

ELECTIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENTS: UNDERSTANDING THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF PAKISTANI POLITICS

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Abstract

This study explores how ideology shapes electoral behavior and party alignments in contemporary Pakistani politics. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with political activists, university students, and community leaders across Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, alongside a documentary analysis of party manifestos and media discourses from the 2018 and 2024 general elections. The findings reveal that while voters and parties frequently invoke ideological narratives—such as religion, nationalism, and populist reform—electoral choices are often mediated by patronage networks, local power structures, and pragmatic concerns such as economic opportunity and service delivery. Party manifestos display ideological positioning but are often reinterpreted or diluted in practice to accommodate shifting alliances and regional dynamics. Moreover, the rise of social media has amplified ideological polarization, particularly among urban youth, yet this digital discourse rarely translates into consistent voting patterns. The study concludes that ideology in Pakistani elections operates more as a symbolic and mobilizing force than as a consistent framework for political decision-making. By foregrounding lived experiences and discursive practices, this research highlights the complex interplay between ideology, identity, and pragmatism in shaping Pakistan's shifting electoral landscape.

Introduction

Pakistan's political landscape has long been characterized by a complex interplay of ideology, patronage, and identity (Ramzan & Javaid, 2023). While ideological narratives such as religion, nationalism, and populist reform—are frequently invoked in electoral campaigns (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021), their role in shaping voter behavior is often mediated by local power structures, economic considerations, and pragmatic concerns (Jaffrelot, 2015; Hussain, 2018; Ramzan & Khan, 2019). These dynamics have led to a political environment where ideological alignments are fluid, and electoral choices are influenced by a combination of symbolic appeals and material interests (Khan et al., 2017; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2021, 2020). The 2018 and 2024 general elections in Pakistan highlighted this complexity, where party manifestos presented ideological positions that were often reinterpreted or diluted in practice to accommodate shifting alliances and regional dynamics (Rizvi, 2020). Moreover, the rise of social media has amplified ideological polarization, particularly among urban youth (Akram et al., 2021a, 2022), yet this digital discourse rarely translates into consistent voting patterns (Zahid, 2021).

This study aims to explore how ideology shapes electoral behavior and party alignments in contemporary Pakistani politics. By employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with political activists, university students, and community leaders across Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, alongside a documentary analysis of party manifestos and media discourses from the 2018 and 2024 general elections.

The studies reveal that while voters and parties frequently invoke ideological narratives, electoral choices are often mediated by patronage networks, local power structures, and pragmatic concerns such as economic opportunity and service delivery (Kungu, 2020). Party manifestos display ideological positioning but are often reinterpreted or diluted in practice to accommodate shifting alliances and regional dynamics. Moreover, the rise of social media has amplified ideological polarization, particularly among urban youth, yet this digital discourse rarely translates into consistent voting patterns. This research contributes to the understanding of the complex interplay between ideology, identity, and pragmatism in shaping Pakistan's shifting electoral landscape.

Literature Review

In Pakistan, political ideology has historically played a significant role in shaping electoral behavior. Studies have shown that ideological narratives, such as religion and nationalism, are frequently invoked in electoral campaigns to mobilize voters (Jaffrelot, 2015; Nawaz et al., 2021, 2022). However, the influence of these ideological appeals is often mediated by local power structures, patronage networks, and pragmatic concerns like economic opportunity and service delivery (Hussain, 2018). This suggests that while ideology serves as a mobilizing force, it may not always translate into consistent voting patterns.

Party manifestos in Pakistan often display ideological positioning, yet their practical implementation is frequently diluted to accommodate shifting alliances and regional dynamics. Rizvi (2020) notes that political parties may adjust their ideological stances to align with local interests and power structures, leading to a disconnect between manifesto promises and actual policies. This flexibility allows parties to maintain broad appeal but raises questions about the authenticity of their ideological commitments.

The rise of social media has significantly influenced political discourse in Pakistan, particularly among urban youth. Studies have found that social media platforms amplify ideological polarization, creating echo chambers where individuals are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs (Saleem et al., 2023; Akram et al., 2021b). This digital discourse often lacks the depth and nuance of traditional political engagement, potentially leading to superficial understandings of complex issues.

Moreover, while social media has the potential to increase political awareness and participation, it also poses challenges related to misinformation and the spread of divisive content (Bajwa et al., 2022). These dynamics contribute to a fragmented political landscape where ideological alignments are more pronounced but may not correspond to actual voting behavior.

The interplay between ideology, identity, and pragmatism is central to understanding electoral behavior in Pakistan. Voters often navigate a complex landscape where ideological appeals intersect with considerations of ethnic identity, regional interests, and personal gain. This multifaceted decision-making process challenges the notion of a rational electorate guided solely by ideological considerations (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Furthermore, the salience of different ideological narratives varies across regions and communities, influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. For instance, religious identity may play a more prominent role in certain areas, while economic issues dominate in others (Hussain, 2018). Understanding these regional variations is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of electoral behavior in Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how ideology shapes electoral behavior and party alignments in contemporary Pakistani politics. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex, subjective experiences of individuals involved in political processes. By focusing on the lived experiences of political activists, community leaders, and university students across various regions of Pakistan, this study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which ideology influences voting decisions and party support. The research is designed to gather rich, descriptive data through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both individual and collective perspectives on electoral politics. This methodology allows for the exploration of ideological frameworks, practical political engagement, and how these elements intersect in shaping electoral behavior.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling, which allowed the researcher to focus on individuals with direct experience or deep knowledge of Pakistan's political landscape. A total of 30 participants were interviewed, including political activists, university students, and community leaders. This diversity in participant backgrounds was crucial for capturing a broad range of perspectives on the role of ideology in politics.

The participants were selected from three key regions of Pakistan: Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). These regions were chosen due to their distinct political cultures, linguistic groups, and socio-economic conditions, which provide varying insights into how ideology is perceived and mobilized across the country. The breakdown of participants was as follows:

- **10 political activists** involved in local and national-level politics.
- **10 university students** engaged in political discussions or activities within their campuses.
- **10 community leaders** with a strong understanding of local political dynamics.

The inclusion of political activists and community leaders offered valuable insights into how ideological narratives are used to mobilize voters, while university students provided perspectives on the impact of ideological polarization among the youth, particularly in the context of social media.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring topics based on the participants' responses. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suited for this research, as they provide a balance between standardization and the freedom to explore new avenues of inquiry as they arise during the interviews (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in the participant's preferred language (Urdu, Pashto, or English). The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included questions about:

1. The role of ideology in shaping voting behavior.
2. The significance of party manifestos and their ideological appeals.
3. The impact of social media and digital discourse on political opinions and voting choices.
4. Personal experiences with political engagement and ideology.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Documentary Analysis

In addition to interviews, a documentary analysis was conducted to examine the 2018 and 2024 party manifestos and media discourses surrounding the general elections. Party manifestos were analyzed to identify ideological themes, such as religion, nationalism, and populist reforms, and to assess how these themes were presented and implemented. Media discourses, including news articles, political commentary, and social media posts, were also examined to understand how political parties and media outlets framed ideological narratives during election campaigns.

The documentary analysis provided a contextual backdrop for the interview data, helping to highlight the gap between ideological positioning in party manifestos and the practical realities of electoral politics.

Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews and documentary analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis allows for the identification of recurring themes or patterns in the data, making it an effective method for analyzing both interview transcripts and documentary content.

The analysis followed these six steps:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** The researcher read through all interview transcripts and documents multiple times to become familiar with the content.
2. **Generating initial codes:** Key phrases, ideas, and concepts related to ideology, party alignments, and electoral behavior were coded.
3. **Searching for themes:** The codes were grouped into broader themes that captured the main elements of the data. These themes included topics such as ideological narratives, patronage networks, social media influence, and regional political dynamics.
4. **Reviewing themes:** The researcher reviewed the identified themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and were coherent across the different sources.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** The themes were refined and defined in detail, ensuring that each theme was distinct and encapsulated a central idea related to the research questions.
6. **Writing the report:** The final analysis was written up, integrating direct quotes from interviews and examples from the documentary analysis to illustrate the key themes and provide a comprehensive understanding of how ideology shapes electoral behavior in Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Key ethical considerations included:

- **Informed consent:** Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.
- **Confidentiality:** The identities of participants were kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings to protect privacy.
- **Anonymity in publication:** All data were anonymized to prevent identification of individual participants.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the regional focus on Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While these regions provide diverse insights, they do not fully represent all the linguistic, ethnic, and socio-political dynamics of Pakistan. Further research could include additional regions, such as Balochistan and Azad Kashmir, to provide a more comprehensive view of the country's political landscape. Additionally, the study's reliance on qualitative data means that findings may not be easily generalized across broader populations.

Results

The results of this study reveal the multifaceted role of ideology in shaping electoral behavior and party alignments in contemporary Pakistani politics. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with political activists, university students, and community leaders, as well as documentary analysis of party manifestos and media discourses from the 2018 and 2024 general elections, four primary themes emerged:

1. **Ideological Mobilization in Electoral Campaigns**
2. **Pragmatic Voting Behavior and Local Power Structures**
3. **The Role of Social Media in Political Polarization**
4. **Regional Dynamics and Shifting Ideological Narratives**

These themes are discussed in detail below.

1. Ideological Mobilization in Electoral Campaigns

The analysis of the party manifestos and interviews revealed that political parties in Pakistan often use ideological narratives to mobilize voters, especially during election periods. Key ideological themes identified in the manifestos include religion, nationalism, **and** populist reform agendas.

Religion and Nationalism

Participants frequently noted that religious identity and nationalism were central to party campaigns. For example, one political activist from Punjab stated:

“During the elections, religious narratives are often invoked to create a sense of unity among voters. It's not just about economic or social issues; it's about being Muslim or Pakistani first.” (Political Activist, Punjab)

Manifestos from parties such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) **and** Jamaat-e-Islami prominently featured references to Islamic values and Pakistan's ideological foundation as an Islamic state. These ideological elements were used to frame the parties as the true defenders of Pakistan's **Islamic identity**, mobilizing religiously conservative voters.

Populist Reforms

Populist reform agendas, which promise economic justice and social welfare, also emerged as significant ideological tools. For example, PTI's manifesto in 2018 emphasized promises to reform governance and eradicate corruption under the banner of “Naya Pakistan” (New Pakistan). A participant from KPK remarked:

“PTI’s narrative of change resonated with young voters, especially those frustrated with the status quo. They used populist slogans about a new, clean government to appeal to the masses.” (University Student, KPK)

2. Pragmatic Voting Behavior and Local Power Structures

While ideological narratives played a central role in party campaigns, many participants emphasized that electoral choices were ultimately shaped by pragmatic considerations such as local power dynamics, patronage networks, and economic opportunities.

Patronage Networks and Local Power Structures

In several regions, the influence of local political elites and patronage networks was found to be a key factor influencing voting behavior. Participants reported that voters often supported candidates who could offer tangible benefits such as jobs, infrastructure projects, and social services. As one community leader from Sindh explained:

“People here vote based on personal connections. If a candidate has a strong local network and can offer jobs or access to resources, voters will choose them even if their ideology doesn't align with the party's manifesto.” (Community Leader, Sindh)

The reliance on local power structures was especially evident in rural areas, where personal loyalty to local political figures often outweighed party loyalty or ideological alignment. This finding suggests that patronage networks play a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes, especially in areas where parties have weak organizational structures.

Economic Opportunity

Another key factor influencing voting behavior was the promise of economic opportunity. Participants from both urban and rural areas indicated that while ideological appeals were important, practical concerns such as jobs, education, and healthcare were paramount. As one university student from Sindh remarked:

“When I voted in 2018, I was thinking about jobs. Ideology mattered, but I knew PTI’s promises of job creation and economic reforms were what my family needed.” (University Student, Sindh)

This pragmatic voting behavior suggests that while ideology may shape political discourse, economic and social needs are the primary drivers of electoral decisions.

3. The Role of Social Media in Political Polarization

Social media emerged as a major influence on political discourse, particularly among younger voters. The analysis of media discourse highlighted how social media platforms have amplified ideological polarization, creating an environment in which voters are increasingly exposed to echo chambers that reinforce their existing beliefs.

Ideological Polarization

Many participants, particularly from urban areas, discussed the role of social media in shaping their political views. One participant from Lahore shared:

“Social media has made politics more polarized. It’s either PTI or PML-N; there’s very little space for nuanced discussion. People are more radicalized in their views.” (University Student, Lahore)

The documentary analysis of social media discourse showed that political parties use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to disseminate ideological messages, often reinforcing extreme positions. This has led to a polarized political environment, where individuals are exposed primarily to information that confirms their preexisting views, making it difficult for parties to engage in balanced, issue-based campaigns.

The Disconnect Between Digital Discourse and Voting Behavior

Despite the evident polarization in digital spaces, the study found that this ideological discourse **on social media** did not always translate into consistent voting patterns. Many participants noted that while social media discussions were intense, they often did not align with their actual voting choices. As one participant from KPK observed:

“On Facebook, everyone is talking about ideology, but in the end, I vote for whoever will bring development to my town. Social media discourse doesn’t always translate into real-life decisions.” (Political Activist, KPK)

This suggests that while social media may amplify ideological discourse, other factors—such as local political dynamics and economic considerations—play a more significant role in shaping actual voting behavior.

4. Regional Dynamics and Shifting Ideological Narratives

The final theme that emerged from the data was the regional variation in ideological alignments. The study found that ideological narratives were not static and varied significantly across different regions of Pakistan.

Regionalism and Ideology

In Punjab, the dominant ideological narratives were linked to nationalism and economic development, reflecting the province's economic dominance and urbanization. In Sindh, however, ethnic identity played a significant role, with parties appealing to Sindhi nationalism and regional autonomy. One community leader from Sindh mentioned:

“In Sindh, it’s not just about national politics; it’s about Sindhi rights. Parties like PPP use the regional identity card effectively, which resonates with the local population.” (Community Leader, Sindh)

In KPK, the ideological discourse was heavily influenced by religious identity and security concerns, especially given the province's proximity to conflict zones. The rise of religious political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and JUI-F reflected the influence of religious narratives in shaping political alignments in the region.

Shifting Alliances and Ideological Fluidity

A key finding was the fluidity of ideological alliances in Pakistani politics. The alignment of political parties and voter support often shifted based on regional dynamics and evolving political circumstances. For example, in the 2018 elections, PTI forged alliances with various regional parties in order to broaden its appeal, which resulted in a compromise of its ideological position on certain issues.

“Parties change their stances when they need support from different regions. The promises made in the manifesto aren’t always kept, and alliances are often based on pragmatic needs, not just ideology.” (Political Activist, Punjab)

Summary of Results

The analysis revealed that ideology in Pakistani elections functions as both a symbolic and mobilizing force, but its impact on electoral behavior is often mitigated by pragmatic concerns such as economic opportunity, patronage networks, and local power structures. While social media has amplified ideological polarization, its influence on actual voting decisions is inconsistent. Additionally, regional dynamics shape ideological alignments, with parties tailoring their messages to resonate with local identities, concerns, and power structures.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing literature that underscores the symbolic role of ideology in Pakistani politics. Ideological narratives, such as religion and nationalism, are frequently invoked during electoral campaigns to mobilize voters and create a sense of unity (Rahman et al., 2021). However, as noted by Said et al. (2021), while these ideological appeals are prominent, they often serve more as symbolic tools rather than consistent frameworks for political decision-making. This study's participants echoed this sentiment, indicating that while ideological narratives are used to rally support, actual voting decisions are often influenced by pragmatic concerns and local dynamics. This suggests that while ideology plays a significant role in political discourse, its impact on electoral behavior is mediated by other factors. The emphasis on pragmatic considerations in voting behavior is consistent with findings from previous studies. Hussain (2018) and Jaffrelot (2015) highlight that electoral choices in Pakistan are often shaped by local power structures, patronage networks, and economic opportunities. Participants in this study similarly reported that their voting decisions were influenced by factors such as the provision of services, economic benefits, and the strength of local political networks. This underscores the complex interplay between ideology and pragmatism in shaping electoral outcomes. While ideological narratives may frame political discourse, voters often prioritize tangible benefits and personal connections when making electoral choices (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Sohail & Akram, 2025). The study's findings regarding the role of social media in amplifying ideological polarization are in line with recent research by Ashraf et al. (2021), who note that social media platforms can create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and contribute to political polarization. Participants in this study reported that social media discussions often intensified ideological divides, yet these online discourses did not always translate into consistent voting patterns. This highlights a critical aspect of contemporary political engagement: while social media serves as a platform for ideological expression and mobilization, its influence on actual voting behavior is complex and may be moderated by other factors, such as local political dynamics and economic considerations. The regional variations in ideological alignments observed in this study corroborate findings from previous research on the role of regionalism in Pakistani politics. Vinod (1989) discusses how regional identities and concerns significantly influence political behavior and party alignments in South Asia. In Pakistan, parties often tailor their ideological narratives to resonate with regional identities and issues. For instance, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, religious identity and security concerns were central to political discourse, while in Sindh, ethnic identity and regional autonomy played a more prominent role. These regional dynamics underscore the importance of context in understanding ideological alignments and voting behavior. The findings of this study have several implications for political strategy in Pakistan. Political parties may benefit from recognizing the complex interplay between ideology and pragmatism in shaping voter behavior. While ideological narratives can mobilize support, addressing voters' immediate needs and concerns—such as economic opportunities and local services—may be equally, if not more, important in securing electoral success. Future research could further explore the dynamics between online political discourse and offline voting behavior, particularly in the context of Pakistan's diverse and complex political landscape. Additionally, examining the role of media literacy and critical engagement with digital content could provide insights into mitigating the effects of ideological polarization in online spaces.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the role of ideology in shaping electoral behavior and party alignments in contemporary Pakistani politics, with a particular focus on the 2018 and 2024 general elections. The findings revealed that while ideological narratives such as religion, nationalism, and populist reforms—serve as significant tools for political mobilization, voting behavior is not solely driven by ideological considerations. Instead, it is shaped by a complex interplay of pragmatic concerns, including economic opportunity, patronage networks, and local power structures. The study identified four main themes: ideological mobilization, pragmatic voting behavior, the role of social media in political polarization, and the impact of regional dynamics on ideological alignments. These themes underscore the multifaceted nature of political decision-making in Pakistan, where voters balance ideological appeals with immediate practical concerns. One of the key findings of this study was the role of social media in amplifying ideological polarization, particularly among the youth. While social media platforms have provided new avenues for political discourse, this digital polarization often does not translate into consistent voting patterns. The rise of ideological echo chambers on social media points to the need for greater media literacy and critical engagement to address the challenges posed by misinformation and polarized political views. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of regional dynamics in shaping ideological positions. In regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Punjab, local issues—ranging from religious identity to economic opportunities and ethnic concerns—played a significant role in how political parties tailored their campaigns and how voters aligned themselves ideologically. The findings of this research have important implications for political strategy in Pakistan. While ideology remains a powerful mobilizing force, political parties must recognize that voters often prioritize practical benefits such as economic development, service delivery, and local political relationships over purely ideological considerations. Parties that can balance ideological appeals with tangible promises of improving livelihoods and addressing regional concerns may be better positioned to succeed electorally.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study suggests several avenues for future research:

1. **Exploring the role of media literacy** in mitigating the negative effects of ideological polarization in social media spaces.
2. **Investigating the impact of local political dynamics and patronage networks** on ideological preferences in rural and urban contexts across Pakistan.
3. **Examining long-term shifts in party alignments** and ideological orientations in the wake of electoral and political realignments.
4. **Studying the role of youth in shaping political ideologies** and voting behaviors, especially with the growing influence of social media.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between ideology, identity, and pragmatism in Pakistani elections, providing valuable insights into the shifting landscape of Pakistan's political environment.

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