting and civil disobedience appropriate for explaining voter behaviour?

To address these questions, the article draws on three interrelated theoretical lenses: retrospective economic voting, protest/anti-incumbent voting, and ethnic bloc voting & party–ethnic linkage. Sungai Bakap is treated as a single-case study through which broader national trends can be inferred, particularly in relation to the traction of the so-called “green wave”, the durability of the Unity Government, and the outlook for GE16.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and outlines the theoretical framework. Section 3 explains the research design and methods. Section 4 provides background to the Sungai Bakap contest and turnout patterns. Section 5 presents the analysis of Chinese and Malay voter behaviour, coalition cohesion and the green wave narrative. Section 6 interprets the official results through the lens of the three theories. Section 7 concludes with implications and suggestions for future research.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Retrospective Economic Voting

Retrospective economic voting theory posits that voters evaluate incumbents based on perceived past economic performance. When economic conditions deteriorate or promises on cost of living are not fulfilled, voters may punish the governing coalition at the ballot box. In the Malaysian context, scholars have highlighted how dissatisfaction with economic management contributed to turning points such as the fall of BN in 2018 and mass protests during earlier crises (e.g. Zawiyah Mohd Zain & Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2012; Mohammad Agus Yusoff & Muhammad Mashril Abdul Jalil, 2019).

In Sungai Bakap, economic grievances centred on subsidy rationalisation (especially diesel), inflation and the rising cost of daily necessities. For Chinese voters, economic prosperity, cultural security and education have consistently been identified as core priorities. When these expectations are not met, voters may disengage, abstain or shift to opposition parties, even if the seat itself does not change the government. The article applies retrospective economic voting to explain why many Chinese voters chose either not to vote or to symbolically support PN despite historically backing PH/DAP.

### 2.2 Protest Voting, Anti-Incumbent Sentiment and Civil Disobedience

Protest voting is a form of anti-incumbent behaviour where voters express dissatisfaction with the ruling government or the political establishment rather than endorsing the opposition's program per se. In some contexts, protest voting at the ballot box may play a functional role similar to civil disobedience, whereby citizens symbolically "punish" rulers without resorting to street protests.

In Malaysia, the literature on civil disobedience has focused on movements such as Reformasi 1998 and street protests sparked by perceived economic injustice and political repression (Zawiyah Mohd Zain & Mohd Naeim Ajis, 2016). These studies show that when institutions are perceived as unresponsive, citizens resort to various repertoires of protest.

In Sungai Bakap, however, Chinese voters appear to have chosen a quieter, institutionalised form of protest: reducing turnout, shifting a small but meaningful share of votes to PN and signalling displeasure through the ballot box rather than mass demonstrations.

This article therefore treats protest voting as an electoral manifestation of civil disobedience, while also recognising that the term "civil disobedience" must be used cautiously, given the absence of organised extra-institutional mobilisation in this case.

### 2.3 Ethnic Bloc Voting and Party–Ethnic Linkages

Ethnic bloc voting and party–ethnic linkage theories emphasise the long-term association between specific ethnic communities and particular parties or coalitions. In Malaysia, UMNO has historically been linked to Malay interests, while parties like DAP, MCA and Gerakan have competed for Chinese support. After GE15, the Unity Government disrupted traditional alignments: UMNO partnered with PKR and DAP, creating tension among both Malay and Chinese grassroots supporters.

Past research underlines how ethnic identities, party narratives and perceived ethnic champions shape voting patterns. In Sungai Bakap, the case is complicated: a Malay-majority state seat within a parliamentary area that has long been associated with DAP, but where Chinese voters still form a significant bloc.

The by-election thus provides a valuable site to observe (i) whether Chinese voters continue to behave as a bloc for PH, (ii) how Malay youth interpret UMNO's cooperation with PH, and (iii) how the "green wave" narrative interacts with ethnic perceptions and economic grievances.

These three theoretical strands—retrospective economic voting, protest/anti-incumbent voting and ethnic bloc voting—jointly inform the analysis of RQ1–RQ3 in the remainder of this article.

## Research Design and Methods

This study adopts a single-case study design focusing on the N.20 Sungai Bakap by-election as an analytically rich case of post-GE15 political contestation. The case is selected because it combines several important features: a mixed ethnic constituency, a historically strong DAP presence at the parliamentary level, direct competition between PH and PN and high expectations that PH would win following its success in Kuala Kubu Bharu.

### 3.1 Data Sources

The analysis is based on a **mixed-methods approach**, combining quantitative and qualitative data:

#### Quantitative data

Official results and turnout statistics for PRK N.20 Sungai Bakap provided by the Election Commission (EC), including comparison with the 2022 state election in the same constituency.

Aggregated turnout trends from recent by-elections (Pelangai, Kemaman, Kuala Kubu Bharu, and Sungai Bakap) across time slots during polling day.

### **Qualitative data**

Fieldwork conducted in the Nibong Tebal parliamentary area and the N.20 Sungai Bakap state constituency for approximately three weeks, covering the pre-nomination period, the campaign period and the immediate aftermath of polling day.

Semi-structured interviews with:

party leaders and strategists from DAP, UMNO and PKR,

campaign workers and youth activists, and

former party members familiar with local political dynamics.

For confidentiality, these respondents are anonymised as *Informant A*, *Informant B*, *Informant C* and *Informant D*.

Media reports and commentary from mainstream and alternative outlets, including national newspapers, online portals and party-linked platforms.

Secondary literature such as academic books, journal articles and think-tank reports on Malaysian elections, economic grievances and the “green wave” narrative.

### **3.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted in person and through follow-up conversations during the campaign. They explored topics such as perceptions of Chinese and Malay voters, coalition cooperation, campaign strategies and responses to economic policies such as diesel subsidy rationalisation. Notes were taken during or immediately after these interactions.

Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis, with codes derived both deductively (from the theoretical framework: economic grievances, protest voting, ethnic loyalty, coalition cohesion and “green wave”) and inductively (emerging themes such as water supply issues, perceptions of leader arrogance and GOTV capacity). Quantitative data was used to triangulate narratives, especially claims about turnout, ethnic patterns and majority swings.

While the study provides rich insights into Sungai Bakap, it is limited by the absence of detailed official ethnic-level voting data at the polling district level and by the non-probability sampling of interviewees. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an in-depth, theory-informed case study rather than statistically generalisable evidence for all Malaysian constituencies.

## **Background to the Sungai Bakap By-Election**

N.20 Sungai Bakap is part of the Nibong Tebal parliamentary constituency in Penang. The state seat is Malay-majority but contains significant Chinese and Indian minorities, with several polling districts understood by party activists as “Chinese strongholds”. DAP has historically dominated the Nibong Tebal parliamentary seat since 2008, giving the perception that the area is part of a broader PH bastion.

In the 2022 state election, PAS (under PN) captured the Sungai Bakap seat with a majority of 1,563 votes. Following the death of the incumbent assemblyperson, a by-election was called. Political expectations were shaped by the recent PH victory in the Kuala Kubu Bharu by-election, where non-Malay voters had strongly backed the Unity Government’s candidate.

Senior PH and Unity Government leaders publicly projected confidence that the PKR candidate, Dr Joohari Ariffin, could replicate this momentum and “wrest” the seat from PAS. At the same time, internal doubts persisted within DAP about UMNO’s ability to mobilise Malay support and about the depth of grassroots acceptance of the UMNO–DAP partnership.

On the ground, local activists observed that young Malay voters in northern states had become increasingly receptive to PAS and PN, especially since the 2023 state elections, while Chinese voters were showing signs of fatigue and disillusionment with the Unity Government’s handling of economic issues and local service delivery.

These mixed expectations set the stage for a contest that ultimately defied optimistic forecasts by PH-aligned think tanks and party strategists.

## Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1 Chinese Voters, Economic Grievances and Retrospective Voting (RQ1)

Early internal surveys by DAP Penang involving around 2,500 Chinese voters in Sungai Bakap suggested three key points (Informant A, interview, June 2024):

A majority of Chinese voters were still inclined to support the PH candidate, not out of enthusiasm but due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives, despite frustration with the Unity Government’s handling of the national economy and cost of living.

Many Chinese voters remained sceptical of the UMNO–DAP partnership, given decades of mutual hostility and negative perceptions of UMNO at the grassroots.

Awareness of the PKR candidate, Dr Joohari, was relatively low among Chinese voters, although DAP leaders believed their survey sample was adequate as an initial barometer.

These initial findings seemed consistent with retrospective economic voting: Chinese voters were unhappy with economic conditions, yet still expected to fall back on PH as the lesser evil.

A survey by the Institut Darul Ehsan (IDE), involving 786 respondents across eight polling districts, also projected a narrow but comfortable win for the PKR candidate, giving him 53.2% support versus 44% for the PAS candidate. IDE emphasised, however, that final outcomes would depend heavily on “Get Out The Vote” (GOTV) capacity, which they acknowledged PAS had historically executed more effectively.

On polling day, turnout patterns and final results contradicted these optimistic expectations. Chinese turnout was significantly lower than in previous elections; local observers and media reports noted that some Chinese voters either abstained or openly expressed frustration with the Unity Government’s performance, especially on economic issues, subsidy rationalisation and rising prices. Field interviews indicated that some long-time Anwar supporters felt “betrayed” by unfulfilled promises relating to cost of living and Chinese education concerns, to the point of symbolically rejecting campaign materials for the PKR candidate.

According to Wong Chun Quan (2024), the low turnout of non-Malay voters—particularly Chinese and Indian voters—before midday on polling day was an early indicator that PH was heading for defeat. He argued that, moving forward, PH’s campaign machinery must prioritise mobilising non-Malay voters early in the morning to secure electoral advantage. This view is supported by Lim Su Yun (2024), who emphasised that PH needs a more targeted strategy to ensure non-Malay voter turnout, especially at a time when Malay voters are increasingly inclined to shift their support to PN.

Based on Predeep Nambiar's (2024) field study during the N.20 Sungai Bakap by-election, interviews with PH campaign workers and local voters revealed that approximately 10% of Chinese voters supported PN, while a segment of Chinese voters chose not to turn out at all as an act of protest against the Unity Government's policies. These voters felt that the government had neglected their core expectations—particularly the need to address rising local economic pressures, the cost of living, and to provide clearer explanations regarding the diesel subsidy rationalisation programme.

Meanwhile, Tai Zee Kin (2024) observed that through DAP, PH had failed to convince Chinese voters that the Unity Government was capable of resolving key economic issues, addressing the rising prices of essential goods, and reducing the overall cost of living. As a result, he argued that DAP was increasingly perceived—much like MCA before it—as ineffective in addressing the core concerns of Chinese voters.

Siti Zubaidah Zakaraya (2024) argues that the outcome of the N.20 Sungai Bakap by-election reflects a clear form of protest voting among Chinese voters and younger voters more broadly, who were dissatisfied with the Unity Government's continued failure to address the cost-of-living issues promised in the GE15 manifesto. Similarly, Dr. Sivamurugan Pandian (USM) and former Bangi MP Dr. Ong Kian Ming (DAP) noted that local Chinese voters understood that the Sungai Bakap by-election would not directly influence state or federal policy, which contributed to a sharper decline in turnout among Chinese and Indian voters compared to Malay voters (Emir Zainul, 2024).

In addition, Fan Xiao Qi (2024) stated that Chinese protest votes emerged because the Unity Government failed to resolve local economic concerns relating to subsidy adjustments, inflation, and rising living costs, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among grassroots voters. This assessment is echoed by Emir Zainul (2024), who emphasised that these localised economic pressures shaped voter decision-making and served as a signal of displeasure directed at the Federal Government.

From a theoretical standpoint, this behaviour can be interpreted as a form of retrospective economic voting blended with protest voting. Chinese voters did not necessarily shift en masse to PAS—indeed, their structural aversion towards Islamist parties remained—but they punished the incumbent coalition through abstention and reduced support for PH, while a small minority reportedly backed PN as a protest signal.

In this sense, their behaviour approximates an electoral, institutionalised version of civil disobedience: rather than marching on the streets, they withheld full support from the government they had previously helped to bring to power, knowing that the by-election outcome would not change the federal government but would send a clear message.

## **5.2 Coalition Fractures, Campaign Missteps and Malay Youth Swing (RQ2)**

The Sungai Bakap campaign exposed significant fractures within the Unity Government coalition, particularly between UMNO and PKR/DAP, which directly affected Malay youth voting behaviour.

At the organisational level, early coordination between DAP and UMNO was weak. DAP had initially pledged to mobilise at least 2,000 outstation Chinese voters to return home but eventually managed to contact only about half that number by telephone. On the Malay side, Puteri UMNO Penang, tasked with contacting “white” (core) Malay voters, was reported by local activists to have worked largely in isolation without effective coordination with PKR.

On polling day, several PKR women's booths reportedly closed earlier than planned, while PAS's machinery remained aggressive in tracking and mobilising late voters (Informant B, field observation, June 2024). This operational weakness in GOTV efforts had direct consequences for turnout and vote

share.

At the elite level, tensions came to the surface when the Deputy President of PKR, Rafizi Ramli, publicly rebuked a UMNO Youth activist who questioned the political impact of diesel price adjustments. Rafizi’s subsequent comments, in which he described critics of his subsidy rationalisation formula as “bahalol (crazy)” and “stupid”, went viral on social media and were widely perceived as arrogant and dismissive.

UMNO Youth activists interviewed on the ground repeatedly cited these remarks as a key reason why Malay youths abandoned the PH candidate and gravitated towards PAS, which positioned itself as the champion of ordinary Malays facing rising costs.

In addition, Source 2 (2024) expressed scepticism toward think-tank surveys that predicted a higher likelihood of a PKR victory. Based on conversations and his prior experience with UMNO and PAS campaign machinery during the 12 August 2023 state elections across Penang—particularly in Nibong Tebal—he argued that young Malay voters in the northern states were far more realistic and prioritised three issues above all others.

First, they believed that the welfare of Malay voters had been increasingly neglected since DAP began governing Penang in 2008. Second, they perceived the protection of Islam as progressively eroding. Third, they were burdened by the daily cost-of-living pressures faced by semi-urban and traditional village communities—demographics that make up the core voters of N.20 Sungai Bakap. To these voters, such concerns were far more pressing than the national economic narratives promoted by PM10 under the Unity Government, which they viewed as rhetorical rather than substantive.

Source 2’s doubts regarding PH’s actual support level in N.20 Sungai Bakap were reinforced by a discussion with Dr Mohammad Redzuan Othman (Executive Chairman, IDE) immediately after Nomination Day on 22 June 2024 at Dewan Serbaguna Sungai Jawi, Nibong Tebal.

According to Harakahdaily (2024), early voting trends before the Sungai Bakap by-election appeared to favour PH, primarily due to the ethnic-based voting behaviours described in the work of Dr Bridget Welsh, who argues that racial identity remains the most dominant factor influencing Malaysian voters.

With respect to turnout trends from previous by-elections, SPR data indicated that voters generally continued to turn out at expected levels, as reflected in Table 1. This finding aligned with DAP’s early internal assessment for N.20 Sungai Bakap, which projected that Chinese voters would still turn out and support Dr Joohari (Source 1, 2024).

<b>Voting Time Period</b>	<b>Kemaman By-Election (December 2023)</b>	<b>Pelangai By-Election (October 2023)</b>	<b>Kuala Kubu Baharu By-Election (May 2024)</b>	<b>Sungai Bakap By-Election (July 2024)</b>
9:00 AM	9%	10%	9%	8%
10:00 AM	18%	21%	18%	16%
11:00 AM	27%	32%	20%	24%
12:00 PM	35%	44%	32%	31%
1:00 PM	42%	53%	38%	38%
2:00 PM	48%	59%	44%	44%
3:00 PM	55%	65%	50%	51%
4:00 PM	60%	69%	55%	57%
5:00 PM	No information	no information	59%	61%
<b>6:00 PM</b>	<b>65.67%</b>	<b>72.12%</b>	<b>61.51%</b>	<b>63.45%</b>

**Source: Official Voter Turnout Percentages by the Election Commission (SPR)**  
(<https://mysprsemak.spr.gov.my/>)

However, once polling concluded on 22 June 2024, PH's expectations collapsed entirely. By as early as 3:00 p.m., key components of the Unity Government were already blaming one another for the impending defeat. Several PKR and UMNO offices in Nibong Tebal reportedly failed to function effectively in mobilising their respective "white" (core) voters. This confirmed IDE's earlier assessment that the outcome would ultimately depend on which coalition possessed superior GOTV machinery – an area in which PAS had clear dominance (Dr Mohammad Redzuan Othman; Source 1; Source 2, 2024).

According to Source 4 (2025), early voting patterns were already revealing by 11:00 a.m. Turnout below the 30% mark at that point strongly indicated that PAS was on track to win. This aligns with the statement of SPR Chairman Ramlan Harun, who revealed that 43.5% of early voters were Malay youths aged 39 and below (Emir Zainul, 2024). Source 4 (2025) emphasised that this demographic has recently shown a consistent inclination toward PAS and has been one of the decisive blocs contributing to PAS victories.

Here, protest voting and ethnic bloc voting intersect. Many young Malay voters appeared less attached to UMNO as an ethnic party of choice and more willing to shift towards PAS/PN, seen as more authentic defenders of Malay-Muslim interests and less complicit in unpopular economic decisions.

The historical party–ethnic linkage between UMNO and Malays weakened as Malay youths reacted against the perceived arrogance of PKR leaders and the symbolic compromise represented by UMNO's partnership with DAP. From their perspective, punishing the Unity Government by voting PAS was both an ethnic and an economic statement.

This pattern illustrates how coalition mismanagement can accelerate realignment within an ethnic community. Instead of consolidating Malay support for the Unity Government, the Sungai Bakap campaign alienated key segments of UMNO's traditional base, especially younger voters who were already inclined towards PAS following the 2023 state elections.

### **5.3 The "Green Wave" Narrative and its Limits (RQ1 & RQ3)**

The term "green wave" has been widely used in Malaysian discourse to describe PAS-PN's surge in Malay-majority constituencies after GE15. In Sungai Bakap, both PH and PN deployed the green wave narrative, albeit in opposite directions. DAP and PH attempted to mobilise non-Malay voters through fear of a conservative Islamic ascendancy, using large billboards in Mandarin warning against the dangers of the "green wave". PAS and PN, conversely, framed the election as a continuation of a righteous Malay-Muslim movement against a morally and economically compromised government.

However, field evidence suggests that Chinese voters were largely unmoved by green wave propaganda, whether from PH or PN. Their priority remained economic stability and cost of living, with water supply problems and local service delivery emerging as equally salient issues. The fear-inducing messaging about the green wave did not prevent turnout decline among Chinese voters nor ensure unwavering support for PH. In practice, their behaviour was more consistent with economic protest voting than with ideological or religious polarisation.

For Malay voters, especially in traditional UMNO strongholds, the green wave did have resonance. PAS successfully capitalised on feelings that UMNO had "betrayed" Malay interests by aligning with DAP, giving ideological and identity-based content to what was also an anti-incumbent revolt. Yet as some analysts noted, it is premature to declare the green wave as a permanent transformation. Sungai Bakap shows that socio-economic grievances and local issues can be as important as religious mobilisation, and that green wave narratives risk oversimplifying a complex mix of economic, ethnic and coalition-related discontent.

In terms of RQ3, the Sungai Bakap case suggests that “civil disobedience” in electoral form is more visible among Chinese voters, while protest voting against incumbents is more visible among Malay voters aligning with PAS. The green wave framework captures only part of this picture; the remainder is better explained by retrospective economic voting and frustration with coalition behaviour.

#### **5.4 Local Service Delivery, Water Supply and Anti-Incumbent Sentiment (RQ1 & RQ2)**

Beyond macroeconomic concerns, local service delivery—especially chronic water supply disruptions—emerged as a decisive factor. Residents in Malay and Chinese localities alike had suffered repeated water interruptions over several years. The Chief Minister of Penang publicly apologised to Sungai Bakap residents during the campaign and promised that electing the PKR candidate would facilitate a speedy solution. Nevertheless, many voters perceived these assurances as too little, too late.

In some areas, previous assistance such as water tanks was reportedly withdrawn after certain PKR candidates lost earlier elections, reinforcing perceptions of partisan and inconsistent service delivery (Informant B). PAS leaders further exploited these grievances, accusing the DAP-led state government of neglecting Malay-majority areas and framing water issues as evidence of systemic marginalisation. This narrative resonated with both Malay and some Chinese voters, who increasingly saw local problems as manifestations of a broader pattern of governmental insensitivity.

From the perspective of retrospective economic voting, water and infrastructure issues function as concrete markers of performance. Voters do not simply react to abstract GDP figures; they respond to daily experiences such as turning on the tap and finding no water. When such issues persist for years, they feed into an anti-incumbent mood that transcends ethnic lines. In Sungai Bakap, they amplified the impact of national economic grievances and coalition tensions, further eroding support for PH and UMNO.

## **Official Results and Voting Patterns**

Official EC data show that the number of registered voters in Sungai Bakap increased by approximately 2.27% (870 voters) to a total of 39,279. Despite this, turnout fell by about 15.6% (4,607 voters), resulting in an overall turnout of 63.45%.

PH’s vote fell sharply—by roughly 26.3% (3,648 votes) compared to the previous state election—while PN’s vote decreased only slightly, by about 6.12% (944 votes). In aggregate, valid votes for contesting parties declined by about 15.7% (4,592 votes), but PAS expanded its majority from 1,563 to 4,267, an increase of approximately 173%.

These patterns are consistent with the interpretations developed above:

Chinese voters: Lower non-Malay turnout, particularly among Chinese voters in certain polling districts, suggests a strategy of partial withdrawal rather than active endorsement of PN. Where some Chinese voters did support PAS, estimates from PN sources suggest it was around 10%, which is symbolically significant but not evidence of a wholesale realignment. This aligns with retrospective economic voting and electoral civil disobedience, whereby dissatisfaction is expressed through abstention or limited protest switches rather than mass defection.

Malay voters: Estimates from PN strategists place Malay support for PAS as high as 90% in some areas, with PH capturing only around 20% of the Malay vote, while about 35% of Indian voters reportedly backed PN. These figures, while partisan estimates, match the strong increase in PAS’s majority and field observations of high early turnout among younger Malay voters. This indicates a significant protest and anti-incumbent vote among Malays, rooted both in economic grievances and in

perceptions of betrayal by UMNO.

**Ethnic bloc and party–ethnic linkages:** The results show partial erosion of traditional bloc patterns. Chinese voters did not migrate en masse to PAS but also did not behave as a solid bloc for PH. Malay voters, especially youths, increasingly treated PAS/PN as their primary political vehicle, undermining UMNO’s historical party–ethnic linkage.

Trend data from other by-elections further reinforce these conclusions. Turnout curves show that young voters, particularly Malays under 40, were disproportionately among early voters in Sungai Bakap. Interviews suggest that in the context of economic strain and controversial subsidy realignments, these early voters were already highly motivated to punish the Unity Government at the ballot box.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the N.20 Sungai Bakap by-election as a window into post-GE15 political dynamics in Malaysia, focusing on Chinese voter behaviour, Malay youth support, and the stability of the UMNO–PH partnership. Guided by three research questions and a theoretical framework combining retrospective economic voting, protest/anti-incumbent voting and ethnic bloc voting, the analysis yields several core conclusions.

First (RQ1), economic issues and the cost of living were central in shaping Chinese voting behaviour. Chinese voters interpreted the Unity Government’s failure to address inflation, subsidy rationalisation and daily economic pressures as a breach of expectations. Rather than organising street protests, they opted for a quieter form of electoral civil disobedience: reducing turnout, limiting their enthusiasm for PH, and in some cases casting protest votes for PN. Their behaviour is best understood as a blend of retrospective economic voting and protest voting, rather than a simple ethnic realignment towards PAS.

Second (RQ2), tensions within the UMNO–PH partnership and campaign missteps—especially the perceived arrogance and harsh rhetoric of key PKR leaders—contributed to a significant swing of young Malay voters towards PAS. Operational weaknesses in GOTV, poor coordination between UMNO and PKR, and unresolved grievances over the diesel subsidy reform fed an intensifying anti-incumbent sentiment among Malay youths. In this context, PAS and PN were able to present themselves as more authentic representatives of Malay-Muslim interests, undermining UMNO’s historical status as the primary Malay party and weakening conventional party–ethnic linkages.

Third (RQ3), the concepts of protest voting and civil disobedience are useful—but must be applied carefully—to explain voter behaviour in Sungai Bakap. For Chinese voters, the by-election was an opportunity to send a strong signal to the Unity Government without risking regime collapse. For Malay voters, the election allowed an anti-incumbent protest that combined economic dissatisfaction with ideological resistance to the UMNO–DAP partnership. The “green wave” narrative, while relevant in explaining Malay support for PAS, is less useful for understanding Chinese behaviour, which remained primarily driven by economic and service delivery concerns.

From a broader perspective, the Sungai Bakap case underscores several implications for GE16 and for scholarship on Malaysian politics:

Economic performance and local service delivery matter deeply, even in by-elections that do not alter government control. Voters are willing to punish incumbents symbolically to demand better governance.

Coalition management is critical. Miscommunication and perceived arrogance at the elite level can rapidly erode trust among grassroots supporters, especially in multi-party coalitions that cross historical ethnic divides.

Ethnic voting patterns are evolving. Malay and Chinese voters no longer behave as rigid blocs; instead, they engage in selective, context-dependent protest, complicating simplistic green wave or ethnic loyalty narratives.

Finally, this study is limited by its single-case design and the absence of detailed, disaggregated official data at the ethnic and polling district levels. Future research could build on this case by conducting survey-based analyses across multiple by-elections, modelling protest voting behaviour statistically, and comparing Malaysia's experience with coalition fatigue and economic grievances to similar cases in other multi-ethnic democracies.

Nonetheless, the Sungai Bakap by-election already offers a clear warning: unless the Unity Government responds credibly to economic grievances and manages its coalition dynamics more sensitively, protest and anti-incumbent voting—across ethnic lines—will remain a potent threat in the lead-up to GE16.

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