

Wealth of Parliamentarians vs. General Public: Evidence from 2013 General Elections of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study compares net average assets of Members of Parliament (MPs) elected in the General Elections of 2013 in Pakistan and the public to examine whether the former are representative of common people on the basis of asset holding. The findings show that distribution of the net average assets of elected MPs is significantly different from the distribution of net average assets of the general public of Pakistan. All MPs, on average, fall in the top rich 5% people in the country. In other words, 95% MPs are not representative of the general people on the basis of asset holding. The study suggests that until the role of wealth is not decreased, there may not be any improvement in true representation of the people; and their basic issues such as health and education may remain unresolved.

Keywords: Political representation, assets and liabilities, governance, political parties, Parliament.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is one of the established frameworks of government for running the affairs of an organised society. In a democracy, people have the opportunity, on a regular basis, to elect their representatives for acting on their behalf and protecting their rights at a time when decisions relating to their interests are under consideration. While the electoral process in a democracy is open for all, winning elections requires huge financial and human resources. A contesting candidate has to reach every individual of his/her constituency for obtaining votes, which may or may not be humanely possible given the size of the latter. Therefore, he/she has to resort to campaigning through advertisements. This is where the role of money comes in. This study examines whether Members of Parliament (MPs) in Pakistan are rich, middle class or poor in terms of their assets in comparison to members of the public whom they are supposedly representing.

The study also reviews research in the context of other countries that show that obtaining votes in elections depends on how much a candidate spends during campaigns. For instance, Paranhos et al. (2014) analysed the 2010 Brazilian elections and found that 1% additional spending increased votes by 0.7%. Similarly, Gius (2010) analysed the 2006 Congressional elections of the United States, and found that most of the winners were those who spent large amounts of money during their election campaigns. Nigerian President Obasanjo¹ argued that in modern politics representatives use huge resources to reach public office. Many studies highlight how representatives, then respond to different interest groups (Monroe 1979 & 1998; Page and Shapiro 1983; Gilens 2005; Gilens and Page 2014; Bartels 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019).

¹ According to Obasanjo: ‘Even more worrisome, however, is the total absence of any control on spending by candidates and parties towards election. I have said that we prepare for elections as if we are going to war, and I can state without hesitation, drawing from my previous life, that the parties and candidates together spent during the last elections, more that could have been needed to fight a successful war. The will of the people cannot find expression and flourish in the face of so much money directed solely to achieving victory. Elective offices become more like commodities to be purchased by the highest bidder, and those who literally invest merely see it as an avenue to recoup and make profit. Politics becomes business, and the business of politics becomes merely to divert funds from the crying needs of our people for real development in their lives.’

Some scholars are of the view that the electoral process of the US Presidential Election is a contest of America's corporate sector. Lyles (2013) after describing the role of wealthy people in promoting Barack Obama in 2008 wrote:

All-in-all, the Obama Administration, as we see, is heavily influenced by individuals who have very strong ties to the Corporate Community, and Wall Street in particular. How can, for example, Mr. Larry Summers, who has deep financial involvement in Wall Street financial affairs, objectively advise President Obama on a course of action that would provide major financial assistance to the average American? President Obama, like the vast majority of American Presidents before him, was auditioned and selected to play the predetermined role in the American Political Drama as a Weak President, one who remains subservient to wealth and hands-off when it comes to any major political decisions that could adversely affect the American Plutocracy's economic agenda (Ibid. p. 287).

Domhoff (2010, p. 166) observed that over the past 150 years, most US Cabinet and staff posts have been corporate directors or corporate lawyers:

96 percent of the cabinet and diplomatic appointees from 1780 to 1861 were members of this economic elite...from 1862 to 1933, the figure was 84 percent, with an increasing number of financiers and corporate lawyers...from 1934 to 1980, the overall percentage was 64...[From] 1897 to 1972...60 percent were members of the upper class and 78 percent members of the corporate community.

In the context of Pakistan, there are only a few studies related to the role of wealth in achieving representation in national politics. PILDAT (2009) provides comparative analysis of the assets of Members of National Assemblies (MNAs) belonging to the 12th and 13th National Assembly of Pakistan. In particular, the report disclosed that on average the value of MNAs' assets increased threefold during 2003-09. The report showed that the value of assets of each MNA increased by an amount of PKR 81 million. A related study highlighted the rent seeking aspects of Local Government elections in district Pakpattan and showed that the total expenditure on election campaigns was several times higher than the expected developmental funds of the whole district.

The present study calculated the mean assets of MPs and compared the same with the mean assets of common people in order to show whether the former belonged to the same strata of society as the citizens they supposedly represent. This is important for measuring the difference in wealth level of common people and MPs. In addition, this

study can also help one understand whether democracy in Pakistan is participatory or biased towards the rich segments of society.

To test the hypothesis, data on assets and liabilities of 2013 MPs from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was extracted, along with data on the assets of the general public from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) of 2013-14. For the purpose of analysis, the average assets of MPs at the national and provincial level with the average assets of general people of Pakistan was analysed.

One may ask why the 2018 elections data was not used. The reason is that ECP does not keep the data of assets and liabilities handy. Rather, they keep scanned copies of the statements submitted by MPs. In addition, there is no set standard followed for submission of statements. Hence, each MP submits the statement per his/her own convenience. This makes data extraction of assets and liabilities a time-intensive exercise. Moreover, when this research was started, the PSLM data for 2018-19 was not available. However, future research can be focused on the 2018 General Elections.

Section 2 of this paper provides a brief literature review on the role of wealth in election campaigns. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework and main hypotheses of the study. Section 4 reports methodology, while the results are presented in Section 5 followed by the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two strands of literature that cover the role of wealth in political representation. The first strand examines the impact of election spending on the outcome of elections. Most of the literature explores the effects of campaign spending on the outcome of US elections since data is easily available and accessible. This is rare in other countries, especially in South Asia and Pakistan. Campaign expenditure has different electoral consequences for incumbents (candidates who are already holders on a seat) and challengers (candidates who contest election against the current holder). Challenger's campaigns against incumbents have a linear relationship between spending and number of votes (Green and Krasno 1988; Smith 1999; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1982; Jacobson and Carson 2019; Hall 2020; Put et al. 2020).

On the other hand, spending by incumbents attract relatively lower vote (see for, instance, Abramowitz 1991; Benoit and Marsh 2008). These studies explain that incumbent candidates spend more money when they face tough challengers and in presence of the latter, incumbents face worse outcomes on average. Studies also explain that incumbents exercise broad communication resources through which they saturate their constituencies with information regarding their qualities and services. These

happen before the start of a formal campaign. Hence, a formal campaign produces very little additional gains in their support. In contrast, challengers typically begin their campaign in anonymity and voters do not know, thus, challengers have a great deal to gain by making themselves better known to the electorate. The level of campaign activity and campaign spending, thus, has a strong influence on their success in the elections. All these trends imply that campaign spending can change the probability of winning for contestant candidates.

The second strand of the literature examines the types of people who represent others in democracy. Many scholars have questioned the extent of true representation of people (Monroe 1979 & 1998; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1982; Page and Shapiro 1983; Ferguson 1995; Block 1977; Winters and Page 2009; Domhoff 2010; Lyles 2013; Gilens and Page 2014; Kalla and Broockman 2016; Bartels 2018; Gilens and Thal 2018; Page and Gilens 2020). These studies mainly examine the extent by which democracy in America protects the right of the general public as compared to the interests of vested groups. Most of the studies provide empirical support in favour of the view that elites and organised groups that represent business interests have considerable influence on US policy outcomes, while average Americans have no or very little independent influence. Researchers have found that senators' roll-call votes and actual federal government policy correspond much more closely with the policy preferences of 'affluent' Americans (those in the top third or top fifth of the income distribution) than with the preferences of middle-income citizens (Bartels 2018; Gilens 2005 & 2012).

There is no systematic work in the available literature that can explain to what extent representatives in Pakistan are representatives of the people in terms of their assets. Hence, this research is significant in the sense that it will help us understand the level of 'representativeness' of the MPs on the basis of asset holding relative to common people. In addition, it may offer ideas about how to make the membership of Parliament accessible to general people by decreasing the role of wealth in Members of National Assemblies (MNAs) or MP elections. Unlike PILDAT (2009), this study compares the assets holding of MNAs, MPs and Senators with the common people.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a democratic form of government, the representative has to make decisions as per the preferences of the majority instead of following one's own preferences. Candidates have to spend significant amounts of money to advertise and reach out to the electorate in order to win a seat of power. Therefore, it is often the 'affluent' who contest elections. Moreover, humans are often self-serving. Therefore, those who have ulterior

motives (to preserve their interests and to get incentives for their businesses etc.) often compete in elections. Low and middle-income people are often too busy in making ends meet to consider competing in elections. In case, many rich people are interested in becoming ‘representatives’ of the general masses, they have to compete with each other for attracting a vote bank. This increases the need for money as every candidate wants to present her/himself as the best candidate. In addition, every political party, which offers tickets to candidates for representation, needs money to maintain their organisational structures, to run electoral campaigns, and to advertise their ideas and schemes (Griner and Zovatto 2004). This need of money by political parties during elections further enhances the importance of wealth and wealthy people in the electoral process. Consequently, only the rich can only afford to contest in the elections and the less wealthy are excluded. Finally, when only the wealthy contest, the middle class or poor have no choice but to vote for them. Based on this discussion, the hypothesis of the study is that: The level of wealth of peoples’ representatives who won the 2013 General Elections in Pakistan is likely to be higher than the level of wealth of the general masses (or the people they represent).

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To test the hypothesis, data on assets and liabilities of elected MNAs, MPAs of the 2013 General Elections was extracted from the ECP. The details about the assets of the representatives of legislative assemblies are compiled and published by the ECP in the form of an annual gazette of the Federal Government for the information and use of general public. The information regarding assets of a representative consists of movable assets, immovable assets, assets in the name of children and spouse, agricultural and commercial land, gold, assets outside Pakistan and miscellaneous assets. However, the ECP only keeps scanned copies of the statements submitted by candidates and does not transfer the statements into Excel sheet. Thus, for this study, after formal approval by the Chief Election Commissioner, books of statements from the ECP were collected and transferred to Excel sheets. The data about votes of political parties was collected from the website of the ECP.

The data on the assets and liabilities of general people was collected from the PSLM conducted in 2013-14. The authors randomly choose the same number of observations from PSLM as members of the National Assembly, all four provincial assemblies and the Senate of Pakistan. As per Article 51 of the Constitution of Pakistan, the National Assembly is a democratically elected body of 342 members, of which 272 seats

are directly elected and 70 seats are reserved for women and religious minorities.² The member of Sindh Provincial Assembly is 168, while that of Punjab is 371. Likewise, the MPAs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are 124 and 65, respectively. For the purpose of analysis, 342 observations (the same number as the seats in National Assembly) were taken from the PSLM for the purpose of comparison with the average assets of MNAs.

For this study, samples were taken at random from PSLM equal to the nationally representative data to keep both sample sizes matchable. Likewise, random samples from PSLM equal to that of each provincial representative were taken to keep both sample sizes matchable. Had the study used the data of 17,989 households from PSLM, the differences in results across parliamentarians and households might have been different because of sample size issues. In general, it is preferable to compare two groups without having a very lopsided sample, therefore, systematic random sampling was applied at the national level and provincial level. We also use the same method for taking provincial level observations of general people. For each province, we select observations from PSLM equal to the number of MPAs in respective province and then compared the average assets of common people with the average assets of MPAs of that province.

We, first, select randomly one observation from the first 342 observations in PSLM and choose the successive observation after fixed periodic interval. The fixed interval was obtained by dividing the total observations of PSLM on 342.³ We find some work in the literature that has used to some extent this methodology. For example, Monroe (1998) examined whether public policies follow public opinions. The study collected public opinion from surveys in US related to various issues such as health, defence, foreign policy etc., and then compared the direction of change in public policy as per preferences of public opinion.

The limitation of the study is that comparison is based on a proxy of sample from public, which may suffer from errors. Hence, the findings must be interpreted with care. However, future research can substantiate the findings and remove this error by using simulations and drawing multiple samples of common public from PSLM 2013-14 and comparing with the assets of representatives. This study is examining representativeness of members of assemblies on the basis of one dimension, that is,

² We assume that political parties nominate wealthy people even on the 70 reserved seats for women and minorities. Hence, here too, wealth plays a role in getting nominations.

³ Total number of households in the 2013-14 PSLM was 17, 989 households. Next observation was taken after the interval of about 53 (17, 989/342) households.

asset holding. Future research can also explore representativeness on the basis of other dimensions such as the educational institutes their children attend, the hospitals they visit, the hotels they reside in, the places they eat at, age, education etc. In addition, data of 2013 National and Provincial Assemblies was used, future research can extend data to the 2018 elections.

5. RESULTS

This section provides three types of simple descriptive analysis. First, the study compared net average assets of MPs and the general people. Second, it compared percentiles in order to examine the actual status of net average assets of MPs relative to common people. Third, it compared the assets of the elected members of political parties along with the number of votes they received.⁴

5.1. Comparison of the Net Average Assets of Representatives and General People

Table 1 summarises the net average assets holding of MPs in 2013 and the general people.⁵ The net assets is calculated by taking monetary value of the assets after subtracting the monetary value of liabilities, while the average is the sum of all net assets divided by the number of relevant MPs. The average assets of MPs ranges from PKR -1 million to 2156 million (or 0 million and 728 million [US\$ 4.55] if we remove the outlier). In contrast, the net assets of common people ranges from PKR 0.04 million (US\$ 0.0025 m) to PKR 26 million (\$0.163m) after the removal of outliers.⁶ The level of net assets of the MPs is significantly higher than that of the general people ($p < 0.05$).⁷ The finding indicates that the current institutional framework of contesting elections facilitates wealthy people in becoming MPs. Table 1 also shows the net average assets of MPs of the main political party relative to the general public. One can observe that net average assets of MPs of all mainstream political parties (PML-N, PPP, PTI, JUI-F) are far higher than the net average assets of common people. Mutahida Qaumi Moment (MQM) is to some extent relatively more representative, but the net average assets of this relatively more representative party is also 116 times higher than the net average assets of general people.

⁴ The word 'net mean assets' and 'mean assets' are used interchangeably and have the same meaning.

⁵ The study also did a calculation for the entire population and found the mean asset of general public equal to 1.4 million which is still significantly lower than the mean assets of MPs.

⁶ For international comparison, PKR 160 = US\$ 1.

⁷ This p-value is the corresponding value of the z-statistic of unequal means, while using the net assets per person as the observation.

Table 1: Net Average Asset Holding Across Members of 2013-Parliament and Common People

Assembly/Party	Net Average Assets of MPs (Million)	Net Average Assets of Common People (Million)	Differential between Rich MPs and the People
Overall Assembly	53	0.14	374
Senate	68	0.14	486
National	64	0.15	427
Punjab	55	0.38	145
Sindh	36	0.15	240
KPK	40	0.42	95
Balochistan	35	0.25	140
Party			
PML-N	56	0.15	373
PTI	52	0.15	347
PPPP	50	0.15	333
JUI-F	32	0.15	213
MQM	25	0.15	116

Source: Authors' calculations.

Notes: Average Assets per Representative = Total Assets of All Representative/Total Number of Representatives.

Average Assets per Party = Sum of Assets of all MNAs of the Party MNAs / Total Number of MNAs of a Party.

Number of time a representative is richer = Average Assets per Representative/ Average Assets of Common People.

Table 2 provides statistical results of comparison of the net assets across MPs and the general public. One can observe that net assets holdings of MPs are significantly different from that of the general masses. However, the net assets of MNAs and MPAs are not significantly different. This shows that in both types of assemblies only rich people are able to become member.

Table 2: Comparison of Mean Assets

Comparison	P-Value
MNAs vs. General People	0.001
Senators vs. General People	0.001
MPAs vs. General People	0.001
PML-N vs. General People	0.002
PTI vs. General People	0.003
MNAs vs. MPAs	0.36

Source: Authors' calculations.

5.2. Relative Standing of MPs among General People

Table 3 provides information on the relative standing of MPs among general people. Here the 1st quartile shows 25% of the general public and MPs, who hold fewer assets, while the 4th quartile represents 25% of those who have the highest number of assets. Table 3 suggests that the value of the first quartile of MPs' assets are no match with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd quartile of the assets held by the general public. In other words, these representatives do not even fall within 75% of the general public. Rather, they possess more assets than the assets of 3/4th of the general population.

To see the actual standing of MPs, the study further analyses the distribution of assets on percentile basis in Table 4. It is found that from 1st until 95th percentile, there is no representation from the general public in the National Assembly. All MNAs are from the top 5% wealthy Pakistanis. However, representatives of the top 5% rich people of Pakistan are in the list of least wealthy MNAs as shown by arrows in Table 4 (see the net assets in first two rows under the column of average net assets of parliamentarians and compare it with net assets of top 5% rich people of Pakistan).

Table 3: Quartile Analysis of the Net Assets of General People and Members of 2013 National Assembly

	Quartile Assets of (Representatives in NAs)	Net Average Net Average Assets of (General People)
1 st	0.09 million	12.8 million
2 nd	0.28 million	36 million
3 rd	0.69 million	101 million
4 th	26 million	728 million

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 4: Percentile Analysis of the Net assets of General People and Members of 2013 National Assembly

Percentile	Average of Net Assets (Common People) PKR Million	Average of Net Assets (Parliamentarian) PKR Million	Representation of Common People in Parliament (Yes/No)
1 st to 30 th	0.04 to 0.09	1.7 to 14	No
30 th to 60 th	0.09 to 0.6	14 to 42	No
60 th to 90 th	0.60 to 1.23	42 to 135	No
90 th to 95 th	1.23 to 1.62	135 to 189	No
96 th	1.74	201	Yes
97 th	2.45	213	Yes
98 th	3.66	218	Yes
99 th	4.70	227	Yes
100 th	26	728	Yes

Source: Authors' calculations.

5.3. Relationship of Assets and Votes of Main Political Parties

The findings related to the obtained votes and wealth of elected members of political parties suggests a linear relationship. Table 5 provides details of this relationship. We can see in Table 5 that PML-N has the richest members among political parties and obtained the highest number of votes in 2013. PTI scored second in terms of assets of its representatives and obtained second highest number of votes. The PPP stands at 3rd position. Thus, it may be concluded that in case of the three mainstream political parties, the wealth of MPs plays a role in obtaining votes. There seems to be a correlation between the value of net assets of the MNA of a party and the number of votes a party receives. In other words, the higher are the value of net assets, higher are the votes of a party. This suggests that electoral success in the case of Pakistan depends heavily on assets holding and wealthy segments of society hold the fate of the common people in the Parliament in Pakistan.

Table 5: Mean Assets of Representative of Political Parties and Obtained Votes

Political Parties	Number of Votes	Mean Assets (Representatives)
PML-N	278, 133, 12	148 million
PTI	143, 022, 28	131 million
PPP	131, 101, 10	108 million

Source: Authors' calculations.

6. CONCLUSION

This study presumes that the current framework of democracy in Pakistan facilitates wealthy people in becoming members of Parliament because the expenditure for contesting elections exclude those who are neither wealthy nor have the support of wealthy people. Thus, the whole process becomes biased towards wealthy people.

Using data from the Election Commission of Pakistan and PSLM of 2013-14, the results showed that the mean assets of all elected members of the National Assembly in 2013 was 427 times higher than the mean assets of general people of Pakistan. The analysis of the Upper House (Senate) showed that the average asset holding of the members of the Senate for the same period was 486 times higher than the mean assets of the general population of Pakistan. In the same manner, representatives of provincial assemblies are richer than the people of their respective provinces. It was found that MPAs from Sindh province were the wealthiest relative to MPAs of other provinces.

The mean asset of MPS of Sindh was 240 times higher than the mean assets of the common people of the same province. The MPAs from Punjab stood 2nd in this regard - being 145 times richer than their people. MPs from Balochistan ranked 3rd, while members of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ranked 4th. These findings show that the process of contesting elections only facilitates wealthy people in Pakistan for becoming the MPs at the national and provincial level.

The study also found that of the three main political parties that contested in the 2013 elections - representatives from PML-N were 373 times richer than the general public of the country. PTI ranked 2nd with members 347 times richer than common people. Members from PPP ranked 3rd with 333 times richer MPs than the ordinary citizen. Almost all MPs elected in 2013 belonged to the top 5% affluent people of Pakistan.

This shows that the role of wealth in becoming MPs is very high. Hence, contesting elections has become almost a luxury which only the rich people can afford in Pakistan. The power of money has made it almost impossible for the layperson to think about reaching legislative assemblies. On average, in Pakistan, it costs PKR 15-20 million to contest for an MNA slot; and PKR 5-10 million for contesting as an MPA. While the Senate election depends on the political party in majority in the National Assembly, a potential candidate has to have at least PKR 40-50 to even be considered for candidature. Hence, the process of contesting election imperceptibly excludes efficient and interested people due to their lack of financial capital. In order to sustain and consolidate democracy and encourage representation of the middle class and the poor, Pakistan needs to review the amounts of funds involved in contesting elections and ensure the implementation of already existing laws in this regard.

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