

Post-Truth Politics: An Analysis of News Channel's Coverage of Political Leaders' Speeches in Public Processions in Pakistan

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This study attempts to find out the symptoms of post-truth political culture — politics of emotions rather than rational political debate — in the context of Pakistan. The data in the form of political speeches of politicians from March to July 2022 was taken from YouTube. Political speeches of leaders of four main political parties of Pakistan were analyzed: Imran Khan from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Maryam Nawaz from Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari from Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Maulana Fazal Ur Rehman from Jamiat-Ulema-Islam (JUI-F). Using the quantitative content analysis method, the content of 26 speeches, consisting of almost 854 minutes, was broken down into nine categories: policy, facts, false statements, religion, party, promises, performance, public issues, and opposition. Agenda setting theory laid the theoretical approach to observe post-truth dilemmas in political speeches in the public processions. The observed categories were compared across all politicians descriptively: the speeches had 2% facts; 4% false statements; 5% discussion on policy making; 41% arguments attacking the opponent political party; 12% religious references; 12% promises; 10% arguments were about the leader's own political party; 5% were based on their past performance; whilst, only 9% addressed the public issues.

1. Introduction

It is being widely discussed that political debate has become devoid of facts and is loaded with emotional and rhetorical statements carelessly being spoken by politicians across the world (Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Wolak & Sokhey, 2022; Brader & Marcus, 2013). Politics is widely discussed but the quality of the political discourse is poor (Fournier-Tombs & Di Marzo, 2020; Qadeer et al., 2017). Furthermore, the public speeches by the leaders of major political parties, mostly, consist of bitter verbal clashes between the government and the opposition (Bashir et al., 2022; Lodhi, 2021; Iqbal, 2013; Resigi, 2008).

When political speeches are televised for hours, the debate merely involves policy making or issues of public interest (Kennedy et al., 2021; Erisen & Villalobos, 2014; DeLandtsheer & Feldman, 2000). Rather, there are promises of ideal nature about a glorious future with a tint of wishful thinking (Uzum & Uzum, 2010). Political parties vilify opposition, degradethem with abusive language and blame them for being morally corrupt (Hassan et al., 2020). However, using any kind of negative, hateful and xenophobic phrases while addressing the public through medium that communicate it to a large number of people has grave consequences; it ends up disrupting the fabric of the whole society by promoting extremism (Jasko et al., 2021; Piazza, 2020).

The term "post-truth politics" was explained by David Roberts in a blog post for Grist on 1st April 2010 as "*a political culture in which politics has become almost entirely disconnected from policy*". In the term post truth, post does not mean something after an event; rather it defines a period in which truth has lost its significance as it no longer matters to the people (Sabastine, 2022; Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Suiter, 2016). Post-truth politics can be defined as a political culture in which appeals to emotions of the masses are made by politicians rather than making rational appeals (Locatelli, 2022; De Freitas Ahuja, 2022; Kwok et al., 2021). Studies have pointed out a major difference between a lie and post truth (Bufacchi, 2021; Capilla, 2021). A lie is simply a denial of a fact of reality. A lie acknowledges the existence of truth, but it is consciously put out to narrate something opposite to it (Pihlstrom, 2021; Pop, 2020; Rodica, 2020). On the other hand, post truth is about messing with the truth in a way that it becomes impossible or irrelevant to talk about it (McIntyre, 2021; Sher, 2021; Pop, 2020; McIntyre, 2018).

The primary role and responsibility of a politician is to make policies (Ma, 2022; Roles and Responsibilities of Politicians and Bureaucrats, 2009) but politics is gradually being depoliticized (Buller, 2006) which means politicians are not serving their primary purpose. Most of the voters gain political information through media outlets (Salman, 2018) and whatever is being broadcasted on media impacts the agenda of political discussion for the general public (Ogundairo et al., 2022).

In post-truth politics, politicians issue warnings of threats that do not exist, make promises with no solid commitment to fulfill them but just to gain votes and win elections (Manzo, 2022; Eze & Salifu, 2022; Fish, 2016). When politicians speak, they do not care to speak the truth, rather they speak what people are more likely to pay attention to and listen to (Chimnani et al., 2022; Fraser, 2020; Baser, 2021). When it comes to research and expert opinions, politicians do not take evidence based decisions to formulate policies, rather they selectively cherry pick evidence that support their decisions and policies (Portes, 2017).

Post truth politics create a gap between political debate and facts (Hainscho, 2022; Ural, 2022). Politicians speak lies and target their adversaries with baseless claims with the purpose of hijacking voter's attention and creating confusion and anger (Ranganathan, 2022; Hyvönen, 2018). Not only political discourse but the quality of civil discourse is also impacted by it due to absence of facts (Singh et al., 2022; Rich, 2018). A careless, abusive, post-truth political discourse reflects the state of politics in a country. Aldous Huxley in his book '*Brave New World*' says that there would be no need to burn books anymore because people would no longer read them. This is the threat the world of alternative facts and post-truth poses today (Barclay, 2022). The threat that constitution, policies and factual reports would be sidelined, truth would be irrelevant, ignorance would be rampant and emotions and personal beliefs would take their place (Huxley, 1932).

In a democracy, voters are considered rational agents who can decide their future themselves (Anderson, 2022). The subversion of truth is a danger to democracy and freedom (Radnitz, 2022). Without healthy political debate, truthful public discourses, and transparency, people cannot be free from the dangers of lies and propaganda (Nahon-Serfaty, 2018; Elkins & Norris, 2012). Democracy cannot thrive on lies; Truth is fundamental to its existence (Rosenfeld, 2018; Nancy, 2010).

The content of a political discussion determines the quality of the discourse being generated through it (Nesbitt-Larking, 2022; Sabastine, 2022; Rich, 2018; Rush, 2014). It is important to analyze what politicians speak about and how much validity their words hold. Post-truth is a new concept and analyzing the political content in light of post-truth would be significant as it will open a discussion about the content of the speeches. This study would act as a monitor on the politicians who speak without thinking and divert the public agenda from useful issues.

The study aims to explore post truth politics and how it depoliticized policy making by diverting people's attention from real issues. Political speeches of political leaders of major political parties are analyzed to judge what is the quality of political discourse in Pakistan and if there are elements of post-truth in them. This study would play a role in encouraging people to critically analyze what is being communicated to them through mediated communication. The content of public speeches must be analyzed critically to come to a conclusion about the stance of each political leader.

1.1 Assumptions

The study had following assumptions:

1. While addressing the general public, politicians ignore public issues, facts and policy.
2. Politicians use emotional appeals of religion and otherings to gain votes.

1.2 Research Questions:

1. What is the content of political speeches of major political party leaders in Pakistan?
2. How much policy is being discussed while addressing the general public through broadcasted speeches of public processions?
3. Do politicians use factual reference to support their argument and what other basis do they make their arguments?

2. Literature Review

A political era where emotion and intuition dominate critical and rational appeals is termed as the post truth era (Locatelli, 2022; Conrad , 2021; Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). It is established that politicians take advantage of post-truth to spread their propaganda and manipulate people (Eze & Salifu, 2022; Baser, 2021; Manzo, 2022; Fish, 2016). Reports claim that many political parties around the world have used disinformation as a tool of political communication (Oxford internet institute, 2021; Rose, 2017). People get around sixty percent of political information from some kind of media source such as social media, newspaper and television (Salman, 2018).

Post truth politics is a factual distortion with the fabric of truth by political parties while communicating their stance to the general public (Post-truth and the political: Constructions and distortions in representing political facts, 2019). Today, people have started to live in echo chambers where information carrying a fragment of reality reaches them and reinforces their previously held beliefs (Sabastine, 2022). Therefore, this is being termed as a post-truth era where facts are not relevant and personal beliefs are more important than truth (Kuo, 2022; Suiter, 2016). Post-truth politics is also a politics of emotion rather than rational political debate (Sher, 2021; Pop, 2020). Not to mention, this lack of rational debate can become destructive for asociety and create anti-intellectual sentiments in the public (Yegen et al., 2022; De Freitas Ahuja,2022).

Politicians make claims and promise a future in half-truth statements that they know can not be fulfilled by them (Eze & Salifu, 2022). Additionally, these statements and promises evoke people's emotions which creates strong voters for the politician (Mashhood, 2022). Post truth politics has no detailed policy discussion as evident from the content of the political speeches. There is only one way to come out of this crisis: before casting a vote, the public must question the capability of a politician to deliver his promises; furthermore, how factually valid the claims are (McCartney, 2016).

If politicians exclude factual data from their discourse and give secondary importance to truth then the truth becomes external to it (Van Dyk, 2022) This is what post-truth is; truth is irrelevant and insignificant (Thompson, 2022).

While researchers on other side discussing political discourse argue that a political discourse should not at all be seen as true or false rather it should be viewed in the light of what actions it is capable of performing (Fridlund, 2020; Muller, 2022; Mashhood, n.d). If politicians start discussing useless ideas that have no significance for the public, it is a possibility that they can corrupt the political discourse (Conrad, 2021).

A research article quotes the sentence “politicians are” when typed on a search engine like google, automatically brings up suggestions like words such as “criminal” and “liars”. (Rose, 2017). PolitiFact is an online website that verifies facts and one of the finding reports showed results that almost 70 percent of Donald Trump’s “factual” statements fit in the categories of “mostly false,” “false” and “untrue” (Politifact, n.d.)

Scholars say that by exploiting the use of social media, politicians can manipulatively politicize certain issues purely through use of social media techniques and can direct the public debate into a particular direction (Wang et al., 2022; Gilardi et al., 2022). In 1995, the late journalist John Diamond wrote: “The problem with the internet is that everything is true”(Farrell, 2012). Nevertheless, the new technology—particularly social media—immensely contributes in creating a post truth environment; wherein, false news spreads way faster than the true news (Boyer, 2021; Valladares, 2022).

Post truth rhetoric also works closely with the Discursive opportunity Structure—that helps to diffuse messages and mobilize a large number of people. One of the major ways of post-truth rhetoric is to either make false claims or to altogether reject epistemic norms of society such as opinions of experts (Forstenzer, 2018). Likewise, societies where facts and truth are under threat suffer from political paralysis in making effective policies (Temmerman et al., 2019; Hanan, 2018; Bentzen, 2018). There is a political stalemate and pressure from interest groups on government that hinders effective policy making (Rich, 2018).

Harari (2018) in *Sapiens* elaborates that post truth is rooted in human’s natural ability to create stories and believe them. Human history shows our species’s psychological tendencies towards manufacturing lies to gain power and imaginative capacity to believe in stories that do not make sense (Harari, 2011). There is a major role of human biases in the Post truth era, similarly, there is a need to dig into the psychology of the human mind to understand the post truth attitude of human beings (McIntyre). Post truth is not only a danger to politics rather it can equally challenge other institutions (Valadier, 2017; Rhonda, 2017).

When it comes to understanding post-truth in a society, it is pertinent to study the prominent aspects of a given society that contribute to it. Giddens concept of ‘reflexivity’, a feature by which society continuously challenges and debates about the existing issues in the light of new information. Reflexivity in a society is important for creation of new ideas and norms but it also gives rise to uncertainty as everything is continuously being challenged. To counter the uncertainty the society needs ‘re-embedding’ which is restoring the trust of the people in a society by institutions that have a responsibility of giving authentic information and playing an honest role in the society.

Post truth poses a threat to the faith of people in the institutions of a society (Bentzen, 2018; Valadier, 2017). There is a widespread lack of trust in both media and governments by people which invariably starts a vicious cycle that leads to dissemination of disinformation, and is widely exploited by political parties for political gains (Harsin, 2018; Valadier, 2017; Gibson, 2018; Hahla, 2018).

Post-truth attitude can be observed in the statement of the President of the United States in an interview: “what people want to hear and believe is ‘hyperbole of truth’ or of exaggeration of what is true” that conveys there can be something far more interesting than the truth itself (Fridlund, 2020). Moreover, populist leaders use social media tools to politicize issues and create widespread resentment in the masses (Gilardi et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). As the facts themselves become disputable there is no commonly accepted factual ground for the debates in the public sphere (Conrad, 2021; Ural, 2022; Hainscho, 2022).

In Pakistan particularly, there is a poverty of sensible political discourse as politicians use abusive language and demean their adversaries by personal attacks (Shami et al., 2021; Shafiq, 2021; Sarwar et al., 2018). Politics has become just a mere struggle for power with no concern about public interest (Lodhi, 2021). At the end of 2021, there was a widespread political debate in Pakistan about the presidential and parliamentary form of government. Even though the debate was valid, the time of the discussion—when the economy is crippling and there are policy issues in a county—was not right (The news, 2020). Political debate in Pakistan is vague, content-less and confusing (Hussain, 2018).

Depoliticization of policy entails that politicians are still central but their responsibility of taking decisions and formulating a policy is not the core of politics anymore (Kalia, 2013; Memon et al., 2011; Khan et al., 2007). Therefore, this has given a margin for false claims, post truth and bullshit to make space in political discourses and influence voting behaviors (Birks, 2021; Bucciol, 2018). This explains how politicians who tell the best stories end up gaining most of the attention because stories are interesting but facts are often not (Boler & Davis, 2018; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). In this way, people are caught up in useless debates and issues (Joseph, 2020; Bucciol, 2018; Waldman, 2003).

When Imran Khan came into power in 2018, he presented an agenda for the first hundred days of his government. By reading the agenda, it was self-evident and clear that it was neither a plan or a policy framework that can be possibly and practically implemented within the given days. These kinds of wishful promises also fall under the category of Post-truth (The news, 2018). Neil Postman in his book argues that politicians and issues too are sold through pictures and emotional appeals—not rationality. This immensely decreases the quality and content of a political discourse (Postman, 1985). Scholars have pointed out that there is nothing wrong with emotions in politics, emotional appeal is important for politicians to create a supporter base and connect to people (Liberty Champion, 2020) the problem is when emotions are used to manipulate and make people unconscious emotional fools.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Maxwell McComb and Donald Shaw in their theory of Agenda Setting put forward that the media does not tell people what to think or what not to think rather it tells on which issues and topics to discuss and think (Cohen, 1963). Media maps the mental agenda list of the public by impacting what should be discussed and what is not worthy of public debate (Littlejohn, 2009). Furthermore, The media might not necessarily change the opinions of the people, rather it influences the agenda of discussion and gives direction to the debate (Cohen, 1963).

Politicians possibly bring their agenda and policies in people's minds through the use of mass media (Walgrave, 2006). Media and politicians both together decide the agenda for public debate. In media, news editors through their filter of newsworthiness decide the news of value and the media consumers digest the news in the same way it is presented. When political parties put forth their manifestos and goals before the people, they also play up certain public issues according to their interest (Konstantinidis, 2008). The coverage of post-truth politics—based on emotions which lacks policy making—makes it the agenda of viewers. Hence, using this tool of media, politicians divert the attention of the general public from critical as well as significant issues to the least important emotionally driven aspects of the society.

3. Methodology

The researcher used quantitative content analysis as a method to analyze the popular elements of post-truth politics in broadcasted political speeches of politicians in a four months duration from March to July 2022. Data—in the form of political speeches—was taken from the Youtube app. Political speeches of leaders of four main political parties of Pakistan were analyzed: Imran Khan from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Maryam Nawaz from Pakistan Muslim league (PML-N), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari from Pakistan's People Party (PPP), and Maulana Fazal Ur Rehman from Jamiat-ulema-islami (JUI-F). The content of these political speeches would be the unit of analysis for this study.

Following are the categories under which the content is marked in. 1) Facts: Any Factual reference to a data report, statistical finding or authentic source of information or even to a legal reference from the constitution. 2) False statement: Any clearly disputable sweeping statement that has no evidence of existence and is solely based on a personal assumption. 3) Policy: Any reference to the policy of the leader's own government or the government of any political party. The policy should have been implemented and has a legal, documented existence. 4) Opposition: any negative reference to the members of other political parties which also contains blaming, derogatory remarks or even personal attacks. 5) Religion: any reference to religious texts or using religion as a reference to support the argument. 6) Promise: any wishful statement or a commitment that they aim to fulfill in the future. 7) Performance: any reference to something their political party or government had practically performed in the government. 8) Public issues: any reference to public issues like poverty, inflation or any social issue of women or laborers is considered as a public issue discussion.

3.1 Duration

Table No 1: The duration of the speeches taken were from March to July 2022 from the website youtube.com

Political Leaders	Minutes	Number of speeches
Maryam Nawaz	229	9
Bilawal Bhutto	190	6
Imran Khan	212	6
Fazal- Ur- Rehman	216	6
Total	854	28

4. Findings and Analysis

The collected data has been analyzed through descriptive analysis techniques. There were eight categories under which the 26 speeches were analyzed consisting of almost 854 minutes, the categories include Factual reference, false statements, policy, Opposition, religion, party, performance and public issue.

Figure No 1: Frequency of Each Category Across All Politicians

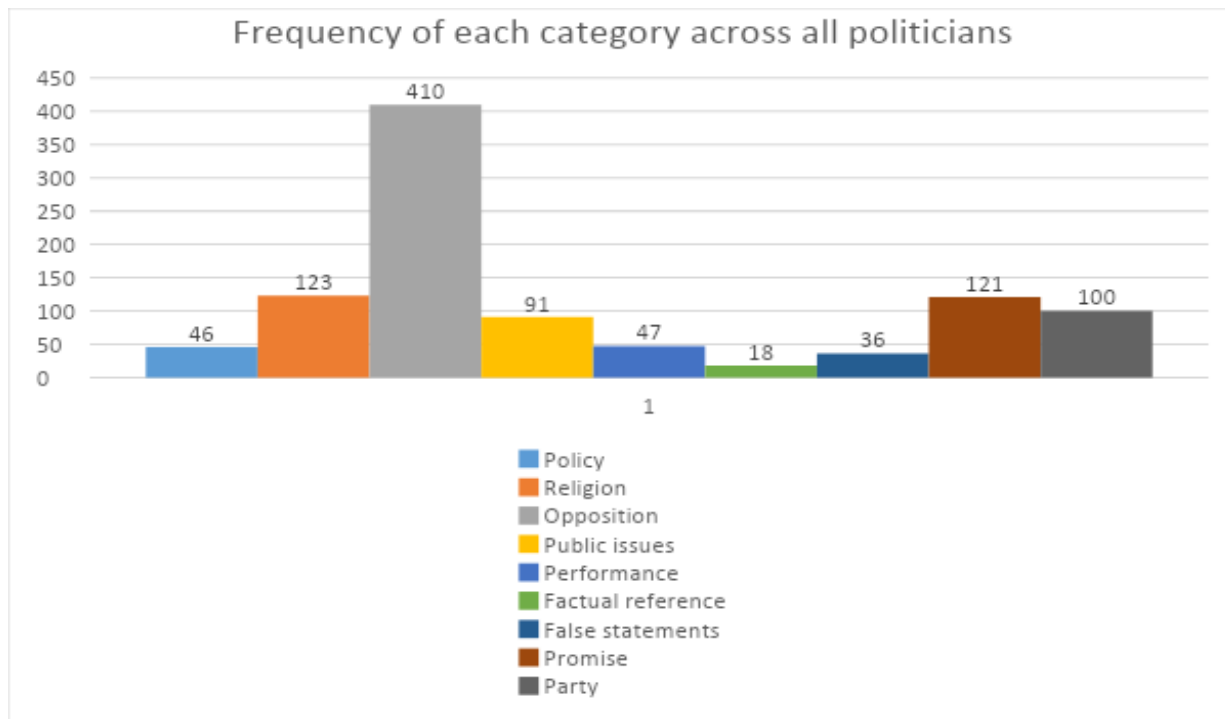
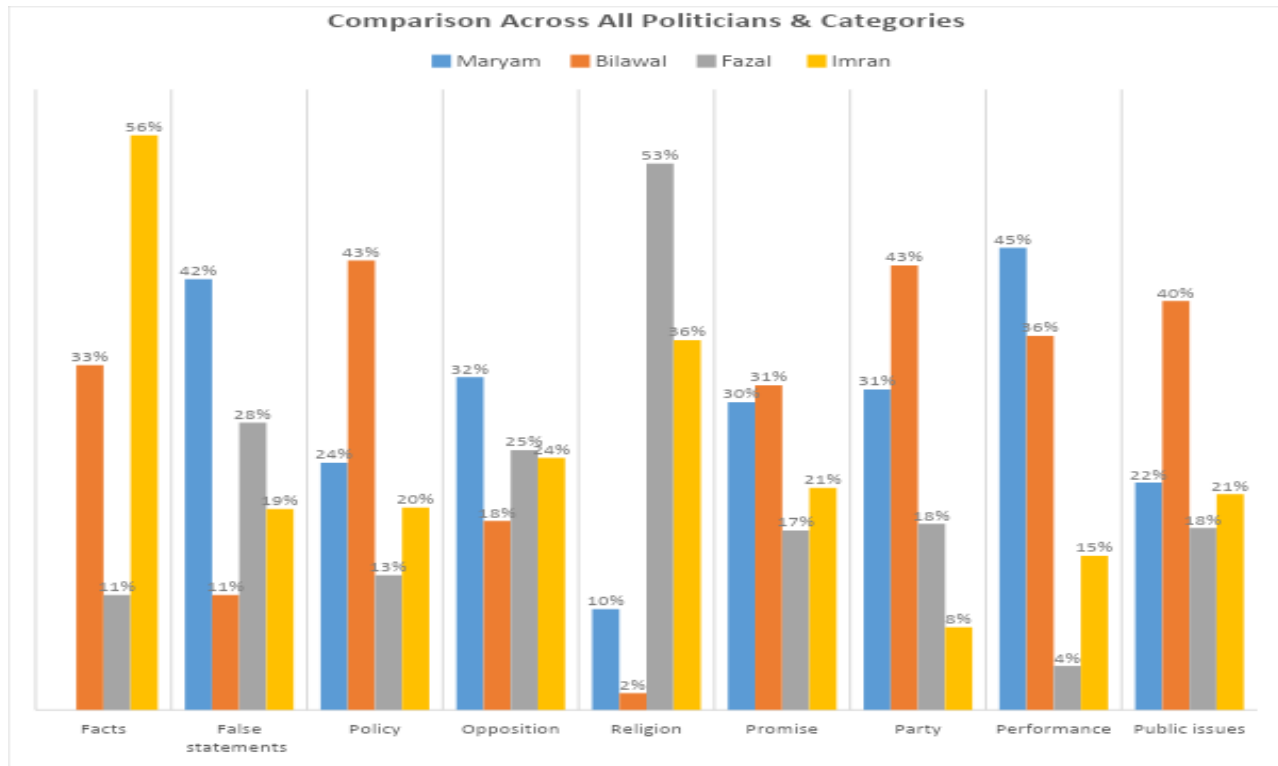


Figure No 2: Comparison Across All Politicians % Categories



There are nine categories under which the data is marked which consists of 854 minutes of televised speeches of four political leaders including Maryam Nawaz, Bilawal Bhutto, Fazal-U-Rehman and Imran Khan. After comparatively analyzing all categories following results were obtained.

In the data under analysis only 2% factual references were made in comparison to all other categories. Maryam Nawaz used facts the lowest number of times equal to 0 while Imran Khan did it 10 times, highest of all. 4% of arguments were supported by outrightly false statements. Bilawal Bhutto made the lowest number of false statements equal to 4 while Maryam Nawaz made a total 15 false statements, highest of all. Policy was discussed 5% in comparison to all other categories. Fazal-Ur-Rehman discussed the policy 6 times, the lowest of all while Bilawal Bhutto discussed it the highest number of times, equal to 20. 41% of the arguments were made against the leaders of opposing political parties. Maryam Nawaz made 132 arguments against opposition, the highest of all, while Bilawal Bhutto made the lowest number of arguments equal to 75 times in total.

12% of arguments were supported by giving religious references. Bilawal Bhutto used religious references the least number of times equal to 2 times while Fazal-Ur-Rehman used it the highest number of times equal to 65 times. 12% of statements were promises of the future.

Fazal Ur Rehman made the lowest number of promises equal to 21 times while Bilawal Bhutto did the highest number of times equal to 38 times in total. 10% of arguments were about the political party of the leader. Imran Khan mentioned his party the lowest number of times equal to 8%: whilst, Bilawal Bhutto did it the highest number of times equal to 43 times in total. 5% of arguments were about the past performance of the party or the leader. Fazal Ur Rehman talked about the past performance the least number of times equal to 2 while Maryam Nawaz talked about it the highest number of times equal to 21 times in total. 9% of the arguments discussed public issues. Fazal-ur-Rehman talked about the public issues the lowest number of times equal to 16 times in total while Bilawal Bhutto discussed them the highest number of times equal to 36 times in total.

4.1 Discussion

In more than eight hundred minutes of speeches analyzed, only 18 arguments were supported by a factual reference to a written report or official document that is accessible to the general public. In all the speeches, Maryam Nawaz gave zero reference to any factual statistical data, report, or findings. Politicians while making arguments use religion and false statements way more than they use facts. In the government of Imran Khan, few schools and hospitals were indeed planned and made contrary to what Maryam has mentioned in four of her speeches that *not even a single school was constructed*. Imran Khan has said in his speech that PTI created the highest number of jobs to the people in its government. There is no statistical data, report or government document that proves this statement to be true. This has been a repeated claim made by Fazal-Ur-Rehman in almost all of his speeches that Imran Khan is an actual agent—which has no factual ground.

The public issues included inflation, labor rights, food prices and unemployment etc. Bilawal Bhutto mentioned public issues the highest number of times; whilst, Maulana discussed it the least. 41% of the arguments in these speeches were a direct attack, blame or criticism of the leader's opponent political parties. The language used by the leader of political parties for each other was derogatory in its nature. They attacked each other with *Chor* (thief), *daako* (robber), *lootera* (fraud), *ghadaar* (traitor), *saazishi* (conspirer), *baironi agent* (foreign agent). Religion was discussed two times more than policy discussion and factual references combined.

Fazal-Ur-Rehman made most of his arguments on the basis of religious texts and references; not to mention, Imran Khan also used religious references the second highest number of times. In the analysis promises were made two times more than policy was mentioned or discussed. This shows how religion and promises together constituted 24% of the total content of the political speeches. Bilawal Bhutto made 43 references to history, performance, manifesto and struggle of his party, highest among all. While Imran Khan mentioned his party and other people the least which constituted only 6 times in total. Leaders are not loner warriors who can bring a change alone. They come in power through the support of a party. Politicians should acknowledge what the party manifesto is, and how the whole party will serve the country.

5. Conclusion

Post-truth politics is a politics of emotions rather than rational political debate. Post truth

poses a threat to the faith of people in the institutions of a society. Societies where facts and truth are under threat suffer from political paralysis in making effective policies. Post-truth politics is precisely a culture of politics that is indifferent to truth, facts and ground realities. This research aimed to quantify the number of times politicians use post-truth elements to support their arguments. 26 speeches, consisting of 850 minutes, of four main political leaders Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and Maulana Fazal Ur Rehman were analyzed. The results showed that these speeches had 41% arguments attacking the opponent political party 5% discussion on policy making; 4% false statements; 2% facts; 12% religious references; 12% promises; 10% arguments were about the leader's own political party; 5% were based on their past performance; whilst, only 9% addressed the public issues.

The quality of the political discourse determines the standard of politics in a country. As politicians are representatives of the people, they cannot carelessly state their own personal ideas and sentiments, rather they have a responsibility to be precise and truthful in their speech and actions. Hence, the researcher argues that the current situation of post-truth politics in Pakistan silences the voice of ordinary people—their prime concerns are being swept under the rug. Not to mention, this lack of rational debate can become destructive for a society and create anti-intellectual sentiments in the public.

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