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Social Media, Voting and Political Engagements: Perceptions and Voting Trends Among the Pakistani Youth

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Original Article

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Keywords

Social Media, Voting Trends,
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Abstract

This paper aspires to explore the empowering influence of social media and digital platforms on the voting decisions of young voters during the general elections in Pakistan. In recognizing the pivotal role of youth in the electoral process, we acknowledge their importance as a crucial segment in both constituency politics and national-level political engagements. Furthermore, we understand that young voters are at the forefront of political campaigns conducted by all major political parties. Their engagement with the electoral process is driven by the hopeful vision of contributing to the betterment of the state and government, as well as ensuring a smooth transition of democracy in the country. This paper recognizes the resilient affiliations of both male and female voters with political ideologies at the macro-level and their source of inspiration at the micro level of political engagement with the electoral process.

Introduction

Technologically advanced movements have had a profound and transformative impact on democratic voting processes across the globe, reshaping how citizens engage with the electoral system (Simon et al., February 2017; Bennett, Segerberg, and Knupfer 2018; Jungherr, Rodriguez, and Gayo-Avello 2020). By fully leveraging a variety of digital tools and platforms, these initiatives have succeeded in making the voting process more inclusive, widely accessible, and transparent than ever before. The integration of technology has not only empowered individuals but also enabled organizations to drive substantial and meaningful transformations within the democratic landscape. As a result, citizens are now better equipped to engage actively in the democratic process, fostering a stronger connection to democratic practices and ideals.

This paper investigates the usage of social media digital platforms and mediated communication effects on the voting decisions taken by the young voters during the general elections in Pakistan. Youth as a major stakeholder in the electoral process makes them one of the important segments in constituency politics as well as the national level political engagements. Young voters are also at the core of Political campaigns run by the leaders of all important political parties. The young voters

perceive the overall electoral process with the hope of betterment at the state and government level as well the smooth transition of democracy in the country.

The 2018 General Elections in Pakistan took place during a pivotal moment in the nation's history—the third successful democratic transition that the country has experienced, driven by an overwhelming public demand for 'Change.' Voters approached the elections with an invigorated and resolute sense of civic duty, motivated by the hope for a better future. The role of digital platforms during this period cannot be overstated, as they significantly enhanced the live broadcasting of political rallies and events that were crucial for nation-building efforts throughout Pakistan. This phenomenon reflects a long-standing and deeply rooted desire among the populace to transition away from authoritarian rule toward a government that is genuinely elected by the people themselves. The empowerment of citizens in this way grants them the essential right to evaluate and hold their leaders accountable at the end of their terms in office.

The competitive spirit of the electoral contest was similarly palpable during the 2013 elections, which saw intense rivalry between the two major political parties. During that time, slogans advocating for change resonated deeply with the voters, igniting a heightened sense of awareness and enthusiasm among the youth, as well as the broader electorate. This surge of civic engagement was significantly spurred by the combined efforts of the government and civil society groups, who worked diligently to promote this discourse through both mainstream and online media channels. In particular, the lifting of YouTube's ban, which had been in place from 2013 to early 2014, followed by the increasing popularity of Twitter, contributed to a heightened awareness and usage of digital platforms. These platforms now provide accessible avenues for the public to obtain political, social, and international news.

Moreover, these innovative methods of sharing information, as well as showcasing lifestyle choices, have considerably amplified peer pressure regarding voting decisions. This influence extends beyond individuals to families and entire communities, facilitated by various digital platforms and personal interactions in both physical and virtual spaces. As a result, the interconnectedness fostered by these technologies has not just changed the mechanics of voting; it has reshaped the very fabric of political engagement and discourse, allowing for a more vibrant and participatory democracy. Through these advancements, citizens are increasingly empowered, ensuring that their voices and choices are not only heard but also valued in the democratic process.

Study Objectives

This study attempts to fully examine the manner in which young voters' significant dependence on social media and other digital platforms for communication impacted their choices during Pakistan's general elections. The youth have become vital participants in the electoral process in today's fast changing political environment, actively participating in constituency politics and wider national engagement (Mycock and Tonge 2014, 11). Political party leaders know how important it is to focus their campaigns on young voters, who see elections as an opportunity to make significant changes at the state and local levels rather than just another ordinary occurrence. Furthermore, by taking on the responsibility of influencing the future through their voting choices and involvement, young people assume a more active role in the country's democratic transition. These patterns highlight how important young voters are in directing political debate and pushing for progressive reform.

Research Questions

1. What is the young voters' dependence on the traditional versus the digital modes of political campaigning?
2. What is the effect of digital platforms and mediated communication on the voting decisions taken by the young voters during the general elections in Pakistan?
3. Which meso- and micro-level political engagements of young voter's shapes their perceptions about political participation?

Methodology

An in-depth investigation into the growing excitement and enthusiasm surrounding the upcoming general elections in Pakistan was carried out through a comprehensive pre-election survey. This survey came in the wake of the resignation of the previous administration led by the Pakistan-Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI), which has sparked considerable interest, particularly among young voters. These young individuals have expressed a strong desire to engage in the electoral process, viewing these elections as a crucial opportunity for fostering governmental change and facilitating a peaceful transition toward a more robust and participatory democratic framework. Our objective was to delve deeper into how both traditional forms of communication, as well as mediated channels, exert influence over young voters and their ultimate voting decisions. To achieve this, we posed a series of questions regarding their preferred political choices, their attitudes and sentiments toward active participation in political activities, and their overall perspectives on political engagement as it occurs at both the micro- and meso- level, involving community and organizational interactions, and the micro level, focusing on individual and personal experiences in the political arena. By exploring these dimensions, we sought to gain a nuanced understanding of the factors that motivate young voters and shape their political behaviors during this pivotal moment in Pakistan's democratic evolution.

An extensive investigation into the significant commotion surrounding the legislative elections in Pakistan was carried out through a thorough pre-election survey designed to capture the sentiments of the electorate. Recent developments in the parliamentary landscape, along with the resignation of key leadership figures from the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, have notably sparked a high level of interest and engagement among young voters in the context of the upcoming General Elections. This demographic perceives the forthcoming elections as a pivotal opportunity for initiating a change in government, representing a critical step toward achieving a peaceful transition to a more robust system of democratization within the country.

The primary objective of the survey was to delve deeper into the ways in which traditional forms of communication, as well as mediated communication channels, influence the decisions made by young voters, subsequently impacting their overall voting choices. We thoroughly explored their political preferences, inclinations, and a variety of feelings about taking an active role in the political landscape. Furthermore, we aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of their levels of political involvement at both meso and micro levels, as well as how these levels of engagement shape their perceptions and attitudes toward political participation. By analyzing these factors, we seek to illuminate the crucial dynamics at play that contribute to how young people navigate their roles within the political arena.

Youth and their Choices

The youth as an active segment of the democracies are well-connected to the digital platforms and academic institutions. They formulate more than half of the registered voters with a higher degree of inclination towards their civic and political engagements. Thus, every major leader would target young voters in their political campaigns using mainstream and the digital platforms. Young voters base their political engagements on the micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors (Chrysochoou and Barrett 2017, 3). Political notice, effectiveness, ideological basis, identity and values encompasses the micro-level factors; family, neighbors, school and peers are the meso-level; while economic, political, cultural and legal institutional are at the institutional level. This study examines the meso and macro-level of political engagement of the youth by directly engaging them in the questionnaire about their meso-level and micro level political engagements. There are different levels of affiliations and ideological motivations that can be a motivating factor when it comes to the decision-making power of the youth. Youth can different levels of gratifications from digital platforms when it comes to their interest in the political, cultural and legal happenings. They are engaged in alternate forms of activism like blogging, vlogging and online forums where their choices can be assessed and strategies can be formulated to engage them with the mainstream projects of nation-building and social integration. Hence these non-conventional ways of youth political participation are reflected in ways they engage with politics and shape the public discourses.

At the state level to engage young voters more actively into the process of state-building and nation-building Hence the participatory model can not only engage the youth in their private engagement and aligning themselves with the public discourse. The mediated communication contributes to redrawing of lines of communicative perceptions between public and personal, self and community and spectacle and mass assembly (Durrant and Lambrou 2009, 20). Hence, the gratifications from the media discourses are bargained by expressing yourself by social networking online, by blogging, or impact to any online discussion thread. On the contrary, the public figures with whom the voters never came across in person are now under critical scrutiny of their words and in what ways they make an effort to deliver them as well as considering tackling of the political scandals linked that emerges using the mediated communication and a result of transformative nature of public and private life and its impact on the nature of visibility and the reformed relations of private and public life (Thompson, 2000, pp. 1-50). The young voter user gratifications of digital platforms also show more intimate or in-formal usage of language on the online platforms. In Pakistan the financial scandals have been a source of political competitiveness in the political arena of the Pakistan. The major political parties during the general elections of 2018 have been using the narrative of these financial scandals of the politicians and focusing them at the heart of their political campaigning. The slogans enchanted by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf especially after the disqualification of Prime Minister from their opposite party led to the use of white-propaganda in their political campaigning based on the financial domain of the 'political scandal' (Thompson, 2000). Such campaign strategies have captured and engaged the young voters' attention towards the political engagements.

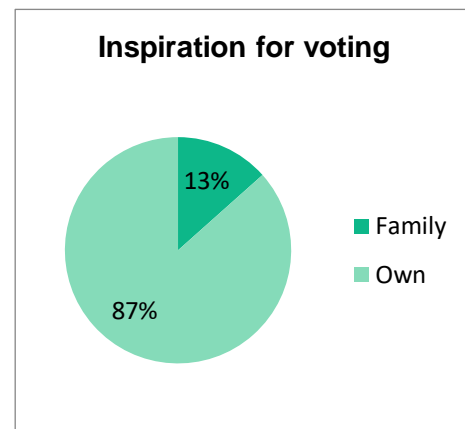
The Nation-Building process at the state level emphasizes on the need to politically engage youth at the level of voting but also their broader concern of inculcating responsibility, nationalism and inclusiveness (Hoefte and Veenendaal 2019, 173). The Nation-Building project engages the citizens to align them to what is important for national interest as well. Hence, the digital platforms

are not only a tool of information rather it provides means of information control by the state apparatus.

Perceptions and Political Engagement of Young Voters

Considering the scope of the digital platforms' gratifications for the young voters this study examines the voting choices as well as the traditional and digital platforms usage by the young voters. The time frame of this study was before the elections where the political debates with regard to the elections and disqualification of Imran Khan as Prime Minister led to a highly active level playing field before elections. I have surveyed a total of 277 young voters to understand the factors affecting the patterns, preferences and decision making at the pre-poll times in the context of general elections in Pakistan. The study further examines the gendered dimension of the voting preferences as well. The total of 271 responses were collected from young voters among those 164 were male respondents and 109 were female respondents. Almost half of the respondents had fair to hopeful expectations from the General Elections in Pakistan.

The Use of digital platforms among the youth make them witness the political happenings unfolding nearing elections especially in the 2018 General Elections and make them a key stakeholder as well in the process. Hence, the political campaigning makes them an important target audience for the leadership for their electoral campaign both traditional and digitally mediated. WhatsApp, Facebook, X (previously Twitter) and YouTube are frequently used by the young voters to monitor the campaign of the political leaders and to express their opinions on the happenings in forms of reactions, likes, comments and in detail posts. The political or financial scandals needs entails an adaptive audience who is ready to receive the information and comment on the emerging political trends. These young voters seek those political gratifications at the meso level to mostly from their family activities and that affects patterns of youth engagement (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 15).



Interest in politics and political knowledge are often linked to levels of participation. According to recent research, young voters, exposed to mediated communication, base their decisions on their knowledge, as platforms provide direct access to political leaders and events. Individuals are influenced by others' opinions on digital platforms only if those opinions align closely with their own.

Spiral of silence theory suggests that people will likely remain silent if their opinions are in minority and might not oppose the ongoing debates with full opposition but they might be able to influence their closer circle of family, friends or professional circles. This broader aspect at the meso- and macro-levels of political engagement of the young voters enables the civic as well as the political participation as informed citizens and can impact the voting outcomes and shows the support of their perceived leadership getting their sympathy votes in the battle of the right and the wrong.¹

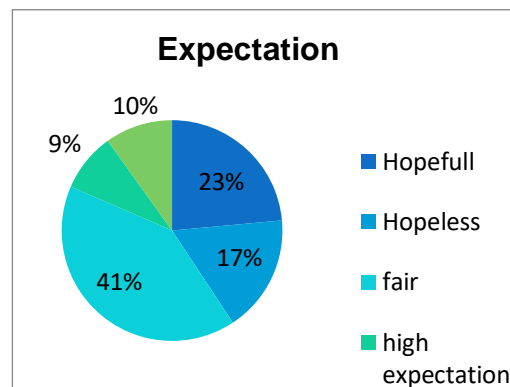
Furthermore, as discussed in (Mycock and Tonge 2014) is the anxiety that younger voters have regarding the electoral process and the necessity of their involvement in parliamentary procedures,

¹ This links to the political and financial scandals being highlighted in the political campaigns in the 2018 General Elections in Pakistan.

including youth politics referendums. Results such as these, where nearly everyone acknowledges their agency of political participation, are the result of an increase in political interactions. This sense of inclusion in the national democratic transition is also promoted by the institutional frameworks at the meso-level. A sense of fulfillment and hope for "change" for the general improvement of our nation-state are also brought about by the mediated and conventional appeals of voting as a national obligation.

Trust, Credibility and Political Engagements

The Data collected shows the trust factor of the young voters which is measured by examining their political affiliations with any specific political party. Half of the male respondents shows strong affiliation with political leadership and specifically identifies themselves as the follower of that specific political party. Thirty-six percent of female voters have shown their affiliation with a political leader or identify themselves as a follower of a specific political party. Around eighteen percent of the voters have not identified themselves with any political party and tends to assess their voting choices based on the personality of the candidate running in the elections. At the personal level all the respondents prefer qualified candidates to run in the elections and endorses the notions 'right man for right job'. They were critical of the cabinet formed and showed high affinity of their impact at the institutional level such as economy, poverty and the security of the state. As per their digital perceptions of self the young voters take the responsible citizen role seriously and makes an effort to use their rights of vote as a responsibility fulfilled by themselves.



Mycock and Tonge (2014) emphatically highlight the critical importance of engaging young voters in the election process and their active participation in parliamentary procedures, including youth politics and referendums. This surge in political involvement has undeniably led to a widespread acknowledgment of their significant role in political participation. Furthermore, the meso-level institutional arrangements unequivocally foster a sense of inclusivity in the national democratic transition. The powerful combination of mediated and traditional appeals to voting as a national duty undeniably cultivates a profound sense of fulfillment and optimism for the potential "change" aimed at advancing our nation-state as a whole.

Demographics and Gendered Preferences

Gender being an important marker of identity can be an important criterion for decision taken by the voters. Surprisingly, the voters did not show any preferences for male or female gender of the candidates. A small majority hoped for a male candidate winning while others stick to their political affiliations and the ideologies. For their voting decisions among the others Education and political affiliations remained very important when it comes to the voting decisions. The respondents are the young voters that have an institutional affiliation and some are employed as well. They are familiar with the importance of education in transformation at the level of state and government as well. Both male and female respondents had a high tendency of casting vote to their populist political leaders in contrast to the conservative or right-wing political parties. A few also considers casting

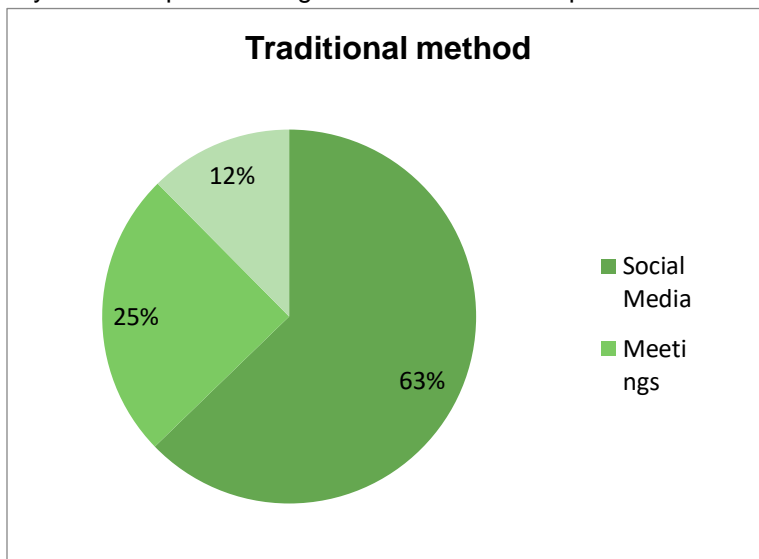
votes without any declared political party affiliation. A small percentage have also shown their inclination towards the religious political parties.

The shift in voting preferences across generations has undoubtedly led to a more engaged and dependable voter base for politicians and other key stakeholders in the electoral process. It's clear that populist regimes heavily rely on both traditional and digital platforms, as well as citizen journalism, to significantly amplify political participation during general elections in Pakistan.

From Traditional to Digital: Transformations in Political Engagements

The social media handles of the political parties are a major source of information on the General Elections in Pakistan. The political gratifications that young voters require from their political leadership is reflected on the posts and hashtags used on the digital platforms. The trend of Tweeting by the major political leaders has made a unique first-person communication with the users of the digital platforms. The young voters are more engaged with the social media platforms and trusts on the direct communication e.g. Tweets, *Jalsas* (live broadcasted) or press conferences of their political leader or party. One quarter tends to attend the meetings, Protests or sit-ins called by their political leaders. This has led an active role of the young voters in shaping the future government as well as their positioning as an important stakeholder in the electoral discourses where previously they have been a source of the broader nation-building project of the state apparatuses.

The traditional methods of political campaigning have also changed and transformed how young voters might want to be engaged by their leadership. This eventually leads to the more direct communication by the political party leadership and using the rhetoric of corruption scandals of their political opponents as an appeal to justify their position as a transparent and available leadership. The platforms used for such communications tends to be the face-to-face meetings as well the usage of the digital platforms to address the hopes of these voters. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents have joined their leadership or party's authentic pages to get the narratives of their leadership or their political party stance contributing to high polarization of the topics introduced online (Zhao and Brown 2023).



Nation-Building and Inclusiveness

The active citizens can ensure the democratic transition of their country. The inclusivity projects at the macro-level of youth engagement is now bearing its fruits and it leads to responsible and informed citizenship. The diversity is recognized on the caste, gender, religion and ethnic lines and at the governor's level it is ensured to engage all the responsible citizens to be engaged for nation-

building inclusive project. Hence, this study is also inclusive of gender and political affiliations be it at the Education, Religion, Caste and Ethnicity dimensions as well. Nation-Building project has bear its benefits using the traditional as well as the digitized modes of communication. It has extended its scope and now all domains are used to generate the information and importance of inclusivity and tolerance and inculcating the values of responsibility, citizenship and nationalism. These markers further strengthen the pillars of political systems and improves the governance of the country by projecting participatory forms of young voters' engagements.

Suggestions/Recommendations

People from different corners of the world are leveraging technology to enhance the way we participate in democratic processes. Through the development and utilization of digital tools and platforms, these initiatives are striving to make voting procedures more transparent, equitable, and accessible. This tech-savvy strategy is dismantling obstacles and fostering a more engaging democratic system for all. Thanks to technology, ordinary individuals and communities have the power to drive meaningful change, empowering citizens to actively participate in molding the future of our societies. In the end, this contributes to building a more robust and inclusive democracy.

Conclusion

The regime change process through elections remained a top priority and key concern of the respondents in the pre-campaign survey. The perception of a responsible citizen engaging in the process of casting of vote and monitoring the political happenings closely remains the top priority of young voters in Pakistan. Family, Education and political motivations are the key motivations in the voting decisions of the young respondents. The mediated communication has an impact on the agency of the voters and leads them to cast votes based on their digital media or mainstream media gratifications. Family affiliations also remained an important source of the meso-level political participation. The gendered dimension is interesting where female young voters tend to believe that change can be brought by the male political leadership. This is interesting given the protection provided by the male members of their households. The same perception is applied at the state and government level by these young voters.

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