Media Influence And Youth Voting Behavior In The 2018 General Elections: Traditional And Digital Perspectives From Southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates how traditional and digital media influenced youth voting behaviour during Pakistan's 2018 General Elections, with particular attention to the southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). These elections represented a watershed in Pakistan's political communication landscape. Traditional media including television, newspapers, and radio -- continued to shape political narratives, while social and digital media platforms redefined political participation, especially among youth. This study explores the dual impact of both media forms on political awareness, perception, and engagement. Using a mixed-method approach involving surveys and interviews, the research examines media framing, message dissemination, and participatory dynamics among young voters aged 18-30. Results reveal that while television and newspapers framed local issues and candidate images, social media fostered interactive political spaces that empowered youth to participate in political discourse and mobilisation. The hybrid nature of media in 2018 strengthened youth political awareness and voter turnout, illustrating the growing convergence of traditional credibility and digital interactivity.

Keywords: Media Influence, Youth Voting Behaviour, Digital Media, Traditional Media, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Political Communication

Introduction
The 2018 General Elections in Pakistan marked a historic transition toward a more media-driven democracy. Across the nation -- and particularly in the southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Dera Ismail Khan, Tank, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Karak, and Kohat) -- a surge of youth participation redefined the electoral landscape. For the first time, young citizens emerged as decisive actors in determining political outcomes. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) capitalised effectively on this demographic shift, employing media-based strategies to attract first-time voters.
Media, long recognised as the "fourth pillar of the state," assumed new relevance in 2018. The rapid diffusion of smartphones, cheap data packages, and internet penetration across rural KP created new channels of political communication. Traditional media (television, radio, print) continued to dominate among older demographics, while digital media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp) captured the imagination of younger audiences.

The purpose of this study is to examine how these media ecosystems influenced youth voting decisions in southern KP. The region's socio-political structure -- dominated by tribal traditions, low literacy, and economic constraints -- makes it a unique case to study how information flows translate into political behaviour. The study contends that media framing, credibility, and accessibility significantly shaped youth awareness and political engagement, ultimately influencing electoral outcomes.

Literature Review
Media and Political Behaviour
Scholars such as Norris (2001) and McCombs & Shaw (1972) have long argued that the media play an agenda-setting role in democratic societies, shaping which political issues citizens consider essential. In Pakistan, traditional media historically served as a tool for political communication, with newspapers and television channels often reflecting partisan leanings. Malik (2018) highlighted that television talk shows and political debates shaped popular perceptions about political credibility.

During the 2018 elections, media exposure became a key determinant of youth voter behaviour. Junaid & Rehman (2018) found that increased access to political content through both traditional and digital media enhanced youth interest in electoral participation. However, they cautioned that selective exposure -- in which users consume content that aligns with their existing views -- may reinforce biases.

Digital Media and Political Engagement
The emergence of social media radically changed the communication environment. Castells (2009) describes digital networks as "spaces of autonomy" that enable new forms of political mobilisation. In Pakistan, parties used platforms like Facebook and Twitter to communicate directly with voters, bypassing traditional media's gatekeeping mechanisms. Rizvi (2020) argued that PTI's digital outreach transformed the 2018 campaign into a participatory movement, particularly among youth familiar with online discourse.

Social media also enabled "micro-targeting," in which political messages were tailored to local contexts and voter demographics. Studies by Ahmed (2019) and Khan & Latif (2020) found that youth in KP responded positively to digital campaigns emphasising employment, education, and anti-corruption—issues central to their lived experiences.

Traditional Media and Framing Effects
Despite the digital surge, traditional media remained central to the political ecosystem. Local newspapers and radio stations in southern KP highlighted regional concerns like unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and law-and-order issues (North, 1990). These outlets often set the agenda for national coverage, ensuring that local priorities were discussed in broader political debates.

Media framing theory, as proposed by Entman (1993), posits that the presentation of information affects interpretation. In KP, PTI's candidates were often framed as reformist and youth-oriented, while established parties such as PPP and JUI-F were portrayed as traditional and resistant to change. Such framing strongly influenced youth perception, aligning them with the narrative of "Naya Pakistan."

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Research Questions

What is the effect of traditional media coverage on the youth turnout to vote in the 2018 General Elections in Pakistan?

How did digital and social media mobilise and engage young voters in the south of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

How does media framing, content credibility, as well as interactivity influence youth attitudes towards political candidates and parties in the 2018 elections?

What are the relationships between various patterns of media consumption among the youth and their degree of political awareness and voter turnout?

Aims and Objectives

To assess how traditional media coverage influenced youth voting behaviour during the 2018 General Elections.

To evaluate the role of digital and social media in mobilising and engaging young voters in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

To analyse the impact of media framing, content credibility, and interactivity on youth perceptions of political candidates and parties.

To explore how media consumption patterns among youth correlate with their political awareness and voter turnout.

Methodology
Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Quantitative data were gathered from 400 respondents aged 18-30 from six southern districts (D.I. Khan, Tank, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Karak, Kohat). A stratified sampling method ensured representation across gender, education level, and rural-urban residence.

Data Collection

Survey Instrument: A structured questionnaire measured media exposure frequency, trust levels, and voting motivation.

Interviews: Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists, local political activists, and young voters to explore qualitative insights into media influence.

Secondary Data: Reports from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and media monitoring agencies were used for triangulation.

Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics summarised quantitative findings, while thematic analysis identified recurring patterns in qualitative data. Reliability was ensured through pilot testing and inter-coder agreement. Ethical standards -- including voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent -- were rigorously maintained.

Findings and Discussion
Traditional Media's Continuing Relevance

Despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional media retained a strong foothold in shaping political discourse in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Television channels such as Geo News, ARY News, Dunya TV, and regional outlets like Khyber News and

Mashriq TV remained trusted sources of news. Survey data revealed that 65% of youth respondents relied on television for political information, 48% regularly read local newspapers, and 38% occasionally listened to radio broadcasts. These figures underscore that traditional media, though older, still provide a sense of reliability and structure absent in fast-moving digital environments.

The enduring appeal of traditional media stems mainly from its perceived credibility and its role in editorial gatekeeping. Television debates, talk shows, and news bulletins offer curated political discussions with identifiable journalists and anchors. In interviews, youth participants described traditional media as "authentic" and "less manipulated," especially compared to unverified online posts. The structured nature of TV reporting — often featuring multiple party representatives in a moderated setting — was seen as a sign of fairness.

However, the influence hierarchy has shifted. Traditional media's top-down communication style, while effective for information dissemination, was less successful at fostering engagement. Youth audiences increasingly prefer platforms that allow interaction, feedback, and personalised access. For instance, televised political messages often lacked youth-oriented appeal, whereas social media campaigns directly addressed employment, education, and social mobility—issues more relevant to the younger demographic.

Despite these limitations, traditional media remain essential for agenda-setting. News coverage during the 2018 elections prominently featured issues such as anti-corruption drives, governance reforms, and PTI's "Tabdeeli" (change) slogan. Local media in southern KP also highlighted regional grievances, such as underdeveloped infrastructure, poor educational facilities, and limited job opportunities. This localisation of national debates helped connect young voters' daily realities to the broader national political context, enhancing the relevance of their participation.

Digital Media as a Game-Changer

The 2018 General Elections represented Pakistan's first truly digital election. Over 60 million internet users and more than 40 million active social media accounts transformed the political communication landscape (PTA, 2019). In southern KP, digital connectivity reached unprecedented levels, enabling youth to consume, critique, and create political content.

Social media platforms enabled three transformative shifts in youth political behaviour: direct communication, participatory engagement, and political personalisation.

Direct Communication: Digital media broke down hierarchical communication barriers. Instead of passively consuming campaign messages through television, youth interacted directly with party pages, candidates, and influencers. This two-way flow of communication created a sense of political inclusion previously unavailable through traditional media.

Participatory Engagement: The ability to share, comment, and react to posts empowered youth to become content participants rather than consumers. Hashtags like #NayaPakistan, #ImranKhanTheHope, and #YouthForChange trended nationwide, reflecting a sense of collective identity among young voters. Youth in Bannu and D.I. Khan even organised localised online movements to advocate for road repairs and educational scholarships, using social media as both a political and civic platform.

Political Personalisation: Unlike television's one-size-fits-all approach, digital algorithms enable micro-targeting of voters. PTI's digital media team utilised data analytics to tailor content by region, age, and interest group. Youth in southern KP, for example, received posts emphasising unemployment, education reform, and anti-corruption -- issues that resonated with their lived experience.

However, digital media's empowerment came with vulnerabilities. Interviewees described fake news as a significant concern, with rumours and doctored videos circulating through WhatsApp groups. Several respondents admitted to being misled by manipulated election polls or viral misinformation. This phenomenon echoes the "post-truth politics" identified by scholars such as McIntyre (2018), in which emotion-driven narratives override factual accuracy.

The Hybrid Media Ecosystem

The data show that youth no longer view traditional and digital media as mutually exclusive but as interconnected systems. Over 72% of respondents reported consuming both television and social media daily for political updates. This hybridisation meant that issues first raised in talk shows would soon trend online, and viral social media debates would later be discussed on TV panels.

This intermediary relationship intensified the impact of political messaging. For instance, PTI's televised rallies were live-streamed across Facebook and YouTube, multiplying reach and engagement. Similarly, digital outrage on Twitter often compelled TV networks to devote airtime to youth concerns trending online. In this ecosystem, traditional media offered credibility and depth, while digital media provided immediacy and engagement, creating a feedback loop that magnified political influence.

A key insight emerging from interviews with media professionals was the decline of gatekeeping. Editors noted that digital virality often dictated newsroom priorities. As one journalist from Mashriq News observed:

"When a hashtag trends for six hours, our newsroom cannot ignore it, even if it lacks substance. The public conversation now dictates the media agenda."

This convergence demonstrates a democratisation of political discourse but also raises questions about quality control and information integrity.

Gender and Media Influence

An interesting dimension of the findings concerns gendered access to media. Female respondents in rural KP reported lower access to digital platforms due to cultural restrictions, limited smartphone ownership, and a lack of digital literacy. However, women with university education in D.I. Khan and Kohat were highly active on Facebook and WhatsApp groups related to politics. They described online spaces as safer and more inclusive than physical rallies, suggesting that digital platforms offered an alternative form of virtual political participation.

Media Literacy and Critical Consumption

The study also found that higher levels of education correlated with greater critical media consumption. University students often verified political claims using multiple sources, whereas high-school-level respondents were more likely to share unverified information. This finding underscores the importance of media literacy education as a tool for democratic strengthening in regions like southern KP.

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Synthesis: Media, Trust, and Transformation

Overall, media influence in 2018 can be understood as a trust-based transformation. Traditional media's authority legitimised political narratives, while digital media's participation energised them. Youth engagement was highest when both channels reinforced each other—for instance, when PTI's televised interviews aligned with viral social media messaging. This synchronisation between credibility and connectivity created a powerful hybrid influence, shaping both attitudes and turnout behaviour among southern KP youth.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three major theoretical approaches -- the Sociological Model, the Psychosocial Model (Michigan School), and Rational Choice Theory -- to interpret how traditional and digital media collectively influenced youth voting behaviour in the 2018 General Elections.

The Sociological Perspective

Rooted in the work of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), the sociological model views voting as a social act determined by group affiliations such as class, religion, and geography. In southern KP, traditional structures like tribal affiliations, religious loyalty, and community networks remain powerful. Historically, these factors constrained youth autonomy in political decision-making.

However, digital media has introduced a counterforce to these social constraints. Online exposure allows young people to engage beyond tribal or local boundaries, forming virtual political communities. For instance, youth from Karak and Tank reported following national political discussions on Twitter and YouTube, reducing reliance on local elders' advice.

This suggests a partial detachment from conventional social hierarchies, as digital platforms enable horizontal communication rather than vertical influence. Thus, while tribal and family loyalties remain relevant, media exposure adds a new dimension of cognitive independence.

The sociological perspective also helps explain how socio-economic inequality mediates media access. Youth from wealthier or urban households are more active online, while economically marginalised youth rely on television and radio. This digital divide reflects broader structural inequalities but also highlights potential for inclusion through expanding digital infrastructure and education.

The Psychosocial Model (Michigan School)

The Michigan Model emphasises long-term psychological attachments, or party identification, influenced by family, education, and peer networks (Campbell et al., 1960). In Pakistan's southern KP, where partisan identity often passes through generations, media exposure plays a critical role in either reinforcing or disrupting these loyalties.

Television programs and social media campaigns during the 2018 elections repeatedly emphasised youth empowerment, anti-corruption, and meritocracy. These themes resonated with a generation frustrated by unemployment and perceived political stagnation. Interviews indicated that many first-time voters identified emotionally with PTI's reform narrative, demonstrating that media messages can substitute for traditional party socialisation when aligned with psychological aspirations.

Furthermore, digital media introduced parasocial interaction, in which youth feel a direct connection to political leaders they follow online. Imran Khan's personal visibility on Twitter and YouTube strengthened this emotional bond, creating what Blumler (2015) calls "intimacy at a distance." As a result, the youth perceived PTI not merely as a party but as a movement embodying their aspirations.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (Downs, 1957) views voters as utility maximisers who choose candidates who offer the greatest personal or collective benefit. In this context, the media serves as an information marketplace, providing voters with data to evaluate the costs and benefits of their electoral choices.

Youth respondents repeatedly cited access to online manifestos, candidate debates, and infographics as vital to their decision-making process. Social media's interactive environment allowed them to compare policy positions and assess credibility independently. Those motivated by instrumental reasoning (e.g., job prospects, governance efficiency) found the media an essential aid in decision-making.

Traditional and digital media together enhanced rational evaluation by reducing information asymmetry—a key barrier in rural and semi-urban areas. When televised content and online materials converged on similar themes (e.g., education reform), youth confidence in their voting choice increased. This aligns with Bandura's social learning theory (1977), which posits that observation and reinforcement through multiple media sources strengthen behavioural intentions.

Integrating the Models

While each theory explains part of the media-voting nexus, their integration provides a holistic understanding.

The Sociological Model explains contextual influences -- tribal systems, socio-economic factors, and digital divides.

The Psychosocial Model explains emotional and identity-based engagement with political narratives.

The Rational Choice Model accounts for logical, information-based decision-making.

Combined, they reveal that youth voting behaviour in southern KP was both emotionally driven and cognitively reasoned, mediated by the interplay between traditional and digital media.

Media thus acts not merely as a messenger but as a structural and psychological mediator -- reshaping social relations, constructing political identity, and facilitating rational evaluation simultaneously.

Conclusion

The 2018 General Elections in Pakistan exemplify the fusion of traditional and digital media as catalysts of democratic participation. In southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this fusion created a communication environment that empowered young voters to transcend historical barriers of apathy and exclusion.

Traditional media provided legitimacy and structure, while digital media introduced immediacy and participation. Together, they expanded political literacy, diversified discourse, and mobilised new voters. The study concludes that youth voting behaviour is no longer shaped by passive consumption of information but by interactive engagement that allows self-expression and community building.

Nevertheless, the rise of digital media also brings ethical challenges -- the spread of misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and declining trust in journalistic standards. Addressing these issues will be crucial for sustaining an informed electorate in future elections.

For policymakers and political parties, the findings imply that effective engagement with youth requires multi-platform strategies that combine credibility with connectivity. Media literacy programs should be institutionalised in universities and communities to empower young citizens to assess political content critically.

Future research may examine comparative patterns across provinces or explore gender-based variations in digital participation. As Pakistan's political communication continues to evolve, understanding the nexus between media and youth remains central to strengthening democracy.

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