

The influence of Populist Narratives on Election Outcomes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A study from 2013 to 2024 Elections

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Abstract

Populist narratives have become a key element of the political discourse of modern electoral politics shaping both electoral dynamics and voting patterns in both established and emerging democracies. The increasing focus on narratives of anti-corruption, accountability, governance reform, and change has had a significant impact on electoral campaigns, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in Pakistan. This study aims to explore how populist narratives have affected the electoral results of general elections in KP in 2013, 2018 and 2024. The study follows a qualitative research approach, using thematic analysis of secondary data to discover the prevailing populist narratives that influenced elections. The findings indicate that anti-corruption and anti-elite rhetoric, political change, accountability, citizen empowerment and democratic legitimacy were the most powerful narratives in influencing voters' perceptions and electoral choices. The study also presents how the effectiveness of these narratives was enhanced by charismatic political leadership, digital media and the growing political participation of young people, which empowered political actors to mobilize voters beyond traditional political motivators like kinship, patronage, and ethnic affiliations. Further, the research reveal that the populist narratives shifted from one election to the next as political, economic and institutional dynamics changed, but retained the core narrative of the people–elite dichotomy. Along with the existing studies, this research work makes a significant contribution to the literature on populism in narrative-based electoral politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and underscores the increasing significance of political communication in the democratic competition in Pakistan. The outcomes have important implications on the study of electoral behavior, on the consolidation of a democracy and how political communication works in emerging democracies.

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Introduction

Populism is one of the defining phenomenon of today's democratic politics, the consequences of which extend to the nature of the electoral competition, political communication and the mobilization of voters in both consolidated and fledgling democracies. In the last thirty years, leaders and political parties have become more extreme in their attacks on traditional political elites

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and articulate a "moral narrative" of politics as a conflict between the "virtuous people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). Such stories represent a form of politics that makes complex political reality into an emotionally resonant story that appeals to citizens who feel insecure about the economy, discontent with politics, suspicious of institutions, and angered by perceived social injustice. Thus, populism has evolved from a peripheral phenomenon in the political landscape to a central one in democratic politics in nations such as the United States, Brazil, India, Hungary, Türkiye and Pakistan (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The rise of scholarly and critical research on populism is a testimony of the profound impact of this phenomenon on democratic governance, electoral behaviour, political legitimacy and public policy. While the definition of populism has been approached in various ways (as a political practice, a communication style, a discourse or an ideology), one of the more prevalent definitions defines populism as an ideology characterized by a thin center, which consists of an opposition between a "ordinary people" and a "corrupt elite" and the claim that politics must embody the "general will of the people" (Stanley, 2008, Aslanidis, 2016). As it is an ideology lacking in an extensive one, populism can easily fuse with other ideologies like nationalism, conservatism, socialism, religious politics, or liberal reform agendas in a particular political and social environment. The result is that this ideological agility has led to the rise in influence of populist narratives in a variety of electoral systems and political cultures (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; de la Torre, 2019).

Current studies emphasize that narratives are an important tool for understanding the success of populist movements beyond ideology. Narratives are not simply campaign slogans, but interpretations that help political actors understand a public problem, assign responsibility for it and offer a solution to the problem. Effective narratives give citizens coherent explanations of complex socioeconomic and political problems, and help shape their political feelings and vote. Populist narratives have moral tone and is similar to the moral language used by leaders in politics, which encourages them to appeal to voters' emotions by drawing an imaginary line between them and "the people" (Hawkins, 2009). In the same vein, Muller (2016) argues that populist actors assert the moral essence of 'the people' should be theirs alone, and that those who oppose their political agenda are either illegitimate or not in touch with the interests of the people. The electoral narrative tactics help to shift the focus from issues of policy preferences to symbolic contestations over representation, identity, and democratic legitimacy (Muller, 2016).

The rise of digital communication has also played a role in pushing populist narratives to the centre of elections. The growth of digital communication technologies has also added extra weight to the electoral power of populist narratives. Social media have revolutionized political communication by enabling parties and leaders to reach the citizens directly, bypassing traditional media outlets. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp have changed the nature of political communication, giving parties and leaders another way to reach citizens, apart from traditional media organizations. This has allowed for the quick spread of emotionally charged messages, easy political messaging and very individualized political content. According to Bennett & Livingston (2018), digital media have helped to create a "disinformation order," in which emotional appeals can easily drown out factual arguments, which has increasingly shifted the focus from objective, factual deliberation to narrative building in electoral politics. The capacity to build a compelling narrative that resonates with voters hopes, and identities is now an

important ingredient in political campaigns, in addition to policy proposals (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The populist narrative has a special impact on electoral outcomes in emerging democracies with weak systems of political accountability and corruption, and in which the lack of public trust in political institutions is a major concern. There, “anti-corruption,” “political reforms,” “national sovereignty,” “social justice,” and “economic equality” are often campaign slogans that appeal to electorate members who are looking for an alternative to the existing political establishment. In contrast to citizens' mobilization based on ideology, populist actors are mobilizing citizens through feelings of hope, resentment, frustration, and collective identity. This emotional element sets populist communication apart from traditional political campaigning that focuses on policy and helps account for the increasing electoral success of populist communication in various political settings (Moffitt, 2016; Bonikowski, 2017).

This is particularly the case in Pakistan. Electoral politics has significantly transformed since the transition towards democratic continuity after the 2008 general elections. Though the traditional factors of kinship networks, biradari affiliations, local patronage and constituency politics remain as important as ever, the growing presence of media and medialization, wider spread of internet access, the growing youth and high education level of the electorate have changed the nature of political competition. Attention to accountability, governance, corruption, economic performance, constitutionalism and democratic representation are now a focus of political parties (Waseem, 2022). This has led to an increasing focus on electoral campaigns not just on organizational and electoral strategies but also on political communication strategies that persuade. This has resulted in an increasing use of persuasive political communication in electoral campaigns in addition to the traditional organizational and electoral strategies (Yousaf, 2023).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is an interesting case with regards to the impact of populist narratives on elections in Pakistan. The province lies on the north-western borders of Pakistan with Afghanistan and has been a region of strategic importance, influencing the political, economic and security developments of Pakistan. Over two decades, KP has experienced militancy, counterterrorism, internal displacement, cross border dynamics and post conflict reconstruction, all of which have had an impact on public perceptions of governance, state legitimacy and political leadership. All these have helped to build a politically mature electorate which sees the political parties in terms of governance, accountability, security, economic development, and public service delivery and not only following the traditional electoral behaviour. Moreover, the province is strongly dominated by Pashtun people with high and strong tribal and cultural traditions, whereby voting behaviour has been influenced by the “biradari” networks, tribal affiliations, religious orientations, local leadership, and ideological preferences. The constant urbanization, growing literacy, increasing higher education, increased youth involvement and the prevalence of digital and social media, however, have slowly shifted the nature of politics, diminishing the exclusive power of traditional electoral factors and increasing the room for issue- and narrative-centred political mobilization.

The general elections of 2013, 2018 and 2024 are a series of three but related steps in the development of electoral politics in KP. During the 2013 election, anti-corruption, institutional accountability, and political reform campaign narratives became a turning point in the political landscape, as they threatened the province existing partisan dynamics and ushered in a new political landscape. This change was further entrenched in the 2018 election, with more focus on the performance of governance, welfare measures, institutional reforms and public service delivery and digital campaigning and social media playing more and more of a role in political communication. By the 2024 general election, the narrative of elections had progressed beyond the themes of accountability and anti-elite mobilization, to include the issues of economic hardship, inflation, constitutional rights, democratic legitimacy, judicial independence, and political victimization. The developments in KP have gradually moved from being identity and patronage-baked electoral competition towards one where popular political discourses have become a key driver of perceptions, political attitudes and electoral decisions. In this regard, KP offers a rich analytical space for the study of the effect of populist narratives on democratic competition in an emerging democracy. (Badshah, Rehman & Muhammad, 2018).

Results and Discussion

The analysis shows how the populist narratives have been growing as an important factor in determining electoral outcomes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province between the 2013 and 2024 General Elections. Instead of just relying on the 'usual' voting predictors (patriotic and ethnic affiliations, local patronage), political parties began to appeal to voters with stories that made politics seem to be a struggle between 'the people' and 'the politician'. Such stories were very much in tune with the popular electorate, tapping into both the everyday socioeconomic grievances, and the calls for political reform and accountability, which are hallmarks of populist communication.

Populist Narratives as Catalyst

The analysis suggests that one of the most important factors influencing electoral mobilization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) was the populist narrative, in the period from 2013 to 2024. The traditional factors like ethnic, kinship, local patronage and reputation of candidates still mattered but in a lesser measure than before, as political competition grew more narrative-driven. Political parties no longer depended on the organization or network of voters in their constituencies, but they needed to create narratives that would resonate with voters, making sense of failures in governance in terms of corrupt governance, capture of the elite and injustice in politics. This discovery was also consistent with Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a moral opposition between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite as electoral competition in KP, which was increasingly turning out to be a symbolic opposition to representation, was not only an ideological contest but also a moral one.

The findings also indicate that the power of the populist narratives was that they made the problems at hand, which were social, economic and political, simple and easy to understand, and presented them as a convincing explanation that was easy for ordinary citizens to accept. Instead of presenting specific policy programmes, parties presented the issues of inflation, unemployment, poor public service delivery and inefficiency of institutions as being directly linked to the mis-governance of the elite. This framing created a way for public discontent to be converted into political action, and

it agrees with Hawkins (2009) that public discontent is converted into political action by the building of coherent moral narratives, not by the provision of advanced ideological choices. Hence, the elections in KP gradually came to be seen as political contests over competing narratives of political legitimacy, instead of just being assessments of the quality of the government.

Anti-Corruption and Anti-Elite Narratives

Of all the populist themes found in the studied period, anti-corruption and anti-elite sentiment was the most common and politically effective. In the 2013 general election, corruption has not been just a shortcoming of governance but the main reason behind the governance crisis of Pakistan. The political leaders were painted as self-serving figures that caused the country's economic and institutional problems, and loss of public confidence. This story resonated especially with voters who felt that democratic institutions were not capable of solving the various socioeconomic issues.

Populist discourses have continued to have political impact, not just at the time of an election, but over time as well, as seen in the persistence of anti-corruption discourse during the 2018 election. Rather than giving up on previous campaign issues, political actors reinforced the anti-elite campaign by connecting each of these issues to corruption. Political actors did not abandon previous themes of the campaign; they strengthened it and connected each of the issues that they discussed to corruption. So electoral support began to be more related to the voters' sense of moral credibility than to traditional ideology. This result confirms the argument of Norris and Inglehart (2019) that populist mobilization gains electoral traction if public discontent with political institutions meets with messages of moral and political change.

The 2024 election is another example of the flexibility of anti-elite sentiment. In spite of the political context, the electoral narratives remained the same as in the past – a battle between the people and the powerful political establishments. Anti-elite sentiments did not vanish, but began to include the issues of constitutional governance, democratic legitimacy, judicial independence and political victimization. The flexibility of these populist narratives is an indication that they change over time depending on the political situation but that they always focus on the moral opposition between people and elite.

The Politics of Change

In addition to anti-corruption discourse, the results suggest that a discourse around political change entered the electoral mobilization process as a central theme during the period covered in the study. The term "change" was used as a catch-all political agenda that included not only "governance reform" and "institutional accountability" but "economic opportunity" and "democratic renewal" as well. Parties were more effective in making change a symbol of people's aspirations for a more responsive political system than in simply proposing policies, since the term change itself was used.

This “electoral story” resonated especially well with younger voters, with folks who were more educated, with first-time voters, and in urban areas. Increasingly these groups looked at political parties on how they could break away from the established political structures, not on how well they were organized in the past. As a result, political legitimacy started to be correlated with the

credibility of narratives for reform instead of the established patronage networks. This discovery builds on work in the field of narrative, as it offers a new perspective on narratives of hope and change both as a campaign theme and as a way to negotiate citizens' political identity. Elections are thus more opportunities for symbolic political renewal, than democratic routines.

Digital Media and Transformation of Political Communications

The other significant point is that digital communication is a medium that can help to reinforce populist narratives. From 2013 to 2024, use of social media fundamentally changed campaign strategies, by allowing political actors to speak directly to the citizens, bypassing traditional media organizations. However, social media like Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp helped to spread campaign messages, speeches in live feed, political symbolism and emotionally charged videos that could be seen by millions of voters within seconds.

The findings suggest that social media had a more significant impact than just raising awareness about the campaign; it changed the way political narratives are being created and read. Digital communication facilitated the generation of shorter and more emotional messages and more readily shared, more personalized and reinforced, via online political communities. So, voters have also tended to be presented with political messaging in their digital "echo chambers," where political predispositions are reinforced regularly. This is in line with what Bennett and Livingston (2018) refer to as the shift of political communication to a more emotionally charged way of communicating, as opposed to traditional policy deliberation. This change was especially pronounced among young voters in KP, where they were more likely than any other age group to engage in politics digitally, but not through campaign activities.

Identity and Nationalism

The findings also show that the question of identity, nationalism and democratic legitimacy was introduced in the populist narratives in the successive elections. The research reveals that, while identity politics has always had an impact on electoral behaviour in KP, the political actors have now started to re-conceptualize identity in the context of general themes of national sovereignty, constitutional rights, democratic engagement and collective political dignity.

These narratives were different from the conventional ethnic mobilizations, because they attempted to build up a politics of political identity based on grievances instead of ethnic loyalties. The political actors started calling citizens at a time when they all faced common challenges of governance failures, institutional injustice and economic uncertainty as members of a larger political community. Electoral mobilization thus began to transcend the politics of the constituency to the politics of the province, of political representation and democratic accountability.

The merging of the concept of identity into the wider context of populism is an example of the versatility of the political strategy of populism. Instead of supplanting current political identities, populist stories merged them into affective and convincing narratives that expanded the electorate to appeal to a wider range of populations.

Populist Narratives Over Three Electoral Cycles

One of the most valuable findings of the present study is that the populist narratives did not remain constant in the period of 2013-2024 in KP. Rather, they have been in a constant state of evolution in response to variations in the political environment, governance experience, economic conditions, and institutional development.

Anti-corruption, accountability and political change were the main issues of the 2013 elections. These themes have grown in the 2018 election to governance performance, institutional reform, and public service delivery. By 2024, the political debate had become much more nuanced, including a discussion of inflation, constitutional debate, democratic legitimacy, judicial independence, economic hardships and political victimhood, as well as the traditional anti-elite rhetoric. The evolution of a narrative is a better way of analyzing populism as a dynamic process, and not a rigid ideology. Electoral narratives were continuously reconstructed in order to keep the political actors relevant in the varying political conditions. This flexibility is what makes populist communication so relevant in the election campaign to this day in this province.

Implications for Electoral Outcomes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The findings indicate that in the KP the outcomes of the election were affected by the intersection of structural and persuasive political narratives from 2013 to 2024. Older factors like party organization, reputation of the candidate and constituency politics continued to matter, but these played in wider narratives that shaped the citizens' understanding of politics.

Based on this, the study suggests that populist narratives served as narratives of cognition and emotion, which participants used to assess political parties, to understand the government's performance and to decide how to vote. Parties with the capacity to effectively connect citizens' grievances with convincing narratives of accountability, reform and political representation were more electorally successful than those based mainly on organizational strength or on traditional party networks of party patrons.

The findings further add to the body of work on populism that shows that the victory of an election is not solely determined on institutional resource or party organization but also on the strategic development of narratives that can convert popular discontent into political support, as is evident in the case of populism in Pakistan, one of the developing democracies. The practice of populist narratives proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of political actors to shape voters' perceptions, redefine electoral competition and impact democratic results in three back-to-back general elections in KPK. In this, it is a reflection of the adaptive nature of the populist communication that is detected in the comparative political research.

Overall Discussion

The findings suggest that the elected results in KP cannot be attributed to just party organization, ethnicity or popularity of the candidates. Rather, populist frames played a crucial role in influencing voters' perceptions, political preferences and voting behavior throughout the elections of 2013-2024.

Narratives of accountability, political change and anti-elite mobilization were a valuable asset for parties that managed to connect citizens' grievances to these stories effectively and persuasively, thereby securing an electoral gain. The results of this study are consistent with the larger international research, which indicates that populist discourses are politically effective when they are closely aligned with the public discontent and when conveyed through emotionally-charged political stories.

Conclusion

This study explored the impact of 'populist narratives' on electoral outcomes in KP in the general elections of 2013, 2018 and 2024. The results suggest that narratives of countering corruption, holding those in authority accountable, changing the system, reforming the governance system and empowering citizens were prominent, impacting how voters saw themselves and their voting choices. These stories began to become important and in some cases supersede traditional considerations of voting behavior including kinship, patronage, and ethnic affiliation. The study findings also show how digital media, charismatic political leadership and enhanced political participation of youth strengthened the effectiveness of populist narratives. Furthermore, the concept of 'populism' changed over the course of the successive elections as a result of the political and socio-economic realities of that time, but always remained grounded in the dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite". It demonstrates how populist communication is and its potential to shape democratic competition. The study also makes a unique contribution to the literature of populism in the context of narrative politics in electoral processes in KP. It highlights the need to examine political communication's central role in comprehending the findings of elections in developing democracies, especially in Pakistan. This analysis could be continued using comparative studies between provinces and/or quantitative and mixed-method research to further explore the link between populist narratives and voting behavior.

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