

## DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL CHANGE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PAKISTAN'S 2018 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper has discussed the importance of social media sites in voter turnout and voter mobilization in the 2018 general elections in Pakistan with reference to youth voters and urban voters. This paper had intended to dwell on how the digital media has transformed the manner in which political communication has been undertaken, how it has contributed towards the level of voter turnout as well as how it has rejuvenated the democracy issue in Pakistan. The mixed method was the research design. Voter surveys were conducted so as to establish the trends between social media and voting with the qualitative data being collected as the semi-structured interviews with the key informants whose views included academicians and journalists. The Digital Democracies Theory and the Participatory Communication Theory were the theory frameworks. Voter surveys, statistics provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), and the literature available were used as different sources of data collection. Thematic analysis and descriptive and inferential statistics were also conducted to interpret qualitative data and analyze the answers of the survey respectively. The findings state that the youth became more political with the use of social media and were more aware. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, among other platforms, have proved significant today where voters informed themselves, communicated with the campaigns and interacted in real time. Political campaigns, influencers, hashtags, live stream campaigns proved to be a successful means of reaching the youth and urban voters, which were also actively used by political parties, especially by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The study also found out that there were severe discrepancies in digital practices: youth in rural areas, women, and less educated citizens were still marginalized by the absence of access to the internet, the degree of digital literacy, and biased social cultures. The research paper aids in*

*understanding some of the peculiarities of digital political behaviour in developing democracies by disclosing that the social media promotes the transparency simultaneously with exposing the digital divide and gender disparity in political participation.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Voting Behavior, Digital Democracy, Youth Political Participation, Urban–Rural Divide, 2018 General Elections, Political Communication, Pakistan.*

## **1. Introduction:**

The emergence of social media has transformed the form of interaction with politics in the world and the 2018 general elections in Pakistan were a breakthrough in this digital revolution. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube became the focal point of political communication, mobilization of a campaign, and voter outreach. The people participated in elections in Pakistan, as the first electoral year of the country, without the physical rallies and television campaigns but in the virtual world where millions of young and urban voters communicated, discussed and took political decisions online (Jamil, 2018).

Traditional ways of campaigning including print advertisement, television coverage and door to door canvassing dominated the political space in Pakistan up to the year 2018. Nevertheless, a new generation of technologically inclined voters that consist of almost 44% of the population younger than 35 became a decisive political factor in 2018 (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2018). This youthful demographic bulge in conjunction with the urbanization process and the growing use of internet moved the political force into a digital sphere. Political parties realized this change and started to target, sway and mobilize voters through social media, particularly in the urban centers such as Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

The leader of this digital revolution was Pakistan Tehreek-e- Insaf (PTI). PTI was able to use social media through its social media slogans Naya Pakistan and Vote for Change to access the young voter who were crying out a change, transparency and accountability in their politics. Contrarily, more established parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People Party (PPP) also adopted the strategy of online campaigning but focused more on broadcasting of their past achievements and leadership experience (Rehm, 2018; Khan and Javed, 2021). Such change of direction were signs to a greater revolution in political communications that was a one way propaganda to a two way digital dialogue.

The social media also offered civic participation in other spheres besides the political ones. The citizen journalism helped the citizens to act as watchdogs and report on anomalies, take videos in the polling stations or even keep institutions on the hook in real time. This was an active presence that was on the Internet, and it contributed to the sense of transparency and civic responsibility (Rehman, 2019). Nevertheless, imbalances existed because the accelerating of the digitalization of politics were also reflected. Regrettably, the rural population, women, and lack of digital literacy and socio-cultural barriers typically excluded the less-educated youth, women, and rural community (Khan and Khan, 2022).

The example of the role of social media in influencing the turnout of voters during the 2018 elections in Pakistan plays the most significant role in determining the process of democracy development in the country. The problem that this paper discusses is the relationship between

social media use and political turnout and how the online platforms affected the turnout of the youth and urban population, the dynamic of campaigns, and the perception of electoral integrity. It also analyzes the evils that have stopped the digital democracy including the digital divide, gender inequalities, and misinformation.

On the same note, the researcher tries to accomplish similar tasks of the continuously growing body of literature on the subject of digital politics in developing democracies, and how technology can either enhance or erode democratic engagement through this study. By discerning the 2018 elections in Pakistan through the lens of social media, this paper does not only get the chance of capturing a pivotal moment in the history of politics in Pakistan, but also a larger trend of globalization of the political landscape in the world of digital age.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the fact that social media as a tool of political communication in Pakistan has the speed of emergence, little has been done to ascertain the real impact of the tool to voter turnout and voter awareness. It turned out to be the 2018 general elections when the digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) played a significant role in the development of the political opinion and the mobilization of the younger and urban voters. As much as these platforms brought more educated and connected citizens on board, they also brought out the unseen inequality of access and education and the representation of gender. Many uneducated and rural youths were not in the digital discussion, and political expertise was typically ruined by fabricated news. The issue of whether the social media has improved democratic participation in Pakistan and has led to the emergence of socio-political divisions or not is a critical question and this imbalance has led to raising a critical question; has social media enhanced democratic participation in Pakistan or has social media brought more socio-political divisions? To fill this gap, this paper will explore how social media influences voter turnout, political awareness, and voter participation in the 2018 election process.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study is important as it points out how social media revolutionized political participation and democratic participation in the 2018 general elections in Pakistan. It reveals that not only did digital platforms mobilize millions of young and urban voters but also changed the way political parties could reach the citizens. Through its analysis of the role of digital media in the behavior of voters, campaign tactics, and citizen journalism through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the study offers indications to the increasing role of digital media in influencing modern democracies. It also reveals some inequalities that have persisted, including the digital divide, low-level literacy, and gender obstacles which constrain inclusive participation. These dynamics are critical in understanding by policymakers, teachers, and political actors in the digital age that aim at enhancing democratic processes and the informed, equitable, and transparent electoral participation in Pakistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. How did social media platforms influence voter participation and engagement in Pakistan's 2018 general elections, particularly among youth and urban voters?
2. In what ways did political parties such as PTI, PML-N, and PPP use social media campaigns to shape voter behavior and political awareness during the 2018 elections?

3. What challenges and inequalities emerged in the process of digital political participation, and how did factors like education, gender, and the digital divide affect the effectiveness of social media in promoting electoral engagement?

### **Literature Review**

The emergence of social media has transformed the process of democracy in Pakistan. The 2018 general elections were a breakthrough as there was transition of the political campaigns to the digital space. The scholars concur that these technologies created new platforms of social engagement, involvement of youths, and political consciousness but also created problems of misinformation, hate speech and manipulation..

### **Theoretical Framework**

Digital Democracy Theory and Participatory Communication Theory form the basis of this work, as both theories assist in understanding how social media sites have changed the way people interact and engage in the political process in the 2018 general elections in Pakistan. Collectively, these frameworks offer an analytical approach to understand how digital technologies allowed creating new modes of democratic participation and at the same time strengthened inequalities based on education, gender, and geography.

#### **1. Digital Democracy Theory**

Digital Democracy Theory is dedicated to the fact that a digital technology such as social media, blogs, and online forums have further intensified the given access of citizens to political information, communication and participation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). According to it, technology can strengthen democracy by rendering the political processes more transparent, inclusive, and participatory. In this view, the Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are seen as virtual community whereby individuals can argue, rally people and hold power to check (Castells, 2012).

It is possible to apply this theory to the process of online interaction that had changed the political involvement in the circumstances of the 2018 elections in Pakistan. The political parties, especially, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) bypassed those traditional gatekeepers, including television stations, and accessed the voters through social media (Rehm, 2018). Citizens, in their turn, seized their chance to voice their views, discuss the policies, and expose the flaws of the electoral process with the assistance of such platforms and make the process more open (Rehman, 2019). The social media, thus, played a mobilizing role and an accountability mechanism in the shifting democratic system of Pakistan.

Nonetheless, the Digital Democracy Theory does not ignore the digital divide, which encompasses unequal access to technology that restricts the ability to participate among the rural population, women, and the less-educated citizens (Norris, 2001). When urban young people became empowered with online activism, a significant part of the rural voters stayed behind because of inadequate internet connectivity and low levels of digital literacy (Khan and Khan, 2022). The current research is a critical application of the theory in presenting how digital tools contributed to the promotion of democracy among particular communities and increased Inequality among others.

#### **2. Participatory Communication Theory**

Participatory Communication Theory is an approach based on the dialogue, inclusion, and empowerment of communication processes, first elaborated by the scholars such as Paulo

Freire (1970) and further elaborated by Melkote and Steeves (2015). It does not consider communication as one way flow of information but two-way interactive process in which people exchange ideas, challenge the authority and jointly influence decisions.

The 2018 elections provided the social media with a participatory platform through which young people and urban voters could communicate with politicians and their peers. The online discussions, live question and answer forums, and citizen-reporting enabled the common people to be participants and not consumers of political messages. Hashtags such as #NayaPakistan were employed by the political parties and particularly PTI to promote a feeling of unity and empowerment among the youthful voters (Afzal and Javed, 2019).

Based on this theoretical perspective, the social media was an active communication tool that dismantled the hierarchical lines between leaders and citizens. However, the participation was not spread equally. The education, digital access, and social norms were some of the factors that limited the accessibility of marginalized groups of people particularly rural youth, and women to join such conversations. Therefore, at the same time that participatory communication has augmented political awareness and political involvement, it also indicated the larger social economic inequalities present in the democracy of Pakistan.

Therefore, the framework contextualizes the 2018 elections in Pakistan in the context of the worldwide trend of digitalized democracy and provides information about their democratizing possibilities and social constraints.

### **Previous Studies**

Jamil (2018) reviewed the role of the new media technologies in making people more engaged in Karachi in the 2018 elections. Based on the surveys and interviews, she discovered that social media allowed people to speak louder during the political debate. Citizens were able to air their views, participate in campaigns and challenge leaders. Nevertheless, Jamil added that the availability of digital platforms was also not even. Urban voters had an advantage over rural ones, which demonstrates that Pakistan has not yet developed digital democracy.

As emphasized by Chaudhary et al. (2021), social media turned out to be a significant means of proclaiming political ideologies, voter mobilization, and opinion shaping. They followed the traces of the political parties sharing manifestos and propaganda by use of Facebook and Twitter. The authors associated these practices with such cases in the world, as the Arab spring or demonstrations in Ferguson, demonstrating that online activism has become an important component of politics. However, they cautioned that this power may be used to divide the society by launching campaigns on selected individuals.

Afzal, Siddiqui, and Naveed (2024) opined that there is a two-sided nature of digital democracy. On the one hand, it enhances democratic participation through the connection of people and awareness. On the other, it propagates false information which may corrupt elections. They proposed that Pakistan needs to develop strategies to deal with such effects to encourage responsible online behaviors and equitable use of electronic platforms in politics.

Muzaffar, Yaseen, and Safdar (2020) found that the 2018 election campaigns revolved around Facebook and Twitter. PTI, PML-N and PPP employed social media to connect to the electorate, with PTI taking over the lead in Twitter. In their findings there is a strong correlation between presence on the online scene and political success. However, they

claimed that social media campaigns mostly centered on party image, instead of policy discussion, which restricted a quality democratic discussion.

Khan and Khan (2022) perceived the 2018 elections to be a turning point in the history of democracy in Pakistan. They linked the victory of PTI to the digital mobilization of young people in the cities. The social media contributed to the emergence of the feeling of political change and unity. Nonetheless, they also cited the issue of elite interference and non-political actors and indicated that not even digital participation can ensure the independence of democracy.

Akram et al. (2025) also extended the argument in the extended space of 2018-2024 to understand how social media redefined the face of the Pakistan democracy. They have observed that it was openness and easy access to politicians by digital tools. In the meantime, there were also increased propaganda and hate speech in the cyberspace. The study required greater media literacy and responsibility in order to be open and responsible.

Similarly, Gul and Ali (2025) examined the digitalization of politics in Pakistan that took place in 2018-24. In their opinion, AI and online analytics turned the information on political communication into a personalized and data-driven one. This proved to be a win-win case as certain political parties such as PTI could meet voters in a one on one level, but it also introduced some emerging ethical issues in terms of privacy invasion and echo chambers. The authors suggested that Pakistan ought to have a nationwide policy that governs the digital political practices.

Imran and Masood (2020) used the survey data within the framework of the study in Bahawalpur to show how social media had impacted the voter turnout. According to the Uses and Gratification Theory, they found that the social media informed people on matters of voting and democracy especially the young generation. The findings confirmed the existence of the ability of online tools to improve civic responsibility, but the researchers have also provided that the effect of online tools varies with the regions and classes.

Saleem, Hayat, and Akbar (2024) have given a comparison of 2018 and 2024 elections in order to establish how the employment of social media changed the voting pattern. They found online platforms to be helpful in helping the candidates target more women and first time voters. The social media was regarded as a credible source of political news and the research cautioned that credibility can be a hazard in the case where the fake news is unregulated.

Ashraf et al. (2025) admitted the problem of media framing and the validity of the elections. They found out that the social media can be used to boost civic education and openness to build trust in the population. However, it could ruin the belief in democracy when mistreated. They proposed media literacy sessions and a better level of institutional controls in their work to establish long-term confidence in online elections in the general community.

According to Butt et al. (2021), the discussed concept of e-participation implies that the youth can engage in elections with a lesser effort with the help of the social media. They discovered that online communication would arouse youthful voters to make political views and participate in online discussions. It, however, also showed that the interest on the internet does not always translate to the actual votes.

Khan and Fatima (2025) have explored the influence of the social media on university student politics. As their research found out the online activity and civic engagement have a strong

connection but also mention the threat of fake news, harassment, and risks of privacy. The authors also challenged the policymakers to stimulate media literacy and safer online politicking.

Saboor, Ali, and Ahmed (2022) explored the problem of social media in political responsibility. They asserted that the internet resources allow citizens to question the leaders and demand transparency. They nonetheless, also emphasized on the point that responsibility remained weak in Pakistan as there was no yet linkage between online activism and institutional transformation.

The article by Rehman and Hussain (2020) investigated the problem of fake news during the 2018 elections and concluded that the transfer of misinformation occurred widely on Twitter and Facebook. There were still so many stories that continued to run as fake despite being exposed as fake due to political polarization. This disclosure shows that the problem of digital democracy in Pakistan is quite acute in the aspect of media literacy and critical thinking.

The findings of Noonari, Fatima, and Ahmedani (2021) are also similar, as Facebook conversations enhanced political awareness and participation. Their mixed-method research established that online debates made the citizens feel empowered and allowing them to express themselves more freely. They however cautioned that emotional matter usually dominated over rational argument, restraining informed decision-making.

Imtiaz et al. (2025) were interested in the youth, as they discovered that first-time voters were greatly affected by social media. Digital campaigns had more effect on young voters compared to the old. Their success in PTI, they claimed, was due to its superior utilisation of social media although not every campaign managed to boost voter turnout.

Rao (2020) emphasized another issue the hate speech. He discovered that leaders of the parties used Facebook and twitter to attack foes in the 2018 election. He believed that this conduct increased the rifts and that the Election Commission of Pakistan needed to have a strict code of conduct. His research revealed that social media may enhance or erode democracy as it is utilized.

Ali et al. (2020) noted that agenda-setting and mobilization on social media was successfully practiced by the political parties, particularly PTI. PTI also posted more and received more interaction which demonstrates that an online presence can influence political perceptions. Nonetheless, the research warned against the digital popularity taking over issue politics.

In all these studies, there is a pattern that sets in. The social media has provided new democratic platforms in Pakistan especially when it comes to the youth and the urban voters. It has brought about more interaction in politics and made it transparent. However, it has also had its own drawbacks like false information, hate speech, and computer inequality. The elections of 2018 were a starting point to digital democracy in Pakistan as it depends on the ways in which the state, media, and people approach the threats and opportunities of digital democracy.

## **Methodology**

The research design used in this study was mixed-method such that both the quantitative and the qualitative research methodologies were used to investigate the impact of social media on voting patterns as the 2018 general elections in Pakistan occurred. The quantitative data was obtained by conducting large-scale surveys of voters in various regions that would assess the correlation between the use of social media and the voting behavior, especially among young people and urban residents. Statistical analysis of survey data was conducted on the responses of the survey under descriptive and inferential statistics in order to determine trends and correlations. To supplement the evidence of the survey, qualitative data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews with key informants such as academicians and journalists to have a more in-depth understanding of how the social media had an impact on the perception and engagement of voters. The data of the interviews were examined with the help of the thematic analysis to investigate common themes and attitudes. Such an approach made it possible to understand the impact of digital platforms on democratic engagement and voting during the 2018 elections comprehensively.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

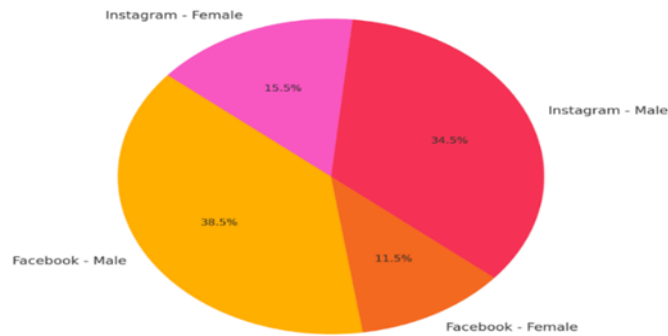
The social media has redefined the participation of Pakistanis in the 2018 general elections. Social networks such as facebook, twitter, Instagram and Youtube became its platforms where people, more so the young and urban voters were informed about politics, discussed issues and even cast their votes. In contrast to the earlier elections that were apporportioned by the television or even rallies, the digital media enabled the populace to immediately access political content anywhere they are (Jamil, 2018).

According to the election commission of Pakistan (ECP, 2018), 44 percent of the total number of registered voters were aged below 35, with the majority using social media. This demographic took advantage of the digital realm to vent their views, track movements, and mobilize their peers to participate in elections. Political discussions became accessible and more interactive on social networks as online political discussions converted the social networks into new public squares. These platforms worked well in mobilizing first-time voters in campaigns like the ones by PTI such as the #NayaPakistan movement (Afzal & Javed, 2019).

This is because social media made young people and the urban dwellers feel politically empowered. Numerous of the young voters in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad reported on social networking that they felt included to converse as a country due to online debates. Parties reacted to these by making short videos, live shows and memes which made political topics that were not easy to understand simple. The digital storytelling by PTI (stressing reform, accountability, and empowerment of young people) turned the interest of politics into voter turnout (Rehm, 2018). The 56.2 percent national turnout compared to 44 percent in 2008 demonstrates that digital media contributed to the development of trust in the process and encouraged people to turn out (Imran and Masood, 2020). The following is the pie chart of gender breakdown on Facebook and Instagram in Pakistan (2018).

**Figure 1**

Gender Demographics on Facebook vs Instagram (Pakistan, 2018)



Nevertheless, this interaction was not even-handed. The city-country separation formed two distinct worlds. Young people in cities were more educated with improved access to the internet, thus turning political and activists. They debated, evaluated manifestos of parties and participated in online forums. Conversely, the rural young people were poorly connected and exposed to politics thus resulting in low participation. Rural voters, especially in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, did not relate to politics as they believed that their votes did not count (Afzal et al., 2024). This gap revealed the digital disparity in Pakistan whereby political empowerment was pegged on the access to information technology.

Women also became attracted to social media particularly those who were well educated and lived in the urban areas. Publicity and online contact made women understand rights and procedures to vote, reducing the gender gap in the cities. However, in the rural community, women were still suppressed in terms of turnout by social barriers and mobility restrictions (Khan and Khan, 2022). It indicates that although the social media encouraged inclusiveness, it was not free of social and infrastructural bias, which restricted the area of access.

More importantly, even though the digital media increased the level of democratization, it transformed the way voters viewed politics. It was frequently emotional engagement fuelled by slogans and viral content as opposed to an actual policy discussion. There are those young people who did not support the political tendencies based on ideology but on identity. Nevertheless, it was still a significant step towards the process of democracy in Pakistan-transitioning to the interactive citizenship as opposed to passive observation.

To conclude, the use of social media during the 2018 elections transformed the youth and urban voters into active voters. It was a breakthrough that crossed the boundaries of tradition, increased access to information and enhanced civic sensitization. But it also brought out the long running divisions-urban and rural, educated and uneducated, male and female. It was not only social media that helped to turn out to vote; through social media, democracy was redefined in Pakistan by making democracy to be associated with connectivity, education, and digital inclusion.

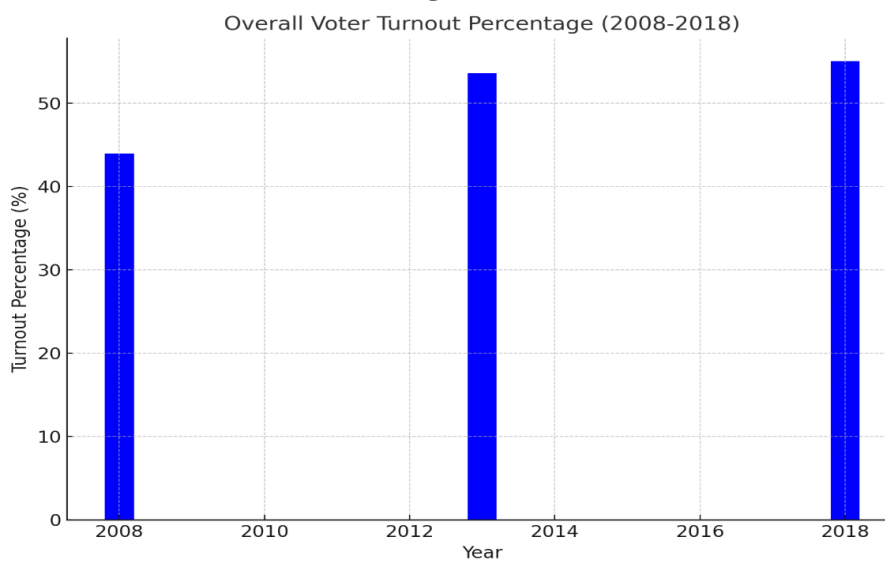
**Table 1. Voter Turnout in Pakistani Elections (2008-2018)**

Province/Area	2008 Turnout (%)	2013 Turnout (%)	2018 Turnout (%)
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<b>Federal Capital</b>	50	62.29	62.8
<b>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa</b>	34	44.64	50.7
<b>FATAs</b>	31	29.22	36.1
<b>Punjab</b>	48	58.38	60.4
<b>Sindh</b>	44	51.58	53.5
<b>Baluchistan</b>	31	38.97	42.3
<b>Total</b>	44	53.62	56.2

Here is the bar graph comparing voter turnout across Pakistani Elections from 2008-2018.

**Figure 2**



The general elections of 2018 in Pakistan created a shift in the level of interaction of the political parties and voters. It was the first occasion where social media took the center stage of political communication, particularly among the young and urban citizens. The main parties, such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), resorted to social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to promote their agenda, impact people, and directly influence voters (Rehm, 2018).

These included PTI in the lead in digital transformation. It ran a campaign of hope, reform and anti-corruption under a viral slogan of NayaPakistan (New Pakistan). The digital strategy by PTI incorporated emotional storytelling and marketing that was data-driven. Memes, short videos, live shows, and celebrity endorsements were some of the resources that the party used to reach the interests of youth who were active online. Pro-PTI supporters such as Wasim Akram and Shoaib Akhtar openly voiced their support publicly, which gave it legitimacy among those young voters who were yet to decide (Friesen, 2019). Direct communication between Imran Khan and citizens was developed by the live Facebook town halls and interactive questions and answer sessions of PTI, so people felt that they are involved in the

political discussion. This participative model transformed social media followers to be real world voters (Khan and Javed, 2021).

On the other hand, PML-N had a more conservative yet strategic online presence. Its campaign emphasized growth and success, and in development, it stressed on such urban projects as Metro Bus and Orange Line Train. PML-N used Facebook and Twitter to highlight its track record in terms of infrastructure and governance and it was seen to attract the middle-class voter, who appreciated stability. It was however lacking in the emotional and interactive appeal PTI had perfected, which made it not as engaging to younger people (ICIJ, 2018).

PPP led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari aimed at promoting inclusivity and social justice. Instagram and YouTube were also used by the party to attract younger, progressive voters. It also centred its campaign on education, gender equality, and human rights, making Bilawal a leader who will be tech-savvy and modern. The visual storytelling of PPP (focusing on empathy and youth empowerment) served to re-energize its traditional image, but could not go as far as PTI due to poorer digital reach (Zafar, 2020).

Hashtags and visual content were very instrumental in controlling narratives by all the three parties. The hashtags by PTI such as VoteForChange and ImranKhanForPM were trending on the internet and the PML-N posts under VoteKoIzzatDo used the respect of the vote as its theme. These were the slogans that influenced the emotions of voters to parties. Hashtags turned the political ideas into a viral trend by becoming a point of discussion among digital communities (Rehm, 2018).

The social media analytics enabled parties to micro-target the voters. Taking into account the audience data, including age, gender, interests, and location, they customized content. PTI was sending employment and reform messages to the young professionals, and PML-N was concentrating on the urban development to the urban voters. This type of communication based on data made political marketing a personal experience that motivated people to view politics as a part of their lives (Khan and Javed, 2021).

Nonetheless, there were good and bad impacts of the digital shift. On the bright side, it made the political process democratic as ordinary citizens could argue with politicians. Twitter turned into the place of open communication between citizens, journalists and leaders. On the negative side, misinformation, echo chambers and emotional manipulation were also encouraged on the same platforms. The content of the memes frequently substituted the actual discussion, and not all voters made judgments relying on the facts (Friesen, 2019).

More importantly, the campaigns were a new milestone in the political communication in Pakistan. The PTI hegemonic presence in the internet demonstrated that social media use could translate into political victory. The sluggish response of PML-N and PPP to change showed the increasing distance between campaigning and mobilization on the internet. In a few words, social media transformed the manner in which parties packaged their stories and how voters perceived them - turning politics into more interactive, image-based, and emotional than ever.

The general elections of 2018 in Pakistan brought to the fore the changes brought about by social media in political participation, but it also unveiled the nature of inequalities and difficulties in digital participation. Although social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter gave the right to vote to millions of youthful and urban voters, not all people reaped the same. Several factors like education, gender and the digital divide contributed significantly in who was able to play a significant role and who was not.

Education was one of the best predictors of politics. The better-educated youth was willing to use the social media and discuss politics and scrutinize party agenda and cast effective votes. They adhered to news, discussed and compared the performances of candidates online rather than basing it on family or tribal belonging (Kanwal, 2024). The students of the universities in such cities as Lahore and Multan were very pro-issue based politics, which engaged the employment, government and transparency (Ali and Raza, 2023). On the other hand, the less educated or poor young people were more likely to use the word of mouth of friends or the elders in the community. Their poor internet connection and inability to use digital technologies predisposed them to misinformation and political influences and results in their exposure to online campaigns.

The digital divide between the rural and urban areas contributed to the growth of these disparities. The city residents were at an advantage as they had access to smart phones, the internet and news on the internet. They would be able to be part of online campaigns, live political, and interact directly with political leaders. Meanwhile, there was a poor relationship between the youth in such provinces as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the online activities, leading to decreased political activity (Imran and Masood, 2020). This unequal access constituted two aspects of citizens, one of them informed and interconnected, whereas the other is not informed. The political voice gap was caused by the digital divide between the rural areas and the cities.

Inclusive digital participation was also not possible due to gender differences. The legal changes and awareness campaigns gave the urban women an advantage as voter registration and voter turnout rose (Khan and Khan, 2022). Women with higher education were actively pursuing political information on the internet and bringing in contributions to online discussions, which in most cases were in favor of candidates who promoted education and gender equality. Nevertheless, rural women were still restricted in their mobility, patriarchal culture, and online harassment, which did not encourage them to participate. Though the women got to social media, they would tend not to engage in any open debates as it would lead to criticism or trolling. These digital and cultural obstacles continued to marginalize the female voices in online politics (Ahmed and Saeed, 2020).

False information and emotional manipulation was another significant challenge. Along with providing open communication channels, social media also turned into a platform of fake news and propaganda. Serious discussion was occasionally substituted with viral memes and deceptive posts. Most uneducated or first-time voters were not digitally literate enough to check information and thus became confused and polarized (Friesen, 2019). This was an issue that undermined the credibility of digital democracy, proving that the absence of literacy does not mean that users can access it with meaning.

More importantly, the inequities showed that even digital democracy in Pakistan was lopsided and weak. Although social media highlighted the voices of young people in cities and educated voters, it negatively impacted on the rural, uneducated, and female population. Inclusion was only promised but restricted by structural and cultural factors; bad infrastructure, gender norms and the absence of even education. However, it also offered a source of advancement: as soon as the issues of access and literacy are resolved, social media can be used as a more inclusive instrument of democratic engagement.

To sum up, social media enhanced the participation of educated and urban voters but could not guarantee a similar participation of the rest of the society. In 2018 digital politics was lively yet unequal, it was more of a privilege than equality. To achieve the maturity of democracy in Pakistan, the campaigns should go beyond the urban elites and work towards eliminating the educational, gender and technology gap.

## Findings of the Study

The paper examined social media influence on voter turnout, political awareness, and electoral transparency in the 2018 general elections in Pakistan. The results show that the democratic process in Pakistan was transformed but unequally through the digital media particularly among the youth and urban voters. To begin with, voter turnout and voter interest in the elections have greatly risen especially among the youth and the urban youth. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube offered convenient forums of political discussion, campaign coverage and voter education. The Election Commission of Pakistan (2018) indicated that individuals aged under 35 years made up 44 percent of the total number of registered voters, and that most of them relied on social media as their primary source of political information. The voter turnout increased to 56.2% and it was seen as an effect of the increased mobilization by online means, particularly the party-led mobilization and the civil society mobilization (Jamil, 2018).

Second, PTI as well as other political parties effectively employed the digital platforms to influence political consciousness and voter turnout. The online campaigns promoted by PTI using such slogans as NayaPakistan and VoteForChange appealed to young people and urban population. Social media became the dynamic campaign environment with the help of live videos, memes, and influencer ads (Rehm, 2018; Friesen, 2019). PML-N and PPP, on the contrary, were more traditional in their themes and employed the social media platform to demonstrate the successes and target younger voters. These campaigns made the national issues more personal to the voters, hence their increasing involvement in national affairs.

Third, transparency and accountability were enhanced in the process of elections through citizen journalism. Smartphones allowed the common people to record and share irregularities during the Election Day that gave them a digital account of the events. Such authorities as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) are put under pressure by their posts to act and provide answers to complaints in a timely and open manner (Rehman, 2019; Ahmed and Saeed, 2020). This participatory surveillance minimized areas of manipulation and also increased faith and trust by people in the process. The motivated reporters were a source of real-time civic accountability which contributed to democratic accountability.

However, the study also provided certain barriers to digital inclusion. The unequal access to political discourse was hindered by the digital divide between the urban and rural territories. The youth of the city who had a greater access to the internet and education were more politically engaged, and the rural youth and women were not, as they had no access since they lacked internet access and literacy, and social constraints (Imran and Masood, 2020; Khan and Khan, 2022). The gender oppositions were most severe, with the educated urban women being active on the Internet, and the rural women being limited in their movements, and being harassed online. The other problem that was severe was the misinformation and emotional manipulation. Political parties and their supporters propagated unverified information, and, therefore, social media became the world of propaganda. This discredited the image of political communication and the failure to comprehend the voting process by the less-educated that were not digitally adept (Friesen, 2019).

Lastly, education as well became one of the conditions of being an informed participant. Educated youths were more prone to engage in policy-oriented debates, give critical evaluations of the candidates, and make leaders to be responsible (Kanwal, 2024). Debates, seminars and social media campaigns which were encouraged in universities and civic organizations taught people to be responsible and think critically in the political arena.

To conclude, the results indicate that social media was a democratizing and dividing force. It has motivated youths and urban electorate in Pakistan, boosted transparency, due to citizen journalism and transformed campaign communication. However, structural inequalities, including unequal access to the internet, disparities in education, gender obstructions, etc. limited its complete democratic power. The 2018 elections therefore introduced digital democracy in Pakistan but this also showed its potential and its weaknesses.

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### **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the role of social media in voter turnout, political awareness and election transparency in the 2018 general elections in Pakistan. The results show that social media reshaped the political environment of the country by introducing alternative ways of political participation, particularly among young and urban citizens. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, turned into cyber platforms of political discourse, mobilizing campaigns, and citizen-based accountability. The 2018 elections attracted the emergence of a digitally active electorate. The youth involvement was at all time high with 44% of the registered voters being below 35 years of age. Social media made this generation have direct access to the political dialogue and motivated them to participate in the formation of the democratic future of Pakistan. The young spirit was successfully harnessed through the innovative online campaigns of PTI which were based on such slogans as #NayaPakistan and #VoteForChange. These online tactics brought a new concept to the communication of politics, where campaigns that used to be one-way broadcasts became a two-way interactive communication.

The paper however has also found that, digital democracy in Pakistan is yet to be equal and complete. On-line political participation was concentrated in urban, education and male populations gaining in benefits. The young people and women in the rural areas were restricted to full participation due to their inability to access internet and due to inability to be digital and social restrictions. This digital divide brought in two political realities into relation and empowerment, and the other, out of relation and disregard. Another issues that were urgent was the misinformation spread. Even though social media provided people with an opportunity to voic their opinions openly, it was also the medium that served the purpose of spreading the fake news and emotional reporting distorting the facts and polarizing. This was a pointer that the accessibility of digital tools is not always a pointer to a well-informed citizenship, the latter should be accompanied by education and media literacy. Despite these challenges, social media played a very important role in the transparency and accountability. The citizen journalism provided the ordinary voter with a voice that was used by them to become watchdogs reporting what was abnormal on real time and calling to account the

authorities. Such a bottom-based surveillance enhanced the trust of the citizens towards the electoral process also it gave the civil society a new momentum of promoting fair elections.

In a nutshell, the 2018 general elections in Pakistan was not only a milestone, but also a reflection. They have shown that digital media can get democracy stronger and vocal and youth focused and keep institutions accountable. They were however a manifestation of the historic inequalities of Pakistan in the fields of education, gender, and technology. The digital involvement of the future elections must not be reserved solely to urban elite and afforded inclusiveness, digital literacy and accountable online voting. Social media can still rise and become a campaign tool wiser when used instead of merely becoming a block of democratic empowerment and participation to a building block of enabling Pakistan to develop a more participatory, open, and fair political culture.

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