
Leans, Lies, and Votes: Uncovering Media Bias in Voters' Minds

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Abstract

This study focused on how media bias affects the political behaviour and voting patterns of registered voters in Lahore, Pakistan. Lahore, being one of the most politically active cities in the country, is a rich and representative setting in terms of contextual background to examine how partisan news coverage on both the television channels, as well as the social media platforms, influences voter opinion and electoral choices. The Agenda-Setting theory, Framing Theory, and Cultivation Theory form the basis of the study as they explain the cognitive and attitudinal impacts of chronic exposure to biased media. The survey technique used was quantitative, and the data were collected by using 100 registered voters who were chosen by using purposive sampling among various localities of Lahore. The data were analysed with the help of descriptive statistics since frequencies and percentages were reported on all major variables. The results showed that a high percentage of the respondents are aware of media bias, both on television and on social media, but they still strongly depend on these media to get political information. The research also showed that there is a visible correlation between the choice of news channels by the respondents and their party affiliation. Social media was found to be a more powerful tool of political opinion forming especially among young voters. The findings emphasize the role of media literacy programs and policy changes in creating objectivity and fairness in the changing media environment of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Media Bias, Political Behaviour, Voting Behaviour, Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, Cultivation Theory, Social Media, Lahore, Electoral Process, Pakistani Voters*

1. Introduction

The connection between the mass media and political behaviour is one of the most researched areas of communication research. Such media organisations are not passive reporters of political processes, but they pay more attention to some issues, shape political actors in specific ways, and organise the information space where these citizens build their beliefs about politics and finally use their right to vote (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). The nature of this environment of information in democratic systems and the quality of

political engagement in the process are directly determined by the quality and fairness of this information environment, and consequently, the quality of the electoral results.

Pakistan provides a very interesting case study in the exploration of these dynamics. The country has experienced a very fast development of privately owned television stations, FM radio stations, and digital media platforms since the liberalisation of its broadcast sector in 2002, some of which have close or overt partisan affiliations (Mezzera & Sial, 2010). Instead of being the dispassionate conveyors of information, many Pakistani news outlets have established a reputation of being the representatives of opposing political movements, cherry-picking the events to favour their like-minded parties (Rehman, 2014; Ali and Rahman, 2019).

The city of Lahore, the capital of the Punjab province in Pakistan and one of the most politically valuable cities in Pakistan, is a perfect place to analyze these dynamics. Having completed high media consumption, a huge and diverse range of registered voters, and a long history as a decisive battleground in both national and provincial elections, the voters of Lahore are not only highly exposed to partisan media but also have a direct impact on national electoral results. However, no previous research has been specifically on the media bias-political behaviour relationship of the Lahore voters, or that combines television and social media as the sources of exposure.

This paper fills this gap. It examines the degree to which media bias, both on television news outlets and social media, influences political views, partisanship, and feelings about voting in the elections by survey of 100 registered voters in the various localities of Lahore. The paper has three known theoretical perspectives, including Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Cultivation Theory.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the presence and the degree to which the registered voters in Lahore use the television news channels and the social media platforms as sources of political information, and their perceptions of the sources as biased.
2. To examine the association between media consumption patterns and political party preference and opinion amongst voters.
3. To examine the effect of perceived media bias on voting attitude and the trust of the people in the electoral process.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1: To what is the extent of the use of television news and social media by registered voters in Lahore as a source of political information and how do they rate the objectivity of these sources?

RQ2: Does one distinguish a relationship between the preferred news channels and social media platforms and the political parties that voters support?

RQ3: How does the exposure to biased media content influence voter attitude towards electoral turnout and trust in the democratic processes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory and Political Communication

The inherent assumption of the Agenda-Setting Theory is that the media does not say what people should think; it is rather extremely successful at saying what people should think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Through the use of differential prominence, i.e. giving prominence to some political issues and little to others, media organisations influence what issues citizens take to be the most important in their assessment of parties and candidates. This framework was later expanded by subsequent scholarship to second-level agenda-setting to understand how the media also influences not only issue salience but also the perceived characteristics of political actors and institutions (McCombs et al., 2014; Zahariadis, 2025).

Agenda-setting effects in Pakistan have been especially apparent during election periods, with rival channels placing narratives, such as corruption scandals, security threats, economic incompetence, and so on, strategically in the frame in a manner that is advantageous to the parties they support. These agenda-setting dynamics have been proven to be as effective in digital spaces as in broadcast media by Rossiter (2022) and Foreman (2024), since algorithmic platforms are equally determined by the kinds of political content that virally spread.

2.2 Framing Theory and Partisan News Presentation

Framing Theory Framing Theory is a theory that was developed by Entman (1993) and explained later by other scholars that the way issues and events are framed, the interpretive frames with which they are conveyed, is the defining factor of how these issues and events are perceived and assessed by audiences. Güran and Özarslan (2022) illustrate that framing does not exist without the editorial and ownership interests of media organisations, as it presupposes the choice of things to emphasize and downplay others. Political reporting the competing media outlets may frame the same candidates and policies in extremely different ways, resulting in radically distinct voter judgments of the same policies and candidates.

Jan et al. (2013) established that in the Pakistani setting there were pronounced differences in framing by the various print media outlets with certain publications habitually referring to opposition politicians as incompetent and corrupt and government supporters to be more favourably framed. It was shown by Druckman and Parkin (2005) in a study of a US Senate election that editorial framing had a significant impact on vote shares - a phenomenon that is directly applicable to the competitive electoral situation in Pakistan.

2.3 Cultivation Theory and Long-Term Media Effects

The Cultivation Theory was coined by Gerbner and Gross (1976) and it suggests that over time, the way viewers perceive social reality is influenced by intensive exposure to media content and thus is more likely to become more consistent with the world as portrayed in the media instead of the empirical conditions. In the context of political communication, the theory can be applied to predict that partisan media consumers will eventually adopt political orientations, which indicate the ideological bias of their primary media environment (Morgan et al., 2015).

This cultivating effect is most specifically applied in the 24-hour news arena of Pakistan, where partisan talk shows and political commentary are some of the prime-time programming. Arafat (2013) discovered that there were cultivation effects among the Pakistani television audience, with the longer the exposure to certain channels, the more partisan political orientations were among the heavy viewers, which is also in line with the prediction of the theory.

2.4 Media Bias and Electoral Outcomes in Pakistan

There is a significant amount of literature on the electoral impact of media bias. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2008) were able to offer compelling evidence that politically aligned cable news coverage had quantifiable effects on presidential vote shares in the United States. Bernhardt et al. (2006) hypothesised that media organisations that are under competitive forces have economic incentives to cater to partisan audiences by providing biased coverage, thus further polarizing politics. More recently, Zhu and Fu (2024) have shown that even entertainment-based political messages are partisan persuasion that change attitudes without the audience being aware of the persuasion.

Ali and Rahman (2019) have discovered in Pakistan, in particular, that Geo News viewers had the highest rate of PML-N supporters, whereas ARY News viewers had a disproportionate number of PTI supporters. Safdar et al. (2015) concluded that the media coverage played a significant role in determining voter turnout in the 2013 general elections, which proves the ability of the media to influence the direction of the vote, as well as the extent of voter turnout. The same results were found by Javaid and Elahi (2014), who stated that there is

a positive correlation between the intensity of media exposure and political engagement.

2.5 Social Media and Political Opinion Formation

The fast proliferation of social media platforms has presented a qualitatively new dimension of the effects of media bias. In contrast to the broadcast media, social media adopts a recommendation algorithm that forms a personalised information environment, or in the formulation by Pariser (2011), a filter bubble, where users are increasingly exposed to information that reinforces their previous likes as alternative opinions are filtered out. These dynamics, confirmed by Rossiter (2022) and Arman and McClurg (2024) as such further expand and deepen the effects of traditional agenda setting in digital contexts.

Social media has taken the place of becoming a major source of political news among young Pakistani voters. Bhadur et al. (2026) concluded that Pakistani university students aged between 18 and 27 often developed political views basing on the social media headlines without reading full articles or referring to other sources. Similar reports were made by Williams et al. (2024), who found that emotional digital content that is one-sided and confirms bias supports the confirmation bias and partisan polarisation among young people.

2.6 Media Credibility and Trust

The success of media bias as a tool of influencing political behaviour is partly determined by the levels of trust that the audiences have in their preferred sources. Studies have always found a contradiction that, despite the general scepticism expressed by the voters regarding the objectivity of the media, they are still affected by the particular media outlets that they habitually watch or read (Rehman, 2014). Eveland and Shah (2003) illustrated that perceptions of media partisanship interact with prior partisanship identity. Voters will perceive partisanship in those outlets that challenge their partisan identity and see outlets that support their preferences as relatively objective, which is a self-reinforcing relationship and forms a habit of partisan media consumption.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the current study is an integrated perspective based on three complementary traditions in the research of the effects of media, namely the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Cultivation Theory. The two frames have each dimension of media bias at work on political behaviour. The analysis of the priorities of the political issues that Lahore voters prioritize the most and the extent to which their priorities can be attributed to the patterns of emphasis adopted by the news sources they watch is based on Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs et al., 2014; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The theory postulates that consumers of partisan coverage will internalise the agenda in the partisan coverage, giving some issues and political actors a higher profile in their minds.

The Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Güran and Ozarlan, 2022) is used to study the influence of the mode of news presentation on voter interpretation of political events and the assessment of political parties and candidates. This theory assumes that the electorate who received news mostly in the editorial prism of a specific channel will subsequently take the frames of the channel to form their own political judgements. The study is informed by Cultivation Theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Morgan et al., 2015) which explains the attention to the cumulative impact of media exposure. The theory hypothesizes that, in the long run, partisan television and social media users will be unable to avoid forming political worldviews that resemble the ideological inclination of their main media space.

These three frameworks, together, provide a holistic explanation of the effects of media bias as immediate cognitive effects, framing effects, and the long-term effects of shaping political worldviews - all of which are applicable to the study of the interaction between Lahore voters and partisan media on both the television and online platforms.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The quantitative survey design was used in this study to examine the connection between media consumption and political behaviour among registered voters in Lahore. A survey method was chosen since it allows gathering similar data on a specific population systematically and identifying trends in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The data collection tool was a structured, closed-ended questionnaire.

4.2 Study Area

The research was carried out in Lahore, the provincial capital of the Punjab, and the second largest city of Pakistan. Lahore was chosen because of its great political awareness, high and varied registered voter turnout, importance as an important electoral battleground in both national and provincial elections, and because of the high percentages of television viewing and social media use. The respondents were selected in a variety of localities within the city to have a variation of demographics.

4.3 Population and Sample

The target population was registered voters living in Lahore. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 100 respondents, and the sample was made up of those registered to vote, and those who said they regularly consumed political news via television or social media or both. To balance the sample, 50 male and 50 female respondents were used as the sample was split equally by gender. There was age groups distributed throughout the 1860+ spectrum, with the focus on the 18-44 bracket in accordance with the increased prevalence of active media use.

4.4 Data Collection Instrument and Analysis

Data were collected with the help of a structured questionnaire containing 28 close-ending questions. The questionnaire was structured into five subparts; (1) demographic details; (2) media consumption behaviour in both television and social media; (3) attitudes towards media bias and objectivity; (4) media impact on political views, and party support; and (5) attitudes towards voter turnout. Questions were asked on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) and frequency-based as well as categorical response options. The instrument underwent pre-testing using 10 respondents and it was made user friendly. In-person administration was used to collect data. Simple descriptive statistics were applied in the analysis of data. All items on the survey were summed up to give frequencies and percentages to summarise responses. The correlation between media consumption patterns and the political party preferences was studied through cross-tabulation. Table form is used to present all the findings; only one summary figure displays the key agreement rates among the main indicators.

4.5 Operationalization of Variables

Media Bias: The term media bias can be described as the impression that a news media outlet or a social media platform has reported political news in a biased way that favours one political party or ideological viewpoint over the other.

Political Opinion: This is the measure of how respondents rate political parties and candidates, including the party preference that the respondents stated.

Voting Behaviour: Operationalized as self-reported support of the party during recent elections and the intention to vote during the election in the future.

Media Exposure: The respondent will be measured on the basis of the primary source of news (television channel or social media platform) and the frequency of daily news intake on politics.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 100)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	50 (50.0%)
	Female	50 (50.0%)
Age Group	18–29 years	38 (38.0%)
	30–44 years	35 (35.0%)
	45–60 years	18 (18.0%)
	60+ years	9 (9.0%)
Education Level	Secondary (Matric / O-Level)	16 (16.0%)
	Intermediate / A-Level	22 (22.0%)
	Undergraduate	42 (42.0%)
	Postgraduate and above	20 (20.0%)
Occupation	Student	31 (31.0%)
	Private sector employee	28 (28.0%)
	Government employee	19 (19.0%)
	Self-employed / Business	14 (14.0%)
	Homemaker / Other	8 (8.0%)

There was an equal division of the sample by gender. Most respondents (73percent) were aged between 18 and 44, which indicates the demographic of Lahore is a younger and politically active urban population. A significant percentage (62) had completed education at least to the undergraduate level, which is in line with the purposive requirement of regular consumption of political news.

5.2 Media Consumption Habits and Perceptions of Bias (Objective 1 / RQ1)

The questionnaires required participants to select their main political news provider and the number of times they would consume political news every day. These findings are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Primary Source of Political Information (N = 100)

Primary Source	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Television news channels	54	54.0%
Facebook / Meta	18	18.0%
YouTube	14	14.0%
X (Twitter)	7	7.0%
Online newspapers	5	5.0%
Instagram	2	2.0%
Total	100	100%

The television news channels are the primary providers of political information, as 54 percent of the respondents indicated this. Nevertheless, the total proportion of social media platforms is 41% of the sample - a significant proportion that indicates the increase in the role of digital media in the consumption of political information in Lahore. In the age group of 18 to 29, Facebook (26) and YouTube (22) were the most mentioned main sources, which shows a significant change in preference in relation to the media generation.

Table 3: Frequency of Daily Political News Consumption (N = 100)

Frequency of Consumption	No. of Respondents	Percentage
More than 3 hours per day	24	24.0%
1–3 hours per day	39	39.0%
Less than 1 hour per day	28	28.0%
Only during election campaigns	9	9.0%
Total	100	100%

Table 3 indicates that 63 percent of the respondents watch political news at least one hour each day, which confirms the high and stable exposure to the media. Only 9 percent limit their news intake to election years, meaning that the use of political media in Lahore is a habitual process throughout the year.

Table 4: Perceptions of Media Objectivity (N = 100)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
TV news channels are objective in political coverage	3 (3%)	12 (12%)	14 (14%)	42 (42%)	29 (29%)
Social media presents balanced political content	4 (4%)	15 (15%)	16 (16%)	39 (39%)	26 (26%)
News channels favour one party over others	38 (38%)	41 (41%)	11 (11%)	7 (7%)	3 (3%)
TV news anchors are politically partisan	29 (29%)	44 (44%)	15 (15%)	8 (8%)	4 (4%)

Table 4 deals with the perceptions of media objectivity, the second Objective 1 component. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents strongly disagreed that television news channels cover political news without bias, and 65 percent also disagreed that social media provides balanced political news. In contrast, three out of four (79) have said that channels are systematically biased against others, and three out of four (73) have said that television news anchors are themselves biased. These results confirm that media bias is highly and visibly seen by the voters of Lahore, of all categories.

5.3 Channel Preference and Party Affiliation (Objective 2 / RQ2)

Tables 5 and 6 provide cross-tabulated data regarding preferred media source and the reported political party affiliation of the respondents in direct response to RQ2.

Table 5: Preferred TV Channel and Political Party Affiliation (Television Viewers, n = 54)

Preferred Channel	PML-N (%)	PTI (%)	PPP (%)	JUI-F (%)	MQM (%)	Other (%)
Geo News (n=22)	50.0	18.2	13.6	4.5	4.5	9.1
ARY News (n=19)	10.5	57.9	10.5	5.3	5.3	10.5
Samaa News (n=7)	28.6	28.6	28.6	14.3	0.0	0.0
Dunya News (n=6)	33.3	33.3	16.7	0.0	16.7	0.0

The information in Table 5 shows a distinct and logical trend. The viewers of Geo News are mainly PML-N supporters (50.0%), whereas ARY News viewers are mostly PTI supporters (57.9%). The party affiliations of the Samaa and Dunya News viewers are more even, which indicates that these channels are viewed as being less partisan. This result directly answers RQ2 and supports the correlation between preference of channel and partisan identity that previous Pakistani studies have defined (Ali and Rahman, 2019).

Table 6: Preferred Social Media Platform and Political Party Affiliation (Social Media Users, n = 41)

Platform	PML-N (%)	PTI (%)	PPP (%)	JUI-F (%)	Other (%)	Undecided (%)
Facebook (n=18)	38.9	33.3	11.1	5.6	5.6	5.6
YouTube (n=14)	21.4	50.0	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1
X / Twitter (n=7)	14.3	42.9	14.3	0.0	14.3	14.3
Instagram (n=2)	50.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

YouTube and X (Twitter) users among social media users were more inclined to PTI support (50.0% and 42.9%, respectively), and this was in line with PTI's established power as a social media-based political movement among urban youths. The distribution of Facebook users was more balanced, with a slight slope to PML-N. These findings indicate that the channel-party congruence trends that are evident on television in general are replicated on social media.

5.4 Media Bias and Electoral Attitudes (Objective 3 / RQ3)

Table 7 provides the information about the impact of the perceived media bias on the attitude of the respondents to the electoral participation and confidence in the democratic processes.

Table 7: Influence of Perceived Media Bias on Electoral Attitudes (N = 100)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Biased media coverage influences who I vote for	31 (31%)	40 (40%)	16 (16%)	9 (9%)	4 (4%)
Media bias reduces my trust in the electoral process	27 (27%)	38 (38%)	18 (18%)	13 (13%)	4 (4%)
I would still vote even if I believe	22 (22%)	35 (35%)	19 (19%)	17 (17%)	7 (7%)

media is biased

Media bias makes it difficult to cast an informed vote	29 (29%)	42 (42%)	14 (14%)	11 (11%)	4 (4%)
I actively seek alternative sources to reduce the effect of bias	12 (12%)	29 (29%)	21 (21%)	28 (28%)	10 (10%)

Table 7 indicates that there are some crucial trends. To start with, 71 percent of the people interviewed said that they agree or strongly agree that biased media coverage is something that affects their choice of whom they vote- a fact with direct consequences on the purity of the election process. Second, two-thirds said that media bias makes them less trustful of the electoral system more generally, indicating that partisan media has a wider impact than vote choice, by making people less trustful of democratic institutions overall. Third and most importantly, 57 percent of the respondents said they would still turn up to vote even when they know there was bias in the media, which implies that bias and trust are mutually exclusive, but not necessarily the same. However, 71 percent concurred that media bias complicates informed voting because the partisan media system makes even motivated voters feel cognitively handicapped. The result that 41% actively use other sources to combat bias points to the fact that the critical use of media is not a common practice among the voters of Lahore.

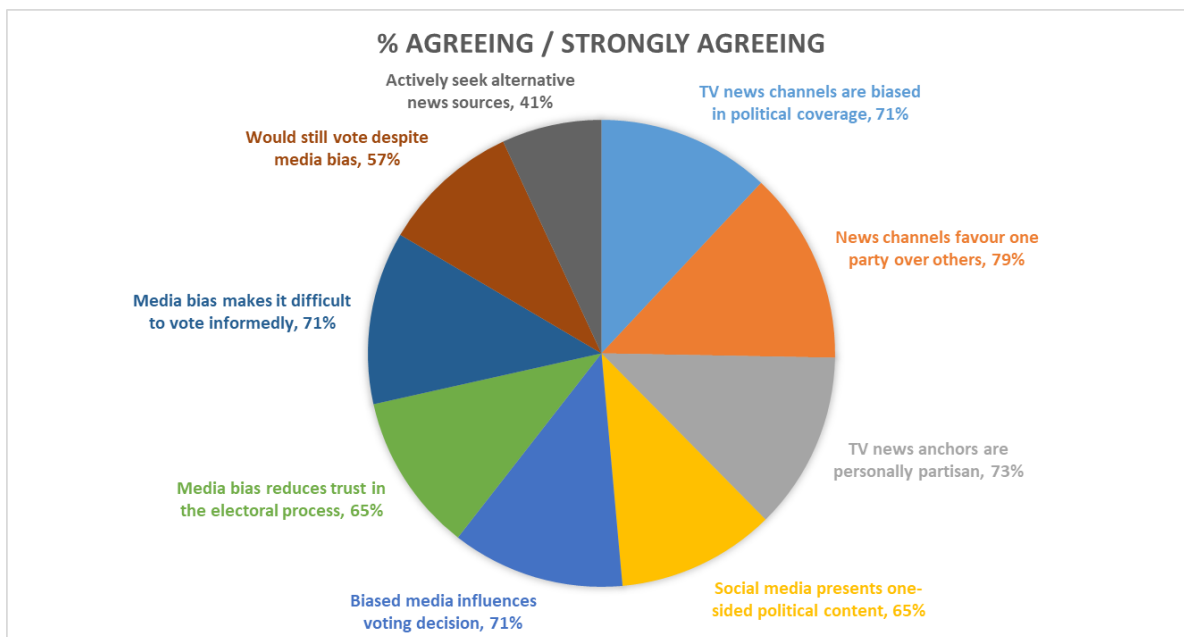


Figure 1 Summary of Key Agreement Rates across Main Indicators (N = 100)

6. Discussion

The results of the research provide a logical and theoretically consistent image of the impact of media bias on political behaviour among registered voters in Lahore. The data used in all three research questions reveal that the partisan media, both on television and social media, has a significant and multidimensional influence on how voters make political views, which parties they prefer, and the relationship between voters and the political process.

The perceived bias rates in Table 4 are high, which can be explained by the Framing Theory predictions.

When 71% of the respondents dismiss the statement that television news is objective and 79% that channels systematically favour a certain party, it is evident that Lahore voters are rather aware of the practice of partisan framing. However, this awareness is not reflected in significant decreases in dependence on these sources, as is supported in Tables 2 and 3. This contradiction in the acknowledgment of bias and the persistence in the use of the same media represents the motivational and habitual aspects of media use that is predicted by Cultivation Theory, as well as by previous studies on the confirmation bias (Eveland and Shah, 2003).

The most practically meaningful result to the study is the channel-preference and party-affiliation patterns in Table 5. The close correlation between Geo News watch and PML-N support (50.0%) and ARY News watch and PTI support (57.95) is in line with the agenda-setting and cultivation models. Agenda-setting-wise, these outlets will always focus on the stories that favour their affiliated persons and highlight the failures of opponents. Culturally speaking, the long-term exposure to such environments leads to an adjustment of the worldview, which can be seen in the cross-tabulation data in question, namely, a downward pattern that directly repeats Ali and Rahman's (2019) results in the Lahore-specific setting.

Table 6, which includes social media findings, is an important dimension, especially to younger voters. The elevated PTI identification in YouTube and X (Twitter) users is in line with the established success of PTI in gaining support via digital media among urban, educated youth. The electoral attitude data in Table 7 have implications that are not restricted to individual vote decisions. When 71 percent of the surveyed respondents indicate that biased media affects their vote, and 65 percent of them claim that media bias affects their trust in the electoral system in general, it is evident that the impact of partisan media is not limited to influencing votes alone, but the entire democratic legitimacy of the electoral process. This observation is reminiscent of a systemic concern that Bernhardt et al. (2006) have about the effects of media polarisation on the functioning of democracy.

7. Conclusion

This paper analysed how media biasness affects political behaviour and electoral attitudes of 100 registered voters in Lahore, Pakistan, based on the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Cultivation Theory. Based on a straightforward descriptive analysis of the survey results, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, the study has produced results that are both theoretically and practically relevant.

The research discovered that media bias is visibly held by the Lahore voters on both television and social media, with large majorities of the voters identifying partisan channel orientations and lack of objectivity, but that this does not lead the voters to think they should not rely on these channels as a source of political information. Second, there is a strong connection between the channel and platform choice of voters and their party affiliations, where the Geo News viewership is linked to PML-N support and ARY News and YouTube viewership are linked to PTI support, indicating the highly partisan nature of the Pakistani media landscape. Third, the perceived media bias has real implications to the electoral attitudes: it affects the vote decisions, decreases the trust in the electoral process, and complicates informed voting, but does not completely demotivate to take part.

The practical implications of these findings are known. PEMRA ought to intensify and reinforce impartiality requirements on television stations especially when there is an election campaign. Media literacy should be part of educational programs and teach younger voters to identify partisan framing and refer to a variety of sources. With fact-checking habits and multi-source information practices, politically active citizens in Lahore and other regions can be encouraged by civil society organisations.

The research recognises a number of limitations. The sample of 100 respondents in Lahore is not statistically representative of the Pakistani voter population in general. The educational background of the sample is fairly high, which can indicate that the level of bias awareness is also higher in this case as compared to the overall electorate. In future studies, random sampling, a low educational and income level of respondents, and coverage of rural regions and other provinces should be used. It would be especially useful to use longitudinal

designs to determine the direction of causality between media exposure and the political behaviour relationship over time.

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