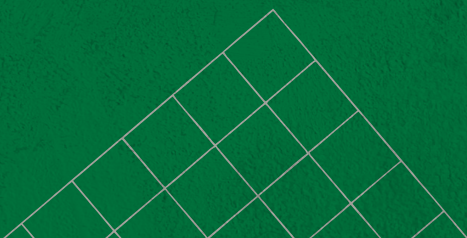




2023
DEMOCRACY'S VANGUARD:
YOUTH'S ELECTORAL
PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN

Be Seen
Be Heard

#YouthinParliament





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PILDAT is an independent, non-partisan and not-for-profit indigenous research and training institution with the mission to strengthen democracy and democratic institutions in Pakistan.

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Islamabad Office: P. O. Box 278, F-8, Postal Code: 44220, Islamabad, Pakistan

Lahore Office: 92-CCA, DHA, Phase 8 (Ex-Park View), Lahore, Pakistan

E-mail: info@pildat.org | Website: www.pildat.org

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While the views and findings in this report are those of PILDAT, they do not necessarily reflect the views of The Body Shop Pakistan or any other contributors. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this report by PILDAT. All information was believed to be correct as of December 08, 2023, and omissions or errors, if any, were unintentional.

Introduction

Research Methodology

The research design is a qualitative and quantitative study employing informal/semi-formal interviews, conversations and focus group discussions to collect data from youth and other segments of society in Pakistan through various interactive platforms. These included sessions of the 17th Youth Parliament Pakistan (YPP)[®] powered by PILDAT, Voice of Youth surveys conducted by PILDAT, Legislative business of YPP, Focus Group Discussions with young people, discussions with political party leaders and heads of their youth wings, heads of provincial youth departments and their focal persons, academia, officials of the Election Commission of Pakistan and observations & key takeaways of dialogues between parliamentarians and young people. Some of these interactions were in-person while some were virtual.

Primary data was acquired from the Election Commission of Pakistan and further arranged and analyzed by PILDAT to assess the levels of representation of youth in the electoral processes of Pakistan.

This research also utilized a range of secondary data sources to assess the patterns and challenges of youth participation and design a youth outreach strategy. The sources employed are as follows:

1. **Published Studies and Research Articles:** Various published studies and research articles were consulted to obtain insightful information, statistics, and analysis that contextualized the findings of this assessment. These sources are cited either in the footnotes or incorporated in the text.
2. **Government Reports and Statistics:** Government reports and statistical information were accessed to gather data relevant to the subject matter.
3. **Surveys and Data Sets:** Youth opinion polls conducted by PILDAT (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency) were utilized to shape the assessment findings and recommendations for the youth outreach strategy. These surveys and data sets provided valuable insights into the opinions and perspectives of the youth population.
4. **Online Databases and Archives:** Online databases, including academic periodicals, digital libraries, and repositories were extensively searched for secondary material. Scholarly articles, conference papers, theses, and dissertations sourced from these databases provided valuable insights and contributed to the research findings.
5. **Media Sources:** News websites, newspapers and other media sources were utilized to gather stories and articles related to the subject. These sources helped provide current events, contextual information, and public opinion on youth participation.

The findings of this assessment contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the electoral and political participation of youth in Pakistan. The research findings can inform policies and interventions aimed at increasing the political participation and representation of youth in the country.

Defining Youth

The National Youth Policy of Pakistan, 2008 defined youth as persons 15-29 years of age. After the devolution of 'Youth' as a subject from the federal to the provincial domain in 2010, the same definition of 'Youth' has been retained in the provincial youth policies.

Different countries and international agencies have their definition of youth. United Nations, for example, states 'youth' as those individuals who are between the ages of 15-24.¹

Youth Population

Pakistan is one of the youngest countries in the world with approximately two-thirds or 68% of its over 250 million

1. Who Are the Youth? United Nations, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>

population under the age of 30.² It is estimated that by 2050, eight nations, including Pakistan, will account for more than half of the increase in the world's population.³ Youth between the ages of 15 and 29 comprise 29% of the population of Pakistan.⁴ This age group is formally defined as Youth in the erstwhile National Youth Policy of the Government of Pakistan and the current Youth Policies of the provincial governments.

Pakistan currently has more young people than it has ever had, and this is forecasted to continue to increase. Pakistan is young, with a median age of 20.0 years.⁵

Voting Age

While the defining age of youth is 15-29 years in Pakistan, the required minimum age to register as a voter is 18 years in line with the norm adopted by most countries. Hence, the 'young voters' is defined in this report as those individuals aged between 18 and 29. For this report, the age requirement to be a legal voter is used as the classification of youth. However, some strategies and recommendations discussed will concern teenagers and children under the voting age of 18 and in some cases up to the age of 35.

Youth Participation Patterns

Youth participation in Pakistan can be categorized into three domains: political, economic, and social. This report focuses on the political participation of youth.

In the political domain, youth participation is often limited to registration as a voter, exercising the right to vote, membership in political parties, contesting elections at local, provincial or national levels and attendance at political rallies and other political activities.

The use of mobile phones has increased among the youth, and they use them for calling, texting and social media usage. Three in five Pakistani youth use the internet, and practically all internet users are on social media.⁶ Nearly half of all young people regularly post on political issues on social media, and over half have regular discussions with their friends on political issues, with internet users more active.⁷ According to Kepios (an advisory firm that enables organizations everywhere to understand how to use digital technologies to improve success) data, internet users in Pakistan have increased a further 22 million between 2021 and 2022, while the number of social media users has risen to 71 million. Internet usage is increasingly moving from laptops/desktops to mobile phones, with 3G/4G subscribers comprising 114 million or 52% of the population according to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA).⁸

While data on age group disaggregation for internet users is not publicly available, one can infer some conclusions from indirect sources. For instance, Meta's ad data, that shows the majority of social media users are men between the ages of 18 and 34. A survey by Kantar (Kantar Group is a data analytics and brand consulting company, based in London) also revealed a pattern in internet users, whereby males (69%), individuals (67% of 15–24-year-olds and 57% of 25–34-year-olds) and employed individuals (63%) are more likely to use the internet in Pakistan. Overall, the study said 66% of internet users are based in urban areas while 47% belong to rural areas, and 46% of all Pakistanis access the internet every day. Of note, there is a large gap between men and women, with 73% of men saying they use the Internet but only 47% of women say so.⁹ This can be attributed to cultural barriers and restrictions, as well as education levels.

2. Pakistan Next Gen Report 2023, British Council, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/british_council_-_next_gen_research_report_2023.pdf
3. Ibid
4. Unleash the potential of a young Pakistan, UNDP, 2018, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan>
5. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: <https://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org/data/PAK>
6. Pakistan Next Gen Report 2023, British Council, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/british_council_-_next_gen_research_report_2023.pdf
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Country's internet penetration stands at 54%, Express Tribune, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2312994/countrys-internet-penetration-stands-at-54>

Youth Participation as Voters

Elections are at the core of any democratic society where the ultimate authority rests with the people who in turn delegate this authority to elected representatives at various levels such as the federal, provincial and local in Pakistan. Voter absenteeism is a problem for democracy. Those groups who do not vote may cause distortion in representation as the group's political opinions may not be reflected in the elections. Groups with low voter turnouts may, therefore, be neglected in policy-making and political decisions.

In Pakistan, youth is one such group that has historically under-participated in elections as voters who actually cast their vote. This low participation has had a detrimental effect as it resulted in fewer youth-focused programmes and development schemes. Even if young people have opinions different from the majority of the voters, they should still be represented in legislatures, Local Governments and provincial and federal cabinets. Youth have to have their voice heard in order to make an impact on public policy. If Pakistan's young people aged under 30, which make up 64%¹⁰ of its population, do not vote, then their voice may likely be ignored. A low level of interest by youth in elections may also be taken as a lack of trust in the democratic system which enhances their vulnerability to undemocratic and radical ideologies.

Youth as Registered Voters

According to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), young voters constitute the largest age group amongst all registered voters as of September 2023. Among a total of 127 million registered voters of all ages, approximately 55 million young Pakistanis aged 18 to 35 are registered as voters making up around 43.85% of those who are eligible to vote.

10. Youth Bulge: Demographic Dividend or Disaster? The Friday Times, August 2022, as accessed on December 08, 2023 at: <https://thefridaytimes.com/12-Aug-2022/youth-bulge-demographic-dividend-or-disaster#>

Table 1: Age-wise & Province-wise Voter Statistics

Age Wise & Province Wise Voter Statistics as on September 09, 2023								
Province / Age Groups	18-22	%	18-29	%	30-35	%	18-35	%
Punjab	6,995,607	9.50%	20,301,681	27.57%	11,503,632	15.62%	31,805,313	43.20%
Sindh	2,373,711	8.86%	7,075,854	26.42%	4,056,458	15.15%	11,132,312	41.56%
KP	2,379,803	10.93%	6,742,460	30.96%	3,805,889	17.47%	10,548,349	48.43%
Balochistan	494,356	9.27%	1,569,134	29.42%	870,132	16.32%	2,439,266	45.74%
Grand Total	12,243,477	9.60%	35,689,129	27.99%	20,236,111	15.87%	55,925,240	43.85%

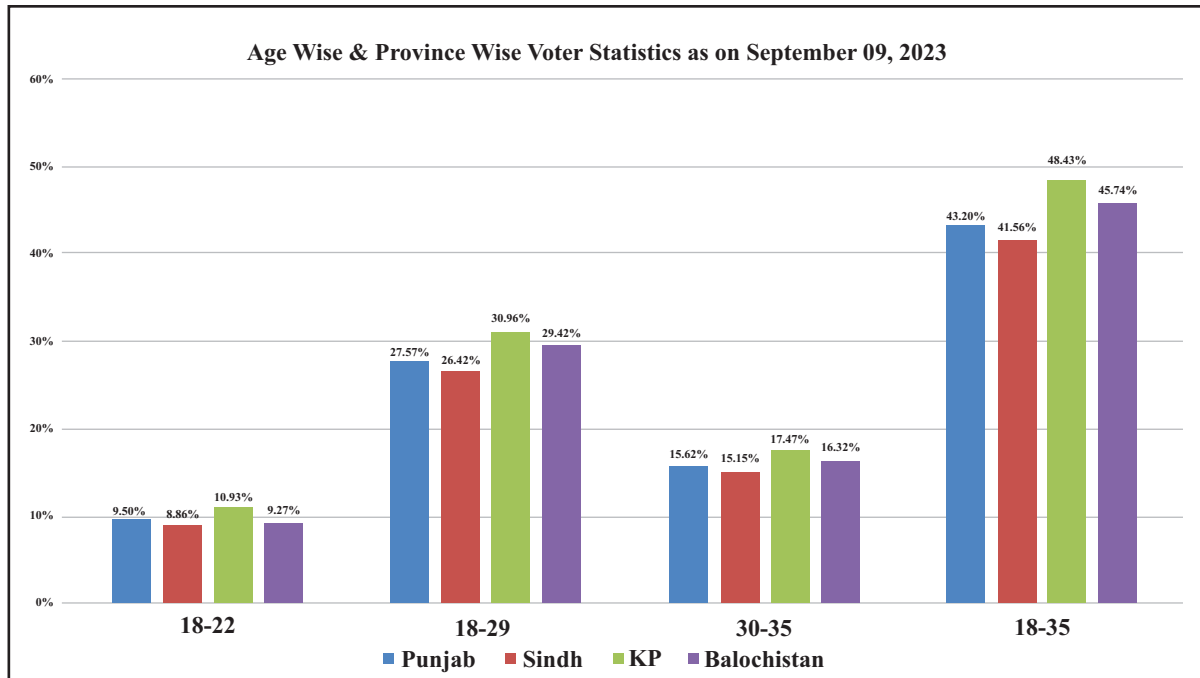


Figure 1: Age Breakdown of Registered Voters in Pakistan, (Source: Election Commission of Pakistan September, 2023)

Age-wise & Province-wise Voter Statistics

As of September 2023, the voter statistics from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) reveal intriguing insights. Among the 18 to 22 age group, the registered young voters accounted for 9.50% in Punjab, 8.86% in Sindh, 10.93% in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and 9.27% in Balochistan. Expanding the range to include voters aged 18 to 29, the figures change to 27.57% in Punjab, 26.42% in Sindh, 30.96% in KP, and 29.42% in Balochistan. Additionally, for the 30 to 35 age group, registered voters constitute 15.62% in Punjab, 15.15% in Sindh, 17.47% in KP, and 16.32% in Balochistan. Overall, encompassing the age range of 18 to 35, the total registered voters are 43.20% in Punjab, 41.56% in Sindh, 48.43% in KP, and 45.74% in Balochistan.

As of examining the voter demographics across the different provinces of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) stands out with the highest registered voter percentages in various age groups. Among the 18-22 age range, KP leads with 10.93%, followed by Punjab at 9.50%, Balochistan at 9.27% and Sindh at 8.86%. Shifting to the 18-29 bracket, KP maintains the lead with 30.96%, trailed by Balochistan at 29.42%, Punjab at 27.57% and Sindh at 26.42%. Moreover, in the 30-35 age group, KP retains the top position with 17.47%, followed by Balochistan at 16.32%, Punjab at 15.62% and Sindh at 15.15%. Overall, considering the 18-35 age range, KP maintains the highest at 48.43% registered voters, trailed closely by Balochistan at 45.74%, Punjab at 43.20% and Sindh at 41.56%.

First-Time Voters in Pakistan's 2024 General Elections

Around 22 million individuals aged between 18 and 23 are gearing up to vote for the first time in Pakistan's upcoming 2024 general elections. This sizable group marks a significant presence of young, enthusiastic voters eager to play a role in shaping the country's political landscape. Their participation signifies a potential shift in the political sphere, as they aim to contribute their perspectives and influence the direction of Pakistan's future.



Historical Youth Voter Turnout compared to overall voter turnout

Since there is no formal system to record the age of voters at the time of voting, Exit Polls are normally used to ascertain the participation of various socio-economic groups in the elections. Using Gallup Pakistan's Exit Polls data,¹¹ a comparison between overall voter turnouts and youth voter turnouts has been documented and studied. According to the data, the gap between overall voter turnout and youth voter turnout has ranged from 7 percentage points in 1993 to 27 percentage points in 2013, showing an increasing trend with the only exception of the 2018 General Election when this gap narrowed to 16.5 percentage points. Fig. 2 shows the trends of overall and youth voter turn-outs. PILDAT has estimated that the average youth voter turnout of the past eight elections, from 1988 to 2018, has been abysmally low at 31%, which is 13 percentage points lower than the average overall voter turnout of 44% in these eight elections.

11. Gallup Pakistan Exit Poll 2018 <https://gallup.com.pk/post/26172>

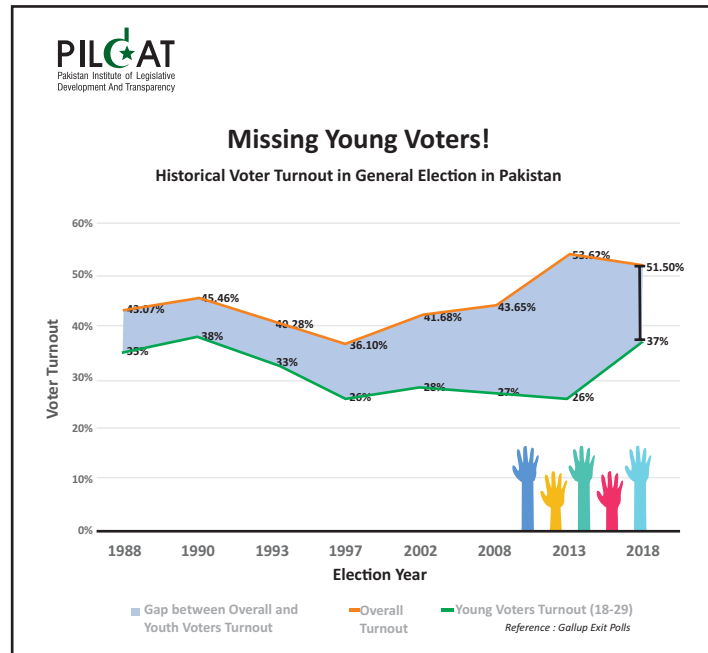


Figure 2: Historical Voter Turnout in General Elections in Pakistan

Even when compared with women's voter turnout, youth have been left behind during the past two elections. Average youth voter turnout is 31%¹² while average women voter turnout in the past two elections, when women voters were separately enumerated, is 40%. This difference shows that youth voter turnout lags even behind women voter turnout by a wide margin.

Young voters can transform election results and should be regarded as the potential game changers as is indicated by the large number of registered young voters. Whichever party can win over the young voters, can swing the results in their way; such is the power of youth. According to experts, elections in the coming years will be decided by young people, as they make up a large proportion of the electorate, with their number undoubtedly increasing with every coming year.

International examples of successful voter mobilization

For Pakistan to plan a strategy to increase the turnout of voters in general and of young voters in particular, the country should look towards democracies from around the world that have set precedence to engage their youth in electoral processes. The following section describes the initiatives taken by some selected countries to engage youth in the electoral processes of their country. While voter turnout data might not be available for young voters in many countries, stakeholders in Pakistan can take inspiration from their examples of young voters' mobilization and make feasible and innovative plans for Pakistan.

India

India is probably the most relevant and most inspiring example for Pakistan as far as the Youth Voter Turnout is concerned. India and Pakistan won independence at the same time in August 1947 when the British-India was partitioned into two countries. Their socio-economic conditions are also similar. Although the two countries went through their separate experiences in democratic development, studying the comparative youth voting patterns in India and Pakistan will be instructive.

12. Pakistan's 11th General Election 2018 – Who Voted for Whom & Why <https://gallup.com.pk/post/26164>

India, Pakistan's neighbor, is a society much like our own but the overall and youth voter turnout in India displays a completely different picture from Pakistan.

Comparing data provided by Gallup Pakistan and *Lokniti* India,¹³ one can see how actively the youth of India participates in the electoral process. The average overall voter turnout of the past five elections for India turns out to be 61.6% while the youth voter turnout for the same period in India is 60%. The voting gap turns out to be just a mere 1.6 percentage points. In the case of Pakistan, we find the gap between the Overall and Youth Voter Turnouts to be 16.8 percentage points which is considerably higher than the gap in India. The youth voter turnout in the past two Indian Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and 2019 exceeded the overall voter turnout by 2 and 3 percentage points respectively. The figure below depicts the above-discussed voter turnouts between the two countries. The gap between the two countries overall and youth voter turnouts also becomes obvious in the following figure.

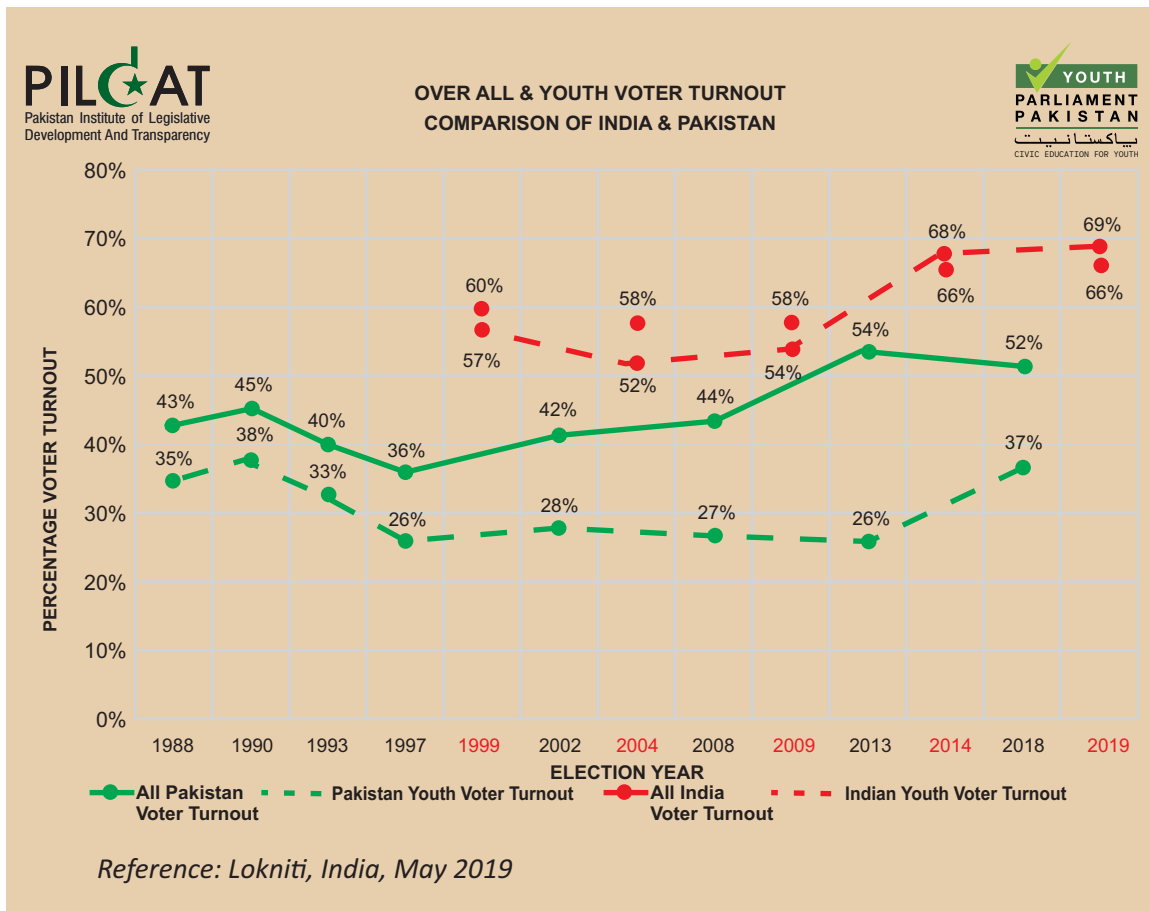


Figure 3: Comparison of India & Pakistan overall and youth voter turnouts, (Source: Gallup Pakistan and Lokniti India (May 2019))

13. The Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy is a research programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), an autonomous social science research institute in Delhi. It is dedicated to studying and understanding the democratic and electoral politics of India and its neighborhood <https://www.lokniti.org/lok-sabha-election>

Societal similarities between India and Pakistan should act as catalyst for Pakistan's government bodies and civil society sector to study India as a case study and try to find answers to such questions as what initiatives has India undertaken to inform youth of their voting rights and encourage them to eliminate its voter gap? It should also be studies that how can Election Commission of Pakistan take inspiration and apply such initiatives in Pakistan?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has launched multiple programs to educate youth of their rights and responsibilities as citizens of India, one of which is their Right to Vote. They made sure to involve the youth in social welfare and cultural activities to keep the community engaged on a grassroots level. Having youth's participation in sports activities such as formation of a human chain, cultural activities where women used *rangoli designs* was essential to bring awareness to electoral voting and create engagement with the local community.

ECI conducted massive voter awareness & registration drives all across the country by commemorating National Voter Day (January 25) to encourage and celebrate young people of the country who were about to become eligible to cast votes. Instead of locating and encouraging those individuals who had already turned 18 (the legal voting age in India), they visited schools and colleges to appeal to young students who were about to become 18 in the next few months.

India was also able to set up its Voter Education Division within the Election Commission of India (ECI) to educate young people of their right to vote, the importance of their vote and the difference that one vote may make. Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program (SVEEP) was the flagship program of ECI for voter education, spreading voter awareness and promoting voter literacy in India. Activities undertaken were to educate the electors regarding procedure relating to registration in Electoral Roll, correction of their existing particulars in Electoral Roll and deletion of name of shifted and/or deceased family members.

ECI was also perceptive to who and what the youth looked up to. They made cricket stars and celebrities their brand ambassadors in order to encourage voting in different interest groups of youth. They reimaged a popular Indian song, *Pappu Can't dance*, to appeal to the young and enthusiastic crowd. The parodied song, *Pappu can't vote*, was quick to become a hit within the country and was able to create massive engagement of ECI with youth.

From local to national level efforts of over a decade, India was able to mobilise its youth to cast their ballots in elections in greater number. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, youth voter turnout was, for the first time, higher than the overall voter turnout. This trend continued in 2019 Lok Sabha election too. These statistics were proof of how effective the initiatives of ECI had been to promote electoral participation within its youth.

The efforts by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in the past 24 months have been commendable in engaging women and young registered voters. Through targeted initiatives, they have extensively reached out to the youth in different colleges and universities across Pakistan, aiming to educate them about the voting process and emphasize the significance of their participation. For instance, the ECP, along with collaborating entities, conducted a substantial number of sessions specifically tailored to the youth. These student work show sessions, totalling 1935 sessions, successfully connected and informed a significant number of students, amplifying their understanding and involvement in the electoral process.¹⁴ This dedicated outreach plays a crucial role in fostering a more informed and participative young electorate. PILDAT, in partnership with UNDP and ECP, also conducted 15 outreach activities aimed at enlightening the youth on the significance of the electoral process and their participation. These concerted efforts were pivotal in imparting knowledge and understanding among young individuals, emphasizing the importance of their participation in shaping the democratic landscape. Through these initiatives, a platform was established to engage and inform the youth, fostering a sense of active citizenship and empowerment, thereby contributing significantly to the cultivation of a more politically aware and participative generation.

Sri Lanka

The last Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka were held on August 05, 2020 to elect 225 members to Sri Lanka's 16th

14. Spokesperson ECP, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/spokespersonecp/status/1730876177735430473?s=46&t=pCVmtRxhjGjY2q53pi461Q>

Parliament. The election was postponed at least twice due to a surge in COVID-19 cases in the country, before the date was finalized as August 5, 2020. While this gave relevant bodies time to extend their voter registration and campaigning activities, the voter turnout was still expected to be low. According to International IDEA the 2020 Sri Lankan parliamentary elections had an overall voter turnout of 75.9%,¹⁵ a small decline from 77.7% in 2015 election.

Sri Lanka continued to conduct campaigns and election during the peak of Covid-19. According to the report of the Asian Network for Free Election's (ANFREL) on Sri Lankan elections,¹⁶ the Election Commission of Sri Lanka had made continuous voter education efforts via its four-year Participatory Strategic Plan¹⁷ which laid out nationwide voter education activities to get all citizens actively involved in the election process. This time, due to Covid-19, they were unable to carry out numerous workshops on the grassroots level and instead had to rely on mass media and social media to disseminate information on polling hours, health guidelines, and guidelines for Persons with Disabilities. Infographics, and videos in English and local languages like Sinhala and Tamil were published to inform new voters of the registration guidelines, voting and complaint processes, Covid-19 health measures, FAQs, etc. The Civil Society sector also played its part by conducting voter education workshops, online seminars, and social media campaigns to achieve its goals of increased voter participation.

United States of America

In the United States of America, mid-term elections for the House of Representatives (lower house of the Congress) & the Senate (upper house) are held after every two years. In 2020, the voter turnout for the congressional elections was 70.8%, a noticeable increase from the 2018 elections which had an overall turnout of just 56.8%. For the presidential elections of 2020, the overall voter turnout was 66.8%,¹⁸ a modest increase in turnout as compared to 61.4% in the 2016 presidential election. While youth voter data is not available for congressional elections, youth voter turnouts have been provided for the U.S. Presidential election between Joe Biden & Donald Trump in 2020. According to CIRCLE, 50% of the young people, aged 18-29, voted in the 2020 presidential election, a remarkable 11-point increase since 2016 when only 39% of young voters had turned out to vote.¹⁹ The highest young voter turnout was for the state of New Jersey where 67% youth turned out to vote while the lowest was South Dakota with 32% youth turnout.

One reason for the high turnouts was the ease of registration and ballot casting provided by different states for their young citizens. Automatic voter registration (AVR), online voter registration (OVR), same-day or Election-Day registration (SDR), early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, pre-registration, and requirements for voter registration programmes in high schools were some election laws that prevailed in most high-youth-turnout states. According to CIRCLE's analysis, states with four or more of the above policies had a combined youth turnout rate of 53%, compared to 43% turnout from states with less than four policies. It is likely that a number of these policies complement each other to create a system and culture of voting that is more conducive to youth participation. Another area of election policy that facilitated youth in voting was the mail-in voting, an initiative taken more seriously and expanded upon during the Covid-19 pandemic. On average, youth voter turnout was the highest (57%), and had the largest increases over 2016, in states that automatically mailed ballots to voters. States with the most restrictive vote-by-mail laws, conversely, had the lowest youth turnout - an average of 42%.

United Kingdom

For United Kingdom, the last parliamentary election held in 2019 had an overall voter turnout of 67.3%,²⁰ resulting in a small decrease of 1.5 percentage points from the 2017 elections (68.8%). While, like most countries, data for youth turnouts might not be available, the Electoral Commission of UK has outlined its efforts to engage its youth in the electoral process. One main issue presented by British youth is the lack of correct information available to them, which is

15. IDEA International, Sri Lanka <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/172/40>

16. The 2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections, ANFREL <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf>

17. Strategic Plan, 2017-2020, Election Commission of Sri Lanka, https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/PSP/Strategic_Plan_2016_English.pdf

18. 2020 Presidential Election Voting & Registration Tables <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-presidential-election-voting-and-registration-tables-now-available.html>

19. Half of Youth Voted in 2020, An 11-Point Increase from 2016 <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>

20. Voter turnout in general elections: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1050929/voter-turnout-in-the-uk/>

why the Electoral Commission has provided introductory modules for new voters.²¹ They can learn about the significance of their vote, local councils vs. parliament elections, the voting process, political campaigning and how to navigate through the vast information available to them to make informed voting decisions. As analysed by Oxford Internet Institute,²² the internet and social media in particular had played a significant role in mobilizing citizens, mainly young people, to vote in the 2017 election.²³ Use of hashtags, memes and emotional appeals by actors, athletes and social media celebrities led to overwhelming political talk on the Internet which eventually translated into young people registering themselves and eventually casting votes during the elections.

Bangladesh

The last general election was held in Bangladesh on 30 December 2018 to elect 300 directly-elected members of the *Jatiya Sangsad*, National Parliament, resulting in a landslide victory for the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina Wajid. For the 2018 election, the overall voter turnout was 80%,²⁴ an almost 30% jump from the 2014 election when the voter turnout was just 51.4%. Bangladesh's election commission and civil sector were able to successfully activate its citizens to vote in the previous election. Bangladesh is one of the few countries that celebrate its own National Voters Day. On March 02, the Bangladesh Election Commission officials routinely carry out conferences, dialogues, and rallies²⁵ in high schools in different regions of the country to create awareness among youth on their voting rights to give democracy an institutional shape. These activities aim to inspire Bangladeshi voters in exercising their voting rights, to infuse democratic culture in them, and to create social awareness and inspire voters to cast their votes as per their own choice to further strengthen the democratic process. The Bangladesh Election Commission²⁶ has also taken to social media to directly engage with youth through their infographics, YouTube videos and awareness posts to remind the younger generation to register themselves as voters and cast votes.

Young Candidates in the past General Election

Out of 1,162 contesting candidates for the National Assembly, only 57 (4.91%) young candidates of age less than 30 years contested the general election of 2018. In the four Provincial Assembly elections, 191 (7.82%) young candidates (Age: less than 30 years) contested election out of total 2,444 candidates.



Young Legislators

Only 4 (1.16%) young MNAs, under 30 years of age at the time of the 2018 General Election, were elected to the National Assembly which comprised 342 members.²⁷ There are only 16 (9.52%) young MPAs (age: 35 and less) out of 168 members in the Provincial Assembly of Sindh, 21 (14.48%) young MPAs out of 145 members in the Provincial Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 6 (9.23%) young MPAs out of 65 members in the Provincial Assembly of Balochistan. As per the website of the Provincial Assembly of Punjab, there are only 5 (3%) MPAs up to 35 years of age out of 167 members of the assembly whereas data about the age of the remaining 204 MPAs is not available on the website. The Senate of Pakistan does not provide the data about age of the Senators.

Young elected representatives in Local Governments

As per 2015 Local Government elections data, there were 12,971 youth members against the reserved seats in three provinces including Punjab (age: 18-32 years), Sindh (age: below 25 years) and KP (age: below 30 years), out of which 7,518 were from Punjab, 3,652 from KP and 1801 from Sindh. There were no reserved youth seats in Balochistan.

21. Resources For 14-18 Year Olds: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/welcome-your-vote/resources-14-18-year-olds>
22. The Oxford Internet Institute is a multi-disciplinary department dedicated to the study of information, communication, & technology, and is part of the Social Sciences Division of the University of Oxford, England: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/>
23. From voices to votes: how young people used social media to influence the General Election: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/from-voices-to-votes-how-young-people-used-social-media-to-influence-the-general-election/>
24. IDEA International, Bangladesh: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/59/40>
25. National Voters' Day observed: <https://www.bssnews.net/district/47997>
26. Bangladesh Election Commission: <http://www.ecs.gov.bd/?lang=en>
27. Pakistan's under 30 MNAs, 2018, as accessed on December 08, 2023: <https://www.geo.tv/latest/208467-pakistans-under-30-mnas>

Table 2: Young Candidates in 2018 General Election

Legislature	Number of Total Candidates	Young Candidates (Age 25 - 29 years)		Young Candidates (Age over 29 up to 35 years)	
		Number	Percentage of total Candidates	Number	Percentage of total Candidates
National Assembly	1,162	57	4.91%	180	15.49%
Provincial Assembly of the Punjab	1,197	92	7.69%	194	16.21%
Provincial Assembly of Sindh	574	45	7.84%	180	31.36%
Provincial Assembly of KP	482	30	6.22%	82	17.01%
Provincial Assembly of the Balochistan	191	24	12.57%	50	26.18%
Total for provincial assemblies	2,444	191	7.81%	506	20.7%
Grand Total	3,606	248	6.87%	686	19.02%

Source: ECP & PILDAT

Table 3: Young Members in the Legislatures after 2018 General Election (Age: 25-35 years)

Assembly	Total number of Members	Number of Young Members	Percentage of Young Members
National Assembly	342	4	1.16%
Provincial Assembly of the Punjab	167	5	3%
Provincial Assembly of Sindh	168	16	9.52%
Provincial Assembly of KP	145	21	14.48%
Provincial Assembly of Balochistan	65	6	9.23%

Source: ECP & PILDAT

Table 4: Tickets awarded to Young Candidates in General Election 2018

Top Pakistani Parties with Young Candidates		
Rank	Party	Young Candidates (%)
1	Tehreek-e-Labbiak Pakistan (TLP)	36%
2	National Party (NP)	20%
3	Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians (PPPP)	18%
4	Mutahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQMP)	17%
5	Mutahida Majlis-e- Amal (MMA)	17%
6	Pakistan Thereek-e-Insaaf (PTI)	16%
7	Awami National Party (ANP)	16%
8	Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN)	13%

Data Source: Election Commission of Pakistan

What can be done to improve youth voter turnout?

Following are some of the recommendations to improve the Youth Voter Turnout:

Revival of Student Unions in Pakistan: The 17th Youth Parliament Pakistan® on January 21, 2023, passed a bill to revive student unions across Pakistan. In a display of leadership and determination, the young leaders of the 17th Youth Parliament Pakistan® voted to give students a voice in their educational institutions and to promote active participation in democracy. This bill was passed with the expectation to shape a more equitable and just future for Pakistan. The Youth Parliament Pakistan®²⁸ made up of young trailblazers from across the country, is a platform for the next generation of leaders to come together and make their mark on the future of Pakistan. The passing of this bill was a powerful statement from the youth of the nation, demanding that their voices be heard and their rights be respected. The Youth Parliament Pakistan® powered by PILDAT is committed to creating a more inclusive and democratic society in Pakistan. With the passing of this and similar bills at provincial levels and motions/resolutions at federal level, the Youth will be able to make its contribution toward a brighter future for Pakistan.

It is suggested that a discussion that is both well-informed and well-structured should be encouraged among the political parties (along with ECP and elected Representatives) involved in the topic of how student unions in Pakistan might be brought back to life in a methodical and orderly manner. Everyone who has a stake in the issue should be encouraged to take part in the conversation, and the government should also be transparent about sharing their thoughts and worries. Encouragement from the media should be given to guarantee a greater diversity of these cultures. In this context, the decision taken by the Syndicate of Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad – the largest public university of the federal capital – in September 2023 to revive the elected Students Union and the departmental societies is a very welcome step.

Steps proposed to be taken by the Election Commission of Pakistan:

Data Collection and Analysis: First and foremost, data collection and analysis on existing young electorate has to be carried out and made public. Estimation of total number of registered voters that fall within the age group of 18-29 has to be conducted and broken down on the basis of gender, provinces and even constituencies.

Study of the reasons behind low youth voter turnout: Further research also has to be conducted with a focus on youth electoral participation to figure out the reasons behind the historically low youth voter turnout. Once the causes and issues have been brought to light only then could they be systematically tackled.



Special Campaigns: Election Commission officials must focus their efforts on designing and executing special campaigns aimed at educating youth on the importance of votes and by giving new voters and others who haven't voted before the practical information they need to register and cast a ballot. ECP has to follow youth trends and utilize social media as their main platforms of information dissemination. Involving celebrities and social media influencers in their campaigns will increase interest and retention of information amongst youth. In this context, it is very encouraging that the ECP, many other institutions like UNDP and civil society organizations like PILDAT and IFES have been running youth outreach campaigns in universities across the country for the last two years. This campaign needs to be continued and expanded to youth outside the educational institutions.

Exit Polls: Exit Polls are a method to collect demographic data of the individuals who have actually casted votes to find out who they voted for and why. They are an early indication of the voter turn-out. Most of the exit polls may not always consider the age group of voters, leaving youth voter turnout undetermined. Conducting multiple exit polls to ascertain

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28. 17th Youth Parliament Passes Groundbreaking Students' Union Revival Bill and Expresses deep concern on the prevailing brand of Democracy: <https://yp17.youthparliament.pk/17th-youth-parliament-passes-groundbreaking-students-union-revival-bill-and-expresses-deep-concern-on-the-prevailing-brand-of-democracy/>

the level of youth voter turnout in the General and Local Government elections should be made a compulsory exercise by Election Commission.

Updating ECP Strategic Plan for Youth Participation: Election Commission of Pakistan published its Strategic Plan for 2019-2023 but it didn't mention youth as a priority area. ECP must be commended that, in response to PILDAT suggestion, ECP amended the Strategic Plan to include youth-related strategic actions aimed at addressing the low youth voter turnout. The design of these strategic actions can be further refined and their implementation further improved. designed and implemented. The next 5-year strategic plan (2024-2029) should also include a separate section on youth.

Creation of a dedicated wing or appointing a Focal Person for Youth Voting: Similarly, a dedicated youth wing/division or a focal person within ECP has to be designated to focus continuous attention on youth's electoral participation.

Youth Focus in National Voters Day programmes: From our international comparison, we have seen examples of countries celebrating their National Voters Day with great enthusiasm and positively engaging with youth using their platforms. ECP also commemorates National Voters Day in Pakistan on December 7 every year. It may be more befitting if ECP plans special activities focusing on youth and the importance of their vote for Pakistan National Voters Day is highlighted.

Mock Elections in Educational Institutions: In order to teach youth of the method of casting a vote, schools should be encouraged to host mock elections at schools with the help of ECP officials. USA holds mock elections in its schools to teach students what voting is and how a vote is cast. Officials of the U.S. Federal Election Commission bring their ballot boxes and voting machines to schools and engage with children of all ages through these simulations or mock elections which familiarize students on the step-by-step process of voting, correct ways to fill ballots and the advantages of voting. It is encouraging that ECP and other organizations have started conducting mock polling exercises in educational institutions as a part of the Youth Outreach Programme.

Ensure Young Women Electoral Participation: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), should make efforts to eliminate inequalities between young men and women and to encourage the meaningful involvement of young women in all areas of political life. By Carrying out data collection and analysis specifically on female young electorate and publicizing these results to highlight the gender gap in young voter registration and participation, the specific issues relating to the registration and participation of young women voters can also be highlighted.

Consultations with Political Parties, Civil Society, Media and Youth: ECP should also strive to hold periodic consultative sessions with political parties, civil society, media and youth to identify & tackle issues that prevent youth from being an active participant of the electoral process. It may be a good idea to create platforms or forums of these groups within ECP.

Steps proposed to be taken by Political Parties:

Youth focus in Election Manifestoes: Political parties need to amend their election manifestos to include the areas of concern for youth. It should specifically highlight the issues relating to Education, Engagement, Employment and Environment that youth currently face and what policies and programmes will the political party introduce to tackle these issues.

Membership drives and party organization focusing on Youth: Moreover, political parties should pursue membership drives to increase youth representation within their own party, while also giving youth important offices to hold. While inexperienced, it is the duty of the seasoned politicians to train and expose the young members to the political world.

Offering more Young Candidates in elections: More importantly, during elections, every political party should offer its party tickets to young candidates in proportion to their population. This would not only increase youth representation in the national and provincial legislatures but would also mobilise those non-voters among youth who wish to see young

representatives with similar opinions and backgrounds as themselves.

Appeal to new voters: Political campaigns and candidates must abandon the “likely voter” model of mobilization that often only appeals to their already existing voter body and neglects new voters and others who aren't yet on the voter rolls. Appealing to the youth's needs and wants and favouring policies that are pro-youth will aid in winning youth's support.

Involving youth in campaigns: While ensuring that youth voices are reflected during election campaigns it is just as meaningful to partner with youth on outreach efforts that go beyond just asking for a young person's vote. This will promote integrity of the political party and youth would be able to see the tangible efforts made by political parties in youth's priority areas.

Civic Education: As elected legislators, political parties in collaboration with ECP and education departments should advocate the enforcement of law for compulsory civic education in secondary and higher education. In this regard, the National Assembly passed a law called the National Civic Education Commission Act, 2018 but it extends only to Islamabad and the Act's implementation is still a question mark since its passing. Civic education should reach all youth, feature comprehensive nonpartisan teaching about elections, include key civic skills like media literacy, and help students develop their voice and power as future voters.

Ensure Young Women Political Participation: Parties need to amend their constitutions to ensure that the women's and youth's wing leadership is made ex-officio members of the higher decision-making bodies of the party, where administrative as well as policy-making is debated and finalized. This may also include a youth women's wing. Amend election manifestos to include areas of concern for young women and highlight policies addressing their issues. Political parties should ensure that at least one senior and one junior/young female leader speaks at the rallies organized by the party. Women, who are given tickets for the general election, under the new electoral laws, should be provided financial help to contest the election, especially those who are young candidates.

Mentoring and training of young members, office bearers, and legislators: Building a robust and successful political organization requires political parties to invest in the mentoring and training of their young members, office bearers, and lawmakers. Mentoring and training for new members, officeholders, and lawmakers may have many positive effects.

Young members, office bearers, and lawmakers may benefit from mentoring and training programmes that assist them to acquire the skills necessary to do their jobs effectively. This category includes abilities like talking to strangers, haggling, giving speeches, and leading.

Young members, office bearers, and lawmakers may benefit greatly from programmes designed to educate and teach them about political institutions, laws, and processes. Informed decision-making and better representation of constituents may result from this.

Youth members, officeholders, and lawmakers who participate in mentoring and training programmes benefit from introductions to more senior political figures. This may help them network, win allies, and progress professionally. Mentoring and training programmes may assist political parties to find and cultivate future leaders, which is an important aspect of succession planning. This may secure the party's long-term viability by creating a succession plan for its leadership.

Workshops, seminars, online training programmes, and mentorship programmes are just some of the ways political parties may give guidance and instruction to their members. Several demographics, such as youthful members, office bearers, and lawmakers, may benefit from these specialized programmes.

In sum, training and mentorship programmes are crucial to the success of any political group. Political parties may secure a future of strength by putting resources into the education and training of their younger members, office bearers, and lawmakers.

Steps proposed to be taken by Youth:

Turn-out to Vote: As eligible young voters, the least they can do is to make an informed decision as a voter and cast their votes. It's imperative for young voters to delve beyond the surface when evaluating political parties. Alongside scrutinising a party's agenda for youth empowerment encompassing social, economic, and political facets, it's equally vital to assess their dedication towards bolstering population education and health initiatives. These facets intertwine with the overarching development and well-being of the populace. By factoring in these critical elements, young voters ensure they advocate for comprehensive policies that not only uplift the youth but also prioritise crucial aspects like education, health, and the overall welfare of society.



Campaign to ask young friends to vote: As the concerned body, youth also have the duty to inform their peers of the importance behind fulfilling their civic duties. Youth tends to follow trends set by fellow young people. Encouraging young people to lead outreach efforts in innovative ways can contribute to increased electoral participation. Utilising social media to set up TikTok trends, hashtags and post voting selfie trends can lead to more youth being informed and taking part in the electoral process.

Youth Voting Ambassadors: Young local voices have the power to mobilise voters of their area. Having young ambassadors of every tehsil and/or union council of Pakistan can greatly encourage youth to be a part of the democratic processes. Involving these ambassadors in campaigns and giving their voices a platform can be a measure to mobilise youth of the particular area. These ambassadors can work in collaboration with ECP to circulate information on voter registration & procedure to the uninformed and uneducated youth of their area.

Conclusion:

Earnest efforts need to be made by the ECP, Federal and Provincial Governments, Political Parties, Educational Institutions, Civil Society Organizations and Youth themselves to address the current low level of youth participation, as voters, candidates and elected representatives, in the electoral process in Pakistan. This can be achieved through measures such as increasing voter education and awareness campaigns, creating more opportunities for youth to engage in political activities, and ensuring that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. It is also important to address the underlying factors that contribute to the lack of youth participation, such as socioeconomic barriers and political apathy.

It is also important that the political and electoral process in the country should not only be made more credible, an effective communication campaign should be undertaken to present the process as credible as well.

Low turnout of young voters is a critical issue in Pakistan that needs continuous attention and sustained action. By making the political and electoral process more trustworthy, increasing awareness, access to information, and addressing socio-economic barriers, we can work towards increasing youth engagement in the electoral process. This, in turn, can lead to a more representative and democratic political system in Pakistan. Efforts should also be made to create a safe and inclusive environment for young people to express their political opinions without fear of retribution. Additionally, providing civic education and leadership training can empower young people to become active and responsible citizens who can contribute positively to the development of their communities. Political parties should give greater opportunities to youth as office bearers in parties and candidates for national, provincial and local elected institutions. Youth should take proactive approach and participate proactively in electoral process at least as voters and, if desired, as candidates for political office.

Appendix A: PILDAT Youth National Poll (2022-2023)

The survey presents an analysis by gauging the perspectives of the youth demographic in anticipation of the forthcoming general elections in Pakistan. The survey encompassed a spectrum of critical topics pertinent to the youth, including the credibility of the upcoming elections, the most suitable governance system for Pakistan, the potential revival of student unions, the significance of local government, the underlying factors contributing to low voter turnout and the primary motivations influencing support for a particular political party. Additionally, the survey aimed to identify the paramount issues facing Pakistan and Pakistani youth in the imminent elections and sought to uncover the core demands expected from the contesting parties.

Summary Methodology

Sample size:	422 Youth of Pakistan (18-29 years old Males and Females)
Survey Dates:	2022-23
Coverage:	National & Overseas Pakistanis

Constituency & Province Wise Coverage

Province/Territory	Total Constituencies	Number (%) of Constituencies Covered
Punjab	141	129 (91.5%)
Sindh	61	47 (77.0%)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	51	38 (74.5%)
Balochistan	16	15 (93.8%)
Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)	3	3 (100%)
Pakistan	272	232 (85.3%)

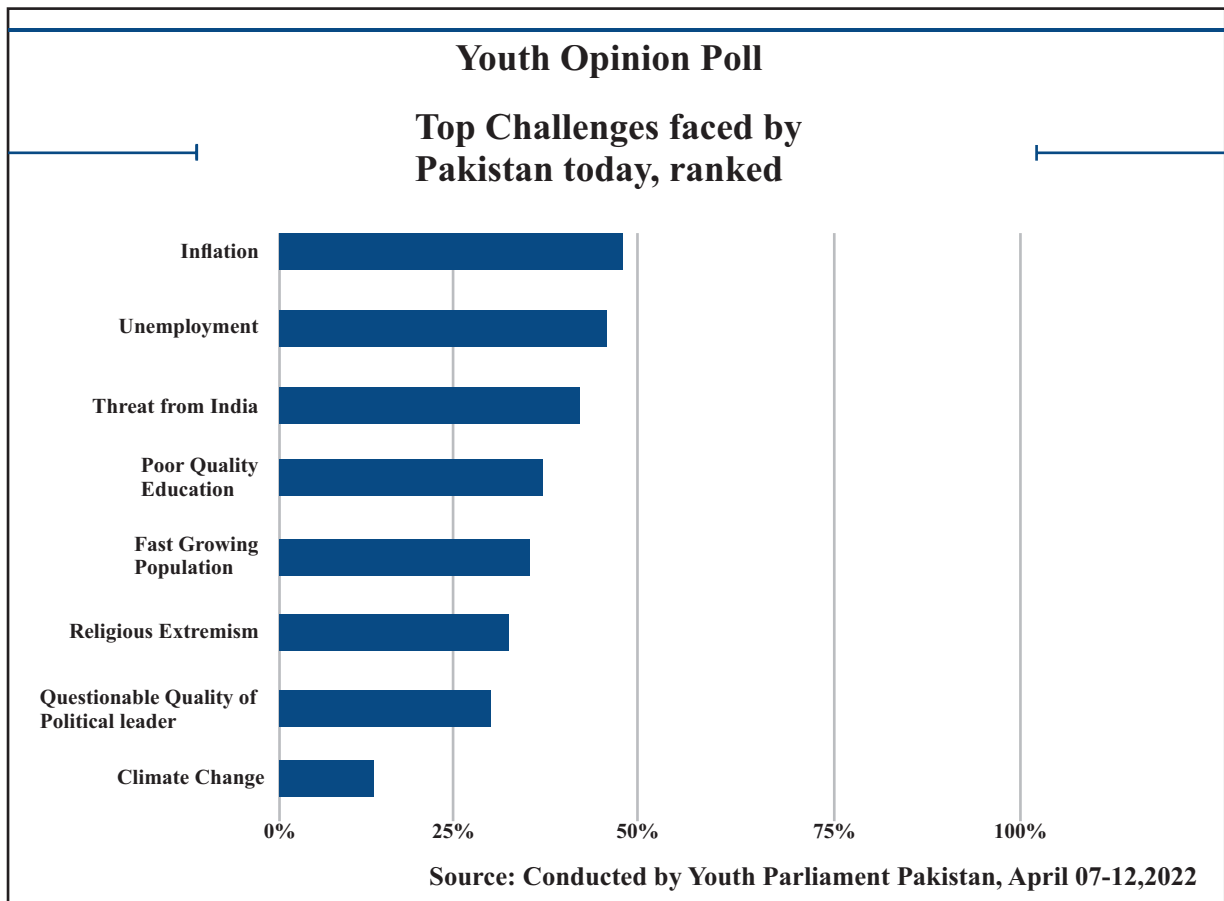
Demographics: Profile of Respondents (n=422)

Province/Territory	Number (%) of Respondents	Share in population (Census 2017)
Punjab	234 (55.5%)	53.92%
Sindh	73 (17.3%)	23.04%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	65 (15.4%)	17.09%
Balochistan	25 (5.9%)	5.94%
Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)	13 (3.1%)	-
Gilgit - Baltistan (GB)	5 (1.2%)	-
Overseas Pakistanis	7 (1.7%)	-

Socio-economic Profile of Respondents

Breakdown		
Gender		297 (70.38%)
	Male	
	Female	125 (29.62%)
Education		
	Less than Bachelors	87 (20.62%)
	Bachelors and more	335 (79.38%)
Employment Status		
	Employed	141 (33.40%)
	Not Employed	281 (66.60%)

Q. What are the top challenges faced by Pakistan today? Please assign a number to the following in order of priority; 1 for the greatest challenge; 2 for the next serious challenge and so on.

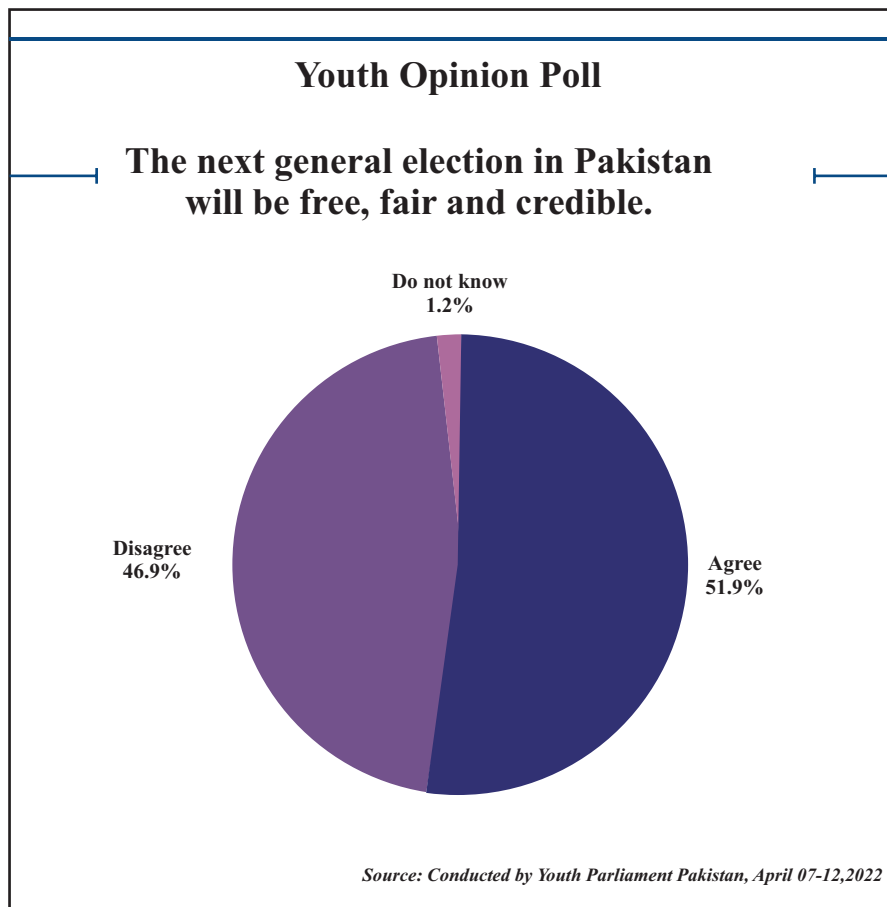


Top 8 challenges as per youth respondents (% of all respondents)

1. Inflation (48.7%)
2. Unemployment (45.6%)
3. Threat from India (42.7%)
4. Poor Quality of Education (36.3%)
5. Fast Growing Population of the Country (35.1%)
6. Religious Extremism (31.6%)
7. Questionable Quality of Political Leadership (29.9%)
8. Climate Change (15.4%)

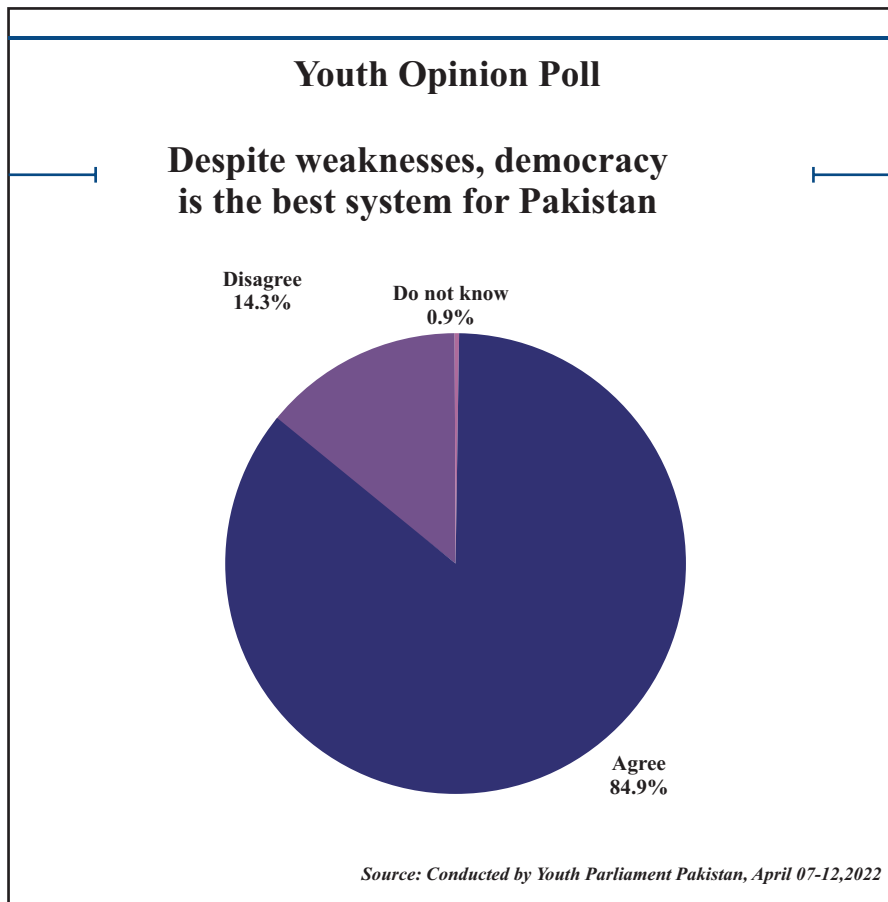
48.7% young respondents believe that inflation is the biggest challenge facing Pakistan, followed by unemployment (45.6%), threat from India (42.7%) and the least important challenge is Climate change (15.4%). The question was put forward to them in order to seek their views and perspectives regarding the challenges be it economic, social or political faced by Pakistan and how they can be prioritized to be tackled by the government in terms of their importance.

Q. How strongly do you believe that the next general election in Pakistan will be free, fair and credible?



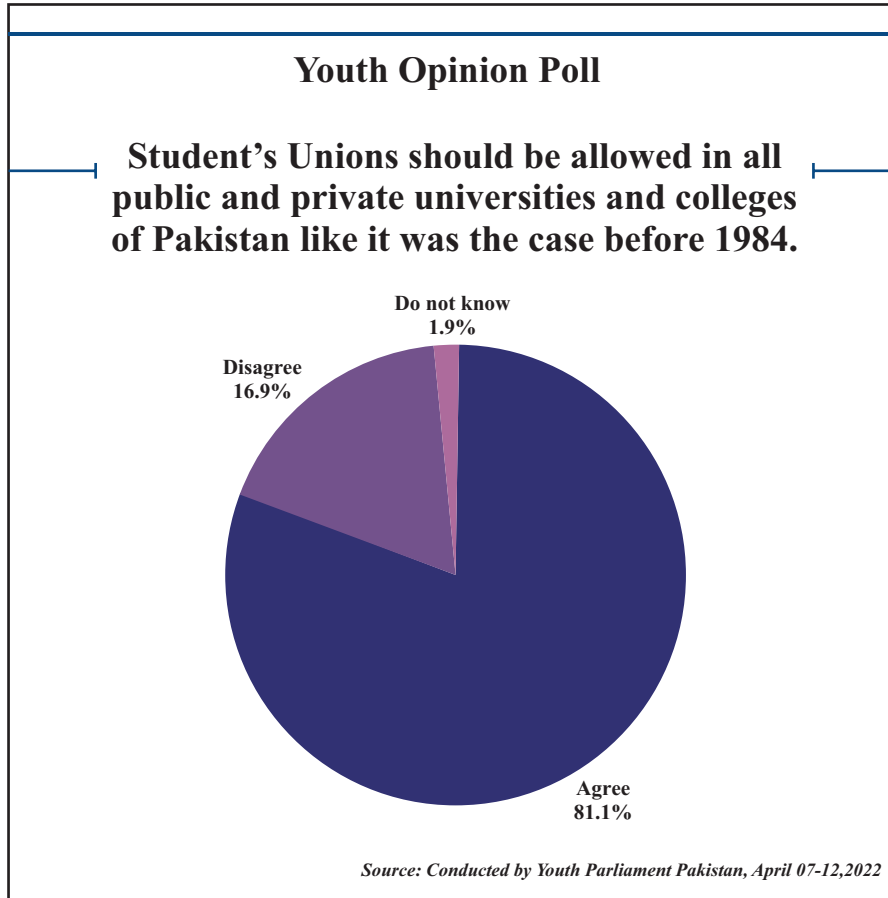
The above question aimed to seek the input of youth regarding the credibility and fairness of the electoral system in Pakistan, to which 51.9% of the respondents strongly believed that the next general elections in Pakistan will be free, fair and credible while 46.9% believed that they will not be free and fair and 1.2% said that they do not know about it at all.

Q. How strongly do you agree that, despite weaknesses, democracy is the best system for Pakistan?



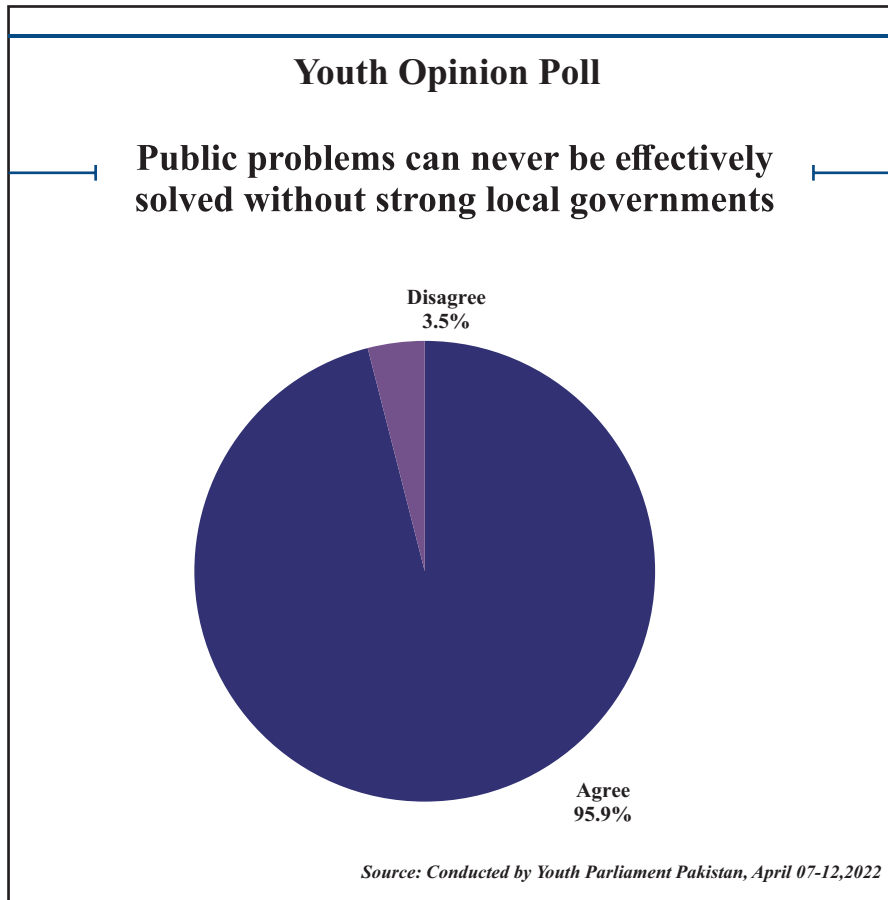
Since its formation in 1947, Pakistan has persistently faced multiple challenges in continuing democracy and democratic practices in the country, with no sitting Prime Minister ever completing a full five-year term. This survey question asked the respondents to provide their input on whether democracy is the best system in Pakistan to which a large majority of 84.9% agree with the statement that democracy is the best system for Pakistan while 14.3% disagreed with the statement.

Q. How strongly do you agree that Students' Unions be allowed in all public and private universities and colleges of Pakistan like it was the case before 1984?



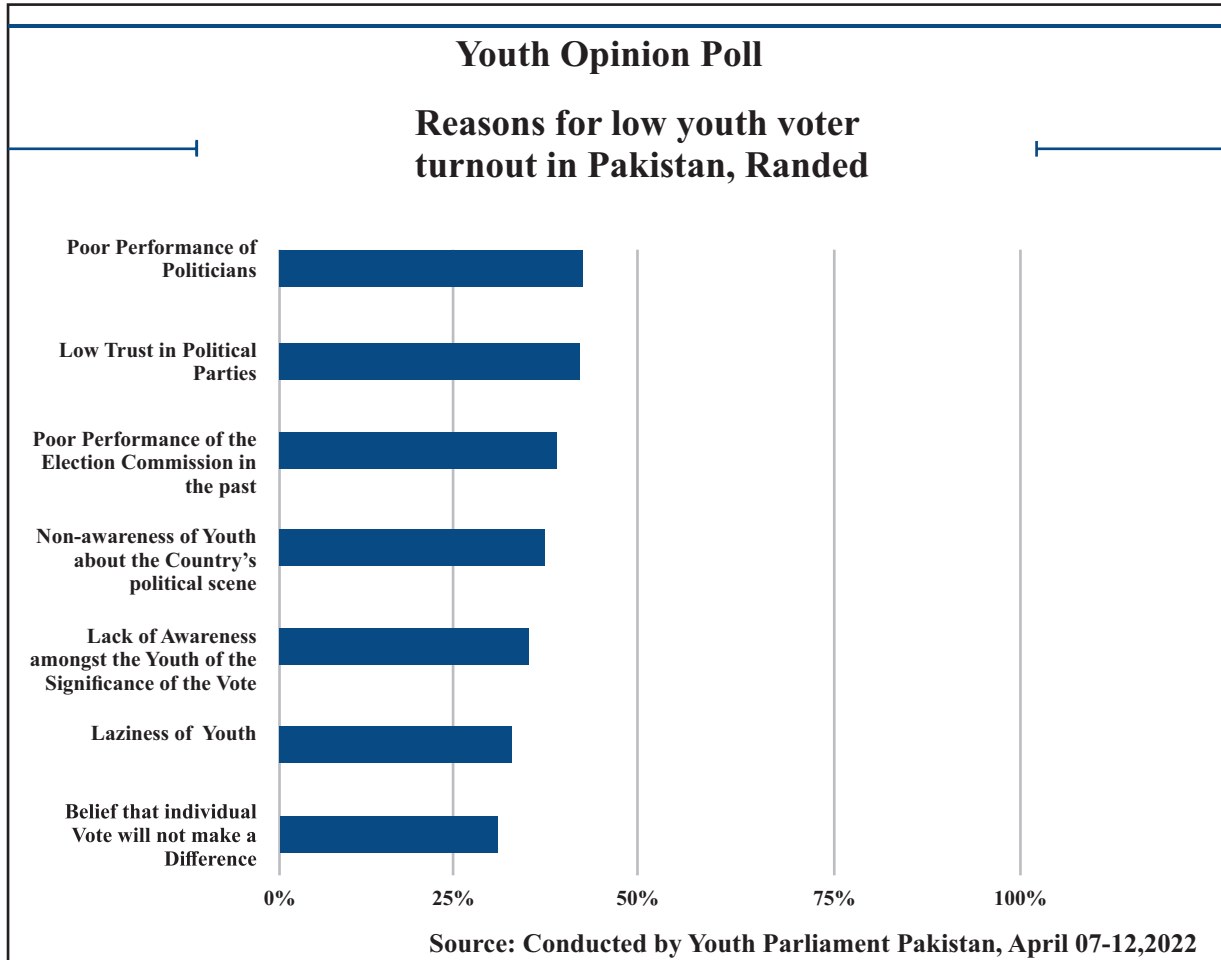
The 'Sindh Students Unions Act, 2022' recently passed by the Provincial Assembly of Sindh is aimed at promoting the rights of students and youngsters in Pakistan. To inquire whether the youth believe in the potential of the students' unions in higher educational institutions, a question was asked to them to which a significant 81.1% of the respondents said that they agree regarding the revival of student unions in public and private universities and institutes, 16.9% disagreed and said they are against student unions and 1.9% said that they do not know.

Q. 'Public problems can never be effectively solved without strong local governments' How strongly do you agree or disagree with the above statement?



The lack of effective local governments across the country is another weak link in Pakistan's system of democratic governance. To ask the youth respondents about the effectiveness of local governments, this question was framed to which 95.9% of the respondents agreed that strong local governments are needed to effectively resolve public problems and only 3.5% believed otherwise.

Q. Exit polls in the past several general elections in Pakistan indicate that youth voter turnout is extremely low and much lower than the overall voter turnout and very low compared to Indian youth voter turnout. What, in your opinion, are the reasons for this low youth voter turnout in Pakistan? Please assign priority to the following possible reasons i.e. 1 for the most important reason; 2 for the next important reason and so on:

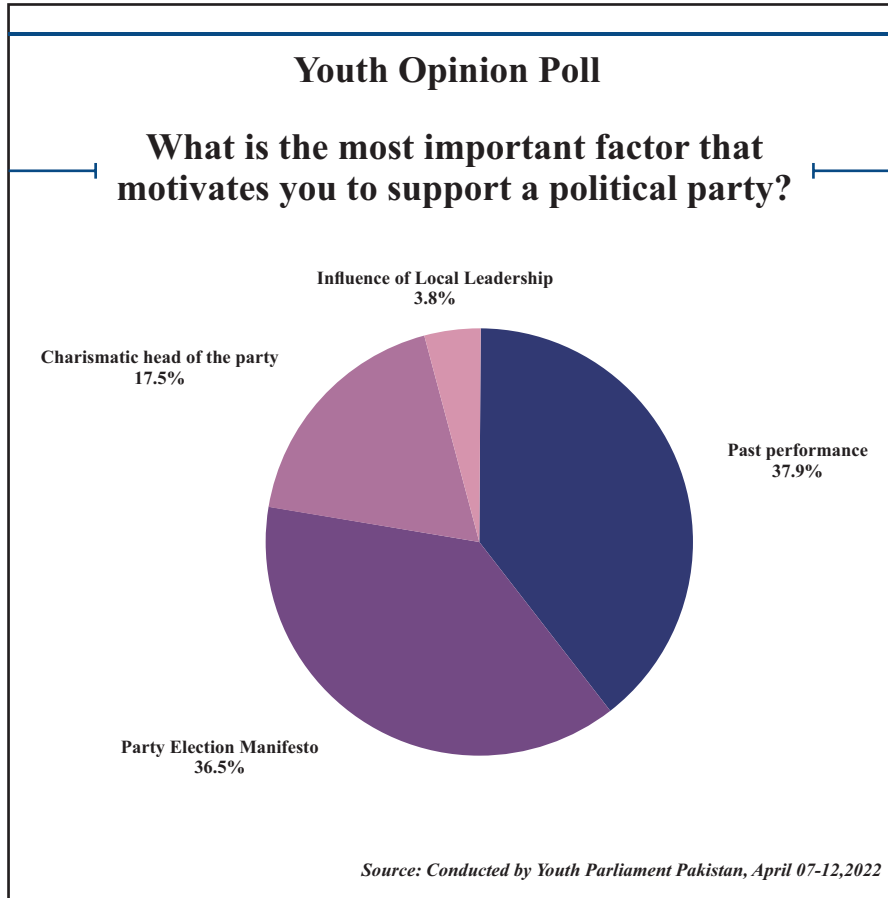


Top 7 reasons for a Low Youth Voter Turnout as per Youth Respondents (% of all respondents)

1. Poor Performance of Politicians (42.3%)
2. Low Trust in Political Parties (42%)
3. Poor Performance of the Election Commission in the past (37.5%)
4. Non-awareness of Youth about the Country's political scene (36.8%)
5. Lack of Awareness amongst the Youth of the Significance of the Vote (33.7%)
6. Laziness of Youth (33.3%)
7. Belief that Individual Vote will not make a Difference (32.5%)

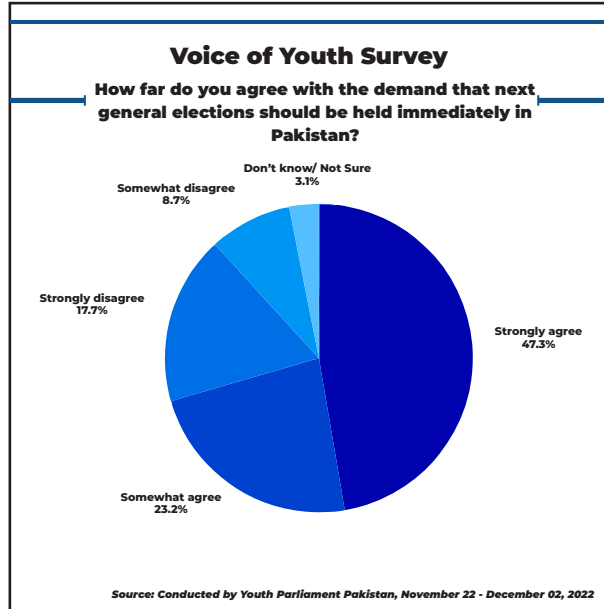
The role of youth in the electoral process of Pakistan has remained persistently low in the previous decades. Therefore, to encourage the youth to exercise their voting rights and participate in the elections more frequently in order to bring a democratic change in Pakistan, this survey question was framed to which 42.3% of the respondents said that the poor performance of politicians is the most important reason, while a large majority (32.5%) believed that the belief that Individual Vote will not make a Difference is the least important reason that contributes to our low youth voter turnout.

Q. What is the most important factor that motivates you to support a political party?



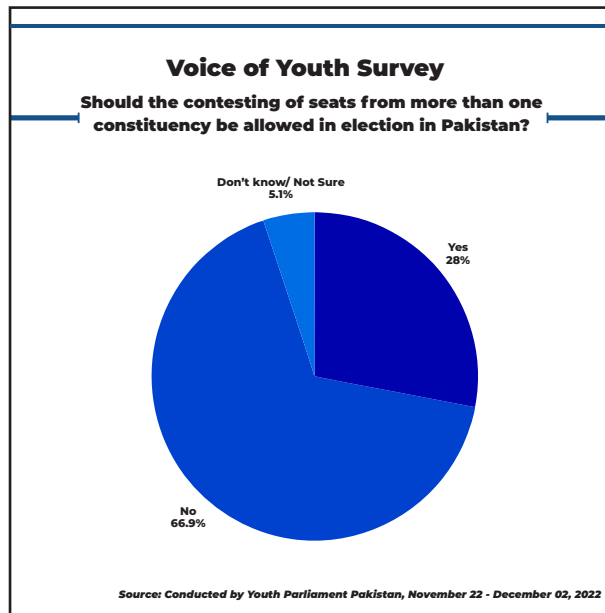
Pakistan's political parties are increasingly turning to social media to engage with the public on policy issues, to seek the input of the youth while engaging with these parties and showing their interest in any of the parties, we asked this question to which 37.9% of the respondents supported political parties on the basis of their past performance, 36.5% based it on the Party Election Manifesto while 17.5% were motivated due to its charismatic head of the party.

Q. How far do you agree with the demand that the next general elections should be held immediately in Pakistan?



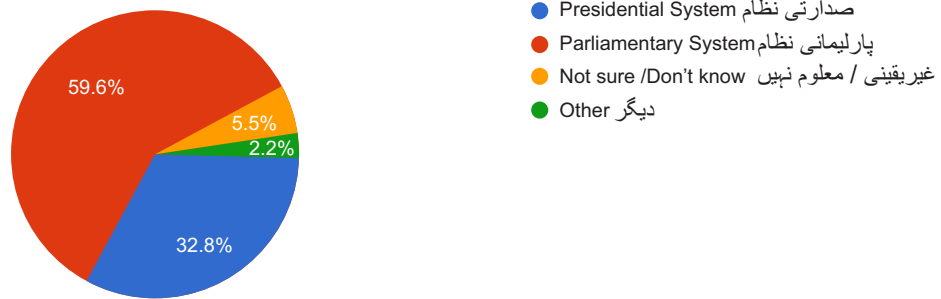
70.5% of the respondents agreed with the demand for holding the next general elections immediately while 26.4% disagreed and 3.1% were not sure.

Q. Should the contesting of seats from more than one constituency be allowed in the election in Pakistan?



66.9% said contesting from more than one constituency should not be allowed by law while 28% believed that this practice should be allowed and continued and 5.1% did not have an opinion

Q. Does the Presidential or Parliamentary system of governance suit Pakistan better?



A clear majority of respondents (59.6%) favour the parliamentary system over the presidential system (32.8%) for Pakistan. This could reflect several reasons, primarily based on the country's political history and current context. Pakistan has mainly operated under a parliamentary system since its independence, except for certain periods of military rule which resembled a presidential system.

Q. Did the quality of democracy in Pakistan improve or decline in Pakistan in 2022?



According to the survey, a significant majority of respondents (77.6%) believe that the quality of democracy in Pakistan declined in 2022.

