

# Building a Case for Reforming the Electoral System of Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Electoral systems are set of rules and procedures which determine how voters cast their votes and how the votes are converted into representative seats. Beyond this, each electoral system has its own impact on how the political system functions. From this perspective, the author has tested the discontents of the Pakistani electoral system, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) taking the election data of 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018. The research finding showed that the FPTP electoral system is ill devised to the Pakistan's current needs and realities. In view of such discontents, there is a genuine concern of reforming the Pakistan electoral system. The question remains, however, which electoral system best suits the Pakistani situation from the bulk of alternatives? The current paper is an attempt to build a case for introducing reforms with a focus on how to translate the votes into seats in a more representative way. For this purpose the article in its first part deals with the problems the FPTP is having in translating the votes into seats. In the second part data from the last four general elections are analysed to show how some of the parties having more votes and less seats and vice versa. Building the argument on this analysis the recent concerns shown by the politicians and critics of the present system are supported to build a strong case for the decision makers to bring in such changes in the system where minimum of the votes are wasted so that a true representative democracy is established in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Electoral System; FPTP; Mixed Electoral System; Proportional Electoral System; Pakistan.

## 1. Introduction

The debate to introduce electoral reforms in Pakistan is periodic and has experienced successive waves. Politicians and critics of the electoral system have sporadically sought to change the established system of first-past-the post (FPTP) i.e. a system which is currently in vogue for general elections of the National and Provincial assemblies in Pakistan. The controversy has been re-energized in recent years with almost majority of the political parties whether small or large have stressed upon introducing reforms (Ayub, 2021), although there is no consensus about what sort of changes they want. The soul of the

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debate is how to translate votes into seats, and, even more fundamentally, how free and fair representative elections should work in Pakistan. The current paper is an attempt to build a case for introducing reforms with a focus on how to translate the votes into seats in a more representative way. For this purpose the article in its first part deals with the problems the FPTP electoral system is having in translating the votes into seats. In the second part data from the last four general elections are analysed to show how some of the parties having more votes and less seats and vice versa. Building the argument on this analysis the recent concerns shown by the politicians and critics of the present system are supported to build a strong case for the decision makers to bring in such changes in the system where minimum of the votes are wasted so that a true representative democracy is established in Pakistan.

Modern democratic societies are governed by a smaller set of public officials whom the people delegate them the task of political decision-making. These representatives are chosen through elections. The question of how votes are casted in an election and how the votes are converted into representative seats are governed by electoral systems (Mitchell, 2005). Electoral systems, other than translating votes to seats, have vital effects on a political system as a whole. They determine the number of parties, the ease of forming a stable government, the degree of representation of political parties and the extent of citizens' interest in politics. (Andrew Reynolds, 2005) Hence, electoral systems are powerful instruments for shaping the content and practice of politics.

However, each electoral system has its own advantages and disadvantages. No system is perfect, either theoretically or practically. Some electoral systems are preferable to some legal systems while others are not and the vice versa. (Andrew Reynolds, 2005) Therefore, what matters most is, whether the net disadvantages of any system is more tolerable than the net disadvantages of other alternative systems taking into account the context where the electoral system works.

From this vantage point, unlike proportional representation (hereafter PR) electoral systems, majoritarian systems (to which the Pakistani electoral system, first-past-the-post (here after FPTP) belongs) are strong in creating cohesive government and ensuring accountability of members at constituency level, among others, but is blamed for misrepresenting smaller parties, failing to create interethnic or intercultural conciliation and affecting multiparty democracy. The research finding showed with a lot of evidence that the FPTP is ill devised to the Pakistani needs and realities. Particularly, it has distorted the level of representation and has produced manufactured majority rewarding bigger parties with bonus seats while punishing the smaller ones (Hussain, 2008). This in turn has obstructed the legitimacy of the government. It has affected the behaviour of political parties fostering 'me or never' or fear

mongering political campaigns exacerbating intolerance between the opposition and the incumbent parties and the supporters behind them instead of conciliation and cooperation (Ahsan ur Rahim, 2018). It has also affected the multiparty system by denying smaller political parties seats proportionate to their votes (Andrew Reynolds, 2005).

## **2. Discontents of the Pakistani Electoral System:**

This part of the paper tries to review the practical pitfalls of the Pakistani electoral system to underscore the need for reforming it. As a matter of fact, the FPTP electoral system does have its own strong and weak sides subject to conditions where the system is implemented. However, it is important to realize that a given electoral system will not necessarily work in the same way in different countries. Although there are some common experiences in different regions of the world, the effects of a particular type of electoral system depend to a great extent on the socio-political context in which it is used. What matters most is, therefore, the context where the electoral system is supposed to work. Regarding the Pakistani context, save its positive results, the following discussion tends to show the problems of this electoral system.

### **2.1. The Effect of FPTP on Representation Parties**

Pursuant to the FPTP, a party which wins in each electoral constituency is returned to the parliament. The literature widely blames this system for hampering fair representation of parties and the views behind the parties. In this regard, let's test this assertion by taking the 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018 Pakistani general elections.

#### **2.1.1. Assessment and analysis of 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018 General Elections**

**Table 1:** General Election of 2002  
(Registered Voters= Casted vote = 29,236,687, Turn Out 41.8%)

N o	Party	Popular Vote	Vote %	Seats on the basis of			Discrepa ncy
				FPTP	Seat %	P R	
1.	PPP	7,616,033	26.05 %	81/34 2	23.68 %	8 9	-8
2	PML (Q)	7,500,797	25.66 %	126/3 42	36.84 %	8 7	+29
3	PML(N)	3,409,805	11.66 %	19/34 2	5.55 %	3 9	-20
4	MMA	3,335,643	11.41 %	63/34 2	18.42 %	3 9	+24
5	National Alliance	1,395,398	4.77 %	16/34 2	4.67 %	1 6	0

6	MQM	932,166	3.19 %	17/34 2	4.97 %	1 1	+6
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**Source:** Derived and calculated by the present researcher from the data of 2002 General Election provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (Pakistan, Report on the General Elections -2002 V-I, 2002).

During 2002 general elections the difference of the seats secured by PPP and PML (Q) is quite remarkable. PPP although got 26.05 of the total votes converted it to only 81 seats of the national assembly while PML (Q) got 126 seats in the Assembly despite having got fewer votes than the PPP.

Similarly, the difference in the votes got by PML (N) and MMA is also noticeable. PML (N) got more votes than the MMA but the number of seats it secured is less than those of the MMA.

**Table 2:** General Elections of 2008  
(Registered voters= 80,910,318 Casted Votes= 35,678,035 Turn out= 44.105%)

No	Party	Popular Vote	Vote %	Seats on the basis of			Discrepancy
				FPTP	Seat %	PR	
1.	PPP	10,666,548	30.79%	119	34.79 %	102	+17
2	PML (Q)	8,007,218	23.12%	50	14.61%	76	-26
3	PML(N)	6,805,324	19.65%	89	26.02%	65	+24
4	MQM	2,573,795	7.43 %	19	5.55%	24	-5
5	MMA	766,240	2.21 %	7	2.04%	7	0
6	ANP	704,811	2.03 %	10	2.92%	7	+3

**Source:** Derived and calculated by the present researcher from the data of 2008 General Election provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (Pakistan, Report on the General Elections -2008 V-I, 2008).

During 2008 general elections the difference of the seats secured by PML (N) and PML (Q) is incredible (Ahsan ur Rahim, 2018). PML (N) although got 19.65% of the total votes yet it grabbed 89 seats of the National Assembly while PML (Q) despite having more popular vote (23.12%) seized less seats (50) in the Assembly.

Similarly, the difference in the votes got by MMA and ANP is also noticeable. MMA got more votes than the ANP but the number of seats it secured is less than those of the ANP.

**Table 3: General Elections of 2013**  
(Registered voters= 84,207,524 Casted Votes= 45,388,404 Turn out= 55.02)

N o	Party	Popular Vote	Vote %	Seats on the basis of			Discrepan cy
				FPTP	Seat %	PR	
1.	PML(N )	14,874,104	32.77 %	126+34+6=166	48.53 %	112	+44
2	PPP	6,911,218	15.32 %	33+8+1=42	12.28 %	52	-10
3	PTI	7,679,954	16.92 %	28+6+1=35	10.23 %	58	-23
4	MQM	2,456,153	5.41%	19+4+1=24	7.01%	18	+6
5	JUI (F)	1,461,371	3.22%	11+3+1=15	4.38%	11	+4
6	PML (Q)	1,409,905	3.11%	2+0+0=2	0.58%	10	-8
7	JI	963,909	2.12 %	3+1+0=4	1.16%	7	-3
8	ANP	453,057	1%	2+0+0=2	0.58%	3	-1
	PKMA P	214,631	0.47 %	3+1+0=4	1.16%	2	+2

**Source:** Derived and calculated by the present researcher from the data of 2013 General Election provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (Pakistan, Report on the General Elections -2013 V-I, 2013).

During 2013 general elections the difference of the seats and votes secured by PML (N) tells the story that it got 32 % of the votes but it secured 48 % of the seats. Conversely the PTI secured 16.9 % of the popular votes but the seats it got are 10 %.

Similarly there this disproportionate trend is visible in the votes secured by MQM and JUI (F) who's votes percentage is less than the percentage of their seats. Whereas in the case of PPP, PML (Q), JI and NP it is the other ways round as the number of their votes are higher than the seats they got.

**Table 4: General Elections of 2018**  
(Registered voters=105,955,409 Casted Votes= 53,123,733 Turn out= 51.6)

No	Party	Popular Vote	Vote %	Seats on the basis of			Discrepancy
				FPTP	Seat %	PR	
1	PTI	16,903,702	31.82%	149	43.56%	109	+40
2.	PML(N)	12,934,589	24.35%	82	23.97%	83	-1
3	PPP	6,924,356	13.03%	54	15.78%	45	+9
4	MMA	2,573,939	4.85%	12	3.50%	17	-5
5	TLP	2,234,316	4.21%	0	0.0%	14	-14
6	GDA	1,260,147	2.37%	2	0.58%	8	-6
7	MQM	733,245	1.38%	6	1.75%	5	+1
8	PML (Q)	517,408	0.97%	4	1.16%	3	+1
	BAP	319,348	0.60%	4	1.16%	2	+2

**Source:** Derived and calculated by the present researcher from the data of 2018 General Election provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (Pakistan, The Gazette of Pakistan Notification dated August 10 2018 about the results of the General Elections -2018, 2018).

During 2018 general elections the difference of the seats and votes secured by PTI tells the story that it got about 32 % of the votes but it secured 43 % of the seats. However, there is little difference in the electoral seats and popular voter gained by PML (N).

The results are conversely disappointing for the new entry of Tehrik-e-Labak as despite having the support of more than 4% of the general voters the seats it gained is zero. Same is the case with MMA and Grand Democratic Alliance which has secured 2.37 % and 4.5 % of the votes but the ratio of the seats is 0.58 % and 3.50% respectively.

Similarly this disproportionate trend is visible in the votes secured by PPP, PML-Q and Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP) who's votes percentage is less than the percentage of their seats. Whereas in the case of PPP, PML (Q), JI and NP it is the other ways round as the number of their votes are higher than the seats they got.

### **3. Strengths and Limitations of the FPTP System:**

Considering the 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018 General elections selected for this Research Paper and on the basis of the visible disproportionality in the votes secured and seats gained by different parties in the various elections discussed above has created feelings of dissatisfaction and displeasure of the parties at the receiving end. However, it has rejoiced the same parties at other times when they were the gainers and beneficiaries of the system. Counting on this bi-polar flaw in the system, electoral reform has been a subject of debate for some time after every election particularly from the parties who were hit by the system. But exactly what are the criticisms of the first-past-the-post voting system? needs further elaboration which is as follows:

#### **3.1. Vote-to-Seat Distortion**

In Pakistani system, the candidate with the most votes wins (first-past-the-post). As a result, a candidate can win a seat in a riding or a party can form the government without having obtained a majority (more than 50 per cent) of the vote. With just two candidates, a majority is needed, but with three or four candidates a candidate could win with just 34 per cent of the votes. Therefore, the first-past-the-post system is said to fail to accurately reflect the wishes of voters. For example, let's say two fictional parties – the PTI and PPP parties – receive substantial support in an election. The PTI wins 171 seats (55 per cent of the seats), with 40 per cent of the popular vote. Meanwhile, the Peoples Party only wins 62 seats (20 per cent of the seats) with 30 per cent of the popular vote.

Many people suggest these results inadequately reflect the wishes of voters. Another concern is that the first-past-the-post system produces “exaggerated” majorities and correspondingly “weak” oppositions. Take, for example, the situation where a party holds a majority of the seats with only a minority of the vote. In the previous example, even though 60 per cent of voters voted for other parties, the opposition parties cannot effectively challenge motions put forward by the PTI, because it has a majority of the seats. In other words, in a first-past-the-post system, the winner (PTI) can control every vote in Parliament despite not having received a majority of the popular vote. As a result, the opposition's ability to contribute to government policies is greatly limited.

#### **3.2. Regionalism**

It is frequently argued that the first-past-the-post system contributes to geographical differences, or regionalism, because political parties focus their efforts in ridings where they have the best chances of winning a seat.

The first-past-the-post system benefits regionally based parties in a way that does not reflect their share of the national popular vote. In other words, parties that enjoy strong support in a given region (e.g. MQM in

Karachi) are more likely to translate votes into a seat in Parliament, while small parties without a regional base (e.g. Jamat-e-Islami) that try to mount a national campaign are systematically disadvantaged by the electoral system, as their support is too diffuse to translate into seats. Many observers have cautioned against overstating a causal relationship between the electoral system and regionalism, on the grounds that in a country the size of Pakistan, differences in the way things are perceived are inevitable. Nonetheless, the first-past-the-post voting system undeniably plays a role in exacerbating regional differences.

### **3.3. Wasted Votes**

Voters who cast their ballots for a losing candidate are considered to have “wasted” their votes. The candidate who obtains a plurality of the vote wins the seat, but what of the votes of those who preferred another candidate? In effect, they may be meaningless, except to cast doubt on the winner’s victory if the winner hasn’t achieved greater than 50 per cent of the popular vote. Many people have suggested that the phenomenon of the “wasted” vote has contributed to increased numbers of citizens who abstain from voting at all.

### **3.4. Women and Minority Representation**

Another concern with the first-past-the-post voting system is that women and minorities (whether ethnic or religious) are under-represented among candidates running for election. In fact, the lowest levels of women and minority representation are found in democratic countries using the first-past-the-post system. Neither women nor minorities as groups are regionally based, and therefore do not benefit from regional concentration. In the first-past-the-post “winner take all” system, political parties aim to maximize their chances of success by running the safest possible candidate (electable in local parlance) in each riding. Women and minority candidates are often seen as controversial and are therefore not readily nominated. However, the reservation of seats for women and minorities has solved the issue of their representation to some extent in Pakistan. Although the current system of filling the reserved seats for women and minorities is parties dependent and there is no direct link of these representatives with the populace rather they are nominees of the successful parties in the National and provincial assemblies of Pakistan.

### **3.5. Youth Participation**

The low voter turnout has been of particular concern in the general elections from 1985 to 2002, especially with respect to lack of participation by young people (Ayub, 2021). Many observers suggest that young people do not vote because they believe that political parties and government do not adequately reflect their needs and values—young people do not see themselves reflected in the system of governance. This trend has prompted calls for strategies that engage young people in the electoral system. In this regard the recent few elections are encouraging as large number of youth came out to the polling



stations due lowering of voter's age to 18 from 21 years along with the effective and youth attractive campaign of one of the major parties like Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (Ayub, 2021).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the existence of all the mentioned problems, there is a genuine concern of reforming the Pakistani electoral system. The question remains, however, whether it is possible to devise an alternative electoral system which mitigates the problems of the FPTP? Vast of the literature long established this question positively. In 1990s several democratic states have answered that question in the affirmative. For instance, Japan, Italy, New Zealand, Russia, Hungary and Chile replaced their electoral systems by new ones in response to achieving some objectives which they had missed in the FPTP (Mitchell, 2005). In light of such experiences, Pakistan can also do the same. But which alternative is best? And what should be the mechanisms employed to select the best alternative needs cautious and meaningful national dialogue to trace such a viable alternative electoral system which alleviates the problems of the existing electoral system without avoiding its existing virtues.

Hence, to suggest that Pakistan's voting system has certain limitations does not mean that the way the voters currently elect the federal and provincial representatives is all wrong.

Proponents of the current system argue that it is familiar, easy to use and establishes a direct relationship with a Member of Parliament or of the legislature. It has frequently led to single-party majorities and, if governments are unpopular, it allows the electorate to vote them out.

The first-past-the-post voting system is regarded as easy-to-use because voters have only to mark a ballot (with a cross or other mark) beside the name of the candidate they choose. Having one representative per district (single-member ridings) is of benefit because it establishes a direct connection between constituents and their representatives, a tradition in the country's political system. One identifiable representative per riding also establishes a clear line of accountability. To voice their displeasure, dissatisfied constituents know who to call or write, and can vote accordingly should they be displeased with the conduct of either the government or the individual representative.

However, the point of focus of this research paper is that in order to get a more representative system, issues like avoiding the wastage of votes, giving proper representation to various divergent groups, women, religious minorities, peasants, labourers and other sections will help assimilate them with the national interests and national integration as well as by becoming part of the coalition governments or parliamentary opposition their extreme tendencies might melt down to those of cumulative nationalist tendencies. The chances of convergent results are also their but denying them any place in the corridors of

powers or policy making are more stronger factors to contribute to extreme tendencies than if they are given representation and espoused in the national system.

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