Unravelling the Link Between Party System Fragmentation and Electoral Volatility: The Case of Pakistan (1970−2024)

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ABSTRACT: Electoral volatility and party system fragmentation are important features of the political party system. This study seeks to examine the role of party system fragmentation in the electoral volatility in Pakistan. The study examines the relationship between the Effective Number of Parties (ENP) and electoral volatility in Pakistan from 1970 to 2024 through a mixed-methods approach. The study uses the Pedersen index to quantify volatility and the Taagepera index of fragmentation to quantify the Effective Number of Parties. The findings showed that the relationship between volatility and fragmentation is not linear over time. Findings showed that the 1970s to 1990s and 2013 have high fragmentation. However, the electoral periods of 2018 and 2024 have high fragmentation but a fall in volatility, thus they nullify the idea that fragmentation necessarily leads to democratic pluralism. The study is an important contribution to the literature on party system fragmentation and electoral volatility in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS: Party System Fragmentation, Electoral Volatility, Politics, Pakistan, Effective Number of Parties, Democratic Pluralism, Democratic Institutions

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Political parties in most democracies play a significant role in influencing representation and political stability. The purpose of democratic institutions is influenced by the structure of the party system, particularly the competition and size of political parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979; Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Multi-party systems have a broader range of choices, which enhances the representation; however, it may also make the formation of stable governments more difficult due to coalition challenges (Lijphart, 1994).

Fragmentation is often associated with a higher level of electoral volatility because it is considered to increase the electoral fluctuations (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). In developing democracies, fragmentation may contribute to instability (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007). Including fragmentation, some studies suggest that poor party structures and elite influence can affect volatility, either enhance the relation of both or eliminate it (Mustillo, 2018).

In Pakistan, party system fragmentation considerably developed over the years. New political parties, such as Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Muttahid Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), have challenged the long-standing

dominance of traditional political parties (Xiang & Ali, 2020; Hasnan, 2022). Still, much work is needed on this relationship; several studies have analyzed the factors separately that are affecting the volatility, and only the work of Zaman & Mushtaq (2023) provides an inclusive time-series analysis, focused on electoral volatility in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, mainly across its four regions, from 1970 to 2018.

This article aims to identify the gap by examining the connection between party system fragmentation and electoral volatility in Pakistan from 1970 to 2024. The study integrates the qualitative insights from the political landscape of Pakistan and quantitative empirical indicators, such as the effective number of Political parties (ENP) for measuring the party system fragmentation and Pederson index of electoral volatility. Based on these arrangements, the study hypothesizes that the higher the ENP, the higher the Volatility is and vice versa (Mair, 2008).

This research work consists of seven chapters. After the introduction, the second chapter describes the conceptual and theoretical framework of electoral volatility and fragmentation through a discussion of the relevant global literature and theoretical expectations. The third chapter describes the methodology applied. The fourth chapter gives a historical account of electoral volatility in Pakistan (1970-2024). The fifth chapter analyses the trends of party system fragmentation in Pakistan (1970-2024). The sixth chapter analyses the factors that influence the PSF in Pakistan. The seventh chapter analyses the relationship between party system fragmentation and electoral volatility in Pakistan. The final chapter summarizes the major findings of this research work

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concepts of party system fragmentation and volatility will be analyzed in this study while maintaining focus on the functioning of these concepts in hybrid regimes. There are various factors that influence electoral volatility. Among these factors, the party system fragmentation is a crucial political factor, but this study will employ the concept of Effective Number of Parties (ENP) to measure the level of fragmentation. There is a positive relationship between party system fragmentation and electoral volatility. But in the case of Pakistan, the relationship is not straightforward and is influenced by factors such as candidate politics and the emergence of new political actors.

Electoral Volatility

Electoral volatility, which refers to the change of voter preferences from one election to another and is a measure of the stability of the party system and the power of the parties, is measured by the changes in vote shares from the elections by the Pedersen Index.

High electoral volatility may reflect an active citizenry in democratic theory, but in hybrid regimes, it reflects the lack of elite manipulation or party identification. Low electoral volatility is often viewed as a restriction on voter preferences.

The Pedersen Index is the most widely accepted measure of electoral volatility because it measures the total change in the vote share of the parties from one election to the next.

$$\text{Pedersen index} \quad \frac{1}{2} \Sigma_{i=1}^{n} |\Delta Pi, t|$$

Where pi, t represents the vote share of party i at election t, and n denotes the total number of parties.

A higher volatility score means that a large part of the electorate has changed its party preference. This could be the case for a variety of reasons, such as voter discontent, party switching, elite fragmentation, or the rise of new political movements (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017).

In our study, electoral volatility is viewed as the dependent variable, and it is affected by the structure of the party system, namely the Effective Number of Parties. When party systems become more fragmented and competitive (higher ENP), voters are presented with more choices, which in turn leads to a higher probability of party switching and a disruption of the long-term partisan alignment (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Gherghina, 2015). Therefore, our research hypothesis is that there is a negative relationship between ENP and electoral volatility.

Party system fragmentation

Fragmentation of party systems indicates how electoral support is dispersed over several political parties in a party system. It is frequently employed as a proxy measure to assess the competitiveness of a political system. In fluid democracies, the rise in ENP indicates a decline in dominating party systems and a more competitive political environment.

The most widely accepted quantitative fragmentation measure is the Effective Number of Parties (ENP), which was first proposed by Laakso and Taagepera in 1979. The ENP takes into consideration the number of parties as well as their level of representation, which can be measured either by votes or seats:

$$\text{ENP}= L - T = \frac{1}{\sum_{i}^{n=1} p_i^2}$$

L-T is the Laakso-Taagepera index, p_i is the proportion of votes (seats). $\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i^2$ is the sum of squared proportions (Scott & Grofman, 2007)

In a fragmented system, the voter preferences are usually distributed over a number of parties, and the party identification is likely to be low. This leads to a higher possibility of party switching, especially when there is no dominant party in the political setting. As the voters have several good alternatives to choose from, there are higher chances of observing high electoral volatility in a fragmented system (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Croissant, 2002Croissant).

Theoretical Linkage between Fragmentation and Volatility

Much work has been carried out on the relationship between party system fragmentation and electoral instability. It is clear that by increasing the electoral marketplace, the level of fragmentation increases the volatility (Lijphart, 1994; Mair, 2008). However, the empirical studies have shown mixed results, especially in developing nations.

As Dalton and Wattenberg (2002) have argued, in a fragmented environment, as the traditional party ties become less significant, voters become less predictable, and this results in electoral volatility. Moreover, Mainwaring and Zoco (2007) found that in new or hybrid democracies with high ENP, the level of party institutionalization is low, and this makes the voters' behavior even more volatile.

Since 2008, in the case of Pakistan, the number of parties and non-traditional actors, such as populist movements and religious blocs, has increased, which has contributed to a higher ENP. This is further aided

by the instability of the coalition and the unpredictable nature of electoral outcomes, which show a direct relationship between ENP and electoral volatility. Hence, the expected result in this research will be that with an increase in ENP, electoral volatility will also rise due to increased competition.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed-methods approach is used, in combination with Qualitative and Quantitative methods to achieve a comprehensive understanding. In this study, an analytical and exploratory method is employed by analyzing the volatility of elections and assessing the fragmentation, as well as the factors that cause this fragmentation. The most widely used indices, namely the Pedersen Election Volatility Index (PEV) and the Effective Number of Parties (ENP), are being employed to measure the key variables.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is the main source of data, including official election data and voter turnout figures. Secondary data was collected after a thorough examination of peer-reviewed academic literature, election studies, and academic databases to provide a solid basis for the empirical and theoretical analysis of this study.

Electoral volatility in Pakistan

This section will analyze the volatility of electoral change in Pakistan based on time series data from the Election Commission of Pakistan and Gallup Pakistan, as shown in Table 4.1. To measure volatility, the Pedersen index is employed. The volatility index varies between 17.32 and 47.84, with huge spikes during 1970-1977 (56.48) and 1988-1990 (52.38). With an average of 30.52 and a standard deviation of 17.32. This index serves as an indicator of the fluidity of voters' preferences.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Electoral Volatility in Pakistan

Time Frame	Electoral Volatility	Degree of Volatility
1970-1977	56.48	Very high
1988-1990	52.34	Very high
1993-1997	20.66	Moderate
2002-2008	17.32	Moderate
2013-2018	24.28	Slightly high
2018-2024	12.07	Low
Mean Value	30.52	
Median	22.48	
Standard deviation	17.32	

Note: Mean plus one standard deviation equals 47.84, and mean minus one standard deviation equals 13.20 The results indicated that when volatility is above 50 percent, as happened during the periods 1970-1977 (56.48) and 1988-1990 (52.34), there is a very high degree of electoral instability, which is usually associated with big elections or the emergence of new important parties. The degree of voter instability increases when the political competition is subject to personalization and institutional discontinuities. This is because these periods are usually associated with the redefinition of party affiliations or the collapse of the traditional party system (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007).

The moderate volatility observed between 1993-1997 (20.66) and 2002-2008 (17.32) corresponds to what Bartolini and Mair (1990) describe as "consolidating democracies"—democracies in which the preferences of voters are stable but still sensitive to performance or limited political choices. Which means there is a degree of Stability with traditional parties, which maintain their basic support. Nevertheless, the degree of volatility between 2013 and 2018 (24.28) is somewhat high, suggesting that voter loyalty had shifted slightly. This is in line with Mustillo's (2018) observation that replacement volatility, where one party replaces another, contributes to an increase in the volatility index without necessarily suggesting a breakdown in the system.

Interestingly, 2018-2024 (12.07) shows low volatility, regardless of prevailing notions that party system fragmentation is associated with growing volatility. This contradicts Bartolini and Mair's (1990) conventional claim that highly fractionalized systems lead to increased vote shifts due to decreased political identification and more voter choice. As observed by Ishiyama (2016) in the African case, the low electoral volatility in the 2018-2024 election cycle may be driven by elites rather than voter-driven. Whereas the Party fragmentation may also be shaped by the elite strategies, with electoral volatility potentially being constrained.

Party system fragmentation in Pakistan

The Effective Number of Parties (ENP) measures party system fragmentation by considering both the number and relative strength of parties. A higher ENP indicates rising fragmentation, whereas a lower ENP specifies a more consolidated system dominated by fewer, larger parties (Umanets, 2024)

To measure ENP, the Laakso-Taagepera (L-T) index is used:

$$L - T = \frac{1}{\sum_{i}^{n=1} p_i^2}$$

Where pi represents the vote or seat share of each party (Scott & Grofman, 2007). This formula is specifically effective in systems with unequal party support and helps to investigate coalition potential and electoral competitiveness.

Table 2

The Effective Number of Parties in Pakistan

Election Years	Effective Number of Parties	Degree-of Fragmentation
1970	4.27	Very high
1977	2.08	Low
1988	3.52	High
1990	3.43	High
1993	2.87	Low
1997	3.09	Moderate
2002	3.09	Moderate
2008	3.89	High
2013	3.12	Moderate
2018	4.36	Very high
2024	4.89	Very high

Note: Mean 3.51, standard deviation 0.78. The high bound value is 4.27, and the low bound value is 2.75.
Source: Table created by the Author.

From Table 2, it is clear that the 1970 elections were quite fragmented (ENP=4.27). The mainstream political

parties, such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Awami League (AL), dominated the elections, along with some smaller factions, such as the splits in the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). This situation was supported by classic party system formation theories, which hold that early elections in newly institutionalized democracies result in high levels of party competition because there are no established cleavages and stable voter alignments (Mainwaring & Scully, 1996; Bartolini & Mair, 1990), resulting in extremely high fragmentation.

Conversely, the 1977 elections had low fragmentation (ENP 2.08), while the elections were highly rigged. In the period between 1988 and 1990, the fragmentation was high (ENP 3.52 & 3.43) because of the formation of electoral alliances—the Islami Jamhuri Ittihad (IJI) contested against the PPP in 1988, and the People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) contested against the PML in 1990. This pattern is aligned with Coleman's (1995) views that systems usually move between equilibrium and disequilibrium situations of fragmentation. These elections saw the development of alliances and coalitions, which frequently increase fragmentation levels before they are re-stabilized.

From 1993 to 1997, and 2013, the fragmentation was low to moderate (ENP 2.87 & 3.09, 3.12), with Independents evolving as the third-largest group. The political landscape showed a transitory consolidation, with PPP and Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N) dominating the political landscape, thus aligning with Sartori's (1976) concept of restricted pluralism, in which two primary candidates dominate while others remain marginal. In the 2002 elections, the fragmentation remained (ENP 3.09) as the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) succeeded the Independents as a prominent political force. According to Hasnan (2022), such arrangements commonly indicate Clientelistic politics, in which party names are less important than the individuals or group affiliations.

Fragmentation rose again in the 2008 elections (ENP = 3.89), with the regional parties, PPP, and PML-N all winning provincial power bases. However, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Jamaat-e-Islami chose to boycott, and no party won a majority, forming a PPP-led coalition government with PML-N, Muttahida Qomi Movement (MQM), and Independents. However, by 2018 and 2024, the ENP value increased to its highest point (4.36 & 4.89). This large increase corresponds to the definition provided by Hanif et al. (2024), which emphasizes the importance of ideological polarization and populist rhetoric in defining the political setting. In line with Croissant (2002) and Umanets (2024), this fragmentation often leads to inefficiencies and unstable coalitions, particularly if it is driven by personalistic or populist politics rather than programmatic politics. These findings show that, in spite of the majoritarian electoral system in Pakistan, there is a high level of Fragmentation, making it difficult for classical theories, such as Duverger's law, to apply. This paradox supports the argument put forward by Xiang and Ali (2020) that the electoral system of hybrid democracies does not follow the conventional institutional logic but works in an informal way.

Factors contributing to the Party System Fragmentation in Pakistan

A strong party system is necessary for democracy. In Pakistan, military dominance, polarization, and patronage politics have resulted in more parties and wider ideological differences. Although fragmentation increases competition, it may also result in a dispersion of votes among smaller and minor political parties. The following are factors that contribute to the Party system Fragmentation in Pakistan.

Emergence of New Political Parties: The formation of new parties leads to the introduction of new ideological narratives and influences voter behavior. In many democracies, the effective number of parties has increased,

often in response to corruption or economic crises (Dassoneville & Cakir, 2021; Bochsler, 2022). The party system in Pakistan shifted from a two-party system to a multi-party system due to the entry of new political parties such as PTI and Muttahid Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which challenged the traditional two-party dominance in the country. The existence of PTI in 2013 and its victory in 2018 transformed the political system to a three-party competition, particularly in KP, Punjab, and Sindh (Xiang & Ali, 2020). Similarly, in 2024, PTI-supported independents won 100 seats, which shows a high degree of fragmentation (ENP: 4.89), with 165 parties contesting for 265 seats. The increase in the number of political parties made it difficult for the parties to have clear policies and form stable coalitions (Hasnan, 2022).

Ideological Polarization: Ideological polarization is an indicator of voter behavior and party dynamics. A high level of polarization often results in proximity voting in a multi-party system, where people vote for parties that share their ideology (Dassoneville & Cakir, 2021). It also makes coalition building more difficult and leads to the rise of short-lived parties with populist or clientelistic platforms (Schmitt & Franzmann, 2020; Croissant, 2002).

The polarization of ideologies in Pakistan has been increased by ideological beliefs, the decline of liberal discourse, and the emergence of charismatic populist leaders. Leaders such as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Imran Khan have used emotional appeals and changing belief ideologies to keep their popularity intact (Batool et al., 2023). The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) generally adopted a center-left stance from 1970 until 1977. However, by the time of the 1988 elections, the ideological gap had broadened, with the PPP competing against the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), which was a combination of right-wing Islamist parties. Such a trend was also observed in the 1990s, with a struggle between the center-left PPP and the center-right Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) factions (Rizvi & Gillani, 2013).

The 2002 elections were characterized by ideological polarization. The Pakistan Muslim League- Quaid (PML-Q), led by President Musharraf, secured power, but the MMA, an Islamic alliance, benefited from increasing Islamic optimism (Talbot, 2003; Waseem, 2006). Meanwhile, the PPP's discourse shifted from Bhutto's communist roots to a development-oriented program (Shah, 2018). By the 2008 elections, ideological resistance had risen because of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, resulting in a contentious campaign between the PPP (center-left) and the PML-N (center-right). Although a coalition government was formed following the election, notably as a consequence of the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), it was quickly destabilized (Rizvi & Gillani, 2013; Nelson, 2009).

Table 3

Ideological Polarization Concerning the Political Spectrum of Predominant Party Type and ENP Index

Election Years	Average TEV	Degree of TEV	Pre-Dominant Party Type	Political Spectrum
1970-77	34.48	High	Charismatic	Center-Left
1988-90	15.25	Low	Charismatic-Clientalistic	Center-Left & Center-Right
1993-97	20.6	High	Charismatic-Clientalistic	Center-Left & Center-Right
2002-2008	12.59	Low	Programatic-Clientalistic	Center-Right& Center-Left
2013-2018	24.28	High	Clientalistic-Charismatic	Center-Right & Right Wing
2018-2024	11.62	Low	Charismatic-Clientalistic	Right & Center-Right

Note: The Geometric Mean is 18.37. The average TEV below 18.37 is considered low, and above 18.37 is considered high—source: created by the Author.

The 2013 elections were considered a transition because the PTI emerged as a strong populist and anti-elites party. The party focused on reform and transparency, which appealed to the urban class and middle class, and the political discourse shifted from patronage politics to development (Mufti et al., 2020). The Effective Number of Parties (ENP) was 3.54, and the voter turnout was 55%, the highest since the 1970s. Still, Clientelist networks and coalitions continue to remain dominant (Mumtaz et al., 2024).

However, by 2018, the rift in ideology had widened further. The PTI won 116 seats, while new far-right parties such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) won about 10% of the total vote. A Gallup survey showed that 46% of TLP voters had previously supported the PML-N, indicating a change in allegiance that was more a result of religious attraction than an ideological shift (Shah & Sareen, 2018).

Similarly, in the 2024 elections, polarization and disintegration increased. The ENP rose to 4.6, which was the highest ever recorded. Although independents, who were supported by the PTI, won 101 seats, the party could not take part in the elections openly because of legal constraints. The elections were also believed to be rigged, and thus an alliance was made between the PML-N and PPP. This phase saw the politicization of the political atmosphere in Pakistan, which was characterized by charismatic populism and religious mobilization.

The degree of contestability and the danger that incumbents face in an electoral system is competitiveness. It indicates the certainty of opposition parties to enter into power. Competitiveness indicates the degree to which a system is open to change (Kayser & Lindstaedt, 2015). However, Gilbert and Mohseni (2011) state that if the same party wins more than four consecutive elections, then the system is not really competitive. Moreover, the Duverger-Demsetz hypothesis suggests that the presence of multiple parties in single-member districts may reduce competitiveness, making it difficult for any single party to win a landslide victory.

Pakistan has always had highly competitive electoral results, with a regular change of government despite authoritarian intervention. The elections of 1970 and 1977 were highly competitive, which paved the way for future diversity. Since 1988, the ruling party has always lost re-election, even in semi-authoritarian regimes.

For instance, in the 2002 elections during the rule of General Musharraf, the opposition parties surprisingly did quite well despite the controlled political environment. At the same time, PML-Q won the elections, it was largely made up of PML-N quitters, most of whom returned to either PML-N, PPP, or the newly formed PTI by 2008 (Talbot, 2003).

A high level of competition was observed in the 2008 elections. The PPP received 30.8% of the votes, followed by the PML-Q with 22% and the PML-N with 19.9%. Though PPP got the largest number of votes, the largest number of seats was won by PML-N (88), and it formed a coalition government with PPP, which shows the degree of fragmentation and competition in the party system.

In 2013, a majority government in partnership with independents was formed by the PML-N, which won 129 out of the 272 seats. The PPP experienced a major fall, lagging 3 million votes since the 2008 elections; meanwhile, the PTI emerged as a major political force, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where it won 34 out of 94 provincial seats.

The 2018 elections maintained the trend of extremely high political competition. The PTI, PML-N, and PPP together received 76% of the total vote. Although the smaller parties and independents together received 24%, their effect was only partial due to the dispersed pattern of support (Griebeler & Resende, 2021; Golosov, 2015). Smaller parties like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Awami National Party (ANP), and Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP), despite having considerable vote shares, are unable to make any considerable impact in terms of representation because of insufficient regional deliberation.

The 2024 elections remained quite competitive, despite the political and institutional hurdles. Even though the PTI had been disqualified from contesting the elections under its symbol, the party secured the highest number of votes (31%). This indicates the voters' tendency to switch loyalties.

In conclusion, in spite of increasing party fragmentation, Pakistan's elections remain highly competitive. Smaller parties, however, continue to struggle to convert support into power, and fragmentation weakens coalition stability, as seen in recent government formations. These configurations show that, although Pakistan still has a competitive electoral environment, the core issue is hindering of effective representation.

Effect of Party System Fragmentation on Electoral Volatility

Fragmentation of the party system and electoral volatility are two issues that are interrelated. According to Ishiyama (2016), the fragmentation of the party system may cause volatility, leading to the rapid emergence and decline of political parties, making it difficult for voters to choose the right political alternative.

Table 4

Degree of Party System Fragmentation and Electoral Volatility from 2008-2024 Elections

Election Years	Average Fragmentation	Degree of Fragmentation	Average E. V	Degree of E.V
1970-77	3.17	Moderate	34.48	High
1988-90	3.47	Moderate	15.25	Low
1993-97	2.98	Low	20.6	Moderate
2002-2008	3.49	Moderate	17.32	Low
2013-2018	3.75	High	24.28	Moderate
2018-2024	4.62	Very high	12.07	Low

Note: The average fragmentation of two consecutive elections is taken to simplify the measurements. The overall average of fragmentation is 3.95; the standard deviation of electoral volatility is 17.32. Mean+1=47.84, Mean-1=13.32. Source: created by the Author,

Table 4 shows the degree of fragmentation and electoral volatility over six election cycles (1970-2024). According to classic theory, increased fragmentation leads to greater electoral volatility due to uncertainty in voter-party alignment (Pedersen, 1979; Bartolini & Mair, 1990). However, the Empirical findings (Table 4) revealed that context-specific dynamics such as ideological polarization, competitiveness, and the emergence of new political parties in each electoral cycle affect this relationship.

Between 1970 and 1977, Pakistan had a very high level of electoral volatility (EV 34.48) and a highly fragmented party system (ENP 3.17). The fragmentation was mainly due to the presence of high ideological polarization, with the emergence of the socialist Pakistan People's Party in West Pakistan and the ethno-

nationalist Awami League in East Pakistan. This is the culmination point of the study by Bartolini and Mair (1990), which contends that basic ideological differences among parties may lead to volatile voter alignments.

The Elections from 1988 to 1990 took place in a politically competitive and organized context. Elite-led electoral competition was the primary factor for fragmentation during this period, with large coalitions (IJI and PDA) emerging to compete for power. Although having the same ENP value (3.47), electoral volatility decreased to a low of 15.25. This conformation corresponds to the notion of Croissant (2002), which argues that not all forms of fragmentation lead to volatility, especially when party preferences are organized by elites rather than ideological differences.

Between 1993 and 1997, Pakistan's party system showed signs of amalgamation under PPP-PML-N bipolarity, leading to a lower ENP (2.98) and moderate volatility (20.60). This decrease in fragmentation hindered voter reorientation, as voters were chiefly divided between two main options. That long-term party competition in a bipolar environment promotes electoral stability (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007). A similar situation happened in the 2013-2018 elections. The rise of PTI as an anti-establishment party appealed to disillusioned urban and youth voters, resulting in a realignment of electoral blocs

Moreover, the electoral cycle of 2002-2008 witnessed a trend of moderate-high fragmentation (ENP = 3.49), mainly because of the emergence of new political actors such as the MMA, a religious party, which changed the electoral equation. Yet, the level of volatility was low (EV = 17.32), since the electoral preferences were associated with regional and identity-driven cleavages, rather than policy-driven ones, thus confirming Coleman's (1995) argument that fragmentation tends to be stable when parties reflect stable social Cleavages.

One of the most interesting inconsistencies emerges in the context of the 2024 elections. Contrary to the extreme value of ENP of 4.62, the electoral volatility reduced to 12.07, which was the lowest recorded during that period. This suggests that the level of fragmentation during that period was artificial, rather than being voter-driven. It is right to say that in hybrid regimes, low volatility may be hiding structural problems rather than political stability (Croissant, 2002).

In conclusion, there is a link between the fragmentation of party systems and electoral volatility. Fragmentation is connected to volatility in the early stages (for instance, the 1970s and 1988-1990) when party systems were still in the development stage. On the other hand, in contemporary elections, especially after 2013, fragmentation and volatility are actually unconnected because of elite politics and people's frustration. In a hybrid democracy such as Pakistan, fragmentation may symbolize anarchy, but it does not necessarily symbolize extreme electoral competition

Conclusion

This paper highlights the relationship between electoral volatility and Party system Fragmentation in Pakistan from 1970 to 2024. It also highlights the dynamic and systematic factors that influence the party system fragmentation. To measure the volatility Pedersen index is used; meanwhile, to measure the Effective number of parties Gallagher index is used. The results showed that fragmentation remains high during each cycle of Elections meanwhile the volatility fluctuates over time. The period of 1970-1977 and 1988-1990 is considered the period of highest electoral volatility, and the period of 2013 is also considered a relatively high period of volatility, because of the rise of new political parties, ideological polarization, and increased competitiveness.

The dominance of two political parties was seen during the period of 1993 to 2008; the PMLQ, which was the representative of Musharraf, was also the faction of PPP, and PMLN, which later joined their host parties after the dissolution of PMLQ. That era from 1993 to 2008 is considered moderate because the voter alignments were stable despite the democratic upheavals. The rise of PTI in 2013 caused a little rise in the volatility, the public loyalties changed because of the emotional appeal used by Imran Khan, the Logos and Ethos influenced the public. Later, the volatility decreased from 2018 to 2024 despite the high level of fragmentation (ENP: 4.62), which indicates the decoupling between the inability of voters and the fragmentation.

The emergence of MMA in the 2002 elections gave it popularity because of the ongoing debate on 9/11. Similarly, the emergence of PTI in 2013 and its stance on transparency help them in achieving victory in the 2018 elections. The rise of such extreme parties, which solely rely on religious beliefs and revolutionary visions, eliminates the liberal discourse, and then people support the charismatic populist leaders more. This gives rise to short-lived parties, which form and break into factions. A similar situation was seen in the 2018 elections when the far-right party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan secured 10% votes. This showed the segregation of votes across the smaller parties, which are unable to secure seats in the legislature due to the electoral system.

These insights showed that competitiveness in hybrid regimes does not necessarily promote democratization. In fact, in fragmented regimes, the electoral volatility can decrease because of institutional inefficiencies, patronage politics, and electoral engineering, which limit the choices of voters and make the political environment more complex. In summary, the fragmentation in Pakistan does not lead to high electoral volatility and democratic consolidation. In fact, the lower volatility in a situation of higher fragmentation indicates that there is no increase in electoral substitutes; this maintains the elite dominance instead of promoting political alternatives.

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