

Social Media's Role in the 2024 Pakistani Elections: An Agenda-Setting Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan marked a significant shift in political communication, with social media emerging as a powerful force in shaping public discourse. This paper analyzes how social media platforms acted as agenda-setters in an environment where traditional media was constrained by censorship and state control. Drawing upon Agenda-Setting Theory, the study explores how digital platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok influenced issue salience, guided public debate, and reshaped political engagement. Using the 2024 Pakistani elections as a case study, it highlights how political actors and grassroots users leveraged social media to circumvent restrictions, mobilize voters, and set political priorities. The analysis reveals the dual nature of digital media as a space for democratic expression and a battleground for narrative control.

Keywords: Social Media, Pakistani Election 2024, Agenda-Setting, Media Role

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's digital transformation has revolutionized its political landscape. By 2024, more than 45 million Pakistanis were active social media users, creating a vibrant digital sphere that significantly influenced the country's general elections (We Are Social, 2024). Unlike previous elections, where television and newspapers played the dominant role in shaping public opinion, the 2024 elections saw social media emerging as the primary vehicle for political messaging, mobilization, and public debate. The elections were held under extraordinary circumstances. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) faced severe institutional hurdles: its party symbol was banned, its leadership was detained, and its media coverage was restricted. Yet, independent candidates affiliated with PTI won the highest number of seats in the National Assembly. This outcome was largely enabled by their strategic use of social media to reach and mobilize voters, particularly young and urban populations (Wikipedia, 2025). Platforms like Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok became battlegrounds for political narratives. With traditional media either muzzled or co-opted, digital platforms allowed users to spotlight issues ranging from electoral transparency to civil liberties. Hashtag campaigns and viral videos not only galvanized support but also drew international attention to the democratic backsliding in Pakistan.

In addition to reshaping how political messages were disseminated, social media played a pivotal role in framing the discourse surrounding the 2024 elections. The Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media doesn't tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. In the context of Pakistan's 2024 elections, social media platforms were instrumental in amplifying specific issues that dominated the public conversation

(Khan et al., 2025). These included concerns over economic hardship, corruption, government accountability, and human rights. Issues that might have been sidelined by traditional media were brought to the forefront through digital campaigns, creating a space for previously marginalized voices to be heard (Mubasharah et al., 2024). For example, young voters took to platforms like TikTok to share personal stories of economic struggles, fostering a collective sense of urgency and frustration that led to wider political mobilization.

Furthermore, social media provided a powerful tool for political actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly communicate with the electorate. Politicians and political parties, especially PTI, capitalized on this opportunity by using platforms like Twitter (X) and YouTube to deliver their messages unfiltered (Umber et al., 2024). This allowed them to not only shape public perception but also engage in real-time dialogue with voters, responding to issues as they emerged. Social media also facilitated the spread of political memes, viral videos, and live streams, which significantly influenced the emotions and opinions of the electorate (Ahmad et al., 2024). The result was a highly dynamic and interactive political environment, where traditional party lines were blurred, and the power to influence public opinion shifted into the hands of digital media users (Haider & Mubarik, 2024). This transition marks a critical juncture in Pakistan's political development, highlighting the increasing significance of social media in modern electoral processes.

This paper uses Agenda-Setting Theory to explore the impact social media has on the election story in 2024. The work investigates how some issues gained prominence, how online sources affected political attention and how these trends shaped election results. This results in revealing shifting relationships among the state, traditional media and internet users.

Theoretical Framework

Social media's effect on the 2024 Pakistani general elections is studied using Agenda-Setting Theory in this paper. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), Agenda-Setting Theory asserts that media does not change opinions but what people think counts. Until now, the theory showed how newspapers and TV impacted which matters entered public debates and became part of policies. Much of the control over who is discovered now rests with popular social media websites. Having Twitter (now X), YouTube and TikTok, the public can see and share what matters to them, as well as have these sites play a large part in driving and sharing those same issues further. Because the media was carefully controlled in Pakistan's elections, many people chose social media to discuss and adjust political narratives. Most of the public talk about the election and news coverage focused on the hashtags like #ReleaseImranKhan, #VoteForBat and #InternetBan. In both ways, topics were selected, sometimes by the authorities and sometimes by the public. Many young people regularly contributed to digital debate by sharing election stories, videos from the voting sites and political memes. Private groups and exiles kept uploading these narratives on the internet, making it clear that online public discussions were happening everywhere. Moreover, using algorithms, both TikTok and YouTube select which topics become significant politically, mainly based on how many likes, views and comments each post gets, not on the choices of professional journalists. Thanks to the combination of public and viral media, salient stories from viral content frequently entered main discussion about the election.

Using Agenda-Setting Theory, the paper shows how what was discussed, protested and discussed online about politics in Pakistan affected people's attitudes and decisions in elections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies keep showing that social media is playing a greater role in Pakistani politics. Ali and Shah (2024) found that more than half of people under 30 got most of their news about politics online. People in this

category didn't just watch videos; they also engaged in discussions, passed along interesting content and gave their input.

PTI followers used trending hashtags, live streams and short videos to make a sort of decentralized media, according to Saleem et al. Thanks to these anti-censorship methods, many people kept seeing PTI's message when media censorship was in place. They indicate social media raised concerns that traditional media groups had avoided. The Digital Rights Foundation warns us in 2024 to be aware of surveillance, biased search results and false reports on social media. During the 2024 elections, digital outlets were used to shape stories and also to reach voters. False reports about election results don't only cause mistrust in elections, but also hurt people's high opinion of them.

Deciding what is important is kept in place because social media both empowers and limits its users. Research shows that even though social media highlighted existing democratic problems and inspired the public to participate, it eventually developed into a setting where state players and others tried to sway voting opinions.

Case Analysis: 2024 Pakistani Elections

In Pakistan, the 2024 general elections perfectly show how social media altered the political scene as they happened. Those running as PTI independents were able to use new technology to overcome the old rules of campaigning. Because they did not watch much TV or read many newspapers, they used Twitter, YouTube and TikTok to determine that key topics at the election were protecting the judiciary, ensuring fair elections and fighting political repression. Among the most obvious examples of agenda-setting was the way #ReleaseImranKhan and #VoteForBat were used by many. This led interest from others outside Columbia which caused mainstream platforms to notice issues they had previously avoided. It highlights the role of social media in leading what is covered in media. However, it was clear during these elections that technology was being used to prevent dissent. There was a nationwide internet shutdown, with Twitter also shut down by the Pakistani government on election day (Reuters, 2024). Human rights and civil society groups accused the government of wanting to silence those with different opinions. Users managed to keep using the Internet, despite the block, thanks to VPNs and other sites. There was a lot of fake news. Blackbird.AI (2024) found that both groups backed by the government and opposition made use of AI and troll farms to share biased information. Social media was full of fake rumors about voter numbers, candidates being removed and ballots being rigged which puzzled voters and weakened real political information. Such changes reveal the fact that social media not only mirrored existing topics but often set new trends as well. It created opportunities for ordinary individuals to speak out, for politicians to avoid being blocked by the government and for fake stories and real activism to both exist. Thanks to the internet, the political space moved from being controlled by a few to being influenced by many.

DISCUSSION

Candidates in Pakistan's 2024 elections made their main points through the help of various social media platforms. Deciding which topics were given more attention, digital platforms steered public and media concentration. Thinking about agendas as described by Agenda-Setting Theory helps explain how political conversations have changed in an internet context. Electoral justice caught people's attention thanks to hashtag activism, rapid political videos and stories shared by influencers. That level of attention was engineered and the result of deliberate online actions by those without power. Because of these moves, the public's conversations about politics began to capture global media and watchdog attention.

Also, the way communication happens online creates new risk factors. Since algorithms are drawn to lively and emotional content, this situation often results in a spread of wrong information and disagreements among users. There is also worry about the state interrupting communications by blocking sites and reading

what people write online. The 2024 elections made it clear that social media can have a big impact on deciding what matters are brought up for discussion. Therefore, we need to build better digital understanding, make digital platforms more accountable and make sure political speech is safe in digital environments.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the 2024 Pakistani general elections that social media now plays a major part in deciding what issues are discussed in politics. For the same reason that traditional media did not cover all issues, people looked to digital resources to feature important matters and outcomes of elections. Between the major themes discussed in this paper are political repression, the independence of the judiciary and the ensured participation of the public in the election—all thanks to social media. Even though social media lets users talk freely, it also brought people into contact with false news and censorship. How Pakistan manages its disputes will have a big impact on whether democracy succeeds in the country. Everyone on the Internet should be heard, everyone should know how to handle media and platforms should follow the law to make sure social media helps democracy.

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