

The Need to Study Political Psychology in Malaysia

Khairul 'Azmi Mohamad & Nooraini Othman

Razak Faculty of Technology and Informatics, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: khairulnooraini@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper aims to describe political psychology and its significance in the context of Malaysian politics. Political studies in Malaysia primarily rely on political science, political sociology, and socio-political analysis. However, it is crucial to examine the political environment and issues in Malaysia from a psychological perspective. Political psychology provides insights into the thinking and behaviour of political leaders and enables an understanding of voters' behaviour. This interdisciplinary approach enriches our comprehension of politics from diverse angles. In the Malaysian context, studying political psychology will enhance our understanding of numerous variables related to political practices. The interaction between politics and psychology, particularly the impact of psychology on politics, is an intriguing subject to explore. A deeper comprehension of political psychology in Malaysia will enable leaders to better appreciate the aspirations of the people and work towards fulfilling their needs. The study of political psychology should aim to uncover the thought processes of political actors and voters alike.

Keywords: Political psychology, Malaysian Politics, Political Leadership, Political Behaviour

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Political psychology is a relatively new field of study in Malaysia, and many students in higher learning institutions have only recently become aware of this discipline. There is still a lack of research specifically addressing political issues in Malaysia from the perspective of political psychology. To reflect the strong presence of political psychology in Malaysia, there is a need to enhance research and writing in this area.

Political psychology has gained prominence in the West, where theories and concepts are well-developed, and empirical studies cover many perspectives in politics. Malaysia needs to adopt a similar approach and develop its own understanding of political psychology to contextualize the Malaysian political landscape. This paper is an attempt to move towards that direction.

■ 2.0 POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW

The American Political Science Review reported the Round Table 1: Psychology and Political Science in 1924. The report, written by Charles Merriam, summarized the Proceedings of the Round Table on Psychology and Politics. The first meeting was devoted to a general discussion and definition of the problem of the round table, namely, the possibility of a more intimate relationship between the study of politics and the study of psychology. Attention was first directed to the earlier development of psychology in the thinking of the classic political theorists and then to later reasons for interest in the psychological basis of political action (Merriam, 1924).

The report stated that the motivation for such a closer study of the psychological bearings of politics was the desire for a deeper understanding of political behaviour as found in the surveys and analysis of political activities as well as developments of mental tests from which broad social and political implications have been drawn. The chief value of this round table was concluded to be the opportunity to conduct scientific studies of the political side of human nature. An advanced scientific study of the traits of human nature underlying political actions, and of the processes that in reality constitute government was believed to be necessary.

Political psychology can be seen as serving the interest of humanistic study as it relates to politics. It reflects on human behaviour relevant to various political contexts. The systematic study of political psychology has been developing for almost 50 years, and it is now a well-established subfield of inquiry in the North American academy

and an increasingly recognized field of research in Europe and the rest of the world. The intellectual roots of political psychology are both ancient and European, and the core theories, methods, and studies in political psychology that have informed the development of the subfield in North America have their origins in centuries of European scholarship. Many of the questions occupying political psychologists today thus originate in political philosophy and its commitment to theorize, critique, and diagnose the norms and practices of political action across time and space. In this respect, political psychology, like political philosophy, has to do with the various symbols and categories that we use to organize our lives and through which we tend to make sense of the world. Political psychology shares an interest in the humanistic study of politics with political philosophy (Nesbitt-Larking et al., 2014).

Political psychology responds to current developments and events that are politically relevant in the world, and it is a dynamic field that is not rigid. Political psychology has much been stimulated by the urgent political problems of the day, especially those with actually or potentially devastating human consequences (Sears, 1987).

Political psychology must address the outcomes of a world with increasingly porous borders, where identities are mutable, transformed, mixed, or seeking secure identities. This approach is well-suited to developing genuinely global traditions and research centres in political psychology worldwide, especially in postcolonial and global southern areas, while remaining receptive to the discipline's future direction (Nesbitt-Larking and Kinnvall, 2012).

Political psychology is a distinct field that brings together different intellectual strands that were previously found only in the conventional social science discipline (Sears, 1987). Political psychology is intrinsically interdisciplinary, bringing together scholars from various fields who employ various theoretical frameworks to inform their research. Therefore, political psychology is a diverse and inclusive field (McGraw, 2000).

The field of political psychology is broadly defined as an attempt to understand political phenomena from a psychological perspective. It involves studying the decision-making, actions, and attitudes of political actors using psychological processes that cannot be directly observed. Political psychologists typically use established psychological concepts to explain political phenomena and their primary goal is to contribute to understanding the political context. Unlike other fields in psychology, political psychology is dominated by political scientists, and is less concerned with identifying universal principles of how the human mind works. The research in political psychology is mostly aimed at understanding the political context rather than advancing psychological theories. For most political psychologists, contributing to understanding the political context is the primary goal of their endeavor (Krosnick, 2017).

Political psychology utilizes psychological theories to explain political phenomena, primarily focused on understanding the political context. While this approach has yielded insights for political science, it has not advanced our understanding of psychological theories or the human mind. To serve both purposes, research in political psychology should aim to produce findings with implications for understanding politics and basic psychological theory. If research only focuses on the former, it may be better categorized as psychological political science rather than political psychology. As a form of psychology, political psychology has the potential to contribute to the larger psychological endeavor of discovering general laws if researchers choose to do so and explain their implications in publications (Krosnick, 2002).

Conducting political psychology with the goal of advancing basic psychological theory can benefit psychology as a whole, as political psychologists often conduct research in real-world settings. This maximizes the external validity of research findings. However, a mix of laboratory and field studies can maximize both internal and external validity, and research conducted in real-world settings can also enrich basic psychological work by identifying processes, mediators, and moderators that may not be present in artificial laboratory settings. Experimental research can provide insights into how people make decisions and behave in similar situations in the real world, but it should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive (Krosnick, 2017).

Some would look at political psychology from the interactional perspective. Political psychology can be defined most simply as the study of the interaction between politics and psychology, particularly the impact of psychology on politics....The intersecting area between economics and politics is called "political economy," between sociology and politics "political sociology," and so on. The intersection of mathematics and politics has developed its own specialized terminology—rational choice, formal theory or game theory—but it is essentially "mathematical politics" (Houghton, 2009).

The Roundtable report by Charles Merriam highlighted the potential for a new field to emerge, focusing on the human nature and behaviour of politics. The report was optimistic that this field could contribute to a better understanding of political actions and actors. Today, the progress and maturity of political psychology as a distinct discipline of study with a more sophisticated worldview is a testament to the wisdom and vision of the Roundtable members.

■ 3.0 THE ADVANTAGE OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY TO MALAYSIA

The field of political psychology needs to address the challenges arising from a world where borders are becoming less significant, and identities are constantly evolving and seeking stability. This orientation is particularly relevant for developing a genuinely global research community in political psychology, including in regions such as the postcolonial world and the global south. It is essential to remain open to the potential changes in the field while developing a broader understanding of politics in a changing world (Nesbitt-Larking and Kinnvall, 2012).

Studying the relationship between political psychology and political leadership, trust, and voters' behaviour can provide new insights into politics in Malaysia. This approach combines the discipline of psychology with scientifically designed research instruments to bring a fresh perspective to the study of politics.

As per Lavine (2010), the realm of Political psychology studies could bring the following effects:

- a) An awareness among psychologists of the creative application of psychological theory within the domain of politics;
- b) The usefulness of politics as a vehicle for developing and refining psychological theory; and
- c) A deeper appreciation among political scientists of the psychological roots of political behaviour.

Political psychology is essentially a field of study that synergises two distinct disciplines, namely politics and psychology. The marriage of the two disciplines reflects its paramount importance and the proximity as well as the relationship of the two towards one another. The integration of these two disciplines is important as it allows for a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that underlie political behaviour and decision-making.

The integration of politics and psychology can elucidate various aspects, such as the rationale behind leaders' behaviours, the preferred traits of a leader by the masses, the factors influencing individuals' voting choices, the variability in voting trends over time and geography, and effective strategies for swaying voters' opinions. While politics is focused on numbers, power, and elections, psychology is focused on the mind and behaviour, making the combination of the two fields essential for understanding political phenomena.

Political psychology is a crucial area of research that should be explored in Malaysia. Although several studies have examined political science, political development, political history, and political sociology in the country, there has been little focus on political psychology. Given the present state of politics in Malaysia, it is essential to analyse and address it through the lens of political psychology.

A great deal of attention has been given to understanding how voters' behaviour contributes to the success of a particular political party. Through political psychology, researchers delve into the reasons behind voters' choices and voting patterns. Additionally, political psychology enables a focus on the mindset and behaviour of political leaders. Leaders' thoughts and actions can serve as a catalyst, providing strong reasons for voters to support both the leader and the party. As a result, political psychology can serve as a catalyst for understanding why certain leaders and parties are elected.

Ultimately, a leader's actions and accomplishments can be the deciding factor in voters' decisions to either elect them, re-elect them, or call for their retirement. In most cases, citizens do not typically participate actively in politics. Instead, it is the politicians who shape their agenda and launch campaigns to attract voters to their cause and persuade them to vote for them or their party.

The success of a political leader is highly dependent on their ability to attract support and votes. This is often determined by the first impression they make on voters, both individually and as a representative of their party. In order to gain the trust of voters, it is essential for leaders to possess certain qualities that resonate with what people desire to see in a leader. For instance, people generally seek a leader who is honest, possesses a high level of integrity, can withstand challenges, has strong diplomatic skills, is charismatic, visionary, intelligent, passionate, reliable, disciplined, and courageous. Essentially, a leader's personality, behaviour, and character play a crucial role in determining their success in politics. Voters may reject a weak or corrupt leader, and may only support those who embody the qualities they deem important in a leader.

Likewise, in the context of a political party, when the party is capable of providing the necessary leadership to govern a country, it is more likely to win the support of the people and be elected. Citizens tend to support parties that reflect the same values and qualities as their leaders, such as integrity, honesty, and loyalty to the people's cause. People generally prefer parties that prioritize the welfare of the public, prioritize serving the nation, and are not susceptible to corruption. Ultimately, the ability of a party to uphold these qualities can significantly influence its popularity and electoral success.

Political trust plays a crucial role in determining whether people will vote for a particular political party to lead a country or constituency. Therefore, it is imperative for party leadership to earn the trust of the people, ensuring that their party is deemed fit to hold power. Building and maintaining trust can be a challenging task, but it is essential for a party's success. Ultimately, a party that is trusted by the people is more likely to be elected, as citizens tend to support those they believe have their best interests at heart.

Indeed, a political party's image is a critical factor in gaining the trust of the people. When voters look at a party or its leaders, they form an impression of them based on a variety of factors, such as their track record, values, policies, and messaging. In essence, a party's image reflects how voters perceive them and their ability to address the needs and concerns of the public. It is not only the responsibility of the party's leaders but also its members to ensure that the party's image is favourable in the eyes of the public. Ultimately, a positive image can significantly influence a party's success, while a negative image can harm its chances of being elected.

Building a positive image is a critical factor in gaining political trust from the people. When voters look at a party or its leaders, their perception of the party's image is crucial. Essentially, it is important to consider what citizens see when they look at a party or its leaders. The image of a party is also influenced by its communication strategy and the messages it conveys to the public. In order to build a positive image and gain political trust, it is important for a party to consistently demonstrate its commitment to the public and be transparent and accountable in its actions. Ultimately, a party that is perceived positively by the public is more likely to be trusted and supported in elections. When deciding which party to vote for, people may look at several factors, such as:

- a) Trustworthiness: Do the candidates and the party have a record of keeping their promises and delivering on their commitments?
- b) Track record: What has the party accomplished in the past, and how have they contributed to the welfare of the people?
- c) Issues and policies: What are the party's stance on the key issues that concern the voters, and do their policies align with the voters' preferences?
- d) Leadership: Are the party's leaders competent, trustworthy, and capable of leading the country effectively?
- e) Party ideology: Does the party's ideology resonate with the voters' beliefs and values?
- f) Image and reputation: How does the public perceive the party, and what is their reputation?

Ultimately, voters consider a combination of these factors when deciding which party to vote for. If a party fails to meet the expectations of the voters in any of these areas, it could affect their chances of winning the election.

Trustworthiness and reliability of a political party are closely linked to the policies and programs that they initiate and implement. If the party is successful in delivering its promises and improving the lives of the people, it will gain their trust and reliability, which could translate into votes in the elections. On the other hand, if the party fails to fulfil its promises or is perceived as corrupt or dishonest, it will lose the trust of the people, which could result in a loss of votes in the elections. Therefore, trustworthiness is indeed a critical factor in determining a party's vote-worthiness.

In the Malaysian context, voters' behaviour pertains to their decision-making process in selecting a political party or candidate to represent them in a particular constituency. The determining factors of their choice usually include political leadership and trustworthiness. Ultimately, their votes play a crucial role in deciding which party or candidate will govern the state and federal governments.

It is important for a country like Malaysia to make significant efforts to understand and develop political psychology in its broadest sense. This will lead to a better understanding of the political behaviour of the people, which in turn will contribute to the development of better political leaders and a better government. With better leadership, the government will be better equipped to serve the people and contribute to the overall development of the nation.

■ 4.0 CONCLUSION

Political psychology is an interdisciplinary field that examines the psychological aspects of human political behaviour. It bridges the gap between political science and psychology, exploring topics such as electoral politics, public policy, leadership, decision-making, intergroup relations, personality, political ideology, political violence, and conflict resolution (Suedfeld and Jhangiani, 2009).

Political psychology examines both the political behaviours of those in power and the general population, exploring the complex interplay between individual psychology, political behaviour, and the broader political context. The field also involves the application of psychological theories, research methods, and data to the study of politics. This interdisciplinary approach allows political scientists to incorporate psychological research into their work and psychologists to apply their research findings to political situations. (Jhangiani and Suedfeld, 2009).

Studying political psychology in the context of Malaysia can lead to a better understanding of the complex factors involved in the country's political landscape. It can provide insights into the thought processes and actions of political

leaders, as well as the underlying motivations of voters. Exploring topics such as political behaviour, decision-making, and group dynamics can shed light on the various variables that shape politics in Malaysia.

In essence, examining the relevant factors pertaining to political leadership, trust, and their correlation to voter behaviour is crucial. If political parties in Malaysia incorporate such analyses into their operations, they would gain a better understanding of the sentiments and goals of the voters. Through this understanding, political leaders can improve their skills and become more effective politicians. It is essential for politicians to comprehend the needs of the people. Nowadays, politicians who lack substance or depth cannot earn the trust of the people and are not worthy of holding public office.

In conclusion, studying the variables related to political leadership, political trust, and voters' behaviour is crucial for political parties in Malaysia to better understand the sentiments and expectations of the voters. By doing so, they can improve their policies and programs to meet the needs of the people and ultimately become better politicians. In today's political climate, politicians who are out of touch with the needs of their constituents will not earn the trust of the people and will not be successful in securing seats in the government.

Malaysia has experienced a series of changes in its political leadership, with ruling parties falling in and out of power at an unprecedented pace. It is crucial for political parties to recognize the genuine desires and expectations of the people when they assume power, as the people's concerns and needs must be acknowledged and addressed. The frequent change in leadership and the collapse of ruling parties may reflect ongoing frustration among the citizens, caused by a failure to meet expectations, resulting in changes in voting behavior and political decision-making. To move the country forward, both citizens and leaders must play their respective roles and address these issues.

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