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ALGORITHMIC MANIPULATION AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY: ASSESSING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IMPACTS ON VOTERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This article examines the profound influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on voter behavior and electoral integrity within developing democracies, focusing specifically on Pakistan. Addressing a critical gap in political communication research, the study investigates how AI-driven technologies—including deepfakes, algorithmic microtargeting, and automated misinformation—systematically manipulate public opinion. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the research analyzes 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted across Pakistan's four provinces with diverse stakeholders, encompassing voters, politicians, and election officials. The empirical findings show that AI significantly alters political perceptions, with 84.2 percent of participants highly susceptible to treating AI-generated fake media as authentic political content. Furthermore, the study identifies that asymmetric digital literacy and the conspicuous absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks profoundly exacerbate the effectiveness of algorithmic manipulation. Ultimately, this research argues that unregulated AI deployment fundamentally compromises democratic processes, highlighting an urgent necessity for transparent governance structures, rigorous media literacy initiatives, and robust legal frameworks to safeguard electoral integrity across Asian democracies. The results strongly suggest that immediate institutional interventions are required to counter modern computational propaganda.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Electoral Manipulation, Deepfakes, Digital Literacy, Voter Behavior

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally restructuring global societal and economic frameworks and is rapidly becoming an indispensable element of the modern digital era (Xu et al., 2024; Ruiz-Real et al., 2021). As technological advancements accelerate, AI's transformative capacity has garnered profound global attention (Ittefaq et al., 2025). Broadly defined by institutions such as IBM as a computational field that synergizes computer systems with robust datasets for advanced problem-solving, AI is increasingly intersecting with political systems. This study specifically aims to investigate the profound impact of algorithmic manipulation on the electoral process, assessing how AI technologies either compromise or enhance electoral integrity and transparency (Ahmed et al., 2025a, 2025b).

To achieve this, the research pursues several core objectives formulated to understand voter dynamics in developing democracies. First, it seeks to determine how familiar voters are with AI-driven technologies in an electoral context. The study also evaluates voter behavior by analyzing how AI-generated news and automated misinformation influence public opinion, and whether voters perceive AI-curated political content as reliable. Finally, it explores the broader implications of AI as a mechanism for mobilizing voters and influencing overall turnout. To address existing gaps in political communication research, this study draws on qualitative evidence from 38 in-depth interviews conducted across all four provinces of Pakistan. By incorporating perspectives from diverse geographic and socio-political contexts, the research provides a nationally grounded analysis of how voters and electoral stakeholders experience AI, situating Pakistan's unique democratic challenges within the broader global discourse on technology, computational propaganda, and democratic integrity.

Contextualizing this research within Pakistan is crucial given its demographic and technological landscape. As the world's fifth most populous country, characterized by a significant youth bulge, Pakistan is experiencing rapidly rising internet penetration and daily increases in mobile connectivity. According to a recent survey, the nation has surpassed 100 million internet users, most of whom use smartphones (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023). Despite this rapid digital growth, a specific segment of society—particularly rural women—remains excluded from this advancement because of inadequate digital infrastructure and persistent socio-economic barriers (Aslam, 2025). Although the Government of Pakistan has launched initiatives to cultivate digital skills in underdeveloped areas to strengthen education and build a modern digital workforce (Ministry of Information Technology & Telecom, 2021), significant vulnerabilities remain. Ultimately, improved digital literacy serves as a key indicator of digital penetration and economic advancement (World Bank, 2022). However, its uneven distribution creates an environment highly susceptible to algorithmic manipulation and electoral interference.

Literature Review

Artificial intelligence has become a pivotal force in shaping political communication, voting behavior, and the overarching fairness of democratic elections globally (Wongmahesak et al., 2025). AI-powered mechanisms—such as algorithmic news-feed curation, microtargeted campaign advertisements, automated social media bots, and the rapid dissemination of fabricated narratives—systematically alter information consumption, exacerbate partisan polarization, and exploit cognitive heuristics (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018; Gorwa, 2019). Research across both Western and Asian democracies indicates that automated recommendation systems disproportionately amplify sensational or contentious material, thereby gradually eroding the foundations of collective democratic deliberation (Vaidhyathan, 2018; Yeung, 2018). In the Asian context, studies of electoral dynamics in nations such as India, Indonesia, and across Southeast Asia show that fragile regulatory frameworks, asymmetric digital literacy, and the monopolistic control of major technology

corporations severely magnify the political consequences of AI integration (Slater & Arugay, 2018; Tapsell, 2021). Specifically in Pakistan, recent scholarship highlights how social media platforms and sophisticated political messaging foster societal division, propagate misinformation, and exploit power asymmetries—particularly among rural demographics, youth, and women—during critical electoral periods (Kumari et al., 2025). Despite growing recognition of these technological threats, empirical research that directly engages voters through qualitative discourse to evaluate their lived experiences with AI-shaped political environments remains scarce. This methodological gap underscores the need for targeted qualitative investigations that can uncover how artificial intelligence intersects with Pakistan's complex social stratification, political dynamics, media landscape, and institutional governance.

Theoretical Framework

To rigorously analyze how digital media shapes voter perceptions, this study draws on Media Effects Theory, which explains the cognitive and behavioral impacts of repeated exposure to specific political messaging (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). In the contemporary digital ecosystem, where AI algorithms increasingly curate political discourse, mechanisms such as personalized content prompts and automated misinformation subtly yet profoundly restructure user beliefs. Because algorithmic architectures dictate information visibility, they systematically amplify certain ideological narratives while suppressing others, gradually distorting political reality. Previous research shows that in environments with diminished fact-checking capacity, repeated exposure to manipulated information can significantly alter public perceptions of political figures and critical issues (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2020).

Applying Media Effects Theory shifts this study's focus from observation to a deeper understanding of computational dynamics. In contexts like Pakistan, where digital access is highly uneven and political messaging is intensely saturated, voters are uniquely susceptible to automated content. The relentless influx of AI-generated information makes psychological resistance increasingly difficult, showing how massive data flows translate directly into behavioral shifts. Consequently, repeated exposure to algorithmic updates fundamentally reshapes long-term message reception, with public trust in manipulated content often rising when it mimics authentic or authoritative formats. The systematic movement of data across digital platforms dictates exactly what voters encounter and internalize, collectively engineering how public opinions and electoral choices are ultimately forged in modern online spaces (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018).

Role of AI in Electoral Management: Administrative Utility versus Manipulative Threats

While this study primarily investigates the detrimental impacts of algorithmic manipulation, it is essential to contextualize these threats within the broader, dual-use nature of artificial intelligence in modern democratic systems. On the administrative front, AI plays a vital, multifaceted role in transforming how election management bodies (EMBs) organize and execute electoral processes. A critical application lies in voting list management, which is essential for maintaining public trust and electoral credibility. Automated systems increasingly filter incorrect data and identify duplicate registrations; for instance, Indonesia has successfully applied pattern-matching algorithms to flag duplicate names (Akbar et al., 2021). Similarly, Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) utilizes AI to secure voter lists against duplication, while the United States employs the Electronic Registration Information Center to cross-reference voter identities with massive datasets from other government agencies (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2025; Electronic Registration Information Center, 2024). Alongside voter registration, AI algorithms significantly optimize election planning and resource allocation by accurately forecasting administrative costs and mapping the optimal geographic locations for polling stations (Al-Haidary et al., 2021).

Paradoxically, the same technological advancements that streamline electoral operations also introduce unprecedented vulnerabilities to the information ecosystem. While EMBs leverage AI-driven tools, such as automated chatbots, to efficiently disseminate civic education and address voter inquiries (Eisen et al., 2023), malicious actors concurrently deploy advanced algorithms to automate computational propaganda. Consequently, AI serves as an indispensable defensive tool for media monitoring during election cycles. Because manual oversight is prohibitively time-consuming, electoral watchdogs rely on AI to track social media trends, monitor the activities of major political stakeholders, and rapidly counter the spread of algorithmic misinformation (Kondamudi et al., 2023; Dhiman et al., 2023). Finally, AI integration extends directly to polling-day operations and post-election data analysis, where software helps identify and geographically verify voters' addresses through optical mark recognition and magnetic strip verification (Hajnal et al., 2018). As votes are processed, these advanced analytical tools automatically predict turnout trends, visualize geographic voting patterns, and proactively highlight potential administrative vulnerabilities, thereby fortifying the overall integrity of the electoral ecosystem against both physical and digital threats (Landemore, 2023).

Research Methodology

To investigate the impact of artificial intelligence on electoral integrity, this study uses a qualitative methodology designed to capture the nuanced experiences of diverse stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research is based on 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted across all four provinces of Pakistan—Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan—along with the capital territory, to ensure broad geographic representation and contextual diversity. This multi-provincial sampling strategy was intentionally designed to mitigate regional bias and capture variations in political awareness, media consumption, and digital exposure. Participants were purposively selected to encompass a wide array of perspectives from key electoral actors, including urban and rural voters, politicians, election officials, media professionals, technology experts, and civil society members. While this qualitative study does not aim for statistical generalizability, capturing voices from across Pakistan’s varied socio-political landscape strengthens the analytical robustness and transferability of the findings.

The collected data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across the interview transcripts, enabling an in-depth, context-sensitive interpretation of participants’ views on algorithmic manipulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure analytical rigor, the study followed established qualitative analysis procedures, including iterative coding, theme refinement, and constant comparison across cases (Miles et al., 2014). Although the study is primarily qualitative, it selectively used limited descriptive statistics—such as simple frequencies and percentages—to summarize commonly occurring responses and provide an overview of shared perceptions. As qualitative methodology literature supports, such descriptive indicators complement narrative analysis without compromising interpretive depth when not used for statistical inference (Guest et al., 2006; Silverman, 2016). This methodological approach allows for a deeply contextualized understanding of AI's influence on voter behavior, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic and Professional Profiles of Interview Participants

Stakeholder Type	Total	Male	Female	Region	Role Focus	Key AI-Related Concerns/Insights
Politicians	5	3	2	Punjab, Sindh	Policy influence, strategy	Aware of the risks.

Stakeholder Type	Total	Male	Female	Region	Role Focus	Key AI-Related Concerns/Insights
Election Officials	5	3	2	KP, Balochistan	Regulation, integrity	No AI regulations and their impact on the electoral process
Media Professionals	5	2	3	Punjab, Sindh	Communication, framing	Misinformation leads to drastic change in the results
Tech Experts	4	2	2	Nationwide (urban hubs)	Technical, infrastructure	Misuse of the information
Civil Society Members	5	2	3	KP, Balochistan, Sindh	Advocacy, rights	Literacy gap
Academics	5	3	2	Punjab, Sindh	Research, ethics	Need for AI literacy, transparency
Urban Voters	5	2	3	Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad	Awareness, experience	Mixed views: empowerment vs. manipulation
Rural Voters	4	2	2	Interior Sindh, South Punjab	Access, trust	Limited understanding, susceptibility to misinformation
Total	38	19	19	All provinces	—	—

Furthermore, this research strictly adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for social science research involving human participants. Before the interviews, we informed all individuals about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was formally obtained from each participant. To protect participant identities, we rigorously maintained anonymity and confidentiality by removing all personal identifiers from the dataset. We used the information collected solely for academic purposes and stored all data securely to prevent unauthorized access, ensuring the ethical integrity of the research process.

Research Results

Thematic Findings on Algorithmic Manipulation and Voter Susceptibility

The thematic analysis of the interviews reveals a significant gap in digital literacy among the electorate, which directly exacerbates their vulnerability to algorithmic manipulation. Of the 38 participants, only 16 demonstrated a clear understanding of AI's role in elections, while the remaining 22 lacked basic awareness. Illustrating this digital literacy deficit, some voters remarked, “I have an idea about AI, but it is just a social media tool; I never think about it having drastic political effects and being used as a manipulator.” Consequently, this lack of awareness makes voters highly susceptible to personalized political advertisements. Twenty-five participants reported continuously receiving highly targeted political ads on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook. They noted, “We search about the local issue during the election process, and continuously, those ads appeared in front of us without searching on social media.” This clearly indicates that AI-driven microtargeting is actively and subtly shaping public perception, a concern echoed by multiple key stakeholders.

Compounding targeted advertising is the rampant spread of AI-generated misinformation. A substantial majority of participants (29 out of 38) expressed profound concern over realistic fake political content. For instance, seven interviewees referenced a specific manipulated event, stating, “We saw a strange video of the incumbent Chief Minister who is welcoming the King of UAE at the airport, and she is dancing; later we found out that it is fake.” Because AI-driven content often appears highly authentic, 32 out of 38 interviewees admitted to trusting such media. As one participant explained, “If a colleague or friend shared a video, I assume it is a real video because I am not well aware of how to check it, whether it is fake or not.” Political actors are acutely aware of this trust; interviewees affiliated with political campaigns (5 participants) openly affirmed utilizing AI for sentiment analysis and voter outreach. They reported, “We easily know the issue of the public, and we highlight that aspect and manipulate what the opposition party did not do.”

This systemic weaponization of AI has triggered significant regulatory and ethical alarms among the respondents. Twenty-five participants raised serious privacy concerns regarding data surveillance, questioning, “No one knows who or which organization is watching these videos and regulating the law!” While global efforts to regulate AI are advancing, participants highlighted that Pakistan currently lacks robust oversight. The findings underscore an urgent need for the government to move beyond traditional challenges and proactively develop transparent ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks tailored to safeguard electoral integrity.

To capture these qualitative insights quantitatively, Table 2 and Figure 1 systematically summarize participants' primary concerns about artificial intelligence. The summarized data clearly show that a vast majority of the electorate is highly exposed to personalized political messaging and expresses deep apprehension about the authenticity of digital content. Ultimately, these consolidated findings empirically reaffirm the pervasive threat of algorithmic manipulation to democratic processes, highlighting the urgent need for institutional countermeasures.

Table 2 Thematic Summary of AI Impacts on Voter Behavior

Theme	No. of Participants	Percentage	Key Insight
Understanding of AI	16	42.1%	Lack of awareness; Lack of digital literacy
Experience of targeted political ads	25	65.8%	Majority noticed highly personalized political messaging
Exposure to misinformation/deepfakes	29	76.3%	Significant concern over realistic fake content
Trust in AI-filtered political content	32	84.2%	Most trust shared content without verification
AI use in political campaign	5	13.2%	Campaigners using AI for sentiment analysis and outreach
Demand for AI regulation and ethics	25	65.8%	Strong call for regulation and transparency in AI use in elections

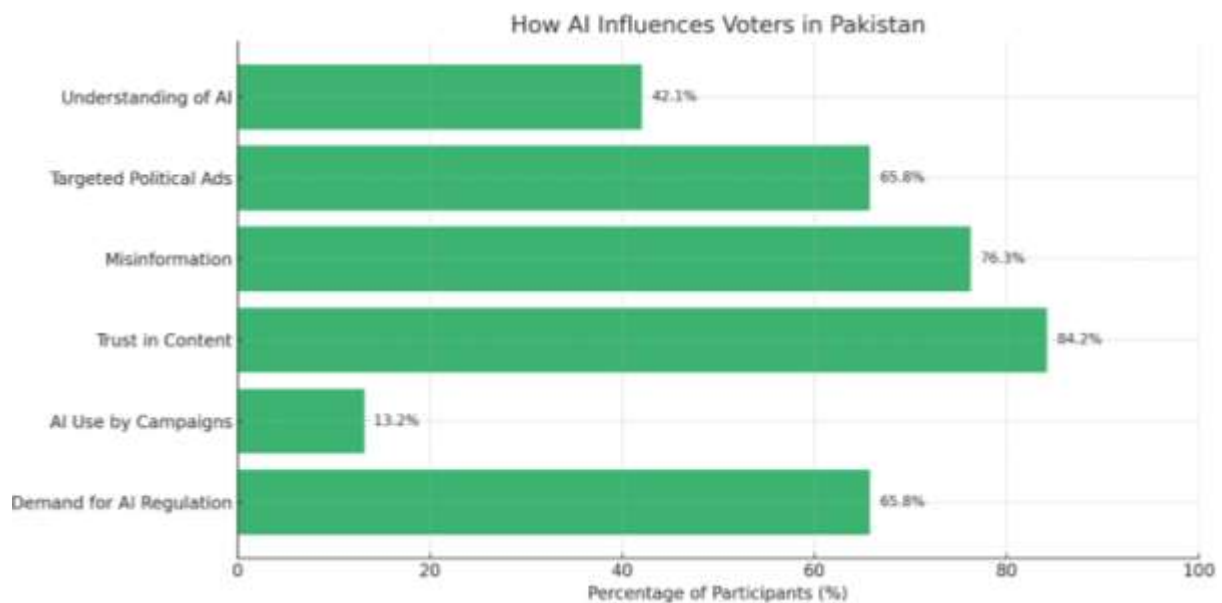


Figure 1 Quantitative Distribution of AI-Driven Influences on Pakistani Voters

Conclusion and Discussion

This study conclusively demonstrates that artificial intelligence profoundly and transformatively influences voter behavior and public opinion in Pakistan. Without robust regulatory mechanisms, AI technologies are systematically exploited for microtargeting and the spread of misinformation, enabling algorithmic manipulation and undermining the foundational tenets of the democratic process. Qualitative evidence from all four provinces shows that algorithmic curation, automated political content, and highly personalized campaign messaging significantly exacerbate societal divisions. Vulnerable demographics—particularly rural communities, youth, and women—face disproportionate impacts because of limited digital literacy and fewer online resources. While the growing integration of digital tools into public discourse mirrors trends in other Asian democracies, such as India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Pakistan’s context is uniquely precarious. This heightened vulnerability stems from lax regulatory oversight, fragile institutional supervision of digital platforms, and a pervasive lack of public awareness regarding computational propaganda.

To effectively mitigate these escalating threats to electoral integrity, the findings emphatically underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive, multi-layered governance framework. Primarily, regulatory authorities must enact specific legislation governing the deployment of AI in political campaigns. Such a framework should strictly enforce legal penalties for the malicious dissemination of deepfakes and automated disinformation, while mandating the transparent disclosure of AI-generated political advertisements and algorithmic targeting mechanisms. Furthermore, existing legislative tools, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and broader cybercrime laws, must be modernized to address AI-driven electoral interference explicitly. Beyond domestic policy, Pakistan would benefit significantly from participating in collaborative dialogues with regional democratic peers to establish unified standards and best practices for AI governance. Ultimately, safeguarding democratic values in the computational era requires a synergistic approach that combines stringent technological regulation with institutional strengthening, platform accountability, and widespread civic education. By clarifying the intersection of artificial intelligence and existing democratic constraints, this study contributes crucial empirical insights to the broader political discourse. It offers an analytical framework for understanding similar technological disruptions in neighboring electoral systems.

Comparative Implications for Asian Democracies

Within Asia's broader geopolitical context, Pakistan's findings closely resonate with patterns observed in other emerging and hybrid democracies across South and Southeast Asia, including India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh. Existing scholarship confirms that the rapid adoption of AI-enabled political communication, predominantly channeled through social media architectures, has significantly intensified challenges related to automated misinformation, algorithmic microtargeting, and the systemic manipulation of voter perceptions (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018; Tapsell, 2021). Like Pakistan, these nations navigate structural constraints such as asymmetric digital literacy, an overwhelming reliance on mobile-centric information consumption, and inconsistent enforcement of electoral and data governance frameworks. Together, these factors significantly increase voter vulnerability to algorithmic influence (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017).

Nevertheless, the Pakistani context reveals distinctly acute risks. Compared to its regional counterparts, Pakistan demonstrates lower baseline levels of digital literacy, a conspicuous lack of transparency in political advertising, and relatively underdeveloped AI-specific regulatory mechanisms, all of which compound the detrimental impacts of AI-driven messaging on electoral trust (Kumari et al., 2025). Comparative studies from India and Indonesia suggest that while AI-based computational campaigning is ubiquitous, robust civil society engagement and active judicial oversight have occasionally mitigated its most severe electoral consequences—institutional safeguards that currently remain fragile in Pakistan (Slater & Arugay, 2018; Vaidhyathan, 2018). This comparative perspective underscores that the democratic risks posed by AI are highly context-dependent, reinforcing the need for locally grounded, politically feasible, and culturally sensitive regulatory frameworks rather than uniform policy impositions (Gorwa, 2019; Yeung, 2018).

Limitations

Despite its robust analytical framework, this study possesses certain limitations that must be acknowledged. While including 38 purposively selected interviewees from all four provinces provides vital geographic diversity and qualitative depth, the inherently qualitative nature of this research precludes broad statistical generalizability. Consequently, the empirical findings are intended to be analytically transferable rather than strictly representative of the entire Pakistani electorate. Furthermore, although the study effectively captures perspectives from a wide spectrum of electoral stakeholders, specific marginalized demographics—most notably rural women and first-time youth voters—remain somewhat underrepresented in the dataset. Future scholarly endeavors should build on this foundational research by expanding the sample size, adopting mixed-method approaches, and deliberately emphasizing these underrepresented populations. Such expansions are essential to cultivate further a nuanced understanding of AI-driven political influence in Pakistan and structurally comparable democratic contexts.

Strategic Recommendations for Electoral Integrity

Based on the empirical findings regarding algorithmic manipulation and its threat to electoral integrity, several strategic interventions are highly recommended. First, Election Management Bodies (EMBs) must proactively develop and enforce explicit guidelines governing the use of AI, particularly for political advertising and the systemic spread of misinformation. To support this regulatory oversight, the government should establish an independent watchdog dedicated exclusively to monitoring deepfakes, computational propaganda, and digital electoral interference. Concurrently, it is imperative to implement and rigorously enforce transparency laws that mandate the disclosure of target-specific or microtargeted political messaging. Furthermore, political parties themselves must commit to adopting and adhering to strict ethical guidelines during campaigns, shifting their operational focus away from digital manipulation and toward genuine public engagement.

Beyond institutional and regulatory reforms, strengthening technological and societal resilience is crucial. The government must invest substantially in national cybersecurity infrastructure, focusing on acquiring and deploying advanced, AI-powered tools to detect misinformation and deepfakes. Equally important is empowering the electorate; stakeholders must collaborate to develop and integrate comprehensive media literacy programs into the public sphere. These educational initiatives are essential to equip voters with the critical skills needed to independently identify deepfakes and navigate AI-generated content, thereby fortifying the integrity of the democratic process against emerging technological threats.

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