

DIGITAL MEDIA, POLITICAL POLARIZATION, AND YOUTH VOTING BEHAVIOR IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

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Abstract

Polarization and intolerance have become a serious problem in Pakistan. The misuse of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media platforms is rapidly fostering a culture of political intolerance, religious extremism, hate politics, violence and misogyny, which is detrimental to democracy, economic independence and freedom of expression, while also being a major obstacle to Pakistan's development and prosperity. The education should be promoted that emphasizes national unity, respect for minorities and democratic values. Lessons based on tolerance, brotherhood, tolerance, harmony and the importance of disagreement should be included in the educational curriculum so that the younger generation can be trained in positive and constructive thinking so that mutual respect and tolerance can be developed among followers of different religions and political parties

1. Introduction

The mushrooming of digital media in Pakistan has altered the way politics is communicated, and in this case, among the young generation. Social media and other platforms have raised awareness and participation in politics, but have simultaneously polarized politics, misinformed, and split ideologies. Considering that youth make a large percentage of the Pakistan population, their voting patterns present a crucially important issue as far as the democratic stability in the country is concerned.

The fast growth of digital media in Pakistan has changed the way political communication is done, particularly among the youth. People have become more aware and engaged in politics due to social media and other platforms, but have also resulted in more political polarization, misinformation, and divisions of ideologies. Their voting habits are the utmost concern about

the stability of democracy, since the youth comprise a large percentage of the Pakistani population.

The digital media in the contemporary Pakistan has revolutionized the manner in which people consider politics, especially the youths. The influence of Facebook, X, Tik Tok, and YouTube platforms on political opinion are now more influential than TV or newspapers. Though this has made people to be aware of the issues, this has also led to political polarization where people are only following one side of the argument. This affects the voting patterns of the young people with majority of the young voters basing their votes on the current trends or viral content in the internet. These trends pose a problem to the stability of democracy since elections are affected by misinformation and polarization. This paper reviews how digital media has impacted the

political choices of the young generation and the implication of this to the democracy in Pakistan.

Zahra Durrani on August 1, 2025

2. Research Problem

In Pakistan, the youth represent a large number of the electorate, yet now the internet is greatly influencing the political choices of the youth. The emergence of social media has resulted in echo chambers, fake news, and political polarization among young people. Such polarization usually transforms elections into emotional contests, as opposed to decisions based on issues. As a result, the voting process of the young people could be destroying democracy instead of developing it. Little is known about the mechanism of how digital media contributes to this change in Pakistan. The proposed study will address this gap by examining the relationship between online political information, polarization of youth, and voter turnout.

This poses important questions on whether the digital interaction enhances or weakens democracy.

3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the effects of digital media platforms on political attitudes among young people in Pakistan.
2. To examine the correlation between online political content and polarization among young voters.
3. To determine how polarization through social media affects youth turnout and voting.
4. To determine the issues that digital media trends present to the stability of democracy in Pakistan.
5. To propose how to encourage responsible digital engagement towards a healthier political culture.

4. Research Questions

- How does digital media shape political attitudes among youth?
- Does digital media increase political polarization in Pakistan?
- What factors influence youth voting decisions?

- How does polarization affect democratic stability?

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Media Effects Theory

According to this theory, media is not merely a source of information but it influences the way people think and act. In the example of Pakistan, the digital media sites influence the youth through repetively proposing certain political discourses. Such messages affect their attitudes, opinions and even voting patterns in the long run. In this way the media is playing an active part in influencing political behaviour.

5.2 Social Identity Theory

This theory explains how people identify themselves with certain groups like political parties, ethnic or religious group. These group attachments are very powerful in the perception they have on political issues. Young people tend to enter echo chambers on digital media, where their group identity becomes more powerful. This leads to polarization as they now start perceiving conflicting groups as threats.

5.3 Constructivist Perspective

This perspective holds that the political reality is not pre-determined, but constructed by a set of stories, language, and discourse. On social media, posts, memes, videos, and hashtags create narratives that identify what the young people believe to be true. Such online tales can rebrand political issues and will influence how young voters view democracy and elections.

6. Literature Insights (Brief)

The existing literature suggests that social media has a twofold impact on politics. On the one hand, it increases the political involvement of young people because they can easily access and get information and have a platform to express their opinions. Conversely, it spreads fake news within a limited time, disorienting voters and affecting the confidence in institutions. Other studies also indicate that the presence of echo chambers on the web platforms makes youngsters

cling to already held ideologies and reject any contrary views. The youths are more online, and so they are more likely to follow trends, viral news and stories online which directly affect their political attitudes and voting patterns.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This research is based on quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered simultaneously. Once collected, the findings will be pooled together to provide a comprehensive view of the relationship between digital media, polarization, and youth voting behavior.

7.2 Quantitative Component

In the quantitative section, a survey will be carried out among young people between the ages of 18 and 29. To ensure that the findings are reliable, the sample size will be approximately 300 to 500 respondents. A structured questionnaire with Likert-scale questions will be the primary instrument. The independent variable is the use of digital media, the mediating variable is political polarization, and the dependent variable is the voting behavior. Creswell, J.W.(2018)

7.3 Qualitative Component

The qualitative part will entail in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The sample size will mainly comprise of university students and first time voters. It will also look at their perception towards political content in the internet, perceptions of the extent to which they trust various media outlets, and perceptions on reasons why they vote or do not vote.

7.4 Data Analysis

To determine the statistical relationship between variables using quantitative data, statistical programs like SPSS and regression analysis will be used to test the relationship between variables. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze qualitative data to determine common patterns and insights of interviews and discussions.

8. Key Findings (Expected / Analytical Insights)

8.1 Digital Media and Political Awareness

The digital media has enabled the young generation to be more politically conscious, however, this consciousness is a shallow one. Majority of the youths use social media to receive news instead of using the traditional media like TV or newspapers. This causes them to be fast in responding to headlines and viral posts without having a profound knowledge of matters. Boulianne, S.(2019)

8.2 Political Polarization

The research concludes that there are significant ideological rifts among the young people influenced by the content on the internet. The common type of echo chambers is that users can only see posts which support their already held beliefs. Political discourses on the Internet are mostly emotional and identity-based, which further polarizes and contributes to a decrease in tolerance to dissenting opinions in people. Spohr, D.(2017), Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M.(2017)

8.3 Youth Voting Behavior

Social media campaigns, peer groups, and political identity are the main factors that affect youth voting decisions, not party manifestos or policies. A lot of first-time voters confess that they are guided by online trends or influencers in choosing whom to support. This indicates a change in policy-based decision-making. Yusuf, H.(2013)

8.4 Democratic Stability Challenges

These tendencies pose grave threats to democracy. The level of informed decision-making is on the decrease because misinformation is spreading rapidly. There is an increase in political intolerance as young voters perceive opposing groups as adversaries. The possibility of elections being influenced by viral fake news rather than facts is also a real threat to the stability of democracy in Pakistan. Jamil, S.(2021)

9. Critical Analysis

The influence of digital media on youth participation in politics in Pakistan is evident, although the effects are both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has provided the youth with a voice, quicker access to information and a sense of involvement that was lacking previously. Conversely, the same platforms have turned into the means of misinformation, hate speech, and one-sided stories. The issue is that the majority of young people passively watch political content in the form of reels, memes, and short posts, which does not allow them to think critically. Echo chambers also increase the divide by isolating users to conflicting opinions. Consequently, voting is turning out to be more emotional and identity-oriented rather than rational and policy-oriented. This change is threatening to the stability of democracy since elections are likely to be won by viral trends instead of a healthy debate. The discussion reveals that although digital media makes the youth more politically empowered, it undermines democracy when unregulated. Pakistan Telecommunication (2024)

10. Policy Implications

10.1 Media Literacy Programs

Media literacy must be taught in schools and universities to make young people aware of how the online content functions. Youths should be taught to be able to verify sources, identify bias, and doubt what they observe on social media. The culture of fact-checking will decrease the blind dissemination of fake news and will make young people more critical consumers of political information.

10.2 Regulation of Digital Platforms

The necessity to control social media platforms to curb misinformation and fake news in elections is high. Rules should force platforms to remove harmful content quickly and be transparent about political ads. Voters ought to be aware of who is financing online campaigns and how they are targeting.

10.3 Promoting Inclusive Political Dialogue

Secure debate areas should be established where young people of various political, ethnic and religious affiliations can discuss without hate. Discussions can be held in universities, NGOs, and online forums, but they should be issue-oriented and not personality-oriented. This will assist in curbing ideological extremism and tolerance towards dissenting opinions.

10.4 Electoral Reforms

The election laws of Pakistan ought to be expanded to incorporate the digital campaigns as they are with the TV and print. Online political spending, sponsored posts, and influencer endorsements should have definite rules. Digital content during campaigns should also be monitored by the Election Commission to avoid manipulation and fair elections. Diamond, L.(2019)

11. Recommendations

To counter the effects of digital media on youth politics, digital literacy must be included in school and university curricula to enable students to think critically about online content. The government should also liaise with technology companies to eradicate the dangerous fake news and create transparency in political advertisements. In addition to social media, young people should be motivated to participate in the actual civic life such as community service and student councils to form responsible political habits. Another thing is to promote independent journalism because reputable news media can disprove prejudiced and fake news. Finally, Pakistan needs a national strategy to reduce polarization through creating awareness, inter-group dialogue and stricter regulation of hate speech where free expression is ensured without polarization of the society.

12. Conclusion

In the context of youth in Pakistan, the digital media is redefining the political participation of the youth. Although it increases involvement, it also intensifies polarization and jeopardizes the

stability of democracy. To help it realize its positive potential and reduce risks, a balanced approach which is regulation, education, and civic engagement should be adopted.

The digital media has been highly impacting the manner in which the youth in Pakistan are engaging in politics. It has made the access of information easier, sharing of opinion and political discourse among the youth easier, but has also polarized and misinformed. This compromises the capacity to make informed decisions and is a threat to the stability of democracy. To enjoy positive interactions with digital media, Pakistan is in need of a middle ground in terms of media education, proper regulation of online sources, and active participation of civic society outside the social media. Only then, when it is already established that the digital platforms can be utilized to promote a healthier democracy, but not to destroy it.

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