Electoral Setbacks to the Political Parties in 2018 General Election in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Comparative Analysis of Anp in District Charsadda and Jamaat-E-Islami in District Lower Dir

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Abstract

Introduction: 2018 general elections (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)) witnessed a bizarre tradition of robust deviation in the province politics. This article narrates the electoral decline of Awami National Party (ANP) in Charsadda and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in Lower Dir, all due to a province-wide rise of Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI).

Methods: Sequential explanatory mixed-methods research with (i) quantitative official returns and district-balanced voter survey (~n≈385) analysis combined with (ii) qualitative (semi-structured interview) investigations among election officials, campaign actors, journalists, and citizens. Descriptive and group tests (t/ANOVA) uncovered patterns; and thematic analysis was used to illuminate mechanisms.

Results: PTI won dominant vote shares in both the districts (Charsadda ≈60%; Lower Dir ≈75%). This contrasts with an overall high turnout, particularly in Lower Dir (≈90% vs. ≈75% in Charsadda). Participation did not vary much by age or education, suggesting a wide political turn rather than a demographic quirk. Interviews coalesced around five processes: (1) a match between message–medium (reform/anti-corruption recast for modern times); (2) a youth–digital synergy that translated online visibility into commitments; (3) leadership credibility and local flexibility, per organizational agility; (4) hybrid mobilization (digital priming and door-to-door followup); as well as (5) the inefficacy of coordination/ideology (e.g., MMA) as electorates process the calculus of governance.

Conclusion: PTI's advantage is a result of convergence of credible performance, digital capability and the reactive local infrastructure. Where competition overcame clinging to legacy symbolism without translating it into provable, near-term capability, strongholds cracked, too. The findings provide a tangible playbook for strategic renewal in an emerging electoral landscape of KP.

Keywords: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; 2018 elections; voter behavior; Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf; Awami National Party; Jamaat-e-Islami; social-media campaigning.

Keywords: *Electoral Setbacks, Political Parties, General Election, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Comparative Analysis, District Charsadda, Jamaat-E-Islami, District Lower Dir.*

1. Introduction

Pakistan's electoral politics blend formal constitutional architecture with fluid on-the-ground contestation. While the ECP mandates, schedules, and administrates general elections, the significance of electoral choice is conditioned by changing coalitions, institutional reforms, security situation, and media ecologies(Hall et al., 2020). This is the national context in which the 2018 KP elections are a striking turning point. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leveraged its provincial incumbency into a thumping mandate, while old parties, which had dominated the provinces, especially the Awami National Party (ANP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), faced severe reverses. The reasons those reverses happened, and why they varied in their scale in traditional heartland seats, are the central concern of this study(Zeb et al., 2024). A number of background forces came together before 2018 commenced. One after the other constitutional amendments and the Elections Act, 2017 provided legal cover, enhanced the regulatory capacity of the ECP, and systematized processes from delimitation to consolidation of results. Professionalization did not eliminate controversy over direction, but it did reduce the reliance on ad hoc arrangements and raised the pressure on parties to compete on governance credibility, message discipline, and organizational performance(Qureshi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the relatively quick proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms radically altered the information landscape. Campaigns found bonuses for creating repeatable, short-content folks could pass along, for breaking all those old filters and engaging voters exactly where they are, and for aligning digital trigger points with real, very visible local hits. Parties that could not adjust the "message–medium fit" might forfeit agenda control to rivals that could.

While these transformations came to the fore in all of Pakistan, they found particularly fertile soil in KP. As being the party in power, PTI could combine a reformist message anti-corruption, service delivery, welfare expansion with visible administrative actions and a youth-heavy outreach apparatus. Across from that, ANP and JI faced a difficult evaluative template. ANP's brand in Charsadda is one of historical lineage of leadership and secular Pashtun nationalism: JI's organizational strength in Lower Dir traces itself to ideological purity and disciplined cadres(Hassan et al., 2021). But in 2018, many voters chose short-term, concrete needs like schools, health, jobs, fixes to local governance, rather than heritage or just ideology. The more decisive question was not whether identity and ideology mattered (they did), but whether they were translated into tangible signals of efficacy that corresponded to how voters now consume politics. Charsadda and Lower Dir make particularly strategic analytical cases. Charsadda, so long enmeshed with the ANP leadership offers a test of whether legacy and heavy associational networks counter a rival's reform narrative under a modern campaign logic. Jamaat's strong historical and institutional links and social base in Lower Dir tried to see if long standing coalition and ideological (lying below MMA flag) branding could save against a performance based party upto a point. Comparing these districts enables us to differentiate between province-wide dynamics on the one hand and district-specific influences leader's credibility, organizational flexibility, candidate's visibility, and youth mobilization the other(Negus et al., 2022).

A second layer of background involves the stack of contacts constitutive of current mobilization. Digital priming leader clips, micro-videos, prompt replies is rarely enough on its own; it's about leverage, from turning it into door-to-door contact, town halls, to fast troubleshooting locally on

behalf of grievances. What we observed in 2018 was that parties that aligned their online and offline touchpoints may have been more successful in mobilizing new voters, helping to convert soft voters and bridging the intention–action gap on election day(Lajevardi et al., 2025). In cases where the parties counted only on such rallies and legacy symbolism and not this new stack they struggled to establish the narrative or to rebut a reformist challenger's claims in real time.

The investigation is based on a generalization of a pragmatic three-part theoretical triad. First, performance voting (a rational-choice logic) assumes that when credible governance signals are visible, voters reward the perceived competence and punish the under-performance (Park et al., 2023). Second, the Michigan model lets us know that short-term forces (issues, candidates, campaigns) are filtered through long-term predispositions (party identification, social background); when conditions are right (salient issues, persuasive cues, credible messengers), short-term evaluations can outweigh habitual loyalties. Third, political opportunity structure emphasizes how the rules of the game (institutional framework), the security situation, as well as media systems regulate gates that can be used to penetrate campaigns. Taken together, these lenses explain how PTI's performance claim, digital capability, and local organization combined to produce advantage, and why ANP and JI would have borne asymmetric costs had they been unable to adjust(Li et al., 2025).

Empirically, the study follows a nested mixed-methods design for sequential explanatory purposes. It quantifies turnout and party vote shares, then links them to demographics and campaign exposure(Almeida et al., 2018). Qualitatively, it sifts through interviews with election officials, campaign workers, journalists and voters to account for what was observed: Why did voter participation surge in one district and not the other? What role did perceived credibility of the leadership and organizational cohesion play in persuasion? How did "youth engagement" play out in practice mere online visibility or a pipeline from feeds to front doors? The combination of strands is intentional: the survey finds patterns, interviews identify mechanisms, a joint display links "what happened" to "why it happened."

That emphasis makes three contributions to the literature. First, it transcends province-level stories to compare two emblematic strongholds at the level of the district, demonstrating that the same provincial swing may yield different changes in magnitude. Second, it combines media ecology with organizational application, seeing digital and ground efforts as complements, not substitutes. Third, it leverages theoretical reflection for practical strategy producing takes that parties can operationalize message reframes as deliverables, youth-first digital pipes, and credible local intermediaries who bridge the promise–action divide.

Problem and objectives. The question we address in this paper is that available narratives of KP-2018 either focus more on provincial shifts or, if written on ANP and JI, consider both parties in isolation, not adequately explaining district-level mechanisms through which a performance-based challenger surpassed the legacy parties in their historical safe heavens. The goals are: (1) to record, in granular detail, the Charsadda (ANP) and Lower Dir (JI) in-district turnout and vote party shares that underpin the empirical profile of "setback"; (2) to analyze relationships among campaigning style, leadership credibility/organizational cohesion, and party image with those outcomes; (3) to probe the roles of youth activism and the digital–ground contact stack in transforming attitudes into ballots; and (4) to weave the findings into the performance voting,

Michigan, and opportunity-structure literatures in order to draw practical lessons for party revitalization in KP's new electoral climate.

2. Literature Review

The literature on electoral change in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), focused on the 2018 general elections, is built around three main themes: (i) institutional and performance-based explanations of party competition since 2013; (ii) shifts in sociopolitical bases of voter preferences—youth support, in particular in the light of governance, campaign style, and media; and (iii) district-level trajectories of party organization and identity in Charsadda and Lower Dir, for example. In combination, these strands elucidate PTI's ability to urbanize to pull a reformist narrative and incumbency performance into an encompassing province-wide momentum, while the legacy parties like ANP and JI failed to defend traditional bases under worksite evaluative terms. The thesis's review of literature itself systematises these themes, structuring previous work around PTI's record from 2013–18, PTI's district-level successes, voter disillusionment with the traditional parties, candidate level attributes, the terrain of youth and social media (including propaganda and door-to-door canvassing), and ANP and JI in KP (Hussain et al., 2022). Performance-based explanations emphasize that between 2013 and 2018, voters increasingly judged parties by perceived delivery on governance, development, and security criteria that could override habitual identifications when credible alternatives emerged. In KP, this recalibration advantaged PTI, which positioned itself as a reformist administrator and a vehicle for anti-corruption, welfare expansion, and service modernization(Beeri et al., 2019). The review highlights that in such contexts, electorate behavior becomes more fluid: constituencies shift support toward actors they believe can generate tangible benefits, and away from parties viewed as inattentive to basic needs.

A second, complementary set of studies isolates dissatisfaction with "old" parties as a driver of change. For ANP in Charsadda, literature cited in the paper underscores a dual liability: attention to broad nationalist positions alongside perceived underperformance on local bread-and-butter issues, compounded by the security environment that constrained ANP's campaigning capacity in earlier cycles. For JI in Lower Dir, accounts emphasize the declining electoral salience of a strictly ideological platform where voters prioritized jobs, schooling, health, and everyday administrative responsiveness (Bennett et al., 2018). In both districts, PTI's framing of good governance and anti-corruption as immediate, household-level benefits resonated with voters looking beyond traditional affiliations especially first-time and younger voters.

Comparative studies on party performance in KP focus on candidate-level and organizational factors to a greater extent. More broadly, the literature speaks to the potency of leadership credibility, message discipline and the routinization of ground campaigns of the sort that involve door-to-door outreach, visible local problem-solving and rapid response to constituent grievances. PTI's campaign infrastructure which lays claim to youthfulness and social media savviness is juxtaposed with rivals' more traditional reliance on legacy networks and symbolic capital (Bergman et al., 2022). Parties that renewed candidate slates, funded disciplined local operations, and aligned provincial-level narratives with ward-level delivery cues were more able to defend or grow their vote share; where these adjustments were slow, vote erosion followed. The review in this paper clusters these insights around candidate personal traits and party

strategies in 2018, including coalition patterns, such as the banner of the MMA, under which JI participated.

A third pillar of explanation is a swiftly changing information environment. Review-conveyed studies show that penetration of social media and diffusion of smartphones shortened campaign cycles and favored concise, emotive, messages and selective mobilization of youth groups(Dunu et al., 2018). The comparative advantage of PTI on these platforms, as magnified through the use of visual media and consistent message reinforcement, reset the standard of responsiveness and accountability- whereas traditional parties needed to take their organizational legacies and translate it to digital markers of competence and inclusion. The review also links those media dynamics to on-the-ground propaganda and door-to-door canvassing, demonstrating how digital and physical outreach amplified one another to convert undecided voters and energize first-time participants(Mare et al., 2020).

Most importantly, paper-mapped scholarship insists that district histories mediate province-wide forces. In Charsadda, ANP's long-standing connection to Pashtun nationalism and secularism formed solid loyalties, but literature shows that by 2018 many voters weighed actual governance and security deliverables more heavily, and the protective effect of the legacy identity waned (Bordonaro et al., 2023). In Lower Dir, JI's entrenched organizational presence and image as a party of principle came under similar challenge: analyses suggest a purely ideological appeal had rapidly diminishing marginal returns when juxtaposed with their opponent's call to collect immediate practical rents. Thus, post Vote 1 and its predecessors, both districts end up situated within an emergent KP-wide pattern increased PTI vote backing, waning clout of traditional elites while retaining the analytic grain of local alignments, candidate personal data, and coalition-making reasoning.

These findings are integrated within theoretical frameworks based primarily on Rational Choice theory, the Michigan model, and Political Opportunity Structure (POS). The Rational Choice perspective puts voters as utility maximizers who elect parties that promise to deliver the most advantageous material and social pay-off; as far as KP 2018 is concerned, this explains why reformist and anti-corruption messages with service delivery claims can take precedence over ancient loyalties. The Michigan model layers on greater psychosocial depth: how long-term endowments (social background, party identification) interrelate with short-term campaign inputs, is the "funnel of causality" everything that needs to be said about why under some conditions compelling performance cues, conspicuous issues, persuasive candidates can tip results even in strongholds(Henry et al., 2024). POS advances the analysis beyond the psychology of voters to the structure of opportunities and constraints: rule changes, security contexts and media systems open or close channels that can be used by parties. The review of the paper explicitly situates the KP case at the crossroads of these two frameworks, relying on them to account for the observed shifts in alignment patterns in Charsadda and Lower Dir.

3. Methods

Study design

The paper employs a comparative mixed methods research design to account for the electoral defeat of Awami National Party (ANP) in the district Charsadda and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in the district Lower Dir during the 2018 elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Quantitative

components draw on official electoral statistics and voter survey data, and qualitative components on semi-structured interviews with election practitioners and observers. The choice of the two districts is theoretically suggested (historical party bastions) and empirically feasible (party performance varies significantly over a common provincial wave). This comparative frame is established in the methodological chapter of the paper and the constructs that mediate between party outcomes and contextual and organizational factors are spelt out.

Variables and conceptual mapping

The analytical model makes a number of interrelated constructs (party performance – vote share, seats, and change from past), district characteristics (demography and SES), campaign strategies (messaging, outreach, and social media), party dynamics (leadership and intra-party) and party image/reputation) and external-related factors (voter turnout), media coverage) and socio-political or cultural factors (such as religious/cultural cues) are hypothesized as underlying explanatory Theorizing Interparty Dynamics and Electoral Performance 105 factors influencing voting behavior. These factors influence instrument development, data collection, and model comparison between the two districts.

Population and sampling design

The population comprises registered voters in Charsadda and Lower Dir in 2018 (Charsadda: 881,017; Lower Dir: 681,841; total N = 1,562,858). These figures anchor sampling frames and descriptive denominators.

A multi-stage cluster sampling strategy is employed. At the first stage, the province is delimited to two district "clusters"—Charsadda and Lower Dir—selected for their substantive relevance. At the second stage, each district is stratified by provincial constituencies (PK seats): Charsadda has four (PK-56, PK-57, PK-58, PK-59), and Lower Dir has five (PK-13, PK-14, PK-15, PK-16, PK-17). Within each PK seat, respondents are drawn to ensure balanced representationacross constituencies.

In practice, the field protocol implemented equal allocations by seat (e.g., c. 41–45 per PK), ensuring constituency-level balance while preserving overall proportionality by district.

Sample size

Sample size was derived using the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) formula for a finite population at 95% confidence and 5% margin of error, with N = 1,562,858 and p = 0.50 for maximum variability. The calculation (and an external Raosoft cross-check) yields a required n ≈ 385, which guided district- and constituency-level quotas.

Field execution reports n = 385 targeted with achieved n = 384 in some sections; we retain the journal standard of reporting target vs. achieved sample where relevant to response rates and robustness checks.

Instruments

1. Quantitative survey

Primary quantitative data were collected using a self-developed, semi-structured closed-ended questionnaire administered to voters across the two districts. The instrument is justified by population size and logistical economy for capturing perceptions of performance, campaign exposure, media use, leadership/image, and turnout behavior.

Instrument development followed a staged process. First, a literature and source scan—including ECP resources, university library OPACs, HEC digital collections, and prior studies—identified constructs and items aligned to objectives. Next, a first draft was prepared to address gaps observed in prior surveys. Content and face validity were established via a five-member expert panel (Annexure-A). Finally, pilot testing (n ≈ 10) verified clarity, flow, and logistics; minor revisions were incorporated prior to launch.

2. Qualitative interviews

To contextualize and explain survey patterns, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with a broad set of election-process stakeholders—Presiding/Assistant Presiding Officers, ECP staff, voters, and media analysts conversant with election rules. Interview guides were shared in advance to standardize topical coverage and improve recall. In total, 384 expert interviews were conducted, scheduled to maximize availability and thematic saturation.

Data collection procedures

Survey teams implemented the constituency quotas using the multi-stage cluster plan, rotating across localities within PK seats and maintaining gender balance per the sampling specification. Door-to-door and spot-intercept approaches were used where appropriate. Interviews were conducted at mutually convenient locations/times after informed consent; a covering letter introduced the study, articulated objectives, and ensured confidentiality.

Data management and quality control

Quality assurance included pre-field enumerator briefing, item-by-item pilot-informed refinements, and on-site supervisor checks for completeness and skip-logic conformity. Expert-panel feedback ensured content validity; the pilot supported face validity and operational feasibility prior to full deployment.

Measures

Operational indicators mirrored the conceptual map. Party performance used constituency-level vote shares/seats and change measures; turnout used ECP-reported percentages; campaign strategy combined exposure to rallies, door-to-door, and social/digital outreach; party image/dynamics used perception scales of credibility, cohesion, and leadership effectiveness; media use captured channels and intensity; district SES/demography were recorded for control and subgroup analysis. The variable plan is enumerated in the methodology chapter and applied consistently across districts.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was performed in SPSS v26, using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, proportions) and inferential tests (t-tests/ANOVA) to compare groups across districts and constituencies, in line with the paper' statistical plan. Where assumptions required, standard diagnostics informed test choice; significance thresholds and effect sizes are reported with the results.

Qualitative analysis followed a six-step thematic procedure in NVivo v12—familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and integrative write-up—allowing triangulation with survey and electoral indicators in the discussion of mechanisms.

Ethics and consent

The study emphasized voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. The covering letter clarified purpose, procedures, and data use; interviews were scheduled only after consent and conducted in settings supportive of free expression. Personally identifying information was delinked from analytic records to protect respondents.

Delimitations

The inquiry is delimited to two KP districts (Charsadda, Lower Dir) and the 2018 general election cycle; the constructs, instruments, and sampling frames were designed to explain party setbacks within this specific scope rather than to produce provincial or national generalizations. This boundary is explicit in the methodology chapter, which also lists the study's delimitation section.

4. Results

This section presents results of a sequential mixed methods study in comparing ANP's Charsadda with JI's Lower Dir during the 2018 KP elections. We start with quantitative findings – descriptive portraits of the respondents and their constituencies, district-level turnout and party vote share – then we proceed to inferential tests (t/ANOVA) to test whether the differences between the groups are significant. All data redrawn from the sources of the theses; tables are structured to be able to compare the districts side by side. We then conduct semi-structured interviews and report qualitative findings, which we code thematically to interpret the patterns observed. The story is organized around five crosscutting themes: message–medium fit, youth digital mobilization, leadership credibility and organizational agility, hybrid ground work bridging online priming with door-to-door contact, and the contours of coalition/ideology under performance based evaluation. Last, an integration subsection combines the quantitative patterns and the qualitative mechanisms in a combined display, thus emphasizing convergences, divergences, and expansions. Taken together, the findings transition from "what happened" to "why it happened" and lay the groundwork for theoretical and practical implications in the discussion.

Quantitative Results

4.1 Charsadda

Table 4.1. Demographic information (Age)

Age group	Frequency	Percentage
18–24	50	25.0%
25–34	60	30.0%
35–44	45	22.5%
45+	45	22.5%

Interpretation. Most respondents are 25–34 (30%), with a sizable 18–24 cohort (25%). This skews the electorate toward younger/middle-age voters—consistent with a context where jobs, education, and services are salient.

Table 4.2. Gender distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	120	60.0%
Female	80	40.0%

Interpretation. Male respondents outnumber female (60% vs. 40%). Campaigns that proactively address women's access/concerns could lift female participation.

Table 4.3. Education level

Education	Frequency	Percentage
High School	20	20.0%
Bachelor's	50	50.0%
Master's	30	30.0%
PhD	10	10.0%

Interpretation. Half of respondents report a Bachelor's degree; another 30% hold Master's—an electorate attentive to governance and delivery, not just identity cues.

Table 4.4. Voter turnout (Charsadda)

Voted	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	150	75.0%
No	50	25.0%

Interpretation. Turnout is high (75%), but a quarter abstained—an actionable segment for targeted, issue-based mobilization.

Table 4.5. Votes by party (Charsadda)

Party	Frequency	Percentage
PTI	120	60.0%
ANP	40	20.0%
JI	30	15.0%
Others	10	5.0%

Interpretation. PTI leads decisively (60%), while ANP retains a notable 20% and JI 15%. Results align with a reform/governance vote eclipsing traditional appeals.

Table 4.6. Statistical tests (Charsadda)

Test	F	df	p
Turnout by Age	2.10	3,146	0.09
Turnout by Education	1.45	3,146	0.22

Interpretation. No statistically significant differences in turnout by age or education at $\alpha=0.05$; participation appears broadly distributed across these demographics.

4.2 Lower Dir

Table 4.7. Demographic information (Age)

Age group	Frequency	Percentage
18–24	45	22.5%
25–34	75	37.5%

35–44	50	25.0%
45+	50	25.0%

Interpretation. The 25–34 cohort is largest (37.5%). Youthful demographics are consistent with programmatic, performance-oriented voting.

Table 4.8. Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	130	65.0%
Female	70	35.0%

Interpretation. A 65–35 gender split suggests scope to further mobilize women via access and policy framing.

Table 4.9. Education level

Education	Frequency	Percentage
High School	60	30.0%
Bachelor's	90	45.0%
Master's	40	20.0%
PhD	10	5.0%

Interpretation. A strong Bachelor's share (45%) indicates an electorate likely responsive to tangible delivery (jobs, services, transparency).

Table 4.10. Voter turnout (Dir)

Voted	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	180	90.0%
No	20	10.0%

Interpretation. Exceptionally high turnout (90%) signals intense engagement and effective local mobilization.

Table 4.11. Votes by party (Dir)

Party	Frequency	Percentage
PTI	150	75.0%
ANP	30	15.0%
JI	15	7.5%
Others	5	2.5%

Interpretation. PTI dominance is even stronger in Dir (75%), while ANP/JI trail. This pattern aligns with a reformist wave over traditional/religious platforms.

Table 4.12. Statistical tests (Dir)

Test	F	df	p
Turnout by Age	1.75	3,176	0.12
Turnout by Education	2.05	3,176	0.09

Interpretation. As in Charsadda, turnout differences by age/education are not statistically significant at 5%, suggesting broad, cross-demographic participation under a common provincial tide.

Qualitative Results

Overview

We conducted a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with presiding/assistant presiding officers, ECP staff, local campaigners, journalists, and voters from Charsadda and Lower Dir. Following the six-step NVivo workflow (familiarization → coding → theme search → review → definition → write-up), we identified five cross-cutting themes that explain ANP and JI setbacks under a province-wide PTI surge.

Theme 1: Campaigning style message–medium fit

Across interviews, respondents framed 2018 as a contest of campaigning styles. JI in Lower Dir was seen "speaking past" voters—anchored in religious rhetoric while the electorate sought concrete problem-solving; analysts tied JI's losses to a style–needs mismatch and to within-party ideological rigidity. In contrast, PTI's narrative of reform and competence—delivered through modernized tactics—was repeatedly cited as resonant in both districts. Respondents described ANP and JI as relying on legacy visuals and conventional outreach, while PTI "met voters where they were"—adapting language, cadence, and channels to local concerns.

Interpretation: The qualitative record depicts style adaptation as causal—when parties failed to translate identity or ideology into practical, near-term benefits, their vote collapsed; when a party could do that while updating its mediums, it prospered.

Theme 2: Youth mobilization and the digital turn

Interviewees, particularly younger voters, described a digital first campaign in which politics felt like something immediate and interactive. They emphasized PTI's constant outpouring of short videos, leader clips and swift retorts compared with the rivals' slower, broadcast-style presence. Youth volunteers described platform cross-pollination (Facebook—Twitter—YouTube) and how shareable content along with peer conversation moved undecided friends. "We actually heard from them on line… they listened to us," summarized one young respondent.

In Charsadda, first-time voting was discussed in connection with online visibility: digital presence had increased PTI's penetration with the new voter in a way ANP could not match; while in Lower Dir, the mosque-centric, traditional JI networks could reach cores but not access the new media voter. Interviews converge on the point that PTI's youth strategy increased not just election-day turnout but a longer-term movement ID among younger age cohorts.

Interpretation: The nexus between the youth and media was a force multiplier: where the digital seemed to mirror the groundwork, PTI won a decisive edge; where parties saw social media as peripheral, they ceded agenda-setting clout.

Theme 3: Leadership credibility and organizational effectiveness

The respondents in these two districts could relate outcomes with the local leaders' quality and municipal coherence. Interviews explained that divisions among ANP leaders in Charsadda, lack of horizontal coordination and communication with women and youth had eroded credibility at the ward level., The JI's organization in Lower Dir was viewed by many as stiff, its leaders not

inspirational enough for swing and younger voters, thus preventing conversion beyond one's conservative base.

In contrast, interviewees described PTI's ticket as nimble, locally present, and message disciplined, with local candidates echoing the provincial reform script. And one voter summary sums up the perceived difference in Charsadda: ANP was "not very dynamic," while most "wanted parties that could come up with realistic, doable solutions.

Interpretation: Organizational agility and authentic local intermediaries mitigated message–action gaps. Where parties sent signals of intra-party conflict or gate-keeping, voters discounted their promises; where they demonstrated a response to problem-solving through visible candidates, that behavior was rewarded.

Theme 4: Ground game door-to-door meets digital

Hybrid mobilization door-to-door but also digital was cited in nearly every interview as key. Respondents described PTI's rallies, town halls and direct canvassing that tracked their online messaging, turning interest into pledges. Several reports stress the fact that traditional canvassing still counted in 2018, it was just that it did best when combined with social feeds and leader clips and PTI managed this mix of tactics more closely than its rivals.

Interpretation: The contact stack (online priming → in-person reinforcement) drove increases in new voters and enabled PTI to overcome legacy loyalties.

Theme 5: Coalition/ideology limits under a performance frame

Interviewees reflect that MMA's tag failed to recapture 2002's momentum; JI laboured against PTI's performance-and-reform yardsticks even in the bygone fortresses. Respondents noted, again and again, the alignment of PTI's control over party narrative and the reach of its appeal to voters, versus ANP/JI's traditional media-based style, and how this asymmetry seemed to affect first-time voters.

Conclusion: With evaluative criteria shifting to governance delivery and media-savvy responsiveness, coalitions grounded primarily on ideological identity seem to face increasingly limited payoffs, except if they repackage messages in terms that are pragmatic and verifiable.

District contrasts within shared dynamics

Interviews portray Dir as more energized (higher level of mobilisation and PTI consolidation) where as Charsadda is more plural and unsettled a diverse party field and higher legacy expectations from ANP). In Charsadda, some respondents reproached ANP for its aloofness from issues young people care about "labaang('unemployment') and talim (education)"—and doubted its "responsiveness"; young people/'swingers' deemed PTI's "change" message as the first believable alternative in ages. In Dir, interviewees recognized JI's organizational strength but emphasised little appeal beyond the conservative bedrock, with PTI's local development pledges and young candidates swaying the vote.

Discussion

The results illustrate KP 2018 as a watershed in performance based voting trends in Pakistan with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) turning incumbency and reform narrative into hegemonic vote shares across the board. In numerical terms, PTI's lead was more pronounced in Lower Dir (75%) than in Charsadda (60%), and polling was quite high in Dir (90% vs. 75%). What was interesting, however, is that participation did not vary much by age or education, which means there was a provincewide political surge and not a wave tied to a narrow demographic. They are consistent with the notion that in the presence of salient credible-governance-framing and anti-corruption frames, short-term efficacy considerations can trump legacy loyalties—even in strongholds of the ANP and JI.

Qualitative evidence further illuminates the reasons behind these figures. The first stage was the 2018 message–medium fit fight: PTI could credibly amplify a reform message into channels and rhythms congruent with how voters consume politics (brief videos, rapid on-line engagement, visible local follow-through) while ANP and JI were seen to rely on old-style reach-out and lagacy symbolism. Second, the youth–digital nexus was a force multiplier. Politics was interactive and immediate, young people said, and online contact turned into real-world commitments when combined with door-to-door canvassing. Third, leadership credibility and organizational agility made a difference: survey respondents in Charsadda which is still a Peshawar-centric district cited ANP's fractiousness and its lack of women and youth appeal, and in Dir most respondents felt that JI's organization was too inflexible good for a diehard core but less credible for swing voters looking for tangible delivery. As a result, the coalition brand (MMA's flag) was not enough once the evaluative frame was underwritten by concrete governance; mere ideological cues could not square off against a well-oiled performance script.

Overall, the synthesis of results addresses the research questions. The PTI advantage is not simply born out of macro-level mood; it is constructed through a touch stack digital priming followed by in-person friction executed by candidates perceived as approachable and viable. Where rivals had failed to update campaign style, to refresh local intermediaries or to speak in verifiable benefits, they had conceded agenda-setting power. The this-district contrast (Dir more energized, Charsadda more plural and unsettled) suggests that the same provincial wave can happen at different intensity levels when local organization and narrative discipline are at play.

From a practical standpoint, what does this mean for parties trying to claw back the past: (i) reframe identity or ideological appeals in deliverable-first agendas; (ii) build youth-centric digital pipelines feeding structured ground campaigns; (iii) prioritize credible, visible local candidates who bridge the promise–action gap; and (iv) systematize listening posts for women and first-time voters. Theoretically it bolsters performance voting arguments and shows how media opportunity structures and organizational decisions transform these evaluations into votes.

Conclusion

This study explains why Awami National Party (ANP) in Charsadda and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in Lower Dir suffered electoral setbacks in the 2018 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa elections. Quantitatively, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) secured dominant vote shares in both districts, with extraordinarily high turnout in Lower Dir. The absence of significant turnout differences across age and education suggests that a broad province-wide performance wave—rather than a narrow demographic surge—underpinned participation. Qualitatively, interviews clarify the mechanisms: PTI achieved superior message–medium fit, translating a reform and anti-corruption narrative into youth-centric digital channels, then converting online salience into commitments through disciplined door-to-door outreach. In contrast, ANP and JI relied more on legacy symbolism and conventional mobilization, struggled to refresh local intermediaries, and were perceived as less responsive to immediate service-delivery concerns. Coalition identity (e.g., the MMA banner) was insufficient when voters evaluated parties on tangible governance.

The comparative lens shows how the same provincial tide produced different magnitudes of change: Lower Dir appeared more energized and consolidated behind PTI, while Charsadda remained more plural and contingent on local organization and candidate credibility. Methodologically, the QUAN→QUAL design and statistics-interview joint reading reveal the intricacies of performance voting, media opportunity structures, and organizational malleability in fashioning masses of enthusiasm into district-level votes.

In practical terms, parties that want to regain ground: (i) should reframe ideological or identity signals into credible, near-term promise delivery; (ii) need to build youthful digital pipelines first that serve structured ground campaigns; (iii) faced with a choice between credible and visible candidates to bridge the promise–action gap; and (iv) should institutionalize listening posts for women and first-timers. The study has local limits across two districts and one cycle but follows mechanisms that do: where reform credibility, digital competence and local responsiveness are combined, legacy commitments are whittled down; where they are not, even strongholds can disintegrate. These findings provide a tangible script for strategic renewal in KP's shifting electoral terrain.

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