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Ready for e-electioneering? Empirical evidence from Pakistani political parties' websites

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of political party websites for e-electioneering and their impact on the outcome of the elections.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical data for the study were collected from the websites of 11 major political parties of Pakistan using modified version of the coding scheme used by Gibson, Rommele and Ward for the evaluation of functionality and delivery of websites. Data were analysed using web content analysis method to achieve the objectives of this study. The study also ranked the party websites based on points scored for functionalities and delivery.

Findings – The study found that although Pakistani political parties have started using their websites for communication with their voters during the general elections but they have not utilized the full potential of the website functionalities for e-electioneering.

Research limitations/implications – The study focused on content analysis of political party websites of Pakistan only. However, comparisons were made to other studies where possible to contextualize the results of this study in international perspective. It is suggested to replicate this study after ten years to study the changing behaviour of political parties.

Practical implications – Political parties might like to improve their websites in the light of findings of this study to spread their message more effectively to larger voter base.

Social implications – Findings of the study will help in improving the readiness of political parties for e-electioneering and improved websites will help voters in making an informed decision during election. It will overall improve the electoral process in the country where democratic system is not very strong.

Originality/value – With the advent of internet, political parties are using their websites during elections for various purposes. This study, first ever in Pakistan on the topic, provides empirical evidence on the use of political party websites during May 2013 general election in Pakistan and presents its impact on the outcome of the election. The study will be valuable for political science researchers especially those focusing on Asia and Pakistan.

Keywords Pakistan, Content analysis, Political parties, Elections, E-electioneering, Political party websites

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

It was a historic moment for people of Pakistan when they voted on 11 May 2013 because it was the first time in the history of Pakistan, since its independence in 1947, that transfer of power was taking place from one democratically elected government to the other. People of Pakistan very enthusiastically participated in the election and

voted for the candidates and parties of their choice. There were 250 political parties registered with Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in May 2013 (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013a). The reason for this big number is that rules in this regard are very liberal. Any Pakistani can establish a political party and get it registered with ECP. The majority of these parties does not have roots in the public and comprise of few members only. The public calls some of them tanga (horse cart) parties because all their members can ride on a tanga. However, all parties can take part in the elections regardless of the size of their membership. That is why 148 political parties took part in the general election 2013 (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013b).

Pakistan has a parliamentary form of government with the National Assembly (lower house), the Senate (upper house) and four Provincial Assemblies. The National Assembly comprises of 342 members out of which the public directly elects 272 members while 60 seats are reserved for women and ten seats are reserved for minorities, which are allocated to the political parties proportionately according to the number of seats they have won in the general election. Same procedure applies to four Provincial Assemblies also. However, number of seats for each assembly depends on the population of the province. In case of the Senate, the provincial assemblies elect the members of the Senate on parity basis, i.e. four provinces have equal numbers of members in the Senate.

Pakistan is a country of 180.34 million people (Population Census Organization, 2013) out of which 80,724,009 people were eligible voters (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2012). Eligible voter means any Pakistani aged 18 years or more registered with National Database and Registration Authority. A large number of young voters polled their votes for the first time. Therefore, they showed enthusiasm in formation of their future government. Voters of all ages were very keen to use their right of vote to decide the fate of their country because of the independent election commission formed after the 18th constitutional amendment. Political parties used various means of communications to reach these voters including traditional approaches of rallies, personal contacts, campaigning through print and electronic media and modern approaches like internet, websites and social media.

To study the e-electioneering, it is necessary to have a look at the situation of internet penetration and use. Literature shows that Pakistan has very good internet penetration. The use of internet has increased at a rate of more than 50 per cent per annum since its introduction in Pakistan in 1996 (Mujahid, 2002). In January 2006, Pakistan was ranked 26th among the countries having highest internet penetration (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2007). According to latest economic survey (released in June 2014), Pakistan had broadband internet penetration of 1.92 per cent with 3.4 million broadband subscribers at the end of February 2014. The actual number of internet users was much more than the subscribers as one broadband subscription could cater the needs of all people in a house or office (Government of Pakistan, 2014).

2. Related literature
Use of internet and party websites during elections and study of different aspects of these communication channels relating to elections is very common in different parts of the world. Literature indicates that use of internet, party websites and social media is very much common during elections in developed countries like America. However in developing countries, like India, the candidates preferred traditional channels of communication, like rallies and face-to-face contact, instead of using the new medium (Gadekar *et al.*, 2011). A recent study of British General Election 2010 found that

internet is becoming a feature of the electoral communication strategy of most of the parties (Lilleker and Jackson, 2013).

The American election held in 2012 may be termed as internet election because both presidential candidates and their parties actively used the internet for communication with the voters. Use of internet, party websites and other channels of communication during American elections is not new. In 2004, Howard Dean almost made his way to his party's presidential nomination with the help of Meetup.com and hundreds of bloggers (Wolf, 2004). However, he was not lucky enough to win nomination of democratic party as presidential candidate but he successfully demonstrated how effective use of internet could make a difference.

2.1 Internet as a communication tool

Internet has provided a variety of options for effective communication. Political parties are using the internet for communicating with their potential voters. This may be one-way communication or two-way communication. Usage patterns of party websites, especially Web 2.0 technologies, during online campaign for last American elections (2012) have presented new models of political approach (Lilleker and Jackson, 2013). An investigation of the online presence of major political parties in the USA (Panagopoulos, 2003) found that state parties were not disregarding the internet and considered it as a powerful tool for communication and organization. However, they allocated meek resources for their online activities. Smaller parties were more likely to use the internet for communicating owing to lack of financial and human resources. The results of a study of political party websites and e-newsletters during 2005 general election in UK (Jackson, 2007) suggested that smaller parties were more likely to use their websites as a two-way communication channel. It concluded, "The Internet is not generally used as an integrated communication tool used to promote a wide range of party communication channels and messages" (Jackson, 2007, p. 267). Similarly, in Germany, smaller parties used their online presence to reach the public (Gibson *et al.*, 2003).

Belgian political parties used their websites for one-way communication, mainly for providing controlled information and offered little opening for interaction and dialogue during 2000 and 2006 local elections (Hooghe and Vissers, 2008). Likewise, South African and Taiwanese political parties used their websites as a one-way communication tool for dissemination of information to voters and did not allow them to engage interactively in the election process during 2009 and 2008 elections, respectively (Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Onumajuru and Chigona, 2010; Wang, 2010).

2.2 Underutilization of the potential of internet

Internet provides many opportunities for political parties to interact with their voters but a number of studies confirm the underutilization of the actual potential of internet. A comparison of website characteristics of county political parties of three American states (California, Pennsylvania and Texas) revealed that the political parties relatively infrequently used the party websites as a political tool at county level (Huckabay, 2008). The study concluded that although county political party websites had potential for use as a political tool but all county political parties lacked sufficient utilization of websites to make any definitive statements.

Australian political parties were very cautious in using internet, the World Wide Web and e-mail. They failed to seize the initiative of web campaigning and website did little to engage the users (Gibson and Ward, 2002). The study reported that only 4.4 per cent of

voters used the internet for obtaining news about federal election in 1998. Although majority of South African political parties had established websites, despite low accessibility rates of internet, they did not take full advantage of the functionalities offered by the internet during 2009 elections. They used it as a tool for dissemination of information instead of an engagement tool for encouraging participation in the political process (Crossland and Chigona, 2010). While in Belarus, the situation of online activities was pathetic with low level of web campaigning on political party websites during 2008 parliamentary election (Khrapavitski, 2008). The political parties and their candidates in the Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat also did not use the maximum potential of internet during parliamentary elections of 2009. Party websites lacked many features and did not provide updated information (Gadekar *et al.*, 2011). The study assumed that low internet penetration might be the reason for this phenomenon.

2.3 Electoral campaigns and party websites

Political party websites are becoming a useful means of political campaigns during elections. Major themes in use of websites during electoral campaigns include information provision/delivery, mobilization of supporters, engagement of voters, etc. A qualitative analysis to explore the use of web by American state parties and Senate candidates in their strategy for 2004 election revealed "four common goals of party and candidate websites: mobilizing existing supporters, getting the message out, empowering existing supporters, and soliciting contributions" (Cohen, 2006, p. 2).

US political parties have used the party websites successfully for serving different stakeholders and their websites are more sophisticated in content than other countries. This impression arises from the master's thesis of Williams and Lahdo (2006) who investigated four political party websites (two each from America and Sweden) to study the use of internet by political parties to serve stakeholder groups. The findings of the study indicated that parties used their websites for information provision, communication, electoral campaigning and fundraising. They found that contents of political party websites and stakeholders differed from country to country as well as from party to party. They concluded, "The US parties are more successful in serving every category of stakeholder groups than the Swedish parties by dedicating a separate webpage for each stakeholder group" (Williams and Lahdo, 2006, p. 81). They further concluded "US parties' websites are much more sophisticated in their content than the Swedish parties' websites" (Williams and Lahdo, 2006, p. 82).

2.4 Information provision/delivery

The British political parties have developed more professional and corporate attitude to web design and kept their web pages updated. Auty and Cowen (2001) were of the view that "the Net is seen as another means of propagating party doctrine and raising funds rather than canvassing opinions or involving surfers in the decision making process" (p. 351). However, a recent study found that British political parties are not only using their websites for internal marketing to party activists but online communication has been embedded in their marketing communication strategies (Lilleker and Jackson, 2013). Gibson and Ward (2002) reported that Australian political parties mainly used their websites for dissemination of information and website did little to engage the users. That is why only 4.4 per cent of voters used the internet for obtaining news about federal election in 1998. Likewise, an analysis of nine German political party websites during 2002 federal election revealed that German parties tended to use the

internet as a tool for information dissemination and opinion formation rather than using it for participation of the user in party policymaking (Gibson *et al.*, 2003). In a recent study, Schweitzer (2011) found that German political parties were still using party websites for information provision and scarcely provided any option for interactive engagement of the voters in electoral campaign.

Websites were not an important source of political information for the Finish voters during the European election of 2004 in Finland. Major candidates and parties dominated the online environment and made better use of the internet. However, their websites provided a small number of information and engagement features. Few voters, with exception of youngsters, indicated that they got much information from the web, which helped them in decision making for voting (Carlson and Strandberg, 2005). Ideology was a significant factor for variation in characteristics of presidential candidates and national parties' websites for online campaigning in France as conservative parties focused on information provision while progressive parties invested more on participation features (Vaccari, 2008).

Belgian political parties' used their websites primarily for dissemination of controlled information (Hooghe and Vissers, 2008). Similarly, main function of the South African party websites appeared to be the provision of information although the political parties also used these websites for fundraising during 2009 election (Crossland and Chigona, 2010). During 2008 general election in Taiwan, political parties and candidates used blogs and websites for attacking their opponents instead of using them for dissemination of their policies and information on various issues of voter's interest (Wang, 2010).

2.5 Engagement of voters
Engagement of voters in political processes, like formulation of party policy and election campaigns, is another important function of the party websites through which political parties can empower their supporters. However, very few party websites provide engagement features to their users. Bowers-Brown and Gunter (2002) analysed the use of websites during 2001 general election in UK by the three major political parties (conservatives, labour and liberal democrats). They found that political parties incorporated a number of interactive features in the design of party websites to take on the attention and involvement of the users. On the other hand, the analysis of 11 political party websites by Auty and Cowen (2001) reported that only few parties tried to pull the users towards their websites during electoral campaigning and allowed limited input into part policy through interactive features on their websites. However, Lilleker and Jackson (2013) found that though convincing the voters remained a characteristics but internal marketing was an emerging feature of political party websites to encourage party supporters for donations, campaigning and promotion of party both online and offline.

Australian parties have failed to seize the initiative of web campaigning and websites did little to engage the users (Gibson and Ward, 2002). Similarly, German parties used the internet as a tool for opinion formation rather than using it for participation of the users in party policymaking (Gibson *et al.*, 2003). Party websites were not an important source of political information for the Finish voters during European election of 2004 because websites provided a small number of information and engagement features (Carlson and Strandberg, 2005). Vaccari (2008) reported that online electioneering, in terms of participation tools, was still at an intermediary stage in France and progressive parties invested more on participation features than the conservative parties.

South African political parties perceived the internet as a tool for dissemination of information instead of an engagement tool for encouraging participation in the political process and their websites did not encourage the participation of users in the political process through internet (Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Onumajuru and Chigona, 2010). While, a content analysis, which investigated the differences in communication patterns between campaign blogs and websites during 2008 general election in Taiwan, found that the voter mobilization was not the main function of the websites (Wang, 2010). Similarly, Belarusian electoral campaign websites lacked engagement features like volunteer recruitment (Khrapavitski, 2008).

2.6 Internet as a replacement of traditional media

Some people are of the view that the internet has replaced the traditional communication media. This point of view is acceptable to some extent but many studies have confirmed that this process of replacement is not yet over. Traditional means of communication are still effective for contacting the voters during electoral campaigns, especially in developing and under developed countries. A study of Belgian political parties' use of the internet as communication and campaigning strategy tool found that parties relied on mix of different media for their election campaign and the internet did not replace any of the traditional media. Belgian political parties used traditional media for small-scale contacts with their voters and the internet was just an addition to the traditional media, especially for the parties focusing on young voters (Hooghe and Vissers, 2008). Similarly, an examination of the use of internet during Indian parliamentary elections of 2009 revealed that the candidates preferred traditional channels of communication like rallies and face-to-face contact instead of using the new medium. The study showed that although internet has proved itself as a supportive medium for electioneering but it has not notably replaced the traditional mediums (Gadekar *et al.*, 2011).

2.7 Quality of website and size of political party

The development of a dynamic party website involves many resources. Larger political parties can develop party websites more easily because they have more human and financial resources (Jackson, 2007; Strandberg, 2007). Strandberg (2007), who explored the opinion of Finish parties about the importance, use and the content of party websites, found that contents of the websites were interrelated to the size of the party. Parliamentary party websites were much better than the websites of parties outside parliament in terms of information provision and presentation. Likewise, the results of a study of political party websites and e-newsletters during 2005 general election in UK (Jackson, 2007) suggested that the size of political party and its financial strength plays an important role in creation, maintenance and quality of the party website.

An analysis of the use of internet by the German political parties during 2002 federal election revealed that there was a clear divide between the websites of major and minor parties in terms of quality and visibility. The study discovered that major parties were beginning to take the internet seriously for election campaigning while smaller parties used their online presence to reach the public (Gibson *et al.*, 2003). This digital divide between German parties has now narrowed but it is still visible (Schweitzer, 2011). Similarly, an analysis of the characteristics of presidential candidates and national parties' websites to assess the state of online campaigning in France showed that the gap between large and small parties was greater than that reported in similar studies in other

countries (Vaccari, 2008). The smaller political parties of Belgium found it difficult to maintain eye-catching websites (Hooghe and Vissers, 2008). While an examination of political party websites in South Africa during 2009 election revealed that websites of large parties offered more functions than those of small parties but delivery of these functions did not follow the same pattern (Crossland and Chigona, 2010).

2.8 Political party websites and election outcome
A number of factors may affect the outcome of an election including, but not limited to, racism (Pasek *et al.*, 2009), use of ICTs (Smith, 2000) and use of party websites for electioneering (Tops *et al.*, 2000). The only study found related to our topic discussed the use of party websites in 1998 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands (Tops *et al.*, 2000). The study found that nearly all parties developed websites, which provided variety of information but impact of these websites on election results was not very significant.

When we look towards Pakistan, in the context of the use of internet and party websites for electioneering, literature is silent on the issue. The researchers were unable to find any study conducted in Pakistani scenario on the topic. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the use of political party websites during election and their impact on the outcome of the election. The general election held in May 2013 was the perfect time for conducting such a study because use of the political party websites for electioneering would have been at the top just before the election.

3. Research questions
In the light of above literature review, the researchers formulated following research questions for this study:

RQ1. How political parties are using their websites for electioneering in Pakistan?

RQ2. Do the Pakistani political parties utilize their website up to its potential?

RQ3. What kinds of functionalities party websites do offer? How effective is the delivery of these functionalities?

RQ4. What efforts Pakistani political parties make to engage the voters through their websites?

RQ5. Is there any relationship between the parliamentary size of the political party and quality of the website?

RQ6. How the websites of Pakistani political parties would be ranked based on their functionalities and delivery?

RQ7. Does the use of websites for electioneering has any influence on the outcome of general election 2013 in Pakistan?

4. Research methodology
4.1 Selection of websites
Selection of political parties was done to shortlist the 148 parties contesting the general election 2013. Names of political parties were obtained from the website of Election Commission of Pakistan (2013b). Selection of political parties for the study based on the party representation in the National Assembly and four Provincial Assemblies, which completed their five years term on 16 March 2013. However, Markazi Jamiat

Ulema-e-Pakistan (MJUP) and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) Pakistan (an alliance of religious parties) were not included in the study because these were not contesting the general election 2013. Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI – F) group had representation in the assemblies from the platform of MMA Pakistan. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Pakistan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) boycotted the 2008 general election held under the dictatorial rule of General Pervez Musharraf but are considered as the major political parties, especially PTI obtained a lot of public support in recent years and it was termed as third largest political force in the country. Hence, MJUP and MMA were not included while JUI – F, JI and PTI were included in the study.

A list of political parties and their websites was then prepared by searching the URLs of party websites through Google using name of the party. Four political parties (26.67 per cent) had no website. Therefore, analysis for functionality and delivery during general election 2013 included the websites of 11 political parties (see Table I). Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) is the parliamentary face of Pakistan People's Party (PPP). PPPP does not have its own website but website of PPP is available. Although, ECP registered both the parties but actually these are the same. Therefore, the researchers considered the website of PPP as PPPP website and used the Pakistan People's Party (along with its abbreviation PPP) in the subsequent paragraphs to describe the party. Leadership of PPP (Sherpao) renamed their party as Quami Watan Party with abbreviation QWP. PPP (S) or QWP has not developed a website. There was no website of JUI (F) with party name as its URL but the website mentioned in Table I showed that it was official website of the party. Therefore, the researchers considered it as the website of JUI (F).

4.2 Data collection

The data collection and analysis for this study based on the modified version of the coding scheme used by Gibson *et al.* (2003) for the evaluation of functionality and delivery of websites. The coding scheme comprised of two parts: functions and presentation and delivery. Detail of measures for each function and the system of assigning the points was as follows. Functions included electioneering (ordinal index 0-5), information provision (additive index 0-14, one point assigned for each item present), services/benefits (ordinal index 0-3), participation (additive index 0-13, one point assigned for each item present), networking internal (ordinal index 0-3) and networking external (cumulative index 0-15 composed of three ordinal indices 0-5).

S. no.	Political parties	Abbreviation	URL
1	Awami National Party	ANP	www.awaminationalparty.org/
2	Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan	JI	english.jamaat.org/
3	Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (Fazal-ur-Rehman)	JUI (F)	www.nrdf.org.pk/jui/
4	Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan	MQM	www.mqm.org/
5	National Party	NP	www.nationalparty.com.pk/
6	Pakistan Muslim League	PML	pml.org.pk/
7	Pakistan Muslim League (Functional)	PML (F)	pmlf.com.pk/
8	Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)	PML (N)	www.pmln.org/
9	Pakistan Muslim League (Zia)	PML (Z)	www.pmlzia.com/
10	Pakistan People's Party	PPP	www.ppp.org.pk/
11	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf	PTI	www.insaf.pk/

Table I.
Political party websites included in the analysis

The original coding scheme had an additive index of 0-14 but only 13 measures were present under it. Therefore, the index was reduced to 0-13 for this study. "Presentation and delivery" included "visibility" (two measures), "freshness" (ordinal index 0-6), "glitz factor" (cumulative index 0-6 composed of two additive indices 0-3), "access" (two measures. Additive index 0-5, one point assigned for each item present for access index and one point assigned if homepage loaded in less than ten seconds), "navigability" (additive index 0-5, one point assigned for each item present), and "responsiveness" (two measures).

The coding scheme was selected because it was considered suitable for answering the research questions of the study. The coding scheme is suitable for present study because it is almost a replica of Gibson *et al.* (2003) study conducted in different settings. Two changes (relating to visibility and responsiveness) were made to the original coding scheme due to time constraint while one change (relating to size of the homepage) was made due to unavailability of sufficient information for repeating the study. "Visibility" and "responsiveness" were not studied while "size of homepage in kb" was changed to "homepage" under "access" and, instead of noting size of the homepage in kb, loading speed (in seconds) was noted for each party website. Homepage opening in less than ten seconds scored one point. Thus, each website could score a maximum of 76 points. Operational definitions of different variables are given in Table II.

Ranking of the party website was done based on the points scored by each website according to the modified coding scheme. Comparisons of party ranking were made to election results of these parties for measuring the possible influence of website on

Variables	Operational definitions
Functions	Different options available on the party website. For example, electioneering or information provision
Electioneering	Features that cover election-specific activities initiated for a limited time. For example, a separate website for election
Information provision	Features that provide textual background material to users about party, its leadership, organization, policies, and election campaign. For example, organization history of the party, like information about its establishment, periods in government and party leaders
Services/benefits	Services and/or benefits offered by the party to the users. For example, commercial merchandise (like t-shirt or poster) for purchase from the website or direct link to other online sellers
Participation	Options that facilitate a two-way communication between party and public. For example, bulletin board or chat room
Networking internal	Links to the websites of the party leaders, candidates, local branches and different party wings/groups. For example, women, youth, labour, etc.
Networking external	Links to other parties, organizations, news, and government websites. For example, links to newspapers and news broadcasters
Presentation and Delivery	Style of presenting different features and the way in which they are supplied to the users. For example, freshness or navigability
Freshness	Frequency with which website is updated. For example, daily or within 1-2 days
Glitz factor	Provision of items like graphics, frames, flash and multimedia objects. For example, pictures and videos of party leaders
Access	Options that facilitate the users in using website. For example, option to translate the website in any other language
Navigability	Options that direct the user to different pages of the website. For example, "homepage icon" and "fixed menu bar"

Table II.
Operational
definitions of
variables

outcome of the election. Utilization of the potential of party websites was determined through comparison of the points scored by websites and total possible points. Parliamentary size of the political parties was measured using number of National Assembly seats won in 2013 elections while relationship between the quality of website and the parliamentary size of political parties was measured using party website rank and parliamentary size of the parties.

Research design adopted for the study is important as it provides knowledge about readiness of political parties for e-electioneering. However, it is limited to web content only and does not include the opinion of party representatives. Major strength of the coding scheme is the mechanism provided for comprehensive analysis of party websites for functionality and presentation. It covers different functions of a party website and measures to evaluate presentation and delivery. However, the coding scheme does not reveal the rational for lack of certain features on the website as it is limited to content analysis.

Though study was conducted by two researchers (both the authors), data collection (including observation of party websites and coding) and analysis was done by the first author alone to ensure consistency in coding and interpretation of data. Data collection/examination of the party websites started on 30 April 2013, 11 days before the general election 2013, and continued until 9 May 2013. All websites were looked at once for the data collection. We used a coding sheet, specially prepared in MS Excel, for recording of data.

5. Findings
Following paragraphs present the findings of the study. The percentages were calculated based on the points scored by each website out of total number of points (76).

5.1 Functions
5.1.1 Electioneering. Results of the study show that majority of the parties (90.91 per cent) has not created a separate website for the election. Only exception to this general trend was PTI, which provided a separate election website. Most of the parties (63.64 per cent) provided pages for the election-related information while websites of three parties (27.27 per cent) had no coverage of election-related information.

5.1.2 Information provision. Analysis revealed that "information provision" was the major function of the party websites examined because majority of the websites (72.73 per cent) scored 50 per cent or higher points for this function. Only three websites (27.27 per cent) scored less than 50 per cent points for "information provision". Majority of the websites (63.64 per cent) provided information about the "organization history" of the party like information about its establishment, periods in government and party leaders. Six websites (54.55 per cent) provided information about the party structure, i.e. organization of party including information about different committees, leadership positions and power relationship among them. Most of the websites (90.91 per cent) gave information about the values/ideology of the party consisting of their goals and guiding principles. Only the website of JUI (F) did not have this information. The majority of websites (81.82 per cent) offered some information about party policies. Similarly, 81.82 per cent websites presented the documents like party manifesto, constitution and research papers on different issues.

Many websites (63.64 per cent) displayed the party news for online reading without using the word "newsletter". However, only one party used the word "newsletter" as a

heading for the news. It indicates that parties did not consider using the concept of "newsletter" for publication of different news items. Remaining parties did not provide news on their websites. None of the parties provided downloadable "newsletter" for offline reading. Media releases were considered important by the political parties because 81.82 per cent websites had dedicated a section for press releases which included statements issued by the party to the media, interviews of party leaders, speeches, etc. The majority of the political parties did not consider the provision of biographical information about important party leaders/members as 54.55 per cent of the websites lacked such information. Leader or National Executive Committee focus was the most important function of the websites as all parties displayed pictures or text about their leader and/or key office bearers.

"Event calendar", "conference information" and "frequently asked questions" were not deemed necessary as 81.82 per cent of the websites did not provide "event calendar" and "frequently asked questions". While all the websites were completely silent about "conference information". Likewise, "article archive or library" was also regard as less significant because only 36.36 per cent websites had such facility. The majority of party websites were deficient in special pages for different groups of people within the party.

5.1.3 Services/benefits. Pakistani political parties did not see the service/benefits as a function of party website as no website offered commercial merchandise (like t-shirt or poster) for purchase from the websites or provided direct link to other online sellers.

5.1.4 Participation. Most of the parties (90.91 per cent) presented audio and video contents and/or search engines on their websites so that users can gather information about the party. Only PML (Z) website was short of such functionality. Political party websites did not pay much attention towards actively engaging their users because less than half of them (45.45 per cent) allowed signup for direct e-mail updates to gather further information about the party. Political dialogue is important in the political process to understand views of others. However, party websites in Pakistan did not provide any facility for political dialogue like bulletin board or chat room for the visitors to exchange views with others and/or to have Q&A sessions with party leaders. Similarly, the websites did not encourage the users to influence others opinion and get support for the party by sending e-mail, postcard or message. Internet and websites have the potential for use as a marketing tool for the party publicity but 81.82 per cent of the party websites did not use this function for advertising their party. Only the websites of PML (N) and PTI offered advertising material for downloading. The majority of Pakistani political parties (81.82 per cent) were interested in getting feedback from the visitors as their websites provided facility for the users to contact with the party, express their opinions and provide feedback.

The political party websites were deficient in petitioning function as no party website offered online petition for lobbying on important issues. Similarly, the websites were also short of donating function because 91.92 per cent parties did not provide facility for donating financially through the website to support the party. The PTI was the only exception, which actively used its website for collection of donations. Offering associate membership or "friend of" status was another function, which was not present on party websites studied. However, the parties somewhat (45.45 per cent) encouraged the users to join them online through their website. The majority of Pakistani political party websites were deficient in the campaigning or volunteering function, as 91.92 per cent of the websites did not offer the opportunity to the supporters to offer their help without necessarily joining the party. The PTI was

the only exception, which had developed a separate web portal for volunteers. The websites were also short of e-campaigning function, as none of them offered a facility for the users to take part in e-campaigning strategy. The majority of party websites (72.73 per cent) did not provide members' section, needing login ID and Password, to access the information reserved for members only.

5.1.5 Networking internal. Political party websites of Pakistan showed weak internal networking. The majority of websites (81.82 per cent) did not provide any internal links, i.e. link to party candidates'/party leaders' homepages or link to internal pressure/issues-oriented groups (like women, youth, labour, etc.) or link to homepages of party members. Only the websites of JI and MQM offered limited range of links to the websites of party branches or internal groups.

5.1.6 Networking external. The websites of Pakistani political parties also showed weak external networking just like the internal networking. The majority of the websites (72.73 per cent) did not offer any link to the organizations, which support their goals, or link to the news/educational websites or even link to commercial services. The websites of JI and PPP provided limited number of links to the organizations supporting their goals. However, the website of MQM presented extensive reference links including (but not limited to) links to newspapers and news broadcasters. Table III presents an overall picture of the functions of political party websites in Pakistan. It noticeably shows that Pakistani political parties have used their websites mainly for information provision instead of using them for active engagement of party workers or volunteers during the election campaign.

5.2 Presentation and delivery

This study did not evaluate two measures of presentation and delivery, i.e. the visibility and responsiveness due to time constraints. However, this study evaluated the freshness, glitz factor, access and navigability of the party websites. Following paragraphs present the findings of the evaluation.

5.2.1 Freshness. The political parties gave good attention to the freshness of their websites as majority of them (63.64 per cent) updated their websites daily or within 1-2 days. However, two parties, NP and PML (F), did not bother to update their websites for more than one month while two parties, JUI (F) and PML (Z), had not updated their websites for more than six months.

5.2.2 Glitz factor. The parties gave less attention to design of the homepage of their website. Majority of them (90.91 per cent) provided graphics and frames on the homepages. However, none of the parties used the Dhtml or Flash on its homepage.

Functions/parties	ANP	JI	JUI (F)	MQM	NP	PML	PML (F)	PML (N)	PML (Z)	PPP	PTI
Electioneering	3	3	0	3	0	3	3	3	0	3	5
Information provision	9	11	3	8	7	10	6	9	2	8	10
Services/benefits	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Participation	3	4	1	2	2	4	3	4	2	3	8
Networking internal	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Networking external	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	15	20	4	19	9	17	12	16	4	15	23

Note: Figures in the table show the points scored

Table III.
Functions of
the political
party websites

The majority of websites (54.55 per cent) did not use the multimedia function while the remaining websites also restricted themselves to the provision of videos only. Neither any website provided the real time or live streaming of the events nor did they offer any audio clip. The contents of the websites mainly contained text, pictures and videos.

5.2.3 Access. The website access index was very low, as majority of the party websites (72.73 per cent) did not even score on the index. Only JI, JUI (F) and PPP scored one point each on the access index for foreign language translation. During the evaluation, the researchers gave one point if found the companion website in any language other than the English language or facility to translate the website in other languages because all parties had their websites in English language. JI and PPP had websites in Urdu language besides their websites in English language while only the website of JUI (F) offered the facility to translate the website in other languages.

5.2.4 Navigability. The navigability of the political party websites was better because majority of the websites (54.55 per cent) scored 60 per cent marks on the navigability index. Detailed analysis revealed that no website offered navigation tips while majority of the websites (54.55 per cent) did not provide any search facility to locate the desired information. All websites provided the "homepage icon" and "fixed menu bar" on lower level pages, which made navigation across the website relatively easy for the visitors. The majority of websites (90.91 per cent) did not present the "site map/index". The only exception was the website of ANP.

Table IV presents an overall picture of the "presentation and delivery" of political party websites in Pakistan. It displays that political party websites were better in "freshness" and "navigability" but less attention was given to "glitz factor" and "access". Some parties appear to have developed their website just for the sake of web presence.

6. Discussion

The results of the study show how political parties are using their websites for electioneering in Pakistan. Findings of the study revealed that political parties in Pakistan have not utilized their website up to its potential. Table III shows that majority of the websites of Pakistani political parties lacked the functions like internal networking, external networking and services/benefits. Whereas, utilization of the functions like electioneering and participation was very low. These results coincide with the findings of many previous studies (Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Gadekar *et al.*, 2011; Gibson and Ward, 2002; Huckabay, 2008; Khrapavitski, 2008).

The study discovered that major functions of Pakistani political party websites were information provision and web presence while use of party websites for electioneering

Measures/parties	ANP	JI	JUI (F)	MQM	NP	PML	PML (F)	PML (N)	PML (Z)	PPP	PTI
Freshness	5	6	0	6	1	5	1	5	0	5	6
Glitz factor	3	3	1	2	2	3	2	3	1	3	2
Access	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1
Navigability	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	2
Total	12	14	6	12	6	12	7	11	4	12	11

Note: Figures in the table show the points scored

Table IV.
Presentation and
delivery of political
party websites

was a function having very low importance (see Table III). These results are in line with the findings of earlier studies (Carlson and Strandberg, 2005; Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Gibson and Ward, 2002; Hooghe and Vissers, 2008; Schweitzer, 2011). These studies found that political parties used their websites mainly for information provision rather than using them as engagement tool by allowing their voters to participate in the election strategy. However, level of the use of websites for electioneering is very low. The authors presume that low level of literacy rate, development of websites in the language which majority of the voters does not know and low internet penetration in rural areas might be the reasons that Pakistani political parties paid less attention towards online electioneering and concentrated more on the traditional channels to communicate with their voters.

The analysis found that Pakistani party websites does not offer many functionalities. These websites paid less or no attention to functions like electioneering, participation and mobilization of the voters through e-campaigning, commercial services, internal networking and external networking during the election campaign (see Table III). The study showed that the majority of the political party websites were better in freshness and navigability but did not have audio, multimedia and live streaming. "Presentation and delivery" of the functionalities offered by political party websites cannot be termed as excellent (see Table IV). Lack of multimedia features on Pakistani political party websites may be due to high costs of managing websites with multimedia features. These results are in accordance with the earlier studies, which found limited use of multimedia features on political party websites (Auty and Cowen, 2001; Hooghe and Vissers, 2008; Wang, 2010). The authors are of the view that functionalities and their delivery may improve with the passage of time, as political parties may consider these issues to attract voters especially the youth.

The study found that Pakistani political parties used their websites mainly for provision of information and did not encourage engagement of voters through these websites as use of participation feature was low on majority of the websites whereas services/benefits feature was missing on all websites (see Table III). These results are in accordance with some earlier studies (Auty and Cowen, 2001; Carlson and Strandberg, 2005; Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Gibson and Ward, 2002; Khrapavitski, 2008; Onumajuru and Chigona, 2010; Schweitzer, 2011; Vaccari, 2008; Wang, 2010) which found that party websites lacked engagement features. The authors of the view that lack of engagement features on Pakistani party websites shows decision-making authority's lack of knowledge about the importance of these features.

When we consider the effect of electioneering through party websites, we see that there is no relationship between the parliamentary size of the political party and quality of the website. Table V shows the parliamentary size of political parties and the ranking of their websites. These results are different from the results of some earlier studies (Crossland and Chigona, 2010; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Hooghe and Vissers, 2008; Jackson, 2007; Strandberg, 2007; Vaccari, 2008) which found that size of political party plays an important role in development and quality of the party website.

Ranking of the political party websites, based on the points scored by each website for the "functions" provided and the "presentation and delivery" of these functions. Parties scoring equal points were listed in alphabetical order and same rank number was assigned to them. Table V shows that none of the parties could score more than 50 per cent points while three parties could not score even 25 per cent points. Moreover, there is a difference of less than ten points between top seven party websites.

Political parties	Abbreviation	Points scored[a]	Percentage	Website rank	National assembly seats won
Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan	JI	34	44.74	1	3
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf	PTI	34	44.74	1	23
Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan	MQM	31	40.79	2	18
Pakistan Muslim League	PML	29	38.16	3	2
Awami National Party	ANP	27	35.53	4	1
Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)	PML (N)	27	35.53	4	124
Pakistan People's Party	PPP	27	35.53	4	33
Pakistan Muslim League (Functional)	PML (F)	19	25.00	5	4
National Party	NP	15	19.74	6	1
Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (Fazal-ur-Rehman)	JUI (F)	10	13.16	7	9
Pakistan Muslim League (Zia)	PML (Z)	8	10.53	8	1

Note: [a]Total points = 76

Table V.
Political parties'
website rank and
parliamentary size

According to the ranking, websites of JI and PTI were best as they provided better functions with superior presentation and delivery of these functions.

The findings of the study show that the use of party websites for electioneering have not much influenced on the outcome of election as the political party (JI) having top quality website (ranked 1) could win only three National Assembly seats while parties having low-ranked websites won more seats. Likewise, the party having a middle quality website (ranked 4) was successful in winning 124 seats of National Assembly and emerged as the largest parliamentary party (see Table V). These findings are similar to an earlier study (Tops *et al.*, 2000) which found that impact of party websites on election results was not very significant.

The analysis revealed that only PTI provided separate election website. This diversity might be because PTI focused on the youth, which is the largest segment of the society. Another notable finding was the use of website for collection of donations by PTI only. This might be attributed to the publically declared stance of PTI that it relied heavily on the donations of overseas Pakistanis and other supporters for its election campaign. It is important to note here that PTI emerged as third largest parliamentary party, in terms of number of National Assembly seats, and second highest vote taking party in 2013 general elections. The PTI's performance in 2013 general elections was very good in contrast to its low performance in 2002 general elections when it won only one seat of National Assembly. Further study is needed to investigate the factors that influenced its electoral performance.

Research design adopted for the study is limited to web content analysis and does not include the opinion of party representatives. However, this limitation has no effect on findings of the study and conclusions drawn as research questions raised for the study have been answered completely and this research design provides ample knowledge to comprehend the readiness of political parties for e-electioneering. For future studies, opinion of party representative might be included in the research design to have a broader insight about the rational of certain decisions of party leaders for electioneering.

7. Conclusion

Results and discussion presented in the preceding paragraphs helps us to conclude that although Pakistani political parties started using their websites for communication with their voters during the general elections 2013 but they have not utilized the full potential of functionalities offered by the internet for electioneering. Political parties might consider paying more attention to the use of internet and use of maximum functionalities available to reach their voters especially the young generation, which is expected to be more involved in online activities. This approach might increase the use of political party websites and engagement of voters in the process of electioneering. The PTI has shown the way in which websites could be used for electioneering especially for fundraising and voters' engagement.

The overall quality of Pakistani party websites is not very good. Main objective of any political party website is to reach the potential voters and spread party message. Therefore, political parties need to consider improving the quality of their websites to spread message effectively and increase their voter base. Websites with improved quality might increase the use of websites and help the voters to make an informed decision during election, which might have a positive impact on the outcomes of the future election. Majority of Pakistanis speak and understand Urdu language but parties developed websites in English language, with exception of few that provided information in Urdu also. It might be a hindrance in achieving the objectives of developing the website. Therefore, Pakistani political parties need to consider the possibility of developing their websites in Urdu language or providing translation facility on their website so that people who cannot understand English may benefit from the information provided on the website. It will help parties in spreading their message to larger voter base. We can also conclude that Pakistani political parties are still far behind the time when party websites will have any impact on the outcome of the election. We suggest repeating this study after five to ten years to see if there is any change.

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918

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