

## ELECTORAL POSTERS IN PAKISTAN: A REFLECTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY OR POPULISM

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### Abstract

*This article examines how electoral posters in Pakistan function as complex visual texts reflecting and constructing national identity, ideological narratives, and populist appeals. While posters are often viewed as peripheral campaign artifacts, this study argues they play a central role in shaping voter perceptions, especially within a hybrid democratic context marked by high visual literacy but low textual context. This study seeks the answers to question: to what extent do electoral posters in Pakistan reflect national identity, ideology or populism? The study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach combining Cognitive Metaphor Theory, Visual Semiotics, and Critical Discourse Analysis. Twelve iconic posters from four major political parties (PPP, PML-N, PTI, Jamaat-e-Islami) were purposively sampled and analysed to decode how visual and textual strategies co-produce political meaning.*

*Findings reveal that posters rarely express a single theme: they blend national symbols (flag, Quran, lion cricket bat), cognitive metaphors (Leader as Saviour, Change as Rebirth), and emotionally charged slogans to simplify complex ideologies into accessible, persuasive narratives. PPP and PML-N posters foreground national identity and developmental nationalism; Jamaat-e-Islami's posters articulate an explicit ideological vision linking faith and governance; while PTI posters embody populist anti-elite discourse, visually framing Imran Khan as a heroic agent of moral cleansing. By integrating visual and textual analysis, the article demonstrates that electoral posters are not passive reflections of political culture but active rhetorical tools that construct legitimacy, mobilize support, and shape democratic imagination. The study contributes to new research by offering an empirically grounded, theoretically informed analysis of visual politics in South Asia, and by showing how posters serve as overlapping sites of national identity, ideology, and populism.*

**Key words:** Electoral posters, Visual rhetoric, National identity, Political ideology, Populism, Cognitive Metaphor Theory, Visual semiotics, Critical discourse analysis, Political communication

### Introduction

Elections in Pakistan, like many evolving democracies, are not merely institutional procedures to choose representatives, but deeply cultural performances where text, images, and symbols converge to shape collective memory, identity, and political behavior. Among these, electoral posters stand out as a unique form of visual rhetoric fusing language, imagery, and symbolic representation to persuade, mobilize, and define political identities. Although, it is frequently dismissed as ordinary street images, posters in fact are a place where national identity, political ideology, and populist discourse actually meet and compete during election campaign season (Dadi, 2007; Sahar, Azam, & Farid, 2025; Nawaz et al., 2024).

Electoral posters in the Pakistani context have been used in a dual role. To begin with, they can be used as reflectors of aspiring national imagination: the pictures of founding fathers, flags, religious symbols, national colors, and everything contribute to the creation of the image of unity and national identity. Second, they have strategic values where parties use them to formulate ideological narratives, personalize politics and transformed the complicated

grievances into visual metaphors slogans to attract and manipulate political emotions of people (Sahar et al., 2025; Nawaz et al., 2024). Such duality positions of the electoral posters not only affects as campaign artefacts but as political texts reproducing politics into the relationship between the voters and political actors, as influencing the perceptions of citizens concerning leaders, policies and the state at large.

According to scholars like Iftikhar Dadi (2007), the poster culture of Pakistan needs to be comprehended as being homogenous in the broader field of popular visual culture, where there is co-existence of contestation and repetition. The symbol of animal in posters such as the lion and tiger do not only represent strength but also incorporate emerging masculinity and power into political linguistics of our daily lives. Dadi's ethnographic examination of Karachi posters on politics between 1988 and 1999 conveys evidence to show the way in which these visuals took place in an interrelation interaction with the urban civic life, showing hegemonic discourses as well as fluid antagonistic narratives. Posters are therefore doing more than what they are useful at the particular election: they encode more subtle cultural recipes regarding leadership, masculinity and power.

To contribute to this recent academic successes note the tactic of implementing cognitive metaphors to seemingly manipulate the voter perception on the lower, more primal level by means of posters (Sahar et al., 2025). Sahar and coauthors explain the processes through which candidates are made up as saviours, guardians or reformers by means of graphological component of the ads, such as color schemes, typography and imagery, on the Cognitive Metaphor Theory introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In order to provide an example of it, the posters showing a leader illuminated in the light on the dark background will stimulate the metaphors of rebirth and hope and identify the candidate with the national rebirth. Once these metaphorical frames are brought into the forefront, such frames reduce the clutter on the minds of the voters to decode the political messages, especially in a low-literacy society (Forceville, 1996; Sahar et al., 2025).

Together with visual metaphors, a language itself turns into an ideological tool of construction. By assuming the socio-cognitive model introduced by Van Dijk (1998), Nawaz et. al (2024) discover the defining in-group/out-group dichotomies suggested in the slogans like the one used by the Naya Pakistan and the Vote ko Izzat Do that, subsequently, creates the party as the sole provider of the national values and justice. They are creating a steady ideological discourse but these slogans alone would not suffice along with posters, colors, symbols. Here it is the context of where one can relate to the language of slogan to be reinforced with incorporation of imagery of posters that augment the emotional recognition as well as the legitimacy of political messages (Nawaz et al., 2024; Jowett & O donnell, 2014).

Nevertheless, there is a development of populism, which caused complexities to such a visual expression. Malik, Noreen, Nasim (2025) are of the view that the populist politics in Pakistan and the most effective spokesmen thereof are PTI who do have many visuals and slogans as a way of mobilization of the people against the corrupt elite. Naturally, this form of posters decontextualizes complex issues of policy-making into black and white anecdotes. Such visual clues as the cricket bat and the PTI logo are not merely a brand; this is a highly populist identity marker, branded with anti-elitist values in the visual field of mostly banal visual culture. As much as this method can awaken the enthusiasm of the masses, there is the risk that the democratic nature of things would be victimized due to increased polarization and undermining the institutional legitimacy (Malik et al., 2025; Mudde, 2019).

Lastly, according to the reports and journalistic accounts of observers, posters and the use of the electoral symbol also played a functional purpose in low-literate Pakistan (RFE/RL, 2024; EU EOM, 2018). The symbols such as the arrow, lion, and bat make the voters recognize and

cater to them, and yet, they come to be so strongly associated with the party identities it turns into a political asset of high emotional value instead of being a neutralized symbol. Collectively, these ideas would indicate that electoral posters in Pakistan are not simple ephemera rather they are the complicated artifacts on which the national identity, political ideology and populism align and threaten. They internalize, duplicate and occasionally subvert hegemonic discourses to form the perception of citizens of the country, its rulers and themselves. By discussing posters as visual rhetoric, using means of metaphors, symbols, and slogans, this research study can place it among the wider discussions about the way political communication builds belongingness, legitimacy, and exclusion (Scammell, 2015; Entman, 1993).

This paper thus poses the question: Is it that in Pakistan, the electoral posters are simply instruments of campaign, or are they instruments of national identity, ideological discourse and populism? The author intends to provide the critical discussion of posters as reflectors and creators of the disputed democratic imaginations of Pakistan by relying on cognitive stylistics, critical discourse analysis, and visual semiotics.

### Literature Review

Study of electoral posters in the context of political communication and visual culture has developed in the course of the last thirty years, shifting away from the aesthetics of campaigning descriptions towards the theoretically informed analyses of identity, ideology and populism. This review describes this development and especially about politics in Pakistan.

Early scholarly writing Iftikhar Dadi (2007) saw a change of direction in the study of Pakistani elections posters. Dadi (2003) employed the analysis of political posters in the city of Karachi between 1988 and 1999 to demonstrate how the deployment of visual motifs such as symbols, animal figures (lions, tigers) as well as nationalistic symbols participated in hegemonic discourse constructions and counter discourses. Then it was further elaborated using this cultural perspective that in a more political communication sense, Scammell (2015) and Jowett & Donnell (2014) reminded about the rhetorical purposes of posters, such as making the ideologies that are complex to understand look simple, stimulating emotions, and validating visual imagery as a lasting mental association. The reasons why visuals still take central stage in an ever-more more digital campaign are reflected in their frameworks. This argument was taken further in a theoretical argument by Forceville (1996), who suggested that the pictorial metaphors used in advertising can be used to influence the perceptions of the audience since pictorial metaphors can convert abstract concepts into concrete, familiar imagery.

In the election poster analysis in Sahar, Azam, & Farid (2025), they presented the case of the graphology and use of metaphors and color palette to create the image of the leaders as those in charge or undertaking reconstruction. Their application of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) depicted a way candidates could be viewed by the voter in terms of culturally recognizable concepts. In parallel with visual investigations, Nawaz et al. (2024) examined campaign slogans, and explained the way they create the in-group/out-group relations and help strengthen the party-based sense of nationhood with the help of Van Dijk socio-cognitive model. Relatedly, these slogans are textural, though synergistically effective with posters to implant ideological and populist messages on the public discourse.

Visual analysis has been done in relation to the emergence of populism in Pakistan, especially related to PTI. Malik, Noreen, & Nasim (2025) further claimed that posters such as the cricket bat had been turned into a populist identity marker, which helped to rally against the elite, yet endangered democratic standards through polarization and a declining restraint on political activity provided by institutions. Situational use of posters and low-literacy strengths are reported on observers and implemented studies. As an example, EU Election Observation

Mission (2018) and RFE/RL (2024) highlighted that the posters use symbols (e.g., arrow, lion, bat) that help voters to recognize them, maintain participation and consequently, turn into politically charged resources associated with an emotional component. Equally, Norris (2014) has claimed that in an environment of low institutional trust, visuals and slogans replace the lack of information and replace the focus of the legitimacy of politics.

When combined with the other two studies, it is quite clear that the premise that the only purpose of electoral posters in Pakistan is aesthetic is a baseless one and instead they are visual texts that manifest and reproduce national identity, ideological discourse, and populist mobilization. However, although the slogans, metaphors, or symbols have been analyzed individually in the relevant studies, not many have made a cumulative analysis of how the posters were used in contemporary Pakistan to convey identity, ideology, and populism in their troubled politics. Filling this gap, the current research locates the electoral posters, where the discourses interlace, as a part of explaining how politics are put together visually in a hybrid democracy.

### Theoretical Framework

Electoral posters are campaign images; they are also rhetorical artifacts that are representative of the national identities, ideological discourses, and populist gestures with precise visual aspects and narrative strategies. This part will study four illustrative posters, one in each of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML (N)], Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). These visuals strategies can be explained and analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 1998), Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Visual Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

#### 1. Pakistan People's Party (PPP): Poster of Benazir Bhutto During 1988 election)

**Visuals elements:** image of Benazir at the center dressed in a white dupatta, background merging the three-color (red, green, black) of PPP.

**Text slogan:** *Benazir aayegi roshni layegi* (Benazir will come will bring light).

#### Cognitive Metaphor Theory:

As the leader position uses the scarf and the halo of light, visual balance connotes purity and hope. The abstract promise (metaphorical), of the state of light, metaphorically sets Bhutto as the national redeemer becoming brighter (breaking out of poverty, hopelessness and dictatorship)

#### Visual Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006):

1. Central placement, frontal gaze establish authority and connection.
  2. National identity reinforced by PPP's tricolor symbolizing federation and sacrifice
- Poster reflects national identity (as daughter of the East) and ideology of social democracy; personal charisma linked to party's historic anti-authoritarian stance (Sahar et al., 2025).

#### 2. PML (N): Poster of Nawaz Sharif (2013 election)

1. **Visual elements:** Nawaz Sharif with raised hand, background of motorway and construction cranes.

2. **Textual slogan:** "*Khidmat ko vote do*" (Vote for service).

#### Critical Discourse Analysis:

1. Language constructs Nawaz as pragmatic builder; "*service*" frames governance as performance not ideology.
2. Emphasizes economic development → modernist narrative.

#### Visual Semiotics:

1. Motorway and infrastructure images become metonymic signs of progress.
2. Green color aligns party visually with national flag → patriotism.



### **Cognitive Metaphors:**

Leader as builder: physical projects symbolize competence and vision.

### **Critical insight:**

Poster foregrounds ideology of developmental nationalism; identity of the party as guardian of economic modernization ( Scammell, 2015).

### **3. PTI: Poster of Imran Khan (2018 election)**

1. **Visual elements:** Khan holding cricket bat, dynamic pose, slogans like “*Naya Pakistan*”.

2. **Textual slogan:** “*Tabdeeli aagayi hai*” (*Change has arrived*).

### **Populism theory (Mudde, 2019):**

1. Emotive appeal: “us” (pure people) vs “them” (corrupt elite).

2. Cricket bat as populist symbol connecting Khan to youth and authenticity.

### **Cognitive Metaphor Theory:**

1. Leader as savior: dynamic posture, direct gaze constructs Khan as heroic agent of change.

2. Change as rebirth: phrase “*Naya Pakistan*” evokes cleansing, national renewal.

### **Visual Semiotics:**

Use of PTI’s red and green color palette aligns with national colors → frames change as patriotic.

### **Critical insight:**

Poster fuses populism and national identity; appeals to youth, urban middle class, and anti-elite resentment (Malik et al., 2025).

### **4. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI): Poster featuring Quran and minaret (2013 election)**

1. **Visual elements:** Quran at center, light rays, mosque minaret in background.

2. **Textual slogan:** “*Islami Pakistan, Khushhaal Pakistan*” (Islamic Pakistan, Prosperous Pakistan).

### **Critical Discourse Analysis:**

Slogan fuses religion and development; frames national identity as inseparable from Islam.

### **Visual Semiotics:**

1. Quran as anchor image symbolizes moral legitimacy.

2. Minaret and light rays signify spiritual guidance.

### **Cognitive Metaphor Theory:**

Quran as light: metaphor of divine guidance overcoming moral darkness.

### **Critical insight:**

Poster constructs ideological narrative positioning JI as guardian of authentic Islamic identity; national identity is explicitly religious (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

### **Synthesis:**

By applying these theories:

*Cognitive metaphors* explain how abstract ideas (hope, progress, faith) become emotionally resonant visuals. *Visual semiotics* decodes how design choices (color, layout, symbols) communicate ideology and identity. *Critical discourse analysis* reveals how slogans create in-group/out-group framing, populist resentment, or moral authority. Together, these posters illustrate how Pakistani parties use visuals and text to reflect and construct national identity, ideological discourse, and populist sentiment supporting the argument that posters are not mere decoration but active political texts.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method design grounded in *visual rhetorical analysis* and *critical discourse analysis* to explore how electoral posters in Pakistan reflect and construct

national identity, ideological discourse, and populist sentiment. The approach integrates Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), Visual Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and Van Dijk's (1998) socio-cognitive model of discourse to systematically analyze visual and textual elements of selected posters.

### 1. Research design and rationale

Given the study's aim to interpret *meaning-making processes* in visual political communication rather than measure frequency or causality, a qualitative design is most appropriate (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This design enables an in-depth examination of how symbols, colors, metaphors, and slogans together construct collective political meanings.

### 2. Data collection

The study focuses on four major political parties:

1. Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)
2. Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML(N)]
3. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)
4. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)

### Sampling method:

Purposive sampling of 12 posters (3 per party) from recent election cycles (2008–2024), selected for: High circulation in print and online spaces, Iconic status (e.g., posters widely reproduced or referenced in media) and representation of different thematic appeals (nationalism, ideology, populism)

Posters were sourced from: Party archives and official social media accounts, Newspaper archives (Dawn, The News).

### 3. Analytical framework

The analysis is made by using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, the study examines composition, Color symbolism, and Use of symbols (e.g., bat, lion, Quran). Applying Cognitive Metaphor Theory, the study identifies: Conceptual metaphors (e.g., *Leader as Guardian*, *Change as Rebirth*) and Emotional framing: how metaphors evoke hope, fear, or pride. Using Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the study analyzes slogans and textual elements, In-group/out-group constructions and Ideological positioning (e.g., populist "us vs them" narratives).

### Data analysis process

Each poster was first described visually (layout, colors, symbols), Slogans were transcribed and analyzed linguistically, Identified metaphors and semiotic choices were coded thematically and findings were compared across parties to trace patterns reflecting national identity, Ideology, Populism. Coding was managed manually, supplemented by qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to organize themes.

### 6. Rationale for methodological integration

Combining visual semiotics, cognitive metaphor analysis, and CDA allows the study to capture: How posters mean (visual grammar and metaphors), what they say (slogans, language) and Why they matter in ideological and populist context? This comprehensive approach ensures the study aligns directly with the research question and title, offering a nuanced understanding of how electoral posters in Pakistan simultaneously reflect and construct national identity, ideological commitments, and populist appeals.

This study set out to investigate the extent to which electoral posters in Pakistan function as visual texts reflecting and constructing national identity, ideological narratives, or populist appeals. Drawing on Cognitive Metaphor Theory, Visual Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis, the analysis of posters from PPP, PML (N), PTI, and Jamaat-e-Islami reveals that

these artifacts do more than decorate campaign landscapes; they actively shape collective perceptions and political imagination.

### 1. Posters as mirrors of national identity

Across parties, posters visually embed symbols directly tied to Pakistan's national narrative such as the national flag, Minar-e-Pakistan, and culturally resonant colors (green and white). For Example, in poster on Benazir Bhutto printed in 1988 by the PPP, it is portrayed in a frame of three colors in the background, dressed in white dupatta and the slogan, which runs Benazir aayegi, roshni layegi, appears her as a rallying point of the nation (Dadi, 2007). Light is something that is used as a metaphor to build Bhutto not simply as a political prospect but as an emblematic savior of a country coming out of authoritarian darkness. Equally, in a 2013 poster by PML (N), Nawaz Sharif placed in front of pictures of motorways. This projects a progressive development with use of modernity and they conducted this under the slogan of Khidmat ko vote do (Vote for service). Here, national identity is reframed through the lens of economic nationalism: progress and infrastructure become the modern symbols of patriotism (Nawaz et al., 2024). The visual use of green tones reinforces the party's claim to be the custodian of national development.

These examples align with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) view that visual grammar is not neutral: composition, color, and salience direct viewers toward politically desirable identities. By integrating national symbols and metaphors, posters shape a narrative where voting becomes an act of patriotic duty.

### 2. Posters as expressions of ideological narratives

Posters also reflect deeper ideological commitments beyond visual patriotism. Jamaat-e-Islami's poster from the 2013 election featuring the Quran at its center, light rays, and the slogan "*Islami Pakistan, Khushhaal Pakistan*" visually fuses faith and prosperity. According to Critical Discourse Analysis, this textual framing constructs an ideological narrative positioning Islam not only as a spiritual foundation but as a policy blueprint for national welfare. The visual metaphor QURAN AS LIGHT reinforces this message, suggesting divine guidance as a pathway to prosperity. The placement of the Quran centrally and the minaret in the background create salience, inviting viewers to see Islamic values as central to Pakistan's future (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This ideological claim is not unique to JI: observer reports (EU EOM, 2018) note that religious symbols often dominate posters in constituencies with religiously conservative electorates, linking faith and governance.

### 3. Posters as vehicles of populist sentiments

Populism becomes most visible in PTI's posters, especially during the 2018 election. A typical PTI poster shows Imran Khan holding a cricket bat, framed dynamically with the slogan "*Tabdeeli aagayi hai*" (*Change has arrived*). Here, the cricket bat transcends sport: it becomes a populist identity marker symbolizing youth, anti-elitism, and outsider authenticity (Malik, Noreen, & Nasim, 2025). Using Cognitive Metaphor Theory, LEADER AS SAVIOR and CHANGE AS REBIRTH emerge as dominant metaphors: Khan is visually framed as the agent of moral cleansing (Sahar, Azam, & Farid, 2025). The slogan's inclusive yet confrontational tone creates an in-group of "the people" and an out-group of "the corrupt elite," aligning with Mudde's (2019) definition of populism as an anti-elite discourse that claims moral representation of the true people.

Visual Semiotics also reveals how design elements—bold fonts, direct gaze portraits, and national colors—visually reinforce this populist appeal. According to observer mission reports (RFE/RL, 2024), such posters played a crucial role in mobilizing first-time voters by turning complex grievances into simplified, emotionally resonant visuals.

## Discussion and Findings

### Posters reflecting in Pakistani politics: meaning, context, and evolution

In Pakistan, electoral posters are far more than campaign accessories; they are visual artifacts deeply woven into the cultural and political fabric. Historically, posters emerged as accessible media in a low-literacy society, becoming primary tools to symbolically claim space and visibility in crowded urban landscapes (Dadi, 2007). During Karachi's democratic interlude (1988–1999), for instance, posters transformed cityscapes into contested arenas where political parties visually negotiated power, legitimacy, and identity (Dadi, 2007).

The role of posters is both practical and symbolic. Practically, they bridge literacy gaps by simplifying party identity through iconic symbols (e.g., PPP's arrow, PML (N)'s lion, and PTI's cricket bat) (RFE/RL, 2024). Symbolically, posters do more than brand parties; they embed emotional narratives, historic memory, and ideological claims into public space, turning mundane streets into dynamic arenas of political persuasion (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Observer reports reinforce this visual centrality: the EU Election Observation Mission (2018) and FAFEN note that posters remain dominant in campaign strategies, especially in peri-urban and rural constituencies where digital penetration is limited. While television and social media have grown, posters continue to provide a physical, inescapable presence — signalling party strength, resource mobilisation, and the candidate's embeddedness in local communities (Sahar, Azam & Farid, 2025).

Methodologically, posters combine visual semiotics (images, symbols, color) and textual discourse (slogans, party names), creating hybrid messages that resonate on cognitive and affective levels (Forceville, 1996; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Scholars argue that posters operate by *foregrounding* salient features bold fonts, leader portraits, repeated symbols ensuring they stick in voter memory, especially during short campaign periods (Sahar et al., 2025). Beyond persuasion, posters function as political performances: by flooding spaces with images, parties demonstrate organisational capacity, claim territory, and construct legitimacy (Scammell, 2015). This is especially critical in Pakistan's competitive and often polarized multiparty environment, where visual presence becomes a statement of power itself. Thus, posters in Pakistani elections are deeply political acts: they project national stories, mobilise ideological symbols, and personalise political charisma shaping not only how parties communicate, but how voters imagine the nation and their place within it. The clearest functions of electoral posters in Pakistan are their role in reflecting and constructing national identity. By using national symbols, historical figures, and shared cultural references, posters visually articulate what it means to be part of the Pakistani nation (Dadi, 2007).

Observer reports confirm these patterns: EU EOM (2018) noted that symbols were not randomly decorative but carefully chosen to resonate with voters' sense of national belonging. Thus, posters do not passively mirror nationalism, they actively construct it. By combining culturally resonant images, slogans, and metaphors, they help voters imagine what the nation is, who belongs, and which party claims to protect its identity (Norris, 2014).

While posters reflect national identity, they simultaneously project ideological positions and, increasingly, populist appeals especially evident in the visual strategies of PTI and Jamaat-e-Islami. PTI's 2018 posters epitomize populist visual rhetoric. Imran Khan appears holding a cricket bat, dynamically posed, with slogans like "*Tabdeeli aagayi hai*" (Change has arrived) became populist metaphor against elite (Malik, Noreen & Nasim, 2025). The slogan constructs a binary pure people vs corrupt ruling class, aligning with Mudde's (2019) definition of populism as moral anti-elitism. Jamaat-e-Islami's posters, reflect ideological rather than populist appeals: centering Quran, mosque, and the slogan "*Islamic Pakistan*", they position governance within a religious framework. Here, ideology is explicit: the party as protector of



moral order, linking faith to policy. PML (N)'s posters, with slogans like "*Vote for service*", embed developmental nationalism and modernization as ideological pillars (Nawaz et al., 2024). The motorways and metro buses become symbols of a practical, technocratic vision. These visual strategies populist or ideological strongly influence voter perceptions, particularly in low-literacy constituencies where symbols and slogans often replace lengthy manifestos. In Pakistan's hybrid democracy, where institutional trust is contested, posters become powerful tools to emotionally mobilize, polarize, and simplify constructing ideological identity and populist sentiment that go beyond policy to shape belonging and legitimacy.

### Conclusion

What this paper attempted to investigate was a question which on the surface seems easy but actually brings out a lot of insight: How far are the electoral posters in Pakistan shaped by the considerations of national identity, ideological discourse, etc. or mass appeals? The title (i.e. Electoral Posters in Pakistan: A Reflection of) itself triggered the inquiry. National Identity, Ideology or Populism" - encouraging a consideration that the poster was more than campaign decorations, but as visual texts of complex meaning actively constructed in the course of politics. Cognitive Metaphor Theory, Critical Discourse, Visual Semiotics a qualitative multi-method design was used in the study to analyse, iconic posters of four large parties selected in terms of their symbolical depth, political saliency and perceived self-sufficiency including PPP, PML(N), PTI and Jamaat-e-Islami. As the analysis shows, in Pakistan, electoral posters act both as a reflection and as a construction of national identity, ideology and populism not as categories that are discrete but as overlapping and debated narratives.

Among the findings that emerge strongest point that poster in the politics represent national identity. Parties use visual imagery to put leaders in the place of national destiny as intertwined personal charismatic affects and shared symbols such as national flag, green and white palettes, historic places of interest such as Minar-e-Pakistan. An example is the poster of Benazir Bhutto in 1988 of the PPP, which was in the middle, white dupatta, the tricolour background, the slogan, Benazir aayegi, roshni layegi on the left-hand side of the candidature list visually establishes the ideology and power of the tricolour. This expressed Benazir as a unifier and savior of the post dictatorship era (Dadi, 2007). Posters of PML (N) place Nawaz Sharif in front motor way, metro buses represents national pride in developing infrastructure and a process of modernization. In this case, national identity is framed in nationalism which shows how vote is something of an act of progressive patriotism based on modernity (Nawaz et al., 2024).

Posters are not merely the reflection of nationalism, but they implicitly contain ideological messages providing the electorate with simplified emotions-laden images of what the country needs to become. The posters of Jamaat-e-Islami have a good amount of Quran, minarets of mosques, and such slogans as Khushhaal Pakistan, Islami Pakistan. In this case, ideology is clearly expressive in true sense: here national prosperity is directly connected with the welfare of citizens in and Islamic state. Cognitive metaphor of Quran is used as light bearing for the guidance of nation. Such depictions connote moral order as the course to common good. Posters of PML(N), in their turn, form a pragmatic modernization ideology. The slogan of the campaign, Khidmat ko vote do (Vote for service), changes the emphasis on identity from abstract identity concrete delivery of services with modern progressive outlook. In both cases, posters do ideological work by visually reducing complex programmes into familiar symbols and slogans transforming politics into emotionally resonant narratives of service, faith, or competence.

The rise of populism in Pakistan finds its strongest visual expression in PTI's posters, especially in 2018. Imran Khan appears as a dynamic, direct-gazing figure, often holding a

cricket bat. The slogan “*Tabdeeli aagayi hai*” (Change has arrived) frames the campaign as a moral rebirth. According to Cognitive Metaphor Theory, *Leader as Saviour* and *Change as Cleansing* metaphors transform complex anti-corruption narratives into simple, emotive frames (Sahar et al., 2025). Visual Semiotics explains how bold fonts, national colors, and direct gaze amplify charisma, while Critical Discourse Analysis shows the populist construction of “us” (the people) against “them” (the corrupt elite). Such visuals helped mobilise first-time voters and urban youth, demonstrating posters’ power to channel dissatisfaction into mass political identity.

By integrating visual semiotics, and cognitive metaphor analysis, the study reveals not just *what* posters say, but *how* they persuade through metaphors, spatial design, and emotionally coded symbols. This approach shows posters are not static or neutral, but *dynamic sites where national identity, ideology, and populism converge*. They construct legitimacy, personalise politics, and simplify ideologies into emotional cues — making them especially powerful in low-literacy, visually saturated contexts (Scammell, 2015; Forceville, 1996).

This research contributes to political communication and electoral studies by: Offering a theoretically grounded, empirical analysis of how posters reflect and construct national identity, ideology, and populism simultaneously. Extending visual rhetorical analysis to South Asian political contexts often studied only descriptively. Showing how parties use shared cultural symbols (flag, Quran, cricket) to narrate competing visions of Pakistan. Electoral posters in Pakistan are more than campaign tools: they are visual texts that reflect, reinforce, and reshape how voters imagine the nation, what ideologies guide it, and who authentically represents “the people.” In blending national identity, ideological narratives, and populist appeals, posters simplify complex politics into emotionally resonant visuals turning walls, streets, and billboards into contested canvases of democratic imagination. As Pakistan’s democracy continues to evolve, understanding these visual rhetoric is not just about art or aesthetics, but about how power, belonging, and identity are negotiated in the public eye.

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