RESEARCH PAPER

Role of Social Media in Shaping Voting Patterns: A Comparative Study of 2018 and 2024 General Elections in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the pivotal role of social media in shaping voting patterns by implementing Stimulus Organism Response psychological theory. In Pakistan factors such as caste, religion, ethnicity, feudalism, vote selling and it is further compounded by rural and urban divide, family loyalties, community affiliations and male headed family influence voting patterns. The emergence of social media facilitates the candidate to communicate with a number of people from different areas and demographics with just a single click. Social media campaigns are influencing people especially the new voters and to the women who cannot attend traditional campaigns programs. It is a quantitative study based on a questionnaire survey targeting a broader demographics and sample size was 167 participants. The questionnaire was validated through expert reviews and pilot testing. Findings showed that social media highly influenced the decision making of people during elections and people have trust on social media. Use of social media to literate people should be encouraged due to its accessibility and cost effectiveness.

Introduction

Elections are the fundamental element which differentiate democratic regimes from other types of regime .i.e Dictatorship, totalitarianism and autocracy. In every small community, democracy means representative democracy, in which elected officials make decisions on behalf of people, these representatives are elected by an electoral system. So, the electoral system is the most fundamental element of representation democracy. There are also different types of representation in democracy (Lijphart, 1994). Elections are of two types. i,e direct and indirect election.

Direct elections are those when citizens directly cast a vote for a political party they want to choose as a ruling leader but on the other side indirect elections means where people firstly cast vote to choose a representative body that further elects officeholders (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). So in all of these scenarios voting is an important phenomena because people choose their leader by their own decision and that leader rules over them for a determinate period. Voting is a complex and multifaceted phenomena. A number of theories explain that how people cast their vote. Voting behavior is the study of human political behavior in the realm of voting in elections (Biswas, 2023). There are a number of theories which explain the voting behavior of how people are involved and how they make decisions. As one theory *of party identification* which was developed by Michigan school, individuals develop strong and enduring attachment to political parties based on socialization i.e family influences, peer group, education sector and surrounding environment. Voters have strong affiliation with a political party and consider that to adhere to that party and to be loyal with the party is his/her identity as it happens in the 2024 elections (Fareed, et. al., 2019)

In a democratic setup, elections are the cornerstone, allowing citizens to exercise their right to shape their future by choosing their representatives through the power of their vote. So it's very crucial how people tend to cast a vote. Voting patterns encompass many factors that motivate and guide a person's voting preferences and actions. Before the emergence of social media, masses tended to articulate their decision through traditional methods but after the advent of social media we have a number of platforms to make our decisions better because of access to information and direct communication with the political leadership.

In a third world country i.e. Pakistan people cast their vote on factors like caste, religion, ethnicity ,vote selling, family loyalties, community affiliations, patriarchal system, urban and rural divide ,demographics , gender biases and economic status. In south Punjab and rural areas of Punjab and in all the provinces i.e. KPK and Balochistan and Sindh the cast factor significantly influences voting decisions. Voters cast their ballots based on a candidate affiliation with a particular caste such as Jutt, Awan, Baloch, or Niazi, rather than considering their abilities and suitability for the position. This voting pattern can result in the election of the under-qualified candidate, undermining the democratic process and compromising the quality of governance. The Islamic faith served as the bedrock for Pakistan's creation and since its inception, religion has played a considerable role in the political arena. Some of the major religious political parties in Pakistan are TLP, JUI and JI. Voters cast their vote to religious leaders just because of their religious affiliations and beliefs without making a rational decision. In Pakistan most of the people cast their ballots on the basis of shared beliefs, language and culture. For instance, BAP, MQM and ANP are ethno- lingual political parties.

Vote selling is a complex issue in a democratic country like Pakistan. Pakistan's political landscape is attributed to widespread sale of votes. Vote selling can be attributed by a number of factors encompassing the fragility of political institutions, economic difficulties, limited political knowledge, mistrust in government and cultural dynamics, which collectively erode the integrity of the electoral process (Schaffer & Schedler, 2007). Pakistan's society is male dominant due to which Citizen's favor male candidates in elections but these trends are changing because of social media emergence.

As we have seen in 2024 elections women candidates not only won elections but also in the history of Pakistan for the first time a female candidate became a chief minister of a province i.e. Mariyam Nawaz Sharif as a CM of Punjab. The rural areas tends to cast their vote on the factors like ethnicity, cast, clan , tribes and family collective decision's while urban dwellers tend to cast their ballots based on rational consideration (Sabharwal, 2017) Stimulus Organism Response model can be used to understand the effect of social media on voting patterns.

Voters observe voting action as a manifestation of the adherence to a political party (Sharlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014). Voting patterns means why people vote the way they do, there are plethora of factors that molded political stance of a voter some of them are political party affiliation, religion, race, ethnicity ,voter apathy, single issue based, income level, education, tactical voting, geography, sex, marital status, age of voter, male headed family and caste system. These are some matrix of influences that mold Voters orientation and voters cast his/her vote (Rome & Rome, 2022). Family system, Biradari system and religion is playing its role in shaping a collectivist social structure. These all factors are making a culture which is anti-democratic and leads towards chaos (Sajid & Adeed, 2023).

People cast their vote without rational thinking that either a person to whom we cast a vote who will legislate for us is either he is genuinely equipped to address the needs of their constituency or not. We cannot claim that these are the only forces that shape voting behavior because political culture, values and civic courses also help shape specific voting patterns and behavior. The advent of technological advancement has dramatically

intensified the influence of factors like media, which enjoy unparalleled ease of access, vast reach and cutting edge communication strategies to shape public opinion and disseminate information with unprecedented speed and efficacy (Mohammad, 2014).

In the elections of 2024 of Pakistan, social media has been used intensively and is the best example of usage of social media platforms for formulation of public opinion. Social media has changed society by breaking traditional collective structures. In the 2018 and 2024 elections social media has been used intensively by political parties and it has changed the public opinion of people. Public opinion is influenced by social media through podcasts, interviews and journalists. Stimulus Organism Model(S-O-R) states that our mind formulates opinion and learns from the environment and then according to these learning we respond (Javed & Sajid, 2020).

Social media, in particular, play a significant role in shaping a specific environment in our surroundings and enable us to form independent opinions, unfettered by the constraints and pressures of peer group, family, caste and tribe loyalties. By providing an open platform for information and discussion, social media empowers individuals to think critically and make logical decisions which are free from the influence of any external pressure.

Literature Review

Pakistan's elections are now witnessing technological development in social media and election campaigns and these campaigns are modifying voting patterns of a society. Social media is substantially impacting the cognitive decision of individuals. This study is organized into three thematic areas. The first one explains voting patterns. The second part explains about social media, its different platforms and how political parties have used it. The last part explains with a theory that social media is influencing the decision making and the decision making affects traditional voting patterns.

Voting is a powerful tool that lets people choose their leaders. This civic duty fosters a sense of belongingness to the system of state while its significance may vary from person to person, ranging from deeply personal , emotional experience to mere formality(Laver, 2012). Clear party ideology and emotional connection increase voter turnouts. Both rationality and emotions play a key role in the vote casting process (Wang, 2013). Z Akhter and YA Sheikh explain that the behavior of a voter is influenced by a number of factors i.e. religion, caste, community, money, language, policy and ideology. To win election candidates use a number of campaign methods such as street meeting, personal contact, posters, speeches ,TV and radio broadcast, newspaper advertisement and handbill, procession and propaganda (Akhter & Sheikh, 2014). Martienelli argues that choosing the right candidate requires knowledge, but larger elections can overwhelm voters to make informed decisions (Martinelli, 2007).

Bilal et al., (2019) states that social media play a major role in shaping voting patterns. The posting patterns and language used by the candidate on social media platforms I.e. Facebook lays impacts on voter.(Farkas & Bene, 2021)argues that politicians show personal stuff on Instagram as compared to Facebook. They post pictures to become more casual with their voters. It's a strategic way of political communication to achieve political goals. Social media shows information on its platforms about politics, political parties and political leaders which has the potential to influence the Voters decision. Social media play a mediating role between candidate and Voter (Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021).social media offers the voters access to direct information, fostering informed decision making. This happens by engaging online discussion, sharing opinions on different platforms and listening to leaders (Chaniago, 2021).

Social media's increasing significance has impacted political campaigns like usage of Facebook, WhatsApp, you tube and Twitter is widely used by parties for their political manifestation. Both users and non users are influenced by political content posted on social media platforms. It gives a label to 2018 elections as social media elections (Chaniago, 2021).

Newspapers and news channels are also playing their role in changing thinking patterns of youth. Because of news channels and newspapers there is a change in voting patterns of youth but there is a threat of false consciousness and structural constraints (Javed & Sajid, 2020). Ideological standpoints are impacting youth behavior in voting behavior. Facebook acts as a communication instrument between voter and candidate. Majority of youth consider Facebook a reliable source and trust on it (Muzaffaret. al, 2020; Sajid et al., 2024).

Material and Methods

There are a number of theories used to predict voter behavior like the Michigan school of thought, socialization, funnel of causality and rational choice theory. Stimulus Organism Response Chain theory is used to explain the relationship of social media on voting behavior which in response changes the voting patterns. This is a quantitative study. It is based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire has three parts I.e. stimulus, organism and response. Total 167 responses are collected, which reveal how strongly social media is changing voting patterns.

sample

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Ethical consideration:

Each and every respondent has informed about the purpose of study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were maintained throughout the research process.

Validity and Reliability

Using SPSS software we have conducted a descriptive analysis on collected data. To ensure reliability, we employ descriptive statistical tests to evaluate accuracy.

Results and Discussion

Data shows that 167 individuals participated in the questionnaire solving response. Some are from rural areas and some are from urban areas and most of the respondents were from 18 to 25 years of age having a percentage of 78.4%. This table show the divide of gender by geographical location and education.

Demographic and Education:

Table 1
Demographic information

Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56 & above
Frequency (%)	78.4%	15.6%	3.6%	1.8%	0.6%
Gender	Male	Female	Prefer not to say		
Frequency (%)	76.6%	22.8%	0.6%		

Education	Secondary education	Bachelor's degree	Master degree	Doctorate
Frequency (%)	4.2%	58.7%	31.7%	5.4%

Employment status	Student	Employed	Self employed	Unemployed
Frequency (%)	68.3%	13.8%	7.8%	10.2%

Geographical location	Rural	Urban		
Frequency (%)	46.7%	53.3%		

Participant demography and education shows that the majority of the respondents are students of Bachelor degree. So social media is affecting new young voters more efficiently.

Table2
The influence of social media during 2018 election Compare to 2024 election

Options given for the question	Frequency	Percent (%)
Decreased significantly	10	6.0 %
Decreased somewhat	13	7.8%
Increased significantly	100	59.9%
Increased somewhat	24	14.4%
Stayed the same	20	12.0%
Total	167	100%

The influence of social media has increased from the 2018 to 2024 elections as it is presented in table number 2. Majority of people responded that the influence of social media increased from the 2018 to 2024 elections. There is also a change of usage of social media platforms in 2018 Facebook and in 2024 Twitter users increased more in percentage as compared to Facebook . Result has shown that the most used social media platform is Facebook. Most used platforms in 2024 elections are no doubt Facebook 62% according t oour population size but use of twitter has increase as compare to 2018 and Tiktock and WhatsApp channels are new for political content.

Table 3
How effective do you think social media campaigns are compared to traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio) in influencing voting behavior?

options	Frequency	Percent
Equally effective	14	8.4
Less effective	37	22.2
More effective	115	68.9
Not sure	1	.6
Total	167	100.0

Respondents almost 69% agree that social media campaigns are more effective than traditional media. Because every person with reasonable expenditure of economy become a part of political campaign and have access of information from direct and official accounts of leaders.

Table 4
Do you think that the regulations on social media content related to politics have changed from the 2018 elections to the 2024 elections?

	Frequency	Percent
No, they have remained the same	16	9.6
Not sure	26	15.6
Yes, they have become more lenient	37	22.2

Yes, they have become stricter	88	52.7
Total	167	100.0

Respondents of almost 52% agree that now in 2024 elections the media content become more stricter. As we have noticed banned twitter and some other prohibitions. But still social media remains an easy and most frequently used medium by public.

Table 5
How has the tone of political discourse on social media changed from the 2018 elections to the 2024 elections?

		Frequency	Percent
	Become more negative	69	41.3
	Become more positive	57	34.1
Valid	Not sure	16	9.6
	Remained the same	25	15.0
	Total	167	100.0

Table 6
Do you think the accuracy and reliability of political content on social media have improved or worsened since the 2018 elections?

	Accuracy and reliability	Frequency	Percent
	Improved	87	52.1
	Not sure	23	13.8
Valid	Stayed the same	19	11.4
	Worsened	38	22.8
	Total	167	100.0

On a question that did social media change your opinion the response is highly positive.

Table7
Did social media changed your opinion?

	Rural	Urban	Grand Total
No	14%	18%	32%
Not sure	5%	7%	12%
Yes	28%	28%	56%
Grand Total	47%	53%	100%

Table 8
Did social media influence your behavior in voting?

	Bachelor's degree	Doctorate	Master degree	Secondary education	Grand Total
1	9%	1%	4%	1%	14%
2	17%	2%	5%	2%	26%
3	14%	1%	8%	1%	25%
4	8%	1%	5%	1%	15%
5	10%	1%	9%	0%	20%
Grand Total	59%	5%	32%	4%	100%

Data from 167 responses shows that Facebook, twitter are mostly used platforms for political activities and they affect decision making abilities and thinking processes by providing information and accessibility to direct interaction with their leaders.

Influence of social media on voting patterns:

Social media is playing a pivotal role by influencing traditional voting patterns. Facebook , X(twitter),YouTube, Tiktok, Instagram, WhatsApp groups and WhatsApp channels are frequently used in the 2024 elections of Pakistan. How social media affects voting patterns a psychological theory I.e. Stimulus Organism Response chain (Visser, 1998).

Stimulus Organism Response chain

This theory helps to understand the causal relationship between social media and voting patterns. In this theory Stimulus means the external environment that can trigger a reaction and organism means the individual. Because of the stimuli, internal processes took place in the human mind I.e. cognition, emotions and perceptions. The response is resultant behavior or action taken by an individual. Social media platforms expose diverse political content to its users. The organism I.e. The user processes the content, evaluates the credibility of source, analysis of argument and the new information integrates with existing beliefs. Social media also evoke strong emotions I.e. fear, anger and hope which shapes individual perception. Continuous exposure to social media content can lead to formation of individuals' perception towards a specific political ideology which he may like or dislike. As a result their attitudes towards a candidate or a political party evolved and this behavior urged them to cast a vote for that candidate or political party. Social media play a key role in providing access to information, direct communication with party members and leaders, mobilizing the voters and providing a platform to all candidates to present their content (Bukari et al., 2023). Post of candidate on social media accounts, their statements on specific issues, talk shows ,podcast and interview on TV channels and YouTube shaping the opinion which help them to make a decision and cast a ballot according to their own rational thinking. Social media has revolutionized society, the way people are connected with leaders and other party members. It dismantled the traditional concept of collective society. Social media offers women to engage with political scenarios and enables them to make informed decisions from the comfort of their own homes because they may have been unable to participate in rallies and public gatherings. Social media provides a platform to candidates to reach a wider audience and help citizens to get access to information and authentic information by official accounts of parties and government proof is less costly as compared to door to door campaigns. Social media is playing a pivotal role in democratizing the political process of a country and also empowered marginalized voices. data is collected by this framework which proves that stimulus affect organisms and result of this affecting individual is shown by her decision as it happens in 2024 elections that social media play a key role.

Case study of 2018 elections:

General election of 2018 held in Pakistan on July 25, 2018. It is also called social media election because of immense use of media in these elections by the major political parties I.e. PML-N, PTI, PPP (Chaniago, 2021). Most used social media platforms are Facebook, twitter and YouTube. According to our survey majority of people respond that social media has influenced their behavior in 2018 elections.

Table 9
Did social media influenced your voting decision in the 2018 elections?

options	Frequency	Percent
No	88	52.7
Not sure	25	15.0
Yes	54	32.3
Total	167	100.0

Facebook and Twitter have not only altered the conventional mode of political communication in established democracies, but also in developing democracies such as

Pakistan. Nowadays, political leaders tend to prioritize social media platforms for their speeches before turning to traditional media. Based on a Data research conducted by Facebook in 2013, the total number of Facebook users in Pakistan rose to 8,055,680. Among these users, 30% were female and 70% were male. The bulk of users fall among the younger demographic, specifically between the ages of 18 and 24. Moreover, there is a contention that social media and the internet play a helpful, unexpected, and stimulating role in the growth of political parties in Pakistan (Eijaz, 2013) Internet utilization increased from 7% in 2013 to 17.8% in 2016. According to 2016 figures, there were 34.3 million internet users in Pakistan, and that number has been rising over time. In Pakistan, Facebook, Linked In, Instagram, and Twitter were the most useful social media sites in 2016, respectively (Ahmed et al., 2021)

Political parties, especially PTI, PML-N, and PPP, used social media in their political campaigns in the 2018 elections. Imran Khan, Shahbaz Sharif, and Maryam Nawaz were the most active political members on Twitter in Pakistan. According to a study that was observed two weeks before the 2018 election, In 2018, Imran Khan was the most followed political leader with 8.120 million followers on Facebook, whereas Shahbaz Sharif has 2.08 million followers, Maryam Nawaz has 666,203 followers, and Bilawal Bhutto has 0.11 million followers (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Because of their significant influence, the major political parties are utilizing social media platforms for their election campaigns. Additionally, in a historic development, women were participating in the 2018 elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the first time in general seats. According to the provisions of the Election Act 2017, political parties were required to provide a minimum of five percent representation of women on general seats. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there were women running for elections on general seats. One of them was Ali Begum from the District Kurram Agency, and there was another female candidate from district Dir Upper PK 10 Hameeda Shahid, who was also running for a general seat. Due to cultural concerns, it might be challenging for a woman to address public gatherings and conduct her campaign. In this context, social media platforms have provided them with a chance to improve their presence on social networks, and they are aggressively capitalizing on this opportunity (*pakistan general election 2018: use of social media to influence opinions in the offline world*, 2020).

During the 2018 electoral campaigns, several hashtags related to the political parties' progress became popular on social media platforms such as Twitter. PTI has achieved great success with the hashtags #TabdeeliLahoreSe and #AbSirfImranKhan. Regarding the PPP, the hashtags #JeetKaNishanTeer and #PMBilawal has begun to gain popularity. Finally, the PML-N party has employed the hashtags #ShehbazKoVoteSeNawazDo and #VoteKoIzzatDo in order to appeal to their followers on the social media platform Twitter (Asghar, 14 july,2018). Immense use of social media and its impact were visible on society that in the next election the reliance of a political party I.e. PTI is only in the media.

Case study of 2024 election

Pakistan general election took place on 8 February 2024, with 128 million people were as registered voters with 60.6 million people casting ballots in Pakistan's 12th general election. Compared to the 2018 elections, when 54.8 million votes were cast, this represented an increase of 5.8 million voters. Despite an increase in the total number of voters, the voter turnout percentage decreased from 52.1% in 2018 to 47.6% in the 2024 election. The primary cause of this drop was the unprecedented increase in the number of registered voters, which increased from 106 million in 2018 to 128.6 million in 2024—a record 22.6 million new voters were added between the two elections ("Fafen analysis of voter turnout," 2024). Masses are following social media accounts of political parties to get information .and here is a table which shows followers of top 3 political parties of Pakistan.

Most followed personality is Imran khan on all social media accounts. In response to changing times, political parties and candidates are embracing digital campaigns which are affecting human psychology to organize a well informed decision. Traditionally political parties rely on door to door campaigns but now because of security concerns and soaring inflation candidates and both voters prioritize social media. In our survey people deliberately express that their attitude to cast a vote is effected by social media as shown in table.

Table 10
Did social media influenced your voting decision in the 2024 elections?

options	Frequency	Percent
No	52	31.1
Not sure	17	10.2
Yes	98	58.7
Total	167	100.0

In the 2024 elections, all political parties focused on social media. PML-N and PPP spent millions of rupees to shoot an ad and also for social media. PTI uses social media because its leading political leadership was jailed, so they use Tiktok for online mass gathering, twitter, podcasting in favor of the party but one new element is usage of AI tools. PTI created an AI video of Imran khan posted on all social media accounts and also on WhatsApp channels. In all political parties only PTI has WhatsApp channels and most followed individuals are from PTI. By social media they make a great change in society because external environments affect responsive behavior and in response the embedded or visual data play a major role.

Conclusion

Voting is a complex and multifaceted phenomena. How people cast their votes and which factors influence them has a great importance. In Pakistan people cast votes on the basis of traditional voting patterns I.e. cast, ethnicity, family loyalties but the emergence of social media has changed it by providing access to information, direct communication with their leader, providing a platform to participate in political content and share your own opinions . It not only urges people to cast a vote but also makes a cheap resource of communication for both candidates and voters. Stimulus Organism Response theory explains that social media affects cognitive decision and organism response according to it. But still there is a research gap on how social media has a negative impact also because of fake news and false propaganda. Social media is now a fourth pillar of democracy and has key importance and its role is increasing day by day. Now the advent of AI tools has revolutionized social media. In the elections of 2024 , AI-generated videos and audio clips of the voice of PTI Chairman Imran Khan have proven to be a game-changer. The use of AI technology has enabled the creation of incredibly realistic and engaging content, allowing political parties to connect with voters in a more immersive and persuasive way. This innovative approach has significantly enhanced the political campaign, making it more dynamic and effective in reaching a wider audience and attracting the public and strongly influencing their decision making abilities. The survey shows that use of social media is increasing from the 2018 to 2024 elections and it will definitely be used more in the next elections. Social media is affecting the thinking patterns of people, now the decision making is not relying on traditional patterns because these patterns are breaking due to the invasion of social media.

Recommendations

- Social media can enhance political engagement, but it also spread false information and harm individuals. Governments should acknowledge this duality and take measures to mitigate the negative effects.

- Political parties and governments should develop new apps and platforms to engage with citizens directly, fostering a more responsive and accountable political environment.
- Political parties should harness social media's capabilities to educate voters, promote their agendas, and encourage civic participation.
- Political parties must use social media responsibly, avoiding harmful or manipulative tactics that exploit human psychology.
- Government should educate citizens to critically evaluate online information, promoting media literacy and informed decision-making.
- Governments should establish guidelines and regulations to ensure social media platforms prioritize factual content and protect users' privacy.
- Political parties and governments should maintain transparency in their online activities, disclosing sources of funding and avoiding hidden agendas.

As we move forward in the digital age, it is essential that we should recognize the role of social media over political discourse. We should create a digital environment that enhances political engagement, promotes civic participation, and strengthens democratic values because the effective use of social media has a potential for the betterment of society.

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