

Changing Public Opinion on Political Participation: Some Trends from Gallup Pakistan History Project Polls Data by Abdullah Waqar Tajwar, Research Intern at Gallup Pakistan History Project

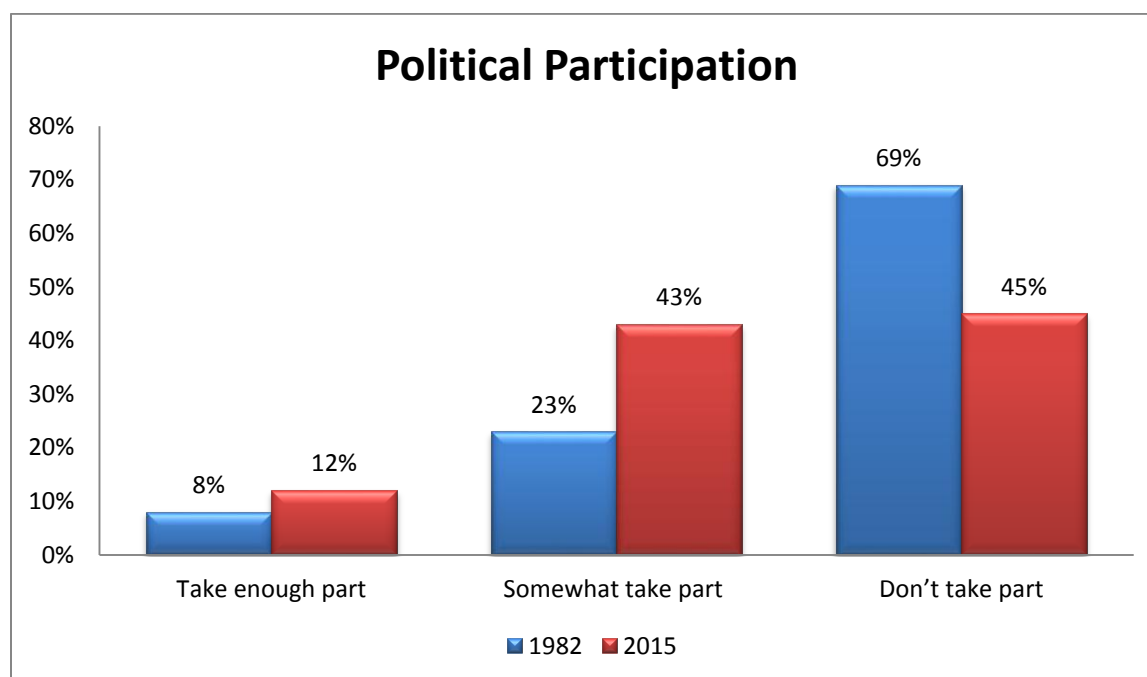
Abstract: *The conclusions and interpretations presented in this article are based on the empirical findings of a National Public Opinion Survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 1982 and again in 2015, with the aim of accurately determining the change in political participation among the Pakistani Public. In the year 1982, 8% Pakistanis said they take enough part in politics, while 23% said that they somewhat take part in politics, and 69% said that they do not take part in politics. Comparatively, in 2015, 12% of the respondents said that they take enough part in politics, while 43% said that they somewhat take part in politics, whereas 45% of the public said that they do not take part in politics. These surveys and polls were conducted by Gallup Pakistan, an affiliate of Gallup International, on a sample of over 1100 respondents in urban areas of all four provinces of Pakistan. This sample was statistically selected across all ages, income groups and educational levels. The error for a sample of this kind is estimated to be +/- 5% at a 95% confidence level.*

Ever since its inception, Pakistan's political history has followed a rather tumultuous trajectory, characterized, for the most part, by ineffective governments and recurrent instances of martial law. As the country nears its 68th birthday, it is worthwhile to mention the major political currents that have occurred in Pakistan till now. Throughout its relatively short-lived history, Pakistan has been ruled under martial law administrators for a total number of thirty three years. Democratically elected governments have come and gone in between, often being unable to complete their tenure in power usually as a direct consequence of the intervention of the Pakistan Army. Surprisingly, the year 2013 marked the first time in Pakistan's history that a political party was able to complete its constitutionally stated five year term and transfer power to another democratically elected political party.

The constitution that governs the State of Pakistan is the 1973 Constitution, promulgated by the Late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. However, since 1973, the constitution has undergone various amendments. Nevertheless, according to the constitution, Pakistan is a Federal Democratic Republic with a bicameral legislature, namely the Parliament of Pakistan. The parliament of Pakistan, consisting of the Senate and the National Assembly, is the foremost legislative organ of the country. Members of this legislative organ are elected by the people of Pakistan via general elections. Thus, in this political system of governance, it is the people of Pakistan that theoretically hold the power of bringing a government into existence. Fortunately

or unfortunately for Pakistan, throughout its history, this process of electoral democracy has been repeatedly impeded by military dictators, who have toppled governments and dissolved the legislative assemblies, concentrating power in their own hands. These military men have waded into the politics of Pakistan on the consistent pretexts of either saving Pakistan from imminent threats of lawlessness and violence, or from its corrupt incumbent politicians and their governments. However, they have mostly overstayed their welcomes and have consequently been ousted out of power by the people of Pakistan.

As a result of this turbulent political history of Pakistan, it inevitably follows that there have been numerous transitions in the political culture in Pakistan as well as a myriad of varying views of the Pakistani public on the political landscape of Pakistan. Gallup Pakistan, a premier survey research institution of the country, has, in this regard, a vast and invaluable library of historical evidence that has recently become available via the Gallup Pakistan History Project. Therefore, in order to quantitatively measure the progression of participation of the people of Pakistan in the politics of their country, a survey was conducted by Gallup Pakistan, back in 1982 and again in 2015, the empirical results of which will be elucidated in a table below. Specifically, Gallup Pakistan asked a representative sample of the Pakistani public the following question: Some people take considerable interest in politics/election e.g. they participate in a public meeting or procession, or make efforts for some party or a candidate. While other people take no interest in politics or voting. Do you take interest in politics?



Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)

Upon an observation of the results of this empirical analysis, an increasing trend can be observed regarding the political participation of the Pakistani public in 2015 compared to 1982. In a span of thirty three years, the percentage of people saying that they take enough part in politics rose from 8 percent to 12 percent, whereas for people somewhat showing an active interest in the politics of Pakistan, the percentage rose by a remarkable 20 percent. Furthermore, the percentage of people taking no part in politics dropped from an outstanding majority of 69 percent to a much reduced figure of 45percent. The basis of this positive shift towards a more participant political culture within the people of Pakistan has to be analyzed and interpreted, first and foremost, in a historical context.

The internal picture that Pakistan presented in 1982 was completely opposite to its landscape in the present day. In the year 1982, Pakistan was still under the grip of martial law, imposed by General Zia ul Haq, who was now ruling Pakistan as its de facto President. Furthermore, the people of Pakistan were still reeling from the execution of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who, despite his shortcomings, had still been a hugely popular national leader. The execution of Bhutto at the hands of Zia had drawn widespread condemnation across the world, let alone in Pakistan. Furthermore, General Zia had also banned all political parties in 1979, effectively bringing all organs controlled by the Civilian Government under direct military rule. All major administrative and ministerial posts were occupied by Army officers. Furthermore, Zia also disbanded the Parliament in 1981, instituting in its place the Majlis-e-Shoora, which was to act merely as an advisory body with no real legislative and political power. More importantly, the members to this Majlis would be nominated by the President, instead of being elected. Therefore, in reality, all doors leading towards a reinstatement of democracy in Pakistan had been sealed shut. The will of the people was replaced by the will of an individual, who had accumulated, via widespread amendments to the constitution, total power in his hands. Therefore, it was in the backdrop of a complete political blackout that this survey was conducted by Gallup Pakistan, thus explaining, for the most part, the low political participation of the Pakistani people.

The situation illustrated above stands in stark contrast to the political clime of Pakistan in 2015. For the first time in the history of Pakistan, there was a successful and democratic transition from a civilian elected government to another civilian elected government, as the People's Party Government completed its five year term without any impediments and was proceeded by the government of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), which came into power after winning the majority share of seats in the general elections held in 2013. Thus, the people of Pakistan were able to oust one party, after witnessing its performance, and elect another one into the government, based solely on the power of their votes. This landmark moment in Pakistan's political history, coupled with the decision of the Pakistan Army to not interfere in the workings of the government and the entire democratic process, has really played a significant part in

communicating to the public that their votes do have political power, thus contributing towards a participant political culture. Furthermore, Pakistan's burgeoning private media industry has also been a vital actor in changing the attitudes of people over politics. The advent of cable television and the privatization of the Media industry in the year 2002 have made a significantly larger section of the Pakistani public aware of the everyday dealings of the government. Information that at one point in time was classified and was filtered out of the ears of the public by the state run media is now readily available. Political talk shows have also established a niche viewership in Pakistan, with hosts like Hamid Mir and Talat Hussain have become household names. Therefore, the interest of the public in politics has grown rapidly as a result of all these factors, as has been empirically validated by the results of the Gallup Poll.

This Public Opinion Poll conducted by Gallup Pakistan has therefore served as an indicator of the changing socio-political trends in Pakistan in the three decades following 1982. The public of Pakistan has witnessed, in this time period, the rules of two military dictators and they have also witnessed the fragile parliamentary governments falling like dominoes in the political flux of the 90's. However, the events of the last couple of years have heralded a new era of relative political calm and democratic stability in the country, despite the threat posed by terrorism to Pakistan's internal security. That, coupled with the rise of the Media has successfully brought about a shift towards a more participant political culture among the people of Pakistan.