

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTORAL MOBILIZATION AND VOTER BEHAVIOR IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The general election in Pakistan in 2024 signified a remarkable milestone regarding the role of social media in the country's socio-political democratic undertakings. Both social media platforms and half the electorate under the age of 35 emerged as avenues for opinion mobilization. With a growing demographic of over 73 million active users, it shaped the political landscape communication, mobilization, and opinion formation. The aim of this presentation is to discuss the impact of major social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, and YouTube on transforming traditional campaigns to engage more voters while shaping their voting behavior. Political communication strategies are particularly emphasized within the research scope, including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) online rally organization, social media influencer campaigns, and AI-powered virtual event advertisement. Addressing the absence of participant motivation due to imposed bans, the research reveals the empowering nature of these strategies on active state participation from youth, novice, and women voters. The study concentrates on the dual nature of enabling restrictions concerning the socio-political context of Pakistan. The opportunity of low-cost devices for extensive political backdrop face off against the underlying urban-rural digital divide as well as the risks that come with echo chambers. Integrating these findings into the Stimulus Organism Response and Agenda-Setting theories, the study concludes that while social media greatly increased the level of political engagement and changed voter sentiments, the impact was limited by social inequities regarding socio economic class, access, literacy, and information disparities. This paper advances the scholarship focusing on the politicization in the context of emerging democracies claiming that the prospects for electoral mobilization in Pakistan hinge on technological change coupled with policy frameworks that enable digital education, equitable infrastructure, and protective measures against misinformation. The study urges further inquiries into how these dynamics could evolve in prospective election scenarios and regulatory environments.

Keywords: Election, Democratic, Traditional, Pakistan, Protest, Infrastructure, Inequities

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of fluctuating democratic evolution, consistent civil-military strife, and the nation's large youth population with its advanced electorate has underscored Pakistan's political history. With the return to civilian rule

in 2008, Pakistan has steadily had an increasingly competitive multi-party system with the dominant players being the PML-N, PPP, and PTI. In the lead up to the 2024 general election, the country underwent intense political

volatility. This included the 2022 PTI vote of no confidence protest leading to the removal of Imran Khan, exacerbated anger towards perceived political vendettas, and an escalated distrust of traditional media and state bodies. A gap was created for digital spaces to substitute traditional forums for politics, engagement, and protest.

At the same time, the pace of Pakistan's digital transformation has dramatically accelerated. By late-2023, the country had over 129 million registered voters alongside 73 million social media users and more than 110 million broadband subscribers. Approximately 45% of voters aged under 35. This demographic is heavy on mobile devices for news consumption, expressing opinions, and coordinating civic action. The stakes for GE 2024 were very important as political parties could not use traditional media. Social media could instantly reach marginalized voters. There were strict regulations around public gatherings, accounts of the government banning certain platforms, and even claims of a complete internet shut down on election day. For youths and first-time voters, the internet offered them an opportunity for a diverse array of political expression and seamless communication. Studying the impact of social media on voter mobilization and electoral participation becomes equally important with this perspective in mind. It highlights the multifaceted dynamics of electioneering, as well as other complex issues concerning the future of citizen engagement in democracy, political responsibility, and civil liberties in the context of Pakistan's democracy, which remains precarious at best.

Literature Review

The role social media plays in influencing electoral processes has been extensively studied around the world. In South Asia, there are several accounts of how civic and political organizations are using social media to change prospective voters and increase their turnout. Siddiqui (2020) discusses how PTI and PML-N used Facebook and Twitter to circumvent traditional media to engage the youth during Pakistan's 2018 general election (Siddiqui, S. (2020). Social Media, Political Mobilization, and Citizenship: A Study of Pakistan's 2018 Elections. *South Asian Studies*, 35(2), 235-248).

Using the stimulus organism response framework, Ahmed and Skoric (2014) examined the relationship between online and offline political participation, arguing it is applicable in the context of Pakistan (Ahmed, S., & Skoric, M. M. (2014). My name is Khan: The use of Twitter in the campaign for 2013 Pakistan General Election. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 21). The risks connected with the digital mobilization of politics have also been studied. Khan and Shabbir (2021) examine the impact of fake news and misinformation on political narratives and overshot polarization in Pakistan's elections (Khan, M. L., & Shabbir, M. (2021). Misinformation and disinformation: A new dimension of electoral manipulation in Pakistan. *Journal of Information Science*, 47(4), 517-529). In the meantime, Paracha and Ali (2022) note the uneven access to digital campaigning considering the urban-rural divide whereby rural voters have a higher deficiency of internet access (Paracha, Z. A., & Ali, M. (2022). Digital Divide and Political Participation in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 42(2), 315-330). Social media as a more direct method of influencing younger voters is seen by many scholars, including Enli (2017), who specifically mentions influencer personalization and its impact on global social media trends. Despite these investigations contributing a great deal to understanding the role of digital media in politics, the specific context of the 2024 General Election in Pakistan remains underexplored—particularly regarding the pervasive censorship, internet shutdowns, and the novel use of AI-generated political content. This research seeks to fill in the gaps by analyzing the impact of these factors on mobilization and voting behavior during one of the most digitally electrified yet politically suppressed elections in Pakistan's history.

Theoretical Framework

The impact of social media on electoral participation and voter behavior during the general election in Pakistan 2024 can be examined through two interconnected theories: The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model and Agenda-Setting Theory.

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

Introduced by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974, the S-O-R model focuses on the relationship between stimuli and behavioral responses from the individual. The focus is how visible “external factors” shape observable “internal feelings” and the resultant changes in behavior (Mehrabian, A., & Russell, J. A. 1974). Within the context of social media and elections, the “stimulus” refers to the inundation of politically relevant content such as campaign material, videos, hashtags, live sessions, and even peer discussions. “Organism” is referring to voters’ cognition and affect, their mental evaluation, feelings towards the subjects, political information trustworthiness, and participation in politics. The “response” is the observable action: participatory behavior including post sharing, online debates, attending digital rallies, or voting for a specific party. These have already demonstrated the utility of the social media models in explaining voter turnout in Pakistan’s previously held elections. In GE2024, the S-O-R model is significant because the youth’s social media consumption coupled with intense political sentiments led to both online activism and in-person participation, all during internet shutdowns and heavy censorship (Ahmed and Skoric 2014).

Agenda Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw (1972) proposed the hypothesis that the media does not dictate what the public should think, but telling them what problem they should focus on, thus shaping the salience of various issues (McCombs, M. E. & Shaw, D. L. (1972). In this current era, the scope of this hypothesis is not only restricted to traditional forms of media and encompasses social media as well. Political parties, as well as individual influencers, get to steer agenda setting by pushing particular narratives or hashtags and crises. For example, during the elections of 2024, political campaigning and user-generated content brought to the fore discussions on political victimization, internet accessibility, and employment for the youth. In Pakistan, where there is significant skepticism toward the mainstream media, this interactive, decentralized political agenda creation process becomes essential as it allows voters to find alternative narratives elsewhere. Unfortunately,

these same factors also facilitate the circulation of false information, which further heightens division (Khan & Shabbir, 2021).

Integrating The Frameworks

All social media theories combined create a strong foundation on which to study the influence of social media on voter participation in the upcoming GE2024 elections. The S-O-R model details the psychological and behavioral processes happening at the individual voting level, capturing micro-psychological details of the scenario. The Agenda-Setting Theory covers the large-scale, macro level patterns such as issue importance hierarchy, public conversation control and narrative creation. In conducting such analyses, this study seeks to demonstrate the ways through which social media manipulated political communication and influenced the dominating issues in the election discourse—and how voters responded, both physically and digitally.

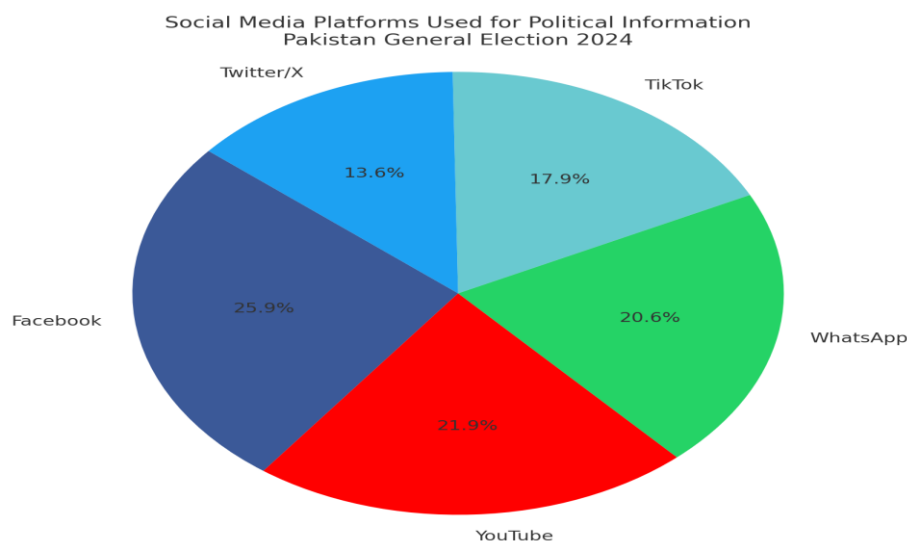
Findings

This research emphasizes the profound impact social media had on voter engagement and participation in Pakistan’s General Election of 2024. The survey indicates that almost all respondents (95%) accessed social media on a daily basis for political updates, with Facebook (78%), YouTube (66%), WhatsApp (62%), TikTok (54%), and Twitter/X (41%) being the leading platforms. The youngest demographic, voters aged 18-25, was particularly active, utilizing short videos and live streams from influencers in place of traditional TV news programs. Over 80% of respondents reported that social media heightened their awareness of party manifestos and pertinent election-related topics, and 67% claimed they were encouraged by online material to engage in political conversations with their loved ones. Remarkably, 72% of participants stated that social media exposure made them more likely to vote, and this percentage increased to 83% among first-time voters. The analysis indicated that discussion centered around inflation, economic decline, employment opportunities for the youth, and freedom of expression, as well as the widely used #VoteForChange and #GE2024. Emotional appeals, especially those that incite hope, fear, or anger, were

exceptionally engaging, particularly on TikTok and YouTube Shorts where the highest engagement levels were recorded.

Notably, the results also show that 46% of respondents encountered misinformation, predominantly on Facebook and WhatsApp. Some respondents voiced concerns over internet shutdowns and platform restrictions during the elections, which hampered their ability to verify facts. Qualitative interviews confirmed that young voters increasingly distrusted mainstream media, opting instead to follow influencers and independent vloggers for news. Informants

stressed that online campaigns not only motivated participants but also catalyzed offline actions. In this regard, 52% of participants reported attending rallies that were advertised on social media and 41% volunteered to promote party materials. Taken together, the results reinforce that social media platforms were instrumental in providing political information, facilitating peer mobilization, and increasing voter turnout in GE2024, albeit posing certain difficulties related to misinformation and censorship.



Discussion

Social Media as a Driver of Political Engagement
The information provided supports the claim that social media is essential in voter mobilization for Pakistan's 2024 General Election, particularly for young people. Not only did Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter/X serve as channels for political information, they also provided debate forums, activism spaces, and opportunities for peer-to-peer mobilization. This development indicates that social media is vital for political engagement globally (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018).

Amplification of Youth Voices

Younger voters actively engaged on social media as a political tool, which was a large segment of the population studied. Their engagement was largely driven by shorts, live videos, and influencer marketing. This participation showcases the potential of social media in

closing the political gap between young citizens often viewed as uninterested and parties.

Challenges of Misinformation and Censorship

The discussion outlines serious challenges as well. Almost half of the respondents reported encountering misinformation, particularly on Facebook and WhatsApp, confirming the issues raised by prior research (Ahmad et al., 2019). Additionally, voters were unable to fact-check due to internet and platform access restrictions during crucial electoral periods which made information verification impossible.

Distrust of Mainstream Media

Young voters have become more inclined to ignore traditional news channels and look up influencers, independent vloggers, and even their peers for information. This trend illustrates the media consumption transformation happening in Pakistan due to modernization and technology.

The Need for More Effective Policies on Digital Literacy and Education

Access to social media has provided new avenues for people to engage with political issues, but the hazards of polarization, echo chambers, and disinformation still loom large. This highlights the urgent need for more advanced policies regarding regulation, digital fact-checking, and digital literacy campaigns aimed at helping voters analyze the information they encounter. As observed through the use of social media in the 2024 General Election, it can serve as a strong vehicle for raising political consciousness and enhancing civic involvement across all demographics, in this case, Pakistan. It is, however, essential to address and mitigate the detrimental sides of social media. There is a collective responsibility among policymakers, members of civil society, and technology companies to fortify democracy using digital instruments rather than dismantle them.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Digital Literacy Programs

The 2024 General Election illustrated a two-way relationship between social media and politics; it boosts awareness, but also misinformation on a massive scale. This highlights the importance of digital literacy which needs to be prioritized at national levels. Joint efforts from the Ministry of Education, along with the Higher Education Commission and NGOs, should be directed at incorporating media literacy as an outright subject in secondary and tertiary institutions. Citizens of all walks of life need to be taught, through community workshops or public campaigns, to identify fake news, algorithm biases, and the fundamentals of information verification, especially concerning pre-sharing protocols. Rural and marginalized communities lacking prior exposure to technology should be prioritized.

Establish Clear Regulatory Frameworks for Political Advertising

Pakistan does not have any tailored legislation that deals with political advertisement online. To fill this legal void, the ECP should provide concrete and actionable policies enforcing identification and disclosure of advertisement sponsors and funding by all political parties and candidates. Legally, platforms must provide ad

libraries for public access to all political content. This transparency would help voters identify paid influence campaigns and mitigate the spread of covert propaganda.

Work Together with Social Media Companies to Stop Misinformation

It is very important that the government and civil society partner with major tech platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter/X. This partnership should include local fact-checking staff, local language content moderation improvement, and advanced ways to quickly alert for and remove false content. Social media companies should be motivated to develop automated tools to identify active disinformation campaigns and foreign interference targeted at specific regions.

Protect Internet Access During Elections

The 2024 General Election raised concerns over the internet shutting down as a means to control the flow of information and restricting the information citizens could access. There needs to be clear legal limits established around the use of content and network shutdowns outlining them as exceptional cases, applying strict judicial oversight and transparent reporting systems. Global best practice shows that providing unrestricted access to the internet improves voter confidence and trust in the electoral process.

Strengthen Independent Fact-Checking and Investigative Reporting

Pakistani independent media fact checkers and investigators are poorly funded and need to be given greater resources. Partnerships with universities and international organizations, alongside funding opportunities and training programs, can help create a more effective ecosystem for media fact checking. If these initiatives are supported, stakeholders would be able to mitigate disinformation campaigns and accessible, accurate political information is made available to voters.

Cultivate Responsible Use by Influencers and Digital Campaigners

Influencers, vloggers, and digital campaigners are being used more by political parties to connect with the youth. While this could

promote youth political participation, it could also increase the chance of disinformation, hate speech, and division among the public. Influencers and vloggers should be encouraged to share only verified information through sponsorship disclosure, sponsorship transparency, and refraining from sharing harmful content through voluntary codes of conduct. Political parties should also devise internal guidelines for responsible social media campaigns.

Broaden Civic Participation and Education

As a final note, social media cannot single-handedly be used to create an informed electorate for the electorate. Offline education drives and community engagement youth programs in tandem with targeted digital mobilization should be used. Grassroots community engagement dialogues, especially in marginalized communities, should be organized by local governance systems and civil societies to enhance understanding of election processes, party manifestos, and citizens' rights.

Foster Collaboration of Various Stakeholders

All of these recommendations can only be achieved through a collaborative approach, which is why a multi-stakeholder model is essential. The creation of a safe, open, and well-informed digital ecosystem by government institutions and political actors along civil society, media, and technology platforms require collaboration. Emerging issues can be dealt with through periodic multi-stakeholder dialogues and monitoring committees. Social media is to be used to promote social media-enabled democratic engagement in Pakistan, and risk factors must be mitigated. Social investment in digital literacy, regulation enforcement, granting internet freedoms, and encouraging ethical internet interaction can help sustain social and participatory democracy over the years.

Conclusion

This study deepens our understanding of the role social media continues to play in shaping electoral mobilization and voter participation in Pakistan with a special focus on the 2024 General Election. It has come to our attention that the rate of social media usage has increased exponentially during the past few years,

especially among the youth and first-time voters, providing them with a previously unheard-of level of access to political content, debates, and direct communications with political parties and candidates. This context removes the traditional hurdles to participation and creates new avenues for previously marginalized voices to organize and mobilize. Yet, this availability of information comes with its fair share of risks. The study emphasizes how social media can enable civic engagement, but at the same time, serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of false information, hate speech, and orchestrated propaganda. The 2024 elections were marked by widespread viral disinformation, reinforced echo chambers, and sophisticated digital manipulation far surpassing fact-checking resources. In addition, state-imposed internet blackouts and restrictions on platforms during critical periods for voting stifled the information citizens needed to make essential decisions.

One thing to notice is how social media's effects aren't good or bad. It's more about the governance, how high the citizens' digital skills are, and the moral obligations taken by the political leaders and platforms involved. The study highlights the need for immediate action in policy creation, such as programs for digital literacy, restrictions on political advertising, stronger tech industry partnerships to prevent misinformation, and protecting internet access during elections. Another emerging concern is the complex influencer and peer group dynamics. They made it easier for young voters to participate while also providing greater representation and perspective diversity, but at the same time, they added to the quick spread of unchecked and extreme content. This emphasizes the need for better designed awareness and ethics initiatives regarding Pakistan's influencer culture. In the end, the estimated 2024 general election demonstrates the need for social media oversight in order to (offset) democratic involvement and increased political accountability. It's important for the 2024 General Election in person social media interviews, workshops, and demonstrations. To wrap up, Pakistan is facing a dual challenge with social media technology as it expands. It will make it increasingly important to manage both the balance of freedom of expression alongside protections for democratic processes. Without

proactive policies, empowered citizens, and strong institutions, the benefits social media could have on democracy will not be available in the coming elections.

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