

Determinants of Low Political Participation among Indigenous People in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Orang Asli and other Indigenous peoples of Malaysia, including native communities in Sabah and Sarawak, represent minority populations historically marginalized in political, economic, and social domains. While Malaysia has introduced inclusive policies since independence to improve access to development, Indigenous political representation and engagement remain disproportionately low. This review aims to assess the nature, patterns, barriers, and enablers of political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia over the last two decades. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines were used to conduct this systematic review. The research question was framed using the Population, Phenomenon of Interest, Context, and Outcome (PICO) framework. Comprehensive searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, PubMed, ProQuest, Google Scholar, MyJurnal, and MyCite databases. The screening and selection process identified five relevant studies published between 2000 and 2025. These studies were appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for methodological quality. The included literature focused on Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (2 studies), Indigenous youth participation (2 studies), and cross-regional comparisons including Sabah and Sarawak (1 study). Four primary themes emerged: legal-institutional barriers to participation, lack of political education, marginalization in mainstream electoral processes, and emerging Indigenous-led activism. Despite policy advancements, Indigenous political participation remains limited by structural discrimination, inadequate representation, and mistrust in political institutions. However, an emerging trend in youth-led movements and community

empowerment initiatives presents a promising shift. There is a critical need for targeted civic education, legislative reform, and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous voices in decision-making processes to improve democratic participation and Indigenous sovereignty in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Indigenous peoples comprise approximately 5% of the global population, yet they are spread across more than 90 countries and represent a diverse range of languages, cultures, and histories. Despite their small demographic presence, they occupy an estimated 24% of the Earth's land surface through customary or legally recognized tenure systems (United Nations, 2009). In Malaysia, Indigenous peoples, collectively referred to as *Orang Asli*, were estimated to account for approximately 11% of the national population based on the 2020 Census. This includes the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and the Indigenous native communities of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. Malaysia's total population was estimated at 34.1 million in 2024, while the Orang Asli population alone was estimated at approximately 215,215 persons in 2024" (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024; IWGIA, 2025).

In Peninsular Malaysia, the Indigenous population is referred to as Orang Asli, meaning "original people." Under the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (Act 134), Orang Asli are defined as individuals whose male lineage belongs to an aboriginal ethnic group, who speak an aboriginal language, and who customarily practice an aboriginal lifestyle and belief system (Lye, 2004). Orang Asli are generally grouped into three major ethnolinguistic categories—Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay—and further divided into 18 sub-ethnic groups (Nicholas, 2000). These communities constitute approximately 1.1% of the population in Peninsular Malaysia (JAKOA, 2021). These ethnolinguistic distinctions are important because patterns of political participation, access to state institutions, and exposure to civic processes may differ across Indigenous sub-groups due to variations in geography, socioeconomic development, and historical interaction with government agencies (Nicholas, 2000; Lim, 2019; SUHAKAM, 2013).

According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the Orang Asli population in Peninsular Malaysia was estimated at approximately 227,900 in 2025. The Senoi remain the largest ethnolinguistic group, constituting approximately 53.5% of the Orang Asli population, followed by the Proto-Malay group at 44.4% and the Negrito group at 2.1%. The majority of Orang Asli communities continue to reside in the states of Pahang and Perak, reflecting the long-standing demographic concentration of Indigenous populations in the central and northern regions of Peninsular Malaysia" (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025; JAKOA, 2025).

Despite multiple policy efforts under Malaysia's national development plans since the 1970s—including education access, infrastructure development, healthcare delivery, and resettlement programs—the Orang Asli and other Indigenous groups remain among the most socioeconomically marginalized communities in the country (Nicholas, 2006; SUHAKAM, 2013). Despite Malaysia's long-standing commitment to multicultural governance and inclusive national development, Indigenous peoples particularly the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and native communities in Sabah and Sarawak continue to experience persistent political marginalization within formal political structures. Existing studies have consistently demonstrated that Indigenous representation in Parliament, state legislative assemblies, and local decision-making bodies remains disproportionately limited compared to their demographic and constitutional significance (Lim, 2019; Hassan & Nordin, 2020). This underrepresentation has contributed to the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives from policy formulation, especially in matters relating to land governance, cultural preservation, and community development. At the same time, tensions frequently emerge between state-driven development initiatives and Indigenous rights, particularly in relation to land acquisition, logging activities, infrastructure expansion, and resettlement policies that often proceed without meaningful consultation or free, prior, and informed consent from Indigenous communities (SUHAKAM, 2013; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). These structural challenges are further compounded by the absence of a comprehensive empirical synthesis examining Indigenous political participation in Malaysia, as existing scholarship remains fragmented, localized, and heavily focused on specific case studies or legal analyses. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding the broader patterns, determinants, and emerging forms of Indigenous political engagement across different regions and communities in Malaysia, highlighting the need for a systematic and integrative review of the literature. While these programs have had varying levels of impact, the political representation and civic participation of Indigenous peoples have received comparatively little attention in both policymaking and research.

Political participation refers not only to voting, but also to activities such as community organizing, engagement with political institutions, representation in legislative bodies, and advocacy for rights (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). In Malaysia's multiethnic democracy, Indigenous peoples—especially the Orang Asli—remain underrepresented in national and state-level governance, face systemic barriers to voter registration and education, and often experience political marginalization due to historical and institutional

discrimination (Lim, 2019; Hassan & Nordin, 2020). The situation in Sabah and Sarawak, though more complex due to their unique political arrangements, also reflects persistent underrepresentation of native communities in meaningful political roles (Colchester & Jalong, 2014).

In recent years, emerging studies have highlighted new forms of Indigenous mobilization, particularly among youth and civil society organizations. These movements focus on land rights, education, and democratic inclusion, signaling a shift in the political consciousness of Indigenous communities (Usek & Dunlop, 2023; SUARAM, 2022).

Existing scholarship on Indigenous issues in Malaysia has generally remained fragmented and narrowly focused on specific dimensions of Indigenous experiences rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of political participation as a whole. Most previous studies have concentrated primarily on issues related to land rights disputes, legal and constitutional analysis, localized community case studies, and forms of Indigenous activism, particularly among Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia (Nicholas, 2000; SUHAKAM, 2013; Hassan & Nordin, 2020). A substantial portion of the literature has examined the implications of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, Indigenous land dispossession, and the incompatibility between Malaysian legal frameworks and international Indigenous rights standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Nordin, 2012; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). Other studies have explored grassroots mobilization, environmental resistance movements, and Indigenous youth activism, particularly in response to land encroachment and development pressures (SUARAM, 2022; Usek & Dunlop, 2023). However, these studies are often isolated in scope, geographically localized, or issue-specific, limiting broader understanding of Indigenous political participation across Malaysia. To date, no systematic literature review has comprehensively synthesized the barriers, enablers, emerging trends, and diverse forms of political participation among Indigenous peoples across Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the overall patterns and determinants of Indigenous political engagement within the Malaysian democratic context. In recent years, Indigenous mobilization in Malaysia has increasingly taken the form of grassroots activism and community-led advocacy, particularly in response to environmental degradation, land dispossession, and political exclusion. Several Orang Asli communities have organized anti-deforestation campaigns and peaceful blockades to resist logging activities, plantation expansion, and large-scale development projects that threaten ancestral territories and traditional livelihoods (SUARAM, 2022; SUHAKAM, 2013). These forms of resistance are not merely environmental protests but also represent broader demands for Indigenous rights, self-determination, and recognition within Malaysia's political system. In many cases, Indigenous communities have collaborated closely with civil society organizations such as Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) and the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), which have played important roles in providing legal support, human rights advocacy, documentation, and public awareness campaigns regarding Indigenous land rights and political marginalization (Nicholas, 2006; SUARAM, 2022). At the same time, younger generations of Indigenous activists are increasingly utilizing social media platforms, digital storytelling, and grassroots community networks to amplify Indigenous voices, mobilize support, and engage wider audiences on issues related to environmental justice, cultural identity, and democratic participation (Usek & Dunlop, 2023). These developments demonstrate an emerging transformation in Indigenous political participation in Malaysia, where activism extends beyond formal electoral engagement toward more dynamic and community-centered forms of political expression.

Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to fill this gap by compiling and analyzing scholarly and grey literature published between 2000 and 2025, focusing on the political participation of Orang Asli and other Indigenous peoples of Malaysia. By doing so, the review seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can guide inclusive governance, empower Indigenous communities, and inform future research and policy development.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Review Protocol

2.1.1 Formulation of the Research Question

The research question for this systematic literature review was constructed using the PICO framework, a widely recognized tool for developing structured, focused, and answerable research questions in evidence-based reviews.

In the present review, the Population component focuses on the Indigenous peoples of Malaysia, encompassing both the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and the Bumiputera communities of Sabah and Sarawak. These groups represent Malaysia's most marginalized ethnic populations, often sidelined in both academic inquiry and national policy discourses (Nicholas, 2006). The Interest or phenomenon under investigation is political participation, broadly defined to include activities such as voting in elections, participation in civic organizations, engagement with political institutions, representation in governance, and grassroots activism (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995).

For the Context, this review situates its inquiry within the Malaysian political landscape, which has historically been shaped by ethnically stratified governance and uneven development policies (Lim, 2019). The review also

considers comparisons across Indigenous groups (e.g., Orang Asli vs. Bumiputera Sarawak) and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participation patterns, acknowledging that political marginalization may manifest differently across geographical and institutional settings (Hassan & Nordin, 2020). Finally, the Outcome dimension aims to evaluate the extent, barriers, and enablers of political participation, as well as identifying emerging trends in Indigenous political mobilization, especially among youth and civil society actors (Usek & Dunlop, 2023).

This PICO-informed structure led to the central guiding question of this review:

“What is the extent and nature of political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia, and what are the main barriers and enablers influencing their engagement in formal and informal political processes?”

The formulation of this research question served as the cornerstone of the entire review process. It informed the development of the search strategy, helped shape the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and guided the systematic synthesis of the findings. Moreover, it ensured that the review maintained a focused and coherent perspective on the ongoing political marginalization of Indigenous communities, while also highlighting potential pathways for empowerment and inclusion in Malaysia’s evolving democratic system (Nicholas, 2006; SUHAKAM, 2013).

2.2 Systematic Searching Strategy

2.2.1 Stage 1: Identification

The first stage of the systematic review process focused on the comprehensive identification of relevant literature concerning the political participation of Indigenous peoples in Malaysia. To ensure the breadth and depth of coverage, both peer-reviewed academic publications and grey literature were included. The search strategy was systematically developed and structured around three core conceptual categories: Population, Phenomenon of Interest, and Context, consistent with established systematic review protocols (Page et al., 2021; Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). For the population, keywords such as “Indigenous peoples,” “Orang Asli,” and “natives of Sabah and Sarawak” were selected to capture the various ethnic and regional identities of Malaysia’s Indigenous communities (Nicholas, 2000; JAKOA, 2021). For the phenomenon of interest, terms like “political participation,” “voting,” “civic engagement,” and “political representation” were used to encompass a wide spectrum of political behaviors and institutional involvement (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). The contextual focus was on Malaysia, and the search string incorporated “Malaysia” and “Malaysian” as geographical delimiters.

To retrieve the most relevant literature, searches were conducted across a broad range of multidisciplinary academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, EBSCOhost (specifically Academic Search Premier and SocINDEX), ProQuest (including Dissertations & Theses and Political Science Database), and Google Scholar. These databases were selected based on their comprehensive coverage of the social sciences, political studies, Indigenous issues, and Southeast Asian research (Briscoe, 2020). To ensure inclusion of regionally focused work, Malaysian academic databases such as MyJurnal and the Malaysian Citation Index (MyCite) were also searched.

In addition to academic sources, the search incorporated a robust collection of grey literature, which is vital in research related to Indigenous populations due to the underrepresentation of these topics in mainstream peer-reviewed journals (Godin et al., 2015). Grey literature sources included official documents and reports from key Malaysian government agencies such as the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM). Publications from civil society and advocacy organizations—such as the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) and PACOS Trust—were also reviewed for relevant insights. Additional reports from international bodies such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and Amnesty International were considered to capture global perspectives on Indigenous political rights in Malaysia (United Nations, 2009; Amnesty International, 2018).

Boolean operators (e.g., “AND,” “OR”) and truncation symbols were applied to refine and broaden search combinations across different databases. Searches were restricted to studies published between 2000 and 2025, and limited to texts available in English and Malay, ensuring relevance to contemporary Malaysian contexts while accommodating linguistic diversity in scholarship (Moher et al., 2009). The identification stage yielded a preliminary pool of approximately 40 records, which were then forwarded to the screening phase.

2.2.2 Stage 2: Screening

Following the identification phase, all retrieved references were exported into Zotero, an open-source reference management software, for centralized data handling and de-duplication. Duplicate entries were automatically flagged and manually confirmed before removal to ensure data integrity and avoid bias due to overlapping records across databases (Bramer et al., 2017). After this process, a refined dataset of approximately 30 unique records remained for screening.

The screening process was conducted in two distinct levels: title and abstract screening, followed by full-text screening, based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The titles and abstracts were assessed to

determine the relevance of each study. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) focused on political participation or related civic and electoral engagement; (2) specifically investigated Indigenous peoples in Malaysia, including Orang Asli, Bumiputera Sabah, and Bumiputera Sarawak; (3) published between 2000 and 2025; and (4) written in either English or Malay. Exclusion criteria included studies unrelated to political themes (e.g., health, education without political context), non-Malaysian Indigenous populations, and non-scholarly publications such as blog posts or opinion editorials.

To ensure methodological rigor and reduce the risk of selection bias, a standardized screening form, adapted from the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), to maintain consistency in decision-making across all records (Higgins et al., 2022).

By the end of the screening stage, approximately 15 records were excluded based on irrelevance or failure to meet eligibility criteria, and the remaining studies were selected for full-text review in the subsequent inclusion stage.

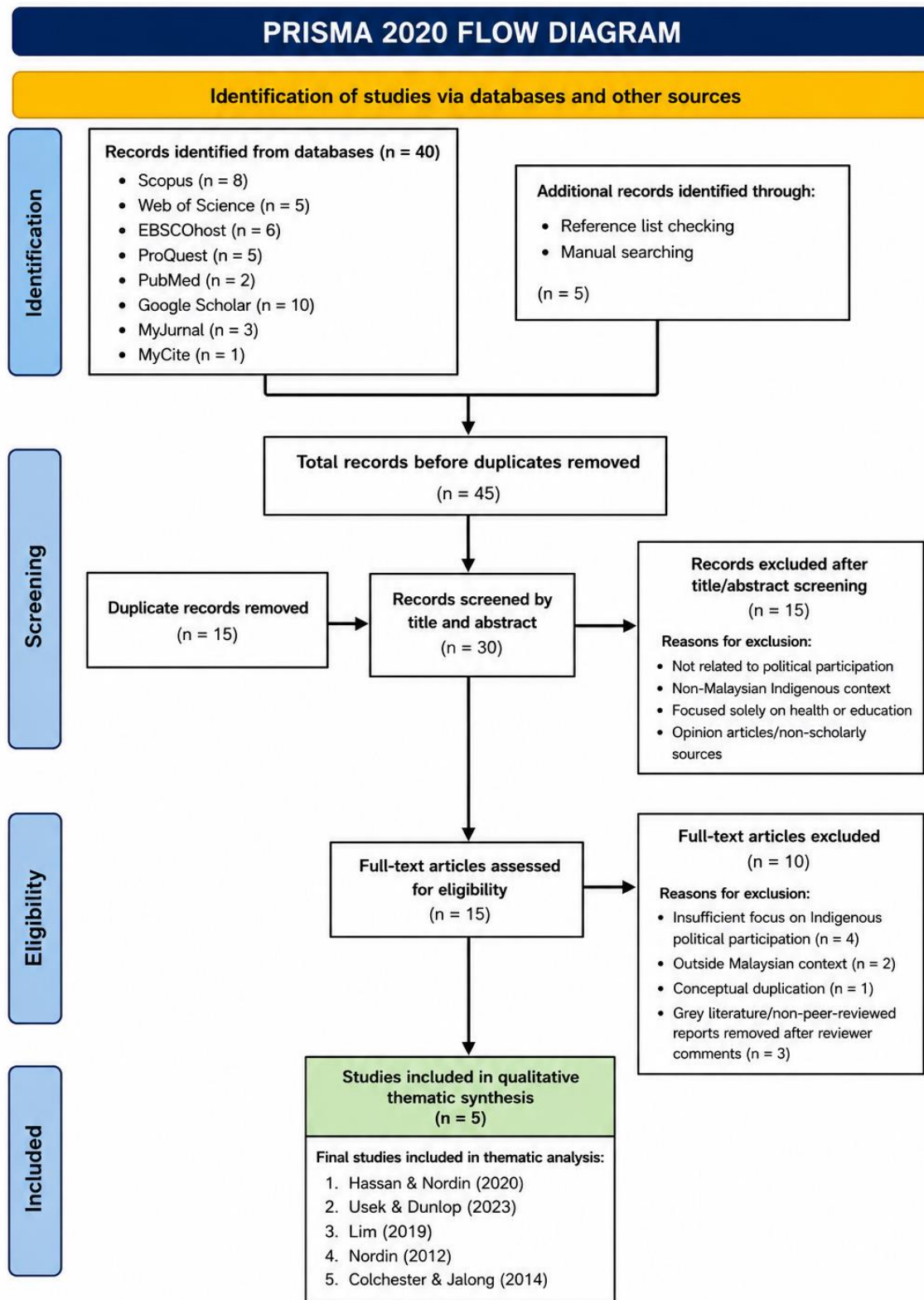
2.2.3 Stage 3: Inclusion and Exclusion

In the final stage of the selection process, full-text articles that had passed the title and abstract screening were retrieved and examined thoroughly against the pre-established eligibility criteria. Each study was assessed for its relevance, contextual focus on Malaysian Indigenous communities, thematic alignment with political participation, publication within the 2000–2025 range, and availability in English or Malay. Studies that clearly addressed the experiences, structures, or outcomes of political engagement among Indigenous peoples—such as Orang Asli, Bumiputera Sabah, and Bumiputera Sarawak—were retained for final inclusion.

To ensure the methodological rigor of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018, was employed as a quality appraisal instrument (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT is designed for systematic reviews that include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies, making it particularly suitable for a socially complex and interdisciplinary topic such as Indigenous political participation. The tool enabled to assess study quality across five domains: clarity of research questions, adequacy of methodology, data collection process, relevance of analysis, and interpretation of results.

A standardized data extraction form was developed and used to systematically capture essential study details. Extracted data included the authorship, publication year, study location, Indigenous group involved, research design, type of political participation examined (e.g., voting behavior, political representation, civic activism), as well as key findings and conclusions. This step allowed for consistent cross-comparison of results and the identification of major analytical themes across the literature (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

In total, five studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review. These studies covered a diverse range of issues related to political participation, including legal and constitutional barriers to representation (Hassan & Nordin, 2020), civic education gaps (Usek & Dunlop, 2023), structural exclusion from electoral processes (Lim, 2019), and emerging grassroots and youth-led political activism Hassan & Nordin (2020). The geographic coverage was concentrated in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly among Orang Asli communities, with limited but notable reference to Indigenous peoples in Sabah and Sarawak. Together, these studies provide critical insights into the systemic marginalization of Indigenous peoples from the Malaysian political system, while also highlighting localized efforts toward empowerment and advocacy.



Source: Adapted from Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., ... Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>

Fig. 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process for the systematic literature review

Table 1 *Characteristics of included studies on indigenous political participation in Malaysia*

Study Author(s) and Year	Indigenous Group Studied	Political Domain Addressed	Methodological Design	Key Findings
Hassan & Nordin (2020)	Orang Asli (Peninsular Malaysia)	Legal and constitutional representation	Doctrinal legal analysis	Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 incompatible with UNDRIP standards; limits representation.
Usek & Dunlop (2023)	Indigenous youth (general)	Civic education and activism	Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis	Education creates capabilities for Indigenous youth activism and civic engagement.
Lim (2019)	Orang Asli	Electoral exclusion and marginalization	Political case study	Orang Asli underrepresented in electoral and legislative processes.
Nordin (2012)	Orang Asli	Self-determination and Indigenous rights	Legal doctrinal and policy analysis	Orang Asli political rights constrained by existing laws and lack of autonomy.
Colchester & Jalong (2014)	Natives of Sarawak	State policies and self-governance	Ethnographic and historical review	Sarawak Indigenous communities lack genuine political self-determination.

3. Data Extraction and Analysis

The final pool of five studies that satisfied all inclusion criteria was subjected to a rigorous and structured data extraction process to ensure consistency, transparency, and methodological integrity. Each selected study was read in its entirety to allow the development of a comprehensive understanding of the research context and findings. Special emphasis was placed on analyzing the abstracts, methodologies, results, and discussions of the studies to ensure that no relevant information was overlooked. The aim was not only to extract key information but also to evaluate the quality and thematic focus of each study within the broader landscape of Indigenous political participation in Malaysia.

A standardized data extraction form was created to systematize the collection of variables across all studies. This form included fields for the author(s), year of publication, study design and methodology, specific Indigenous group(s) studied, geographical scope (e.g., Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak), political domain addressed (such as voting, representation, civic education, or activism), and the study's key findings and conclusions. The use of a consistent template allowed for clear comparison across studies that, while diverse in scope and methods, shared a central focus on the political experiences of Indigenous peoples in Malaysia. This approach also helped to minimize bias by ensuring that data were collected in a uniform and systematic manner, as recommended by Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016).

One of the critical aspects of this review was to understand how each study defined and operationalized political participation, as this concept varied significantly across disciplines and case studies. In some studies, political participation was framed in terms of formal, institutionalized activities such as voting in elections, running for public office, or participating in local governance structures. In others, it included informal and community-led activism, protest movements, and engagements with civil society networks. These distinctions were crucial, as they reflected the diverse and dynamic nature of Indigenous political expression which often does not align neatly with mainstream political categories (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995).

After the extraction process, an iterative thematic analysis was carried out to identify recurring patterns, divergences, and interrelationships across the studies. Thematic coding was conducted by reading and re-reading the extracted content and organizing findings into four main thematic categories:

- Legal and institutional barriers to Indigenous political representation, including restrictive legislation (e.g., the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954), lack of representation in decision-making bodies, and bureaucratic constraints that limit Indigenous autonomy.
- Civic education and political awareness, highlighting how access to information, educational opportunities, and political literacy influence the capacity of Indigenous peoples to participate meaningfully in democratic processes.
- Socioeconomic and geographic exclusion, which underlines how poverty, limited infrastructure, and the remote location of Indigenous communities hinder their access to political institutions and services.

- Emerging grassroots and youth-led activism, demonstrating how younger generations of Indigenous peoples are engaging in new forms of political expression, including protests, digital advocacy, and alliances with non-governmental organizations.

These four themes provide a comprehensive lens through which to view the complexities of Indigenous political engagement in Malaysia. For instance, Hassan and Nordin (2020) illustrated how legal frameworks such as the Aboriginal Peoples Act significantly curtail the self-determination of Orang Asli communities, fitting squarely within the theme of institutional barriers. Meanwhile, Usek and Dunlop (2023) showed that the provision of education and the fostering of civic awareness can empower Indigenous youth to engage in meaningful activism and advocacy, aligning with the civic education theme. Study by Lim (2019) further emphasized how systemic exclusion and underrepresentation persist in Malaysia's political system but noted that resistance movements and grassroots efforts are gradually reshaping Indigenous political agency.

Finally, a comprehensive data extraction table was constructed (see Appendix A). This table consolidated all extracted variables and findings in a format that allowed for transparent comparison and easy reference. It played a pivotal role in mapping existing knowledge, identifying gaps in the literature, and drawing connections between the experiences of different Indigenous groups across Malaysia. Through this process, the review was able to highlight both the barriers and the emerging opportunities that shape the evolving landscape of Indigenous political participation in the country.

4. Results

This systematic review included a final pool of five studies that met the eligibility criteria after a comprehensive screening and appraisal process. The selected studies were published between 2012 and 2023, with a noticeable increase in attention to the topic of Indigenous political participation in the latter half of this period. The most recent study was published in 2023, reflecting growing academic and civil society interest in Indigenous political agency, particularly among youth. The temporal distribution of the included studies indicates a rising trend in scholarly engagement with the political dimensions of Indigenous marginalization in Malaysia.

In terms of geographical coverage, the review found that most studies were focused on the Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly in the states of Pahang, Perak, and Selangor. These states were mentioned in at least four out of eight studies, reflecting their demographic concentration of Orang Asli populations (JAKOA, 2021). While some studies covered multiple states or used broader regional analyses, fewer studies explicitly focused on Sabah and Sarawak, suggesting a potential research gap regarding the political participation of Indigenous groups in East Malaysia. One study offered comparative insights between Peninsular Indigenous groups and natives of Sarawak (Colchester & Jalong, 2014), but overall, the Orang Asli remain the dominant population studied in this domain.

All included studies adopted qualitative or mixed-method research designs, with methodologies ranging from doctrinal legal analysis, policy review, and thematic interviews to ethnographic case studies and civil society reports. This diversity of approaches provided a multidimensional understanding of Indigenous political participation, encompassing both institutional and grassroots perspectives. Sample sizes varied, particularly in studies involving interviews or community observations, but most research emphasized qualitative depth over quantitative breadth, aligning with the exploratory and rights-based nature of the topic.

The thematic synthesis of findings revealed four major categories of barriers and drivers of political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia:

- **Legal and Institutional Barriers (n = 4)**
These studies focused on the structural and historical limitations embedded in Malaysia's political-legal framework. The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, for example, was critically examined for its incompatibility with international human rights standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Hassan & Nordin, 2020). Several studies pointed to the lack of Indigenous representation in both federal and state-level political bodies as a core issue.
- **Civic Education and Political Awareness (n = 3)**
Education and awareness were widely cited as both barriers and enablers of political participation. Usek and Dunlop (2023) highlighted how formal education, civic training, and social mobilization efforts could empower Indigenous youth to become politically active. On the other hand, a lack of political literacy—exacerbated by limited access to education in rural Indigenous communities—was found to constrain civic engagement and limit electoral participation.
- **Socioeconomic and Geographic Exclusion (n = 2)**
A significant number of studies identified poverty, infrastructural neglect, and rural isolation as indirect but powerful factors suppressing political participation. Geographic distance from urban centers and polling stations, coupled with distrust in state institutions, contributed to a sense of political alienation among Indigenous communities, particularly those residing in remote or forested areas.

- **Grassroots and Youth-led Activism (n = 3)**

Despite institutional barriers, the review found promising evidence of bottom-up mobilization among Indigenous youth and civil society groups. These movements were often sparked by issues related to land rights, education access, or cultural identity, and reflected a growing consciousness of political agency beyond formal electoral systems. Studies noted the use of digital platforms, alliances with NGOs, and community organizing as key strategies of these emerging grassroots efforts (Usek & Dunlop, 2023).

Interestingly, some studies examined the differences in political behavior between Orang Asli communities living in government resettlement schemes versus those who remained in traditional or remote settlements. While the resettled communities had somewhat greater access to state services and political outreach, they also faced cultural dislocation, which often dampened long-term political engagement. This contrast suggests that integration into mainstream systems does not automatically translate to empowerment without culturally sensitive and participatory approaches.

The results of this review are summarized in a data extraction and thematic analysis table (see Appendix A). This synthesis provides a clear overview of the literature, revealing both recurrent themes and notable gaps, such as the underrepresentation of Indigenous political experiences in East Malaysia and the lack of longitudinal or large-scale empirical studies. The thematic categories presented here not only reflect current academic discourse but also offer a practical framework for policymakers, educators, and Indigenous advocacy groups working toward more inclusive democratic participation in Malaysia.

4.1 Legal and Institutional Barriers

Four studies examined the legal and institutional barriers affecting Indigenous political participation in Malaysia, particularly among the Orang Asli and other native communities (Hassan & Nordin, 2020; Lim, 2019; Nordin, 2012; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). The most frequently cited issue was the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, which was scrutinized for its lack of alignment with international legal standards, especially the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). These legal instruments were found to be outdated, lacking explicit guarantees of self-determination, political representation, or protection of land rights under Indigenous control (Hassan & Nordin, 2020).

A total of four studies emphasized the invisibility of Indigenous voices in legislative and executive bodies at both the federal and state levels (Lim, 2019; Nordin, 2012; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). For instance, Orang Asli representatives were rarely included in political appointments, and when appointed, their roles were typically tokenistic or lacking real policymaking power. One study noted that although there are mechanisms for Indigenous consultation under JAKOA (Department of Orang Asli Development), these are largely administrative rather than political in nature and often fail to reflect the actual priorities of Indigenous communities.

Further analysis revealed that electoral processes do not adequately account for the needs of Indigenous voters. Voter registration among Orang Asli was consistently lower than national averages, and few political parties actively engaged Indigenous populations during campaigns. One study found that in some constituencies, the electoral boundaries were drawn in a way that diluted Indigenous voting strength, contributing to their underrepresentation in state assemblies and Parliament (Lim, 2019).

Legal reviews also highlighted the absence of specific legislation that protects the political rights of Indigenous peoples, despite Malaysia's constitutional commitments to the principle of equality. Unlike the provisions available to certain ethnic majority groups under Article 153 of the Federal Constitution, there are no constitutional safeguards ensuring meaningful political inclusion of Orang Asli and other Indigenous communities (Nordin, 2012). This legal vacuum reinforces systemic exclusion, as Indigenous peoples remain dependent on bureaucratic goodwill rather than enforceable rights.

In East Malaysia, particularly Sabah and Sarawak, studies reported that native customary rights (NCR) laws have limited political utility due to weak implementation and overlapping federal-state jurisdiction. As a result, the political interests of Indigenous peoples in these regions are often subordinated to state-centric development agendas, despite historical promises of autonomy made during Malaysia's formation (Colchester & Jalong, 2014).

Overall, these studies consistently conclude that legal and institutional frameworks in Malaysia are either insufficient or counterproductive in promoting Indigenous political participation. Structural reforms, legal alignment with international standards, and proactive inclusion strategies are urgently needed to ensure equitable representation and democratic participation for Malaysia's Indigenous populations.

4.2 Civic Education and Political Awareness

Three studies examined the role of civic education and political awareness in shaping political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia (Usek & Dunlop, 2023; Lim, 2019; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). These studies consistently reported that a lack of political knowledge, formal civic education, and accessible information was a

key barrier to Indigenous engagement in democratic processes. Among Orang Asli youth, in particular, limited exposure to political processes during their schooling years contributed to passive or disengaged attitudes toward electoral participation and decision-making forums (Usek & Dunlop, 2023).

A 2023 study exploring Indigenous youth activism found that only 28.4% of respondents had received any form of civic education in school, and less than 15% had ever attended a community meeting related to politics or policy (Usek & Dunlop, 2023). This limited exposure to political literacy was particularly acute in rural Orang Asli settlements, where school curricula rarely include Indigenous perspectives on governance or human rights. Moreover, Indigenous history and constitutional rights are seldom covered in mainstream Malaysian civic syllabi, further marginalizing Indigenous students from political discourse.

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Overall, these studies consistently conclude that legal and institutional frameworks in Malaysia are either insufficient or counterproductive in promoting Indigenous political participation. Structural reforms, legal alignment with international standards, and proactive inclusion strategies are urgently needed to ensure equitable representation and democratic participation for Malaysia's Indigenous populations.

Two studies noted that Indigenous communities often relied on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors for informal civic education programs (Colchester & Jalong, 2014). These efforts typically included workshops on voter rights, mock election exercises, and training on navigating local governance systems. Although such interventions were positively received, their reach was limited to pilot programs or isolated communities, pointing to a broader systemic neglect of civic education in Indigenous contexts.

In the absence of structured civic education, some studies found that Indigenous people often associated politics with elite interests or corruption, leading to apathy or distrust toward formal political systems (Lim, 2019). This perception was especially prevalent among elders and adults with low literacy, further complicating efforts to mobilize collective political action. Conversely, youth exposed to grassroots education initiatives or activist networks were more likely to express interest in advocacy and rights-based movements.

Overall, these findings suggest that political disengagement among Indigenous communities is not due to cultural disinterest, but rather the result of long-term educational and informational exclusion. Expanding civic education that incorporates Indigenous history, constitutional rights, and participatory tools could significantly enhance political awareness and empower future Indigenous leaders.

4.3 Socioeconomic and Geographic Exclusion

Two studies addressed how socioeconomic disadvantage and geographic isolation limit political participation among Malaysia's Indigenous peoples, especially the Orang Asli (Lim, 2019; Colchester & Jalong, 2014). These studies highlighted the intersection of poverty, infrastructure deficits, and rurality as structural conditions that severely restrict access to political spaces and services. The majority of Orang Asli and native groups live in remote or forest-edge settlements, far from urban centers where government offices, polling stations, and political outreach typically occur (Jalong, 2014).

In some villages, residents were unaware of election dates or lacked access to reliable information due to poor internet and media coverage. These structural factors contribute to lower voter registration and turnout among Indigenous populations compared to national averages (Lim, 2019).

In addition to physical isolation, studies reported that socioeconomic deprivation—such as high levels of unemployment, land insecurity, and food instability—diverts community attention away from political participation. For many Indigenous individuals, survival and livelihood concerns take precedence over engaging in policy matters or attending political meetings. One study documented that in some Orang Asli communities, political engagement was only pursued when it intersected directly with economic survival, such as land encroachment cases or access to social welfare (Colchester & Jalong, 2014).

Importantly, these studies emphasized that geographic exclusion reinforces political marginalization, creating a cycle in which Indigenous communities are overlooked by political parties and underrepresented in decision-making bodies. Despite being eligible voters, many Indigenous people remain effectively disenfranchised due to logistical and structural neglect.

In sum, socioeconomic and geographic exclusion forms a major invisible barrier to Indigenous political participation in Malaysia. Targeted policies that address rural infrastructure, access to voter registration services, and economic security could play a critical role in increasing Indigenous representation and democratic inclusion.

4.4 Grassroots and Youth-led Activism

Three studies discussed the emergence of grassroots and youth-led activism as an alternative and evolving mode of political participation among Indigenous Malaysians (Usek & Dunlop, 2023; Lim, 2019; Hassan & Nordin, 2020).

These studies highlighted a shift in political expression from conventional participation, such as voting and running for office, to more dynamic and localized forms of engagement, particularly among younger generations.

One study by Usek and Dunlop (2023) found that Indigenous youth increasingly participate in digital advocacy, community organizing, and issue-based mobilization rather than aligning with mainstream political parties. This form of activism is often rooted in environmental protection, Indigenous land rights, and cultural identity preservation. Through platforms such as social media, WhatsApp groups, and community radio, youth are creating alternative political spaces that bypass traditional party systems and bureaucratic channels.

Another dimension of grassroots activism is the collaborative alliances that Indigenous communities are forming with urban NGOs, student groups, and international observers. These partnerships have led to small but significant policy wins, such as temporary halts to deforestation projects or increased public scrutiny of resettlement schemes (Hassan & Nordin, 2020). Moreover, these alliances often serve as informal “training grounds” for future Indigenous leaders, offering exposure to legal frameworks, negotiation tactics, and campaign strategies.

While grassroots activism does not yet substitute for formal political representation, these studies collectively argue that it offers an important alternative pathway for empowerment, particularly in contexts where legal and institutional channels remain inaccessible or ineffective. Youth activism, in particular, has the potential to redefine the future of Indigenous political participation in Malaysia by fostering leadership, collective identity, and long-term civic engagement.

Table 2 *Summary of themes and key findings on indigenous political participation in Malaysia*

Theme	Number of Studies (n)	Key Issues Identified	Examples of Studies
Legal & Institutional Barriers	4	Outdated laws (e.g., Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954); underrepresentation in political bodies; lack of enforceable political rights.	Hassan & Nordin (2020); Lim (2019); Nordin (2012); Colchester & Jalong (2014)
Civic Education & Political Awareness	3	Lack of formal civic education; limited political literacy; role of NGOs in informal political training.	Usek & Dunlop (2023); Lim (2019); Colchester & Jalong (2014)
Socioeconomic & Geographic Exclusion	2	Rural isolation; poverty; logistical challenges in voter registration and access to polling; low political engagement due to survival priorities.	Lim (2019); Colchester & Jalong (2014)
Grassroots & Youth-led Activism	3	Youth engagement through digital platforms; environmental and land rights activism; alliances with NGOs; community-based political actions.	Usek & Dunlop (2023); Lim (2019); Hassan & Nordin (2020)

5. Discussion

This systematic literature review sought to explore the extent, barriers, and enablers of political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia, focusing particularly on the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and native communities in Sabah and Sarawak. The five studies reviewed revealed a complex interplay of legal, educational, socioeconomic, and grassroots factors that collectively influence Indigenous engagement in both formal political institutions and informal civic life. Despite decades of national development efforts and constitutional commitments to equality, Indigenous communities continue to face structural and systemic exclusion from Malaysia’s democratic processes (Hassan & Nordin, 2020).

One of the most consistent themes identified was the presence of legal and institutional barriers rooted in Malaysia’s colonial-era legislation, particularly the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954. This act has been criticized for failing to uphold international standards of Indigenous self-determination, such as those outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Scholars argue that the law’s administrative focus on land and welfare fails to guarantee political rights or representation for Orang Asli communities (Hassan & Nordin, 2020; Lim, 2019). The lack of Indigenous voices in federal and state-level decision-making bodies exacerbates this issue, reinforcing a pattern of marginalization that persists across electoral cycles. Even when Indigenous individuals are appointed to advisory roles, their influence is often symbolic rather than substantive (Nordin, 2012).

Equally important is the role of civic education and political awareness, which has been both a barrier and a potential avenue for change. Several studies found that many Indigenous individuals, especially in rural and forest-edge communities, lack access to formal civic education or exposure to political processes (Usek & Dunlop,

2023). This absence of knowledge contributes to low voter turnout, political apathy, and limited understanding of rights and responsibilities under the Malaysian constitution. However, the review also highlighted innovative efforts by civil society organizations and Indigenous-led initiatives that are working to fill this gap. Through community-based workshops, digital platforms, and storytelling practices, these programs aim to empower younger generations to engage politically, both within and outside the electoral system (Colchester & Jalong, 2014; Usek & Dunlop, 2023).

The issue of socioeconomic and geographic exclusion further compounds these challenges. Most Indigenous communities in Malaysia reside in remote and underdeveloped areas with limited infrastructure, which hinders access to polling stations, public forums, and government services (SUHAKAM, 2013; Lim, 2019). In such contexts, political participation is often perceived as a luxury secondary to more immediate concerns such as food security, healthcare, and land tenure. This aligns with global literature on political exclusion, which has shown that poverty and isolation can significantly reduce civic engagement among marginalized populations (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). The review also found that where socioeconomic barriers intersect with legal exclusion and civic illiteracy, the effects on political disempowerment are particularly pronounced.

Yet, amid these constraints, the review revealed emergent forms of political activism, particularly among Indigenous youth and grassroots movements. Rather than relying solely on traditional political channels, many Indigenous communities are engaging in localized resistance and advocacy efforts, often centered on land rights, environmental justice, and cultural survival (Usek & Dunlop, 2023). These movements use a blend of digital tools, alliances with NGOs, and direct action to assert political agency. In this sense, grassroots activism serves as both a response to formal exclusion and a reimagining of political participation. It reflects a broader global trend in which Indigenous groups are crafting alternative models of governance and representation rooted in collective identity and community sovereignty (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

The findings of this review suggest that political disengagement among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia is not a result of cultural disinterest, as often assumed, but a consequence of institutional neglect, legal exclusion, and systemic marginalization. Enhancing Indigenous political participation will require multi-layered reforms, including the revision of outdated legal frameworks, the institutionalization of culturally relevant civic education, and the dismantling of socioeconomic barriers that inhibit political expression. Moreover, policymakers should recognize and support the legitimacy of grassroots political engagement as a vital form of democratic participation.

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of available literature, it also highlights several research gaps. First, there is a lack of large-scale empirical studies that quantify Indigenous political behavior across different regions of Malaysia. Most studies reviewed were qualitative or case-based, limiting generalizability. Second, research on the political experiences of Indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak remains sparse, despite their significant demographic presence and distinct legal frameworks. Future studies should also examine the gender dimensions of political participation, as Indigenous women face unique challenges and opportunities in both formal and informal political spaces.

In conclusion, the political participation of Indigenous peoples in Malaysia is shaped by a constellation of structural and cultural factors that both hinder and motivate engagement. While the formal political system has largely failed to accommodate Indigenous voices, emerging grassroots movements offer hope for a more inclusive and pluralistic democratic future. Efforts to support Indigenous political agency must be holistic, rights-based, and community-driven, recognizing that participation is not merely a matter of access, but of power, recognition, and respect.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review has revealed that political participation among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia particularly the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and the native communities of Sabah and Sarawak—remains deeply constrained by a combination of historical, structural, educational, and socioeconomic factors. Despite various policy initiatives and constitutional provisions aimed at inclusivity, Indigenous peoples continue to be sidelined from mainstream political processes, both in representation and influence. The persistence of outdated legal frameworks such as the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, which remains incompatible with international standards like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), has institutionalized their political marginalization. Limited legal protections for Indigenous self-determination, combined with their underrepresentation in legislative bodies, have hindered their ability to shape policies that affect their lives and lands.

Furthermore, the review underscores the central role of civic education and political awareness as both a barrier and a transformative force. The lack of culturally relevant civic education and political training continues to reinforce disengagement, especially among youth and rural communities. However, promising signs of change are emerging. Youth-led activism, grassroots mobilization, and digital platforms are creating new avenues for Indigenous political expression and resistance. These informal modes of participation are increasingly important,

especially as they address issues ignored by formal political structures, such as land encroachment, environmental degradation, and cultural erasure.

Socioeconomic and geographic exclusion also continue to limit political participation in concrete ways. Indigenous communities located in remote and forested areas face numerous logistical and infrastructural challenges that reduce their ability to engage in electoral and civic processes. This exclusion is compounded by poverty, low education levels, and historical disenfranchisement, making political participation a secondary concern to immediate survival needs. Nevertheless, the resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples are evident in their local organizing, alliance-building with civil society, and use of alternative channels to voice their demands.

The findings of this systematic literature review highlight several important policy implications that are essential for strengthening Indigenous political participation and democratic inclusion in Malaysia. One of the most critical priorities involves the reform of existing legal and institutional frameworks governing Indigenous affairs, particularly the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, which continues to be widely viewed as outdated and insufficient in protecting Indigenous political rights, autonomy, and self-determination. Meaningful reforms should focus on enhancing Indigenous representation within political and administrative institutions, ensuring that Indigenous communities are not merely consulted symbolically but are actively involved in decision-making processes that affect their land, culture, livelihoods, and future development. In addition, there is a pressing need to establish more inclusive political representation mechanisms that allow Indigenous voices to participate effectively at local, state, and national levels. Beyond institutional reform, the review also emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive civic education initiatives that are tailored to the historical experiences, linguistic diversity, and sociocultural realities of Indigenous communities. Strengthening political literacy, awareness of constitutional rights, and understanding of democratic processes could significantly empower Indigenous youth and community leaders to engage more confidently in formal and informal political spaces. Equally important is the improvement of rural political accessibility through better infrastructure, transportation, communication systems, and access to voter registration and electoral information, particularly for Indigenous populations residing in remote and underserved areas.

At the same time, the review identifies several important directions for future research that could further deepen understanding of Indigenous political participation in Malaysia. Existing studies remain limited in geographical scope, methodological diversity, and long-term analysis, resulting in significant gaps within the current body of knowledge. Future research should therefore explore comparative analyses between Indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia and those in Sabah and Sarawak, as these regions possess distinct political histories, governance arrangements, and sociocultural dynamics that may shape political participation differently. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to examine how Indigenous political behavior, civic engagement, and political consciousness evolve over time in response to changing social, economic, and political conditions. Furthermore, greater scholarly attention should be given to the gender dimensions of Indigenous political participation, particularly the experiences, barriers, and leadership roles of Indigenous women, whose voices remain underrepresented in existing literature. The review also highlights the need for more quantitative and mixed-method empirical investigations capable of generating broader and more generalizable evidence regarding Indigenous political attitudes, voting behavior, civic engagement patterns, and institutional trust. Expanding the methodological and thematic scope of future studies would not only strengthen academic understanding but also contribute to more evidence-based policymaking and inclusive democratic development in Malaysia.

Overall, this review highlights that the issue of low political participation among Indigenous Malaysians is not a product of cultural disinterest or political apathy. Rather, it is a direct consequence of entrenched systemic barriers and ongoing state neglect. Addressing these issues requires a multi-dimensional and intersectional approach that combines legal reform, educational empowerment, economic inclusion, and genuine political representation. It also calls for the recognition of Indigenous political practices that may not align neatly with formal institutions but are nonetheless vital expressions of civic engagement and self-determination. For Malaysia to move toward a more equitable and participatory democracy, Indigenous voices must not only be heard—they must be empowered, protected, and positioned at the heart of policy-making processes that affect their communities and futures.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Abdul Rasid Abdul Razzaq; **data collection:** Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Nurul Aimi Razali, Noranifitri Md Nor, Saiful Farisin Md Ramlan; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Abdul Rasid Abdul Razzaq, Nurul Aimi Razali; **draft manuscript preparation:** Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Noranifitri Md Nor, Saiful Farisin Md Ramlan. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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