Portrayal of Political Parties in English Newspapers during the General Elections 2008 in Pakistan

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Headings

Abstract   *This research aims to explore the portrayal of political parties in the English newspapers of Pakistan during the general elections of 2008. The media's importance during the process of elections becomes manifold as it can frame the image of politicians and political parties. Comparative analysis of the leading political parties of Pakistan, including PPPP, PMLN and PTI, in the two English dailies – Dawn and The News was done. This paper examined the frequency and direction of editorials and front-page news stories that were published on leading political parties from 18th January 2008 to 18th March 2008. Along with the content analysis method, theoretical postulates of agenda-setting were employed to explore English newspapers' depiction of political parties during general elections 2008. Findings revealed that a maximum number of news and editorials were published on PPPP, but it was portrayed in a negative manner. The English print media adopted a supportive tilt towards PMLN by giving it a positive portrayal during the general election of 2008.*

Key Words: Newspaper, Dawn, the News, Pakistani Political Parties, General Elections 2008

Introduction

Media holds an important position in modern society because of its ability to keep people informed about local and international events. Media has broadened the mind-set of people by giving awareness about various issues and happenings. Media could be termed as the voice of any society (Singh & Nity, 2017). It has provided a platform for discussions and debates. The advancement in technology has led to a revolution in the media industry around the globe. It has also changed the ways of information processing and media consumption. Convergence has made various forms of media more interactive as compared to the past, whether it is a newspaper, Radio, TV or social media. Leading a life without media could be considered as being isolated from the rest of the world (Dwivedi & Pandey, 2013). Media can pave the way for a societal change by constructing attitudes and perception of the public. Media sets the agenda for issues of public debate by focusing their attention on particular issues while creating ambiguity about other subjects (Happer & Philo, 2013).

The prominence and importance of news content are determined by media houses and media professionals. Media reminds us which issues are to be perceived as the major issues'. Since the masses don't have an opportunity to know about what actually is happening around them, they rely upon the press to get the required information (Lippmann, 1946). Different forms of media, including print media, provide information that shapes up our perception of the world. Since people are dependent upon media for

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information and news about the events happening all around the world, media assumes an important role in prioritizing and re-arranging the news agenda, thus making people reliant upon media.

Media can play an important role in the development of politics, being a source of political communication. It stimulates people's engagement in political activities. (Sanyaolu, Sanyaolu & Oni, 2017). Media is an essential part of any democratic set up as it keeps the public informed about political issues. Media and politics are in a complex relationship in a democratic state, particularly during the elections process. They have a divergent as well as symbiotic relation. Political parties need media to campaign their policies, plans, activities, motivation, ideas and agendas to win voters' trust. Media, in turn, informs people about the aims and objectives of political parties and politicians. They criticize each other but simultaneously, they gain benefits from each other. The media is a watchdog as it uncovers the misconduct and wrongdoings of the politicians (Venturelli, 1998). This research work presents a comparative analysis of two English newspapers of Pakistan that are *Dawn* and *The News*. Coverage patterns of these newspapers are analyzed regarding the three major political parties of Pakistan during the general elections 2008

Objective of the Study

was to examine the depiction of leading political parties in the editorials and front-page news stories of English newspapers of Pakistan during the general elections 2008.

Research Questions

RQ 1: Which political party was given the most frequent coverage by the English newspapers of Pakistan during the general elections 2008?

RQ2: How did the English print media present the stance of three political parties of Pakistan during the general elections 2008.

Review of the Literature

Elections coverage has been a researchable topic for scholars around the globe. Agenda setting function of the media has a considerable impact on voting behavior during the election campaigns. The media can set the agenda with reference to the issues of national importance during political campaigns.

While talking about The Role of newspapers in elections and their potential to influence voting behavior, Druckman (2005) found that the local newspapers serve as an important medium of learning and gaining information for the voters.

Stromback and Dimitrova (2006) compared the coverage patterns of the Swedish and US media during the election campaigns. Content analysis showed that US media did framing political news as a strategic game, while the focus of the Swedish media remained on substantive issues. Moreover, Swedish newspapers were more conflict-oriented as compared to the newspapers of the US.

Rosales and Lowry (2000), in a study on elections, showed that all the newspapers covered elections news in a supportive way by giving positive coverage to the candidates during the 1998 presidential elections in the Philippines. Media could have a significant role to play regarding the priming and framing of a democratic process as a study was done by Entman (2007) to show control of media over the division of power. The study uncovered that by applying the concept of agenda-setting, priming and framing of various political issues, media could determine who gets what, when and how with reference to the coverage of political issues.

Graber (2002) explained that media coverage of politics is an integral part of democracy. Media facilitates democratic discourse and deliberations by providing a platform for policymakers and stakeholders to express their thoughts and opinions about different issues. The privileged position of elites, particularly the ones who hold governmental positions, were identified to gain access to media. While studying media coverage, Froehlich and Rüdiger (2006) concluded that journalist could do the framing of the campaigns of

political parties by ignoring the direction of the PR cells of the parties. Steger (1999) examined the coverage pattern of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* during the 1996 US elections. Both newspapers were found to show biasness as they gave more prominence to the leadership as compared to the other candidates.

While referring to media biasness, a study conducted in the United States on the elections and newspapers concluded that the newspaper articles framed the news stories and there were over-exaggeration and fragmentation of the news in the news articles that are against the norms of democracy which upholds the highest standard of accurate and true dissemination of information for the general public (Johnson and Avery 1999).

In a content analysis study of the coverage of political campaigns by print media, Diedong (2013) concluded that in a state like Ghana press was quite functional regarding the political communication and treatment are given to political parties in the print media contents.

Apart from the print media, there have been studies on political campaigns in other forms of media as well, like Herrnson, Stokes-Brown and Hindman (2007) conducted a study on the political campaign of political parties and the digital divide. They concluded that a division was created between digital and political because of the internet. Elections candidates other than presidential or congressional did not make frequent use of the internet for the purpose of their campaign and promotion. While the young and well-educated candidates were more inclined towards using the internet for their election campaigning. Though the experience of a candidate was considered important, Candidates' activities on social media had a direct influence on voters' perception of them.

Walgrave, Van Aelst and Nuytemans (2008) conducted research on the electoral campaign contact with voters. By analyzing a Vote Advice Application and a TV show during the Belgian elections in 2004 on internet users, the study revealed that the application had an impact on the voters.

Williams and Gulati (2012) examined the Role of Facebook during the 2006 US elections. Facebook was used by almost all the candidates of political parties for their promotion. The study showed that all the political leaders used Facebook to update their important personal and official information. Members of Facebook could show their support to the candidates that provided an estimate of their votes.

This study has examined the editorial and news coverage of the three leading political parties of Pakistan (PPPP, PML-N and PTI) by the two English dailies, i.e. *Dawn* and *The News,* from 18th January 2008 to 18th March 2008. In light of the literature review and objective of the study, the agenda-setting theory was found relevant to this study.

Agenda Settings Theory and Coverage of Political Parties

Agenda setting is a process through which media tells the individuals what to think about. It is not about the way a certain event is reported but about the amount of attention given by the media and amount of the time that people get exposed to that event (Abreu,2015). Concept of agenda-setting was put forth by Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. This theory explains that media creates certain images in the minds of people, so the consumers of media messages respond to those images, not to the facts and real events. Agenda setting remodels and re-shapes all the happenings that occur in our atmosphere into the better and simpler model (Baran & Davis, 2011).

Cohen (1963) coined the term agenda-setting by refining Walter Lippmann's ideas about ordinary people's inability to make important political decisions (Baran & Davis) But this theory was formally presented by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. They conducted empirical research during the US presidential elections in 1968, 1972 and 1976. They concluded that there was a correlation between the importance given to issues by media and voters perception about the salience of the same issues. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda setting theory refers to playing up and playing down the issues before the public. Media does not reproduce and reflect but shapes and filters reality. Issues highlighted by media are perceived as important as compared to the issues that are given less importance. (Freeland, 2012).

Various studies show that newspapers frequently apply agenda-setting theory to their news contents. A study by Walgrave and van Aelst (2006) on agenda setting highlighted the process of political agenda set by the media. The study identified that the political agenda was determined by the factors like what was the issue, what sort of coverage was given to it, and by which media outlet.

In the same way, Olayiwola (1991), in a study on Nigerian media, found that media ownership was quite influential in setting the agenda for political issues in Nigeria. Public opinion and perception, to a large extent, was contingent upon the way political reality was presented by the mass media. So media had a detrimental role in political stability or instability and integration or disintegration of the nation.

This study presents an analysis of editorials and front-page news stories during the elections, and agenda-setting was considered suitable to examine the portrayal of political parties in newspapers. By employing this theoretical approach, newspapers can set an agenda regarding a specific political party and can mold the minds of readers, particularly during the electoral process.

Methodology

This study has employed the technique of content analysis to examine the news stories and editorials of selected newspapers. Content analysis is one of the extensively used research methods in the field of social sciences. It has been used in different disciplines like political communication, political science, gender, psychology, race, and violence. Content analysis has been used by Political science studies for the analysis of propaganda techniques that were used during the wars (George, 1959; Lasswell et al., 1965). While talking about the content analysis, Miller and Whicker (1999) labelled it as a research method to draw inferences from the recorded text. The prime advantage of this method is that it gives exact knowledge of media content and its reliability (Berelson, 1952). Benefits of using the content analysis technique are:

1. content analysis can be utilized as an unobtrusive measure of content to avoid bias
2. content analysis offers potentials for examining the effects of various messages on responses of recipients.
3. the content analysis leads to new research on definite subjects of communication
4. content analysis that can be used in research studies that involve multiple research methods (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991).

content analysis during the election campaigns mostly focuses on the content (analysis) of news media or messages of the candidates (Esser 2019).

Categories were created to study the treatment given to three political parties of Pakistan by the English newspapers. The categories were

1. Party leaders
2. Party candidates
3. Party campaigns

The frequency and direction of the front page news and editorials related to these categories were analyzed by the content analysis method.

Variables

The two English newspapers were the independent variable, while coverage/portrayal of political parties was considered as the dependent variable.

Unit of Analysis

An editorial or the news story published on the front page of *Dawn* and *The News* from 18th January 2008

to 18th March 2008 was considered as the unit of analysis.

Overall tone method was used to determine the tilt of the contents of newspapers. A five-point scale ranging from highly negative to highly positive, was used to rank the direction of the news stories and editorial.

The rationale for Choosing Editorials and front pages of the Newspapers

Editorials are the most important part of a newspaper as they reflect the newspaper ideology and policy towards the political environment in the country, so they are most appropriate to use in the study of the political content of newspapers (Bilal et al. 2012). The front-page news stories were chosen for analysis as they determine the importance of news.

Findings and Discussion

The coverage given to Political Parties with Reference to Frequency

The leading English newspapers of Pakistan gave PPPP the most frequent editorial and news coverage regarding the elections 2008 (57.4 %). The second most frequently covered political party was the PML (N) (38.3 %), and the least frequent coverage was given to PTI with only (4.3 %) by the newspapers in their editorials and news stories

Dawn gave PPPP the maximum coverage (71.4 %). Likewise, *The News* also gave the maximum news and editorial coverage (55%) to PPPP during the general elections in 2008. While newspapers gave PTI got minimum coverage (4.3%) by both English newspapers. Coverage of both newspapers differed in terms of frequency; *The News* published 40 editorials and news stories on the selected themes about political parties, but Dawn did not give much space to the political parties' news during elections 2008, as it did not publish single news on PTI in this context (table A).

Table 1. Newspaper and Political Party-Wise Comparison of Editorial and News Coverage during Elections 2008

			Political Party			Total	
			PML(N)	PPPP	PTI		
Newspaper	Dawn	Count	2	5	0	7	
		% within Newspaper	28.6%	71.4%	0%		100%
	The News	Count	16	22	2	40	
		% within Newspaper	40%	55%	5%	100%	
Total		Count	18	27	2	47	
		% within Newspaper	38.3%	57.4%	4.3%	100%	

Portrayal with Reference to Stance of Newspapers

PTI was given the most negative (bottom two box percentage) editorial and news coverage by the newspapers during the elections 2008 (100 %). PPPP was given the second most negative coverage (19.6 %), and the least negative coverage was provided to PML(N) by the newspapers regarding the elections 2008 (10.4 %). The direction of editorials and front-page news stories remained negative towards the PTI as 100 % of news covering the party were in a negative vein as just a few news were published on PTI. Whereas PPPP received the second most negative coverage as 19.5 % of editorials and news were published on the party in a negative direction. In contrast, PML (N) got the least negative coverage with 10.4 % editorials and news about it was published in an unfavourable manner in the leading English newspapers vis-à-vis the general elections 2008 in Pakistan (table B).

Table 2. Political Party-wise Comparison of Direction of Editorial and News Coverage on Elections 2008

			Political Party		
			PML(N)	PPPP	PTI
The direction of the news	Highly Negative	Count	0	0	0
		% within Political Party	0%	0%	0%
	Negative	Count	1	5	2
		% within Political Party	10.4%	19.6%	100%
	Neutral / Mixed	Count	2	9	0
		% within Political Party	12.5%	32.6%	0%
	Positive	Count	13	11	0
		% within Political Party	66.7%	41.3%	0%
	Highly Positive	Count	2	2	0
		% within Political Party	10.4%	6.5%	0%
Total		Count	18	27	2
		% within Political Party	100%	100%	100%

Conclusion

PML (N) was presented in the most favourable way by *Dawn,* and *The News* during the general elections 2008, though the most frequent coverage was given to PPPP. While PTI remained at last position with reference to overall coverage. Looking at the coverage of the two leading English newspapers of Pakistan, findings reveal that PPP got maximum editorial and news coverage, but the tilt of the newspapers was not in its favour, but rather it was pro-PML(N).

Dawn did not publish even a single editorial on PTI. The reason is that PTI boycotted the general elections in 2008, so it was not given representation in the newspaper pages for not being a part of the elections process at that time. As far as the tilt of selected newspapers during the general elections 2008 is concerned, both English newspapers were the most critical towards PPPP. This criticism could be because of the policies of the party. The content analysis of the newspapers' overall coverage pattern shows that the party that got maximum coverage, the newspapers portrayed it in a negative manner. On the other hand, PML (N) was framed in the most positive manner by the selected newspapers as compared to the other two political parties. The English print media *(Dawn and The News)* of Pakistan adopted a supportive tilt towards PML (N) by giving it a positive portrayal during the general election 2008.

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