



Elections and Voter Choices in Pakistan: A Comprehensive Analysis

Muhammad Ali Murtaza Mehdi

M.Phil Scholar, Political Science BZU, Multan. Email: alimurtazamphil@gmail.com

Abstract

Pakistan's democratic landscape is characterized by a complex interplay of its non-symmetric federal parliamentary system, a history of political instability, and pressing socio-economic challenges. Elections in this context are not merely contests for power but critical junctures for addressing national crises, including economic precarity, militant violence, and the aftermath of natural disasters. This report provides an in-depth analysis of Pakistan's electoral system, examining the structure and processes of its national and provincial assemblies, and the pivotal role of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). The analysis delves into the dynamics of the 2018 and 2024 general elections, highlighting the significant shifts in political power and the controversies surrounding electoral integrity. While the 2018 elections saw the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerge as the largest party, the 2024 elections presented a unique scenario where PTI-backed independent candidates secured the most direct seats despite facing severe restrictions, ultimately leading to a coalition government formed by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and its allies. This outcome underscores a notable disconnect between popular vote and government formation, raising questions about the fairness and legitimacy of the electoral process. The report further dissects the ideologies, policy positions, and electoral trajectories of Pakistan's major political parties: PML-N, PTI, and Pakistan People's Party (PPP). It explores the dual function of party manifestos as both policy blueprints and electoral rhetoric, and the enduring influence of populist slogans and dynastic politics on voter behavior.

Introduction

Contextualizing Pakistan's Democratic Journey and Electoral Significance

Pakistan, since its establishment in 1947, has functioned as a non-symmetric federal government and a federal parliamentary democratic republic. Its political history is characterized by a recurring pattern of military interventions interspersed with periods of civilian rule, often dominated by entrenched dynastic political parties. This historical backdrop is fundamental to understanding the persistent challenges to democratic stability and the evolving nature of its electoral processes. The nation's journey towards democratic consolidation has been fraught with difficulties, including frequent shifts in power and the enduring influence of non-civilian actors. The current political landscape in Pakistan is further complicated by a confluence of severe national challenges. The country faced a significant risk of economic default for much of 2023, with the economy taking a heavy toll on its citizens through high inflation, commodity shortages, and other adverse impacts. This economic fragility is compounded by a notable increase in militant attacks, resulting in approximately 1,000 civilian and security force casualties in 2023 alone. Furthermore, Pakistan continues to grapple with the long-term consequences of devastating natural disasters, such as the widespread flooding in August 2022, which impacted a third of the country and displaced millions. These multifaceted crises underscore the critical importance of elections as a mechanism for the

populace to seek solutions to national challenges and for the broader stability of both Pakistan and the South Asia region. The profound national crises, including economic precarity, rampant inflation, and escalating militant attacks, elevate the stakes of elections in Pakistan. These are not merely contests for political power but critical junctures where the electorate seeks tangible improvements in their daily lives and national security. Voters, facing severe economic hardships and security threats, tend to view elections as their primary avenue for change or for holding incumbent governments accountable. This often leads to a more pragmatic, rather than purely ideological, voting behavior, where citizens prioritize candidates or parties perceived as most capable of delivering economic relief or enhancing security. Consequently, the legitimacy and long-term stability of elected governments are intrinsically linked to their ability to mitigate these pervasive crises, making electoral outcomes a direct reflection of public discontent or hope for concrete improvements.

Pakistan's Electoral System and Institutional Framework

Structure of National and Provincial Assemblies: Seat Allocation and Election Processes

Pakistan's federal parliamentary system features a bicameral legislature at the national level, known as the Parliament of Pakistan. This Parliament comprises two houses: the National Assembly, which is the lower house, and the Senate, serving as the upper house. Members of the National Assembly are directly elected by the people, while Senators are chosen by elected provincial legislators.

The **National Assembly** currently consists of 342 seats, a number that includes adjustments following the ex-FATA merger. A significant portion of these seats, 266 members, are directly elected from single-member constituencies using a first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. In addition to these general seats, 60 seats are reserved for women and 10 for non-Muslims. These reserved seats are allocated to political parties based on their proportional share of the general seats they win. This allocation mechanism means that a political entity, even if it garners substantial direct votes or wins numerous single-member constituencies, can be significantly disadvantaged in the overall seat count if it fails to formally register as a political party or is stripped of its party symbol. The 2024 general election vividly illustrates this dynamic, where PTI-backed independent candidates, despite winning the largest number of directly elected seats, were deemed ineligible for reserved seats due to a court ruling concerning their internal party elections and the loss of their party symbol. This procedural decision effectively reduced their overall parliamentary strength, allowing a coalition of other parties, notably PML-N and PPP, to form the government. This highlights how legal and procedural rulings on party status can have substantial, even decisive, electoral consequences, potentially altering the composition of government despite the popular vote. It also raises critical questions about the effectiveness of representation for these reserved groups if their presence is contingent on the strength of major parties rather than direct voter choice or independent political identity. General elections for both the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies are constitutionally mandated to occur every five years, either upon the completion of the National Assembly's term or its dissolution. Senatorial elections, conversely, are held every six years.

At the provincial level, Pakistan is divided into four provinces Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, and Sindh each possessing its own assembly. These provincial assemblies also employ a combination of FPTP general seats and reserved seats for women and non-Muslims.

- The **Punjab Assembly** is the largest provincial legislature, with a total of 371 seats,

comprising 297 general seats, 66 seats reserved for women, and 8 seats reserved for non-Muslims.

- The **Sindh Assembly** consists of 168 seats, with 130 general seats, 29 seats reserved for women, and 9 seats reserved for non-Muslims.
- The **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Assembly** has seen some changes in its seat allocation. While one source indicates 124 elected members (99 regular seats, 22 reserved for women, and 3 for non-Muslims), another states that following the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) through the 25th Constitutional Amendment, the number of seats increased to 145 (115 general seats, 26 for women, and 4 for non-Muslims), with elections on these new seats intended to be held "after one year of general election 2018". This discrepancy, particularly the delayed election for FATA merger seats, implies a potential lag or ongoing transitional phase in fully integrating these areas into the provincial assembly. This situation could lead to feelings of political marginalization or incomplete integration among the FATA population, potentially fueling grievances and impacting their trust in the electoral system, thereby undermining the principle of equitable representation and democratic inclusion.
- The **Balochistan Assembly** is composed of 65 members, including 51 directly elected general seats, 11 seats reserved for women, and 3 reserved seats for non-Muslims.

The head of government, the Prime Minister, is elected by a majority of the National Assembly members. The head of state, the President, is a figurehead elected by an Electoral College, which comprises members from both houses of Parliament and the four provincial assemblies.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP): Mandate, Functions, and Autonomy

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) stands as a constitutionally established, independent, autonomous, and permanent federal body. Its foundational mandate is to organize and conduct elections in an honest, just, and fair manner, strictly in accordance with the law. The ECP's responsibilities are extensive and critical to the democratic process. These include: preparing and annually revising electoral rolls for national, provincial, and local government elections; undertaking the delimitation of constituencies to define electoral boundaries; organizing and holding general elections across all tiers of government; conducting Senate elections and by-elections to fill casual vacancies; appointing Election Tribunals to adjudicate electoral disputes; and overseeing the election for the office of the President. A particularly important constitutional directive for the ECP is to implement measures to guard against corrupt practices within the electoral process. Designed to operate with full financial autonomy, the ECP receives its operational funding from the annual federal budget, a provision intended to safeguard its impartiality. This financial independence is a cornerstone of its perceived neutrality. However, a notable operational limitation exists within its administrative structure: while the ECP can re-appropriate its allotted funds as it deems fit, it does not possess the authority to create new posts or abolish existing ones without the approval of the Finance Division, and sometimes even the Prime Minister. This subtle yet impactful limitation on the ECP's administrative autonomy can severely impede its ability to adapt swiftly to the evolving demands of Pakistan's electoral landscape, implement its strategic plans, or scale up its operations efficiently, especially given the country's large and growing electorate and complex security environment. For instance, if the ECP identifies a need for more specialized staff, such as IT experts for digital systems or security analysts, delays in obtaining government approval for new posts could hinder critical reforms and operational effectiveness. This structural impediment, despite the nominal financial and constitutional independence, can contribute to operational challenges, perceived inefficiencies,

and ultimately, public questioning of its credibility, as was observed during the delayed announcement of 2024 election results. This suggests that true institutional independence requires not just financial freedom but also full administrative control over its human resources. Furthermore, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has consistently affirmed the exclusive jurisdiction of Election Tribunals, which are appointed by the Chief Election Commissioner, in matters related to elections. This judicial stance generally limits the intervention of other courts, except in specific instances of patent illegality that could disenfranchise a candidate.

Recent Electoral Cycles: The 2018 and 2024 General Elections

The 2018 General Election: Results, Key Players, and Outcomes

The 2018 general elections in Pakistan were held on July 25, 2018, encompassing contests for 272 National Assembly constituencies and provincial assemblies across the country. The electoral landscape saw the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by the prominent cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, emerge as the single largest party at the national level. PTI secured a significant 157 seats in the 342-member National Assembly, a total that included 124 directly elected seats, 28 seats reserved for women, and 5 for non-Muslims. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), then led by Nawaz Sharif (with Shehbaz Sharif as a key figure), secured the second position with 84 seats, of which 66 were directly elected. The Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), under the leadership of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, came in third, securing 54 seats, with 43 being directly elected. Following these results, PTI successfully formed a coalition government, and Imran Khan assumed the office of Prime Minister. The overall voter turnout for the 2018 general election was recorded at 51.7%. However, the electoral period was significantly marred by a series of violent incidents. In the run-up to the election and on Election Day itself, multiple bombings and clashes occurred, targeting candidates, political rallies, and polling stations. These incidents resulted in numerous fatalities and injuries across various regions, including Peshawar, Mastung, Bannu, and Quetta. The prevalence of pre-election violence, including targeted bombings and clashes, inherently introduces an element of coercion and fear into the electoral process. While specific data on its direct impact on voter turnout or preferences is not provided, such an environment can deter voters from participating due to security concerns, or it might influence their choices towards parties perceived as strong on security. This highlights a persistent and critical challenge to the conduct of free and fair elections in Pakistan: the pervasive security context. High levels of pre-election violence can fundamentally undermine the integrity and perceived legitimacy of the electoral process, irrespective of the Election Commission's procedural adherence. It creates an uneven playing field, intimidates the electorate, and can distort the true expression of popular will, thereby contributing to a broader public perception of elections being compromised and further eroding trust in democratic institutions. Addressing electoral violence is therefore not merely a security issue but a fundamental requirement for strengthening Pakistan's democracy.

The 2024 General Election: Dynamics, Results, and Post-Election Landscape

The most recent general elections in Pakistan were conducted on Thursday, February 8, 2024, for both the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies across all four provinces. Over 128 million voters were registered, with nearly 18,000 candidates contesting for 336 National Assembly seats and 749 Provincial Assembly seats.

Analysis of PTI-backed Independents' Performance: The 2024 election yielded a widely perceived "surprise result". Independent candidates, predominantly backed by former Prime

Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, secured the largest number of directly-elected seats in the National Assembly, ranging from 92 to 103 seats. This remarkable performance occurred despite significant pre-election legal setbacks for PTI. A court ruling had prevented them from standing as a recognized party, and they were blocked from using their traditional cricket bat symbol on ballot papers, a crucial factor in a country where a significant portion of the population is illiterate. Furthermore, a pivotal ruling by the Election Commission declared PTI's independent candidates ineligible for the reserved seats for women and non-Muslims in both the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies, substantially impacting their overall seat count. At the provincial level, PTI-backed independents demonstrated their continued stronghold in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) by winning the most seats in its assembly. Gallup Pakistan's exit poll data further corroborated PTI's popularity, indicating it was the most favored choice (31%) among voters across most age groups, particularly among first-time voters (18-24) and relatively educated segments, underscoring a generational divide in voting preferences.

Formation of the Coalition Government: Despite the strong showing of PTI-backed independents, no single political party secured an outright majority in the National Assembly. Consequently, a coalition government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s Shehbaz Sharif took office. This coalition was formed with the support of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan (MQM-P), Pakistan Muslim League (Q) (PML-Q), Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), and other smaller parties. After the allocation of reserved seats and the joining of some independents to the PML-N, it emerged as the largest party with a total of 123 seats. The PPP finished as the third largest party with 73 seats, trailing the 92 PTI-backed independents. Shehbaz Sharif was subsequently re-elected as Prime Minister on March 3, securing 201 votes. This situation highlights a significant paradox: PTI-backed independent candidates secured the highest number of directly elected seats and were identified as the most popular choice among voters, particularly youth. Yet, due to legal rulings that prevented PTI from contesting as a unified party and subsequently rendered their independent candidates ineligible for reserved seats, the PML-N, despite winning fewer direct seats, was able to form a government through a coalition with other parties. This outcome directly contradicts the popular mandate expressed at the ballot box. This creates a profound tension within Pakistan's democratic framework, illustrating a significant gap between the will of the electorate and the eventual formation of government. Such a disconnect can severely undermine public trust in the electoral process, foster a perception of political engineering, and exacerbate existing political polarization. This erosion of trust, as evidenced by widespread allegations of rigging and international concerns, poses a fundamental threat to the legitimacy and long-term stability of the government and the democratic system itself. It suggests that while elections occur, the mechanisms for translating popular support into governance can be circumvented, leading to widespread public discontent and a sense of disenfranchisement.

Controversies and Allegations of Electoral Irregularities:

The 2024 elections were marred by significant controversies. In the days following the election, widespread protests erupted as PTI supporters took to the streets, alleging widespread vote-rigging. International observer groups and members of the international community, including the United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union, publicly voiced concerns about the fairness of the elections. Media outlets globally also denounced the election as "fraudulent". The Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) delay in preparing and announcing preliminary election results significantly overshadowed an otherwise orderly election process, raising serious questions about

the credibility of the election outcome. Additionally, the caretaker government's suspension of cellular and internet services on Election Day, regardless of stated security reasons, was widely seen as undermining years of parliamentary efforts to reform the election results management process and maximize integrity. A notable aspect of the 2024 election dynamics was the strategic use of technology by PTI amidst severe restrictions. PTI faced unprecedented restrictions leading up to the elections, including a de facto ban on standing as a party, the loss of its iconic cricket bat symbol (critical for illiterate voters), and a virtual blackout from mainstream television media. In response to these severe constraints, PTI strategically and innovatively leveraged technology. They utilized platforms like Twitter Spaces for virtual rallies, GitHub for listing candidates when their websites were blocked, chatbots linked to Imran Khan's Facebook page, and artificial intelligence to generate messages in Khan's voice, ensuring his virtual presence despite his incarceration. Furthermore, they built robust peer-to-peer communication networks, particularly via WhatsApp, to disseminate campaign materials, rally information, and voting instructions, directly informing voters about their independent candidates and their respective symbols. This demonstrates a direct causal relationship: the severe restrictions imposed on PTI compelled the party to adopt highly innovative and decentralized digital campaign strategies. The traditional media blackout forced them to pivot to alternative online platforms. The ban on their symbol necessitated the creation of P2P networks to educate voters. This strategic adaptation allowed PTI to bypass traditional gatekeepers and maintain significant public engagement, contributing to their surprising electoral performance despite the obstacles. This sets a new and potentially disruptive benchmark for electoral campaigns in Pakistan and other developing democracies where political spaces might be constrained. It illustrates the power of digital platforms to empower political movements to circumvent state control over information and mobilize grassroots support. However, it also raises critical concerns about the potential for rapid spread of misinformation, the formation of echo chambers, and the challenges of regulating online political discourse, which can impact the overall integrity and fairness of the electoral process.

Major Political Parties: Ideologies, Manifestos, and Electoral Performance

Pakistan's multi-party system features several significant political entities, each with distinct ideologies, policy platforms, and electoral histories. The manifestos released by these parties during election years serve as crucial benchmark documents, articulating their plans, programs, and broad policy directions. These documents are intended to provide a basis for evaluating a party's performance once in government and to educate the electorate about proposed service delivery and commitments to public issues. They also aim to specify the party's ideological direction, attracting voters and fostering a program-specific relationship between parties and their constituents, thereby discouraging purely personality-oriented bonds.

The Role and Impact of Party Manifestos on Voter Engagement

Party manifestos are formally presented as binding commitments and serve as a tool for voter education and accountability. This implies a rational, policy-driven voter. However, evidence suggests a potential gap between these "paper promises" and a party's actual behavior or communication. For instance, the PML-N's 2018 manifesto emphasized economic growth and infrastructure development, but its subsequent Twitter discourse showed a significant shift in focus, indicating a potential divergence between stated policy and public communication. Furthermore, other factors like political connections, personality, and traditional social loyalties are known to heavily influence voter choices in Pakistan. This suggests that while manifestos fulfill a formal democratic requirement, their practical influence on voter behavior might be limited by a pervasive skepticism regarding their fulfillment, or by the overriding importance of other, more

immediate or traditional, considerations for voters. If voters perceive manifestos as mere electoral rhetoric rather than genuine policy blueprints, it undermines the concept of issue-based voting and reduces the accountability of political parties. This raises questions about the maturity of policy discourse in Pakistani elections and the need for greater transparency and enforcement mechanisms for manifesto pledges to truly shape voter decisions and governance.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N): Core Ideology, Policy Positions, and Electoral Trajectory

The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) self-identifies as a conservative political party, typically positioned on the centre-right of the political spectrum. Its platform is generally nationalist and conservative, advocating for free markets, deregulation, lower taxes, private ownership, and a "peace through strength" foreign policy. While the party initially supported social conservatism, its ideology has evolved towards a more liberally conservative stance in recent years. The PML-N also maintains an ideological alignment with the military on matters of national security. The party was founded in 1993 following a split within the broader Pakistan Muslim League. After its establishment, PML-N, alongside the Pakistan People's Party, largely dominated Pakistan's two-party political system. It achieved a significant two-thirds majority in the 1997 general elections and is notably credited with authorizing Pakistan's first nuclear tests, *Chagai-I* and *Chagai-II*, in 1998. However, its relations with the military deteriorated, culminating in a coup in 1999 that ousted its government. The party regained popularity in the 2008 general elections, becoming the principal opposition, and returned to power in 2013, with Nawaz Sharif serving an unprecedented third term as Prime Minister. A major setback occurred with Nawaz Sharif's disqualification in 2017. In 2022, PML-N became a key component of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition that successfully moved a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan, leading to Shehbaz Sharif becoming Prime Minister. In the 2024 general election, PML-N won 75 directly elected seats and, after the allocation of reserved seats and the joining of some independents, emerged as the largest party, subsequently forming a coalition government.

Key policy positions highlighted in PML-N's manifestos and historical actions include:

- **Economic Policies:** Emphasis on free markets, individual achievement, deregulation of economic sectors, and a strong foundation of capitalism. The party generally opposes labor union management and large-scale workers' unions. It asserts that "prosperous agriculture is the backbone of national prosperity" and advocates for diversifying the rural economy to alleviate poverty. Historically, PML-N governments have pursued privatization of major heavy industries as part of their industrial development program. Its 2018 manifesto promised to create 10 million jobs and 5 million low-cost homes, with an overarching goal of positioning Pakistan among the top 25 world economies.
- **Infrastructure Development:** The party is credited with establishing the National Highway Authority and inaugurating the M2 Motorway in 1997. It is generally known for its focus on infrastructure spending, including roads, bridges, and rapid transit projects.
- **Environmental Policies:** Established the Environmental Protection Agency in 1997. However, it has faced criticism for perceived neglect of environmental health, including issues related to the 2011 dengue fever outbreak and medicine quality.
- **Science and Defense:** Authorized Pakistan's first nuclear tests and established the Pakistan Antarctic Programme. It has contributed to increasing Pakistan's nuclear deterrent and nuclear power growth.
- **Foreign Policy:** Advocates for broader and stronger relations with a wide range of countries, including the United States, China, the United Kingdom, European Union, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, as well as India (having signed the

Lahore Declaration in 1999). While supporting US financial policies, the party has expressed skepticism about Pakistan's role in the War on Terror, with some intellectuals viewing it as a campaign against Islam. It is firmly opposed to religious extremism and terrorism, having established Anti-Terrorism Courts during its 1997-1999 tenure. The PML-N leadership consistently supports the cause of Indian-held Kashmir, stating they will "never compromise this long standing position on Kashmir dispute".

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI): Core Ideology, Policy Positions, and Electoral Trajectory

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) positions itself as an anti-*status quo* movement, advocating for an Islamic democracy centered on egalitarianism. Its official goal is to transform Pakistan into a model welfare state espousing Islamic socialism, based on the principles of the Medina state (*Riyasat-e-Madinah*). The party also emphasizes dismantling religious discrimination against Pakistani minorities. PTI distinguishes itself by claiming to be the only non-dynastic party in mainstream Pakistani politics. Founded by Imran Khan in Lahore on April 25, 1996, PTI experienced slow initial growth and notably boycotted the 2008 elections in protest against alleged electoral manipulation. The party gained significant traction in the 2013 general election, emerging as a major political force and successfully forming the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. It's most significant victory came in the 2018 general election, where it became the single largest party at the national level and formed a coalition government with Imran Khan as Prime Minister. In April 2022, Imran Khan and his PTI government were removed from federal office through a no-confidence motion. The party faced a severe crackdown following the May 9, 2023, riots. In the 2024 elections, despite being unable to contest as a party and losing its symbol, PTI-backed independent candidates won the most direct seats. They currently govern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincially and serve as the largest opposition party in Punjab. PTI has demonstrated strong popularity among youth and educated segments of the electorate.

Key policy positions highlighted in PTI's manifestos and actions include:

- **Domestic Policy:** Advocates for civilian control of Pakistan's military, proposing that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) report directly to the Prime Minister and the defense budget be audited by the government. Imran Khan notably pledged to resign if terrorism originated from Pakistani soil after these reforms. The party organized protests against US drone attacks and called for blocking NATO supplies through Pakistan. It emphasizes religious tolerance and greater representation for minorities. PTI promised comprehensive governance reforms, including cracking down on police brutality, restructuring the civil service, electoral system reform, ensuring an independent judiciary, decentralizing state power, and enforcing laws that extend personal liberty. Its 2013 'Education Policy' aimed to introduce a uniform education system with a single curriculum in three languages (Urdu, English, regional) for primary schools nationwide. PTI also advocated for the establishment of South Punjab and Gilgit Baltistan as formal provinces. In the 2018 election, Imran Khan promised a "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan), though some manifesto commitments faced criticism for being "U-turns" after the party came to power.
- **Economic Policy:** Plans include developing poverty reduction programs and promoting diverse livelihood options.
- **Foreign Policy:** Aims for a relationship with the US based on "self-dignity and respect" and pledged to stop all foreign aid to Pakistan. Imran Khan stated that relations with the US, Russia, and China are in Pakistan's interest, and that Pakistan's "future is tied up with Russia". The PTI also promised to prioritize the Kashmir issue, seeking a permanent solution to border and territorial disputes.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP): Core Ideology, Policy Positions, and Electoral Trajectory

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is a centre-left to left-wing political party, deeply rooted in Islamic socialism, Islamic democracy, and egalitarianism, with a leaning towards social democracy. Its iconic slogan, "Roti, Kapra aur Makaan" ('Bread, Clothes, and a House'), encapsulates its populist appeal. The party's stated priorities include transforming Pakistan into a social-democratic state, promoting egalitarian values, establishing social justice, and maintaining a strong military. Its founding manifesto famously declared: "Islam is our Religion; Democracy is our Politics; Socialism is our Economy; Power lies with the People". The PPP was founded in Lahore in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, rallying prominent left-wing politicians against Ayub Khan's rule. The party quickly emerged as a powerful united front of opposition, connecting with the masses through radical slogans like 'Land to the Landless,' which proved popular among peasants and labor. The PPP's historical and continued electoral success is deeply intertwined with its ability to articulate emotionally resonant, populist slogans that tap into fundamental needs and aspirations of the masses. Despite the party's well-documented dynastic control, which often contradicts democratic ideals of meritocracy, it maintains significant public support. This phenomenon suggests that in Pakistan's political landscape, the ability to connect with the populace through powerful, often simplified, populist narratives and a perceived commitment to the common person can be as, or even more, influential than detailed policy manifestos or traditional political structures. The persistence of dynastic politics alongside this populist appeal indicates that traditional power structures, family loyalties, and charismatic leadership remain deeply entrenched factors in voter behavior. This complicates the development of a purely issue-based voting culture and can lead to a political system where personality and lineage often overshadow policy substance and democratic accountability. The PPP has been voted into power on five separate occasions (1970, 1977, 1988, 1993, and 2008) and emerged as the largest opposition party on four occasions (1990, 1997, 2002, and 2013). Currently, it holds the position of the largest party in the federal Senate and the second largest in the National Assembly, and is in government in Sindh and Balochistan provinces. In the 2024 general election, PPP won 54 directly elected seats nationally and solidified its position as the largest party in Sindh and Balochistan.

Key policy positions highlighted in PPP's manifestos include:

- **Economic Policy:** Historically, the PPP has advocated for a socialist program involving nationalization, reducing economic inequality, abolishing the feudal system, and redistributing land. Its manifestos have also outlined priorities for improving economic equity and implementing expansive social welfare programs. The party pledged to rebuild an economy that works for all and to free Pakistanis from the fear of hunger, thirst, and helplessness.
- **Social Policy:** The PPP has emphasized revising the curriculum to remove hate and violence, and to include human rights, ethics, religious tolerance, hygiene, nutrition, reproductive health, and environmental protection.
- **Foreign Policy:** Focuses on enhancing regional stability.

Voter Participation and Demographic Trends

Overall Voter Turnout Analysis (2013-2024)

In the 2024 general election, Pakistan saw a substantial number of registered voters, exceeding 128 million individuals. A total of 61,282,920 voters cast their ballots, marking the highest absolute number of votes ever recorded in the country's electoral history. However, despite this record number of votes, the overall voter turnout percentage has exhibited a consistent decline over the past decade. Turnout stood at 55.5% in the 2013 general election, decreased to 52% in

2018, and further declined to 48% in 2024. This downward trend in turnout percentage is also reflected at the constituency level. The number of high-turnout constituencies (where participation surpassed 60%) significantly decreased from 90 in 2013 to just 11 in 2024. Conversely, the number of constituencies with turnout rates below 30% increased from three in 2018 to eight in 2024. Low voter turnout is often indicative of voter apathy, a lack of trust in the electoral process, or significant barriers to participation. The consistent decline in overall voter turnout percentages since 2013, despite an increase in the absolute number of votes, points to a growing disconnect between the expanding electorate and actual participation rates. This trend, when viewed alongside public opinion data indicating a significant lack of confidence in the honesty of elections and widespread government corruption, strongly suggests a systemic erosion of public engagement and trust in the democratic process. Voters may feel their participation has little impact or that the system is inherently flawed. If unaddressed, this sustained decline in turnout could lead to a crisis of legitimacy for elected governments, as their mandate might be perceived as weaker or less representative. It signals a critical need for comprehensive electoral reforms that enhance transparency and accountability, alongside targeted civic education initiatives aimed at rebuilding public confidence and addressing the root causes of voter apathy and disengagement. Without a robust and trusted participatory base, Pakistan's democratic stability remains precarious, potentially leading to increased political instability and reduced effectiveness of governance.

Gender Dynamics in Voter Participation: Disparities and Trends (Urban vs. Rural)

Gender dynamics play a crucial role in voter participation in Pakistan. In the 2024 elections, women constituted 46% (59.3 million) of the total registered voters, while men comprised 54% (69.2 million). Despite an increase in registered female voters, female turnout decreased from 46.9% in 2018 to 42.7% in 2024, mirroring a decline in male turnout from 56.1% to 51.8% over the same period. The gender gap in voter turnout slightly narrowed from 10 percentage points in 2018 to 9 points in 2024. A notable aspect of this disparity is that the gender gap in voter turnout is disproportionately higher in urban areas compared to rural ones. In 2024, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province registered the highest gender gap at 15.7%, whereas Sindh province had the lowest at 7.4%. A significant concern is the observation that 464 polling stations recorded no female votes in 2024, compared to only 62 polling stations with no male votes, underscoring persistent barriers to female participation. Paradoxically, women in urban Pakistan generally exhibit higher levels of education, marry at later ages, and have greater autonomy in household decision-making compared to their rural counterparts. Despite these indicators of empowerment, they show a lower voter turnout in metropolitan areas. This observation presents a paradox: conventional wisdom suggests that higher education and greater autonomy correlate with increased political participation. In Pakistan, urban women generally possess these characteristics more than rural women. However, the data reveals a counter-intuitive pattern: urban areas exhibit a higher gender gap in voter turnout, and female turnout in urban metropolitan areas remains persistently low. This suggests that factors beyond individual empowerment are at play. The large number of polling stations with zero female votes also points to systemic or deeply ingrained cultural barriers. This paradox indicates that while individual-level empowerment indicators (education, autonomy) are present, other socio-cultural norms, community pressures, or specific urban-centric barriers (e.g., different social dynamics compared to rural areas where collective family/caste influence might compel voting, or a more pronounced sense of political disengagement/apathy in urban anonymity) might be suppressing female participation. The "social cleavage of education, age, and gender" influencing political behavior suggests that while education can spark curiosity, it does not automatically translate into higher turnout if other social deterrents are strong. This highlights the complex and nuanced nature of voter behavior in Pakistan, where demographic trends alone cannot fully explain participation

patterns. It underscores the critical need for highly targeted, localized interventions to address specific barriers to female voter engagement, particularly in urban centers. These interventions must move beyond generic voter education to understand and counteract the unique socio-cultural dynamics and structural impediments that contribute to this paradoxical low turnout among otherwise empowered urban women. Furthermore, research suggests that relatively low levels of education and labor force participation among women can contribute to weak motivation to engage with the political process. Women in Pakistan often have lower access to media, less knowledge of current events, and reduced participation in public life.

Youth Engagement and Age-Group Voting Patterns

Pakistan possesses a remarkably young population, with approximately two-thirds of its citizens being below the age of 30. This demographic reality makes the youth vote a critically important factor in the country's elections. In the 2024 elections, the largest segment of registered voters (44%) was below the age of 35, and a substantial 35% of those who actually cast their votes were under 30 years of age. Significantly, youth voter turnout in 2024 was roughly similar to the national average, marking a "massive improvement" compared to earlier elections where youth participation was considerably lower. This indicates a growing political awareness and willingness among young people to participate in the electoral process. Gallup Pakistan's exit poll data from 2024 revealed that PTI was the most popular choice (31%) among voters across most age groups, including the youth. Conversely, PML-N showed a stronger lead among the 50+ age group, indicating a generational divide in voting preferences. This suggests that while PTI has successfully mobilized younger voters, older demographics may continue to align with more established parties. The increased engagement of youth, particularly given their numerical strength, represents a significant shift in Pakistan's electoral dynamics.

Factors Influencing Voter Choices

Voter choices in Pakistan are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic conditions, access to information, evolving media landscapes, and deeply entrenched socio-cultural factors, alongside the influence of political connections and patronage.

Socio-Economic Factors: Economic Conditions, Inflation, Unemployment, and Poverty

Economic conditions exert a profound influence on voter choices in Pakistan. The country's struggling economy, characterized by high inflation and unemployment, is a central concern for the electorate. In late 2023, Pakistanis expressed the highest level of pessimism about their economy in 18 years, with 70% believing it was worsening. Inflation reached 29.7% in December 2023, and a significant portion of the population (49%) found it "very difficult" to manage on their current income. Research consistently demonstrates that adverse socio-economic performance negatively affects the political support for incumbent parties. Voters tend to reward incumbents for strong economic performance and punish them for weak performance, with inflation emerging as a dominant factor influencing both personal and national economic evaluations. Studies in Pakistan have shown that economic deprivation, along with a lack of educational opportunities and health facilities, significantly reduces the vote shares of incumbent parties. The impact of inflation and unemployment on income inequality has also been noted, with urban areas and Punjab province suffering disproportionately from unfair income distribution. This economic distress directly translates into voter priorities, with rising inflation, unemployment, and corruption identified as the top three issues influencing decisive action in elections, particularly among the youth. The pervasive economic challenges mean that voters often prioritize candidates or parties who promise economic relief and stability, making economic policy a critical determinant of

electoral success.

Education and Access to Information

Education plays a vital role in shaping political behavior and voter choices. It sparks curiosity, grants access to knowledge, and encourages political engagement. An educated populace is generally more aware of candidates, voting procedures, and policy issues, enabling more informed decision-making. However, the impact of education on voter turnout can be complex. While education can lead to greater political involvement, it does not always translate into higher participation, especially for women in urban areas where other socio-cultural barriers may exist. Women, particularly those with lower education levels and limited labor force participation, may have weaker motivation to engage with the political process. They also tend to have less access to media and lower knowledge of current events compared to men. The ability to access accurate and unbiased political information through diverse media platforms is crucial, as greater exposure correlates with increased political participation and accountable voting behavior. This suggests that while education is a foundational element, its full potential in fostering informed voting is realized when coupled with accessible and reliable information channels.

Role of Media: Traditional vs. Social Media in Political Campaigns

The media landscape in Pakistan is dynamic, with both traditional and social media playing increasingly significant roles in shaping political behavior and voter decisions. Historically, traditional print and electronic media have been active players in election coverage, providing information and influencing public opinion. However, the rise of digital and mobile media has transformed political communication, especially among young people. Social media platforms have become a major force in Pakistani politics, used heavily by political parties since 2008 to spread information quickly and reach large audiences. They empower individuals to voice opinions, organize collective action, and hold leaders accountable, facilitating the exchange of ideas. For example, in the 2018 elections, major parties like PTI, PML-N, and PPP actively used Facebook and Twitter for campaigns. In the 2024 elections, PTI, facing restrictions on traditional media, innovatively leveraged platforms like Twitter Spaces, GitHub, and WhatsApp, along with AI-generated voice messages, to bypass gatekeepers and directly engage with voters. This strategic adaptation allowed PTI to maintain significant public engagement despite a virtual blackout from mainstream television. This shift towards digital campaigning, while enabling broader communication and grassroots mobilization, also introduces challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation, the formation of echo chambers, and the potential for manipulation of public opinion through targeted campaigns are growing concerns that can impact the integrity and fairness of the electoral process. While social media offers an alternative source of information, particularly when traditional media is perceived as biased, it also carries the risk of unreliable information due to a lack of fact-checking.

Socio-Cultural Factors: Biraderi (Caste/Clan), Ethnicity, and Religious Affiliations

Socio-cultural factors, including *biraderi* (caste/clan), ethnicity, and religious affiliations, profoundly influence voting patterns in Pakistan, a traditional society where such ties often supersede other considerations. The *biraderi* system, a social structure based on kinship and brotherhood, significantly shapes voting behavior, particularly in rural areas. Voters often feel pressured by their caste groups and families to support specific candidates, leading to decisions based on clan and caste affiliations rather than merit or policy. This can result in the election of under-qualified candidates, potentially undermining democratic processes and governance quality. Ethnicity is another substantial factor. Major ethnic groups like Punjabis, Sindhis, Balochis, and

Pakhtuns often have distinct political identities. Ethnic-based political parties, such as the Muttahidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) for Muhajirs and the Awami National Party (ANP) for Pashtuns, successfully mobilize voters by addressing issues specific to their ethnic communities. This strong ethnic alignment means voters often prefer candidates affiliated with their ethnic identity. The historical emergence of ethnic political parties, dating back to the Awami League in 1949, reflects a long-standing pattern of groups feeling marginalized and seeking political representation based on shared identity. While ethnic politics can mobilize specific voter bases, it can also pose challenges to democratic stability by fostering divisions. Religious affiliations also play a considerable role. Islam is the official religion of Pakistan, practiced by an overwhelming majority. Islamic parties, despite often having limited electoral success in terms of votes, wield significant street power and influence political processes. They are at the forefront of issues like the establishment of Shariat Courts and legislation on religious matters. While the Constitution limits political rights for non-Muslims, who cannot become President or Prime Minister, reserved seats exist for non-Muslims in assemblies. However, critics argue that the system of appointing reserved seat members by mainstream parties, rather than direct election, effectively segregates religious minorities from mainstream politics. Religious leaders can influence voters based on shared beliefs, sometimes leading to non-rational voting decisions. The influence of religious groups, whether Bareilvi, Deobandi, or Ahl-e-Hadith, often extends beyond electoral performance due to their organizational strength and ability to mobilize on specific issues.

Political Connections and Patronage

Political connections and patronage significantly influence voter choices in Pakistan, particularly in contexts where information about candidates' qualifications and policy positions may be scarce. In such environments, voters often value candidates' connections with influential, higher-level politicians, perceiving these connections as crucial for the delivery of services to their constituents. Studies, such as one conducted during the 2015 local government elections in rural Sargodha, Punjab, revealed that voters demonstrated high knowledge of a local candidate's connections, and a significant majority considered these connections an "extremely important reason" to support a candidate. Candidates contesting these elections explicitly highlighted their links with the incumbent party (PML-N) and other high-level politicians in their campaign materials. The research indicated that providing voters with information about candidates' connectedness increased their expressed support for more well-connected politicians. This suggests that voters are forward-looking, basing their choices on expectations that politically connected candidates will be more effective in securing public goods and services that often fall under provincial or federal jurisdiction. This phenomenon underscores that in Pakistan, where a wide range of citizen services (such as road maintenance, sewage, irrigation, electricity, education, health, and social welfare programs) remain centralized at provincial and federal levels, local candidates' ability to deliver is often perceived as directly tied to their influence with higher-level political figures. This system of patronage, where political support is exchanged for targeted benefits, can facilitate vote-buying and pork-barrel projects, potentially at the expense of effective provision of broader public goods. The emphasis on political connections over past performance or detailed policy positions reflects a pragmatic voter calculus in an environment where direct service delivery is often mediated by political influence.

Conclusions

The analysis of elections and voter choices in Pakistan reveals a multifaceted and dynamic political landscape, shaped by a complex interplay of institutional frameworks, socio-economic realities, evolving media environments, and deeply ingrained socio-cultural factors.

Pakistan's electoral system, while constitutionally designed for democratic representation, exhibits inherent complexities, particularly concerning the allocation of reserved seats. The 2024 general election starkly illustrated how procedural rulings, such as the disqualification of a party from contesting as a unified entity and the subsequent ineligibility of its independent candidates for reserved seats, can significantly alter the parliamentary balance of power, even when those candidates secure the largest number of direct votes. This creates a discernible gap between the popular mandate expressed by the electorate and the eventual formation of government, potentially eroding public trust and exacerbating political polarization. The consistent decline in overall voter turnout percentages since 2013, despite an increase in absolute votes, points to a growing voter apathy or mistrust in the electoral process. This trend, coupled with public skepticism regarding election honesty and government corruption, signals a critical need for comprehensive electoral reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the persistent gender gap in voter participation, particularly the paradoxical lower turnout of urban women despite higher education and autonomy, highlights the nuanced influence of socio-cultural norms and specific urban-centric barriers that require targeted interventions beyond generic civic education. Socio-economic conditions, notably high inflation, unemployment, and poverty, are paramount drivers of voter choices. The electorate consistently prioritizes candidates and parties perceived as capable of delivering economic relief and stability, often leading to pragmatic voting decisions. The evolving media landscape, with the increasing dominance of social media, has profoundly reshaped political campaigns, allowing parties to bypass traditional gatekeepers and mobilize grassroots support. However, this shift also introduces challenges related to misinformation and the formation of echo chambers, impacting electoral integrity. Finally, deeply entrenched socio-cultural factors such as *biraderi*, ethnicity, and religious affiliations continue to exert substantial influence on voting patterns, often overshadowing policy platforms and candidate qualifications. The significance of political connections and patronage further reinforces a system where a candidate's ability to deliver services through influence with higher-level politicians can be a primary determinant of voter support.

In conclusion, while Pakistan's democratic institutions provide a framework for electoral competition, the effectiveness and legitimacy of its electoral outcomes are continually challenged by structural impediments, socio-economic distress, and deeply rooted societal dynamics. Addressing these interwoven factors is essential for fostering greater public confidence, enhancing electoral integrity, and strengthening democratic stability in the country.

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