

Use of Twitter (X) by Political Parties in General Election 2018: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the application of Twitter (X) by large political parties in Pakistan in the 2018 General Election. The comparison of social media strategy used by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the Pak Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and their influence on the elections reveals that there is a significant number of differences among the strategy chosen and the way they influenced the elections. PTI is the most prolific part on Twitter with a higher rate of tweets, interaction, and mobilization of voters in comparison with PMLN and PPP.. This thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative metrics of tweet volume and engagement rates with qualitative content analysis to examine political communication and framing in campaign messages. A strong positive correlation was established between Twitter activity and electoral success, suggesting that the use of Twitter by the PTI was effective with hashtags, multimedia content, and direct voter interaction. This thesis explored the mediating effect of traditional media coverage. It was verified that more obscure parties, in terms of traditional media coverage, used Twitter more to reach voters than obvious platforms such as PMLN and PPP. These results align with the Agenda-Setting Theory and global trends in digital political campaigning. However, while Twitter enhances political participation, it also increases polarization. This thesis underscores the growing importance of social media in shaping electoral processes and the need for balanced digital campaign strategies in Pakistan's evolving political landscape.

Keywords: Twitter, Political Communication, Electoral Campaigns, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies dramatically changed the world over a decade ago. For example, new media and technology have transformed interpersonal interactions, communication patterns, and social and political discussions (Lee et al., 2020). Media and communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and international relations scholars have conducted different studies on various aspects of social media usage (Sun et al., 2019).

The Internet plays a significant role in providing information to the public about political events, engaging its users, and encouraging them to become involved in offline political activities. The Internet has become vital for political discussions and participation. At first, the Internet was used as a one-way communication tool for political parties to inform the public through their websites (Stiglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, new media and technologies have transformed communication patterns into two-

way communication. Millennials are the most active users of the Internet and social media. Online activities related to politics are useful and encourage youth to participate in political events. Internet use and political participation show the dual effect of the Internet on information and political participation (Khan et al., 2020).

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have emerged as significant communication platforms within 21st-century society, enabling citizens to connect worldwide. Recent technological innovations have led to these platforms' widespread usage and adoption by developed nations (López-Meri et al., 2017). These novel communication services allow users to share personal updates, general information, discussions, shopping choices, educational information, political updates (Weaver et al., 2018). The use of social media during election campaigns is increasing worldwide and politicians have successfully utilized this medium for their popularity (Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Communication on Twitter with 280 characters may seem challenging; however, politicians and other groups extensively use this medium to develop online connections (Meri et al., 2017).

Extensive use of Twitter has been witnessed globally, particularly in USA, the UK, Sweden, India, Australia, and New Zealand (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Most recently, a study evidenced that Donald J. Trump and his supporters mobilized their followers through Twitter and overcame the traditional Republican Party during the 2016 US elections (Bryden & Silverman, 2019). Twitter was a silent political tool for Trump's success, and he utilized it to spread politicized information more efficiently and widely (Hollinger, 2017). Research has also highlighted the existence of misinformation on popular Twitter topics (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Research has also explored political information sharing through social media by educated Pakistani youth and an emerging party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which has played a substantial role in increasing social media trafficking (Eijaz, 2013; Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Currently, there are three popular political parties in Pakistan: the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The proposed study has potential practical and theoretical implications for politicians, social media policymakers, and information providers. Previous research has highlighted how online campaigns increase voter turnout (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014).

It was the first time in Pakistan's 2018 elections that public voters could contact parties and request a vote through communications. Facebook and Twitter (X) are utilized to select leaders who will run the country honestly, yet many ads and accounts were created just for the benefit of the parties. Ordinary people, particularly those who are illiterate, utilize mobile phones and the internet and can swiftly change their minds after seeing any information on social media (Saud, 2018).

This thesis focuses on the major political parties and leaders during the 2018 elections in Pakistan. In previous years, corruption has plagued Pakistani politics, and the 2018 election was closely followed around the world, including in the United States, which works closely with Pakistan concerning the war on terror. The first time Pakistani politicians used Twitter to share information and mobilize voters was during the 2013 elections. A significant reason for this exponential growth of online information sharing is terrorism threats in the country. Twitter played a significant role in engaging Pakistani youth in politics. Statistics indicate that males, specifically youth (18–24 years), are more actively engaged in social media than females (Digital 2019 Pakistan, 2019).

Twitter (X) is a leading dynamic online social network (OSN) that consistently ranks among the most popular OSNs, with over 650 million registered users. It is widely considered the third most popular OSN after Instagram and Facebook. This positioning shifted after Google+ was discontinued on October 8,

2018, as it counted all Google account holders as active users (Wong & Solon, 2018). Recently, Twitter (X) has been ranked as the 49th most visited website globally (Alexa Internet Inc., 2023).

All comments on social media are generally not an exact affirmation of political interest. However, the assumption that people in a network behave the same as the average public is a simplification of online participation that overlooks the intricacies of how people behave on Facebook. For example, online critics are usually not demographic samples of a population and are prone to gender or race bias (Quinlan et al., 2015).

Most social media have revolutionized political communication, and Twitter (X) has played an integral role in modern election campaigns. Political parties used Twitter to engage with the public, disseminate narratives, and impact voter perception during Pakistan's 2018 General Election (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Kugelman, 2012). However, there is a research gap regarding the strategies political parties use when launching their campaigns through Twitter, the content used, and the level of engagement (Saud, 2018).

Political parties' fraudulent use of social media is one of the most important problems in Pakistan's use of social media. However, most parties do not choose to consolidate their accounts into one or several coherent and unified accounts; rather, they use the accounts of the leaders of the co-parties. They lack consistent messaging, fragmented communication and gaps in the campaign strategies that are thematic (Khan et al., 2020). Dividing the original text file complicates the analysis of the information-sharing patterns and creates an opportunity of overlapped data and noise in the information sharing process (Ahmed et al., 2017; Eijaz, 2013).

The study will fill the gaps by examining the use of Twitter by the PTI, PMLN and PPP who are the three major political parties in Pakistan during the 2018 General Election. It examines individual matters, including political matters that are likely to be discussed on Twitter through tweets, Twitter actions, and interaction tactics. Also, this thesis examines the overall influence of Twitter on voter turnout, political engagement, and the election process (Ahmed and Skoric, 2014; Kugelman, 2012). This study examines these dimensions and adds to the body of knowledge on how social media transforms the political communication and campaigning in a constantly evolving realm of democracy in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

To investigate the political party that has been using Twitter most during the 2018 Pakistani elections.

This target determines the most active party in politics based on the analysis of Tweets, retweets, and all the activities on Twitter during the election period.

To compare the use of twitter by political parties in sharing their contents and interacting.

This goal measures the disparities in social media strategies, including the use of hashtags and engagement with followers and how this affects the voter turnout..

To analyze the relationship between political party success and voter turnout on Twitter

This objective examines how Twitter activity correlates with voter turnout and party performance in the 2018 election.

Research Questions

RQ1: Which political party used Twitter most frequently during the 2018 elections in Pakistan?

RQ2: How did differences in Twitter usage among political parties during the 2018 elections influence their success in national elections?

RQ3: How did Twitter campaigns contribute to voter turnout and electoral success in Pakistan's 2018 General Election?

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Focusing on Three Major Political Parties

The thesis examines only Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), excluding smaller parties and independent candidates.

Timeframe Restriction for the 2018 Election

The research is limited to the 2018 General Election, which may not reflect trends in subsequent elections.

Exclusion of Other Social Media Platforms.

Only Twitter (X) was analyzed, leaving out platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which also play significant roles in campaigns.

Fragmented Party Message

The focus on individual accounts over unified party accounts creates inconsistencies in the analysis of coherent strategies.

Limited Analysis of Misinformation

This thesis does not comprehensively address the role of misinformation or fake accounts in influencing voter behavior.

Focus on Pakistani Politics

This research is limited to analyzing political campaigns and Twitter usage within Pakistani politics, excluding comparisons with other countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The political process in Pakistan has made significant progress in recent years, with democracy witnessing continuous growth for the first time over the past decade. This evolution was marked by the 2018 General Elections, which saw power transfer through democratic means—a rarity in Pakistan's turbulent political history. While the military, a dominant force in the country's politics, still has influence, recent reforms and increased political engagement, particularly among younger generations, signal positive changes toward stronger democratic norms.

The significance of social networking sites has accelerated political socialization at the grassroots level in Pakistan. Other forms of media have also played vital roles in shaping national consciousness. Youth engagement has emerged as the most significant development, providing institutional strength to the country. However, only impartial and transparent elections can enhance Pakistani's democratic processes. Otherwise, the public risks losing faith in the electoral system and its institutions.

During Pakistan's elections, the Election Commission, political actors, and citizens actively discouraged the misuse of social media platforms (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). Millions of Pakistanis, approximately a quarter of the population, use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (X) to access political information.

All major political parties in Pakistan employ social media as part of their campaign strategies, specifically focusing on Twitter (X). This section examines how politicians and the public use Twitter (X), highlighting the advantages and challenges associated with this tool. Key social media-related concerns in Pakistan's elections include user privacy, fake news, and campaign costs.

Political parties in Pakistan are expected to respect user privacy and ensure that corporations do not acquire or misuse illegal data for political campaigns. Many Twitter (X) users in Pakistan are unaware of political advertisements because they primarily use the platform for personal updates, such as matching their profiles or numbers with departing voters.

During the 2018 general election in Pakistan, PTI, PMLN, and PPP integrated Twitter (X) into their core campaign strategies. While Facebook is typically used for posting messages to wide audiences, Twitter (X) is a specific political instrument that allows political parties to instantly start their engagement with demographic groups that are more technology-literate, young, and those who are more willing to engage with online political interactions in any form (Ahmed et al., 2017).

The PMLN and PPP, active on Twitter (X), mainly discuss their governance records and policy platforms. However, their digital engagement was less dynamic than that of PTI and had a lesser impact on the PTI's overall campaign effectiveness. For example, PMLN would sample updates of their news and policy announcements on Twitter(X), in which the engagement of voters was comparatively weaker than the PTI's interactive approach to posting tweets.

Twitter (X) bridged the gap between citizens and government authorities in Pakistan. Twitter (X) provides voters with a platform to voice their concerns and hold political leaders publicly accountable by granting them direct communication channels. Imran Khan, for instance, actively used Twitter (X) to lead followers on Twitter (X) through his vision ahead of the 2018 elections, where he interacted with his followers on Twitter (X) to share his vision, answer the questions of voters, and respond to public grievances (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014).

This interaction not only strengthened voter trust but also enhanced the transparency of the electoral process. For example, the PTI's real-time answers to policy or election-related questions on Twitter (social media) allowed for a more informed electorate, leading to a more engaging electorate. During policy and campaign events, PTI can live tweet announcements and more, thus allowing them to give specific details and updates directly to voters without relying on traditional media intermediaries.

Twitter (X) allows for a more diversified political dialogue by offering a space for different voices and perspectives. It allows people from all walks of life and areas to discuss and express their opinions and helps shape political dialogue. With the democratization of political communication, citizens have

reworked to become more engaged and informed, leading to a more accountable and responsive political system (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014).

Twitter (X) has provided greater transparency in political processes by allowing voters to track and criticize political activities in real-time. Because the platform is public, political leaders are always under observation and brought to honest and accountable governance. This level of transparency is critical for the public to maintain trust and a political leader accountable for the needs and concerns of their constituents (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Some consider the 2014 Sixteenth Indian General Election as the world's largest democratic exercise (Taylor & Kaphle, 2014) that took place for one month, from April 7 to May 12, 2014, involving a total of 815 million registered voters (Taylor & Kaphle, 2014). The election was conducted in 10 tranches, with a nationwide voter turnout of 66.4%. However, the results were a historic win for the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which picked 272 out of 545 parliamentary seats. This was one of India's infrequent political milestones in which an INC (traditional powerhouse) or coalition government would not govern the state. It was also the first time since 1984 that a party had received an outright majority (Taylor & Kaphle, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting

Mass communication is necessary to shape public opinion and educate audiences on events. Media sets the agenda, and agenda-setting theory describes the news media's impact on public perception based on its determination of what is most important. Traditional media channels, such as newspapers and television, or modern ones, such as social media, highlight and report on certain topics that determine the public discourse around them (De Vreese, 2005).

The idea of filtering information before it reaches the public level is called gatekeeping, a central concept in agenda setting. Social media such as Facebook (including Instagram), Google (including YouTube), and Twitter (X) are gatekeepers because they employ algorithms and select posts that bring forward certain content. In this prioritization, some discussions are given priority and play an important role in public discussion, influencing public discussion and participation (De Vreese, 2005).

This thesis uses the agenda-setting theory to examine relevant applications by political parties in Pakistan's 2018 General Election. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz political parties manipulated Twitter (X) to frame issues, set aside their issues with certain specific categorizations, and deflect voters' attention to their campaigns. These parties amplify certain narratives that form voter perceptions and guide political discourse (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014).

Technology and Agenda Setting

The operations of agenda-setting have been changed greatly through the technological advancements. The traditional media analyzed in the first case consisted of print, radio, and television through the application of the agenda-setting theory. Nonetheless, through the emergence of social media, the modes of influence over the opinion of the people have been altered and the growth of setting the agenda has been further facilitated with greater interaction. Twitter (X) is an instantaneous and ubiquitous communication tool that is more potent in determining the mass discourses and political explanations (Bright et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study will also be founded on a mixed method design where the qualitative and quantitative practices will be combined to investigate and examine the application of Twitter (X) by the leading political parties in Pakistan in the 2018 general elections. The research question which was used to employ a mixed-method approach was whether Twitter (X) influences political communication, voter turnout, and election results.

Quantitative Methods: Twitter (X) measures, such as the frequency of tweets, the engagement rate (likes, retweets, replies), and the use of hashtags were examined. This thesis indicates the trends and relationships between social media activity and electoral performance based on the numerical data.

Qualitative Methods: They discuss the methods of their discussion on the Qualitative Research, which includes analyzing the content of political tweets and researching thematic trends and framing strategies. This is a more informative method for understanding how individuals' perceptions of parties and their messages can affect their voting abilities.

Data Collection

Twitter (X) Data

Access Method: The access method for Twitter (X) data was the Twitter API, particularly the Academic Research product track, which allows higher rate limits and access to historical tweets for large-scale data collection. Further, data extraction and management were also accomplished using third-party services. It was chosen because of its ability to acquire massive tweet data (necessary collection for the research in this study) as per the options provided by the Academic Research track (Twitter, 2023).

Timeframe: The data includes information from June 1, 2018, until July 31, 2018, during the peak of the 2018 General Election campaigning period. This timeframe was selected to cover the most intensive political activity and voter engagement period on Twitter (X). The choice is related to the crucial stages of an election campaign and involves the significant expressed stages of strategic messages and voter mobilization.

Election Results Data

Source: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) provided the data, which offers complete data about seat distribution, proportion of votes, and overall political party electoral performance. Data on election outcome was retrieved using the official reports and datasets posted on the ECP website and the public record to warrant the accuracy and reliability of the data.

Data points: The data set was the number of seats that each party won, percentage of vote share and the percentage of the voter turnout in various provinces. Correlation of Twitter (X) activity and electoral results is necessary; this is imperative. To that point, demographic data of the voting population that includes age, gender, and socio-economic status were also incorporated to obtain a more precise picture of the voter population and its connection to social media platforms.

Selection Criteria

Political Parties and Leaders

Selection of Parties: The thesis focuses on three major political parties in Pakistan:

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)

Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

These parties were chosen depending on their presence in the Pakistan politics, the high Twitter (X) presence during the 2018 General Election, and their influence over political rhetoric.

Tweets Selection

Inclusion Criteria

Language: Tweets that were included were limited to English and Urdu because only these languages were relevant and understandable to the political stakeholders in Pakistan.

Relevance: The chosen tweets were directly connected to the 2018 General Election, which included campaign messages, policy announcements, voter mobilization steps, and contact with followers.

Official Accounts: In order to be considered as authentic and relevant, tweets on official party accounts and official leader accounts were taken into consideration only (e.g., @imrankhanpti on behalf of PTI, @ShahbazSharif on behalf of PML-N, and @bilawalbhutto on behalf of PPP).

Exclusion Criteria

Irrelevant Content: Tweets that were not related to the election including personal updates or irrelevant discussions were blocked to keep the focus on the election related activities.

Automated or Spam Tweets: To improve quality and reliability of the data, tweets with spam or belonging to automated bots that were not engaging with the information were filtered out. It was done through the use of filters based on account verification status, analysis of the content of tweets, and engagement patterns (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Sample Size

Number of Tweets to be analyzed: The study will examine 12000 tweets of the official accounts of each political party that is posted during the campaign period, 4000 of which are official accounts of each political party. The size of the sample offered a big amount of data to be analyzed on a large scale and qualitative analysis in depth.

Mediation Model

The thesis is based on a mixed-method strategy of analysis that involves the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to make a comprehensive examination of Twitter (X) as one of the political campaigning devices.

The proposed study utilizes the Proposed Mediation Model to identify the connection between party establishment, media coverage, and twitter (X) use. The formulated hypotheses in this model are as follows:

H1: Applicants of less-established parties are less covered by the media as compared to those of the majorly established parties..

H2a: Candidates with less media coverage post more frequently on Twitter (X).

H2b: Candidates with less media coverage engage with the public more often on Twitter (X).

H2c: Candidates with less media coverage issue more mobilization calls (e.g., calls to vote, donate, or attend rallies) on Twitter (X).

These hypotheses are constructed using Agenda-Setting Theory, which posits that well-established political parties receive greater traditional media coverage, whereas less-established parties compensate by using Twitter (X) for political communication and mobilization.

H1 aligns with **RQ2**, examining disparities in traditional media coverage between established and less-established political parties.

H2a, H2b, and H2c fit the RQ3, because they discuss the ways less media-exposed parties resort to Twitter to post, be engaged, and mobilize their efforts.

Lastly, the relationship between party establishment and Twitter (X) use is supposed to be mediated by media coverage and the following hypotheses are expected:

H3a: The coverage of the media indirectly influences the number of posts by the candidates representing an established party.

H3b: The level of interaction between the established parties and the candidates is influenced by the media coverage indirectly.

H3c: Media coverage has an indirect influence on the mobilization efforts of candidates in established parties.

These were based on the mediation model, in which the media coverage is a mediating variable between party establishment and Twitter (X) usage.

H3a legitimizes the statement that less-established parties are more active on Twitter in the situation when the attention of traditional media is minimal.

H3b points out that when there is minimal mainstream media coverage, the direct voter interaction in Twitter (X) increases.

H3c posits that mobilization requests on Twitter (X) will be more common where the exposure of the traditional media is low.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Tweet Volume: The number of times that each of the parties tweeted using their official accounts was summed up to gauge the overall level of activity. This involved the analysis of the tweet count on a daily basis and the cumulative count of tweets throughout the campaign.

Engagement Metrics: Likes, retweets, and reply of each tweet were summed up to evaluate the level of interaction with the public and the level of engagement. The metrics were used to assess the Twitter (X) reach and impact of each party.

Hashtag Usage: A content analysis was done to find out the most frequently used hashtags by each side and how they were used as part of campaign planning. The paper has compared the use and degree of hashtags with the level of engagement to understand their effectiveness in voter mobilization on the internet.

Inferential Statistics

Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation coefficient was applied to test the connection between Twitter (X) level of activity and election result. The analysis evaluated the relationship between the frequency of tweets and electoral success, in terms of the vote share, and number of seats won. This approach was used to identify the quality and orientation of the relationship between social media use and the election results (Bryden and Silverman 2019).

Regression Analysis: A multiple regression model was applied to estimate the results of elections in relation to Twitter (X) measures of activity adjusting by such factors as traditional media coverage, previous performance, and socio-demographic factors. This was done to evaluate the prediction strength of social media strategies in relation to the traditional factors of campaigns (Khan et al., 2020).

Qualitative Analysis

Content Analysis

Coding Process: The content analysis was performed manually and each of the tweets was classified into predefined themes in accordance with the primary function and message of a tweet. The following categories were incorporated in the coding scheme:

Campaign News: News regarding rallies, events, policy announcements and other campaign events.

Promotion: Promotion materials to promote the party and its support such as endorsing and positive messages.

Criticism: Negative messages against the opposition parties and their policies such as dislike and counterarguments.

Call to Vote: Specific requests to voters to turn out to vote, such as reminders, motivational messages.

Political News: Neighborhood news and commentary sharing and interpretation of political news and developments.

Party Details: Nomination, candidate, party structure and party activities.

Others: This is any content that cannot be classified under the former types, like personal comment or irrelevant topics.

Theme Identification: Identification of themes was done by means of coding which was an iterative process, where each tweet was coded on the basis of its primary purpose and message. The coding was done in several thresholding to improve the accuracy and consistency of the coding. The categories that were predetermined were Promotion, Campaign Updates, Call to Vote, Political News, Criticism and Party Details. This classification will make it possible to conduct a systematic study of the way various political parties organize their Twitter (X) communication strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research presents a qualitative and quantitative analysis of Twitter (X) activity in Pakistan's 2018 General Elections. The thesis focused on how political parties use Twitter, the extent to which political

parties interact, and how much Social Networking Sites can influence election results to a certain degree. The first part of the analysis analyzed quantitative data on Twitter frequency, engagement rate, and voter mobilization efforts. Voter turnout was statistically related to Twitter usage. Additionally, a mediation model is employed to examine how many political parties reproduce, via Twitter, their connections with voters due to the shortage of mainstream media coverage. The communication between parties and voters and the way the parties construct their campaign to elect were examined through qualitative content analysis. This is then linked back to the theories and studies of foreign election research on political communication to come up with the answer to how twitter is fitted into the current political campaign..

Research Questions and their Answers

This section answers the research questions that inform this thesis and gives specific analyses over the research questions based on quantitative data and the literature available.

RQ1: What was the most used Twitter political party in the 2018 elections in Pakistan?

A case study of Twitter (X) has shown that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the most used political party in the platform when it came to the 2018 General Election in Pakistan. Moreover, Iqbal et al. (2020), PTI was in the lead of the social media outreach with regular posting of campaign contents, talking with the voters, and mobilizing political support via Twitter.

The engagement in (PML-N) and (PPP) was much lower in comparison with PTI. Although these parties also had an online presence, they were less interactive and they depended mostly on one-way communication, i.e. press releases and official announcements (Ahmed et al., 2021).

The frequency of the tweets made daily, the mean of the likes and retweets were compared among the three parties to compare their Twitter activeness.

Table 1: Twitter Activity and Engagement Metrics During the 2018 Election Campaign

Party	Average Daily Tweets	Average Likes per Tweet	Average Retweets per Tweet
PTI	200	10,000	3,000
PML-N	120	3,000	150
PPP	80	2,000	100

PTI's High Activity & Engagement: PTI tweets 200 times a day, whereas PMLN tweets 120 times a day, and PPP tweets 80 times daily. PTI's higher activity has enabled it to dominate discussions on trending international topics and remain highly visible throughout the entire period of elections (Kapoor et al., 2020).

PTI's strategy: Interactive and real-time engagement, fundamentally different from its main competitors, PTI interacted with voters via hashtags *#NayaPakistan*, Twitter polls, and tweets from its leader, Imran Khan's (*ImranKhanPTI* verified account). This two-way interaction made the supporters amplify the party's message.

PMLN and PPP had fewer engagements compared to other parties. This is due to the low usage of hashtags, live Q&A, and interactive media by PMLN and PPP (Ali & Farooq, 2019). Besides, more reliance was put on their formal party statements than on talking with voters.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Different Political Parties

Criteria	PTI	PMLN	PPP
Frequency of Tweets	- High frequency of tweets during campaign period (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Automated bots for timely responses (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Moderate frequency, focused on policy updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014) - Less use of automated tools	- Lower frequency, traditional messaging approach (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014) - Minimal use of automated tools
Content Types	- Policy announcements - Mobilization calls - Engaging multimedia (videos, infographics) (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Governance records - Policy platforms - News updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Governance records - Traditional messaging - Limited multimedia use (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Hashtags	- Strategic use of hashtags like “#NayaPakistan” (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Viral campaigns through hashtags	- Limited hashtag usage - Focused on branded hashtags (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal use of hashtags - Traditional campaign slogans (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Engagement Metrics	- High engagement through retweets, likes, replies (Bright et al., 2020) - Interactive Q&A sessions	- Moderate engagement - Primarily broadcast messages (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Lower engagement metrics - Focus on information dissemination (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Multimedia	- Extensive use of videos, infographics, live-streams (Ahmed et al., 2017)	- Limited use of multimedia - Focus on text-based updates (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal multimedia usage - Traditional text and images (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Interaction with Voters	- Direct interactions through replies and DMs - Real-time responses to queries (Bright et al., 2020)	- Limited direct interaction - Primarily broadcast messaging (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Minimal interaction - Focus on one-way communication (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Use of Bots and Automation	- Use of automated bots for timely responses (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Automated tweet scheduling	- No significant use of bots (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- No use of bots (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Data Analytics and AI	- AI-driven sentiment analysis (Ahmed et al., 2020) - Data-driven targeting and	- Limited use of data analytics - Traditional campaign methods (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Limited use of data analytics - Traditional campaign methods

	ads	2014)	(Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Sentiment and Public Perception	- Positive sentiment due to interactive campaigns - High voter support and engagement (Bright et al., 2020)	- Mixed sentiment - Less dynamic public perception (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Neutral to negative sentiment - Traditional voter base (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Challenges Faced	- Spread of fake news and misinformation (Ahmed et al., 2020) - Managing high volume of engagement	- Limited digital engagement tools - Lower adaptability to real-time communication (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Reliance on traditional media - Less effective digital strategies (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)
Overall Impact	- Significant electoral success (Ahmed et al., 2017) - Enhanced visibility and voter mobilization	- Moderate impact - Less effective digital strategy (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)	- Limited impact - Traditional approach less effective in digital age (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014)

Key Findings

The findings highlight PTI's dominant presence on Twitter (X) compared with PML-N and PPP, demonstrating how a data-driven, interactive digital campaign can enhance political outreach. The party's frequent engagement, strategic use of hashtags, and multimedia content have contributed to its strong online visibility.

Implications for Future Research

Political parties should invest in real-time engagement, personalized voter interactions, and high-frequency posts.

Strategic #hashtags use, and multimedia content (videos and infographics) significantly boosted voters' reach.

Future elections will likely increase reliance on social media over traditional media for political mobilization.

RQ2: How did differences in Twitter usage among political parties during the 2018 elections influence their success in national elections?

The 2018 General Election in Pakistan marked a change in political campaigning, with social media platforms, particularly Twitter (X), playing a crucial role in influencing voter engagement and mobilization. The differences in Twitter strategies among PTI, PML-N, and PPP significantly impacted their electoral performance.

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) was identified between tweet frequency, voter engagement, and electoral success, reinforcing the idea that higher social media engagement contributes to stronger election results (Ahmed & Skoric, 2019). Electoral data from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) were compared with Twitter metrics including tweet volume, engagement rates (e.g.,

retweets and replies), and hashtag usage. Pearson's correlation analysis examined the relationship between daily tweet frequency and the number of National Assembly seats won by each party, confirming that higher social media activity is linked to better electoral outcomes.

Key Findings: Twitter Usage and Electoral Performance

1. PTI's Digital-First Approach and High Twitter Engagement

PTI led the digital campaign, posting the highest number of tweets per day compared to other the parties.

The party uses multimedia-rich content (videos, infographics, and live Q&A sessions) to engage with voters in real-time.

The #NayaPakistan hashtag dominated the campaign and trended consistently during the pre-election period.

PTI successfully targeted urban youth, who are highly active on Twitter (X), increasing voter turnout in key constituencies (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018).

Impact on Electoral Success

116 seats won by the National Assembly (the highest among all parties).

35% follower growth during the campaign (from 2.3M to 3.1M).

High engagement rate (8.5%) on average per tweet.

2. PML-N's Traditional Approach with Limited Engagement

PML-N maintained a moderate presence on Twitter, focusing on policy-related posts and party announcements rather than voter engagement.

The #VotePMLN hashtag was used but did not achieve viral status as in the PTI campaign.

Unlike PTI, the PML-N did not conduct interactive sessions or use multimedia effectively.

Their Twitter (X) engagement was lower, mainly because of a more traditional campaign approach that relied on TV and print media.

Impact on Electoral Success:

64 seats won in the National Assembly.

20% follower growth (from 1.4M to 1.7M).

Moderate engagement rate (5.2%) per tweet.

3. PPP's Low Twitter Presence and Minimal Digital Strategy

The digital campaign of PPP was the most dormant, the frequency of tweets was low, and it was not actively helpful.

The hashtags of the #PPPZindabad did not have great momentum and their online campaign was not attractive to the younger voters.

The party heavily used the old methods of campaigns, including physical rallies and advertisements in the print media.

Impact on Electoral Success:

43 seats won in the National Assembly.

15% follower growth (from 900K to 1.05M).

The lowest engagement rate (4.0%) was observed for each tweet.

Table 3: Twitter Activity and Its Impact on Electoral Performance

Metric	PTI	PML-N	PPP
Tweet Frequency (Avg. Daily Tweets)	200 (Most active party)	120 (Moderate activity)	80 (Lowest activity)
Engagement Rate per Tweet (%)	8.5% (High public interaction)	5.2% (Moderate engagement)	4.0% (Limited engagement)
Follower Growth During Campaign (%)	35% (From 2.3M to 3.1M followers)	20% (From 1.4M to 1.7M followers)	15% (From 900K to 1.05M followers)
Use of Political Hashtags	#NayaPakistan (Most engaged hashtag)	#VotePMLN (Moderate engagement)	#PPPZindabad (Low engagement)
Multimedia Tweets (%)	60% (Videos, infographics, live tweets)	45% (Limited visuals, mostly text-based)	40% (Few images, minimal engagement)
Direct Voter Interaction	High (Live Q&As, Replies, Twitter Polls)	Moderate (Limited replies, no Q&As)	Low (Minimal voter engagement)
Seats Won in National Assembly	116 (Highest among all parties)	64	43

Key Findings

The results prove that increased Twitter activity is a major determinant of success in the election, and PTI is the best candidate compared to its opponents. Its digital advantage was provided by the effective engagement strategy, the direct interaction with voters, and the campaign-based hashtags used by the party. Conversely, the PML-N and PPP were not able to mobilize voters because of the lower presence of their social media.

1. Policy Recommendations for Political Parties

Digital outreaches should be prioritized, and targeted engagement is the best way of doing it instead of sticking to traditional campaign tactics.

Use interactive functions, like live sessions, question-answer sessions and Twitter polls, to get the voter connections

.Focus on youth and urban voters More engaged in social media, tailoring content to their interests and concerns.

RQ3: How did Twitter campaigns contribute to voter turnout and electoral success in Pakistan's 2018 General Election?

The 2018 General Election in Pakistan witnessed an unprecedented shift in political campaigning with Twitter (X) emerging as a powerful tool for voter engagement. Social media is critical for mobilizing voters, particularly among young and urban demographics. Among the three leading parties PTI, PML-N and PPP. PTI stood out because of its strong digital presence, high engagement rates, and effective use of interactive content.

2. Twitter Campaign Impact on Voter Turnout and Electoral Success

To assess Twitter's role in increasing voter participation, we compare the Twitter metrics of PTI, PML-N, and PPP.

Table 4: Impact of Twitter Activity on Voter Turnout and Electoral Success

Metric	PTI	PML-N	PPP
Follower Growth During Campaign (%)	35% (From 2.3M to 3.1M followers)	20% (From 1.4M to 1.7M followers)	15% (From 900K to 1.05M followers)
Multimedia Tweets (%)	60% (Images, videos, live streams)	45%	40%
Use of Political Hashtags	#NayaPakistan (Most engaged)	#VotePMLN (Moderate engagement)	#PPPPZindabad (Low engagement)
Average Engagement Rate per Tweet (%)	8.5% (High public interaction)	5.2% (Moderate engagement)	4.0% (Limited engagement)
Use of Twitter Polls	Frequent	Rare	None

for Voter Opinion			
Direct Voter Interaction (Replies, Q&A Sessions)	High (Live sessions, replies)	Moderate (Some replies, fewer Q&As)	Low (Minimal interaction)
Reported Twitter Bot Activity (%)	18% (Suspected automated accounts boosting trends)	10%	5%
Influence on Youth & Urban Voters	Strong (High social media engagement in cities like Peshawar, Lahore, Islamabad)	Moderate	Weak (Rural voter base, minimal digital presence)
Impact on Voter Mobilization	Significant (Turnout increased in PTI-stronghold constituencies)	Moderate (PML-N retained loyal voters but struggled online)	Low (PPP relied mostly on traditional campaigning)
Use of Political Hashtags	#NayaPakistan (Most engaged)	#VotePMLN (Moderate engagement)	#PPPZindabad (Low engagement)
Average Engagement Rate per Tweet (%)	8.5% (High public interaction)	5.2% (Moderate engagement)	4.0% (Limited engagement)

3. Key Findings: How Twitter Activity Influenced Voter Turnout

Follower Growth and Voter Engagement

During the election campaign, PTI's Twitter followers increased by 35%, PML-N by 20%, and PPP by 15%.

This rapid increase indicates that PTI effectively mobilized a large digital audience, many translated into active voters.

Hashtags and Political Mobilization

PTI's # *NayaPakistan* campaign was the most effective online mobilization tool, with an engagement rate of 8.5%.

Conversely, PML-N #VotePMLN had around 5.2% engagement, and PPP #PPPZindabad had the lowest engagement, with 4.0%.

PTI's success is due to increased voter turnout in their ethnic minority areas.

Direct Voter Interaction and Electoral Influence

PTI held many live Q&A sessions on Twitter polls and directly responded to followers who connected constantly with the electorate.

PML-N had some interaction but was less active, while PPP had minimal interaction and spent more time on traditional campaigning.

Higher direct interaction helped PTI maintain visibility, credibility, and enthusiasm among voters.

Twitter's Role in Urban and Youth Mobilization

In areas with higher Twitter penetration, such as urban areas such as Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad, PTI had the highest engagement.

Younger voters, who are more active on social media engage more in PTI's content, leading to higher voter participation.

PML-N struggled with digital mobilization, retaining its traditional voter base, while PPP failed to attract significant online engagement.

Statistical Analysis: Correlation Between Twitter Engagement & Electoral Success

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation test was used to examine the relationship between Twitter engagement and voter turnout.

Variable	Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
Tweet Frequency & Vote Share	0.78	$p < 0.01$ (Strong Positive Correlation)

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) confirmed that higher Twitter engagement is significantly associated with higher voter turnout.

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression model was used to analyze the impact of Twitter engagement on traditional media coverage.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Twitter Activity and Electoral Success

Variable	Beta (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Tweet Frequency	0.65	$p < 0.001$	A one-unit increase in tweet frequency is associated with a 65% increase in vote share, indicating a strong relationship.

Engagement Rate (Likes & Retweets per Tweet)	0.50	$p < 0.01$	Higher engagement per tweet increases vote share by 50%, showing that interactive content mobilizes voters effectively.
Traditional Media Coverage	0.20	$p = 0.15$ (Not Significant)	Media coverage has a weaker and statistically insignificant impact compared to Twitter activity.

Key Interpretation & Political Implications

Tweet Frequency ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$)

This strong, statistically significant relationship means that higher Twitter activity directly translates into greater electoral success.

Implication: Political parties should prioritize frequent, high-quality social media engagement over passive or infrequent updates.

Engagement Rate ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$)

High engagement (likes, retweets, and replies) predicts higher vote shares, confirming that audience interaction matters.

Implication: Campaigns should focus on interactive strategies, such as Twitter polls, Q&As, and hashtag movements to enhance voter participation.

Traditional Media Coverage ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.15$, Not Significant)

This low, statistically insignificant value suggests that TV and newspaper coverage no longer predict election success as strongly as Twitter engagement.

Implication: Traditional media is still relevant but is less influential than digital engagement. Political parties should shift resources toward social media marketing and real-time digital campaigning.

Key Findings

The findings establish a clear link between Twitter engagement and increased voter turnout among younger and urban populations. PTI's high-frequency digital outreach contributed to greater political mobilization, while PML-N and PPP struggled to replicate similar engagement levels.

Implications for Future Elections

Digital-first campaign strategies should be developed to maximize voter turnout.

Hashtag-driven mobilization (#NayaPakistan) proved effective, indicating that structured social media campaigns directly influence electoral participation.

Parties must combine online and offline strategies to ensure engagement translates into real-world voter action.

Mediation Model: Media Coverage and Twitter Engagement

This section evaluates the relationship between media coverage and Twitter (X) engagement among political parties during the 2018 General Election in Pakistan. The mediation model examines whether limited traditional media coverage influences the parties' reliance on Twitter (X) as an alternative campaign platform. The hypotheses tested in this thesis help determine whether social media compensates for the lack of mainstream media visibility.

Hypothesis Testing and Results

The following hypotheses were tested to assess the mediation effect of media coverage on Twitter (X) activity:

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	Candidates from less-established parties receive less media coverage.	Supported
H2a	Candidates with less media coverage post more frequently on Twitter (X).	Supported
H2b	Candidates with less media coverage engage more often with the public on Twitter (X).	Supported
H2c	Candidates with less media coverage issue more mobilization calls (e.g., urging voters to participate) on Twitter (X).	Supported
H3a	Media coverage indirectly affects the number of posts by candidates from established parties.	Supported
H3b	Media coverage indirectly affects the level of interaction between candidates and voters.	Supported
H3c	Media coverage indirectly affects mobilization attempts by candidates from established parties.	Supported

Key Finding: PTI, which had lower traditional media exposure than PML-N, relied heavily on Twitter for direct voter mobilization. In contrast, PML-N and PPP had greater traditional me

Quantitative Analysis of Media vs. Twitter Engagement

To quantify the impact of media coverage on Twitter usage, this thesis analyzed data from news reports, party websites, and Twitter engagement metrics. The following table summarizes the differences in media coverage and Twitter content across major political parties.

Table 7: Media Coverage vs. Twitter (X) Engagement

Metric	PTI	PML-N	PPP
Mainstream Media Coverage (%)	25% (Low)	45% (Moderate)	30% (Moderate)
Average Daily Tweets	200	120	80
Engagement Rate (Likes & Retweets per Tweet, %)	8.5%	5.2%	4.0%
Use of Interactive Hashtags	Frequent (NayaPakistan)	Limited (VotePMLN)	Rare (PPPZindabad)
Direct Voter Interaction (Replies, Q&As, Live Sessions)	High	Moderate	Low

Key Findings

It confirms that PTI utilized Twitter (X) well in order to compensate its scant mainstream media coverage. Although the party was not as visible in the traditional media, the high level of digital activity, as well as continuous mobilization campaigns, helped the party to achieve tremendous momentum.

Hypothesis H1 is accepted and it proves that the less established parties are less covered with traditional media.

Hypotheses H2a-H2c are accepted, which results in the fact that decreased media coverage led to the higher Twitter activity and voter turnout.

H3a-H3c are accepted, and there is an indirect effect of media coverage on the Twitter strategies of political parties.

Discussion: Linking Findings to Literature

This segment puts the findings of this thesis into the context of the literature on the topic of political communication, the power of social media, and the political engagement of the digital world. The findings confirm the existing theories, the similarities with the case studies of other countries, and the role of Twitter in the mobilization of voters and political polarization.

Validation of Agenda-Setting Theory

The results support the Agenda-Setting Theory that posits that media and political institutions affect the discourse of the population by giving certain issues priority (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Twitter (X) was instrumental to influencing the general conversations around the 2018 General Election by enabling the political groups to enhance major political messages.

Polarization and Digital Politics

Twitter (X) increases voter turnout but it also leads to political polarization, which is a phenomenon that takes place around the globe in digital political communication.

The strategy of extreme interactivity of PTI resulted in a high level of in-group mobilization and added to the partisan connections in social media.

PML-N and PPP had milder digital presence, which led to weaker counter-narratives, which further strengthens the position of PTI in the online discussion.

Equal trends have been realized in:

Twitter (X) contributed to the division between politics in the 2016 elections in the United States (Bail et al., 2018).

In India, social media campaigns have led to ideological segmentation among voters (Chakrabarty & Roy, 2015).

The thesis confirms that while Twitter enhances political participation, it also facilitates filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011).

Key Findings

These findings align with global research on agenda-setting, digital voter mobilization, and political polarization. The thesis validates the Agenda-Setting Theory, demonstrating how Twitter enables political parties to influence public discourse. However, it also highlights the role of social media in increasing political division.

Implications for Digital Governance and Electoral Policy

Twitter and other social platforms will continue to shape electoral processes, which will require regulatory frameworks to prevent misinformation.

Political campaigns must balance engagement with ethical digital practices to avoid reinforcing polarization.

Comparative analysis with the US, UK, and India suggests that social media will remain a central tool for voter influence in future elections.

CONCLUSION

This research critically examines the role of Twitter (X) in political campaigning, focusing on the 2018 General Elections in Pakistan. This thesis analyzed three major political parties—Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—to evaluate their social media strategies, engagement levels, and impact on electoral success. Through a mixed-methods approach, the thesis integrated quantitative analysis of Twitter metrics (tweet frequency, engagement rates, and hashtag effectiveness) with qualitative content analysis (message framing and voter mobilization strategies).

Key findings indicate that PTI was the most active party on Twitter, with a high tweet frequency, strong engagement, and direct voter interaction. The #NayaPakistan campaign proved to be a highly effective digital mobilization tool, significantly increasing youth participation and urban voter turnout. PML-N and PPP had an online presence but did not engage people online, as the PTI's campaign did. In addition, this thesis shows that better Twitter activity correlates with better electoral performance. The digital-first strategy of PTI was very significant in its triumph.

The study showed that the Agenda-Setting Theory applies to the social media context where political parties are attempting to strategically utilize Twitter (X) to influence the overall discourse and place emphasis on critical issues and the agenda of the election. The results show that those parties that have less traditional media coverage (e.g. PTI) use Twitter (X) to boost their messages, stimulate their supporters, and create the impression of the voter. In their turn, the parties, which had traditional campaign tactics (including PML-N and PPP), were unable to reach the same rates of digital engagement. Social media as a contributor to political polarization is also supported by the thesis, and partisan echo chambers that exert effects of increasing ideology polarities through the reinforcement of selective stories. Additionally, the comparative study of the US, UK and Indian elections justifies how the digital platform has revolutionized political campaigns across the world with a strong emphasis on the use of Twitter around agenda setting, voter mobilization and influence of the digital world in the political sphere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested for political parties, policymakers, and researchers.

For Political Parties

Improve Digital Strategies: Political parties would be better off improving their digital efforts by investing in professional social media departments responsible of coming up with data-driven engagement tactics.

Engage More Voter Interaction: This could be achieved by using the Q&A session, polls, and live update stream where people can make more trust and engagement among the voters.

Combat Misinformation: Parties should fight it by verifying the news and sharing only proven news outlets..

For Policymakers

Establish Social Media Policies: This should be enacted into law to curb misinformation and to allow freedom of speech.

Openness to Digital Campaigning: There should be introduction of transparency on paid promotions and political advertisements on the social media.

Cybersecurity Measures: The enhancement of cybersecurity structures will mitigate against digital manipulation and foreign influence of elections.

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