

TURNOUT: Upbeat and on the Upswing

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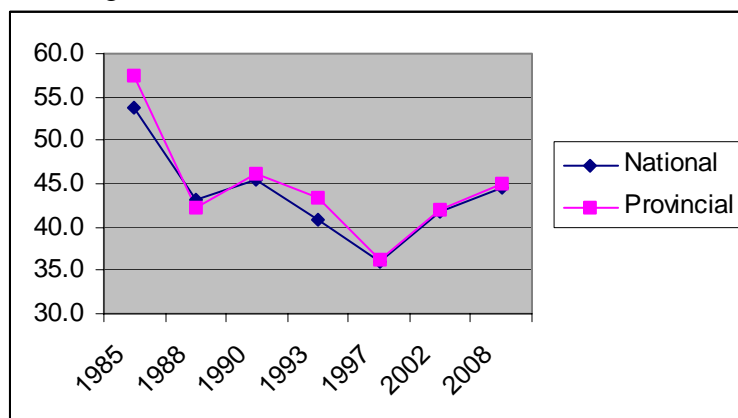
Voter turnout is generally regarded as a barometer of political participation. High turnout rates usually signify popular interest and public confidence in the electoral system. The 2008 polls were the second successive elections in Pakistan that saw an increase in voter turnouts – up to 45 per cent compared with 42 per cent in 2002. This is good news for those who believe that political changes should be brought about through the electoral process. But the fact that around 55 per cent of the registered voters did not vote shows the distance that must be covered. Moreover, detailed analysis of voter registration and turnout rates raises a number of issues about fairness and representation.

Turnout trends

Figure 1 shows the trend in the turnout rates in general elections since 1985. National and provincial election have moved in tandem, particularly since 1997 when polls for both levels of government have been held on the same day. The general picture up to 1997 was one of declining turnout rates. The massive decline between 1985 and 1988 was attributed to the disqualification of registered voters who did not possess national identity cards. Apart from the small recovery between 1988 and 1990 the turnout rate continued to decline until it reached an historic low of 36 per cent in the 1997 elections.

Pakistan's trend was in line a majority of the countries that had experienced falling turnout rates in the 1990s. Since 1997 Pakistan has rejoined its South Asia neighbours that bucked international trends and experienced rising turnout rates in the recent period. But Pakistan at 45 per cent still has a long way to go before it catches up with Bangladesh and India where turnout rates were in the 70 and 60 per cent ranges respectively.

Figure 1: Voter Turnout Trends – 1985 to 2008



Source: Dawn Election Cell Data

Special factors in 2008

Several factors were expected to affect turnout in 2008. Even before the assassination of Benazir Bhutto it was expected that the return from exile of the leaders of the two mainstream opposition parties was going to invigourate the electoral process. The 27 December tragedy effectively put an end to the election campaign but it was thought to lead to a higher turnout through a sympathy wave for the PPP. On the negative side, however, fears of election-day violence were thought to dampen popular enthusiasm for voting. Then there was the call for a boycott on the part of the APDM, the lawyers’ organizations, and sections of civil society. Finally, the wide expectation of polls rigging might have led to voter apathy.

Table 1: Turnout rates, by province or federal territory

	Turnout per cent 2002	Turnout per cent 2008
Pakistan	42	45
Islamabad	51	50
Punjab	46	49
Sindh	38	45
Balochistan	30	31
NWFP	36	34
FATA	25	27

Source: Dawn Election Cell Data

The regional breakdown of turnout rate (Table 1) confirms a general increase across the board compared with 2002. There are two main exceptions – Islamabad and NWFP. It is possible to analyze election data also with reference to ethnic segments. A constituency is defined as being in a Punjabi segment if it is located in a district where 60 per cent or more of the population reported Punjabi as its mother tongue. A segment where no language enjoys a 60 per cent plus majority is considered as being “heterogenous”. Table 2 shows that all ethnic segments except the Pushto-speaking ones saw increases in turnout rates.

Table 2: Turnout rates, Ethnic segments

	Turnout per cent 2002	Turnout per cent 2008
Punjabi	46	49
Sindhi	39	43
Pushto	32	31
Saraiki	47	47
Balochi	33	37
Urdu	38	59
Others	39	41
Heterogeneous	41	45

Source: Dawn Election Cell Data

The decline in the turnout rate in Islamabad and NWFP, and in the Pushto-speaking segments may be due to the boycott campaign, and the fear of violence, particularly in the latter. But the changes are relatively small. Moreover, in Islamabad and NWFP, and in the Pushto-speaking segments voter registration had increased by over 20 per cent since 2002. The proportion of the voting age population that actually voted

probably increased despite a small decline in the turnout rate. The fact that the turnout rate in FATA increased from 25 to 27 per cent also suggests that the fear of election-day violence may not have been a major factor in dissuading people from voting.

When the PML(N) joined the electoral fray the APDM boycott was effectively limited to NWFP and Balochistan. This was due to the MMA split into pro and anti-boycott camps, and full support to the boycott camp on the part of Baloch and Pashtun nationalist parties in Balochistan. The small decline in voter turnout rates in NWFP might be attributed to the split in the MMA. In Balochistan, however, the turnout rate increased slightly. In the Balochi-speaking segments it actually increased from 33 to 37 per cent.

The large increase in the turnout rate in Sindh – from 38 to 45 per cent – might be attributed to the sympathy wave emanating from the assassination of PPP chairperson Benazir Bhutto. Closer scrutiny of data from various ethnic segments reveals, however, that the increase in the turnout rate in Sindhi-speaking segments, where the sympathy wave was expected to be the strongest was a mere 4 per cent points. The high overall Sindh turnout rate was quite largely due to a massive rise – from 38 to 59 per cent – in the turnout rate in the Urdu-speaking segments. There is no obvious political explanation for this massive increase.

On balance it appears that parties that mobilized their voters and supporters – despite all the fears and apprehensions – guessed the public mood correctly. By actively putting up contest on the day – polling station by polling station – they probably blunted the effects of rigging. The boycott campaign had a relatively small effect – if that – on voter turnouts in the NWFP. The MMA's loss cannot be attributed simply to the staying at home of its Jamaat-e-Islami constituents. The Baloch voters also participated in the elections despite the absence of the nationalist parties from the field.