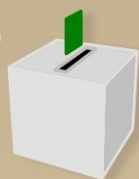


ONLINE PARTICIPATION OF **FEMALE POLITICIANS**

IN PAKISTAN'S
GENERAL
ELECTIONS
2018



CONTENTS

2	Executive Summary
3	Background
4	Social Media in Pakistan
7	Social Media and Elections – A Strong Nexus
9	Methodology
14	Censorship and internet shutdowns
16	Fake news
22	Gender inclusivity in the Election
31	Allegations of Fraud
34	Political Advertisements
36	Conclusion & Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report seeks to analyze the use of social media during the 2018 General Election in Pakistan. The report focuses on online participation and harassment of female politicians along with issues pertinent to elections in the digital age: online political advertising, misinformation and regulation of social media spaces.

The report draws on data from social media in the lead up to the 2018 election. The key findings are:

- Twitter analysis of election-related hashtags shows that 61% of tweets contained verified content and 25% contained political content. Unverified content - content which had a single reporting source - accounted for around 5% of the links and pointedly biased content made up just 3% of the links.
- Professional news and social media made up the vast majority of information shared on Twitter.
- In terms of number of active female politicians on social media, the PPP was ahead of its counterparts in PTI and PMLN.
- PTI's female politicians, it seems, manage to produce more activity despite their slightly lesser numbers.
- Based on 216,849 Facebook comments directed at the women in our dataset and 843,943 comments directed at three prominent male politicians - Imran Khan, Shehbaz Sharif, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari - we see that women are much more likely to receive objectifying, personal, sexualised and sexist comments, whereas the abuse faced by men was focused on their political integrity rather than their appearance.
- Analysis of 43,372 comments from the Facebook pages of 43 women politicians from 7 parties was such: 90% neutral, 6% unwelcoming, and 4% abusive.
- The large majority of both abusive and unwelcoming comments were classified as political victimization (49%), with 25% of comments classified as sexist, 23% as personal abuse, 2% as threats, and 1% as racist.
- Female politicians in some parties received a much higher percentage of unwelcoming comment types, such as ANP, PMLQ, and PPP politicians, who received more than 50% of sexist comments. The PMLN's politicians, meanwhile, received almost 76% of comments that were based on political victimization.
- Out of the 89 Facebook ads by major political parties and some Facebook pages, 36% of ads came from the PTI Official Facebook page, 32% from Shehbaz Sharif's Facebook page, and another 12% from the official PMLN Facebook page.
- The 89 Facebook ads analyzed reached an enormous audience, gathering a total of 1,307,697 likes, 732,580 shares, and 77,426 comments at the time we collected data for each post.
- There was no monitoring of social media activities by the ECP and the Code of Conduct was not applied to the activities of parties online.
- In the aftermath of the elections, between July 25th to 27th, 329,44 tweets contained the hashtags “#Rigging”, “#massiverigging,” and “Form 45” as electoral fraud was a key concern after the conclusion of polls. A high proportion of these tweets came from accounts created in June and July 2018, sending an average of 2,549 tweets by the end of the elections.

BACKGROUND

The general election for the National and Provincial Assemblies was held in Pakistan on July 25, 2018. The incumbent government of Pakistan Muslim League Noon (PML-N) gave way to the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), a party that has not had power at the federal level before. An election of many firsts, 2018 was also unique in its widespread use of technology by both the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and almost all major parties.

Once dismissed as irrelevant to constituency, on-the-ground politics, this election marked a major shift in attitude towards social media and internet-enabled technologies. While social media was employed in the 2013 general election, the scale and scope of its usage was unprecedented in 2018. This report seeks to examine the role of social media in the 2018 general election from the prism of women's participation, usage of campaign advertisements, and proliferation of misinformation.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

Social media is now a widely-used tool for mobilizing and coordinating political movements and campaigns.¹ Less than a decade ago, the conventional view was that social media is a democratising tool and gives voice to citizens who otherwise would not have space within the traditional political structure. This wide-eyed enthusiasm has been turned on its head in recent years, particularly in light of Brexit and Trump's campaign in 2016. In Pakistan, there has been political ambivalence towards social media since its proliferation in the country. Social media as a tool for campaigning has been riddled with questions of unequal access and misinformation that is usually spread through unverified reports. At the onset it is important to point out the immense digital divide in Pakistan based on class, geographical location and gender.² This means that online political participation is inherently not representative of the population. Thus political parties are conscious about the limitations of social media and tailor their political messages according to their audience on social media.

Social media usage is rising in Pakistan, with over 44 million social media accounts in Pakistan³ and about 35 million Facebook users.⁴ Experts say that the number of social media users in Pakistan is increasing by an average of 7 percent a year. As a result, the 2013 election in Pakistan was the first 'social media election' when the established political parties such as PML-N, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) as well as the challenger, PTI, turned to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote and connect with citizens before and during the election. This move to social media platforms was motivated not only by the aim to connect to wider audiences and optimize party visibility, but also as a safeguard to deter acts of violence. In areas outside the glare of the national media, for instance Balochistan, social media has emerged as an important tool for campaigning. Furthermore, social media was used quite innovatively and strategically by independent candidates, such as Jibran Nasir, to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach out to the voters directly.

However, in 2013 the conventional wisdom was that the political benefits of social media are limited in their scope. It was posited that a majority of Pakistanis live in rural areas and most do not have access to the internet-social media, at best, can supplement electioneering. Some parties, such as the right-wing Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), rejected the use of social media outright. The attitude of Islamist parties towards social media and campaigning has been ambivalent, however it is noteworthy that the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has been an exception to this general rule. The rise of the TLP has been attributed to the proliferation of the internet, where speeches of its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi are shared extensively, especially when they were not covered by the mainstream media. This has allowed the TLP to expand its message beyond religious spaces, such as the madrassa, into the mainstream. Khadim Rizvi himself had a significant social media following, before his Twitter account was suspended for hate speech in November 2018. In its first election, in 2018, the TLP amassed 2,234,265 votes, emerging as the fifth largest political party in the country.

¹ Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011), pp. 28-41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800379>, p. 30.

² Measuring the Information Society Report 2016, International Telecommunications Union, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/misr2016/MISR2016-w4.pdf>.

³ "Over 44 million social media accounts in Pakistan", *Geo News*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/131187-Over-44-million-social-media-accounts-in-Pakistan>.

⁴ Mehtab Haider, "FB assisting Pakistan in blocking content", *The News International*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/309357-fb-assisting-pakistan-in-blocking-content>.

⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-parties-look-to-social-media-to-boost-popularity/a-16730531>

⁶ McKenzie, J. (8 May 2013). Pakistanis take refuge in social media campaigning before election. *Techpresident*. <http://techpresident.com/news/wegov/23853/pakistanis-take-refuge-social-media-campaigning-election>.

⁷ Syed Ali Shah, "Candidates in Balochistan forced to run campaigns on social media in absence of TV coverage", *Dawn*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1419199>.

⁸ Ahmed Yusuf, "What is behind the sudden rise of TLP?", *Dawn*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1425085>.

⁹ "Khadim Hussain Rizvi's Twitter account suspended", *Dawn*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1443541>.

If we look back to the social media wing formation of political parties, PTI was pioneering in terms of online mainstream political campaigns in Pakistan. Their social media team was informally organized in 2007. In addition to managing its campaigns on Twitter and Facebook, the PTI team runs an online television and radio channel (Insaf TV and Insaf Radio). "Our online groups have a larger following because PTI has a strong youth following, connected to the virtual world," says Imran Ghazali, team leader. PTI's party head and current Prime Minister of the country, Imran Khan cited social media and its potential early on. In an interview for New York Times in 2012, Khan referenced social media as a means of canvassing as part of "a mass movement would take the PTI to power, not wheeling and dealing with power brokers"¹⁰:

"Today in the party we made a breakthrough. We're going to have a membership drive and then elections through mobile phones. The youth want new faces. They can elect their own from the ground up. There has to be democracy in our own party before we bring it to the country. This is what we decided in the meeting today, and I feel liberated."¹¹

This strategy was followed by the PPP social media team which has been around since 2008-09. Soon, the team spread out across the country, whereas, the largest group was based at the PPP Central Secretariat in Islamabad back in 2013. However, the PML-N social media team was conceived towards the end of 2011. By January 2012, the 20-member team, all aged 30 and below, was active in the virtual world. PML-N has a large presence on Facebook and Twitter after PTI.¹²

Following the 2013 elections, major Pakistani political parties started using social media as a platform for connecting with voters, particularly the youth given that they constitute a significant voter segment, approximately 60% of Pakistan's registered voters¹³. Both in the case of PPP and the PML-N, the shift towards social media was championed by younger leaders within the respective parties. In 2015, Bakhtawar Bhutto Zardari was named as the PPP's social media chief.¹⁴ Likewise, Maryam Nawaz Sharif heads the social media team within PML-N.¹⁵

¹⁰ Pankaj Mishra, "Imran Khan Must Be Doing Something Right", The New York Times, August 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/19/magazine/pakistans-imran-khan-must-be-doing-something-right.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://tribune.com.pk/story/544938/electioneering-the-people-behind-the-parties-online-persona/>

¹³ Sajid Hussain, "Politics-media-youth nexus: Analysis of Pakistan's general elections 2013", Cogent Social Sciences, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2018.1446688>.

¹⁴ Shafqat Ali, "Bakhtawar made PPP social media chief", The Nation, October 10, 2015, <https://nation.com.pk/10-Oct-2015/bakhtawar-made-ppp-social-media-chief>.

¹⁵ "Social media team of PMLN is 'efficient and capable', says Maryam", The Nation, May 22, 2018, <https://nation.com.pk/22-May-2018/social-media-team-of-pmln-is-efficient-and-capable-says-maryam>; Sardar Sikander, "Maryam in a battle with PTI for social media supremacy", The Express Tribune, February 11, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1632360/1-maryam-battle-pti-social-media-supremacy/>.

In a research paper, Saifuddin Ahmed and Marko M. Skori, point out how social media campaigns by Khan and Obama have been similar given their focus on the “politics of personality”.¹⁶ PTI's campaign has been built on Imran Khan's persona, providing frequent but not detailed insight. Another aspect of PTI's campaign has been the focus in courting young voters as well as social media volunteers. This strategy is born of demographic realities, since out of an electoral list of 83 million voters, 47% of the voters were under the age of 35 and 30% under 30 years. According to the National Database Registration (NADRA), 30 million voters were newly listed in the electoral rolls out of which a high proportion turned 18 years only in the last 3 years. Hence, PTI aimed to capitalize on this demographic.¹⁷ PTI has a network of accounts including those with region-based focus, targeting a particular province or constituency.

One of the main concerns of the PTI's online presence has been its greatest strength as well - its zealous supporters. Not officially affiliated with the party itself, social media volunteers often engage in abuse and trolling of journalists, commentators and politicians who challenge the party line. In 2017, for instance, when former party member Ayesha Gulali accused Imran Khan of sexual harassment, social media abuse against her and her sister was so pervasive that the party leadership was forced to issue a statement of restraint for his supporters.¹⁸

Despite the initial optimism regarding social media, a more cautious and weary approach is now adopted towards social media given the specter of misinformation and abuse. A growing war of information has encapsulated the political landscape of Pakistan. It is this anxiety that this report seeks to interrogate and explore.

¹⁶ Saifuddin Ahmed and Marko Skoric, “Chapter 9: Twitter and 2013 Pakistan General Election: The Case of David 2.0 Against Goliaths”, In Boughzala I., Janssen M., Assar S. (eds) Case Studies in e-Government 2.0. Springer, Cham, 2015, 10.1007/978-3-319-08081-9_9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “PTI chief urges workers to refrain from targeting Maria Toorpakai on social media”, The Express Tribune, August 3, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1473003/pti-chief-urges-workers-refrain-targeting-maria-toorpakai-social-media/>.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTIONS – A STRONG NEXUS

The usage of social networking sites in Pakistan like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp is increasing exponentially. This usage is expected to rise exponentially given the proliferation of mobile internet. While social media usage results in greater access to information and avenues for speech, the datafication of the social media user now provides unprecedented insight into voter patterns, preferences and platforms.¹⁹ For instance, PTI was able to use a mobile application - Constituency Management System (CMS) - and voter database of more than 50 million voters to strategically target voters for the 2018 election. This nexus between voter data provided by the ECP to each candidate and machine-driven sorting has been attributed as an essential reason for PTI's gains in this election.²⁰ Given that Pakistan lacks a personal data protection law, the growing use of data analytics in campaigning can lead to large scale data mining and intrusive data collection akin to the Cambridge Analytica scandal where political campaigning based on Facebook user data raised concerns of protection of citizens' data and its susceptibility to political manipulation in the United States and Britain.

Despite the fact that the internet has revolutionised access to information, not everything that appears on social media is authentic. With the stakes high, the proliferation of misinformation campaigns and fake followers have been weaponized by various parties to bolster their support online. For instance, the social media popularity of a political figure is often measured by the number of followers that they have - however not all of this following is authentic. In the 2016 US electoral campaign, approximately 60% of followers on Donald Trump's Twitter account were deemed to be fake.²¹

Election authorities around the globe make use of basic technologies to administer elections, but now more sophisticated tools, such as database systems, geographic information systems and biometric scanning are being used to conduct elections. Technology is used, for example, to compile voter lists, draw electoral boundaries, manage and train staff, print ballots, conduct voter education campaigns, record cast votes, count and consolidate vote results and publish election results. The appropriate application of technology to elections can increase administrative efficiency, reduce long-term costs and enhance political transparency.²² In countries such as the United States and Australia, voters can cast their votes electronically and even via internet using the punch card system.²³ Nevertheless, technology also comes with its problems and its application in the voting process process has raised questions of lack of transparency and hackability.²⁴

¹⁹ Social Media and the Elections By Panagiotis T. Metaxas and Eni Mustafaraj. Social Media and Political Participation: Are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube Democratizing Our Political Systems? By Robin Effing, Jos van Hillegersberg, and Theo Huibers.

²⁰ Saad Sayeed and Drazen Jorgic, "How a phone app and a database served up Imran Khan's Pakistan poll win", Reuters, August 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-election-pti-analysis/how-a-phone-app-and-a-database-served-up-imran-khans-pakistan-poll-win-idUSKBN1KQ00X>.

²¹ Ana Campoy, "More than 60% of Donald Trump's Twitter followers look suspiciously fake", Quartz, October 12, 2018, <https://qz.com/1422395/how-many-of-donald-trumps-twitter-followers-are-fake/>.

²² <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/et/onePage>

²³ Electronic voting and Electronic counting of votes: A status report By Colin Barry, Paul Dacey, Tim Pickering, & Debra Byrne

²⁴ "German Court Rules E-Voting Unconstitutional", DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-rules-e-voting-unconstitutional/a-4069101>.

In Pakistan, for the 2018 General Election, the ECP and NADRA collaborated to prepare Result Transmission System (RTS)²⁵. The new system aimed to enable presiding officers at polling stations to transmit results to returning officers and the Election Commission in real-time. Under the agreement, NADRA provided technical assistance to the Commission for development of mobile based result transmission system for the presiding officers. This allowed presiding officers to transmit results directly from polling stations using their mobile phones. On election day, however, the RTS suffered a “technological failure” and collapsed on the night of Elections leading to widespread confusion and speculation - even calling into question the integrity of the elections.²⁶ The cause of the failure is currently under investigation.²⁷ The experience of the RTS highlights the frailty of technological systems and their susceptibility to interference.

²⁵ <http://www.radio.gov.pk/14-02-2018/ecp-nadra-sign-agreement-to-prepare-rts-for-general-elections>

²⁶ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/994348/pakistan-election-results-vote-counting-technology-collapsed-imran-khan>

²⁷ “RTS failure: FIA to run forensic audit of election night phone call”, *Pakistan Today*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/10/10/rts-failure-fia-to-run-forensic-audit-of-election-night-phone-call/>.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this research was taken from two major social platforms, Twitter and Facebook, given their popularity in Pakistan and that fact that all major political parties have an established platform on them. Given that the aim of this study was to analyse discourse on social media during the 2018 General Election, the data collection period for Twitter spanned from June to July 2018. The campaign period in Pakistan commences when the caretaker government takes the helm.²⁸ For Facebook activity level of politicians, we collected data from January till July 2018.

Twitter

Analysis on Twitter was conducted to gauge the impact of misinformation in 2018 election. To create our Twitter archive, we utilized the Twitter Archiving Google Sheets (TAGS) tool to retrieve tweets that contained hashtags related to the elections, which we assessed as the main hashtags used to reference the elections. TAGS automatically collects tweets by using Twitter's Search API.

It is important to note that there are limitations of scope and relevance. First, the Search API "is not a complete index of all Tweets, but instead an index of recent Tweets" of the last 7-9 days, and the Search API "is focused on relevance and not completeness."²⁹ Second, TAGS uses Google Sheets to automatically collect the data every minute, and it is subject to quotas imposed by Google Services.³⁰ Google Sheets also have limitations on the number of cells allowed per sheet, which require the creation and setup of a new Google Sheet. We collected 1,091,310 tweets in this manner between 6 June and 25 July 2018.

“ We collected **1,091,310 TWEETS** in this manner between 6 June and 25 July 2018. ”

In addition, between 23 to 26 July 2018, we used rtweet to access Twitter's Streaming API and collect 239,773 tweets in real-time. The data returned by the Streaming API is a 1% sample of all global traffic produced on Twitter at a specific moment in time.

Table 1: Hashtags Tracked

#PTI	#PakElections2018
#PMLN	#PakistanElections2018
#PPP	#NawazSharifKaySathChalo
#JUJIF	#ImranKhan
#MQM	#NawazSharif
#AWP	#MaryamNawaz
#ANP	#BilawalBhutto
#GE2018	

²⁸ Ex-chief justice Nasir-ul-Mulk took over in June 1, 2018 ("Pakistan names former judge as caretaker prime minister", AlJazeera, May 28, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/pakistan-names-judge-caretaker-prime-minister-180528094649314.html>).

²⁹ See Twitter's API documentation here: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/rules-and-filtering/guides/how-to-build-a-query>.

³⁰ See Google Services for more on the quota limits: <https://developers.google.com/apps-script/guides/services/quotas>

We extracted external media links which occurred more than five times in the dataset, and expanded links that had been shortened by services such as Bit.ly and goo.gl. We then counted the number of occurrences of both links and domains and categorized them. The details of our categorization are below:

Category of domain	Definition and example
Political party content	Political party content is information or news created and promoted by the party with the explicit purpose of promoting its candidates, highlighting its policies and achievement, as well as content commenting on another party of political opponent.
Professional news content	Information from a recognized local or international news outlet. Individuals journalists posting on behalf of their news organisation come under their category; however if they posting in their personal capacity they will be classified under user-generated data or social media. For instance, a video clip of a news program that aired on a news channel.
Blog and user-generated content	Individuals or independent groups not reporting or writing on behalf of an established news organisation. Information from a blogging network or an individual website fall under this category.
Junk news and spam	Unverified news or information that has not been verified by any established or mainstream news outlet, civil society group or international organization. For instance, a YouTube video attributing statements to a politician without verifiable evidence and not reported by any other organisation.
Social media content	Posts on social media, text form or visual representation, that does not cite any external source. For example, a private citizen live tweeting from a political event.
Government or state	Official statements in the form of text, audio, video or pictures issued by government officials, departments, ministries, courts or the military through official accounts.
Non-governmental or civil society	Statements in the form of text, audio, video or pictures issued by civil society organisations, international organisations and activist collectives.

Table 2: Definitions of domain categories

Category of links	Definition and example
Authentic	News and information that has been corroborated and verified through widely recognized journalistic ethics.
Unverified	News and information that has only been reported by one news outlet and has not been verified through thorough reporting.
Biased	News and information that only presents a partisan point of view on a story or fact that is either contested or not common knowledge. Paid content to advertise or further an organisation or a particular party will fall under this category.
Proven False	News or information that has been repudiated through an investigation, official statement or video/audio evidence. News or information that has been denied by the government, but backed up by civil society or credible news organisations will not fall under this category.
Satire	Parody presented in the form of conventional news for purposes of humour, entertainment or political commentary. Satire contains false facts or exaggerations that cannot be considered credible news.
Clickbait	Sensationalist content that contains hyperbolic language and images, whose sole purpose is to get online users to click on hyperlinks, and misleads users regarding the content of the news/article/video.
Political	News and information originating from the particular party or individual to further their political cause or agenda. While this content is not necessarily false, it is not being reported by a third party.

Table 3: Definitions of quality of links

Facebook

Data from Facebook was used to analyse the level and quality of participation of female politicians through the posts on official pages and the user comments the posts generated. We created our Facebook dataset by first drawing up a list of women in Pakistani politics and cross-referencing this with the list of candidates released by the Election Commission of Pakistan. We identified 70 women politicians in total, but further refined this list down to only those who held official Facebook pages, resulting in 43 accounts. Furthermore, given that our purpose was to analyse election related discourse, we excluded pages which had not sent any post updates since January 2018, resulting in 40 accounts. We did not confine our list to just candidates running for election in 2018, rather female politicians in general since many of them were engaged in election campaigning even if they were not direct candidates.

On 2 July 2018, Facebook closed the Graph Explorer API, which allowed researchers to generate a temporary token to access data from Public Facebook pages. Facebook's decision to shutter the API imposed several limitations on researchers, such as securing the approval of an app to access data. This change also prevented us from using our preferred method of data retrieval and analysis, which would have been to use the R programming language and the Rfacebook package.

To overcome this limitation, we used Netvizz, an app developed by Bernhard Rieder, a researcher at the Digital Methods Initiative in the University of Amsterdam. The tool can be used to retrieve publicly-available data from Facebook and contains similar variables to data retrieved via R. However, using the Netvizz tool also limited our data collection methods by requiring us to identify Facebook ids for pages of interest and input them manually into the app's search fields.

In total, we retrieved 10,455 posts from 43 women politicians or candidates, and the 200 top ranked comments for each post, for a total of 234,644 comments.

“ In total, we retrieved **10,455 POSTS** from **43 women politicians or candidates**, and the 200 top ranked comments for each post, for a total of **234,644 comments**. ”

These comments included text, images, videos, and stickers; after removing comments which contained no text, we had 216,849 comments for analysis. From these comments, we took a random 20% sample directed at each politician the comments had to be sorted manually by a team of just four data analysers.

The staff at Digital Rights Foundation hand-coded comments at the first stage as “Neutral,” “Unwelcoming,” and “Abusive.” Staff then coded “Unwelcoming” and “Abusive” comments at a second stage, using the categories: “Sexist,” “Racist/ethnicity-based,” “Threats,” “Political victimization,” and “Personal-individual based abuse.” The details of our categorization are below:

Category of abusive or unwelcoming comment	Definition and example
Sexist	Any comment that is demeaning, discriminatory, abusive or derogatory towards an individual/group because of gender or gender presentation. This includes comments on appearance that imply a gendered element.
Racist/ethnicity-based	Any comment that demeaning, discriminatory, abusive or derogatory towards an individual/group because of nationality, race, ethnicity or linguistic identity. This includes slurs, jokes or reference to stereotypes that are racially charged
Threats	Any comment directed towards an individual/group that articulates an intention to cause injury or results in reasonable fear of harm. This includes threats of sexualized violence directed towards individuals.
Political victimization	Any abusive or threatening comments targeting the political beliefs, ideology or affiliation of an individual. This does not include disagreements along partisan lines, however does include comments that serve to ridicule political beliefs rather than legitimately challenge them.
Personal/individual abuse	Comments directed at the individual’s personal characteristics, appearance, family life or other non-political aspects of their life.

Table 4: Definitions of abusive comments

In addition to the data analysis conducted, Digital Rights Foundation took part in an election observers project in which team members attended corner meetings and rallies of various political parties in Lahore during the elections period as well as polling stations on election day. The purpose of this observation was to measure gender inclusivity in the 2018 election. Some of the general observations have been incorporated in this report.

CENSORSHIP AND INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

Censorship on the internet is not new in Pakistan. The primary mode of social media censorship has been through blocking of content by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). The PTA is empowered under section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) to block and remove online content if it infringes on “interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or an part thereof, public order, decency or morality”. Even before PECA, the government blocked both YouTube and Facebook at a national level.³¹

The PTA has blocked 831,002 websites till date, as per its official figures.³² While a bulk of the websites blocked are pornographic content (769,947 URLs) and blasphemous (34,762). Nevertheless, 11,544 webpages have been blocked for “anti-state, anti-judiciary and sectarian/hate speech content” and web pages were blocked over defamation/impersonation.³³

Early in the 2018 campaign period, the left-leaning political party the Awami Workers' Party (AWP) found its website (<http://awamiworkersparty.org>) blocked at a national level on June 3, 2018.³⁴ The AWP was not informed regarding the blockage through a notice by the PTA, in fact it was only when they filed an application two days after the banning with ECP did the PTA unblock the party's website.³⁵

Furthermore, the official web-news channel of the MQM - mqm.org/tv - has been blocked in Pakistan since the past two years by the PTA.³⁶ Previously the entire official website was banned in 2016 due to inflammatory statements made by the party leader.³⁷

³¹ Facebook was blocked by the PTA over a Facebook page entitled “Everybody Draw Mohammad Day” in May 2010 on orders of the Lahore High Court. The ban was lifted 18 days later by the court (Declan Walsh, “Pakistan blocks Facebook in row over Muhammad drawings”, May 2010, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/19/facebook-blocked-pakistan-muhammad-drawings>; “LHC orders lifting ban on Facebook”, The News International, 1 June 2010, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/671481-lhc-orders-lifting-ban-on-facebook>).

YouTube was banned in Pakistan on September 2012 after an anti-Islam film, “Innocence of Muslims”, and the ban was finally lifted in January 2016.

(Tommy Wilkes, “Pakistan lifts ban on YouTube after launch of local version”, Reuters, 18 January 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-youtube/pakistan-lifts-ban-on-youtube-after-launch-of-local-version-idUSKCN0UW1ER>).

³² November 2018.

³³ Ramsha Jahangir, “Pakistan's online clampdown”, Dawn, October 28, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1441927/pakistans-online-clampdown>.

³⁴ “Study reveals extent of Awami Workers political party website block in Pakistan”, Netblocks, June 3, 2018, <https://netblocks.org/reports/study-reveals-extent-of-awami-workers-political-party-website-block-in-pakistan-zgBlrk84>.

³⁵ “AWP appeals to ECP to help unblock its official website”, Daily Times, June 6, 2018, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/249521/awp-appeals-to-ecp-to-help-unblock-its-official-website/>.

³⁶ Sarfraz Ali, “PTA bans official MQM website”, Daily Pakistan, July 23, 2016, <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/pakistan/pta-bans-official-mqm-website/>.

³⁷ Salman Siddiqui, “PTA bans MQM's official website”, The Express Tribune, August 23, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1168336/pta-bans-mqms-official-website/>.

Given the lack of transparency by the PTA, political content removed cannot be easily tracked. Facebook's transparency report provides some insight into government requests--it has been seen that in the first half of 2018 alone, there have been 2,203 content removals, an overwhelming majority of which have been based on requests by the PTA.³⁸ National newspaper Dawn, subject to censorship by the state in offline spaces as well,³⁹ experienced the removal of a social media post reporting criticism of the military.⁴⁰ Facebook also reported that accounts and pages of the Milli Muslim League were recently disabled after being denied registration the ECP.⁴¹ Given the hate speech propagated by its head Hafiz Saeed, this is a welcome move, however it speaks to a partnership between the ECP and Facebook that is not regulated by a transparent and tightly defined criteria.

Besides political censorship, mobile internet services were suspended in several districts of Balochistan on July 20 (days before the elections) on the orders of the Interior Ministry. As per the directives issued to the PTA, mobile internet services were suspended in the districts of Pishin, Killa Abdullah and Mastung.⁴² This is compounded by the fact that mobile internet services were already suspended in Awaran, Kech and Kalat since February 2018.⁴³ The notice issued to the PTA did not mention a specific reason, however it is not inconceivable that the security situation in Balochistan, especially in light of the deadly suicide attack in Mastung on an election event by Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) which resulted in the death of candidate Nawabzada Siraj Raisani and 128 other attendees, was the primary motive.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, blanket bans based on generalised security threats have a disproportionate impact on access to information and freedom of expression especially this close to the elections. Additionally, mobile internet services have been shut down for more than two years in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), which has meant that a significant portion of the population has been denied access to political participation online.⁴⁵

³⁸ "Content Restrictions: Facebook", <https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/PK>.

³⁹ "Disruption to Dawn's distribution continues across country", Dawn, June 20, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1414903>.

⁴⁰ "Facebook says blocking Dawn.com post in Pakistan was 'mistake'", Dawn, May 11, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1407047>.

⁴¹ Waleed Tariq, "Facebook seeks to stem fake news ahead of Pakistan general elections," The Express Tribune, July 21, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1762710/8-facebook-seeks-stem-fake-news-ahead-pakistan-general-elections/>.

⁴² Fahad Chaudhry, "Suspension of internet services in Balochistan to hamper election-related process, PTA tells ECP", Dawn, July 20, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1421358>.

⁴³ "Mobile internet service in six districts of Balochistan suspended", The News International, July 21, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/344251-mobile-internet-service-in-six-districts-of-balochistan-suspended>.

⁴⁴ "128 martyred in Balochistan suicide blast; BAP candidate among victims", The News International, July 13, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/341277-128-martyred-in-balochistan-suicide-blast-bap-candidate-among-victims>.

⁴⁵ Hija Kamran, "A Year Without the Internet", The Slate, August 21, 2017, <https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-internet-has-been-shut-down-in-pakistans-fata-for-more-than-a-year.html>.

MISINFORMATION AND “FAKE NEWS”

The issue of fake news, misinformation and propaganda has been flagged by most parties and observers of the election. The weaponization of misinformation for political means has been a prime electoral concern around the world including the United States,⁴⁶ Britain and Brazil.⁴⁷

Social media news feeds and internet enabled messaging applications have become the site of false news and misinformation. Due to a combination of psychological factors and algorithms that prioritize the most popular tweets,⁴⁸ the content that users see on their newsfeeds is not random, rather it is selected based on calculations of what users might find engaging. Political parties are conscious of these dynamics have often times worked to manipulate these algorithms to their advantage. With news outlets struggling to keep abreast with the immediacy of social media, an algorithm-based news diet can have detrimental impact on the health of a democracy where political fragmentation is heightened. Cass Sunstein posited that in the early 2000s that online spaces are beginning to constitute “echo chambers” that create homogenous communities online confirming already-held biases and prejudices.⁴⁹ The advertising-based revenue model for social media giants such as Google, Twitter and Facebook has also given rise to the phenomenon of targeted political advertisements based on personal profiles generated from mining of personal data.

Given the spectre of fake news over modern elections, political parties in Pakistan were surprisingly unprepared to tackle the issue effectively. All parties interviewed by Digital Rights Foundation indicated that they had experienced issues regarding fake news and propaganda through social media, however there was no concerted strategy in place to tackle the issue.

The subject of misinformation was taken up by the Senate in the lead up to the elections as the issue of defamation, impersonation and propaganda was raised by the Senate's Standing Committee on Interior. The Standing Committee had been approached by several politicians from various parties, including Shehla Raza (PPP), Sadiq Imrani (PPP), Mian Tariq (PTI), Talha Mahmood (JUI), Pir Sadruddin Rashidi (PML-F) Farheen Mughal (PPPP) and Ayesha Gulalai (PTI-G), to clamp down on fake news with relation to the elections.⁵⁰

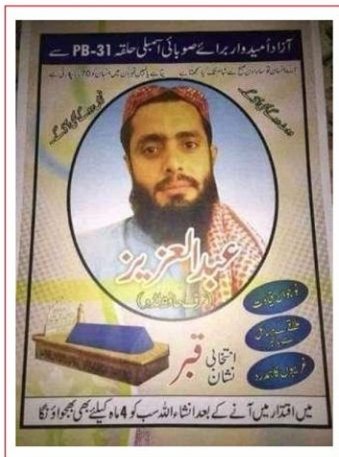
⁴⁶ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Spring 2017, p. 211–236, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>.

⁴⁷ Mike Isaac and Kevin Roose, “Disinformation and fake news spreads over WhatsApp ahead of Brazil's presidential election”, *Independent*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/brazil-election-2018-whatsapp-fake-news-presidential-disinformation-a8593741.html>.

⁴⁸ Twitter for instance uses “deep learning” tools to prioritize content on users newsfeed (Nicolas Koumchatzky and Anton Andreyev, “Using Deep Learning at Scale in Twitter's Timelines”, *Twitter Blogs*, 9 May 2017, https://blog.twitter.com/engineering/en_us/topics/insights/2017/using-deep-learning-at-scale-in-twitters-timelines.html).

⁴⁹ Cass Sunstein, “Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond”, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁵⁰ “Social media propaganda against Pakistani politicians: FIA briefs Senate panel”, *The News International*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/344163-social-media-propaganda-against-pakistani-politicians-fia-briefs-senate-panel>.




This is a fake campaign poster with the grave as an election symbol—no grave symbol was allotted by the ECP.

This report analyses the trending election-related Twitter hashtags from July 1 to July 30, 2018 to pick out links being shared in relation to the elections. The data did not reveal systemic misinformation campaigns based on fake news. Nevertheless, specific stories such as the “Eurasia Future” report⁵¹ linking PLMN to the infamous company Cambridge Analytica made the rounds in the lead up to the 2018 election, despite being debunked several times. The report gained traction because it was picked up by several television programs.

The prevalence of fake news has been difficult to track given that some of the trends were believed to have emerged on WhatsApp, rather than Facebook or Twitter, which poses methodological challenges for this study due to the fact that WhatsApp is encrypted. Nevertheless, Digital Rights Foundation’s elections observers noted that there was widespread sharing of videos on WhatsApp that misattributed statements to candidates. In one particular corner meeting with a PTI candidate, attendees confronted the candidate with dubbed videos of himself and the party leader, Imran Khan. Misinformation regarding voting procedures was also prevalent, so much so that one viral picture that claimed to allow voting for overseas Pakistanis required a clarificatory statement from NADRA in order to debunk it.⁵²

⁵¹ The report, titled “Exclusive: Hacking Democracy — Cambridge Analytica Turns to Pakistan”, has been subsequently removed: <https://eurasiafuture.com/2018/03/09/hacking-democracy-cambridge-analytica-turns-pakistan/>.

⁵² Haddiqua Siddique, “NADRA refutes viral picture claiming overseas Pakistanis allowed to vote”, The Express Tribune, July 19, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1761835/1-nadra-refutes-viral-picture-claiming-overseas-pakistanis-allowed-vote/>.




Election Commission of Pakistan in collaboration with **NADRA** has developed an Online Voting System for Overseas Pakistanis.

Using this system, Overseas Pakistanis can now cast their vote in their home constituencies as per the Voters List from the comfort of their homes using any internet connected device like PC, Laptop, Smart Phone or Tablet. An Overseas Voter who wishes to use the system must have:-

- A National Identity Card for Overseas Pakistani
- A Machine Readable Passport
- A valid Email Address

Overseas Voters must first register themselves with the Online Voting System in order to cast their vote.



To register, simply visit the website www.overseasvoting.gov.pk and create an account using an email address and mobile number.

Next login to the website using the account and select the menu of Registration.

The system will first determine the eligibility of the voter and will ask to enter:-

- 13-digit Unique National Identity Card Number printed on NICOP Card
- The Issuance Date of the NICOP Card
- Machine Readable Passport Number
- And the Tracking ID Number printed on Machine Readable Passport

If the voter is eligible, the system will ask two verification questions from the data to confirm the identity of the voter.

Upon successful verification, the system will send a notification to the registered email address of the voter, confirming their registration as an Overseas voter.

Subsequently, the system will also de-list the Overseas Voter from the local Voter list of their home constituency.

Before the Election, the system will send a Voter Pass to the Voter on their registered email address.

On Election Day, the Voter will log in to the website using their account and select the menu of Vote Now.

Using the Voter Pass, the Voter will select the National Assembly or Provincial Assembly Constituency and cast their vote for the candidate of their choice.

Once the Voting time is over, Election Commission of Pakistan will enable the reporting portal of the Online Voting System.

PLEASE FORWARD TO ALL YOUR OVERSEAS RELATIVES AND FRIENDS AND GROUPS. MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO MAKE A BETTER PAKISTAN.

A viral picture falsely claiming to allow voting for overseas Pakistanis.

In order to gauge the trend of fake news in the general elections, the DRF team has compiled a list of prevalent false news during the 2018 election period:

1. This article has reported various fake news incidents and hoax during elections like Begum Kulsoom Nawaz's death hoax that went viral on social media within a short time. (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1752482/6-fake-news-general-elections-pakistan/>)
2. Indian fake reporting during Pakistan's General Elections (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1rdkX-d-Y>)
3. This news article is about how Mr. Nawaz Sharif could cut a deal for exile in Saudi Arabia: "Pakistan's former prime minister would escape a corruption trial and be allowed to live in exile under a potential deal being brokered by Saudi Arabia". (<https://nation.com.pk/31-Dec-2017/fake-news-industry>).
4. This article is also about Nawaz Sharif cutting the deal to lessen the sentence (<https://www.samaa.tv/news/2018/07/nawaz-sharif-has-struck-no-deal-says-pml-n/>)
5. This news is post-election regarding the call made to France PM by IK and how it got falsely portrayed in media. It also includes screenshot of twitter and media screens. (<https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/another-fake-news-by-pakistan-media-pakistan-france-leaders-phone-call-issue.575600/>)
6. It has been claimed via whatsapp story that 5000/- currency note is going to be phased out which turned out to be a false news [Post-Election News] (<https://www.samaa.tv/economy/2018/09/no-the-rs5000-note-is-not-being-phased-out/>)

7. This is less related to politics and political scenario but more towards Pakistan Defence. See, if it needs attention: (<https://globalnews.ca/news/3147621/pakistan-issues-nuclear-warning-to-israel-on-twitter-after-fake-news-story/>)



7. This is less related to politics and political scenario but more towards Pakistan Defence. See, if it needs attention: (<https://globalnews.ca/news/3147621/pakistan-issues-nuclear-warning-to-israel-on-twitter-after-fake-news-story/>)
8. GEO news issues fake survey report of NA-120 giving an impression of PMLN majority (<http://www.lakeertv.com/geo-news-issued-fake-survey-report-na-120/>)
9. This article share the top 5 fake news (post-election) with pictures and tweets, examples, IK has given his Banigala land for dam fund, and KPK subsidizes segment news (<https://sronews.com/top-5-fake-news-viral-on-social-media-in-pakistan/>)
10. Rana Sanaullah misdirecting the press and public that Justice Nisar expressed desire to see PML-N again as the ruling party. <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398501>
11. Cambridge Analytica turned to Pakistan, hired by Nawaz Sharif <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/hacking-democracy-cambridge-analytica-turns-pakistan>
12. Marriyum Auruangzeb denies Nawaz Sharif has struck any deals prior to the elections <https://www.geo.tv/latest/204614-marriyum-slams-shameful-fake-news-of-nawaz-entering-into-a-deal>
[https://nation.com.pk/24-Jul-2018/news-of-nawaz-entering-into-deal-baseless-shameful-marriyum?how=preview?](https://nation.com.pk/24-Jul-2018/news-of-nawaz-entering-into-deal-baseless-shameful-marriyum?how=preview)
13. PEMRA imposed ban on 17 news channels for airing fake news that Lahore High Court had imposed interim ban on airing of anti-judiciary speeches Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Safdar and other PMLN leaders <https://www.dawn.com/news/1405717>

There were no independent measures taken by the ECP to address fake news as a whole, confining its interventions to debunking misinformation as it emerged, that too sporadically. The void was filled by social media companies such as Facebook who collaborated with local civil society groups. Days before the elections, Facebook's push notifications alerted users to potential fake news and extended third-party fact-checking in Pakistan through a partnership with AFP.⁵³ Informational advertisements by Facebook were also placed in major newspapers. Furthermore, Facebook also introduced features in WhatsApp to limit mass forwarding in an effort to stymie the proliferation of misinformation.⁵⁴

Even within the major political parties, there was no concerted strategy to deal with online fake news, despite the fact that these news items were often weaponised against the parties themselves. Some parties indicated that they sought to get official pages and accounts verified to establish an official voice online, however this was not an election specific strategy and belies the fact that many accounts of party candidates were left unverified during the elections.

Overall, our Twitter analysis of election-related hashtags shows that 61% of tweets contained verified content and 25% contained political content. Unverified content -- content which had a single reporting source -- accounted for around 5% of the links and pointedly biased content made up just 3% of the links.

“ Unverified content -- content which had a single reporting source -- **accounted for around 5% of the links** and pointedly **biased content made up just 3% of the links.** ”

⁵³ Waleed Tariq, "Facebook seeks to stem fake news ahead of Pakistan general elections," The Express Tribune, July 21, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1762710/8-facebook-seeks-stem-fake-news-ahead-pakistan-general-elections/>.

⁵⁴ "WhatsApp steps in to fight false news in Pakistan", The News International, July 18, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/343285-whatsapp-steps-in-to-fight-false-news-in-pakistan>.

Verified content accounted for 60% of the links shared in tweets about Pakistan's 2018 elections

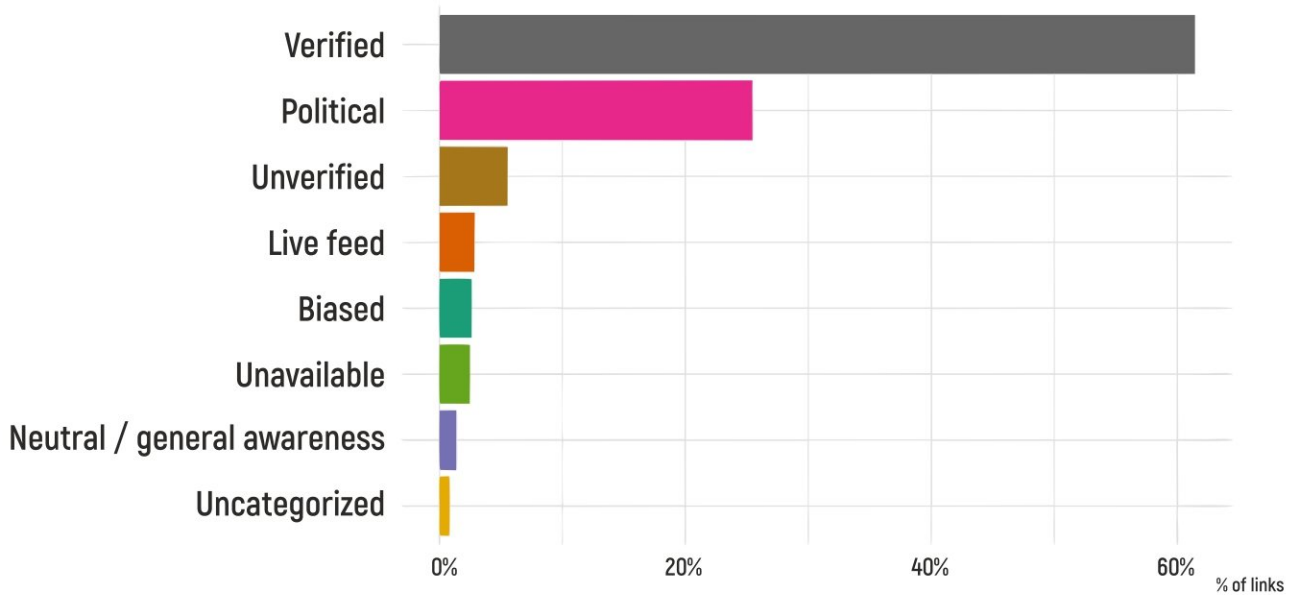


Figure 1: Content classified according to authenticity

Additionally, after categorizing the domains on which content was hosted, we found that professional news and social media made up the vast majority of information shared on Twitter. Often, social media content were links that pointed to a candidate's Facebook page or content by political parties related to election campaigning.

90% of the content shared on Twitter was hosted on professional news and social media sites

based on links hosted 201 unique domains

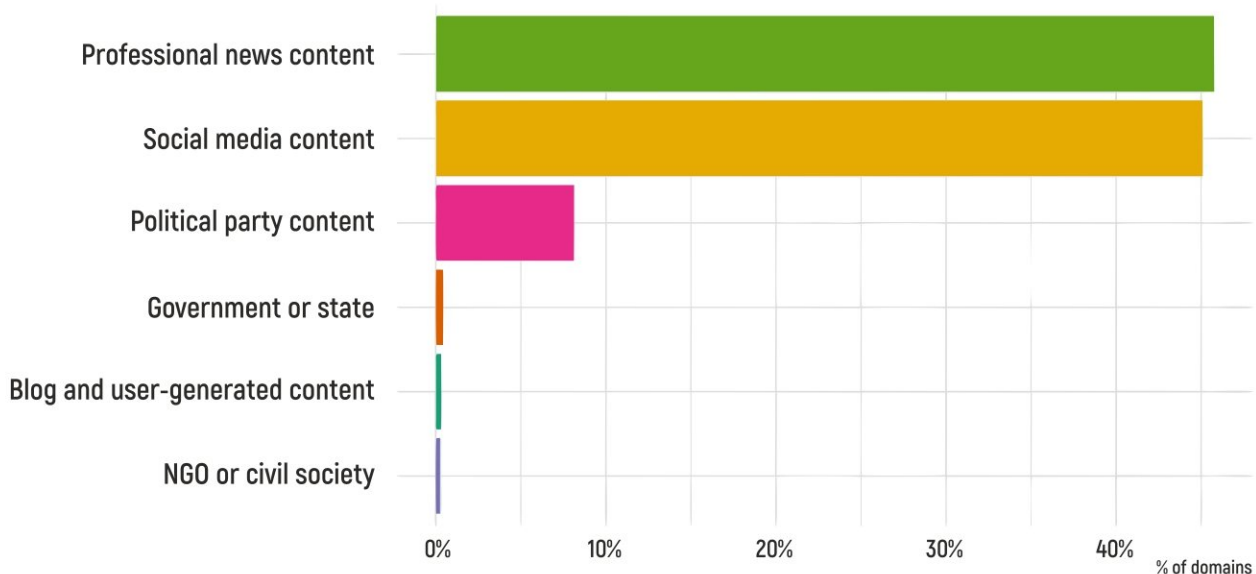


Figure 2: Content classified according to hosts

GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN THE ELECTION

The Elections Act 2017 contained several sections aiming to enhance the role of women in the electoral process, ranging from awareness campaigns and voter registration drives to minimum participation thresholds for both voters and candidates. The Gender Wing of the ECP undertook to include a module with the name of “Gender and Elections” while training ECP Officers and created a “Gender and Disability Electoral Working Group (GDEW)”.⁵⁵ In light of these legislative changes, the ECP previously declared the elections of provincial constituency PK-95 Lower Dir (KPK) null and void on the ground that no women voters came out to vote in the constituency. In the 2018 election, polls in NA-10 (Shangla) and NA-48 (North Waziristan) are also to be declared void due to failure to meet the minimum female voter benchmark.⁵⁶

Online political participation is becoming increasingly important as the political conversation is shifting to online spaces. Social media is often used as a tool for dissemination of information, campaigning and communicating with constituents. The shift of all major political parties in Pakistan onto online spaces has not been uniform—women on the whole are underrepresented in politics, which is reflected in the low number of female politicians active on social media.

Despite measures taken at a policy and legislative level, there have been several obstacles to female participation. In online spaces, the data collected by Digital Rights Foundation revealed staggering amount of abuse directed towards female politicians. Female politicians like Firdous Ashiq Awan and Fauzia Kasuri were targeted for their political affiliations, with insults hurled at them such as “lota” (a colloquial term for a disloyal person/someone who changes political affiliations frequently). Other women were at the receiving end of objectification, sexism and threats. The brunt was suffered by politicians such as Ayesha Gulalai with slut shaming, political victimization and even rape threats in the comments section of her posts.

No institutional support was provided to politicians facing online harassment, despite some flagging this as an issue.⁵⁷ Both the FIA and PTA, the investigative and regulatory bodies for online spaces respectively, did not address this issue, nor was it taken up by the ECP’s Gender Wing. According to the FIA:

“As objectionable material is being uploaded from abroad so it becomes difficult to take action. We are trying our best to investigate the matter and take action against the elements concerned, but there is a lack of coordination between the FIA and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)”.⁵⁸

It seems that social media and the issues emanating from this space were not a priority in terms of elections regulation. The Election Commission of Pakistan as of yet⁵⁹ does not have an official social media account. Registration drives notwithstanding, there were no efforts to engage female voters online—a gap that was filled by civil society groups. In the 2018 election, the male turnout was 56% of registered male voters as compared to 47% female registered voters.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ This information can be accessed on the ECP’s official website: <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/frmGenericPage.aspx?PageID=3171>.

⁵⁶ Iftikhar A. Khan, “ECP set to void two polls over low women turnout”, Dawn, August 03, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1424604>.

⁵⁷ Ikram Junaidi, “Senate body directs FIA, PTA to curb online abuse ahead of polls”, Dawn, July 21, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1421530>.

⁵⁸ Riazul Haq, “FIA’s cybercrime wing ‘in dire straits’”, The Express Tribune, June 22, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1739675/1-fias-cybercrime-wing-dire-straits/>.

⁵⁹ As of December 2018.

⁶⁰ Ghulam Dastageer, Sairah Zaidi and Rizwan Saffar, “A look into the turnout of women voters for the 2018 elections”, Herald, September 18, 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398671>.

This report seeks to analyze the online experience of female politicians. In terms of **number of active female politicians** on social media, the PPP was ahead of its counterparts (figure 3). Since there was a legislative requirement for parties to field at least 5% female candidates, there was an uptake in overall female candidates however this did not translate into increased online participation as many of them were not active on social media—in fact most did not have accounts on social media. As per our interviews with social media wings of these parties, there was no institutional support from within the party to help candidates enhance their presence online.

Distribution of women politicians for each party

total of 40 women candidates or politicians

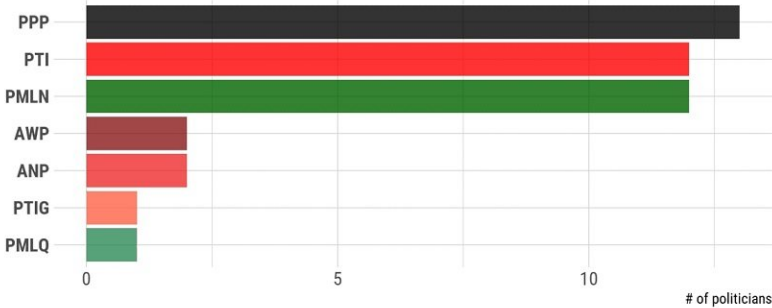


Figure 3: Distribution of women politicians for each party.

Activity levels of female politicians roughly maps onto the number of politicians present online. However, PTI's female politicians, it seems, manage to produce more activity despite their slightly lesser numbers. The level of activity is measured by the number of posts on the official pages of female politicians. Furthermore, a correlation can be observed between activity levels and electioneering as activity levels increase significantly across the board in the months right before the Election.

Women from Pakistan's major parties are especially active on Facebook

10,455 posts by 43 politicians since January 2018; posts aggregated weekly

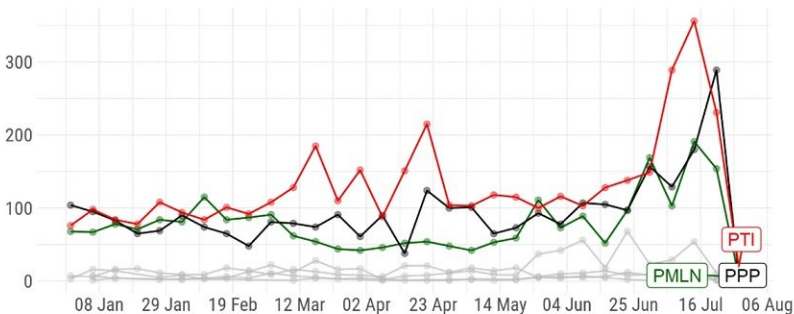


Figure 4: Social media activity levels of women from Pakistan's major parties on Facebook

Based on data collected from January 2018 till the elections, Maryam Nawaz and Ayesha Gulalai had the most number of shares on Facebook among all female politicians (figure 5). Shares on Facebook signify organic reach of the politicians' posts and active engagement with the content. It is interesting that Maryam Nawaz did not contest elections due to the conviction against her,⁶¹ while Ayesha Gulalai's party did not secure a single seat in the elections.

Which woman politician had the most number of shares?

data retrieved from 10,455 posts by 43 politicians since January 2018

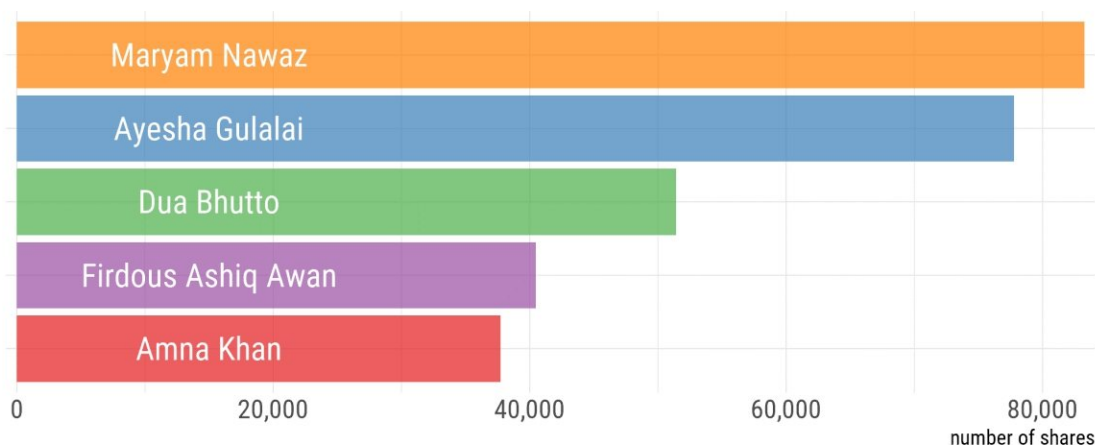


Figure 5: Top number of shares on Facebook for Women Politicians

Engagement in the form of Facebook comments was the major focus of this study, both through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The number of comments demonstrates that PTI and PML-N female politicians elicited the most active engagement, an observation that tracks onto the number of posts by politicians per party mentioned above.

⁶¹ Malik Asad, "Avenfield verdict: Nawaz to serve 10 years in jail for owning assets beyond income, Maryam 7 for abetment", Dawn, July 06, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1418326>.

Facebook comments sent to women politicians per party

% of 234,644 comments sent to politicians or candidates of the party

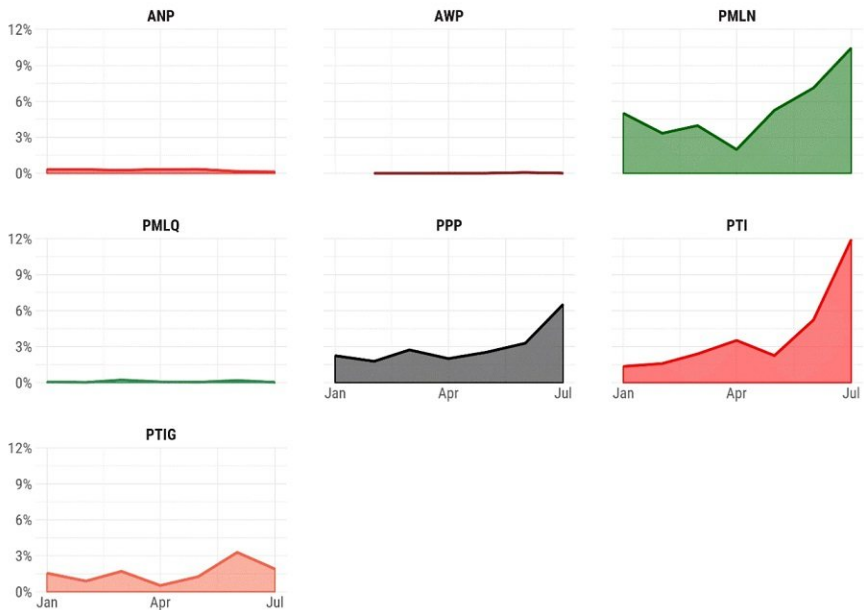


Figure 6: % of Facebook comments on posts of female politicians per party

An emerging norm within the Pakistani social media landscape is online harassment, primarily based on gender, political affiliation, religious identification and ethnicity. This has the effect of limiting the experience of political participants and their freedom of expression in online spaces. The experience of women and certain minority groups on the internet has long been marked by abuse and harassment. This is often exasperated by the online visibility of particular women online, particularly journalists, politicians and activists. Access to offline public spaces, and by extension political public space, for women is extremely limited and undercut by structural impediments. Online spaces often provide an alternative to these spaces, but given the continuity between the online and offline realm, digital spaces are also emerging as sites of exclusion and silencing of women's voices.

Online harassment of politicians can be seen by comparing the most frequent words in comments directed at male and female politicians. Based on 216,849 Facebook comments directed at the women in our dataset and 843,943 comments directed at three prominent male politicians - Imran Khan, Shehbaz Sharif, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari - we see that women are much more likely to receive objectifying, personal, sexualised and sexist comments, whereas the abuse faced by men was focused on their political integrity rather than their appearance.

Online harassment of politicians can be seen by comparing the most frequent words in comments directed at male and female politicians. Based on 216,849 Facebook comments directed at the women in our dataset and 843,943 comments directed at three prominent male politicians - Imran Khan, Shehbaz Sharif, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari - we see that women are much more likely to receive objectifying, personal, sexualised and sexist comments, whereas the abuse faced by men was focused on their political integrity rather than their appearance.

Pakistani women politicians are 'sexy', 'cute', and 'beautiful' in Facebook comments whereas a male politician can be a 'lion,' 'thief', or 'hero'

words near the red line are used equally on both pages, whereas words further away are used more frequently on that specific genders' page

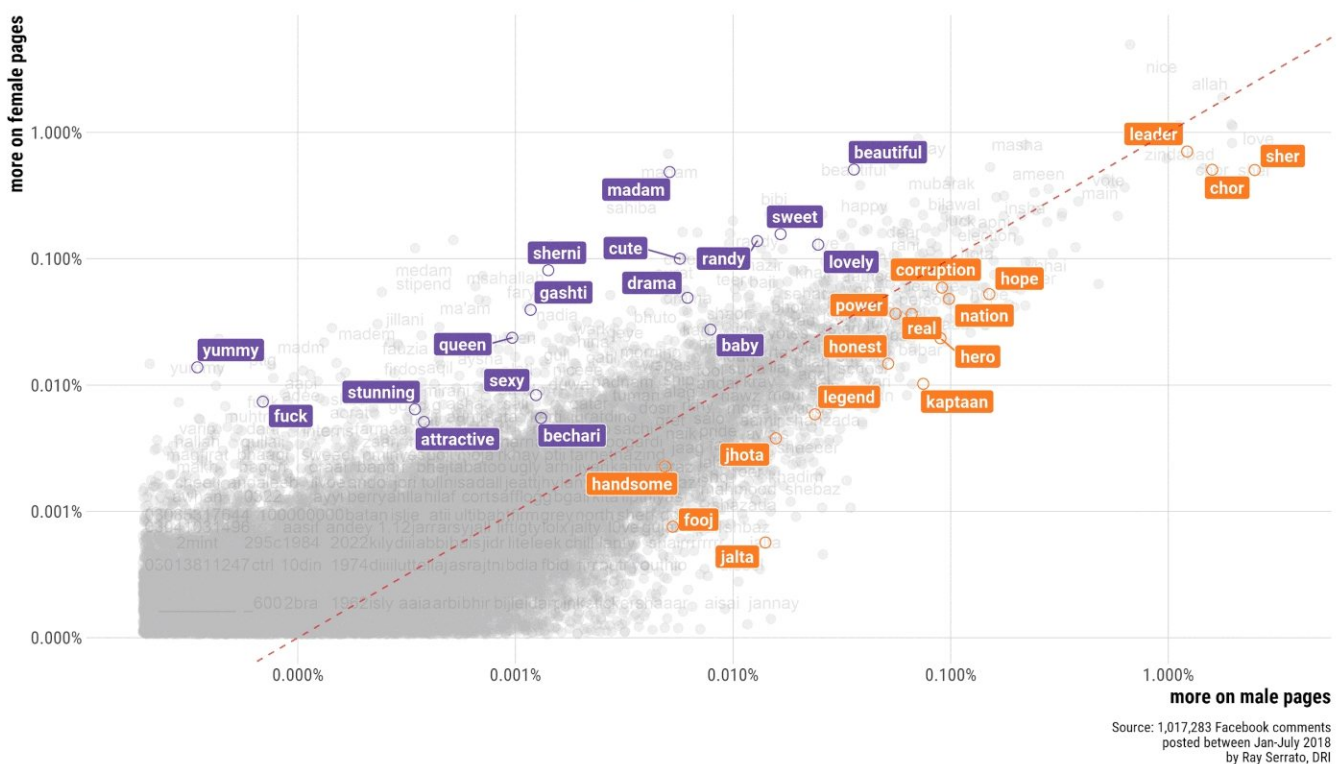


Figure 7: Comparison between Facebook comments directed at male and female politicians

As the pioneers in political social media and the most criticised party in terms of online harassment, PTI has acknowledged the problem of online harassment and stressed on zero tolerance policy to trolls and abusive language in politics.⁶² Nevertheless, no decisive action has been taken by any party to transform online political culture.

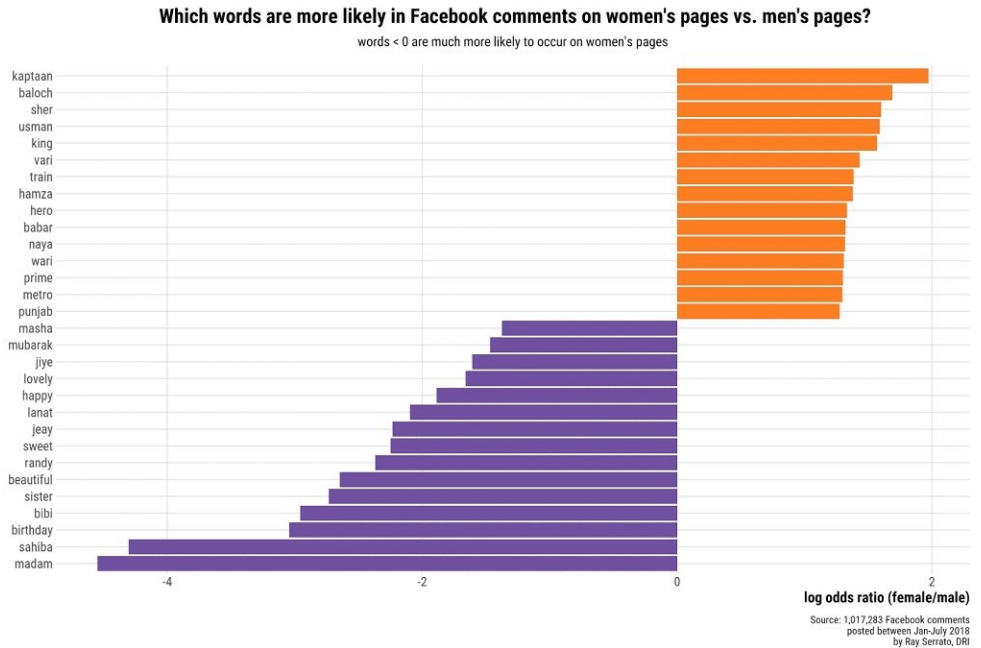


Figure 8: Most frequently used words in Facebook comments for male and female politicians

To understand the nature of discourse directed at female Pakistani politicians, we conducted a textual analysis of Facebook comments for female politicians compared to their male counterparts. Picking out most frequently used words (top 15) we find the prevalence of derogatory words such as “lanat” and “randy” which can be classified as abusive and sexist (figure 8). Even less abusive comments such as “beautiful” are directed at the women’s appearance rather than their leadership qualities connoted by words such as “kaptaan”, “king” and “hero” for men.

⁶¹ “PTI issues 'zero tolerance' policy for abusive language on social media”, The News International, August 22, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/358706-pti-issues-zero-tolerance-policy-for-abusive-language-on-social-media>.

Classification of comments

For a qualitative analysis of comments, we took a random 20% sample directed at each politician. This left us with 43,372 comments from the Facebook pages of 43 women politicians from 7 parties. Out of 43,372 comments, 2,262 comments (5%) were unclassified. The remaining analysis was based on 41,110 comments, which we categorized as neutral (90%), unwelcoming (6%), and abusive (4%). Abusive and unwelcoming comments were further sub-classified as either political victimization, sexist, individual-based abuse, threats, or racist. Given the samples from the Facebook pages of each politician, there were a varying number of comments for each party.

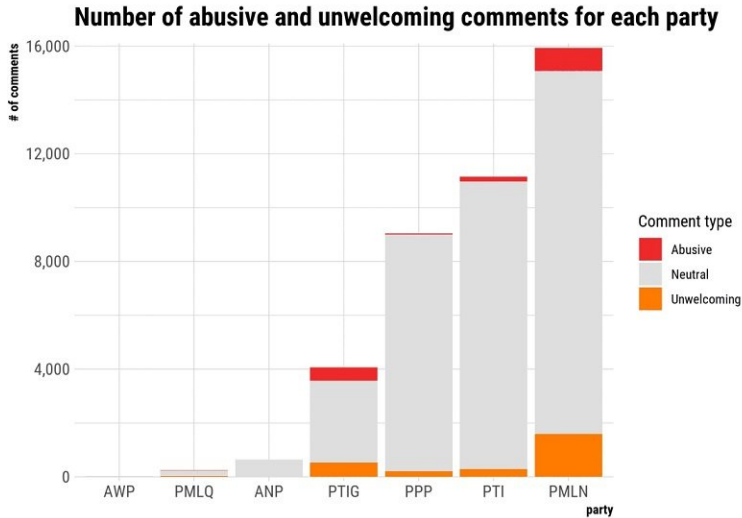


Figure 9: Number of abusive and unwelcome Facebook comments for pages of female politicians per party

The large majority of both abusive and unwelcoming comments were classified as political victimization (49%), with 25% of comments classified as sexist, 23% as personal abuse, 2% as threats, and 1% as racist.

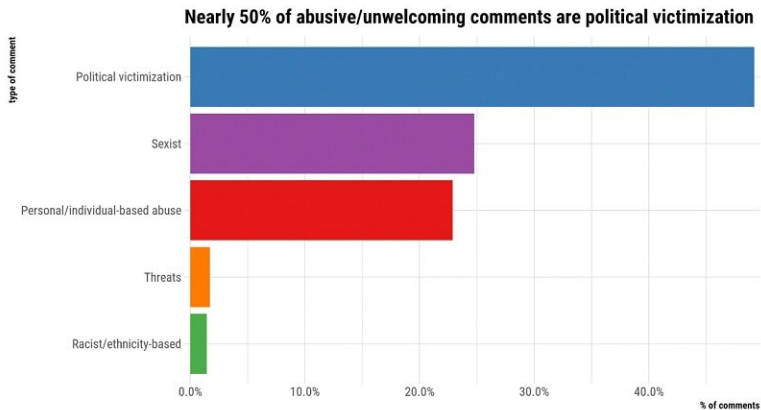


Figure 10: Types of abusive/unwelcoming Facebook comments

For each category of comment, we also analyzed the type of comments for each political party. These breakdowns differed for both abusive and **unwelcoming** comment categories. The female politicians in some parties received a much higher percentage of unwelcoming comment types, such as Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam Group (PML-Q), and PPP politicians, who received more than 50% of **sexist comments**. The PML-N's politicians, meanwhile, received almost 76% of comments that were based on **political victimization**.

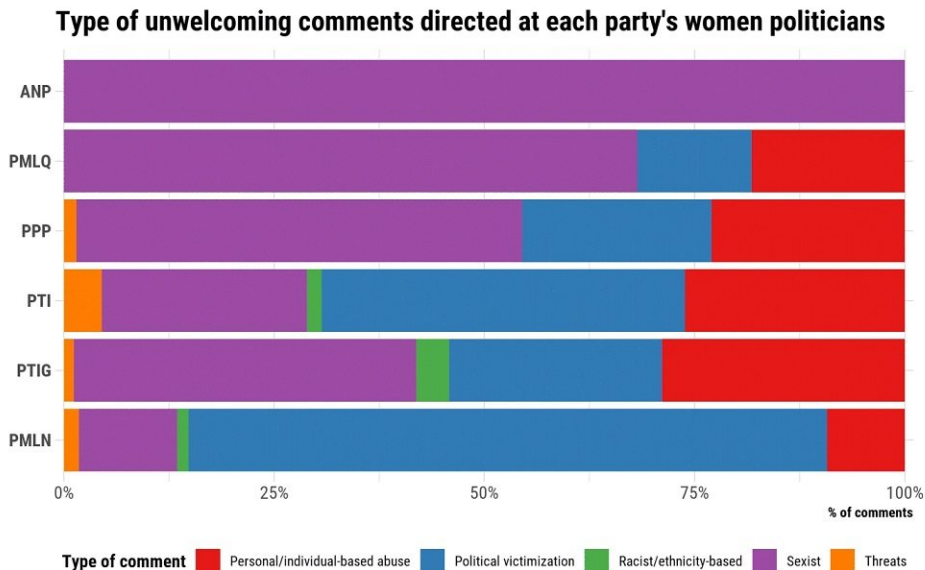


Figure 11: Types of unwelcome Facebook comments per party

For almost all parties, **abusive** comments were more often personal and individual in nature. However, the PML-Q also still received a high percentage (77%) of abusive comments that were classified as sexist. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-Gulalai (PTI-G), which consisted primarily of Ayesha Gulalai Wazir, also received many comments which were both sexist and personal in nature. Whereas other parties, such as the PML-N, continued to receive comments that were mainly based on political victimization.

Type of abusive comments directed at each party's women politicians

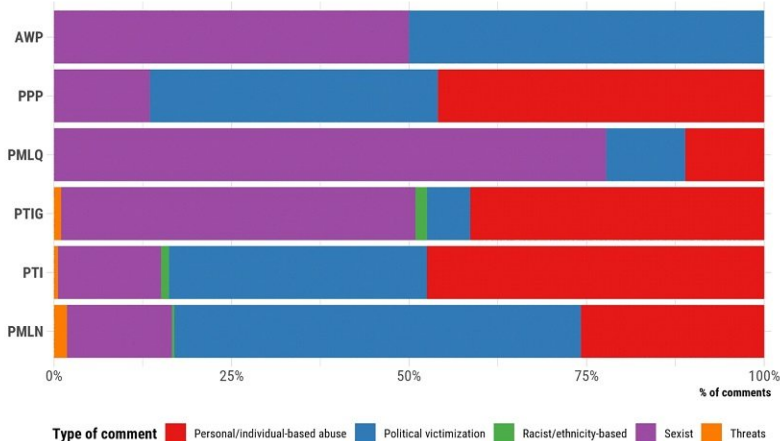


Figure 12: Types of abusive Facebook comments per party

This data speaks to an online political culture that is deeply gendered and unwelcoming for women. Furthermore, online harassment of female politicians is an issue across partisan and party lines. This unfortunate shared female experience is exacerbated by the fact that neither is the ECP's Code of Conduct for elections is being applied online nor is there any effective monitoring for implementation of the Code. Furthermore, individual parties have failed to check the sexist comments and abuse being directed at women from opposition parties.

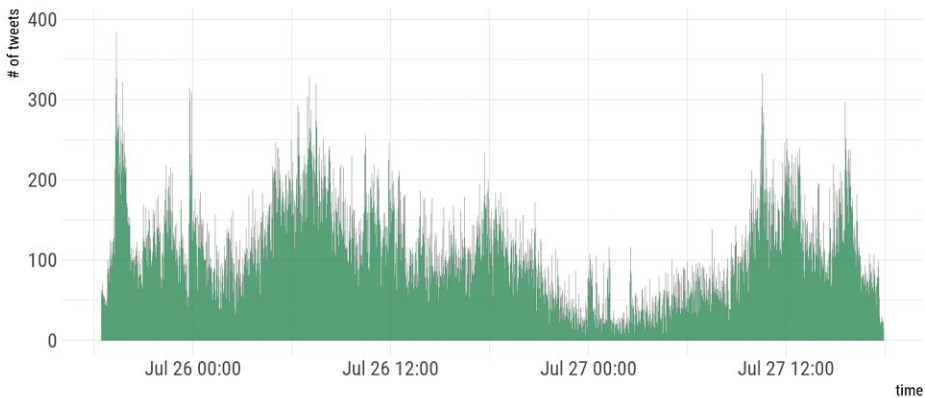
ALLEGATIONS OF FRAUD

Within hours of the polls closing on Election Day, allegations of rigging began to circulate on social media. Almost all major parties, with the exception of PTI, claimed that the election had suffered from electoral irregularities.⁶⁵

On 27 July, we collected 329,44 tweets by using Twitter's Search API to retrieve tweets that contained the hashtags “#Rigging”, “#massiverigging,” and “Form 45.” Form 45 refers to official forms which include the tally of votes at polling stations and are normally prepared in the presence of party agents; many parties alleged that their representatives were barred from observing the counting of votes and the preparation of these forms. The data we collected began with tweets sent during the evening of 25 July.

Frequency of tweets referencing electoral fraud after Pakistan's 2018 elections

tweets aggregated each minute between 25-27 July



Source: 324,944 tweets, Twitter Search API

Figure 13: Frequency of tweets referencing fraud

We identified 268 unique Twitter accounts which were engaged in high-frequency tweeting, which we measured by setting a threshold of 20 or more tweets sent per minute. We also used a less conservative estimate, in line with past studies, and examined the number of tweets sent each day, setting a threshold of 50 tweets or more. Using this measurement, we identified 754 unique Twitter accounts engaged in high-frequency tweeting.

⁶⁵ Danish Hussain, “Key national parties insist of massive rigging”, The Express Tribune, July 26, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1766621/1-key-national-parties-insist-massive-rigging/>.

The vast majority of these tweets were retweets (88%) made by political party followers that sought to amplify allegations of fraud by prominent political party leaders, and to reject the results of the election. These amplifiers consisted of a variety of Twitter accounts that had been created as far back as 2008, with the creation of more numerous accounts at distinct points in time; this was most obvious for accounts created in mid 2010, late 2014, and in the final months before the 2018 elections.

Twitter accounts mentioning electoral fraud were created between 2008 and 2018, with some bursts of new accounts

aggregated on a monthly basis; 18,028 accounts

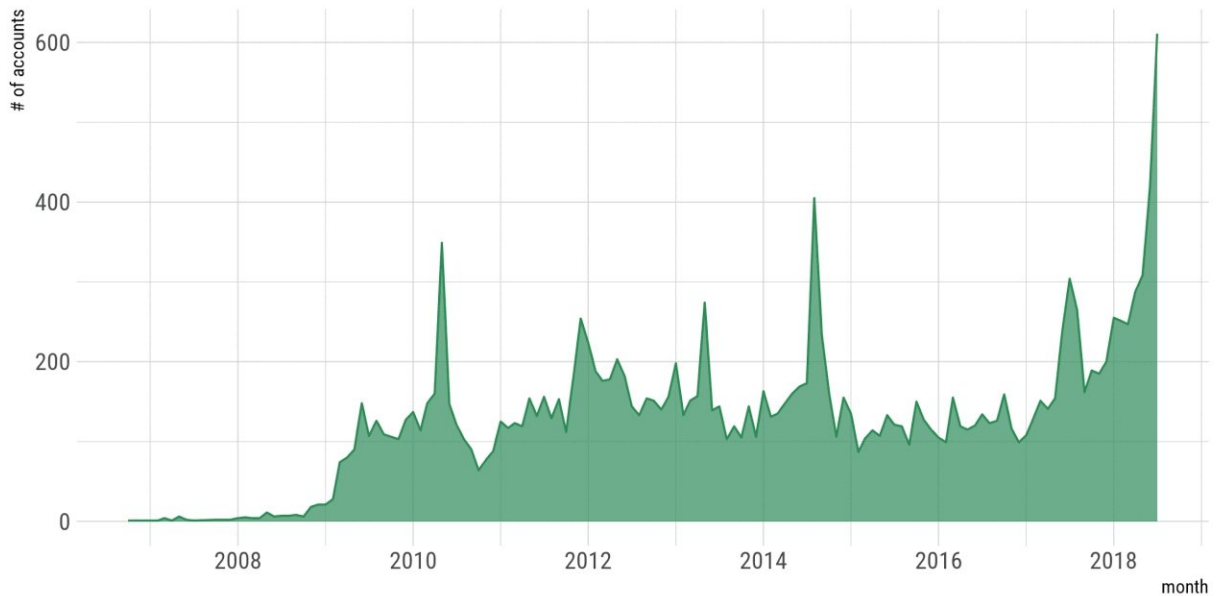


Figure 14: When Twitter accounts mentioning electoral fraud were created

In addition, the accounts created in the last two months were especially prolific, sending an average of 2,549 tweets by the end of the elections. We did not conduct a detailed analysis of suspected automation given the number of accounts in the data, but news reports tracked the Twitter followings of several politicians and noted the rise of dubious followers ahead of the elections.

Twitter accounts created just two months before the election sent an average of 2,549 tweets each

account creation vs. tweets sent; one account sent as many as 63,458 tweets between June and July

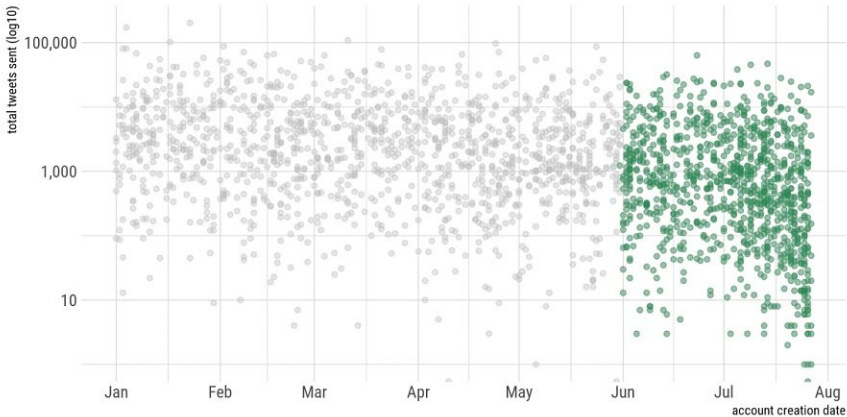


Figure 15: Two month old accounts engaged in high frequency tweeting

These findings do not take away from the allegations of electoral irregularities, however it speaks to coordinated campaigns being used in the elections to amplify political claims. As observed in the section on misinformation and fake news, many of these tweets were based on media reports and statements from party heads, thus cannot be classified as fake news.

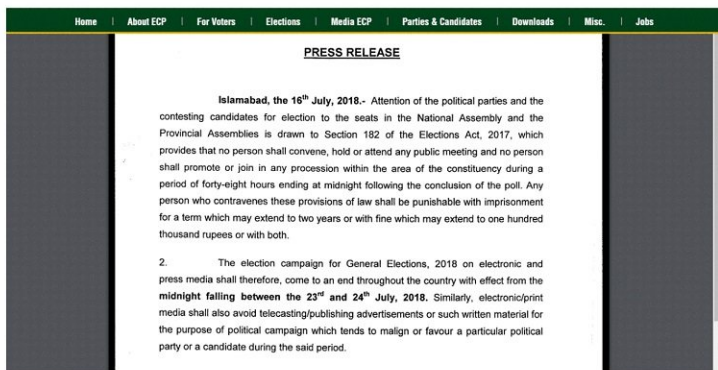
⁶⁶ "Microblogging politicians, fluctuating counts and dubious followers", The Express Tribune: News Lab, <https://newsrab.tribune.com.pk/tracking-twitter/>.

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

Despite the Election Commission distinctly banning advertising and campaigning within the last 48 hours leading up to Election Day, this rule was not followed by any of the parties on social media, as their official social media accounts continued to post campaign material till the day of the elections. Rule number 50 from the ECP's Code of Conduct can be seen below:

“On Polling Day, there shall be a complete ban on all campaign, canvassing and persuading voters for vote, soliciting of vote and not to vote in the election or canvassing for a particular candidate within a radius of 400 meters of a polling station. Violation will be treated as an illegal practice.”

This Code of Conduct was also followed by a press release on July 16, which again emphasized that there would be no campaigning, promoting or joining any public meeting or procession. Additionally, media campaigning was specifically prohibited as well.



Monitoring by Digital Rights Foundation on July 24, revealed that social media campaigns of several major political parties remained active. We observed that that Facebook and Twitter accounts of various parties, including the three biggest parties PTI, PML-N and PPP, had been posting material that qualified as campaigning on their official social media pages. Additionally, we also noted that PTI's Snapchat account (pti.imrankhan) was active after the deadline of midnight between July 23rd and 24th, 2018. Furthermore, SMS directed at voters of NA131 by PTI were also delivered after the deadline. It has also been observed that one political party was streaming live through its YouTube account at noon on July 24th.⁶⁷ Thus we saw both internet and telecommunications based campaigns in full swing despite the halt in activities in non-virtual spaces.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Zohaib Ahmed Majeed, "PTI's active ad campaign on YouTube is why the ECP should expand its horizons", Dawn, July 24, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1422197/ptis-active-ad-campaign-on-youtube-is-why-the-ecp-should-expand-its-horizons>.

⁶⁸ "Press Release: Campaigning on Social Media beyond ECP's Deadline", Digital Rights Foundation, July 24 2018, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/press-release-campaigning-on-social-media-beyond-ecps-deadline/>.

Advertisements in electronic and print media as well as hoardings in physical spaces are regulated by the ECP's Code of Conduct. Furthermore, there are budget limits prescribed per constituency. These rules are not applied to social media, where advertisements, in terms of volume and content, have been left unregulated. The amount spent by each political party on social media advertising in the 2018 election is unaccounted for.

We collected data for 89 Facebook ads that were run by major political parties. The majority of ads were run by the PTI and PML-N, with 36% of ads coming from the PTI Official Facebook page, 32% from Shehbaz Sharif's Facebook page, and another 12% from the official PMLN Facebook page.

Party	Number of ads
PMLN	43
PTI	39
None or not applicable	4
Independent	1
MMA	1

Table 5: Distribution of Facebook ads per party

“ The 89 Facebook ads analyzed reached an enormous audience, gathering a total of

1,307,697 LIKES **732,580 SHARES** **77,426 COMMENTS**

at the time we collected data for each post. ”

The 89 Facebook ads analyzed reached an enormous audience, gathering a total of 1,307,697 likes, 732,580 shares, and 77,426 comments at the time we collected data for each post.⁶⁹ This demonstrates the potential impact of campaigning and advertising in online spaces. Table 6 shows that PTI's ads received the most cumulative likes, however PMLN's ads received more collective shares and comments.

Party	Total Likes	Total Shares	Total Comments
PTI	786,182	312,887	32,631
PMLN	496,695	403,310	43,009
None or not applicable	10,960	12,169	883
MMA	8,660	1,014	280
Independent	5,200	3,200	623

Table 6: Distribution of engagement with Facebook political ads.

⁶⁹ We collected additional data for posts on 9 August 2018. Engagement counts for some posts was unavailable because the post had been removed.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the analysis contained in this report, the following recommendations are put forward to the Elections Commission of Pakistan, government departments regulating online spaces, individual political parties, social media companies and lawmakers:

- 1. Code of Conduct for Online Political Activity by the ECP:** The ECP's Code of Conduct governs campaigning and electioneering both on the ground as well as in print, broadcast media and distribution services (electronic media is defined as "television-based media" under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance, 2002). Social media is not covered by the current Code of Conduct, Elections Act 2017 or the Commission's Election Rules 2017. Despite the fact that the Election Act 2017 allows for campaign monitoring team, as this report concludes, social media is not being monitored by the ECP. It is recommended that the existing Code of Conduct either be extended to social media or a specific code should be developed to deal the nuances of online campaigning.
- 2. Social Media Monitoring Cell by the ECP:** Currently, the ECP does not have the mechanisms in place to monitor content on social media against its code of conduct. Regulation of social media has been left to the FIA, a criminal investigation agency empowered under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, which is not equipped to carry out monitoring in terms of elections. A monitoring cell run by the ECP, with the narrow mandate of implementing the Code of Conduct should be set up and such a social media monitoring cell should be interlinked with other organisations and social media companies to ensure speedy removal and compliance in a manner that is politically neutral and complies with the standards of freedom of expression online.
- 3. Proactive Strategy by Political Parties for Participation of Female Politicians in Online Spaces:** A majority of the female candidates in the 2018 election did not have a presence online and the social media wings of major parties did not facilitate them in developing an online campaign. It is crucial that female politicians, who might be denied access to male dominated spaces, are given a platform online and an institutional policy from within parties is the most direct way of ensuring participation.
- 4. Effective Legal Redress for Harassment by Law Enforcement Agencies:** Given the volume of harassment experienced by female politicians and the potential the harassment has for silencing political speech, the capacity of law enforcement agencies (in the case of online harassment, the FIA) has to be enhanced to provide redress to politicians who face online harassment. It is important that this be done in gender sensitive manner and that harassment not be used as a tool to silence political speech.
- 5. Amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to account for trolling and mass harassment:** The sections relating to harassment (section 21 and 24 of PECA) cover abusive comments through electronic devices for blackmail, monitoring or using pictures without consent. These provisions, however, do not allow for a remedy against abusive comments and mass trolling--forms of harassment primarily faced by women in public eye. This lacuna in the law prevents reporting of such forms of abuse and harassment.
- 6. Transparent and Human Rights Compliant Policy to Tackle Online Misinformation by ECP and PTA:** Section 37 of PECA gives the PTA wide powers to block and remove online content. The vague phrasing of these powers has allowed for political censorship and blocking of content that can otherwise help individual citizens make informed decisions about who to vote for. Thus, the ECP and PTA need to collaborate to develop guidelines that account for the PTA's powers but also ensure that they do not clash with the objectives of the ECP, which is to ensure an open, free and fair elections.

7. **Judicial Oversight of Decisions by PTA to Block Political Content:** Blocking and removal of content by the PTA should be done in a transparent manner with due notice provided to the affected party. Currently, notice is very rarely given and there is no set procedure for appealing a decision of blocking/removal by the PTA.
8. **Ensuring Access to Information Online During Elections:** Internet shutdowns during the elections should be avoided to ensure that all citizens have equal access to online spaces and are able to access information regarding the elections - ranging from party manifestos to educational information on voting. Localised shutdowns amount to discrimination against specific sections of the population, depriving them of information that is accessible to the rest of the country.
9. **Informational Transparency by Social Media Companies:** Social media companies should make data more readily available for collection and analysis, particularly during elections. The collection of Facebook ads presented numerous challenges. Facebook ads only appear in the "Info and Ads" section of a Facebook page for as long as the ad is running, and ads do not contain information such as date and time and engagement data. In order to find this data, researchers needed to search for the ad using Facebook's Graph Search, which proved time-consuming, and sometimes failed to find the original Facebook post. In addition, other data, such as who the Facebook ad targeted, was unavailable (with the exception of which country the ad appeared). For the average citizen these complexities are extremely difficult to navigate, and they have no way of knowing how much Facebook pages spent on ads or if they were targeted by ads

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been researched and printed in partnership with Heinrich Boell Stiftung.

The data analysis and research methodology was developed by Raymond Serrato, former Governance and Innovation Expert at Democracy Reporting International. Development of the methodology and elaboration of this report is supported by the "Supporting Democracy" which is an EIDHR-funded technical assistance programme working with EU Delegations (EUDs) to strengthen the role of local civil society in advocating and monitoring democratic accountability. The content of this report does not reflect the views of the European Union.

The data sorting and literature review for this report was completed by an army excellent team of interns for this project. We would like to thank and acknowledge Abdullah Khan, Ashtar Haideri, Joshua Danish, Maha Azhar, Tariq Jamil, Sualeha Khalid, and Umar Asghar for the hard work they put into the compilation of this report. This report has been authored by Shmyla Khan who is a member of the Digital Rights Foundation team. The expert advisor and editor for the report was Nighat Dad. The design of this report has been done by Muhammad Rashid Ali Jadoon.



DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL

HEINRICH
BÖLL
STIFTUNG
PAKISTAN

