

## THE POPULIST PLAYBOOK: ANTI-ELITE AND PEOPLE-CENTRIC RHETORIC IN MEDIA DURING THE POLITICAL CRISES IN PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18334225>

### Keywords

populism, framing, newspapers, anti-elitism, people-centric

### Article History

Received: 01 July 2025

Accepted: 11 September 2025

Published: 22 September 2025

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### Abstract

This research study examined the framing of populist political communication in leading newspapers of Pakistan by using qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques. The central problem addressed by this study was to comprehensively analyze the coverage of populist rhetoric by the leading press in Pakistan before and after the “No Confidence Motion” against PTI government in April 2022. Four leading newspapers, two each from English and Urdu press (*The News International*, *Dawn*, *Daily Jang*, and *Daily Express*) of Pakistan were selected for the purpose. Findings indicated that both Urdu and English newspapers gave greater coverage to populist narratives. Anti-elitist, polarization, and people-centric frames appeared more frequently, suggesting that political news stories often emphasized societal and political division in Pakistan. Out of 785 news stories of front pages 574 (73.1%) contained populist frames, while 211 (26.9%) were without populist frames. There was a potential difference between Urdu and English press in editorial policies and ideological leaning which helped us to understand the role of media in shaping public perception of political discourse through populist narratives. In comparison to leading English press (47.6%), the higher proportion of favorable political news to populist framing in Urdu newspapers (64.2%) indicated a less critical approach and a more populist political narrative aligned approach. The frequency of Anti-elitist, polarization, and people-centric frames suggested that political news stories often emphasized societal and political division in Pakistan.

### Introduction

#### 1. Background of the Study

Many societies are currently experiencing a period of populism and there are numerous populist movements around the world. Populism revolves around the strategic use of empty signifiers, which are symbols and expressions that lack concrete content but can gather and unite

various disconnected demands under a shared meaning. Cas Mudde (2004) claimed that “We are living in the age of populism,” populists often target divisive issue by using media. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) explain that it has been shaping public narratives worldwide and has become a dominant force in recent past.

According to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) populism is a thin centered ideology in which society is divided into conflicting groups (homogeneous and antagonistic). This ideology has three core dimensions: *Anti-Elitism* (elites of every kind are seen as corrupt, self-centered and disconnected from people), *People-centrism* (People are a legitimate source of power, that is the reason why politics must represent the general will of the people), *National Sovereignty* (Transnational elites are considered as enemy of national dominion. Populists often use rhetoric of safeguarding national sovereignty).

In Pakistan political polarization has increased (Hassan, 2018) and become a defining feature of public discourse. In populist communication, vague and inclusive language, and empty signifiers are used to unite various disconnected demands under shared meanings (Laclau 2005). Leaders of almost all political parties employ populist rhetoric to mobilize their supporters by utilizing both conventional and social media. Generally, populist rhetoric is used during election campaigns and crises to influence voters and followers, however problem remain the same even after crises is passed by. It has been observed that political leaders in Pakistan vehemently use populist rhetoric in their political discourse either to malign opposition or to mobilize support. They use populism during election and crises situation to influence their followers' perception. The interpretation of political communication is influenced by media framing. In Pakistan, politician often practice ideational approach (Mudde, 2004) of populism (dichotomy between "the pure people" and "corrupt elite"). Media shape such rhetoric and disseminate among audience. Press with its editorial policies, ideological orientations, and institutional interests frame political discourse. Hence, newspapers may amplify, challenge or reframe populist political communication according to their editorial decisions. The frequency of populist coverage in leading newspapers has become a critical subject of inquiry. The aim of the study is to systematically explore how

Pakistani leading press frame populist political discourse in political crises, to identify dominant frames, and to analyze whether the coverage portrays populist rhetoric in a favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. Kramer (2014) argues that media considerably act as co-creator of political discourses rather than only working as information transmitter. Media amplify populist messages through selective framing (Nasir, 2025) by focusing on themes of "anti-elitism" and "pro-people" sentiments.

### 1.1 Media and Populism

Media either intentionally or unintentionally serve to populism by framing populist narratives as favorable in its coverage. Sensationalism replaces newsworthiness when media try to reach its large audience's demand of gratification by following populist rhetoric given by populist leaders (Mazzoleni, 2008). Donald J. Trump (USA) received extensive media coverage in his 2016 presidential election campaign due to his controversial statements and sensational quoted arguments (Ott, 2017). Oliver and Rahn (2016) in their research work explain why the 2016 election in US was a ripe time for a populist appeal. They suggest that there can be lots of speculation for the rise of populism which is often linked to class struggle, economic conditions, or new media technological advancements, but they found that populism originates in political sources. It rises when political parties do not respond according to the desires of their voters and fail to address the concerns of large portion of electorates. They call such condition "a representation gap". The term "representation gap" is a political concept that emphasizes the disconnect between the electorate and political parties. Marine Le Pen (France) championed himself as a leader to protect French National Sovereignty by giving statements to oust immigrants. In Europe, for last few decades immigrants have been core issue for populist leaders in populist campaigns. Le Pen's sensational speeches against immigrants and Islamization led media coverage over newsworthiness (Ivaldi, 2018). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emerged as populist

leader in South Asia who targets common folk with his political stunts (as Chaiwala etc.). Modi promotes Hindutwa in his statements which most of the time hurts Muslim sentiments, fueling Hindu religious groups to attack Muslims making headlines on media of all kind. Indian media remains uncritical to Modi's populism (Kaul, 2017; Yousaf, Lal, & Alvi, 2024; Waheed & Hussain, 2024). The success of Brexit was the result of populist narrative and its coverage in media. Media's focus on immigration issues and populist sentiments on nationalism played a decisive role in Brexit campaign (Basten, 2016). Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan used social media to build his populist image as savior of the nation. After the failure of the coup attempt in 2016, the media started promoting his populist narrative compromising policy debates and criticism. He used religion as his main weapon for political campaigns (Turk, 2018). Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan used anti-elite narrative with adding sensations in his political pudding. He often placed himself as a divine leader battling against corrupt elites. Media instead of conducting debates and criticizing policy statements, it followed and promoted populist narrative provided by Imran Khan (Hassan, 2020; Waheed & Hussain, 2024). In Modern politics, Populist movements always in need of media (social and traditional) to promote their populist rhetoric. On the parallel, media need audience which incite its emotional framing contributing to the rise of populism.

### **1.2 Populism and Democracy: A Conflict or Coexistence**

Torre (2018) explains that whenever populist leaders come into power, they often demean democratic norms with their anti-pluralist attitude. They attempt to control all the state institutions with centralized power mechanism, try to regulate media, and suppress civil society organization. Their authoritarian tendencies erode democratic institutions by damaging inclusive politics. Weyland (2019) argues that populism disfigures democracy by closing off all democratic space to the oppositions that leads to radical forces to plot a coup. Francis Fukuyama

(2015) explains that political development has three main components: (i) the state, (ii) rule of law, and (iii) accountability. When institutions fail to meet public expectations, populist arises, who often demand direct representation and accountability. Populist leaders believe in centralized power in politics, attack judicial independence, civil society institutions and media to consolidate their power. They bypass democratic institutions like parliament and political party and consider themselves as the sole representative of "the people". Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) argue that populist parties prioritize short term gain instead of sustainable policies. Populist leaders oversimplify complex issue and divide society into two antagonist groups (us vs them) which often compromise democratic deliberation. Yascha Mounk (2018) argues that democracy is under threat worldwide because populist leaders build arguments that they want to return power to the people but on the contrary, they create a system of "democracy without rights". He came up with the solution that politicians need to enact radical reforms which should benefit many rather few.

### **1.3 Framing Populist Narratives**

Media framing influence public perception of political communication (Entman, 1993). Rather working as an information transmitter, media often act as co-creator of political discourse (Kramer, 2014). Populism is a thin a centered ideology, and populist leaders practice its ideational approach in which the dichotomy between "the pure people" and "corrupt elite" is framed (Mudde, 2004). Through selective framing, media magnify populist messages focusing on themes of "anti-elitism and people-centrism" ideas. In populist communication, different populist frames are used such as "Personalization Framing" (Karvonen, 2010) that highlights the charisma of populist leaders, "Conflict Framing" (Mudde, 2004) highlights dichotomy of "us vs them" divide causing polarization, "Crises Framing" (Rosanvallón, 2008; Wayland, 2024) focuses on crises narratives putting blame on systemic failure of political system. These frames can weaken democracy,

strengthen populism and create political division in the country. Media's role is to facilitate populism rather than generating debate to resolution (Kramer, 2014). Media provide extensive coverage to populist rhetoric which is indirectly giving prominence to populism all over the world. Luca Manucci (2017) "*Populism and the Media*" in The Oxford Handbook of Populism explores the relationship between media systems and populist movements with a focus on framing processes. The mutual reinforcement drives the mutually beneficial relationship, where media thrives on drama, conflict and simplicity of populism. Populist messages become more visible, accessible and engaging when media apply crises and personalization framing techniques.

A study by Ragragio (2022) on news editorials during Rodrigo Duterte's presidency in Philippine highlights that populist framing in newspapers contribute to succeed a populist leader, how media frame populist narrative, tailoring themes of crime and drug policies to align with Duterte's agenda. Editorials used anti-elitism, people-centric and law and order frames, reflecting populism as key aspects of Duterte's rhetoric. The findings revealed that editorial undermine democratic norms by reinforcing authoritarian tendencies, legitimizing populist agenda creating political divide.

#### 1.4 Statement of the Problem

Political leaders often use anti-elitist and people-centric rhetoric to mobilize public opinion, position themselves as true representative of "the people" against corrupt elite (Fukuyama, 2017). For the purpose they use populist rhetoric which has now become a dominant style of political discourse in Pakistani landscape which loudens in crises situation. Media shape such rhetoric and disseminate among audience. Press with its editorial policies, ideological orientations, and institutional interests frame political discourse. Hence, newspapers may amplify, challenge or reframe populist political communication according to their editorial decisions. Scholarly research in Pakistan has paid little attention to how newspapers construct populist narratives

through anti-elitism and people-centric frames (Waheed & Hussain, 2024). The frequency of populist coverage in leading newspapers of Pakistan has become a critical subject of inquiry. The aim of the study is to systematically explore how Pakistani leading press frame populist political discourse in political crises. Thus, the central problem addressed by this study is to comprehensively analyze the coverage of populist rhetoric by the leading press in Pakistan before and after the "No confidence Motion" against PTI government in April 2022,

#### 1.5 Objectives of the study

1. To examine the extent of populist rhetoric in leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan.
2. To identify the dominant populist frames (e.g., anti-elite, people-centrism, nation sovereignty) employed in the news coverage.
3. To analyze whether the coverage portrays populist rhetoric in a favorable, unfavorable, or neutral manner.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Populist Rhetoric in Media

Populist rhetoric characterized by its appeal to "the people" against "the elite or establishment" has become a significant topic in the field of mass communication worldwide (Mudde, 2004). Media disseminates political rhetoric with its own framing which influences public opinion and their behavior (Sharma, 2022). Populist leaders extensively use media to promote their political agendas (Ernst, Engesser & Esser, 2017; Stromback & DeVereese, 2017). Donald Trump used populist rhetoric in presidential campaign in 2016 US presidential election using media to his advantage. Oliver and Rahn (2016) analyze that Trump's election campaign stood by populist rhetoric characterizing simplification of complex issues, anti-elitism and nationalism. They conducted his speeches' content analysis. The analysis showed how populism became a powerful tool in shaping the dynamics of the 2016 US election.

Pakistan is a country where political narratives are being shaped on media (Nasir, 2025). Previous studies in Pakistani perspective show that politicians create political divide among people by using populist rhetoric (Khan & Rehman, 2023). In the modern era, politician approach the media for their agendas and sometimes media approach them for the coverage. Mainstream media mostly focuses on difference between political parties in Pakistan rather than on social issues and biased news instigate political conflict that leads to political polarization, and media and political elites are the causes of political polarization (Sadiq, 2024). The present study explores the extent of coverage of populist rhetoric in leading Pakistani Urdu and English newspapers that can be the major cause of political polarization.

**RQ1.** *What is the extent of coverage of populist rhetoric in the leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan?*

Mass media perform three functions watchdog, policy making (Nasir, 2025), and educating for change and modernization (Schramm, 1964). Populist political communication attracts media's attention due to its problematic relation to democracy, sensationalism, and conflict driven nature (Moffitt, 2019; Mazzoleni, 2008). and people are dominant actors of politics in populism and elites (who control the principal institutions) are demonized (Waisbord, 2018). The challengers to populism are considered and criticized as anti-democrat because populists believe in post-truth politics such as interpretation over evidence, emotion over reason, and belief over fact (Jutel, 2018). Populists use radicalized sensationalism (Hopmann, et al., 2024). political and social issue are framed in emotional and conflict lenses in Pakistani media landscape (Hussain, Wani, & Khan, 2022). Media in Pakistan is in developing phase which is not functioning as watchdog due to its censorship which limit its ability to perform in national development and private news channels in Pakistan frequently sensationalize topics like politics, crime and terrorism and it drew a high viewer engagement (Riaz, Kalid & Mirza, 2012). Populist leaders use media to

convey anti-elite messages by politicizing emotions (Torre, 2010). Urdu and English press are different in news making due to their audience; English press addresses the elites of the country while Urdu press reaches to the masses (Shakoor, Siddiqui, Idrees, & Murtaza, 2023). Anwer et al., 2022) analyzed the populist coverage Pakistani political parties in English press. Findings suggested that PTI used more populist communication, and newspapers covered its anti-elite narrative and PMLN as corrupt party. The comparative analysis showed that "The News" gave more coverage to the populist narrative than "Dawn". The results of this study proved that Pakistani press gave more coverage to populist narrative of PTI.

Aligned with RQ1. Of the present study, the following hypotheses were tested to examine the extent of media coverage devoted to populist rhetoric.

**RH1.** *The extent of coverage of populist rhetoric in Urdu newspapers will be more than the English newspapers in Pakistan.*

## 2.2 Framing of Populist Political Communication

Entman (1993) defines that "Media framing refers to the way media outlets select and highlight certain aspects of reality while downplaying others". It shapes how audiences perceive and interpret news and political events. Framing is important elements in the case of populist rhetoric used in political communication by the leaders because populism often relies on narratives, jargons and sometime, empty signifiers for the political use (Moffitt, 2016). It is important to investigate that how leading press in Pakistan frame political narratives helps in analyzing the impact of populist frames on public opinion and political polarization. Media is a powerful political actor, plays an intermediary role between leaders and masses, and its editorial policies and frames can be biased (Entman, 1993). Traditional agenda setting deals with salience of an object while the attribute agenda focuses on properties and traits of candidates that compromise an object in a political issue (McComb, 2014). Hyun and Moon (2016)

investigate, how partisan TV news channels (NBC, CNN, and Fox News) influence public opinion of U.S. presidential candidates through “attribute agenda-setting”, a process where media emphasizes certain attributes of candidates, shaping how viewers evaluate them. Attribute agenda setting posits that media prioritize some kind of attributes in their news that last in public minds. Results showed that Fox News viewers are more likely to view Republican candidates favorably due to positive attribute framing, while CNN and NBC viewers lean towards Democratic candidates. It also highlights that media framing not only sets the agenda by highlighting particular issue but also contributes to polarization by consistently presenting candidates in a favorable or unfavorable stance.

Yasmin Jamali, Ghazala Shoukat, and Rameez Ali Mahesar (2021) examines the democratic role of Pakistani media (Dawn, Daily Jang, and Daily Express, The News International) focusing on news coverage of the 2018 General Elections. To assess how media portray socio-political issues, debates, and democratic practices, the framing theory was used by researchers. The results indicate that over qualitative debates on democracy, Pakistani media often sensationalizes news, prioritize drama and superficiality. The findings about sensationalism and simplification of complex issues like democratic norms and its implication inform understanding the present study how media framing contributes to political polarization. Their recommendations provide insight into the present study’s problem statement as populism provokes sensationalism and sensationalist media coverage can exacerbate political polarization that deepen the political division.

**RQ2.** *How do the leading English and Urdu press frame populist political communication of major political parties of Pakistan? (favorable, unfavorable, or neutral towards populist rhetoric).*

**RQ3.** *Which populist dimension (anti-elitism, people-centrism, national sovereignty) is most dominant in the coverage of populist political*

*communication in leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan?*

Swati Vishwanathan (2016) conducted a study “A Quantitative Content Analysis of Media Coverage of Obamacare Rollout in the Red and Blue Nation: Texas and Massachusetts” in politically opposing states, Texas (a red state) and Massachusetts (a blue state). Its main focus was framing of rollout of “the Affordable Care Act” (ACA) known as Obamacare. A quantitative content analysis indicated that coverage was largely critical and focused more on critiques of Obamacare as a federal health law than on the online insurance marketplace. The geographical difference was highlighted in the coverage. For comparative analysis of how press in states resisted Obamacare to roll out, largely circulated newspapers (two of each state) from politically polarized states. “Boston Globe” and “Boston Herald” from Massachusetts, and “Dallas Morning News” and “Houston Chronicle” from Texas were selected. The findings revealed that 90.6% of articles focused on website rather than ACA, criticizing Obamacare health insurance as federal health law. The tone of coverage varied between states Texas and Massachusetts. This study exemplifies how political leanings affect media framing of government policies, similar to how Press in Pakistan may frame populist political rhetoric based on their political bias. Pakistani press may similarly exhibit variations in framing political rhetoric, particularly around populist leaders and their agendas, just as the U.S. media showed bias in framing Obamacare. The following hypothesis were tested to examine favorable populist frames.

**RH2:** *Leading Urdu newspapers are more likely to employ favorable framing while covering the populist political communication compared to leading English newspapers.*

**RH3:** *The coverage of populist rhetoric in both leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan increased after the No Confidence Motion compared to before.*

**RH4.** *Among the three populist dimensions, anti-elitism is likely to be the most dominant in*

*the coverage of populist political communication in leading press of Pakistan.*

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

Framing generally refers to the process of structuring news story in specific perspective of reality (Entman (1993). To understand populist political communication 'Framing Theory' provide a critical foundation as it explains how media constructs information to influence public perception. Many scholars (Matthes & Schumck 2017; Busby et al. 2019; Engesser et al. 2017; Ramasubramanian, 2017; Akkerman et al. 2017) analyzed framing effects of populism by focusing how media frames influence attitudes, polarization and political behavior.

Framing refers to the method of conceptually and factually organizing news items that communicate proposed narrative (Maslog et al., 2006). To fully understand framing multiple and competing theoretical perspectives are necessary (D'Angelo, 2002). Under a single framework various strategies of news framing need to be unified (Entman, 1993). By selecting limited number issue media structure them in terms of relative importance (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Media framing influence audience interpretation of the issue. Framing is often seen as second level of agenda setting process highlighting the notion of "How to Think" instead of "what to think". Within this perspective, the present study uses the concept of framing in the context of populist rhetoric in the leading press of Pakistan.

### 3. Methodology

The researcher employed qualitative as well as quantitative content analysis techniques in the present investigation. Quantitative analysis enabled systematic examination of political news stories (front page) to categorize different framing strategies used in leading press while qualitative content analysis provided an in-depth exploration of how populist communication was framed in political communication. Content analysis help uncover deeper meanings by identifying key themes (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Four leading newspapers (*The News International, Dawn, Daily Jang, and Daily Express*) of Pakistan were selected for the purpose. The selection was based on their audience share (Gallop Pakistan, 2017-18) and circulation (Pahore et. al., 2021). These leading newspapers cater to a diverse readership, audience reach, and provide comprehensive coverage. Population of the study was political news published on front pages of selected newspapers. The time period was 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 to 30 September 2022 (six months before "No Confidence Motion" against PTI government and six months after). This was a political crises period in the country, after the success of "no confidence motion" Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) an alliance of political parties took over the government charge. Before and after the selected time both opposition and government parties used populism in their speeches and statements which divide and polarize people (Fukuyama, 2017). All parties including PTI actively rallied and launched political protests against each other using populist rhetoric in their political communication. During the period large scale protests were launched by PTI and political leaders extensively used populist political communication to attract the audience (Sadiq, 2024).

The whole political news story published on front pages of selected English and Urdu newspapers (*Dawn, The News International, Daily Jang, and Daily Express*) was measured as the contextual unit of analysis while each paragraph served as recording unit of analysis. Every single political news story was coded under the anti-elitist, people centric, and people sovereignty frame. A news story containing anti-elitist indicators was coded as an anti-elitist frame. Similarly, the news story that specified the indicators of the people-centric frame was coded as a story of people-centric frame.

Systematic random sampling techniques was employed for the collection of required data, every nth unit, element or subject is selected from a population" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). Since the selected newspapers published daily

and each month contain 30 issues or so making 365 issues for a year for each selected newspaper. Total issues of four newspapers become  $365 \times 4 = 1460$  issues in a year, which was almost

impossible for researcher to analyze due to time limitation. For this purpose, systematic random sampling technique was used for data collection.

**Operationalization of populist political communication**

Dimension/Categories	Populist Frames	Operationalization
<p>1. Anti-Elitism</p>	<p>1. Anti-elite/Anti-Establishment</p>	<p>“Stories that narrate “elites are accused of being morally and financially corrupt, money launderers, tax evaders, incompetent, criminal, lazy, stupid, racist, undemocratic.” They are denied credibility and morality. One political leader blames the other.</p>
	<p>2. Anti- media</p>	<p>Targets mainstream media as being biased or aligned with corrupt elites and political actors frame the media as an untrustworthy institution working against the people’s interests.</p>
	<p>3. Polarization</p>	<p>News stories that single out specific individual (politician) or group (political party) as the cause of societal, political and economic problem, creating common enemy and a threat to political system. Dichotomy between “us vs them” (us as people and them as political elite).</p>
	<p>4. Simplification</p>	<p>Issues in political news stories are framed in binary terms by providing simplistic solution to a complex social, economic, and political issues. Statements in news story often involve black and white narrative. For example, country’s economic struggle is framed as direct consequence of corruption (<i>corrupt politicians are only reason for economic crises</i>).</p>
<p>2. People-Centrism</p>	<p>5. People are virtuous</p>	<p>News story highlights the struggles, rights, and interests of ordinary citizens and emphasize on common people’s merits and rights by stressing the empowerment of ordinary citizens and moral superiority of general public over traditional elites.</p>
	<p>6. Leadership charisma / Personalization</p>	<p>News stories that highlight personality traits like cult, charm, heroism, leaders as savior of the nation, the only virtuous leader who can understand the public pulse were categorized under charismatic leadership rhetoric</p>

3. Nation's sovereignty	7. Foreign interference	Focuses on issues like foreign interference, weak governance, and loss of control over national decisions.
	8. Emotional appeal	Any use of language or imagery in news story that is designed to provoke an emotional response, aim to rally the public around a common cause, rely on emotions like fear, hope, or pride to connect with the audience on political issues. Emotional appeal can be utilized by using religious rhetoric, economic crises or fear of political failure. . (e.g., "This is a fight for the survival of our nation. If we don't rise now, these corrupt elites will destroy everything we hold dear!")
	9. Nationalism	News stories covered the expression of ultra-national positions. Focused on people of proposed community and generated the feelings of motherland. Or news highlighted the stories regarding anti national interest activities of populist leader. The jargons like patriotism, ideal nation and national interests are used in the news.
Topics	1. Politics (National or International).	News stories that discusses national or international politics in which political actors highlights any political matters under cover such as "foreign interference in Pakistani politics" or other country's official discussing Pakistani politics or leader. e.g., "Dynastic Politics Ruining Pakistan's Future" and <i>IMF should not dictate our politics.</i>
Level of Frames	Total numbers of Frames in a single story.	To estimate the total frames in a story, number are assigned to each frame. E.g., 1 for anti-elitist frame, 2 for anti-media frame and 3 for polarization frame and so on.
Type of News story	Political News Stories	A newspaper publishes diverse types of stories on front page, containing hard news and soft news. In this study, only political news stories were included, covering news about political matters, political parties, leaders, Parliament, election commission and politics (national or International).
Time Period	1. Before 2. After No confidence motion	On 10 <sup>th</sup> April 2022 'no confidence motion' was passed against then prime minister Imran Khan which resulted into ceasing to hold the office of PM. The time period for content analysis of the study was six months before 'no confidence motion' and

		<p>six months after ‘no confidence motion’ as all political parties in Pakistan rallied against each other.</p> <p>October 2021 to March 2022 was considered as “before no confidence motion” time and from April 2022 to September 2022 as “after no confidence motion” time period.</p>
Tone	1. Favorable	<p>If the news story aligns with populism narrative, portrays populist leaders positively and reinforces their political agenda, uses praise filled language, highlights political leader as savior of the nation, promotes “us vs them” narrative, directly uses leaders’ catchphrases, frames opposition parties as self-serving elites, and echoes anti-establishment sentiments, then it has favorable tone. (e.g., <i>Massive crowds rally in support of Imran Khan as he vows to free Pakistan from corruption</i>)</p>
	2. Unfavorable	<p>If the news story challenges populist narrative, using critical language (e.g., <i>Khan’s confrontational politics deepens crisis</i>), covers criticism on populist leaders from experts, civil society and media, then a news story has a unfavorable tone towards populist rhetoric.</p>
	3. Neutral	<p>If a news story does not use populist rhetoric, gives a balance coverage, avoids emotive language, sticks to facts instead of slogans, avoids charged words like “hero, dictator, savior or threat, then the news story has a neutral tone.</p>

**3.1 Inter-coder reliability**

Inter-coding reliability was measured by using Cohen’s Kappa (for two coders) in SPSS 26.

Coders were taught and explained in detail in about all other categories so that they could code without any ambiguity.

**Table: 3.1 Intercoder Reliability (Cohen’s Kappa) Results**

Measure	Value	Interpretation
Cohen’s Kappa (k)	0.827	Almost perfect agreement
Asymptotic Standard Error	0.058	Precision of estimate
Approximate T-value	8.298	Test static for significance
Significance (p-value)	0.000	Statistically significant
N of valid cases	100	Number of news stories coded

Cohen’s Kappa coefficient verified intercoder reliability. The coding scheme appeared to be consistent in 100 valid cases. Two coders ensured that categorization of populist rhetoric in news stories was objective and reproducible, and the results validated the robustness of the content analysis with p-value (0.000) which indicated the reliability of coding scheme.

**4. Findings**

The sample of the study was 785 political news stories of front pages of four leading newspapers of Pakistan during October 2021 to September

2022. Dawn 170 (21.7%), The News International 191 (24.3%), Daily Jang 209 (26.6%), and Daily Express 205 (27.4%). Statistics highlights that leading Urdu newspapers provided more coverage to political news (54%) in their front pages than leading English newspapers (46%) of Pakistan.

**4.1 Coverage of Populist Rhetoric**

**RQ1.** What is the extent of coverage of populist rhetoric in the leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan?

Newspaper	News Stories With Populist Frames	News Stories Without Populist Frames	Total News Stories
Dawn	104 (61.1%)	66 (38.9%)	170 (100%)
The News International	143 (74.9%)	48 (25.1%)	191 (100%)
Daily Jang	164 (78.5%)	45 (21.5%)	209 (100%)
Daily Express	163 (75.8%)	52 (24.2%)	215 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>574 (73.1%)</b>	<b>211 (26.9%)</b>	<b>785 (100%)</b>

Table 4.1 presents the frequency distribution of political news stories with and without populist frames in leading press of Pakistan. Out of 785 news stories 574 (73.1%) contained populist frames while 211 (26.9%) were without populist frames. Dawn exhibited balanced coverage with having lowest number news with populist frames (61.1%), on the contrary Daily Jang had the highest proportion of political news stories

(78.5%) with populist frames in its political communication followed by Daily Express (75.8%) news stories having incorporated populist rhetoric. As for as English press was concerned, The News International (74.9%) were on higher side than Dawn. Comparatively, leading Urdu press exhibited higher number of political news stories on the front pages with

populist frames than leading English press in Pakistan.

Overall, these findings indicate that populist rhetoric in news framing was a dominant

characteristic in political news coverage across all the four selected newspapers.

**Table: 4.2**  
Level of frames

	News Stories	Populist Frames	Mean Frame per Story
English Press	361	489	489/361 = 1.35
Urdu Press	424	731	732/424 = 1.73
Total	785	1220	1220/785 = 1.56

Table 4.2 Indicated that in total 785 political news stories 1220 populist frames appeared in leading all four selected newspapers of Pakistan. The mean number of populist frame per story in Urdu press is 1.73 (60%) which is higher than leading English press with mean value 1.35 (40%) populist frames per story. It indicates a greater

prevalence of populist rhetoric in leading Urdu press of Pakistan. The mean number of populist frames per story in Urdu newspapers was higher than the English newspapers, indicated a greater prevalence of populist rhetoric in Urdu press of Pakistan.

**RH1:** Thee extent of coverage of populist rhetoric in Urdu newspapers will be more than the English newspapers in Pakistan”,

**Table: 4.3**  
Independent Sample t-test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T	Df	Sig.	Mean Difference	p-value	95% confidence Interval	
F	Sig						Lower	Upper
6.750	.010	-3.516	782.912	0.000	0.372	0.000	-0.579	-.164

The Levene’s test for equality of variances resulted in F = 6.750, p = 0.010, indicating that the variances between the two groups are not equal. The mean difference -0.372 suggested that Urdu newspapers contained 0.372 more populist frames per story on average than English newspapers. The statistically significance difference between the two language groups was t (782.912) = 3.516 with p-value = 0.000 and 95% confidence interval (-0.579, -0.164) had confirmed that difference was statistically meaningful and did not occur by chance. Hence, the p-value was below the 0.05 threshold which was the evidence to strong empirical support for

**RH1.** This suggested that leading Urdu press of Pakistan, compared to English press, exhibit a significantly higher degree of populist rhetoric in their news coverage, supporting the mentioned hypothesis.

**4.2 Slant of Newspapers**

**RQ2.** How do the leading English and Urdu press frame populist political communication of major political parties of Pakistan? (favorable, unfavorable, or neutral towards populist rhetoric).

**Table: 4.4**  
Slant/Tone of Newspapers

Newspapers	Favorable	Unfavorable	Neutral	Total
Dawn	62 (36.5%)	15 (8.8%)	93 (54.7%)	170 (100%)
The News International	110 (57.6%)	64 (7.3%)	67 (35.1%)	191 (100%)
Daily Jang	141 (67.5%)	2 (1.0%)	66 (31.6%)	209 (100%)
Daily Express	131 (60.9%)	2 (0.9%)	82 (38.1%)	215 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>444 (56.6%)</b>	<b>33 (4.2%)</b>	<b>308 (39.2%)</b>	<b>785 (100%)</b>

Table 4.4 demonstrates slant of four leading newspapers of Pakistan towards populist political rhetoric. Urdu language newspapers exhibited a higher percentage of favorable framing. Daily Jang with 67.5% favorable, only 1.0% unfavorable and 38.1% neutral. While Daily Express had 60.9% favorable coverage, less than 1% unfavorable and 38.1% neutral coverage.

While leading English press also showed leaning towards populist framing but less than leading Urdu press. The News International 57.6% with favorable framing, 7.3% unfavorable and 35.1% neutral while Dawn gave a balance coverage with 36.5% with favorable, 8.8% as unfavorable, and 54.7% as neutral.

**Table: 4.5**  
Slant/Tone of Newspapers

	Favorable	Unfavorable	Neutral	Total	Chi-square
English	172 (47.6%)	29 (8.0%)	160 (44.3%)	361 (100%)	p-value- .000 df - 2 value- 37.112a
Urdu	272 (64.2%)	4 (0.9%)	148 (34.9%)	424 (100%)	
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>444 (56.6%)</b>	<b>33 (4.2%)</b>	<b>308 (39.2%)</b>	<b>785 (100%)</b>	

Table 4.5 indicated a predominance of favorable slant towards populist rhetoric framing in political news coverage across both English and Urdu press of Pakistan. Out of 444 favorable news stories overall, 272 appeared in Urdu newspapers (Daily Jang and Daily Express), while 172 were published in English newspapers (dawn

and The News International). The trend suggested that Urdu newspapers tend to portray political news favorably loaded with populist rhetoric than the English newspapers.

**RH2:** “Leading Urdu newspapers are more likely to employ favorable framing while covering the

*populist political communication compared to leading English newspapers*

To test the hypothesis (RH2) Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. The hypothesis was accepted resulting with the p-value .000 which was less than 0.05, indicating statistically significant relationship between newspapers language (English and Urdu) and the framing of populist

rhetoric and ensured the Chi-Square assumption was met.

#### 4.3 Dominant Populist Dimension

RQ3. Which populist dimension (anti-elitism, people-centrism, national sovereignty) is most dominant in the coverage of populist political communication in leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan?

**Table: 4.6**  
**Dominant Populist Dimension**

Populist Dimension	Frequency	Percentage	Chi-Square
Anti-elitism	348	44.3%	$\chi^2 = 223.209$ df = 3 p = .000
People-centrism	112	14.3%	
Nation's Sovereignty	87	11.1%	
News stories without populist frames	328	30.3%	
Total News Stories	785	100%	

Table: 4.6 illustrates that anti-elitism emerges as the most dominant populist dimension, appearing in 348 (44.3%) analyzed political news stories in leading English and Urdu newspapers of Pakistan. The findings also supported RH4 “Among the three populist dimensions, anti-elitism is likely to be the most dominant in the coverage of populist political communication in leading press of Pakistan”. The result ( $\chi^2 = 223.209$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .000$ ) indicated that distribution of populist dimensions in news coverage was statistically having significant difference. These findings suggested that Pakistani leading press largely structured and frame its coverages around opposition to political elite rather than direct appeal. The criticism of ruling elites and establishment remained a central narrative of political discourse in Pakistan was proven with the results of significant dominance of anti-elitism in media coverage.

#### 5. Discussion/Conclusion

Findings indicated that both Urdu and English newspapers gave greater coverage to populist narratives. Anti-elitist, polarization, and people

centric frames appeared more frequently, suggesting that political news stories often emphasized societal and political division in Pakistan. The political news coverage also regularly criticized elites being corrupt and incompetent, by highlighting ‘will of the people’. There was a potential difference between Urdu and English press in editorial policies and ideological leaning which helped us to understand the role of media in shaping public perception of political discourse through populist narratives. The higher proportion of favorable political news to populist framing in Urdu newspapers indicated a less critical approach and a more populist political narrative aligned approach. Theory of Populism was constructed around three core dimensions Anti-elitism, People-centrism, and National Sovereignty. Anti-elitism was a dominant dimension with frames like anti-elitist, anti-media, polarization and simplification among other two dimensions. Framing theory explains how issues are constructed and interpreted by audience. This study found clear evidence of strategic framing in populist news content. The study concludes that

both Urdu and English newspapers gave greater coverage to populist narratives. Anti-elitist, polarization, and people centric frames appeared more frequently, suggesting that political news stories often emphasized societal and political division in Pakistan.

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