SECTARIANISM AND DEMOCRACY: ANALYZING VOTER BEHAVIOR IN DISTRICT CHITRAL, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the effects of a sectarian identity on voting behavior in District Chitral which is a unique district having both Sunni and Ismaili communities. It analyzes how a voter's religion affects his political preferences, the factors which make him vote and even the turnout rate in different precincts. The study enhances the understanding of the importance of the sect as a factor in electoral results by providing a mix sampling that represents the region under survey with the help of a descriptive research design which is relevant to the demographics of the district. The results reveal that the Sunni members of the electorate are inclined to support PTI While Ismaili ones tend to support PPP, thereby portraying evidence of a sectarian split between the parties in focal concept. Other important aspects that affect the electoral behavior of voters include sectarianism, the characteristics of the candidates and the party policies, whereas the most important focus is placed on sectarianism. The research also provides an explanation for the variation in voter participation between Sunni, Ismaili and mixed constituencies, thereby explaining the complex nexus between religion and politics in Chitral. Demographic data covers the analysis with insights into voting behavior and influence factors on election decisions included.

Keywords: Sectarianism, Voting Behavior, Political Identity, District Chitral, Electoral Dynamics

1. Introduction

Deemed as a glorious mountainous area, District Chitral is situated in northern Pakistan and inhabited by followers of more than one religion. This valley has a tiny representation of the larger religious structure of Pakistan because it has both Ismaili Muslims and Sunni Muslims. Because of this, deposition of 'hard positions" on sects has created a whirling social structure in which sectarianism closely combines with political behavior- local and national politics and elections for that matter. Historically, Muslims of different sects have co-existed in peace in this region, but the sectarian identity has, and still is, a core aspect of the social and political culture of the area (Ali, 2010).

Over the span of the last three to four decades the politics of Chitral has changed drastically. The introduction of democracy in the region has highlighted the

significance of identity policy. Political candidates and their parties are viewed through the prism of political sect, which has also become self too voting profiles. Not only Chitral have elections been characterized through sectarian identity; other research throughout Pakistan have shown that in such elections, it is more likely to find that the professor has never been a telescopic of choices in the pluralistic context including that of religion as well (Nasr, 2000; Fair et al, 2013).

It is, however, on the local level, say in Chitral that your allegiance to a particular sect takes predominance over your secular loyalties. They have such parties in Ayub's area only although the entirety of the leadership is drawn from Chitral. Since these regions are somewhat remote, they have been forced to cooperate politically. Due to this factor for unity, sectarianism takes mature shape in the political parties and elections as people come to vote based on their ethnic language. These phenomena point at the current situation where the local culture informs the politics of the place, for instance, various electoral campaigns (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2023).

Communal violence has erupted from time to time as in the rest of the country, though in the case of Chitral one must note that peace is observable. Each political party tries to remain within bounds in general but not as understood elsewhere in the country. Political science is subordinate to everything else because of specific country's situation; and here the study tries to analyze the level of votes impacted by political sectarianism in Chitral as a case with a focus on two Muslim sects Sunni and Ismaili who are both actively participating in the regional politics of this area.

2. Literature Review

Sectarian affiliation as a determinant of political behavior has been studied extensively in various contexts. Studies have observed that sectarian affiliation is a major determinant of political preferences, especially in societies where religious identification cut across political behavior (Nasr, 2000).

In Pakistan, sectarian identity overlaps with political behavior and often affects electoral outcomes and creates diverse political alliances (Fair et al., 2013).

Internationally, the works of Horowitz (1985) and Chandra (2004) outline a theoretical framework explaining how ethnic and sectarian identities affect political behavior.

These studies are particularly relevant in understanding Chitral's context in which sectarian identity is a critical determinant of Political affiliation.

The say of Akhtar and Amir (2014) who looked at voting patterns in northern Pakistan claimed that there is strong interplay between a person's sect and his political party. The study points out that sect driven politics tends to encourage people to become more polarized and as such tries to sabotage national integration. From comparative studies of various regions, Rizvi (2017) asserts that the impact of sectarianism on voting patterns and behaviors is not uniform across all sects. In this sense, Chitral should be a perfect case to illustrate how the impact varies.

Based on his research, Hassan (2015) claimed there was more to sectarianism in Pakistan than socio – cultural or social aspects, noting that religious sectarianism was also a strategy employed by political parties in electioneering. This is particularly so in areas such as Chitral where there is wider religious diversity and among other things,

ethnic nationalism thrives. A similar assertion is made by Bano (2012) of how religious leaders in some countries used their positions to garner political support from specific sects.

In his study, Shafiq (2016) focused on Chitral and other areas in northern, Pakistan considers the effects of grassroot movements in the area and remarks that efforts towards inter sect dialogues have proven futile due to strong politicians. By and large, these studies have set superior linkage regarding the relationship between sectarianism and related voting patterns in District Chitral.

Zahid (2017) has talked about how social media is used in political campaigns that are based around sectarianism and how these platforms enhance the extreme views held during the elections.

It has also been highlighted by Ahmed and Naqvi (2018) that certain times there are economic motives which help in overcoming sectarian identities, especially in conservative places. However, in the context of Chitral, which is more rural, sectarian identity seems to prevail.

Fatima (2019) was more interested in gender issues in sectarian politics, for she believes that sectarian cleavages often go beyond the men to also influence the choices of women voters.

Similarly, Malik (2019) and Khan et al. (2020) further explore and expand on the issues of sectarianism and governance, and they have further shown that identity politics shortchanges minorities. The solutions to the outcomes are to be dealt with through policies of integration.

Rehman (2020) focused on how previously there was sectarian politics which was greatly advanced using colonial strategies which promoted religion and even up to now influences the voting behavior of individuals.

Ahmad (2021) investigated the politics of electioneering in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and established that sectarian loyalties constitute a common basis on which a candidate is selected and the choice of campaign strategies. This is reflected in the local observations of Chitral, where political actors frequently employ common identities as a strategy to garner votes.

Iqbal et al. (2021) have carried out research on the importance of education and its effect on the subordination of sectarianism in politics. They observed that higher education attainment tends to be associated with a trend towards issue-based voting and less dependence of the electorate on sectarian bases for their political preferences.

Yusufzai, (2022) asserts that the media helps in perpetuating sectarianism through the language of the campaign during electioneering. The study finds out that bias in news coverage and selectivity of news stories reported and true to fact very often fed into and reinforce division on certain issues, with voters' attitudes and behavior being influenced.

Khan and Tariq (2022) highlight the economic dimensions of sectarian politics, which postulates that development projects are often distributed unevenly according to sect bias, thereby aggravating existing disparities and voter devotion.

Through qualitative research, perceptions of voters regarding sectarianism in politics were interrogated by Zafar (2023).

Respondents from Chitral felt mixed emotions; while they appreciated the significance of identity, on the other hand, they criticized its over-coverage in political discourse.

In regional trends of voting in regions that are somewhat like Chitral, Ali and Shah (2022) demonstrated that sectarian diversity is generally both unifying and dividing depending on the political weather. They also focused much on how local governments might mitigate sectarian conflicts.

Saifullah (2023) discussed the impact of international sectarian conflicts on local politics in Pakistan, arguing that global narratives often exacerbate local divisions, as in the case of regions like Chitral.

These studies together highlighted the multi-dimensionality of sectarianism's effect on behavior in terms of politics and serve as a strong basis for studying its specific manifestation in District Chitral.

3. Data and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of how sectarian affiliations impact voting behavior in District Chitral. The methodology was crafted to include both descriptive analysis and visual representations through tables and figures, enhancing the interpretation of the data.

Quantitative Data: Structured survey methodology was employed in this research, which involved collecting data from a sample of 500 registered voters from different constituencies in Chitral. The survey included questions related to sect distance, voting behavior and factors that influenced their voting decisions. The quantitative data were examined to find out patterns and trends through the usage of descriptive statistics.

Qualitative Data: Key informants such as political analysts, community leaders and candidates themselves were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to obtain a better understanding of how sectarianism operates in election processes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and interpreted in respective themes focusing on obtaining in-depth views.

Secondary Data Analysis: Historical election data, population figures and historical data were analyzed to find relevant associations between the population structure of the sectors and the results. In this regard, this analysis serves the purpose of providing a clearer understanding of the data.

Descriptive Analysis: The use of descriptive analysis techniques enabled us to summarize and make deductions regarding the data. Tables and figures helped in illustrating voter choices, voting sects, and the voting pattern. In this manner, these relations between variables were well illustrated and simplification of data for better understanding of large populations was enhanced. It is apparent that through qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study deepened their understanding of the research issue, where it was also appropriate to adopt descriptive analysis method supported by graphs.

1. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	300	60
	Female	200	40
Age Group	18-25	150	30
	26-35	200	40
	36-50	100	20
	50+	50	10
Education Level	Primary	80	16
	Secondary	120	24
	Bachelor's	200	40
	Master's and above	100	20
Sectarian Affiliation	Sunni	300	60
	Ismaili	200	40

Source: Author's estimates

Figure 1:   Demographic Profile of Respondents
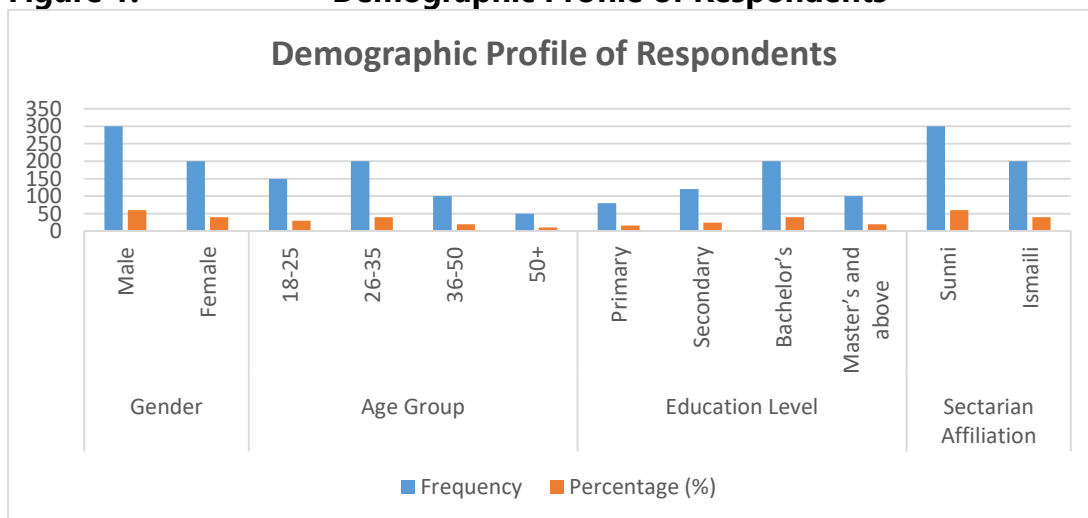
Explanation:

The demographic profile of the respondents is a mixture of gender, age, level of education, and sectarian affiliation.

In respect of gender, the responses predominantly came from males: males: males 60% female, 40%. There are 40% that correspond to the 26 to 35 age categories while 30 % lie between 18 and 25: this means that in age, the most actively represented population bracket was the young adult. In terms of education, respondents were relatively well educated as 40% reported bachelor's degree and 20% master's degree and above. Sectarian affiliation was split into 60% Sunni and 40% Ismaili as the sectarian group's dominant in District Chitral which provides a balanced basis for comparative analysis.

Table 2: Voting Preferences by Sectarian Affiliation

Sectarian Affiliation	Preferred Party	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sunni	PTI	170	52.93
	JUI	80	36.72
	PPP	30	20.30
	Others	20	17.18
Ismaili	PPP	110	58.15
	PTI	50	37.32
	PML (N)	30	21.01
	Others	10	10.23

Source: Author's Estimates

Figure 2:   **Voting Preferences by Sectarian Affiliation**
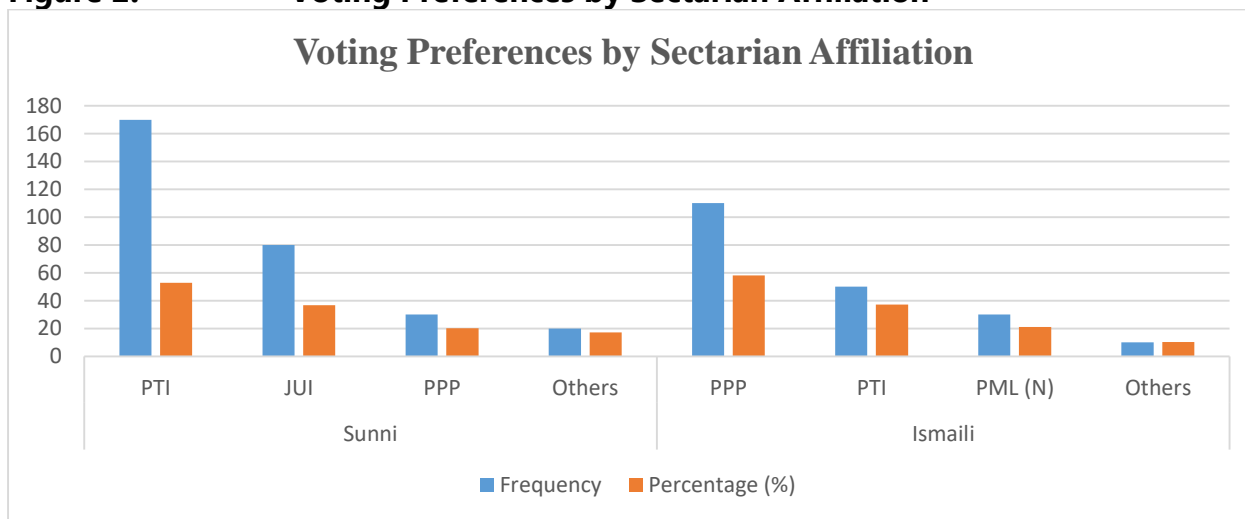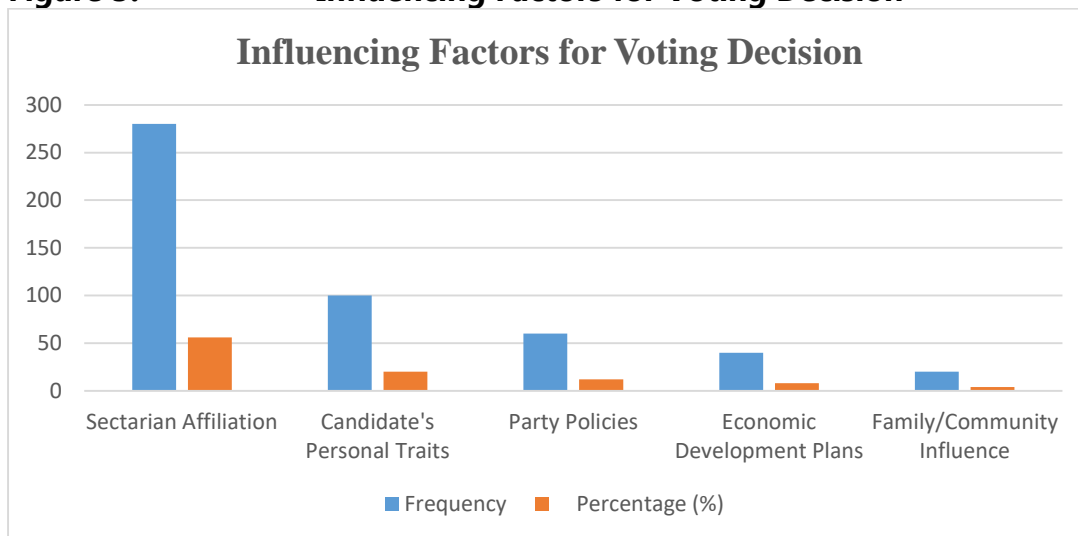

Explanation:

The analysis of voting preferences by sectarian affiliation demonstrates clear patterns. 52.93% of the Sunni respondents supported PTI, whereas 58.15% of the Ismaili respondents supported PPP. A small number of both groups supported other parties, showing that established parties dominate the political landscape there.

The difference indicates that sectarian affiliation is significant in the formation of political affiliations.

Table 3: Influencing Factors for Voting Decision

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sectarian Affiliation	280	56
Candidate's Personal Traits	100	20
Party Policies	60	12
Economic Development Plans	40	8
Family/Community Influence	20	4

Source: Author's Estimates

Figure 3:   Influencing Factors for Voting Decision

**Influencing Factors for Voting Decision**

Explanation:

The factors that may have influenced the vote were further analyzed. It was clear that sectarian affiliation was a leading det determinant; 56% of the respondents attributed it to being significant, suggesting its leading position in political behavior. Traits of the candidate were a close second in importance; 20% of respondents cited this, again showing how personal appeal can be key. Party policies and economic plans added up to 20%, while influence by family or the community was only a fourth factor, reported by only 4% of respondents.

Table 4: Perceived Role of Sectarian Identity in Politics

Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Influences Voting Behavior	250	50
Moderately Influences Voting Behavior	150	30
Minimal Influence	70	14
No Influence	30	6

Source: Author's Estimates

Figure 4:   Perceived Role of Sectarian Identity in Politics

Perceived Role of Sectarian Identity in Politics
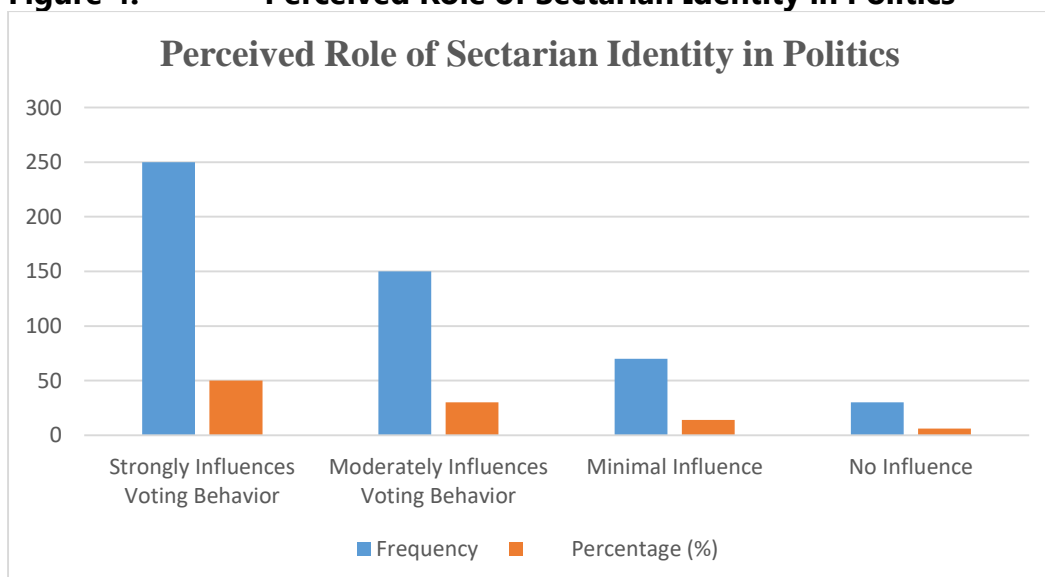
Explanation:

The perceptions of the respondents regarding how sectarian identity affects politics strengthen its influence. Half the respondents perceive that sectarian identity has strong effects on voting behavior; 30% perceived this to have moderate effects; 20%, minimal or nil influence, but there are voters that will look past sectarian factors if policies and development agendas gain the upper hand. Altogether, these findings highlight the sectarian identity, as one among demographic and political concerns, in the constituency voting behavior of District Chitral.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

The findings, then, show the significance of sectarian identity in explaining voting behavior in District Chitral. It was observed that sect has become a major factor influencing political choices as respondents who described themselves as Sunni were more likely to support their religious leader while Ismailis were more likely to support their own. This suggests that political decisions made in the district are contextually related to religious affiliation, such that even when candidate characteristics, party doctrines, or economic concerns are expressed, the first thing that comes to one's head is the sect affiliation.

The younger and educated group constituted most of the respondents in this analysis, thus it is further possible that the voting patterns of this study may represent those of the active voters in Chitral. More than that, there are still voters in Chitral who profess not to belong to a certain sect explaining that such votes should be directed towards developmental needs, though such numbers are rather small in relation to the relatively bigger number of people whose politics is determined by sectarianism.

These findings insight political action in Chitral as well as other similar areas where the religious perspective is underlying. These political parties should also appreciate these sectarian dynamics and in turn focus on the unique needs of each group to foster inclusiveness and decrease tensions. This study has also showcased a gap in literature which warrants more attention as well as criticism regarding voting behavior from a more general development and policy address rather than simply sectarian loyalty. There is the need to conduct a qualitative longitudinal change study of these trends and look at possible socio-political factors such as economic growth or educational growth that could influence the voting patterns of Chitral in particular. This work contributes to the widening angles around which the religion and politics have been viewed, thus adding useful perspectives to those policymakers and political strategists who wish to understand the socio-political landscape of the country.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the influence of sectarian identity on voting behavior in District Chitral and to promote more inclusive and policy-driven electoral practices:

- Political parties should engage with diverse sectarian groups to address their unique concerns and foster a sense of inclusivity. By incorporating voices from

all communities into their decision-making processes, parties can work towards reducing sectarian divides.

- Platforms for inter-sect dialogue should be established to encourage mutual understanding and collaboration between Sunni and Ismaili communities. Such initiatives can help reduce sectarian biases and create a more unified electorate.
- Local leaders who command respect across sectarian lines can play a critical role in bridging divides. Encouraging such leaders to advocate for unity and policy-based voting can influence public opinion positively.
- Addressing socio-economic disparities and implementing development projects in both Sunni and Ismaili-dominated areas can help shift the focus from sectarian identities to shared goals of regional progress and prosperity.

By implementing these recommendations, it is possible to mitigate the influence of sectarian identity on voting behavior, promote inclusive democracy, and ensure that electoral outcomes are driven by collective development goals rather than sectarian divides.

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