

## BIAS IN POLITICAL REPORTING: HOW MEDIA WORKERS' EDUCATION AND POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS SHAPE NEWS COVERAGE

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### ABSTRACT

Pakistani newspapers are considered as biased. This quantitative study explored that how the individual characteristics and political affiliations result in political bias. Working journalists from largest English newspapers of the country resurveyed to find out that to what extent the journalists color their reporting with their own beliefs. Hierarchy of Influences Model of Shoemaker and Reese is used as theoretical framework. Findings of the study revealed that political affiliations of the journalists have strong effects on political bias in news stories. Most of the journalists are young and highly educated so they are aware of the importance of objectivity. However, lack of professional education causes more political bias.

**Keywords:** Journalists, Political Affiliation, Political Bias, Biased Coverage, Individual Characteristics

### INTRODUCTION

Research proved that mass media in Pakistan is full of political bias (Saeed et al., 2021). It is important to know that what the sources of political bias are. In this age of digital journalism, journalists from print media still have a strong role in opinion building of the public. Organizational and editorial policies are important for framing the news but personal perspectives and biases of journalists also contribute in news reporting. Personal traits of gatekeepers may be a source of bias in news. A study revealed that variables like gender, education, age, residence, religion, and political orientation, might influence gatekeepers of media (Lazaridou & Krestel, 2016). From the Pakistani perspective, experts see the hegemonic control of traditional journalists in the media industry as a key factor for media bias. Researchers interviewed the journalists and concluded that for practical journalism the situation in the country is very alarming. This research study

seeks to examine that how the individual influences that cause biased coverage of political events.

### Literature Review

According to the first level of Hierarchy of Influences Model by Shoemaker and Reese, biographical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of journalists are included in individual-level influences. Journalist's age, gender, sexual orientation, family values, race, ethnicity, and class status can affect the news they produce because prior life experiences color their interpretation of reality. The same is with religious beliefs and political attitudes. Individual-level influences can be intentional or unintentional. The individual level is the most micro level of influence in the model. This level of analysis contemplates the personal traits of media workers (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). It is discussed at the Individual level how journalists'

attitudes, training, and background influence their journalistic work. Characteristics of journalists and influences on their occupational works remained a popular area of research from the very beginning of mass media research (Reese, 2001). Research documents that the intuitive emotions of journalists come over their reasoning process in the link of moral judgment, which often results in propaganda (Lim & Lemanski, 2021), so can be with the media bias. However, there is another standpoint underlining that bias by journalists may not be intentional, it can be a result of tiredness, stress, workload, or due to other basic human needs.

According to the previous research, journalists present the news reports according to their frame of reference. They reflect their political affiliations, partisanship, and cultural associations in their stories and critical analysis. Value-laden and sentimental analysis of issues by journalists leads them away from embracing journalistic standards (Saeed et al., 2021). Results of another study showed that journalist's attachments, political affiliations, personal agendas, and self-censorship are the reasons behind the neglecting ethics of media in Pakistan (Riaz & Taj, 2017). This negligence of ethics results in media bias. Some working journalists reported that the untrained and immature workforce are the main reasons behind the lack of professional and objective journalism (Ashfaq & Shabir, 2018). According to some just liberal or conservative views of journalists are not enough to tag /her reporting as slanted. Many journalists have their ideology but remain impartial in their reporting. A study concluded that most of the US journalists are liberal democrats or have moderate views, but they give more and gentler coverage to conservative Republican candidates, in this way, they try to counterbalance their natural biases. Researchers of this study commented that conservatives have a habit of criticizing media for having a liberal bias, while liberals believe that media have a conservative bias. It was concluded, "Bias is in the eyes of the beholder," (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005). Some framing-based studies on media bias conclude that biased frames in news are produced by journalists, here the question arises if the frames are the product of journalists (Baden, 2020), than what are the factors that play their role to create these frames.

Very interesting results of a study showcased that to achieve public trust and to save her/himself from criticism, journalists use strategic bias, which is a form of ideological bias but occurs when journalists present intentional slants towards the group, people, or perspective he/she personally doesn't support only to be credible in public (Panievsky, 2022). A qualitative research study calculated the influences of individual-level factors on journalists' decisions during traumatic incidents coverage. Journalists make decisions for the selection of information to exclude or include in news. In-depth interviews with 30 journalists concluded that education, experience, training, focus on crime and conflict, self-promotion, the newsworthiness of the story, and job security impact journalists' decisions (Ullah & Jan, 2021).on Pakistani media landscape both print and electronic media compromise the audience's interests and they provide thoroughgoing, but discriminating, coverage to some political parties over others (Rehmat, 2018). A study aimed to examine journalists' perceptions about the affecting factors of investigative journalism. Elements from intra, extra, and within-media were examined to determine how they influence media content along with decisions of coverage. The study resulted that organizational sources, personal biases, pressure groups, job threats, and economic constraints influence coverage decisions (Rahman & Riaz, 2020).

An overview of this literature demonstrates that personal characteristics of the journalists have strong influence on the news they produce. This study has been designed to find that to what extent these personal characteristics cause political bias in newspapers.

## Research Questions

1. To what extent do media workers' education shape their views on reporting politics?
2. How do media workers' political affiliations influence their political reporting?

## Methodology

Data for this study was collected through a standardized online survey questionnaire from 105 journalists working in English press from largest media groups of Pakistan including Dawn, Tthe News International, The Express Tribune, and The

Nation. Sample was selected purposively. Data has been analyzed by using SPSS.

### Demographics of Our Journalists;

In this survey the researcher got 70.48% responses from male journalists and 29.52% from female Journalists. Most of the respondent journalists are young, as 40.95% of them belong to the age group of 31-40 years old, 31.43% of journalists are from the 21-30 years old age group, 19.05% of journalists are between 41-50 years of age, only 8.571 are from 51 years or above age group. The qualifications of Journalists who responded to this survey. 48.57% of

respondents of the study are well educated having an MA, MSc, or BS Degree, 27.62% have higher degrees of MPhil, MS, or Doctorate, 17.14% of respondents are graduates, almost 3.9% of total respondents are intermediate, 2.857% journalists of this study have matriculation level education. Most of our respondents (36.19%) have less than or equal to 3 years of experience, (18.10%) of respondents have 7-10 years of experience, (17.14%) of journalists have 4 years of experience, (16.19%) of journalists have experience 16 years or above, and (12.38%) respondents have experience of 11-15 years.

**Figure 11**

Political Party Voted by Journalists

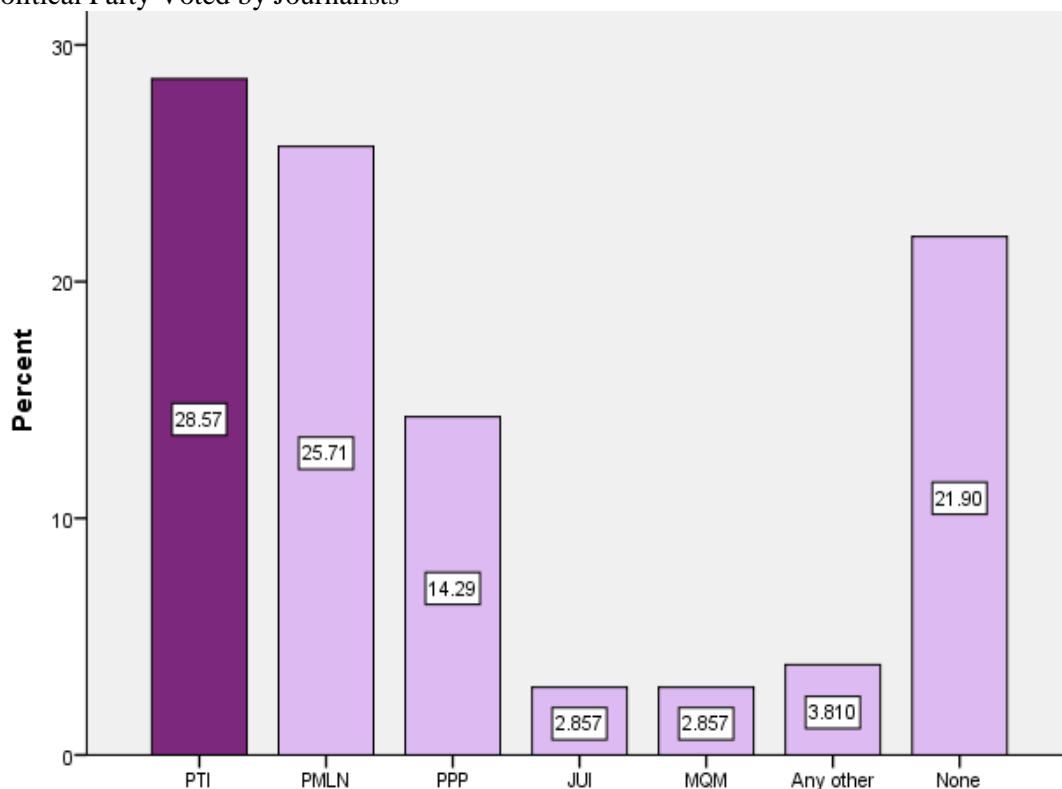


Figure 1 indicates that most of the respondents 28.57% cast their vote for PTI in the recent election, 25.71% voted for PMLN, 21.90% of respondents did

not cast their vote at all, 14.29% of journalists voted for PPP, 3.810% cast vote for other parties, 2.857% voted JUI, and 2.857% also for MQM.

**Figure 2**  
Importance of Unbiasness for Media Outlets

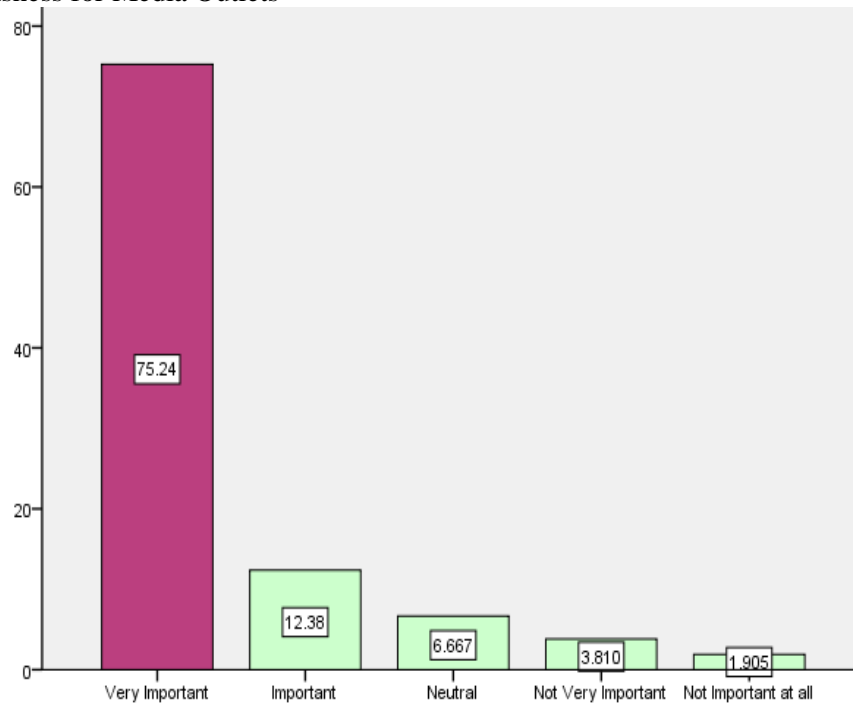
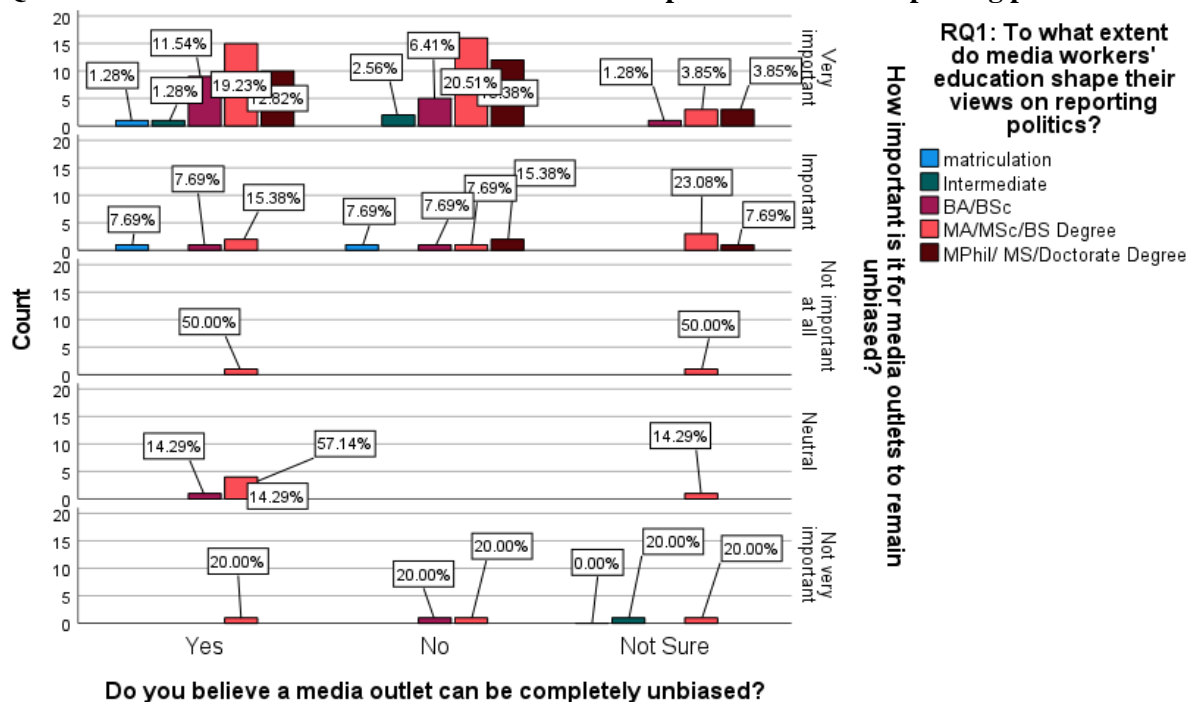


Figure 2, shows that 75.24% of respondents consider that it is very important for media outlets to remain unbiased, 12.38% think it is important, 6.667%

remained neutral, 3.810% consider it not very important, and 1.905% reflect that it is not important at all.

**RQ1: To what extent do media workers' education shape their views on reporting politics?**



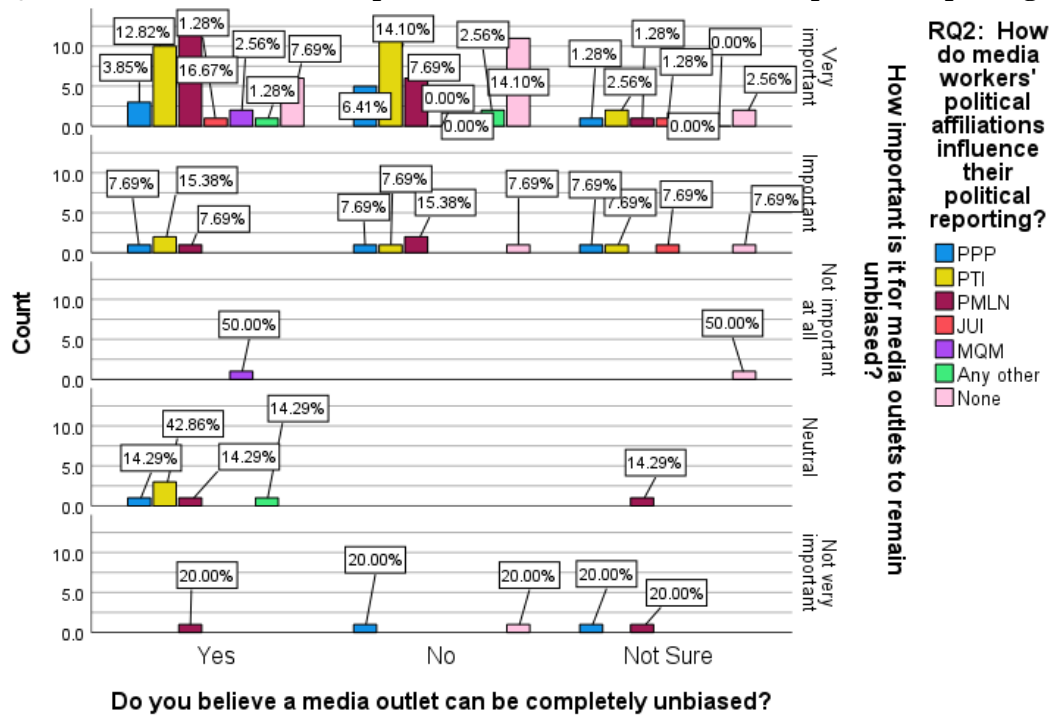
This figure examines the extent to which media workers' education shapes their views on reporting politics, specifically their beliefs about whether media outlets can remain completely unbiased and the perceived importance of impartiality. Matriculation, intermediate, BA/BSc, MA/MSc/BS, and MPhil/MS/Doctorate degrees. A significant proportion of respondents with advanced degrees, such as MA/MSc/BS (57.14%) and MPhil/MS/Doctorate (20%), believe that complete unbiasedness is unattainable ("No"). In contrast, respondents with matriculation or intermediate education are more likely to express uncertainty ("Not sure," 50% in both groups).

The data suggests that higher education levels may encourage a more nuanced or skeptical view of absolute impartiality in media reporting, likely due to exposure to complex journalistic theories and media ethics in advanced education. Across all education levels, the majority agree that remaining unbiased is "important" or "very important." This agreement is especially strong among those with higher education: MA/MSc/BS degree holders: 23.08% believe it is

"very important," and 15.38% rate it as "important." MPhil/MS/Doctorate: 3.85% see it as "very important," and 7.69% as "important." However, respondents with lower education, such as matriculation or intermediate, exhibit more diverse opinions, with 50% of matriculation respondents remaining neutral on its importance.

The chart strongly supports the argument that media workers' education significantly influences their views on political reporting. Those with advanced degrees not only value unbiased reporting more but also tends to adopt a more critical stance toward the feasibility of complete impartiality. This aligns with the idea that higher education equips individuals with the tools to critically analyze political reporting and recognize inherent biases in media systems. In contrast, media workers with lower educational qualifications appear less definitive in their perspectives, as evidenced by higher rates of "neutral" and "not sure" responses. This suggests that their understanding of bias in reporting may be less developed or less influenced by academic training.

## RQ2: How do media workers' political affiliations influence their political reporting?



This figure examines that how do media workers' political affiliations influence their political

reporting views on reporting politics, specifically their beliefs about whether media outlets can remain

completely unbiased and the perceived importance of impartiality. We observed that 14.10% PTI affiliation holders don't believe that their media outlet can be completely unbiased and also respond that it is very important for media outlets to remain unbiased. 12.82% PMLN affiliation holders believed that 'Yes' their media outlet can be completely unbiased and also respond that it is very important for media outlets to remain unbiased.

The chart strongly supports the argument that media workers' political affiliations influence their political reporting. The contrasting views between PTI and PMLN-affiliated workers highlight how personal political beliefs shape perceptions of media objectivity and impartiality. PTI-affiliated workers' skepticism about complete impartiality may reflect a broader distrust in media, possibly linked to their political experiences, while PMLN-affiliated workers' more optimistic view suggests they may believe in the possibility of unbiased reporting within their own media environments. However, despite these differences, both groups agree on the importance of impartiality, which underscores a professional acknowledgment of the need for fairness in reporting, regardless of political stance.

This data suggests that while political affiliation can influence how media workers perceive media impartiality, it does not necessarily negate the shared professional value placed on unbiased reporting. It raises important questions about how personal and professional beliefs coexist in the field of journalism, potentially affecting the overall quality and neutrality of political reporting in media outlets.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Pakistani media is considered full of bias and away from professional standards like objectivity. However, the question is from where this bias comes. Journalists select occasions, sources, and information to publish in the form of news stories. This selection process can host bias in news stories. Journalists' choice of information and selection of words influence the reader's perception (Hamborg et al., 2019). There are several reasons behind this bias. To some, Pakistani journalists lack in education that is why they lack professionalism (Kalansooriya, 2010). To some others, gender inequality in newsrooms causes bias in news content (Richiardi, 2012). Some researchers commented that Journalists

are humans; their work could encompass deliberate or accidental bias (Lazaridou & Krestel, 2016). Unconscious or accidental bias means journalists do not knowingly display bias, but bias is apparent in what they produce. It is perceived that journalists must be competent, independent, and well trained. They must be qualified and committed to serving the public by delivering accurate and impartial information (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022). They can remain unbiased by equipping them with formal education and specialized training in their field (Ullah & Jan, 2021).

The findings of this study provide significant insights into how media workers' education and political affiliations shape their views and practices in political reporting. The first research question, "To what extent do media workers' education shape their views on reporting politics?" reveals that education plays a crucial role in determining the level of bias in political reporting. Media workers with formal professional education in journalism tend to exhibit less bias in their coverage, while those without such education are more likely to present politically slanted news. This indicates that a lack of professional training can lead to less objective political reporting, underscoring the importance of education in shaping how journalists approach their work, particularly in political contexts.

The second research question, "How do media workers' political affiliations influence their political reporting?" demonstrates that political affiliations have a clear and significant impact on the way media workers report on political matters. Journalists who are affiliated with specific political parties often show bias by giving more prominence and favorable coverage to their affiliated party while downplaying or minimizing coverage of opposing parties. This bias manifests in various ways, such as through selective language, framing of stories, and editorial decisions, including the placement of news items and the use of more favorable terms for preferred political parties. The study reveals that political affiliation is a major determinant in political reporting, influencing everything from the selection of stories to their presentation.

Overall, both education and political affiliation are central factors that shape media workers' views on reporting politics. Media workers with higher education tend to show more objectivity in their



reporting, while those with strong political affiliations may allow their personal biases to affect their coverage. This research highlights the need for media outlets to provide proper training for journalists to help mitigate political bias and ensure that political reporting remains as impartial and balanced as possible. Furthermore, media organizations should be aware of the impact of political affiliations on journalistic practices and take steps to promote objectivity in political news coverage.

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