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Article:	The Political Impact of Media Bias on Electoral Process
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Abstract

In democratic society, political beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and political choices of the electorates affect elections policy outcomes. Mass media play vital role in shaping opinions, manipulating political behaviors and influencing electoral process. The study maintains that electorates depend on the mass media for getting information about political parties and candidates during the election campaigns. The study investigates the political impact and influence of media bias over political opinions and electoral process through survey to determine the relationship between media bias and its influence on election outcomes and political decision-making. The researcher distributes questionnaire to 300 students enrolled in public sector universities to generalize the responses and gauge the political impact of media bias. The study provides evidence about bias in political contents of media and the extent to which the political content of media persuades and mobilizes voters. The study reveals that mass media bias influences political beliefs and opinions of the public through selective presentation of facts in subjective manner. The consequences help comprehend the special effects news media bias had on political behaviors and the election result. The study confirmed that media bias shape political opinions, persuade voters and exercise strong influence over the electoral process and election outcomes.

Key Words: Political Impact, Political Behaviors, Elections, Electoral Process, Mass Media, and Media Bias

Introduction

Independent media is essential part of democracy as without free press democratic process is almost impracticable. Free press is an important part of politics and media scholars, journalists, and politicians often discuss the crucial role of the media in manipulating election campaigns. Media scholars are of the opinion that mass media shape opinions of voters in democratic processes (Cavanaugh, 1995).

Closs and Nikoltchev (2004) noted that mass media have changed the nature of relationship between politicians and people and this relationship become clearer during election campaigns. They argue that mass media present the manifestos and policies of candidates and party-political and consequently distress electoral procedure. The powerful effects of media on polling practice can change the casual of any applicant and political party. Chandrappa (2014) argues that mass media guarantee free, fair and transparent elections as the press acts as a watchdog. Undoubtedly, elections in the absence of independent media and free press will never serve the cause of democratic elections.

Media need to maintain high standards of professionalism, unbiasedness, impartiality, accuracy, objectivity, and balance while covering political events in a democratic society. Fair coverage and equal admission to all candidates and political parties will ensure suitable media behavior during election campaigns and political events.

Political Impact of Media Bias

Media plays crucial role in informing the public and educating the public about social and political issues in the society. The press also plays significant role in forming political opinions and behaviors about political issues and events (Ali & Rahman, 2019). Political elections test objectivity, accuracy and impartiality of the mass media, as media role is central in elections.

Media is not supposed to support government or political parties rather to is to inform, educate, and aware the public. Media is supposed to offer an unbiased and objective platform for open debate (Alotaibi, 2013). Levitsky and Way (2012) maintained that the media as watchdog has a right to thoroughly examine the electoral process and ensure level playing field for all political parties (Levitsky & Way, 2012).

It is essential to discuss the political impact of mass media bias on elections and political decision-making in Pakistan. Therefore, studying the impact of the political contents of mass media on the voting behavior and electoral process is of great importance. The study documented the effects of media's political contents on the political opinions and voting behaviors. Political communication refers to the use of mass media to influence voting behaviors and how political decisions have made (Foster, 2010). Sentiments, arrogances, and even behavior are no lengthier whispered to be entirely invulnerable from media influences (Bascom, 2016). Readings on political communication mostly emphasis on the dependent variables like political opinions, political behaviors, voting choice, electoral process and the effects of mass media on society as a whole. Mathews and MacLeod (2010) assert that most political actions work at the societal level; however, theory and research focus mainly on the behaviors at individual levels.

Mass media is a vital module of politics and has denoted to the fourth pillar of the government as it assists as watchdog on government, its institutions and the society. Media collect, edit, and frame news information for the public to make political decisions and casting of vote in elections. Mass communication researchers often argue that media is manipulating political opinions and behaviors of its audience through framing, priming and subjective presentation of political information (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2008). Several studies confirm that

mass media exercise strong influence over the political decision-making. Media is subjective and biased whenever it gives wrong information for political purposes (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2008).

Media Bias in Election Campaigns

It is imperative to investigate into the media bias so people can develop an understanding of media effects and make decisions while taking media bias into consideration. It is necessary to examine media bias effects on elections, as media role is critical in electoral process. In *Press Bias and Politics*, Kuyper J. A. (2002) explored, "voices coming from the media groups itself discloses extraordinary honesty about readiness to involve in biased politics as reportorial rehearsal". Media has often alleged of bias in its coverage of political issues as mass media researchers, media professionals, and politicians always argue over existence of media bias.

The current study debated that the political impact of media bias on electoral process and election outcomes. The study examines how media bias contributes to the fragmentation of the audience and influence political and voting behaviors. The study has explored in detail the consequences of media fragmentation for political polarization among the mass public.

Problem Statement

Media bias influence opinions of voters through and framing and agenda setting that ultimately affect electoral process as well as election outcomes. The study investigates "the political impact of media bias on political and voting behaviors, electoral process and election outcome". Media bias refers to the selective presentation of information in subjective manner where journalists give advantage to one side of the political competition.

Objectives of the Study

This study explores the political impact of media bias on the electoral process in Pakistan.

Key objectives of our study are:

1. To explore the impact of media bias on the political beliefs and actions of potential voters during election campaigns in Pakistan.
2. To examine the political impact of mass media bias on the outcomes of democratic elections and political decision-making.

Significance of the Study

The study will aware and educate audience how the political contents of mass media influence political behaviors, which will access them in making political decisions free of media bias. The study results have also suggestions for policy making to regulate mass media.

Review of the Relevant Literature

Numerous mass media scholars have studied and investigated the power effects of mass media messages on the political beliefs and behaviors. Fang and Knight (2011) investigated the connection between mass media bias and mass media influence on voting and claimed that media are most likely bias to support one candidate and voters take into account for the reliability of media endorsements. These researchers claimed that media endorsements are effective as the voters' support for a particular candidate increased after media endorsements.

Morris (2007) argues that media audiences have dissimilar approaches toward mass media and political issues. Examining the political influence of media bias, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) reveal that the *Fox News' introduction into the mass media landscape had limited but crucial impact on the political and voting behaviors*. They pointed out that their results have also suggestions for policymaking and regulations to regulate media.

While analysing the impact of media bias on electoral process and election outcomes, Bernhardt, Krasa, and Polborn (2008) assert that, the press offers a system to influence election results through political polarization. According to them, media outlets' income is dependent on

its readers, listeners and viewers as media organizations sell their readers, listeners and viewers to advertisers as a product. Media organizations are always in competition to increase profits and for this purpose; they frame news to increase audiences. Thus, media bias cause the loss of important facts and affect election results. Investigating the influence of newspapers on voting behaviors, Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan (2009) stressed that even limited exposure to news information from newspapers results in influencing voting choices election outcomes.

Media frame political issues and highlight certain issues differently, which in turn influence voters' political opinions about candidates and parties (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). While studying effects of framing and agenda setting, Dobrzynska, Blais, and Nadeau (2003) found support for the assumptions that supportive media coverage result in increase of voters' support for candidates and political parties during election campaigns.

To investigate slanting and framing in media, Druckman and Parkin (2005) demonstrate that editorial slanting and framing prejudiced voters by means of an Election Day exodus poll to collect their statistics. Abbe, Goodliffe, Herrnson, and Patterson (2003) argue that media influence political opinions, beliefs, actions, and election outcomes by setting agenda for both political candidates and voters. The researchers confirmed that media not only influence political opinions of potential voters but also set priorities for candidates. Speedy dissemination of information becomes possible after the innovation of digital and electronic technologies that uncovered different cultures.

Several mass media researchers have conducted studies into the political effects of media on political opinions and election outcomes. Majority of these studies confirm the role of mass media in influencing public's opinions and beliefs about political issues. Based on several studies and researches, it is obvious that media bias exist.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Main part of the study comes under the effects tradition of media studies. The study deploys ‘agenda setting theory’ with the logic that mass media will not let you to independently think of issues which are important to you, but will struggle to convince you what to think of issues which the media have set as important for you and you should only think of these issues as important. The study also uses ‘cultivation theory’ in terms of long-term effects through exposure to media contents. Cultivation theory stresses that behaviors and attitudes of heavy viewers are cultivated mainly according to what they has presented on television.

Research Questions

The research questions of the article are as given below:

RQ₁: Is political contents coming from the biased media influence political behaviors?

RQ₂: Does the consumption of biased media influence elections and its results?

Methodology of the Study

Different methodologies has used in mass communication research. The quantitative technique of research has used to study the political impression of mass media bias on voting process. Field survey conducted to gather primary data directly from the large representative population. The population the study comprises of students enrolled in public sector universities of Islamabad. The study confined to three universities, i.e. National University of Modern Languages (NUML), International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), and Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU). Equal respondents from each university selected for the sample of 300 students by applying non-probability purposive sampling technique for the generalization of the study results to the entire population of the study. The required data gathered through distribution of questionnaire among 300 respondents. The respondents equally divided into 150

males and 150 females. The Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) has used for the compilation and analysis of the collected data.

Study Variables

Political Impact

The mass media is a powerful custodian of political behaviors because media audiences tend to trust the media for information. Audiences consider media should inform and aware them about the wrongdoings of the government and offer suitable suggestions. Media is politically important due to its potential of disseminating messages to large number of audiences.

Mass Media

Mass media refers to the print and broadcast media in Pakistan that provides political news and inform public about the overall political situation.

Media Bias

Media bias is defined as media outlets' selective presentation of political facts in subjective way to manipulate political realities. Media bias in the study refers to the framing, labeling, slanting, spinning of information and agenda setting to support one candidate or political party against the other candidate or political party.

Political Behavior

Political behavior refers to the political opinions, ideology, beliefs and political participation of individuals.

Electoral Process

In this study, electoral process refers to the selection of representatives by Pakistani nationals through casting of votes as a democratic process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study put forth two research questions to examine the political effects of media bias on the electoral process and election outcomes. The first research question explored the impact of political contents of biased media on political behavior of the masses. The second research question explored the influence of media bias on electoral process and election outcomes. Interviews has taken from equal number of female (150) and male (150) respondents from *IIUI*, *QAU* and *NUML* to examine the impact of media bias on political beliefs and behaviors and electoral process. Majority of the respondents were aged 25 or below 25 years.

The impact of media biased political contents on political behaviors

Table 1.

Mass media exercise strong influence over political behaviors of voters

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	36	70	31	12	1	150
Female	40	69	29	8	4	150
Total	76	139	60	20	5	300

How much mass media affected your political opinions and behaviors.

	Great Deal	Limited	Don't Know	Not very much	No Effects	Total
Male	29	56	23	29	13	150
Female	20	56	27	38	9	150
Total	49	112	50	67	22	300

The table shows that that majority of the respondents consider mass media has strong impact on the political opinions and behaviors of voters in Pakistan. Likewise, the table indicates

that majority consider mass media as key factor in effecting their political opinions and behaviors.

Table 2.

How much mass media influences political behaviors during election campaigns?

	Great Deal	Limited	Don't Know	Not very much	No Effects	Total
Male	45	77	21	6	1	150
Female	61	58	19	8	4	150
Total	106	135	40	14	5	300

The table indicates that 80 percent of the respondents believe that mass media is the main factor in influencing political behaviors during election campaigns.

Table 3.

Do you depend on mass media to shape political opinion?

	Never	Seldom	Sometime	Often	Always	Total
Male	18	19	34	35	44	150
Female	19	15	38	36	42	150
Total	37	34	72	71	86	300

The table indicates that majority i.e. 73 percent of the respondents are dependent on mass media to shape their opinions about political issues.

Table 4.

Media organizations support candidates and political parties against others through favorable coverage.

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	62	55	24	8	1	150
Female	59	61	20	10	0	150
Total	121	116	44	18	1	300

The table indicates that strong majority i.e. 79 percent of the respondents consider that mass media organizations support candidates or political parties against others through systematic favorable coverage of political issues.

Table 5.

Do you mass media is objective in its coverage of political issues?

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	3	35	25	47	40	
Female	4	33	31	42	40	150
Total	7	68	56	89	80	300

Mass media slant and frame political information to manipulate political opinions

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	58	50	28	11	3	150
Female	58	51	28	12	1	150
Total	116	101	56	23	4	300

The table indicates that majority of respondents consider mass media as biased while covering political issues. Similarly, the table indicates that 72 percent (strong majority) of the respondents believe that mass media frame and slant political information to manipulate political opinions.

Table 6.

Mass media are biased in its coverage of political issues

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	64	51	18	13	4	150
Female	61	48	26	13	2	150
Total	125	99	44	26	6	300
To what extent the media are biased in its coverage of political issues						
	Great Deal	To Some Extent	Don't Know	Slightly Bias	No Bias	Total
Male	63	51	26	6	4	150
Female	58	62	19	10	1	150
Total	121	113	45	16	5	300

The table indicates that majority i.e. 75 percent of the respondents consider mass media is bias in its coverage of political events and issues. Furthermore, majority of the respondents were of the opinion that media is hugely or to some extent biased in its coverage of political issues

Media bias effects on electoral process and policymaking.

Table 7.

Mass media bias effects voters’ political opinions and behaviors

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	51	65	21	11	2	150
Female	59	56	26	8	1	150
Total	110	121	47	19	3	300

The table indicates that majority i.e. 77 percent of the respondents opined that mass media bias influences political opinions, beliefs, and behaviors of qualified voters. These findings offer enough support to the hypothesis that media bias has powerful effects over the opinions and behaviors of voters during election campaigns and balloting.

Table 8.

Media bias has influential impact over electoral process and election results.

	S. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	S. Disagree	Total
Male	52	74	16	7	1	150
Female	54	70	19	6	1	150
Total	106	144	35	13	2	300

The table indicates that strong majority i.e. 83 percent of the respondents opined that media bias has powerful effects over electoral process and results of the political elections. These findings offer great support to the argument that media bias has strong and lasting impact on the political decisions and electoral process as well as election outcomes. The study findings support

the argument that media play important role in shaping political opinions and influencing election results.

Discussions and Conclusion

The study investigated the effects of media bias on voter's political attitudes, behaviors and electoral process. Independent media plays crucial role in democratic societies and are considered as part of the political system and has referred to as fourth important organ of the state. The media is biased whenever it frames issues in a particular or provides out of context facts to support a certain viewpoint. Biased media affect people's understanding of political events and issues without presenting complete account of facts (Lawrence, 2016).

The study found that majority of the masses considers mass media influential in shaping political opinions and choice of political parties. The study confirms that the media exercise strong influence over political behaviors of the voters. These effects are stronger during elections campaigns in democratic states. The study also confirms that people do rely on media for opinion formation on political issues.

The study findings support the argument that media slant and frame news information to shape opinions on political issues. The study also confirms media organizations favor one political party over the others and provide favorable coverage to the political party of its line. Respondents maintain that media are biased and subjective in its coverage of political issues. Fang and Knight (2011) have claimed that mass media has biased in support of one candidate and voters thus consider media endorsements as more important. The study found strong support for the argument that media bias influences political opinions and behaviors that ultimately effect electoral process and election outcomes. Media stress on particular issues, frame political events in certain ways, and represent candidates in a particular ways that eventually affect voters'

political attitudes and behaviors. A strong majority of the study respondents were of the opinion that media play crucial role in influencing electoral process and has strong influence over electoral process.

Conclusion

The study investigated “The Political Impact of Media Bias on Electoral Process” as media play central role in electoral process and election campaigns. Politics and media are interdependent and this relationship becomes more apparent at the times of election campaigns. Mass media disseminate the manifestos and policies of candidates and political parties and hence affect elections. The study confirms that media exercise strong influence over voters’ political opinions, behaviors, and electoral process. The study found that exposure to media affects political beliefs and behaviors. The study specifies that political content of media be bias. The study found that media frame and slant information to shape public opinions. Media bias influences political beliefs and behaviors of voters in a democratic system of government. The study confirmed that media frame political events to support a particular point view to shape opinions of voters. Media framing and bias eventually affect election campaigns in a democratic society and influence election outcomes.

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