Disrupted Harmony in Pakistan: A Case Study on Political Polarisation Among University Students

Hina Nasir[1]

Abstract

Political polarisation is a pressing issue in Pakistan, with far-reaching implications for social cohesion, democratic governance, and public discourse. This abstract provides an overview of the impacts of political polarisation specific to Pakistan, drawing on survey results and existing literature. The survey findings reveal high levels of interpersonal conflict, negative perceptions of opposing parties, and reluctance to engage with individuals of differing political preferences among Pakistani respondents. These trends exacerbate divisions within society, undermining trust in democratic institutions and hindering effective governance. Polarised political discourse in Pakistan perpetuates ideological echo chambers, marginalising alternative viewpoints and undermining the quality of public debate. Furthermore, political polarisation has psychological, economic, and societal implications, including increased stress, economic instability, and social fragmentation. Addressing political polarisation in Pakistan requires comprehensive strategies to promote dialogue, understanding, and cooperation across political divides. By fostering inclusive politics, strengthening democratic institutions, and promoting media literacy, Pakistan can mitigate the detrimental effects of political polarisation and build a more resilient, cohesive, and democratic society.

Introduction

Political polarisation, characterised by deep divisions and ideological rifts within societies, poses significant challenges to social cohesion and democratic governance. It fuels animosity, hampers cooperation, and undermines trust in institutions, ultimately eroding the social fabric of nations. This phenomenon manifests in various forms across the globe, reflecting unique historical, cultural, and political contexts. From the highly polarised landscape of the United States to the Brexit-fuelled divisions in the United Kingdom, and the religious, ethnic, and regional tensions in India and Turkey, political polarisation has emerged as a pervasive force shaping contemporary societies.

In Pakistan, political polarisation is a multifaceted issue deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics. Divisions along ethnic, religious, and regional lines intersect with competing

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[1] Lecturer, Higher Education Department, Punjab, Pakistan

✉ hinanasir230@gmail.com

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political narratives and interests, exacerbating societal tensions. These divisions are further compounded by the pervasive influence of political leaders, religious figures, and community elders, who often promote polarising rhetoric and ideologies. As a result, Pakistani youth, in particular, are vulnerable to becoming passive adherents rather than critical thinkers in the face of polarised discourse.

This research aims to explore the impact of political polarisation on Pakistani youth, focusing on the role of traditional media and social media platforms in shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. By examining the ways in which youth navigate polarised environments, engage with information, and form political identities, this study seeks to shed light on the broader implications for civic engagement and social cohesion. Additionally, it will investigate strategies to mitigate the negative effects of political polarisation and promote critical thinking, media literacy, and inclusive dialogue among youth.

Addressing political polarisation among Pakistani youth requires a multifaceted approach encompassing education, dialogue, regulation, and leadership. Investing in civic education to foster critical thinking and media literacy skills from an early age is essential for equipping youth with the tools to navigate complex political landscapes. Creating spaces for open dialogue and deliberation, where diverse perspectives can be shared respectfully, can promote understanding and empathy across ideological divides. Moreover, combating misinformation and promoting fact-checking initiatives can help mitigate the spread of polarising falsehoods on different platforms.

Furthermore, promoting inclusive political processes and ensuring fair representation for all segments of society are crucial steps towards reducing feelings of marginalisation and alienation among youth. Upholding the rule of law, protecting democratic institutions, and fostering accountability and transparency in governance are essential for restoring trust in the political system. Finally, political leaders have a responsibility to set the tone for public discourse, prioritising unity over division and seeking bipartisan cooperation to address contentious issues.

By implementing these strategies in tandem, Pakistani society can work towards mitigating political polarisation, fostering a more inclusive and resilient public sphere, and empowering youth to become active and engaged citizens in shaping the future of their nation.

Literature Review

Political polarisation has become a defining feature of contemporary politics, posing significant challenges to democratic governance and social cohesion. Abramowitz and Webster in "The Polarised Public? Why American Government Is So Dysfunctional," delve into the roots of political polarisation in the United States. They focus on the roles of party activists, interest groups, and media in widening the ideological divide. The authors argue that these factors have contributed to gridlock and dysfunction in American government, highlighting the profound impact of polarisation on legislative processes and governance. (Abramowitz, 2013)

In "Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity," Mason explores the psychological and social drivers of political polarisation. She argues that politics has become a central aspect of individual identity, influenced by social psychology. This identity-based polarisation has reshaped American politics, making political affiliations more emotionally charged and divisive. Mason's work emphasises how personal identification with political parties can deepen social divisions. (Manson, 2018)

Campbell provides a comprehensive analysis of political polarisation in the United States in his book "Polarised: Making Sense of a Divided America." He traces the historical roots of polarisation and examines its impact on public opinion, electoral behaviour, and government institutions. Campbell argues that both elite rhetoric and grassroots activism have driven polarisation, affecting how citizens perceive and engage with political issues. (CAMPBELL, 2016)

Cramer investigates the role of resentment and identity politics in driving political polarisation in "The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker." Focusing on rural communities in Wisconsin, she argues that cultural and economic marginalisation has fuelled support for conservative politicians like Scott Walker. Cramer's work highlights how feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalisation can intensify political divisions. (Cramer, 2016)

In "Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations," Chua explores the role of tribalism and identity politics in driving political polarisation globally. She draws on examples from various countries, including the United States, Iraq, and Venezuela, to argue that identity-based divisions threaten democracy and social cohesion. Chua's analysis underscores the

dangers of group instincts in exacerbating political conflicts and undermining national unity. (Amy Chua, 2018)

Achen and Bartels, in "Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government," challenge traditional democratic theories by arguing that voters' choices are often driven by group loyalties and symbolic appeals rather than rational deliberation. They explore how this "folk theory" of democracy contributes to political polarisation and undermines government responsiveness, highlighting the limitations of electoral processes in addressing deep-seated social divides. (Bartels, 2017)

Lilla critique's identity politics in "The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics," calling for a renewed focus on common citizenship and shared values to overcome political polarisation. He argues that the liberal focus on identity-based grievances has fragmented progressive politics and contributed to polarisation. Lilla advocates for a shift towards a more inclusive and unified political discourse that emphasises commonalities over differences. (lilla, 2017)

Saeed explores how historical events, political leadership, and policy decisions have contributed to the current polarised landscape in Pakistan. Ahmad examines the role of political parties in fostering polarisation among university students, emphasising its social implications on students' friendships and social circles (Saeed, 2016). (Ahmad, 2018) Khan investigates the psychological factors driving political polarisation among university students, focusing on how social identity theory shapes students' political identities and behaviour. (Khan, 2017)

Ali (2019) explores the role of social media platforms in exacerbating political polarisation among university students, highlighting the impact of echo chambers on students' exposure to diverse perspectives. (Ali, 2019) Rehman analyses how political polarisation affects the academic environment in universities, emphasising its negative implications for students' academic performance and well-being. (Rehman, 2018) Naveed examines the social consequences of political polarisation among university students, emphasising the fragmentation of social groups based on political affiliations. (Naveed, 2019)

Scholars have proposed interventions to mitigate the effects of political polarisation among university students. Hussain suggests implementing structured dialogue and conflict resolution programs within universities to foster understanding and reduce tensions.

(Hussain, 2020) Farooq emphasises the role of educators in promoting critical thinking and media literacy to counteract the influence of echo chambers and foster a more balanced understanding of political issues. (Farooq, 2019) (Amir Hanif , Sultan , & M. Haqeeq, 2024)

These works collectively offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of political polarisation. They emphasise the complex interplay of social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors that shape contemporary political divides. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate polarisation and promote more cohesive and functional democratic societies.

Methodology

In this study, data were collected using quantitative and qualitative methods (mixed method). Both primary and secondary data Sources were used to explore the study objective. The selected study area was three different universities of Lahore. Primary data was collected by conducting the survey based on close ended questionnaires to collect preliminary data. The targeted respondents of the survey were only the students of FHSS (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) department. In total, 200 students (aged19-29 years & above 30 years old) participated voluntarily. Among the respondents, 64.3 percent were undergraduate students, 30 percent were graduate students, and other (i.e., students of professional master's degree and MPhil students)5.7 percent. A comprehensive literature analysis was conducted for secondary data by reviewing journals, reports, edited volumes, and other publications. Secondary data sources were mainly used to understand the concept of political polarisation; to enrich the research objectives. It helped with the validation of collected data through cross-checking.

Here is the questionnaire with closed-ended questions:

1. Have you ever had a verbal fight with a person holding a different political opinion?
2. Have you ever heard a speech by the leader of an opposing political party?
3. Do you think that the leader of the opposing party has ever done anything good for the country?
4. Would you develop a relationship with a person who has a different political preference?
5. Do you think that the political leader you support has ever done something wrong?
6. Would you ever vote for a candidate from another party if you believe they would be

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better than the candidate from your favourite party?

These questions aim to gauge respondents' experiences with political polarisation, their attitudes towards opposing political parties and leaders, and their willingness to engage with individuals and candidates from different political backgrounds. The closed-ended format provides clear response options while allowing for quantitative analysis of the data.

Result Analysis

Below is a table summarising the survey results of 200 students from the four different universities (UCP, UMT, University of South Asia, COMSATS University (Lahore)) on how political polarisation has disrupted the social fabric of Pakistan. Each university contributed 50 students to the survey.

Table 01 Survey Results

Survey Questions	Options	University of Central Punjab	University of Management & Sciences	University of South Asia	COMSATS University (Lahore)	Total
1 Have you ever had a verbal fight with a person having different political opinion?	Yes	30	32	28	36	126
	No	20	18	22	14	74
2 Have you ever heard the speech of the opponent political party leader?	Yes	24	26	25	22	97
	No	26	24	25	28	103
3 Do you think that the opponent leader ever did any good thing for the country?	Yes	21	22	24	22	89
	No	29	28	26	28	111
4 Would you develop a relationship with a person having a different political choice?	Yes	26	24	25	25	100
	No	24	26	25	25	100
5 Do you think that the political leader you support has ever done something wrong?	Yes	20	19	21	20	80
	No	30	31	29	30	120
6 Would you ever vote for a candidate from another party if they are better than your preferred party's candidate?	Yes	22	20	18	20	80
	No	28	30	32	30	120

This table provides a clear summary of responses from the surveyed students at UCP, UMT, University of South Asia, and COMSATS University (Lahore) reflecting their experiences and perspectives on political polarisation and its impact on social relationships and opinions. Based on the information that 63% of the

respondents indicated they had a verbal fight with a person holding a different political opinion, this suggests a significant level of conflict and polarisation within the population regarding political views. This finding highlights the prevalence of ideological divides and the potential for interpersonal tensions arising from differing political beliefs.

The finding that 48.5% of respondents reported not having heard a speech by the leader of an opposing political party suggests a significant level of political disengagement or limited exposure to diverse viewpoints within the population. This lack of exposure to opposing political perspectives may contribute to a lack of understanding or empathy towards alternative viewpoints, potentially reinforcing existing political polarisation.

The finding that 44.5% of respondents believe that the opposing party has never done anything good for the country indicates a high level of negative perceptions and polarisation towards opposing political parties in Pakistan. This perception suggests a deep-seated mistrust or animosity towards rival political factions, which can contribute to heightened political tensions and hinder efforts to build consensus and cooperation across party lines.

The finding that 50% of respondents are willing to develop a relationship with someone who has different political preferences suggests a moderate level of openness and tolerance towards diverse political views within the population. This willingness to engage with individuals of differing political beliefs is encouraging and indicates a potential avenue for promoting dialogue, understanding, and cooperation across ideological divides. It highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in bridging political differences and fostering social cohesion.

The finding that 60% of respondents believe that their political leader has done nothing wrong suggests a significant level of support or loyalty towards their preferred political figure within the population. This perception may reflect a strong partisan bias or a lack of awareness or acknowledgment of any potential shortcomings or controversies surrounding their chosen leader. It also highlights the tendency for individuals to defend or rationalise the actions of political figures aligned with their own ideological preferences, contributing to political polarisation.

The finding that 60% of respondents indicated they would not vote for a candidate from another party, even if they believe that candidate would be better than the one from their favourite party, suggests a high level of partisan loyalty or adherence to party affiliations within the population. This result underscores the entrenched nature of political polarisation and the challenges of fostering political openness and flexibility among voters. It highlights the influence of party identification and loyalty in shaping electoral behaviour, even when individuals recognise the potential merits of candidates from other parties.

Discussion

The survey results from UCP, UMT, University of South Asia, and the COMSATS University (Lahore) reveal significant insights into the state of political polarisation among university students in Pakistan and its broader implications for society. The findings suggest that political polarisation is not just a matter of differing opinions but a deep-seated issue that affects interpersonal relationships, social cohesion, and democratic governance.

The fact that a significant percentage of students reported having verbal conflicts with others who hold different political opinions indicates that polarisation has permeated everyday interactions. This is concerning as it suggests that political differences are no longer merely a matter of discourse but have become a source of tension and conflict, leading to a potential erosion of social bonds. The reluctance to engage with opposing viewpoints, as evidenced by the 48.5% of respondents who had not listened to speeches by leaders of opposing political parties, further exacerbates this issue. Such behaviour reinforces echo chambers, where individuals are exposed only to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, thereby deepening divisions and reducing opportunities for constructive dialogue.

Moreover, the survey reveals a troubling trend in how students perceive the actions of opposing political parties. With 44.5% of respondents believing that the opposing party has never done anything good for the country, it is clear that there is a significant level of distrust and negativity towards the "other side." This binary thinking, where one's own party is viewed as wholly good and the opposition as entirely bad, contributes to a polarised "us vs. them" mentality. Such a mindset can lead to the demonisation of political opponents, making compromise and cooperation increasingly difficult.

The reluctance of students to consider voting for a candidate from another party, even if that candidate may be more qualified, further highlights the entrenchment of partisan loyalty. This unwillingness to cross party

lines can have serious implications for democratic processes, as it may prevent the election of the most capable leaders and lead to the entrenchment of less effective governance.

The societal impacts of these findings are profound. High levels of political polarisation can lead to the fragmentation of communities, where interpersonal trust and solidarity are weakened. This can manifest in various forms, including increased social segregation, where individuals form social circles based solely on political alignment, further exacerbating divisions. The polarisation can also hinder effective democratic governance by contributing to legislative gridlock and policy paralysis, as political actors become more focused on defeating their opponents rather than working towards the common good.

The polarised political discourse, characterised by misinformation, divisiveness, and the demonisation of opponents, undermines the quality of public debate and decision-making. When individuals are not exposed to diverse viewpoints, their ability to critically evaluate issues and engage in meaningful discussions is compromised. This not only affects public discourse but also has the potential to marginalise alternative perspectives, leading to a less informed and more polarised electorate.

Additionally, the polarisation of political discourse can have detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of individuals. The constant exposure to conflict and the pressure to conform to partisan identities can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of alienation. The "us vs. them" mentality can also lead to social isolation, as individuals who do not align with the dominant political narrative in their social circles may feel disconnected from their peers.

Furthermore, the economic implications of political polarisation cannot be overlooked. A polarised political environment can create uncertainty and instability, which can deter investment and hinder economic growth. Divisive policies driven by partisan agendas may neglect the long-term interests of the economy, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and undermining overall economic resilience.

Overall, the survey results highlight the urgent need for efforts to mitigate political polarisation in Pakistan. Promoting inclusive dialogue, fostering tolerance, and encouraging understanding across political divides are essential steps toward building a more resilient, cohesive, and democratic society. Strengthening democratic norms and institutions, as well as promoting

critical thinking and media literacy, are crucial in addressing the challenges posed by political polarisation and ensuring that the social fabric of society remains intact.

Way forward

Addressing political polarisation requires a comprehensive approach that tackles its underlying causes and promotes dialogue, understanding, and cooperation across political divides. Here are some suggestions to overcome the issues of political polarisation:

Promote Civic Education: Invest in civic education programs that teach critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse from an early age. Educating citizens about democratic values, institutions, and processes can help foster informed and engaged citizenship, empowering individuals to navigate complex political landscapes and engage in constructive dialogue.

Encourage Dialogue and Empathy: Create opportunities for open dialogue and deliberation where individuals with differing perspectives can come together to discuss issues respectfully. Encourage active listening, empathy, and mutual understanding to bridge ideological divides and promote constructive engagement.

Combat Misinformation: Implement measures to combat misinformation and disinformation, such as fact-checking initiatives, media literacy campaigns, and regulation of social media platforms. Promote critical thinking and encourage citizens to verify information from multiple sources before forming opinions or sharing content online.

Foster Inclusive Politics: Promote inclusive political processes that ensure fair representation for all segments of society. Encourage diverse participation in political decision-making, including marginalised groups, and ensure that their voices are heard and respected.

Strengthen Democratic Institutions: Uphold the rule of law, protect democratic institutions, and ensure accountability and transparency in governance. Strengthening democratic norms and institutions can help build trust in the political system and reduce polarisation by fostering confidence in the fairness and integrity of democratic processes.

Remote Interpersonal Relationships: Encourage interpersonal relationships and interactions across political lines. Emphasise shared values, common goals, and mutual respect in fostering connections with

individuals holding different political beliefs, thereby humanising political opponents and reducing animosity.

Political Leadership: Political leaders have a crucial role to play in setting the tone for public discourse and promoting unity over division. Encourage leaders to prioritise the common good, engage in respectful dialogue with opponents, and seek bipartisan cooperation on key issues.

Empower Civil Society: Support civil society organisations, community groups, and grassroots movements working to promote tolerance, dialogue, and democratic values. Empowering civil society can help amplify diverse voices, mobilise collective action, and counteract divisive rhetoric and polarisation.

By implementing these suggestions in combination, societies can work towards mitigating political polarisation and fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and democratic public sphere.

Conclusion

The case study of political polarisation in Pakistan among educated youth reveals a complex landscape shaped by various social, cultural, and political factors. Despite access to higher education, educated youth in Pakistan are not immune to the divisive forces of political polarisation, which manifests in various ways within this demographic group. The findings suggest that educated youth are not only active participants in political discourse but also key agents in perpetuating or mitigating polarisation within society. Factors such as ideological biases, partisan affiliations, socio-economic backgrounds, and exposure to diverse perspectives influence their attitudes and behaviours towards political polarisation.

While education can play a role in fostering critical thinking and civic engagement, it is not a panacea for overcoming political polarisation. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses media literacy, intergroup dialogue, civic education, and institutional reforms. Moreover, the case study highlights the importance of targeted interventions and policies aimed at promoting inclusive politics, fostering empathy and understanding, and strengthening democratic institutions. By empowering educated youth to navigate political polarisation responsibly and engage in constructive dialogue, Pakistan can move towards a more cohesive, resilient, and democratic society.

Ultimately, political polarisation in Pakistan among educated youth underscores the need for concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including government, civil society, academia, and media, to address this pressing challenge and safeguard democratic values and social cohesion.

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