

DEMOCRACY BY DESIGN OR DEFAULT? RETHINKING ELECTIONS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Electoral integrity is widely regarded as the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, yet in many hybrid political systems it remains contested, negotiated, and unevenly practiced. This article critically re-examines electoral integrity in Pakistan by situating elections within the broader tension between citizen choice and institutional control. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of electoral laws, institutional practices, media narratives, and post-election controversies, supplemented by secondary data from election reports and scholarly literature, the study interrogates how formal democratic procedures coexist with informal power structures. The article argues that while Pakistan's electoral framework constitutionally guarantees universal suffrage, political competition, and procedural transparency, the realization of these principles is frequently constrained by structural interventions, elite dominance, and uneven enforcement of electoral regulations. Particular attention is given to the role of the Election Commission of Pakistan, the judiciary, political parties, and media actors in shaping both the conduct and perception of elections. The findings suggest that electoral integrity in Pakistan is not simply undermined by isolated irregularities but is systematically influenced by power asymmetries that blur the boundary between democratic choice and political management. Elections thus function simultaneously as mechanisms of participation and as instruments of legitimacy for entrenched authority. By conceptualizing elections as arenas of negotiated democracy rather than purely procedural events, this study contributes to broader debates on electoral governance in transitional and hybrid regimes. The article concludes by highlighting the need for institutional reforms, normative consensus on civilian supremacy, and strengthened accountability mechanisms to move Pakistan's electoral system closer to substantive democratic integrity rather than symbolic compliance.

Keywords: Democracy, Design, Default, Election, Pakistan

Introduction

Elections occupy a central position in modern democratic theory, serving as the primary mechanism through which citizens confer legitimacy upon political authority. In ideal democratic systems, elections are expected to translate popular will into representative governance through free competition, equal participation, and institutional neutrality. However, in many contemporary political systems—often described as *hybrid*, *transitional*, or *competitive authoritarian*—elections perform a more ambiguous function. They coexist with informal power

structures, uneven rule enforcement, and elite interventions that complicate the relationship between citizen choice and democratic outcomes. Pakistan represents a compelling case of this tension, where elections are regularly held and constitutionally mandated, yet their integrity and democratic substance remain persistently contested.

Since its inception, Pakistan's political trajectory has oscillated between civilian rule and authoritarian intervention, producing an electoral system shaped as much by institutional design as by historical contingency. While the country has made significant strides toward electoral continuity—most notably since the completion of consecutive civilian terms after 2008—questions surrounding electoral credibility, fairness, and autonomy continue to dominate public and scholarly discourse. Allegations of pre-poll engineering, post-election judicialization, media manipulation, and selective enforcement of electoral laws routinely accompany election cycles, suggesting that the challenge facing Pakistan is not merely electoral malpractice but a deeper structural ambiguity in how democracy is practiced and managed.

This article engages with a fundamental question: Are elections in Pakistan the outcome of democratic design or the product of default arrangements shaped by power asymmetries? Framed differently, do elections function primarily as instruments of popular sovereignty, or have they evolved into managed processes that legitimize entrenched authority while maintaining the appearance of democratic compliance? Addressing this question requires moving beyond narrow procedural assessments of elections toward a broader understanding of electoral integrity as a negotiated and contested political process.

Electoral integrity is often defined in legalistic and procedural terms, emphasizing transparency, neutrality, and adherence to electoral laws. However, such definitions risk overlooking the informal dimensions of power that shape electoral environments in hybrid regimes. In Pakistan, the constitutional guarantee of universal suffrage and competitive politics exists alongside informal mechanisms of control exercised by political elites, state institutions, and influential non-elected actors. These dynamics complicate simplistic dichotomies between “free” and “rigged” elections, suggesting instead a continuum in which democratic procedures coexist with political management.

The role of electoral institutions is central to this tension. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), constitutionally mandated to ensure free and fair elections, operates within a politically charged environment marked by institutional contestation and public skepticism. Similarly, the judiciary has emerged as a powerful post-election arbiter, increasingly shaping electoral outcomes through legal interpretations and verdicts that extend beyond procedural oversight. Political parties, while formally committed to democratic norms, often adopt contradictory positions—invoking electoral integrity when excluded from power and downplaying irregularities when victorious. Meanwhile, media actors play a dual role as watchdogs and political participants, shaping public perceptions of electoral legitimacy through selective framing and narrative construction (Ma et al., 2024, 2025).

This article argues that electoral integrity in Pakistan cannot be understood solely through the presence or absence of electoral irregularities. Rather, it is systematically shaped by power asymmetries that blur the boundary between democratic choice and institutional control. Elections function simultaneously as arenas of participation—mobilizing citizens, enabling competition, and renewing political mandates—and as instruments of legitimacy that stabilize existing power arrangements. This dual function reflects what may be termed a form of

negotiated democracy, where electoral outcomes emerge from continuous interaction between formal rules and informal constraints.

By adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach, this study re-examines elections in Pakistan as political processes embedded within broader struggles over authority, legitimacy, and civilian supremacy. Drawing on an analysis of electoral laws, institutional practices, media narratives, and post-election controversies, the article situates Pakistan within comparative debates on electoral governance in hybrid regimes. In doing so, it challenges proceduralist assumptions that equate elections with democracy and instead foregrounds the political conditions under which elections either deepen or dilute democratic integrity.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond Pakistan. As elections increasingly serve as legitimizing tools in non-liberal and hybrid systems worldwide, understanding how democratic rituals coexist with managed outcomes becomes crucial for both theory and practice. Pakistan's experience offers valuable insights into how electoral institutions function under structural constraints and how democratic legitimacy is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

Literature Review

Classical democratic theory positions elections as the foundational mechanism through which popular sovereignty is exercised and political authority legitimized (Dahl, 1971). Free, fair, and competitive elections are assumed to provide citizens with meaningful choice and ensure vertical accountability between rulers and the ruled. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly questions this procedural understanding of democracy, arguing that elections alone are insufficient indicators of democratic quality (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski et al., 1996).

Digital technologies and social media have reshaped clientelist dynamics in Pakistani elections (Akram et al., 2021, 2022) enabling politicians to target voters with personalized goods and messaging at scale while expanding the reach of patron-client networks beyond rural face-to-face interactions (Jalalzai et al., 2025). These technological shifts have not displaced traditional clientelism but amplified its efficiency (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023, 2020), as digital platforms streamline the exchange of support for services and strengthen the visibility of political intermediaries (Abdelrady et al., 2025). Recent literature on electoral integrity advances this critique by emphasizing that the democratic value of elections depends not only on formal rules but also on the broader political environment in which elections are embedded (Norris, 2014). Norris conceptualizes electoral integrity as a multidimensional process encompassing pre-election conditions, campaign environments, polling-day procedures, and post-election adjudication. This expanded framework shifts attention from isolated instances of fraud to systemic patterns of manipulation, institutional bias, and unequal competition—an approach particularly relevant for hybrid political systems.

A substantial body of comparative literature highlights the rise of hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian practices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In such systems, elections are neither entirely free nor fully controlled; instead, they function as arenas of constrained competition. Scholars argue that elections in hybrid regimes serve dual purposes: enabling limited political participation while simultaneously legitimizing existing power structures (Schedler, 2002, 2013).

Schedler's concept of the "menu of manipulation" demonstrates how electoral integrity can be undermined without overt fraud, through subtle mechanisms such as biased institutions, legal engineering, selective enforcement, and media control. These insights challenge binary

classifications of elections as democratic or authoritarian and instead conceptualize them as managed political processes. This literature provides a critical lens for examining Pakistan's electoral system, where formal democratic continuity masks persistent informal interventions.

The role of electoral management bodies (EMBs) has received increasing scholarly attention as a key determinant of electoral integrity. Independent EMBs are often presented as safeguards against manipulation; however, comparative research suggests that formal independence does not necessarily translate into functional autonomy (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002). EMBs operate within political contexts shaped by elite pressures, legal constraints, and enforcement asymmetries (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021).

In hybrid regimes, EMBs frequently become sites of contestation rather than neutral arbiters, contributing to what Birch (2011) terms "institutionalized uncertainty." The credibility of elections thus depends not only on legal frameworks but also on enforcement consistency and public trust. Studies of judicial involvement in electoral disputes further complicate this picture, as courts increasingly function as political actors influencing post-election outcomes (Ginsburg, 2003). This literature is particularly relevant for Pakistan, where the Election Commission and judiciary play highly visible and contested roles in electoral processes.

Another strand of literature examines how elite dominance and party strategies shape electoral outcomes in non-consolidated democracies (Ramzan & Khan, 2024, 2019). Rather than acting as programmatic intermediaries between society and the state, political parties in many hybrid regimes function as elite coalitions oriented toward access to power (Kitschelt, 2000). Electoral competition thus becomes personalized and transactional, weakening ideological differentiation and accountability.

Scholars argue that when parties prioritize access to state resources over policy commitments, elections lose their deliberative function and instead reinforce existing hierarchies (Van de Walle, 2007; Nawaz et al., 2021, 2020). This perspective aligns with research on Pakistan's political system, where elite bargaining, candidate selection practices, and post-election realignments frequently overshadow voter preferences. Elections, in this sense, become instruments through which elite competition is regulated rather than mechanisms of citizen empowerment.

Beyond institutional design, the discursive construction of electoral legitimacy has emerged as an important area of inquiry. Media narratives play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of fairness, credibility, and democratic participation (Strömbäck, 2008). In hybrid regimes, media can simultaneously expose irregularities and normalize managed democracy by framing elections as inherently flawed yet inevitable (Veltmer, 2013).

Scholars emphasize that electoral integrity is not only a procedural condition but also a perceptual phenomenon, dependent on how elections are interpreted and narrated by political actors, media institutions, and civil society (Norris, Frank, & Martínez i Coma, 2014). This literature underscores the importance of examining post-election controversies, legal disputes, and public discourse as integral components of the electoral process rather than peripheral reactions.

While Pakistan-specific scholarship acknowledges recurring concerns about electoral credibility, much of the existing literature remains event-driven, focusing on individual elections rather than systemic patterns. Studies often emphasize electoral irregularities, military influence, or judicial activism without situating these factors within broader theoretical debates on hybrid regimes and negotiated democracy (Ahmed, 2013; Fair, 2015).

Comparative insights suggest that Pakistan's experience is not anomalous but reflective of a broader global trend in which elections serve as mechanisms of controlled participation. However, there remains a gap in scholarship that conceptualizes Pakistan's elections as sites of ongoing negotiation between citizen agency and institutional power rather than as failed or incomplete democratic exercises.

The reviewed literature reveals three key gaps. First, electoral integrity is often treated as a technical or legal issue rather than a political process shaped by power relations. Second, Pakistan's elections are rarely analyzed within the broader theoretical framework of hybrid regimes and managed democracy. Third, limited attention has been paid to how electoral institutions, elites, judiciary, and media collectively construct both the conduct and perception of elections.

This article addresses these gaps by reconceptualizing elections in Pakistan as arenas of negotiated democracy, where formal procedures coexist with informal controls. By integrating theories of electoral integrity, hybrid regimes, and institutional power, the study contributes to comparative debates on how elections function not merely as democratic rituals but as contested political institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the centrality of elections to democratic legitimacy, their role and meaning in hybrid political systems remain conceptually and empirically contested. In Pakistan, elections are constitutionally mandated, regularly conducted, and procedurally elaborate, yet they continue to generate persistent disputes over credibility, fairness, and civilian authority. Electoral cycles are routinely accompanied by allegations of institutional bias, pre-poll interventions, selective enforcement of electoral laws, judicialization of political outcomes, and contested media narratives. These recurring controversies point to a deeper problem that extends beyond isolated irregularities or administrative weaknesses.

The core problem lies in the ambiguous nature of electoral integrity in Pakistan, where democratic procedures coexist with informal mechanisms of political management. While formal frameworks guarantee universal suffrage and competitive participation, the realization of these principles is uneven and often constrained by power asymmetries among political institutions, elites, and non-elected actors. Elections thus operate within a tension between citizen choice and institutional control, raising fundamental questions about whether they function as mechanisms of substantive democratic representation or as instruments that confer legitimacy on entrenched authority.

Existing scholarship on Pakistan's elections has largely focused on episodic failures, legal disputes, or the role of individual institutions, without sufficiently theorizing elections as *political processes shaped by negotiated power relations*. This gap limits our understanding of how electoral integrity is systematically produced, contested, and normalized within a hybrid regime. Consequently, there is a need for an analytical framework that moves beyond procedural assessments and interrogates the structural conditions under which elections both enable participation and constrain democratic choice.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study arises from the need to reconceptualize elections in Pakistan within broader theoretical debates on electoral integrity, hybrid regimes, and democratic governance. As elections increasingly serve as the primary marker of democratic legitimacy in both domestic and international discourse, understanding how they function in practice—rather than how they are

designed in law—has become analytically urgent. Pakistan presents a particularly compelling case for such an inquiry. The country has experienced sustained electoral continuity alongside persistent institutional contestation, making it an ideal setting for examining how formal democratic procedures coexist with informal power structures. By analyzing electoral laws, institutional practices, media narratives, and post-election controversies, this study seeks to capture the multidimensional nature of electoral integrity as a negotiated process rather than a fixed outcome. Moreover, this research responds to limitations in existing literature that often treats electoral integrity as a technical or administrative issue. By situating elections within the broader political economy of power, the study emphasizes the role of institutions, elites, and discourse in shaping both the conduct and perception of elections. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of why electoral reforms have produced limited democratic dividends and why electoral disputes remain recurrent despite procedural improvements.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant theoretical, empirical, and practical importance.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, the study contributes to comparative politics by advancing the concept of **elections as arenas of negotiated democracy**. By integrating insights from electoral integrity literature and hybrid regime theory, it challenges proceduralist assumptions that equate elections with democratic substance. The study extends existing frameworks by demonstrating how electoral integrity can be simultaneously upheld in form and undermined in practice through structural power asymmetries.

Empirical Significance

Empirically, the research provides a systematic and qualitative analysis of Pakistan's electoral system that moves beyond event-specific accounts. By examining institutional behavior, legal frameworks, and discursive practices across electoral cycles, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how elections are conducted, contested, and legitimized. This contributes to a more robust empirical grounding of Pakistan within comparative debates on electoral governance in transitional and hybrid regimes.

Policy and Practical Significance

From a policy perspective, the findings have direct implications for electoral reform, institutional accountability, and democratic strengthening initiatives. By identifying the structural factors that constrain electoral integrity, the study offers insights for policymakers, electoral authorities, and civil society actors seeking to move beyond symbolic compliance toward substantive democratic reform. It underscores the importance of institutional autonomy, normative consensus on civilian supremacy, and consistent enforcement of electoral laws as prerequisites for credible elections.

Broader Comparative Relevance

Finally, the study's significance extends beyond Pakistan. As elections increasingly function as legitimizing instruments in hybrid and non-liberal regimes worldwide, the analytical framework developed here offers a transferable lens for examining electoral politics in similar contexts. In this sense, the study contributes to global debates on the future of democracy and the evolving role of elections in contemporary political systems.

Methodology

Research Approach and Epistemological Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach to examine electoral integrity in Pakistan as a politically negotiated and institutionally embedded process rather than a purely

procedural outcome. Grounded in constructivist and interpretivist traditions, the research assumes that elections acquire meaning through institutional practices, elite behavior, and public discourse. Electoral integrity is therefore understood not as a fixed legal condition but as a contested concept shaped by power relations and interpretive struggles among political actors. A qualitative design is particularly suited to this inquiry because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how democratic norms are enacted, constrained, and rationalized within a hybrid political system. Rather than seeking causal generalization, the study aims to generate analytical insights into the mechanisms through which electoral governance is structured and legitimized.

Research Design and Scope

The study employs a qualitative document- and discourse-centered design, combining institutional analysis with narrative interpretation. Elections are treated as political processes extending beyond polling day, encompassing pre-election legal frameworks, campaign environments, media narratives, and post-election adjudication. This temporal and institutional scope enables the study to capture the full electoral cycle and identify patterns of continuity and contestation across different electoral moments.

Pakistan is examined as an analytical case of a hybrid regime where democratic institutions operate under structural constraints. The case-study approach facilitates a context-sensitive analysis while allowing for theoretical engagement with comparative literature on electoral integrity and hybrid governance.

Data Sources and Selection

Data for this study are drawn from multiple qualitative sources to ensure depth, triangulation, and interpretive richness.

Legal and Institutional Documents

Primary sources include Pakistan's electoral laws, constitutional provisions, rules of business of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), judicial verdicts related to electoral disputes, and official election reports. These documents are analyzed to assess how electoral integrity is formally defined, regulated, and operationalized. Particular attention is paid to ambiguities, discretionary provisions, and enforcement mechanisms that shape institutional behavior.

Election Reports and Secondary Data

The study incorporates secondary qualitative data from domestic and international election observation missions, policy think tanks, and governance-focused organizations. These reports provide critical assessments of electoral processes, institutional performance, and procedural compliance, offering an external perspective on electoral integrity. Scholarly literature is also used to contextualize empirical findings within existing theoretical debates.

Media Narratives and Public Discourse

Media coverage constitutes a central data source for examining how elections are framed and interpreted in the public sphere. Newspaper editorials, opinion columns, televised political talk shows, and digital media commentary are systematically reviewed to analyze dominant narratives surrounding electoral credibility, institutional neutrality, and political legitimacy. Media discourse is treated not merely as reflection but as an active participant in constructing electoral meaning.

Analytical Strategy

Data analysis follows a thematic and narrative interpretive strategy, combining inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Textual materials are read iteratively to identify recurring themes related to electoral governance, institutional authority, political intervention,

and legitimacy construction. These themes are then analyzed in relation to broader theoretical concepts such as managed democracy, hybrid regimes, and electoral integrity.

Narrative analysis is employed to examine how different actors—state institutions, political parties, media outlets, and civil society—construct competing accounts of electoral fairness and democratic legitimacy. Attention is paid to language, framing, and silences, revealing how electoral controversies are normalized, contested, or depoliticized over time. Cross-source comparisons are used to identify consistencies and divergences between formal institutional claims and public discourse.

Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and rigor of the qualitative analysis, the study employs several strategies. Data triangulation across legal documents, election reports, and media narratives strengthens the validity of interpretations. Thick description is used to situate findings within their political and institutional contexts, enabling analytical transferability. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the research process, with careful consideration of the researcher's positionality and interpretive assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

As the study relies primarily on publicly available documents and media content, ethical risks are minimal. Nevertheless, care is taken to represent institutional actors and political positions accurately and fairly. Interpretations are grounded in documented evidence, and contentious claims are contextualized within broader debates to avoid normative bias.

Methodological Limitations

While the qualitative, document-based approach allows for deep institutional and discursive analysis, it does not capture individual-level perceptions through interviews or surveys. However, given the study's focus on electoral governance and legitimacy construction at the institutional level, this limitation is consistent with the research objectives. The findings are analytically, rather than statistically, generalizable to other hybrid regimes.

Results

The qualitative analysis of electoral laws, institutional practices, election reports, judicial decisions, and media narratives reveals that electoral integrity in Pakistan is neither wholly absent nor fully realized. Instead, elections operate within a structured environment of negotiated democracy, where formal procedures coexist with informal mechanisms of control, selective enforcement, and discursive management. The findings are organized into key thematic domains that emerged consistently across data sources and electoral cycles.

1. Constitutional Guarantees and Procedural Compliance

Across official legal frameworks and institutional documentation, Pakistan's electoral system demonstrates a strong commitment to procedural democracy. Constitutional provisions guarantee universal adult suffrage, periodic elections, political pluralism, and the formal independence of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Election laws outline detailed procedures for voter registration, candidate nomination, polling, counting, and dispute resolution.

Election reports and institutional narratives consistently emphasize procedural compliance, particularly on polling day. Official accounts frequently highlight improvements in electoral logistics, technological integration, and voter turnout, reinforcing a narrative of progressive institutional maturation. These findings suggest that electoral integrity, when assessed narrowly through procedural benchmarks, appears largely intact.

However, this emphasis on procedural adherence often obscures broader structural dynamics. The data reveal that compliance with formal rules does not necessarily translate into equitable competition or substantive voter choice, pointing to a disjunction between legal design and political practice.

2. Pre-Election Environment and Structural Asymmetries

A recurring theme in election observation reports and media discourse concerns the pre-election phase, where the conditions of competition are shaped unevenly. Legal ambiguities, discretionary powers, and institutional asymmetries create an environment in which certain political actors operate with structural advantage.

The analysis shows that electoral laws provide wide interpretive space for enforcement, allowing institutions to act selectively without overtly violating legal frameworks. Decisions related to candidate eligibility, campaign regulation, and party activity often appear formally justified yet politically consequential. These practices contribute to an uneven playing field while maintaining the appearance of legal neutrality.

Importantly, the findings indicate that electoral manipulation in Pakistan is rarely overt or easily measurable. Instead, it manifests through anticipatory compliance, self-censorship, and strategic adaptation by political actors who internalize institutional constraints long before polling day. This dynamic reflects a form of electoral governance that relies less on direct coercion and more on structured uncertainty.

3. Institutional Contestation and the Role of the Election Commission

The Election Commission of Pakistan emerges in the data as a central yet contested actor in electoral governance. Institutional documents and official statements consistently assert the ECP's constitutional autonomy and impartiality. At the same time, media narratives and post-election controversies reveal persistent skepticism regarding its capacity to enforce regulations uniformly.

The analysis highlights a pattern in which the ECP's authority is strongest in administrative domains—such as logistics and scheduling—but more constrained in politically sensitive areas, including campaign regulation and enforcement against powerful actors. This uneven enforcement contributes to perceptions of selective neutrality, undermining public trust even when procedural requirements are met.

Rather than functioning as a purely independent arbiter, the ECP appears embedded within broader institutional power configurations, reflecting the limitations of formal autonomy in hybrid political systems.

4. Judicialization of Electoral Politics

Judicial intervention emerges as a defining feature of Pakistan's electoral landscape. Court verdicts related to candidate eligibility, party symbols, and post-election disputes play a decisive role in shaping political outcomes. The analysis reveals that judicial processes are increasingly treated as extensions of electoral competition rather than neutral mechanisms of dispute resolution. Legal reasoning in electoral cases often rests on constitutional interpretation, yet its political consequences are widely debated in media and scholarly commentary. The findings suggest that judicial involvement contributes to post-electoral uncertainty, prolonging political contestation beyond the ballot box. This judicialization blurs the boundary between legal accountability and political arbitration, reinforcing the perception that electoral outcomes are subject to institutional negotiation rather than exclusively determined by voter choice.

5. Political Parties and Strategic Adaptation

Political parties are shown to engage in strategic behavior that reflects an acceptance of managed electoral conditions. Party documents and media statements reveal a dual discourse: parties publicly invoke democratic norms and electoral integrity while privately adapting to institutional constraints and power asymmetries. Rather than challenging the structural conditions of electoral governance, parties often focus on navigating them effectively. Electoral participation thus becomes a calculated engagement with institutional realities, reinforcing a system in which competition occurs within predefined limits. This finding underscores that electoral integrity is not undermined solely by institutions but is also sustained through political actors' strategic compliance and normalization of constrained competition.

6. Media Narratives and the Construction of Legitimacy

Media analysis reveals a fragmented and polarized discursive environment surrounding elections. Coverage oscillates between exposing procedural irregularities and reinforcing the inevitability of contested outcomes. While investigative reporting highlights inconsistencies and institutional bias, dominant narratives often frame electoral controversies as routine or unavoidable features of Pakistan's political system. This discursive normalization plays a critical role in sustaining electoral legitimacy despite persistent disputes. Elections are portrayed simultaneously as flawed yet necessary, enabling public acceptance of outcomes without resolving underlying governance issues. Media thus functions both as a watchdog and as a stabilizing force that moderates public expectations of democratic perfection.

7. Elections as Mechanisms of Participation and Control

Synthesizing across themes, the findings indicate that elections in Pakistan serve a dual function. On one hand, they provide genuine opportunities for political participation, mobilization, and competition. On the other, they operate as instruments of legitimacy for existing power structures by channeling political contestation into controlled institutional pathways. This duality reflects the central paradox identified in the study: elections are neither purely democratic nor overtly authoritarian. Instead, they constitute arenas of **negotiated democracy**, where outcomes emerge from continuous interaction between citizen agency and institutional constraint.

8. Temporal Continuity and Systemic Patterns

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that these dynamics are not election-specific anomalies but recurring patterns across electoral cycles. Despite legal reforms and administrative improvements, the fundamental structure of electoral governance remains largely unchanged. Incremental procedural enhancements coexist with persistent power asymmetries, limiting the transformative potential of elections. This continuity suggests that electoral integrity in Pakistan is shaped less by technical capacity and more by political consensus—or lack thereof—regarding civilian supremacy, institutional accountability, and democratic norms.

Summary of Key Findings

The results demonstrate that:

- Electoral integrity is upheld procedurally but constrained structurally
- Institutional autonomy exists formally but is limited in practice
- Judicial intervention has become central to electoral outcomes
- Political parties adapt strategically rather than contest systemic constraints
- Media narratives both challenge and normalize managed democracy
- Elections function as negotiated arenas balancing participation and control

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the need to rethink how electoral integrity is conceptualized and evaluated in hybrid political systems. Rather than portraying Pakistan's elections as either procedurally democratic or fundamentally flawed, the results reveal a more complex reality in which elections function as arenas of negotiated power. This section situates the empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on electoral integrity, hybrid regimes, and democratic legitimacy, highlighting how Pakistan's experience both confirms and extends existing scholarship. A central contribution of this study is its challenge to proceduralist conceptions of electoral integrity. While Pakistan's electoral framework meets many formal criteria associated with democratic elections—such as universal suffrage, periodic competition, and administrative organization—the findings demonstrate that procedural compliance alone is insufficient to ensure substantive democratic choice. This aligns with Norris's (2014) argument that electoral integrity must be understood as a multidimensional process encompassing pre-election conditions, institutional behavior, and post-election adjudication. The emphasis placed by electoral authorities on polling-day procedures reflects what Schedler (2013) describes as the strategic narrowing of democratic evaluation to technically manageable domains. By focusing on administrative efficiency while leaving broader power asymmetries unaddressed, electoral integrity becomes symbolically upheld even as political competition remains structurally constrained. Pakistan's case thus illustrates how procedural compliance can coexist with democratic dilution, reinforcing the limits of formalistic assessments of elections. The results strongly support theoretical perspectives that conceptualize hybrid regimes as systems characterized by managed uncertainty rather than outright authoritarian control (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Elections in Pakistan are competitive and unpredictable at the surface level, yet the underlying conditions of competition are shaped by institutional asymmetries, discretionary enforcement, and anticipatory adaptation by political actors. The finding that electoral manipulation operates primarily through pre-election structuring rather than overt fraud echoes Schedler's (2002) "menu of manipulation." Importantly, the absence of blatant irregularities does not signify democratic consolidation but rather a shift toward more sophisticated forms of control that preserve legitimacy while limiting risk. Pakistan's elections thus exemplify how uncertainty can be calibrated rather than eliminated, allowing regimes to claim democratic credentials without surrendering political control. The contested role of the Election Commission of Pakistan highlights a key insight from comparative electoral governance literature: formal independence does not guarantee functional autonomy (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002). The ECP's uneven enforcement capacity reflects its embeddedness within a broader institutional ecosystem where political pressures shape regulatory outcomes. This finding complicates normative assumptions that strengthening electoral management bodies alone can resolve integrity deficits. In Pakistan, the ECP's authority is constrained not by legal insufficiency but by the political environment in which discretion is exercised. This supports Birch's (2011) argument that electoral malpractice often persists through selective enforcement rather than legal violation, reinforcing systemic bias while maintaining procedural legality. The increasing judicialization of electoral politics represents a significant transformation in how electoral disputes are resolved and legitimized. Rather than serving as neutral arbiters, courts have become central political actors whose decisions reshape electoral outcomes and party competition. This phenomenon aligns with Ginsburg's (2003) analysis of judicial power in new democracies, where courts frequently assume roles that extend beyond legal adjudication into political arbitration. The

findings suggest that judicial intervention contributes to prolonged uncertainty and contested legitimacy, shifting democratic accountability from voters to legal institutions. While judicial oversight can enhance accountability in principle, its politicization risks further distancing electoral outcomes from citizen choice. In Pakistan, judicialization appears to reinforce the perception that elections are provisional events subject to institutional renegotiation rather than definitive expressions of popular will. The study's findings on party behavior reveal how political actors internalize and normalize constrained democratic environments. Rather than mobilizing against structural inequities, parties adapt strategically to institutional limits, focusing on survival and access rather than systemic reform. This behavior aligns with theories of elite-driven democracy, where political competition occurs within boundaries acceptable to dominant power holders (Kitschelt, 2000). This normalization of managed competition weakens the potential for elections to serve as vehicles of democratic transformation. When parties accept structural constraints as given, elections become rituals of legitimacy rather than sites of genuine contestation. Pakistan's experience thus illustrates how democratic erosion can occur not through repression but through strategic compliance. The role of media in constructing electoral legitimacy highlights the discursive dimension of democracy. The findings demonstrate that media narratives oscillate between critique and normalization, exposing irregularities while simultaneously framing them as endemic or unavoidable. This dual role supports Voltmer's (2013) argument that media in transitional democracies often stabilize political systems by moderating public expectations. Electoral legitimacy, therefore, emerges not solely from institutional performance but from discursive management. By framing elections as flawed yet necessary, media narratives contribute to what might be termed *resigned legitimacy*—public acceptance without democratic confidence. This insight expands the literature on electoral integrity by foregrounding perception as a constitutive element of democratic practice. Synthesizing across findings, this study advances the conceptualization of elections as arenas of negotiated democracy. Elections in Pakistan simultaneously enable participation and constrain outcomes, reflecting a balance between democratic aspiration and political control. This duality challenges binary classifications of elections as democratic successes or failures and instead situates them within ongoing struggles over authority and legitimacy. This framework extends hybrid regime theory by emphasizing negotiation rather than domination as the defining feature of electoral governance. Elections do not merely reflect power relations; they actively reproduce them through institutional routines, legal interpretations, and discursive practices. Pakistan's elections thus function less as mechanisms of transformation and more as instruments of stabilization within a hybrid political order. The findings carry broader implications for democratic theory. They suggest that elections should be evaluated not only by procedural standards but by their capacity to disrupt entrenched power asymmetries. Where elections primarily reinforce existing hierarchies, democratic legitimacy becomes performative rather than substantive. Pakistan's case illustrates the limits of electoralism as a democratizing strategy in contexts where civilian supremacy and institutional accountability remain unresolved. Elections, in such settings, may sustain democratic form without delivering democratic substance—a condition increasingly visible across hybrid regimes globally.

Conclusion

This article set out to rethink elections in Pakistan by moving beyond procedural assessments of electoral integrity and situating electoral processes within broader structures of power, institutional negotiation, and legitimacy production. By examining electoral laws, institutional

practices, judicial interventions, and media narratives through a qualitative and interpretive lens, the study demonstrates that elections in Pakistan function neither as purely democratic exercises nor as overtly authoritarian spectacles. Instead, they operate as arenas of negotiated democracy, where citizen participation coexists with institutional control and elite management. The findings reveal that electoral integrity in Pakistan is upheld in form but constrained in substance. While constitutional guarantees, administrative procedures, and periodic elections provide the appearance of democratic compliance, the realization of democratic choice is systematically shaped by pre-election structuring, selective enforcement of rules, judicialization of politics, and discursive normalization of contestation. Elections thus perform a dual function: they enable participation and political mobilization while simultaneously legitimizing entrenched power configurations. This duality complicates conventional understandings of democratic failure or success and underscores the limits of proceduralist conceptions of democracy. Theoretically, the study contributes to comparative debates on hybrid regimes and electoral governance by foregrounding negotiation rather than manipulation as the central logic of electoral politics. Rather than relying on overt coercion or fraud, Pakistan's electoral system operates through managed uncertainty, institutional discretion, and strategic adaptation by political actors. This insight extends existing hybrid regime theory by highlighting how democratic rituals can stabilize political order without fundamentally redistributing power. Elections, in this context, do not simply reflect power relations; they actively reproduce them.

The analysis also underscores the importance of perception and discourse in sustaining electoral legitimacy. Media narratives and post-election debates play a critical role in shaping public acceptance of electoral outcomes, often framing democratic shortcomings as inevitable rather than contestable. This produces a form of conditional or resigned legitimacy, where elections are accepted as necessary but not trusted as transformative. Such dynamics raise important questions about the long-term sustainability of democratic norms in environments where electoral credibility remains perpetually contested yet politically functional. From a broader comparative perspective, Pakistan's experience offers valuable insights into the evolving role of elections in contemporary politics. As elections increasingly serve as markers of legitimacy in hybrid and non-liberal regimes worldwide, this study illustrates how democratic form can persist without democratic substance. The findings caution against equating electoral continuity with democratic consolidation and highlight the need for analytical frameworks that account for informal power, institutional asymmetry, and discursive construction. Ultimately, this article argues that the central challenge facing Pakistan's democracy is not the absence of elections, but the conditions under which elections are conducted and interpreted. Moving toward substantive democratic integrity requires more than technical electoral reforms; it demands a normative consensus on civilian supremacy, consistent institutional accountability, and a reorientation of political competition away from managed outcomes and toward genuine citizen choice. Until such structural transformations occur, elections in Pakistan are likely to remain democratic by default rather than by deliberate design.

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