

Political Communication and Post-Election Public Opinion Formation in Pakistan: Effect of PTI Government's Policies on Youth Voters

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to observe the effect of Pakistan Tahreek-i- Insaaf (PTI) government's policies on its voters almost two years after General Elections 2018. Data was collected from PTI's youth voters of Lahore through survey (n=422) using the instrument of questionnaire comprised of 12 item. While for the qualitative part of the study Z test was applied. The study results predicted that the vote bank of PTI gradually decreased from timeline 2018 to 2020 as the the proportion of PTI voters has declined from 0.83 per cent to 0.67 per cent respectively. However, regarding overall policies of the PTI government, party voters gauged PTI policies as 'normal' and they wanted to give time to the regime expecting better output. The government's monetary and exchange rate policy has been seen as the worst part of the party performance so far by the voters while tax reforms, accountability and foreign policy on Iran and Kashmir have been termed as 'excellent'.

Keywords: *Political communication, PTI government policies, post-election public opinion, PTI Lahore voters.*

Introduction and Background

Political agents' exchange of messages about the political issues are considered as political communication. Most of the time the acts of political leaders are also considered political communication. When general public exchange thoughts on some political agendas and issues in their social circles, this is also termed as political communication (Schulz, 2015).

On the basis of political communication public have a general view point about the prevailing government and this construct is called public opinion making. Simplistically, public opinion is the general publics' narrative related to government and political issues. However, public opinion is complex terminology according to researchers and they have various perspectives about public opinion. One aspect is to consider individual point of view. On the other hand, one opposite

aspect is the view point of organized groups, government leaders and media tycoons.

An opinion is a stance of general public on specific problem, policy or political party. The opinion can be positive, negative or neutral/undecided. Public opinion is often made concrete through questions asked on polls. Politicians and people routinely cite public opinion polls to justify their support or opposition to public policies. Candidates use public opinion strategically to establish themselves as front-runners or underdogs in campaigns. Interest groups and political parties use public opinion polls to promote their causes (Paletz, Cook & Owen, 2013).

Political parties set a narrative for public by organizing and structuring choices among different alternatives. General public is normally influenced on a point of interaction between public's motivations and news gathered from political environment (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014).

Historically two political parties and military dictators have ruled Pakistan since its inception after partition from India in 1947. During democratic regimes either Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) or Pakistan People's Party (PPP) were remained in power in power both for three regimes each. For the first time in the history of the country a third party namely Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) made its government in the center as well as in three out of four provinces after General Election 2018. The leader of PTI Imran Khan, a cricketer turned politician won election on the basis of a new slogan *Naya Pakistan* (new country) based on overhauling reforms agenda comprising accountability, 50,00,000 homes for poor and low income people, new employments, debt free economy, police reforms, uniform education system etc (PTI Manifesto, 2018).

However, soon after taking charge of the government affairs, the party leadership gave a narrative that the country was facing far serious nature of economically adverse condition than their expectation and they could not deliver as per their reforms agenda except accountability of opposition leaders. The country witnessed serious economic crisis as dollar price went up, petrol and electricity prices increased and inflation rate increased (Dawn, 2019).

There is a general notice that the PTI government mostly remained unable to deliver as per the party manifesto and election campaign commitments with the voters Pakistan. Rather, in many cases the party leadership had to take decision exactly opposite to what they had promised just before General Elections 2018. Opposition parties popularise such a practice on part of PTI leadership as politics of U-turns and failure. There was a general impression in the public that this political communication negatively affected PTI voters.

This paper aims at analysing the effect of PTI government's policies on the general voters including its highly committed voters, less committed voters and undecided voters. The study would also determine whether there is any decrease in the party popularity graph and of so what are key factors which contributed to this effect. This study aims would contribute in trend analysis of popularity of PTI government and its policies. This study will helpful in anticipating upcoming elections trends. This research work is worthy for the comparing public opinion formation after GE 2018 about PTI narrative and its actual economic and social policies.

1.1. Research Questions

Following research questions were the focus of the study:

Q1: What is the effect of PTI government policies on its voters?

Q2: Whether PTI vote bank decreased or increased during the timeline 2018 to 2020

Q3: If popularity graph decreased, which policies were mainly criticized by voters?

1. Literature Review

Political leaders and political parties have the tactics and framing techniques to upgrade the consistency in general public opinion and their roots towards any political party (Petersen, Slothuus & Togeby, 2008).

Public evaluations are very much important for the sustainability of a political party. The ultimate power of a political leader depends on voters' after election evaluations. Post-election assessments are very much important, which are normally ignored by the researchers. Commitment is an important moderator variable affecting post-decision evaluation. The high committed voter is more strongly tied with the political candidate than low committed voter. Low-loyal voters have less preferences regarding the political party. Post-election time and strategies are referred as "honey moon" period when political elite cannot do negative especially in the eyes of his voters. The honey moon period can be considered as a commitment effect (Cross & Taylor, 1983).

One important factor is the concept of "Halo Effect" for the post-election evaluations about a political party. Halo effect is basically a rational preconception through which observers' general perception about a man, brand or party influences the observers' cognition about that character or party. A person's attractiveness has also been found to produce a halo effect in a sense that perceptions of attractiveness may affect judgements related to personality traits. There is impact of "halo effects" of on the voter's decisions and evaluations about political parties. Halo effect is a psychological bias has been observed in decision making in different fields. Evaluation and decision making process is a difficult concept but "halo effect" concept cannot be ignored in the voting behavioral process (Nayak & Pakrashi, 2015).

2.2. Theoretical framework

Cognitive Dissonance means when people have cognitive distress with actions or behaviors, then a situation occurs when your thoughts conflicts with your behaviors or actions, results sometimes, in the alteration of behavior (Festinger, 1957).

Cognitive dissonance is also used to make decisions in opting different choices, to decide what to loose and what to acquire. According to this theory we have a self-conscious voice to do all our actions and decision in a balance and best way and to restrain from disharmony (or dissonance), this is the basic root of cognitive consistency. When there is imbalance or something awkward in behavior and attitudes, something must be changed to decrease dissonance.

Motivated reasoning is phenomenon studied in cognitive science and social psychology that uses emotionally-biased reasoning to produce justifications or make decisions that are most desired rather than those that are most logical, while still reducing cognitive dissonance. In other words, motivated reasoning is the "tendency to find arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe to be stronger than arguments for conclusions we do not want to believe". It can lead to forming and clinging to false beliefs despite substantial evidence to the contrary. The desired outcome acts as a filter that affects evaluation of scientific evidence and of other people.

2. Method

This is a quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to conduct this study.

Mainly the data was collected through survey, which is widely used tool of data collection in quantitative research. The questionnaire was developed keeping in view the following eight policy areas of PTI government:

- PTI govt tax reform policy
- Accountability policy
- Policy regarding the curtailment of NAB powers
- Monetary and exchange rate policy
- Foreign policy in the context of Middle East
- Policy on Kashmir issue
- Economic policy
- U-turn policy media policy

In the last question respondents were questioned about the vote casting of which political party and the Z-test was applied to measure this qualitative part of the study.

For the quantitative part, a purpose-built questionnaire was prepared and pretested to examine its reliability. The questionnaire comprised three demographic questions, two basic questions about party affiliation and level of commitment with the party and 13 general questions about satisfaction level of voters.

The population of this research comprised the registered youth voters of Lahore who voted PTI in General Elections 2018. Lahore district registered the largest number of voters 5.3 million in 2018 while keeping in view the 60 percent youth population the youth voters were estimated around 3.1million in the city. The technique of random purposive sampling was applied to reach out the sample of 522 while for the qualitative part the sample size was 161 as less responses were received for this section of the questionnaire because generally response rate remains low in qualitative parts of research or open-ended questions.

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3. Discussion and Analysis

While using the quantitative and qualitative research techniques, Z-test was applied to measure the qualitative part of the study while for the quantitative part simple percentile score was measured.

No.	Questions	Poor	Below Average	Avg	Above Avg	Excellent
1	PTI govt. tax reforms policy is good for the development of country	16.8	11.2	11.8	25.5	34.8
2	PTI govt.'s accountability policy is beneficial for the country.	17.4	9.9	14.3	23.6	34.8
3	Changes in NAB ordinance to curtail its powers are good	17.4	15.5	21.1	28	18
4	PTI govt has created ease of doing business.	16.8	20.5	19.3	24.2	19.3
5	PTI govt. monetary and exchange rate policy	24.2	28	14.9	17.4	15.5
6	PTI govt. health policy is good.	17.4	12.4	18	28.6	23.6
7	PTI govt. education policy is favorable	13.7	20.5	18	27	20
8	PTI govt. foreign policy on IRAN is satisfactory.	9.9	11.2	19.9	26.1	32.9
9	PTI govt. policy on Kashmir is good	15.5	11.2	19.3	18.6	35.4
10	PTI govt. economic policy	14.3	18	22.4	24.2	21.1
11	U-turn policy of PTI is good.	20.5	17.4	24.2	20.5	17.4
12	PTI'S media policy is good.	21.7	9.9	16.1	25.5	26.7

This study was focused on youth to gauge the PTI party's policies after their elected government. With a sample of 422 respondents the researcher has taken the political view point from students about the PTI government policies.

Regarding tax reforms which PTI government has made during the 1st year of governance, 16.8% out of total 422 responded termed as "poor". A total 23 % of the respondents gauged tax policy as average and below average. 25% of total 422 said the tax policies is good. And taking the lead, 35% respondents mentioned PTI government policy as an excellent policy for the welfare of country.

The second question was related to the accountability process of PML-N, PPP and other parties who was declared by Imran Khan as corrupt and to be accounted for even before elections. 17.4% of the total responded as poor accountability policy whether 9.9% expressed as below average policy. 14.3% of the respondents remained neutral on the accountability policy. 23.6% gauged as good and 34.87% expressed accountability policy as excellent policy of PTI government.

The third question was about curtailment of NAB powers by PTI government. 17.4% of the responded strongly disagreed on this NAB policy in benefit of government. 15.5% respondents ranked as below average the NAB policy. 14.3% were neutral while 23.6% ranked it as good policy. 18% of the respondents said NAB policy of the government is excellent.

Respondents were asked about the creation of 'Ease of business' by PTI government. 17.4% totally disagreed this concept. 20.5% ranked this question as

below average. 19.3% remained neutral. 24.2% agreed to this statement and 19.3% ranked it as excellent.

24.2% said PTI govt. monetary and exchange rate policy as poor. 28% was disagreed on the said policy. 14.9% were neutral on this question whether 17.4% were agreed on this statement and 15.5% were strongly agreed on this monetary policy of government.

When queried about health policy, 17.4% ranked it as poor policy. 20.5% disagreed with education policy and 18% remained neutral. 27% of total 422 respondents satisfied and ranked it a good policy of PTI government while 20% of respondents ranked it as excellent policy.

When probed about PTI’s foreign policy on IRAN issue, 9.9% stated it as poor policy. 11.2% regarded as below average policy. 19.9% were neutral and 26.1% expressed as a good government policy. 33% of respondents said it is an excellent foreign policy on IRAN issue and strongly in favor of country.

Policy on Kashmir was very poor according to 9.9% of respondents whether 11.2% considered Kashmir policy below average. 19.3% were neutral and 18.6% stated it as good policy rather 35.4% totally agreed on Kashmir policy as an excellent policy.

When asked about economic policy 14.3% responded as poor policy. 18% disagreed and 22.4% were neutral. 24.2% respondents were considering it as good policy and 21.1% respondents marked it as excellent policy.

About u-turn policy, 20.5% strongly disagreed and 17.4% considered it as below average policy. 24.2% was neutral on u-turn policy of Imran Khan. 20.5% considered it a good policy and 17.4% gauged it an excellent policy.

PTI government’s media policy was poor according to 21.7% of respondents and 9.9% considered it below average policy. 16.1% respondents were neutral. 25.5% agreed on media policy and 26.7% considered it an excellent policy.

PTI youth voters of Lahore believed that overall policies are average. Although PTI’s vote bank is decreasing from the timeline 2018 to 2020 but government policies are gauged as overall ‘normal’ by the voters. As the Mean is 3.26 which is greater than 3 so the policies overall effect is normal.

4.1. Analysis of qualitative question:

If today is election day, which political party or personality you will vote for?

Table 1: Z-test for comparison of proportions

Time	Sample size (N)	PTI Vote	Proportions	p-hat	q-hat	std. error	z-value	p val
In 2018	161	133	0.83	0.76	0.24	0.05	2.91	0.00
In 2020	122	82	0.67					

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There is a significant difference in the favour of PTI vote bank from Timeline 2018 ($p_1=0.83$) to Timeline 2020 ($P_2= 0.67$) conditions; $z= 2.91$ and $p = 0.000$. As p value is less than 0.01 so the vote bank of PTI is decreased as compare to the last election at 1% level of significance.

1. Conclusion

The study "Political communication and post-election public opinion formation in Pakistan: Effect of PTI government's policies on its voters" was conducted by survey of PTI youth voters in Lahore. The main research question of the study was: *If today is election day, which political party or personality you will vote for?* Out of 161 respondents, 82 responded in the favor of PTI and they wanted to give another chance to Prime Minister Imran Khan, if elections held in 2020. In 2018 out of these 422 respondents a majority (133) were in favor of PTI. There is a clear unfavorable condition for PTI popularity. The study revealed that the proportion of PTI voter in GE 2018 was high as compared to the proportion of voters in 2020.

The study results revealed that the vote bank of PTI is gradually decreasing from timeline 2018 to 2020. The popularity graph of PTI is declining as compared to 2018. PTI is weakening its position in circles of voters.

However, regarding the overall policies of PTI government, people also wanted to give some time to PTI for better output. So the voters are gauging PTI policies 'normal'.

From the overall analysis, average of 35% respondents were strongly satisfied on government's tax reform policies, accountability policy and Iran foreign policy and Kashmir policy. 40 respondents considered monetary policy as the worst policy whereas 25 respondents considered exchange rate and monetary policy as excellent policy.

So the overall graph of PTI government policies is average or normal which is complementing with the current discussions of public spheres that most people are looking forward for PTI policies for next some more years. People are ready to give more time to rank the performance of government and this argument is also supported by the current study.

On the other hand, there is a significant difference in the favour of PTI vote bank from 2018 to 2020. Voters are shifting from PTI to other parties or towards decision of "no vote casting" behaviour but this is with the 1% level of significance. Out of 122 voters only 82 voters are willing to cast their votes again to PTI. The proportion in 2018 of vote casting to PTI was 0.83 which is decreased to the proportion of 0.67% in current year (2020).

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