

Navigating the Political Landscape: Exploring Patterns of Media Impact on General Election 2024 in Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan 2024 General Elections held in February were a historical political event in the history of Pakistan where media significantly played key role in changing the fate of any political group or candidate. Thus, the objective of this paper is to analyze the relationships of the election with the media and to study its diverse aspects and consequences. Traditional press like television, radio, and newspaper had prominent influence over the political contenders and their ideas. Conventionally, closeness with media owners and editorial team can benefit some political individuals while deprive others. Today with the availability of new forms of media especially the social networks, the distribution of information becomes more of a citizen affair with more activism at the base level. While this process has democratized the availability of information, high risk factors such as fake news, echo chamber and algorithmic interference questions the credibility of the process and information being spread in the population. Against this backdrop, this study aims to incorporate an amalgam approach of quantitative content analysis of media alongside qualitative data obtained from personal and focus group interviews, and content analysis. Applying the analysis of the patterns of media framing, media agenda settings, and media agenda building this study aims to discover how media determines certain political perceptions and actions during the course of an election campaign adding to the existing body of knowledge on media-politics interactions in Pakistan in order to explain factors influencing the voters.

Keywords: Media Impact, General Elections, Electoral Outcomes, Political Landscape, Pakistan

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Introduction

Pakistan is no new to democracy and the country has been celebrating general elections right from its early days. Over the last few years, the use of media has grown and it plays a very key role in the shaping of peoples' attitudes and behavior during voting. The Pakistani general elections were scheduled in 2024 will not diverge from this thinking and the role of the media on influencing the electoral results shall be a significant one. It is with this premise that this paper aims at establishing the pattern of the media influence on the voters' decision in the next general elections in Pakistan. More so, it will analyses details of how the mainstream media affect the public, the factors that define the media effect on voters and the way the coverage given by the media to the political candidates has the impact on the voters' decision making process. By reviewing these aspects of media, it is the hope of this study to present a framework understanding of media in the upcoming general election in Pakistan. The general election of 2024 in Pakistan is such transitional landmark that was eagerly awaited and closely observed both nationally and internationally. Therefore, this electoral process cannot be discussed without mentioning the media whose responsibility it is to shape opinions and fashion out the way people perceive political personalities and any other individual who participates in the exercise of the democratic process. This introduction aims at stressing the central importance of media in the political setting of Pakistan, especially concerning the upcoming general election and to present the goals and the delimitation of this work in order to investigate the complex dynamics of media influence (Ahmed, 2023).

Considering modern Pakistan as a common ground of traditional and newly emerging media including TV, Radio, Newspapers and now the social and digital media, this context gives a perfect environment for media politics interflow. Importance of media in the context of political socialization and as the main source of information and communication between governors and governed cannot be overemphasized. In light of the abovementioned background of political polarization and electoral strife, it becomes even more important to grasp the dynamics of the media effects in discerning the forces at work in the construction of democracy in Pakistan (Martin, 2017). Media influence works through complex processes that go beyond information transmission into such broad processes as setting the media agenda, media frames, and media agenda-building. In particular, media outlets control the relevance of issues, portrayal of candidates, and the given dominating vision significant enough throughout the exercise of selective news coverage in conjunction with the provisioning of the news frames. However, the trends of digital media and social networking site brought new possibilities and unrests at the same time, it democratized the sharing of information while at the same time it radically activated the issues of fake news, bubble, and biased algorithms (Ali, 2019). This research aims at beyond the perceived media political relationship in context to the forthcoming general election 2024 in Pakistan focusing on tracing out the patterns of media impact and its implication in shaping the election result as well as democratic process. Therefore, this research will adopt the combination of quantitative and qualitative research design, whereby the number of media items that create perception will be converted into frequency in order to make comparison on perception or interview and focus group results while content analysis will used to complement interview and focus group results. By analyzing media framing, agenda setting characteristics, and ways

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through which media affect political beliefs and actions, the present study will give some insights into the role media play in the political context of Pakistan. It is hoped that the findings of this research will serve to help policymakers, journalists, and citizens learn about the complexities of media effects and where risks and possibilities exist in an increasingly complex media system in a democratic society. In this manner, the current research proposes to describe the patterns and impacts of media in Pakistan to provide a better understanding and effective decision-making in support of the principles of democratic governance.

Background

Pakistan's general election in 2024 represents one special event in the political context of the country – a highly expected electoral battle with potential consequences for governance, democracy and society. Before getting to this particular election, there is a number of political, economic and social factors that contributed to the development of voters' attitudes, parties' position and the general conditions of electoral contest. The important part of its background is a share of the previous general election in 2018 when Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) got a plurality of the seats in National Assembly and came to power. Khan's triumph defeated the traditional trend of politics where Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) dominated the politics (Shehzad, 2021). Nevertheless, the PTI-led government of Pakistan has faced some rare and unconventional problems and controversies during its stay in power mostly related to economy, administrative corruption, and controversies on many domestic and foreign policy matters. These challenges have raised the political temperatures, political realignments, internal factions, and protracted coalition negotiations leading to a probable very intensive general elections in 2024. In this context, dynamics of the media have critically influenced the political discourses and election narratives up to the year 2024 election. Currently, Pakistan media sector comprises of television channels, radio stations and newspapers and has elaborated into digital media sector including social media, news portals and streaming service providers.

The media in political communication has become contentious concerning its influence towards the formation and determination of political issues, hence electoral decisions based on these issues, ownership and influencing independencies of the media events and spread of misinformation. The proliferation of digital media platforms has further complicated the media landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for political actors seeking to leverage media channels to advance their agendas (Toor et al., 2024). When political parties started preparing for the next general election in the year 2024, the relations between media and politics once again become pivotal for any stakeholder aiming at comprehending the destiny of Pakistan's democracy. Against this backdrop it becomes possible to undertake a detailed analysis of the patterns of media effects on the upcoming election, with a view to understanding the processes by which media intervention determines the nature of election and outlines the future landscape of Pakistani politics. The general election of 2024 in Pakistan was held in an environment that was highly charged with political, social and economic processes which created the milieu within which media influence did matter. When the nation was gearing up for yet another democracy mission it was to encounter a plethora of opportunities as well risks; all seemingly well connected with media revolution.

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During the period leading to the general elections scheduled for 2024, there was rather increased polarization of political actors in Pakistan with different political discourses and ideologies in the contestation for hegemonic power. The ruling party was under pressure to explain its record of stewardship and the achievements scorecard in things like economic management, the war on corruption, and terror. On the other hand, oppositions tried to take the chance and offered their own visions and political programs in order to gain necessary votes. In the midst of all these political stunts, there were interesting changes in media scenario of Pakistan. The traditional segments of the media such as television, radio, and newspapers remained dominant and popular because they were able to penetrate through different segments of the society. Although a new era of digital media and social networking was added another dimension to the crisis mapping, making it easier to engage citizens, update real-time information, and interact. The role of media in defining the story around the 2024 general election came to the foreground. To a large extent, newspapers and broadcast media formed an important force of interpretation of key topics of discourse; reverberation of particular voices, dissemination of opinion and construction of a particular worldview through news and comments. Furthermore, the increased availability of the digital media platforms that allowed information to be disseminated very effectively for the exercise of political literacy as well as for the sharing of fake news and propaganda. This complicated relationship between political players and the media was spurred on by the fact that political parties and contenders were looking for avenues to promote their own mission and vision while media outlets shifted more to the center ground. Thus, Media ownership structures, editorial biases and regulatory frameworks impacted the type of coverage and nature and tone of the reports that emerged, leading to blogging issues of media credibility, impartiality and accountability. Various actors seeking to engage in the political processes of the 2024 general election had to contend with using media, while some revered its capability of enlightening the public and making people capable of making well informed decisions, they also knew about the manipulative prowess of media in shaping people's perceptions. .. In light of this, comprehending the patterns of media influence on the election emerged as a critically important question, which scholars, policymakers, journalists, and citizens had no other option but to study these patterns and the role of media and electoral democracy for Pakistan and the world at large.

Impact of media on elections

The impact of media on elections is multifaceted and profound.

Agenda Setting

Therefore, self-organized media has the capacities to determine which issues attract attention and which accustom a certain significance to issues at the election period. Due to reporting, construction of reality and gate keeping, media is able to determine what matters to the voters at the time of exercising their electoral functions (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This agenda-setting function is especially important in influencing the political context of a nation to the extent that the matters of primary concern are concerned. Even in the case of the General Election of Pakistan in year 2024 media may give some specific political issues or scandals being viewed by the voter in relation to the contending political parties or their

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candidates. For example, should the daily media cover the economic decay or bad governance as the major vices in their countries, these challenges might form the core of the voters' decision leaving out other crucial issues like health or educational reforms. In some ways, media does this intentionally, and in others, it may do this unconsciously, yet such choices do align society's perception and shape the results of the election.

Framing

Media framing refers to the story telling approach used in news coverage that enhances aspects of a given subject while deemphasizing others (Iyengar, 1991). This kind of selection enables media outlets to determine how an issue will be understood by the audience while fashioning coverage to reflect political/ideological bias. The lens through which people view election news tell them not only about the stakeholders but also how to view the stakes. For instance, the way that a media gives certain aspects of a particular candidate maybe as the strong or weak leader or the credible or the incredibly, it affects the perception that the public has of that candidate (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Media framing had a potential impact on the General Elections 2024 in Pakistan therefore, has the potential to influence the voters/decided voters' preference. A candidate painted in the enclave of corruption or perceived to be intellectually inept will for example lack popularity even as a contender whose policies will benefit the voters. Likewise, a positive orientation toward some actors could generate politically soft prejudices that tilted the election.

Candidate Image

It may be agreed that media coverage greatly determined the perception that people have for political candidates. The kind of image portrayed in the mass media could either bolster a candidate's character or competence, or make the candidate seem unfit for the office (Mazzoleni, 2000). The implication of this is that, candidates who receive positive presentation from the media can be favored by the electorate and otherwise their opponents receive negative portrayal from the media they are likely to be eliminated from the electoral competition. In this case therefore, media image of the candidate is another significant factor in the entire campaign process. Mainstream Pakistani media will be instrumental in the construction of candidate images during General Elections 2024, focusing on positive aspects and achievements of the candidates under discussion as well as their weaknesses or sins. The portrayal of candidates in interviews, debates or news broadcasts probably influences voters as to who ultimately gets elected.

Information Dissemination

Especially during an election campaign the media exist as the main source of information for the voter. Hence through the news reports, interviews, debates, and analyses, votes are able to be equipped with the vital information on the background of the candidates, their stands on various issues and policies and their promises in their campaigns. Media plays a vital role in conveying true and real information to the people of Pakistan as these people would cast their votes as per the information provided by the media outlets. Nevertheless, if the media does not accomplish this task, for instance through providing misleading information or emphasizing on the trivial issues, the voters are likely to be misinformed and if they vote their

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choice of candidate on such information or orientation, the electoral process is likely to be unfair (Pfister, 2023). In this respect, it shall therefore be important to appreciate balanced and objective media as crucial elements for healthy political participation.

Mobilization and Turnout

Media can have impact on voters' turnout and the enabling of mobilization during an election campaign. In this manner, the media play a crucial role of implementing information regarding the practice of voting and increasing the turn out of the population into voters (Norris, 2003). On the other hand, negative outlook to media or perceptions of electoral malpractice might help reduce turn out. For instance continuously entertaining messages about political corruption or electoral manipulation are likely to demobilize voters and lead to low voter turnout (Hayes & Lawless, 2015). During the Pakistan General Elections 2024, media was used to sensitize the population in order to vote in the election. When the media act proactively and engage the citizens in a voting exercise as a duty and not a privilege, and when they report objectively without any inclination, then, the elections are genuinely determined by the people's choice.

Social Media Influence

More so, social networking sites have fine-tuned campaigns whereby the candidates and the party vie for support and or engagement of electorate online individually (Chadwick, 2015). Social networking sites also disseminate news, information, and misinformation at the speed of light affecting public opinion and that of the voters. Now conversing about Pakistan's General Elections 2024, it will be evident to witness the active participation of social media in the political process and also impacts the results. This comes with the traditional media maintaining its' agenda setting and framing advantage over the voters while the social media provides a more personal and real way of reaching out to the voters (Toor, et al., 2024). These social sites such as Facebook; Twitter; WhatsApp makes interaction between political players and the voters real time but at the same time the electorate is likely to receive half- baked information or even complete falsehoods. It will therefore be mandatory to continuously check and control the effects that social media will have on the election process in order to secure democracy.

Literature Review

Media has a very essential function as it influence politics especially during election exercises. For the purpose of the study, it would be crucial for identifying patterns of the media impact in the context of the General Election 2024 in Pakistan to discuss the process in which the political discourses are created, how public opinions are shaped and how voting outcomes are decided. This literature review focus on few elite scholarly works which discuss about different aspect of media effect on election and which gives insights about the factors involving in the Pakistan political parties.

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Ahmed (2023) explores the influence of media on political behavior among Pakistani voters. Through a survey analysis, Ahmed demonstrates how media exposure shapes voter perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making processes during elections. The study highlights the significant impact of media framing and agenda-setting on voter behavior, emphasizing the need for media literacy and critical engagement with political information.

Manju et al. (2023) investigate the relationship between media ownership, political bias, and democratic governance. By analyzing ownership structures and editorial practices, Khan elucidates how corporate interests and political affiliations influence media content and coverage during election campaigns. The study underscores the importance of media pluralism and independence for fostering democratic accountability and transparency. Ali & Rahman (2019) examine the relationship between media ownership structures and political bias in Pakistani news channels. By analyzing ownership patterns and editorial content, the research highlights how ownership influences the framing of political news and the portrayal of candidates during election periods.

The literature on media impact in elections provides valuable insights into the complexities of navigating the political landscape in Pakistan. By understanding the dynamics of media influence, policymakers, journalists, and citizens can better navigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in shaping electoral outcomes and democratic processes. As Pakistan prepares for the General Election 2024, continued research on media impact will be essential for fostering a more informed, engaged, and participatory electorate.

Theoretical Framework

A well-established theory in media studies that ensures the media has the ability to prioritize what should be made important to the public based on what is given attention to. Research that has been conducted to determine the extent of the agenda-setting effects during elections has shown that media coverage determines what the voters regard as important and what the candidates consider important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The nature of media influencing agenda setting during previous election periods, and on the participation of both conventional and new media in setting the pace of discourse (Shehzad, 2021). Developing the key postulates of agenda-setting theory, scientists have attempted to consider more details about how media affect public perceptions and political results during the election campaigns. A number of aspects have been pointed out by researchers regarding the issue of media owning the public agenda, namely: Nature of issue: Either selective or constructed by the media houses; H-L: How frequently the issue is reported; T: Where it is reported and what part of the media houses; P-A: Influence of politician and/or government agenda on issues selected by the media or otherwise; OD: Finally, influence of ordinary people in the selection or Based on agenda-setting theoretical framework, framing theory also focuses on how the media messages paradigm shapes the perception of an issue by amplifying some aspects while diminishing others (Entman, 1993). Research on media framing in electoral studies has pointed out some form of bias, spin and stories that guide attitudes and perceptions of the electorate (Iyengar, 1991). A study conducted by a Pakistan also explained that how media of the country uses framing in their reporting in order to bring positive change to political

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leaders and parties, which is crucial for electoral change.

Research objectives

The key objectives of the current study are 1) To analyze how mainstream media shapes public opinion during elections 2) To identify and evaluate the key factors that influence the impact of media on voter behavior 3) To assess the effect of media coverage of political candidates on voter decision-making.

Research questions (RQ)

The main research questions are “How does mainstream media shape public opinion during elections?”, “What are the key factors that influence the impact of media on voter behavior?”, “How does the media coverage of political candidates affect voter decision-making?”.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the nuanced dynamics of media impact on the General Elections 2024 in Pakistan, drawing inspiration from the principles and practices of agenda-setting theory. The qualitative method was chosen for its appropriateness in exploring complex phenomena like media influence through an exhaustive analysis of existing literature and empirical evidence. However, the Secondary sources of data collection for this study included scholarly articles, books, media reports, and other relevant sources that offer insights into the patterns and mechanisms of media impact on electoral processes. By synthesizing information from diverse secondary sources, this research aimed to present a comprehensive understanding of media influence in navigating the political landscape during the upcoming General Elections 2024 in Pakistan.

Findings of the study

The exploration of media impacted on the General Election 2024 in Pakistan illuminated the relationship between media dynamics and the electoral process. By analyzing the patterns of media impact, the stakeholders were able to establish potentiality of Media Framing, Agenda Setting and the narratives influences on the voters’ perception, candidate image and issues salience. Furthermore, the analysis of how media influence occurred can help strategic actors such as political actors, policy makers and media operatives in managing media influence as a political process. Hence, the findings suggested that people lessened media bias and enhanced their media literacy skills to have an efficient and credible electorate base in Pakistan.

Influence of mainstream media on voter behavior

RQ 1: How does mainstream media shape public opinion during elections?

The role of mainstream media in shaping public opinion during elections is significant, with a range of effects on cognitive, affective, behavioral, and physiological levels (Yadi, 2023). Overall, the media plays a crucial role in providing information and shaping the opinions and behaviors of voters during elections (Martin, 2017). Television broadcasts have been found to increase political knowledge, participation, and ultimately influence voting decisions (Pfister, 2023). The effectiveness of mass media electioneering campaigns in influencing voting decisions is moderated by factors such as fairness and balance in media coverage, as

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well as the persuasiveness of campaign messages (Ahmed, 2023). Media exposure has a direct influence on voting behavior, with online media and other forms such as billboards or banners being preferred sources of political information (Yadi, 2023). Negative news coverage can affect voting behavior, with participants in web studies consistently preferring frequently encountered names in mock elections. Media exposure can alter voting behavior in a variety of ways, as seen through the four preregistered web studies exploring the effect of media exposure on voting behavior. Theoretical frameworks propose that increased information typically benefits voters by enabling them to more effectively monitor politicians. However, media biases can emerge even without deliberate manipulation and may sway public opinion in favor of specific partisan perspectives. Mainstream media plays a role in shaping public opinion during elections by making decisions about candidate coverage. Journalists choose which candidates to cover and how much, which can have a significant impact on voter perceptions. The manner in which an issue is portrayed in news coverage can impact how it is perceived by the audience, a concept known as framing. The quality of information provided by different types of media may vary and give rise to media biases. Overall, mainstream media has an impact on shaping public opinion during elections and is perceived as less biased and direct persuasive attempt compared to information from political campaigns.

Factors shaping media influence on voter behavior

RQ 2: What are the key factors that influence the impact of media on voter behavior?

The impact of media on voter behavior is influenced by various factors. One such factor is the type of news coverage being broadcasted. Whether a candidate receives neutral or positive media coverage or negative coverage can significantly impact their voter behavior. Another key factor is the frequency of media exposure to a candidate's name, which can influence voting behavior and create a sense of familiarity with the candidate (Heblich, 2016). The activity and assertiveness of the candidates are also crucial factors that influence the impact of media on voter behavior. Analyzing the different features, candidates, who are actively invested into the campaign and are more 'pushy' in a way, benefit from media exposure since it actually does have an impact on voters. Sources of information is another factor that determine the effect of media on voters on its behavior by acting based on self-preference. Some populations may have better access to Internet, in this case it can be noted that the percentage of politically interested populations may influence the vote. Appearances and one's image on the social site as well as brand images and other characteristics have impacted party affiliation and decisions. Tribal and religious connections also play a crucial role in shaping voter decisions, with individuals often supporting candidates who have similar backgrounds or uphold values that resonate with them (Alhaimer, 2023). The second variable is information and mobilization potential of the applications like blog, twitter or face book which is a critical variable that defines the extent to how media influence the behavior of the voters. . In addition, it has been discovered that positive messaging influence the rate of voter turnout and the candidate support. But interestingly, only 45% of the respondents feel that positivity of the person is an essential characteristic. In sum, it is seen that over time the following factors have become significant with respect to the media voter causality: Media exposure, type of news coverage, the level of activities and assertiveness of candidates, the

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sort of voters self-selecting their most favored media sources, voters' tribal / religious affiliation, and growing dimension of social networking media.

Impact of media coverage on voter decision-making

RQ 3: How does the media coverage of political candidates affect voter decision-making?

The media can have a powerful influence on voter decision-making. Exposure to political candidates through media coverage can significantly impact voter preferences. In one study, participants were shown headlines featuring two names, with one name appearing frequently and one name appearing infrequently. The results of the study showed that the frequency of exposure to a candidate's name in the headlines had an impact on voter decision-making, demonstrating that mere exposure to media coverage of political candidates can affect voter behavior (Heblich, 2016). Reports on political candidates via online news can build an overarching narrative of current events, embedding political information in the minds of voters. The frequency of prominent political figures appearing in news coverage is on the rise, as numerous present-day news outlets concentrate their reporting efforts on a restricted set of political figures. The influence of exposure to media coverage may vary from the effects of direct exposure to political campaigns, as media coverage provides information of a distinct nature compared to political campaigns. However, exposure to candidate names in the media has a direct effect on voting preferences, which has been observed in a wide range of situations and applies to both positive and neutral reporting (Alhaimer, 2023). Opinion polls have been known to sometimes bring about what is referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy in as much as it fuels emerging trends. Consequently, the results obtained imply that media reports could influence the voter's choice and should not be dismissed in consideration of elections.

Conclusion

The analysis of the present research paper exposes how mainstream media has influenced the 2024 General Elections in Pakistan. The findings suggest the explored studies showing that media influence can change the voting intention through the persuasion of the people's opinion, the impact on cognitive and emotional processes, and the voter choice. It also reports that the type of information that can be derived from media coverage is different from information that is obtained from political campaigns. It is for this reason that candidates in electoral processes have to be very vigilant on the kind of media coverage they are given to help them influence the choice of their voters positively. The study also found that, online media and others such as billboards or banners are among ideal media types for political information. Nonetheless, there are some implications arising from the study for example, one was unable to probe deeper into what influenced voters' choice. Further studies should overcome such shortcomings and examine the efficiency of various media communication approaches on voters. This work contributes to the ongoing accumulation of knowledge in political communication and establishes the features of media in shaping people's attitudes during different election campaigns.

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