Impact of Social Media on Electoral Process: Way Forward for Upcoming Elections

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The advent of social media has profoundly transformed the electoral landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for democratic processes worldwide. Pakistani voters relied on a range of media platforms, including television, radio, newspapers, and social media, to access political information, discussions, and broaden their knowledge. The study delves into the multifaceted impact of social media on the electoral process, exploring its influence on public opinion formation, political discourse, and candidate-citizen engagement. It proposes a strategic roadmap, outlining key considerations for navigating the evolving digital terrain in a manner that upholds democratic principles. Notably, social media in Pakistan is being credited with driving shifts in voter behavior. The primary objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms through which political news contributes to political discourse and, ultimately, shapes electoral choices. This study seeks to chart a course toward fair, transparent, and inclusive elections, offering insights and recommendations to stakeholders, policymakers, and electoral bodies for the effective management of upcoming electoral cycles in an increasingly digital era. To achieve this, a carefully constructed questionnaire was administered through a survey targeting eligible voters residing in Lahore city. The data required for this research was collected using a method known as simple random sampling, ensuring that each member of the population has an equal opportunity to be included in the study. The central focus of the present study is to investigate the relationship between social media consumption and voting behavior, with specific attention to political knowledge and the dynamics of the democratic electoral process. The research design adopted in this study emphasizes the equitable selection of participants from the population through the simple random sampling technique.

Keywords: Democratic Principals, Electoral cycle, General Elections, Voters, Media Consumption.

Introduction:

The duration of a political campaign significantly shapes how political information unfolds. This period triggers shifts in the flow of information due to the heightened competition among political parties. Researchers are deeply intrigued by this timeframe, concentrating on the campaign's length to explore how news media influences voting behavior [1]. In the ever-evolving landscape of modern democracy, the pervasive influence of social media on the electoral process has emerged as a defining force. As nations prepare for upcoming elections, the role of social media stands at the nexus of transformation, shaping the dynamics of political discourse and voter engagement. The impact of these digital platforms on electoral outcomes, political narratives, and the behavior of both candidates and voters has captured the attention of scholars, policymakers, and the public alike [1][2][3].

The history of a free and independent media in Pakistan is relatively recent, and regrettably, the same can be said for the presence of free and fair elections. Regrettably, in Pakistan, citizens have only experienced 11 General Elections from 1947 to 2018, without a clear distinction of fairness or unfairness. The country's political history has been marred by prolonged military martial laws and interventions. The 1970 transparent election led to the tragic separation of East Pakistan. Even the government established as a result of the 2002 election completed its term, but the election results were marred by allegations of manipulation [4][5][6]

A significant milestone towards democracy was achieved when the cherished parliament, formed after the ninth General Elections in 2008, completed its full five-year term. During this period, mass media, despite occasional government restrictions, continued to wield its influence over the masses. From competitive election campaigns to coalition negotiations, from principal adversaries to coalition partners, the evolving political landscape was extensively covered and disseminated by the media. Despite allegations of corruption and conspiracy, Dr. Ijaz Gilani views this government term as a "transition to democracy and the rule of law" [7]

Every political party utilized television channels, radio, social media, and newspapers to showcase their achievements and highlight the failures of others, encouraging people to cast their votes, and recognizing the critical role each vote plays in shaping their destiny. Media played a pivotal role in mobilizing voters by fostering political awareness. Recognizing the profound scope and influence of mass media, numerous scholars incorporated it into their research as one of the factors influencing voters' choices. This assumption about media's impact gained support when a positive correlation was discovered between political news consumption and voting patterns. Nevertheless, some critics argue that Pakistani media falls short of expectations in mobilizing grassroots support for democracy. Therefore, this media backdrop sets the context for evaluating the extent and impact of political news exposure on voting behavior in Pakistan [8].

The influence of media on voting behavior is evident in the General Elections of 2008, 2013, and 2018. Media encompasses many platforms or channels through which data is disseminated and conveyed [7]. Multi-media is a broad term that encompasses various communication tools used to disseminate information to a wide audience. The term "Media" refers to the means and channels through which information, news, entertainment, and communication are conveyed to a large and diverse audience. Media encompasses various forms, including print (newspapers, magazines), broadcast (television and radio), digital (websites, social media), and other communication outlets. In essence, any device that functions to store and transmit data can be classified as media [9]. In her influential publication from 1984, the distinguished German scholar Noelle Neumann elucidated the effects of political news consumption on voters' behavior, a concept she referred to as the "spiral of silence." Neumann's research examined the outcomes of biased news coverage by Christian, a news anchor, which ultimately led to the electoral loss of the Democratic Party [10]. In this study, the researchers aim to evaluate the influence of political news on voters' knowledge. They propose the premise

that citizens do not necessarily require extensive knowledge and information in order to fulfil their fundamental civic responsibilities, such as casting their votes. The aforementioned study pertains to the measurement of voters' knowledge of recent political developments through the analysis of political news [11]. In Pakistani society, the advent of social media has led to a noticeable increase in the quality of media as a platform for deliberative discussions. The mainstream media in Pakistan has become more active in analyzing and discussing a wide range of political issues. Given this shift toward mediated deliberation, there is an expectation that, in order to advance democracy in Pakistan, media professionals should further embrace the principles of deliberation. This dissertation serves as a platform to assess whether Pakistani media aligns with these principles, thus allowing for an examination of deliberative democratic theory by situating news media between the public and media professionals.

As per researcher [12] have delved into how the discussions among media professionals influence the decision-making processes of voters. To promote rational thinking among voters, it is crucial for the quality of media discussions to embody the key characteristics of mediated deliberation, as highlighted by [13]. This, in turn, can pave the way for voters to make informed decisions, as emphasized by [14].

Furthermore, individuals' political orientations are, to some extent, shaped by their use of social media. Existing literature suggests that individuals' responses to specific political events are influenced by the messages they encounter regarding those events. Therefore, it is essential to consider both the quantity of messages received and the manner in which they are processed as crucial factors that produce both psychological and behavioral outcomes, as underlined by [15].

In 1984, the concept of the "Spiral of Silence" was introduced by Noella Neumann, shedding light on how the prevailing majority opinion tends to silence the minority within a given cultural context [16]. Neumann's theory suggests that individuals in the minority often choose to remain silent due to their perceived fear of social isolation within a climate dominated by the majority opinion. This apprehension leads individuals to withhold their thoughts and opinions, fearing a lack of support or validation, regardless of the accuracy or influence of their beliefs, thus significantly impacting their behavior [17].

Noella Neumann proposed that news media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion through selective exposure. She argued that the media can exacerbate the "Spiral of Silence" phenomenon, highlighting the importance of effectively capturing media attention for those seeking to influence public opinion. Neumann's analysis of the 1980s United States presidential election, in which Republican nominee Ronald Reagan emerged victorious over Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, exemplified her perspective on how politically biased news campaigns can influence the electoral process [18]. Consequently, exposure to political news may lead to the erroneous perception that a majority group is, in fact, a minority, distorting their societal standing [19].

This study conceptualizes political news exposure through various media channels as individuals' engagement with political news before and during the 2018 General Election in Pakistan [20]. This engagement encompasses multiple mediums, including newspapers, radio, and television, and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as well as interpersonal discussions with friends, family members, and workplace colleagues [21]. Political news, as defined within this study, adheres to specific political standards, encompassing various aspects such as official statements from political party leaders on political matters, press conferences held by political leaders and their spokespersons, media coverage of political parties, political issue coverage, the stances of ruling and opposition parties on these issues, actions taken by interim governments during election campaigns, and activities conducted by the Election Commission to promote voter awareness and ensure a fair and impartial electoral process [22].

This study seeks to investigate the impact of social media exposure and examination of political behavior in relation to exposure to the media has been a focal point for scholars in the fields of media and communication, particularly during election campaigns [23]. It is observed that citizens generally become more aware of the connection between politics and local events [24]. As Election Day draws nearer, the probability of campaign activities having a more substantial impact on voters' awareness increases. The researchers also underscore the significance of two key variables: media attentiveness and political discourse [25][12].

At now, Pakistan boasts a multitude of television channels, each with its own online and print media counterparts. Additionally, numerous international and regional channels are being disseminated through cable networks throughout the country [26]. According to a study conducted by Jim Willis in 2007, an examination of the 1968 presidential elections in the United States demonstrated a strong association between the topics addressed and aired by the media and the level of concern expressed by voters for these particular concerns [14]. The establishment of private media stations in Pakistan commenced during the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf in 2002. Prior to this period, the absence of private media channels meant that the only available sources of electronic broadcasting were government-owned networks [27]. These newly emerged media channels were perceived as impartial sources by the general population. These outlets consistently and autonomously bring attention to any topic that arises in Pakistan [28]. President Musharaf declared a state of emergency in Pakistan, leading to the emergence of talk programs on several networks that openly criticized the administration [29].

This research aims to focus exclusively on the influence of social media. It aims to investigate how political news exposure through various compaigns affects political socialization, political awareness, political mobilization, political engagement, and voting preferences across different political parties.

Methodology:

Research Design:

The research design for this study is primarily quantitative in nature, employing a cross-sectional approach. This approach allows for the collection of data at a single point in time, offering insights into the relationship between media consumption and voting behavior during the upcoming General Elections in Pakistan**.**

Population and Sample:

The target population for this study comprises eligible voters residing in Lahore city. To ensure representative results, a simple random sampling technique was employed. This method guarantees an equal opportunity for every eligible voter in Lahore to be included in the survey.

Survey Instrument:

A carefully constructed questionnaire served as the primary survey instrument. The questionnaire was designed to capture information related to individuals' media consumption habits, engagement in political discussions, political knowledge, and voting behavior during the expected during upcoming General Elections. The questions were structured to provide quantitative data for statistical analysis.

Data Collection Procedure:

The survey was administered through face-to-face interviews and electronic means, such as online surveys, to enhance accessibility and participation. Trained interviewers conducted in-person interviews using the questionnaire, ensuring standardization in the data collection process. Additionally, an online version of the survey was distributed to reach a broader audience.

Variable Measurement:

Important factors encompass: Patterns of media usage spanning television, radio, newspapers, and social media; the frequency and intensity of involvement in political dialogues;

levels of political awareness; and anticipated voting conduct in the forthcoming General Elections.

Data Analysis:

The collected data was analyzed using statistical tools, such as regression analysis and correlation, to identify patterns and relationships between media consumption, political engagement, and voting behavior. This descriptive study employed a cross-sectional survey method to gather data in Lahore, utilizing simple random sampling to select a sample of voters. The study's outcomes shed light on the correlation between exposure to political news and voters' engagement in political events during the general election in Pakistan. A total of 150 respondents were chosen through simple random sampling in Lahore. Variables: Political News by by Social Media exposure for political news was assessed by questioning respondents, and their responses were collected.

Chi-square Test of Independence

This test was used to determine if there's a significant association between the frequency of exposure to political news through social media and the level of voter engagement.

Results and Discussion:

In this study, we compared the audience's awareness and information about political issues gained attention from social media which can lead to changed voting trends in upcoming general elections. According to a comprehensive examination of 15 national surveys spanning over a period of more than ten years, it was discovered that there exists a positive correlation between news media attention and public learning. In other words, as the level of exposure to news media increases, there is a corresponding increase in the acquisition of information by the general public.

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents based on their political news viewership and engagement in political discussions in previous elections.

Table 1: Overview of Responses Across Various Demographics, Media Habits, and Political Engagement during Previous Election

Primary News Source	Hours Consuming News	Types of News Followed	Political Discussions	Political Engagement	Political Knowledge	Voting in Elections	Factors for Voting	Impact of Vote	Willingness for Further Surveys
Television: 92	Less than 1 hour	Varies based on indiv.	Daily: 40	Social Media	Very High: 25	Yes: 120	Party Affiliation	Yes: 80	Yes: 100
Social Media: 18	1-2 hours		Weekly: 50	Family Gatherings	High: 50	No: 30	Policies	No: 40	No: 50
Newspaper: 5	2-4 hours		Monthly: 30	Workplace	Moderate: 40		Recommendations	Unsure: 30	
Online News: 35	More than 4 hours		Rarely: 20	Online Forums	Low: 25				

Table 2 demonstrates a notable dependency on social media for making voting decisions, with a higher tendency among younger individuals to share and distribute news compared to older age groups.

Table 2: The pattern of selecting political leaders based on the news disseminated via social media platforms

Primary News Source	Expected Viewership	Actual viewership
Social Media	70%	78%
Online News Media	25%	12%
Television	10%	9.8%

Newspaper	5%	0.2%

If we refer to the chi-square distribution for table 1 with df=1 and a significance level (0.05), the critical chi-square value is approximately 3.841. Since 4.81 (computed chi-square) is greater than 3.841 (critical chi-square), we would reject the null hypothesis. This suggests that there's a significant association between reliance on social media and voting trends in forthcoming elections based on the provided data. This implies that there might be a relationship between the primary news source people choose and their voting behavior.

Discussion:

Pakistan inherited a Print Media sector that was characterized by its limited strength, comprising a small number of press agencies primarily located in West Pakistan, specifically. The regions of Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) are significant administrative divisions within Pakistan. The remaining portion of Pakistan, including the region of Baluchistan, lacked a singular news agency [30]. Consequently, in order to address this void, publications that are owned by individuals of the Muslim faith were also introduced in Pakistan. To address the communication requirements of both wings within the constraints of limited resources, certain agencies were relocated to East Pakistan, also known as present-day Bangladesh. The subject matter of this text pertains to the morning news and Azad. The other news outlets were transferred in Sindh, specifically on the western side. Karachi, encompassing prominent publications such as the present-day Daily Jang newspaper and Dawn newspaper, among others [31].

This study primarily focuses on the theoretical framework of agenda setting, a critical concept in media research. Approximately 400 empirical research studies on agenda setting have been published, with a particular emphasis on the agenda-establishing approach, including priming and framing, and the integration of Zeller's model of media effects. The shaping of the media agenda is influenced by various factors, such as political elites, other media sources, societal norms, and traditions. Additionally, elements like media routines, organizational sociology, ideology, and individual characteristics among journalists play a significant role in shaping the media agenda, which is also impacted by real-world events. Agenda setting has been explored at both the object and attribute levels, with some studies delving into agenda building at these levels, including the concept of third-level agenda building.

The central focus of this study aligns with the agenda-building perspective, and it formulates hypotheses based on the existing literature. One central aspect is the salience of an object within the agenda-setting theory, indicating the perceived significance of a topic on the agenda. Furthermore, this study aims to explore the extent to which political news influences political discourse among individuals, focusing on research question.

In the context of democratic governance in Pakistan, scholarly works have highlighted recurring challenges, including weaknesses, fragility, and a history of temporary democratic governments followed by military regimes. These challenges stem from various factors, such as the country's inherited administrative and political legacies from the British colonial period, the presence of non-democratic political parties, and a lack of support for liberal democracy among the ruling class.

In this study, we compared the audience's understanding of subjects that received varying levels of attention from the media. Based on an examination of 15 national surveys spanning over a period of more than ten years, it has been observed that there exists a positive correlation between media attention and public learning. Specifically, an increase in social media exposure is associated with a corresponding increase in public knowledge. When examining crucial political developments, individuals often rely on media coverage as a means of obtaining factual information.

The impact of social media on the electoral process has become a central discussion in modern politics. As we look ahead to upcoming elections, understanding and navigating this influence is crucial for shaping effective strategies. Firstly, social media has transformed how political information is disseminated and consumed. Its reach and immediacy allow candidates to directly engage with voters, breaking traditional communication barriers. This direct interaction can humanize candidates, allowing them to convey their message authentically and resonate with diverse audiences. However, the unchecked spread of misinformation and the echo chamber effect pose significant challenges. Social media algorithms often create filter bubbles, reinforcing existing beliefs and polarizing opinions. This can exacerbate societal divisions and hinder informed decision-making during elections.

Moving forward, a balanced approach is essential. Implementing mechanisms to combat misinformation without infringing on free speech is a delicate balance. Encouraging media literacy and critical thinking skills can empower voters to discern credible information from falsehoods. Regulation of social media platforms is another key aspect. Striking a balance between maintaining an open platform for expression and curbing harmful content is a complex task. Collaborative efforts between governments, tech companies, and civil society are pivotal in establishing effective regulations that safeguard the electoral process without stifling free speech. Furthermore, transparency in political advertising and data usage is critical. Ensuring that voters are aware of the origins and intentions behind online political campaigns can foster trust and accountability. Additionally, fostering a more inclusive online political discourse is essential. Social media should serve as a platform for constructive debates and diverse perspectives rather than a battleground for hostility and division. Encouraging respectful dialogue and fact-based discussions can contribute to a healthier electoral environment.

This study emphasizes the significant impact of social media on shaping and influencing political discourse among individuals, which contradicts the idea of its negligible impact. However, this research has rejected the null hypothesis, establishing a statistically significant link between social media news consumption and voting behavior. Exposure to political news through social media informs individuals about political activities, motivating them to participate in elections and contribute to societal improvement. Social Media serves as a platform for deliberation, enhancing political engagement and the perceived importance of voting for societal progress.

Way Forward for upcoming elections

As nations prepare for the impending electoral cycles, a comprehensive approach emerges as the guiding beacon to steer these elections toward integrity and inclusivity. The path forward encompasses a synergy between technological innovation and democratic principles. Initiatives geared toward enhancing digital literacy hold a pivotal role, empowering citizens to discern accurate information from misinformation in the realm of social media. Simultaneously, bolstering cybersecurity measures becomes imperative, safeguarding electoral systems from potential cyber threats and foreign interference. Regulatory frameworks governing social media and online political advertising stand as essential pillars, ensuring transparency in campaign messaging without compromising freedom of expression. Equally crucial is the emphasis on fostering inclusivity and accessibility, enabling all segments of society to participate meaningfully in the electoral process. This inclusive approach extends to robust civic engagement initiatives and accountability mechanisms that uphold the democratic ethos. Collaboration with international partners and continuous evaluation of electoral systems round out this multifaceted strategy, promising fair, transparent, and credible elections while adapting to the ever-evolving landscape of democracy.

Concluding Remarks:

The findings suggest a correlation between exposure to political news and the act of voting. Individuals become informed about political party activities through social media,

motivating them to participate in the electoral process for societal improvement and positive, purposeful change. Social Media-delivered discourse serves as an alternative to formal deliberative forums, acting as a representative platform for the public. Engaging in discussions through the media has the potential to link various strands of literature on public deliberation. In conclusion, the study finds that exposure to political news through social media platforms is intended to significantly influence the political discussions of individuals during upcoming general elections in Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations:

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines, ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Informed consent will be obtained from each participant, and they will be assured that their participation is voluntary. Limitations: Potential limitations include recall bias, as participants may have difficulty accurately recalling their media consumption and political engagement.

Significance of the Study:

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between media consumption, political discourse, and voting behavior, particularly in the context of upcoming General Elections in Pakistan. The results may have implications for media literacy programs and electoral strategies in similar settings.

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