



Engaging the Next Generation: Political Awareness and Voting Preferences in Pakistan Election 2024

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between students' awareness of the political context in Pakistan and their voting preferences in the 2024 elections, while also exploring the moderating role of gender. Data were collected through a survey of 306 social sciences' students who voted first time in 2024 elections from Khawaja Fareed University, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, and Bahauddin Zakaria University in South Punjab. The questionnaire assessed political awareness and voting preferences, with hypotheses tested using structured regression analysis. The findings of the study revealed that political awareness has positive influence on voting preference. Moreover, gender play a moderating role on the relationship of political awareness and voting preference. The study suggests future research should investigate mediating factors, such as socio-economic background, and additional moderating variables to deepen the understanding of this relationship. Practical implications highlight the need for policymakers and educational institutions to enhance political awareness among students, which is crucial for fostering civic engagement. This research contributes to the understanding of political behavior among youth in Pakistan and emphasizes the importance of awareness in shaping electoral outcomes.

Keywords: Generation¹, Awareness, Preferences

1. Introduction

In the backdrop of modern democratic governance structures, the inclusion of youth in civic and political matters is being acknowledged as pivotal for the protection and promotion of answerable and effective mechanisms to cope up with the challenges faced by third world countries. Pakistan, being a country with above 65% young voters aged between (18-35) is predominantly plays a decisive role in shaping the outcome of every electoral process. The recent such electoral process held in 2024 faced an influx of youth voting for the first time. These inclusions not only contribute to add another layer to the electoral process but are also important to understand their role in the broader political engagement (Saud, Ida, Mashud, Yousaf, & Ashfaq, 2023). However, such progress is only possible when political conscious of the youth is aware of the political choices they make and the way they make such choices. The progress dependent on such inclusion of young voters' stresses on an urgent need for political awareness to assists the core purpose of democratic norms of informed civic engagement.

Political consciousness includes a broader understanding of political issues, party ideology, manifestos and the broader socio-political context in which these phenomena take place. Research shows that citizens with better levels of political consciousness are more active in the participation in political processes, have better articulation of their political opinions, and challenge predominant political narratives (Ansolabehere & Puy, 2018; Bartle, 2000). In countries like Pakistan, where political narratives are predominately shaped by convergence of socio-cultural, historical and economic factors, understanding how youth engage with such complexities is pivotal for enhancing active political engagement. This is specifically detrimental in a social structure where the bulge of youth and their political preferences can significantly alter governance setups and policy making.

Existing scholarly work, consistently focuses on the association between political conscious and voting behaviors. Studies have established that better informed voters engage with greater political agency and are more likely to involve in political deliberations, thus persuading their fellows to contribute to a more vibrant democratic process (Bueso, Hodgins, Kahne, & Kiesa, 2024) project through their work that the levels of political awareness meaningfully influence how voters assess candidates ultimately determining electoral results. However, in spite of such perceptions, there is a substantial gap in research specifically investigative how political conscious alters the voting trends and choices of young voters in Pakistan. The exceptional socio- cultural and political dynamics of the country and ever-evolving electoral landscape, requires warrants further scrutiny.

RQ-1: How does political awareness influence voting preferences among students in Pakistan?

This study attempts to fill this lacuna by analyzing the link between students' awareness of national-local and global-global political developments influencing Pakistan and their voting behavior in the February 2024 general elections. In addition, it aims at examining the interaction effect of gender on this association.

RQ-2: What moderating effects do demographic factors have on this relationship?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to offer valuable acumens into the political conduct of young voters in Pakistan, informing policies aimed at promoting political engagement among voters voting for the first

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time. Such attempt underlines the importance of nourishing a politically aware youth electorate, which is vital for the progress of democracy in Pakistan. Eventually, this research brings the patterns of political awareness under light and voting choices of the Pakistani young voters and also advocates for a more politically informed and engaged population that can vigorously participate and monitor the shaping of their future.

As the importance of young involvement in political developments continues to rise, it becomes imperative to dig deeper into how voter's understanding of political events of the past and present have an impact on their electoral outcomes. This academic inquiry adds up to the broader discussion on the political behavior of voters in general and youth specifically by focusing on the role of political literacy in the development of a politically engaged voting behaviors. To attain this objective, the research engages survey methodology by collecting data from 306 social sciences students who voted for the first time in the general elections of 2024. The survey tool is precisely designed to measure both levels of political consciousness and voting choices, by applying likert scales to ensure reliability and accuracy. Hypotheses will be assessed through structured regression analysis, enabling the research for a robust scrutiny of the association between variables. By pinning the study in theories of civic engagement, it offers an all-inclusive framework to encompass, how political awareness impacts electoral behavior among youth.

1.1. Research Gap

The political association of youth with regards to voting behavior, specifically in the democratic countries where there is a significant amount of young voters, has remained an area of academic enquiry garnered significant scholarly attention. A large body of scholarly work explores the multiple factors affecting political consciousness and voting patterns among students, specifically in Pakistan. These studies focus on the relationship between socio-economic conditions, educational impacts, and peer pressures, stressing on the complex space in which young voters vote.

Table no. 1 summarizes the prominent studies that have scrutinized the association between political awareness and voting choices among young voters in Pakistan. It signifies the independent and dependent variables, mediators and moderators that have an added impacts on this relationship.

Table No. 1 (Source: Data table is design by authors)

Studies	Context	Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Mediators	Moderators
Ahmed, F. (2022)	Pakistani Universities	Political Apathy	Political Engagement	Awareness of Political Issues	Socio-Economic Status
Ahmed, F. (2021)	Youth in Pakistan	Family Influence	Political Engagement	Family Communication	Peer Influence
Ali, S., & Hussain, R. (2022)	University Students	Education	Political Awareness	Educational Resources	Age, Gender
Farooq, U. (2022)	Student Politics	Peer Influence	Voting Preferences	Group Dynamics	Social Media Usage
Farooq, U. (2021)	Higher Education	Peer Influence	Political Awareness	Collaborative Learning	Institutional Support
Khan, F. (2021)	University Students	Trends in Political Awareness	Political Engagement	Media Literacy	Cultural Background
Khan, M., & Awan, N. (2021)	Youth in Pakistan	Civic Engagement	Political Awareness	Community Involvement	Educational Level
Khan, M., & Bhat, A. (2023)	Young Voters in Pakistan	Disillusionment	Voting Behavior	Trust in Political Institutions	Economic Stability
Khan, M., & Iqbal, R. (2022)	Students in Pakistan	Socio-Economic Issues	Voting Preferences	Personal Experience	Family Background
Mumtaz, A. (2023)	General Population	Misinformation	Political Awareness	Critical Thinking Skills	Media Exposure
Raza, S., & Ali, M. (2023)	Students	Media Exposure	Political Preferences	Information Quality	Societal Norms
Raza, S., & Hussain, R. (2022)	Youth in Pakistan	Various Influences	Voting Behavior	Peer Discussions	Political Climate
Rizvi, S. (2020)	General Population	Disillusionment	Political Participation	Engagement in Local Issues	Community Support

Shah, M. (2020)	Pakistan	Socio-Economic Status	Political Awareness	Educational Attainment	Geographic Location
Shah, M., & Zaman, A. (2023)	University Students	Social Media	Political Engagement	Online Interaction	Platform Type
Zaidi, A. (2021)	General Population	Cultural Influences	Political Awareness	Cultural Education	Ethnic Background

In spite of conclusive results presented in these studies, there remains a considerable gap in the understanding how political awareness dictates the voting choices among Pakistani young voters, voting for the first time. Most of the scholarly work presented in the table focused on general voting trends among youth or individual preferences, often neglecting the real-world voting behavior that change every political term by the incorporation of new young voters voting for the first time. Furthermore, the research also overshadows the moderating impacts of gender on this relationship.

This study intends to fill this gap by directly examining the patterns of political awareness and its impact on the voting choices of students who have participated in the general elections of 2024. By exploring the moderating role of gender, this research offers an inclusive account of how various factors interplay to direct young voters to their electoral decision-making process.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

2.1. Political Awareness among New Voters

Political awareness being an essential aspect of a democratic governance structure, allows voters to make informed choices and take an active part in the political process. It encompasses not only the understanding of political structures and institutions but also awareness on political narratives, policies, and the implications of voter choices on the socio-political space. In Pakistan, where there is a substantial part of the population comprises of youth, the political conscious of new voters, specifically students, is pivotal for shaping the future of the country's democratic space.

Plentiful studies have examined the different strands of political awareness among students in Pakistan, focusing on various contributing factors. Such as (Asma & Rauf, 2024) steered a wide-ranging survey suggesting that while many students project a basic understanding of political structures, their understanding of particular policies and political candidates remains basic and based on poor judgement. The study shows that more than 40% of graduate and post-graduate level students at university level, felt unacquainted about local political problems, projecting a gulf that could stop effective participation in democratic processes.

Education appears as a crucial factor in determining political awareness. Research demonstrates that students enrolled in social sciences or political science courses tend to display higher levels of political participations as compared to university students in other areas of study. As (Kavanagh, 2024) explored that educational curriculum that stresses on civic education and political issues, considerably enhances students' understanding of political issues. This reflects that educational institutions play a critical role in nurturing politically aware citizens.

Additionally, media exposure, mostly through digital channels, has a significant impact on students' electoral decisions. This bill has also left a mark on political spaces, kindled by a social media effect fostering certain changes, improving the access to information, and amplifying all the voices. According to (Hasan et al., 2024) this E-activism would motivate the students to interact with political matters in the digital spaces like twitter and Facebook etc and it is likely that they would hold a political debate in their college or relations with other students and participate in political activities. On the other hand, it becomes a dangerous side of this engagement when propaganda in digital spaces make the students confused about the political questions and problems. Peer effects are also important in determining political knowledge as well. According to (Lee, Tandoc Jr, & Diehl, 2024), students who engage in political discussions within their circles exhibit higher level of political awareness and participation. These environments promote a culture of political engagement, encouraging students to stay up to date with the political happenings.

Social issues further effect political awareness among students. Study of (Graf, Goetz, Bieleke, & Murano, 2024) claims that family background and cultural standards meaningfully impact students' engagement with politics. Students who have a political family background, tend to be more aware of the political issue and their contexts which leads to better political awareness as seen among fellow students from no political backgrounds. Such inter-generational transmission of political understanding shapes the political consciousness of young voters.

Despite these areas for engagement, several challenges continue to flawed political engagement among students as highlighted by (Xue, Wei, & Wu, 2024), many students feel oblivious by the complexity of political issues that leads to indifference and detachment. This disenchantment is worsened by an apparent lack of influence in the political procedure, where students feel their opinion do not matter or they would never be heard. The lack of effective avenues for youth engagement, coupled with widespread disenchantment, has an ability to hamper active political participation in democracy among youth.

The factors influencing political awareness among new voters, particularly students in Pakistan, are a mixture of lack of educational opportunities, exposure to digital platforms, social context, and peer influence. Participation is helpful, but a lot of work remains in empowering youth. Finally, increasing political awareness is the only way we can help create an informed electorate, which is critical to a functioning democracy in Pakistan. By emphasizing the importance of education and media literacy, and providing an environment based on political dialogue, stakeholders can make certain that Pakistani youth are ready to face the challenges brought about through political participation.

2.2. Voting Preferences

Research shows many factors influence students about their votes from Pakistan. Author (Alelaimat, 2023) in his study found that the students often give the preferences to Social Justice, Work Opportunities and Education while voting. This emphasis in part mirrors the near-term priorities for the youth as they square off against a tough socio-economic environment. The upshot is that politicians who are seen to be meeting these challenges are likely to have a greater chance of attracting the student vote. Education level is predictive of political preference. The level of political interest and knowledge of students studying social sciences or political science also impacts voting behavior (Kavanagh, 2024). These students are more likely to seek out information on policies and candidates, and will be able to make informed choices in the voting booth. On the flip side, employees outside of the political industry couldn't really participate as much either, which might lead to less informed choices in the ballot box. This suggests that, especially in the case of digital media, media exposure plays an important role in students' vote choices. Authors (Marquart, Ohme, & Möller, 2020) found that students who frequently engage with political content from a major social media platform such as Facebook and Twitter are likely to adopt specific preferences based on the issues politician bring up. Misinformation on these platforms, however, continues to pose a serious threat since it has the potential to skew students' opinions about politicians and their platforms. Moreover, it is also worth noting that peer influence is also a significant factor in affecting students' voting preferences. Autor (Kavanagh, 2024) ascertains that interaction among people, in particular, the student circles and political clubs, is capable of changing their perception and encouraging them to participate in politics. This is also the case when students particularly exchange ideas related to their concerns and experiences, which helps shape the appreciation of political issues and changes the voting preferences of individuals in most cases. Equally important for explaining voting preferences are cultural factors. Family background and cultural norms can also play a substantial role in shaping the students' perceptions of political issues and candidates (Bornschiefer, Häusermann, Zollinger, & Colombo, 2021). Individuals born into politically active families tend to inherit robust civic values and exhibit greater partisan voting preferences corresponding to those of their families. But those from households with fewer political ties may find it hard to express a preference, forcing them either to be passive at the polls or sit them out altogether.

As they tend to each be affected by personal, local, and national issues, many factors contribute to students' shapes of preferences for voting; however, there are many challenges that impact by what numbers students vote. According to a recent study by (Hamann, Glazier, Wilson, & Pollock, 2020), students appear disillusioned with the political process, generally seeing few candidates as sincere representatives. A consequence of this disillusionment potentially is to lead to much lower turnout rates and an unwillingness to be involved in the political system. Moreover, the lack of faith that these students have over political parties being able to address issues that impact them may actually cause a realizable division among youth voters and make their ideal considerations in the ballot box difficult.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

This research study relies on a questionnaire survey to validate the generated hypothesis and model. Before 2024 elections, several surveys were conducted on various niches of the elections and results are available as these polls or surveys are held by independent institutions. But this study (post- 2024 elections) is based on students' narrative regarding political awareness and their preferences for votes in 2024 elections. We told the purpose of this research study to maximum students of these universities (Khawaja Fareed university, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur and Bahaudin Zakria University, Multan) and assist them to fill their data by giving them time and other necessary stuff. To ensure the novelty and quality of the research, students from social sciences disciples were chosen so that results of the study should be more reliable and authentic. Students from social sciences departments in these universities are more involved in political awareness campaigns and debates. This criteria of selections of respondents ensured that only politically aware and knowledgeable people participated in the survey providing accurate responses. Furthermore, before giving them questionnaire for their thoughts on this research study, we had a presentation on the topic and a long questions and answers session to judge their knowledge to ensure the quality of the responses which will ultimately affect the final results of this research study. This technique helped the respondents to understand the questionnaires and answers more wisely. During the study, 550 questionnaires were issued, of which 330 were collected. Of these, only 306 questionnaires were considered valid, resulting in a validity rate of 55.63%.

3.2. Variable Measurement

We used five-point Likert-type scales ranging from “1” (strongly disagree) to “5” (strongly agree) to measure all items in this study.

Political awareness. This study utilized ten items adapted from Bartle. (2000) An example of one of the items used is, "Political Awareness".

Voting Preferences. The study employed sixteen items that were adapted from the research of Morabito, Themistocleous, and Serrano (2010)Pratto, Felicia et al. (1994) to measure the voting preferences.

3.3. Common Method Bias

The effects of "Common Method Bias (CMB)" in self-reported variables have been debated among researchers, and different statistical methods and techniques have been suggested to check the potential CMB issues (Zhang, Yuan, Xue, Han, & Taylor, 2022). This study used Harman's single-factor (Herman's one-factor) analysis technique to examine the possible CMB issues (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Further, this study implemented exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to analyze the two construct items, which extracted cumulative percentage variance, demonstrating that the items in constructs were capturing a large portion of the variance in the data, and the percentage of explained variance of the first factor was 41.817% less than 50%. This indicated that no single factor was represented for most of the variance and that CMB was not a significant issue in the data. These findings show the validity and reliability of self-reported variables in research studies.

Data analysis methods

"Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS)" was used to validate measurements and assess the structural model based on data from 306 participants. The data was analyzed using SPSS and AMOS version 24. "Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)" was employed to analyze the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this study.

4. Data analysis and results

The current study used SPSS and AMOS 24 to examine the proposed hypothesis. Firstly, data screening was conducted through SPSS, which identified missing values and outliers, assessed normality, calculated descriptive statistics, and analyzed correlation. Table 2 show the results of descriptive statistics and correlations.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Gender	NA	NA	1		
2. Political Awareness	3.2905	.85284	.300**	1	
3. Voting Preference	3.5060	.82859	.480**	.539**	1

** = $p < 0.01$ level, * = $p < 0.05$ level

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

The current investigation through SEM used four different model fit indices to assess the goodness of model fit (GoF): First is the "Minimum Discrepancy Function by Degrees of Freedom divided or CMIN/df", second the comparative fit index (CFI), third the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and fourth is the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003). Prior studies have established that for a model to be considered appropriate and fit, the values of CFI and TLI must exceed the 0.90, while the value of RMSEA must be below 0.08 (Hair et al., 2010). The results of the first model applied to all items of four factors compared to the second model, which has relatively poor fit statistics (i.e. RMSEA = 0.075, CMIN/df = 2.40, CFI = 0.902, and TLI = 0.799). The subsequent model was tested by connecting the error terms of items using modification indices. In this scenario, the data's model fit statistics enhanced dramatically and reached acceptable levels. (CMIN/df = 2.019, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.944, and RMSEA = 0.058). The factor loadings, reliability, and validity of the constructs are given in Table 4.

Table 3: Factor Loadings, reliability and validity of the constructs

Construct	Measurement Items	Loading	(CR)	(AVE)	(MSV)
Political Awareness	PA8	.800	0.928	0.632	0.317
	PA5	.787			
	PA9	.806			
	PA1	.768			
	PA6	.783			
	PA7	.783			
	PA3	.691			
	PA2	.667			
Voting Preference	VP5	.860	0.917	0.613	0.218
	VP6	.856			
	VP11	.823			

VP10	.718
VP9	.841
VP3	.823
VP13	.706
VP2	.677
VP14	.666
VP7	.623
VP4	.622
VP12	.638
VP8	.643
VP15	.539
CA2	.743
CA3	.816
CA4	.787

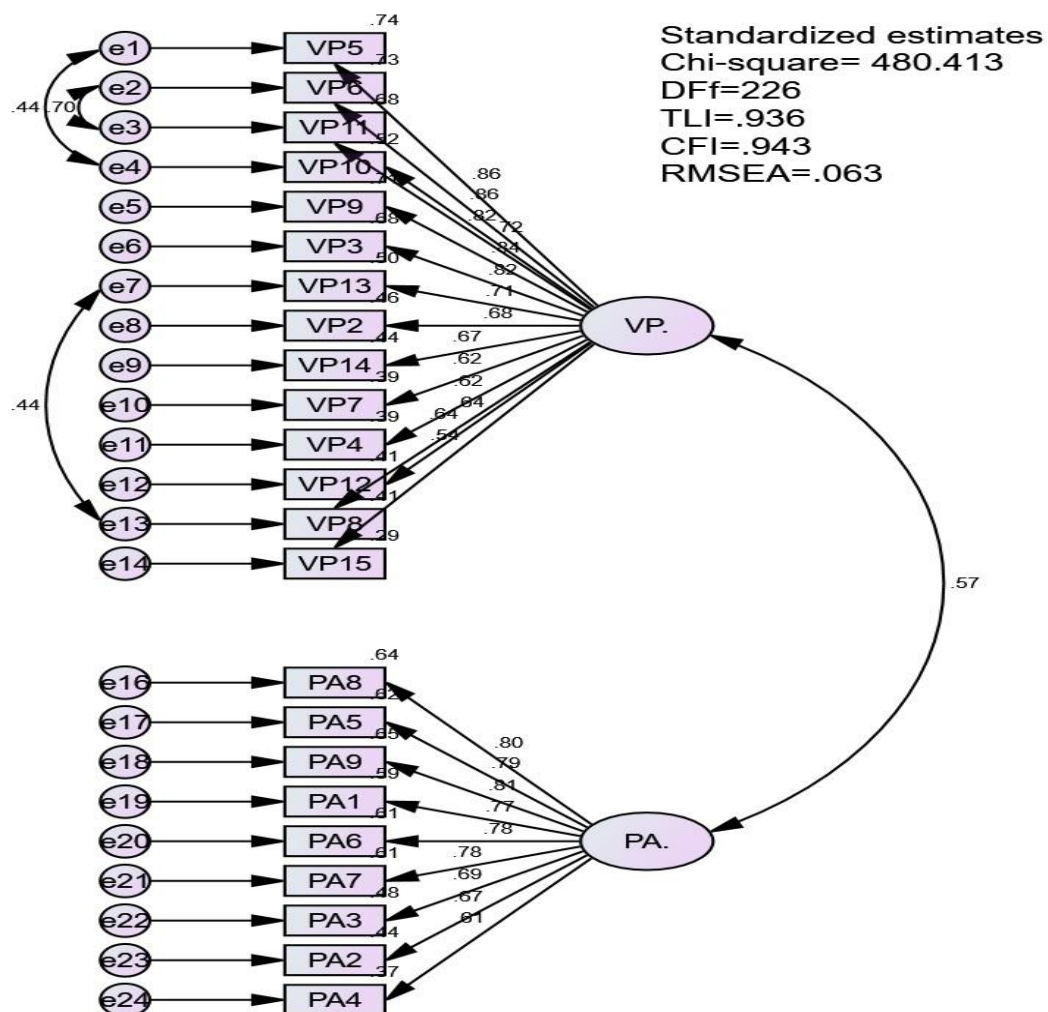


Figure 01: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

4.2. Hypotheses testing

4.2.1. Testing Direct Effects

The presented hypotheses were investigated using the technique of structural equation modeling (SEM). We used the recommendations from previous studies to design the framework for measuring the latent interaction construct. Following prior research (Pattnaik & Sahoo, 2020), we used SEM to assess both direct and moderating hypotheses. The primary reason for assessing hypotheses in the SEM is that it allows for detecting measurement inaccuracies within the framework.

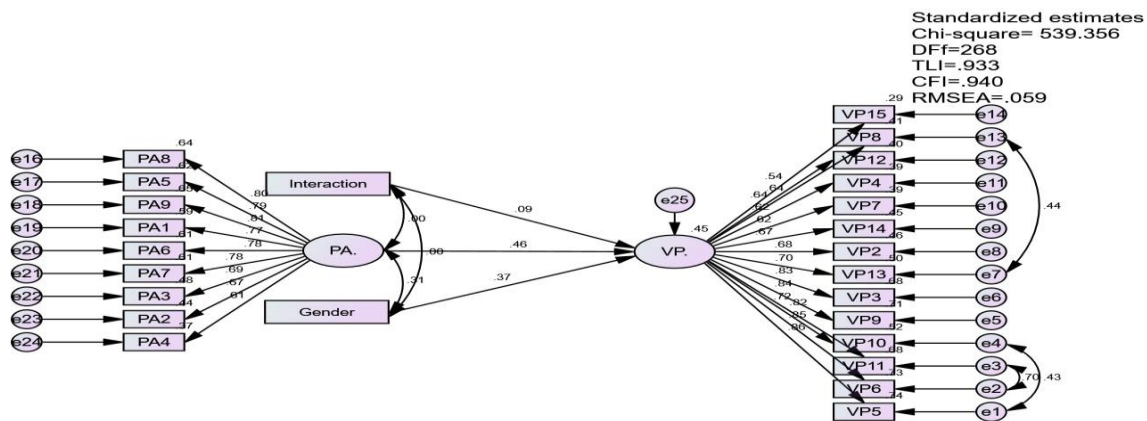


Figure 02: Structural Regression

Hypothesis 1 of the study stated that “H1: The political awareness has a positive association with voting preference”. Results presented in Table 2 supported this relationship, showing that the political awareness (independent variable) has a positive significant influence on the voting preference (dependent variable) (H1: $\beta = 0.456$; $p = 0.000$).

Relationships	β	p	R ²
Political awareness \rightarrow Voting preference	0.456	0.000	0.455
Gender \rightarrow Voting preference	0.369	0.000	
Interaction \rightarrow Voting preference	0.089	0.049	

4.3. Testing Moderating Effects

Hypotheses H2 of the analysis found moderators in the theoretical framework of the study. Many writers have presented numerous ways to evaluating the association effects among the two latent variables (Bollen & Hoyle, 2012; Loehlin, 2004). However, the most prominent and extensively used technique for measuring the impact of interaction is the product measure firstly suggested by Kenny and Judd (1984) Kenny and Judd (1984) Kenny and Judd (1984) which describes a method for estimating structural equation models (SEM) with a latent product term and uses products of indicators to identify the latent product variable. As a result, the moderating hypotheses H2 were examined using SEM utilizing the product indicator technique, which involves multiplying the latent independent variables by the latent moderator variable, in order to identify and gauge the degree of interaction effects For example, the moderating effect of gender was analyzed using product terms i.e., gender x political awareness (by taking the product of political awareness (independent variables) and gender (moderator) to see its interaction impact on dependent variable i.e., voting preference.

The results presented in Table 2, show that the product terms (indicators of the interaction terms) i.e., political awareness x gender has significant effects on their dependent variables i.e., voting preference (H2: $\beta = 0.089$; $p = 0.049$). Thus, hypotheses H2 is supported.

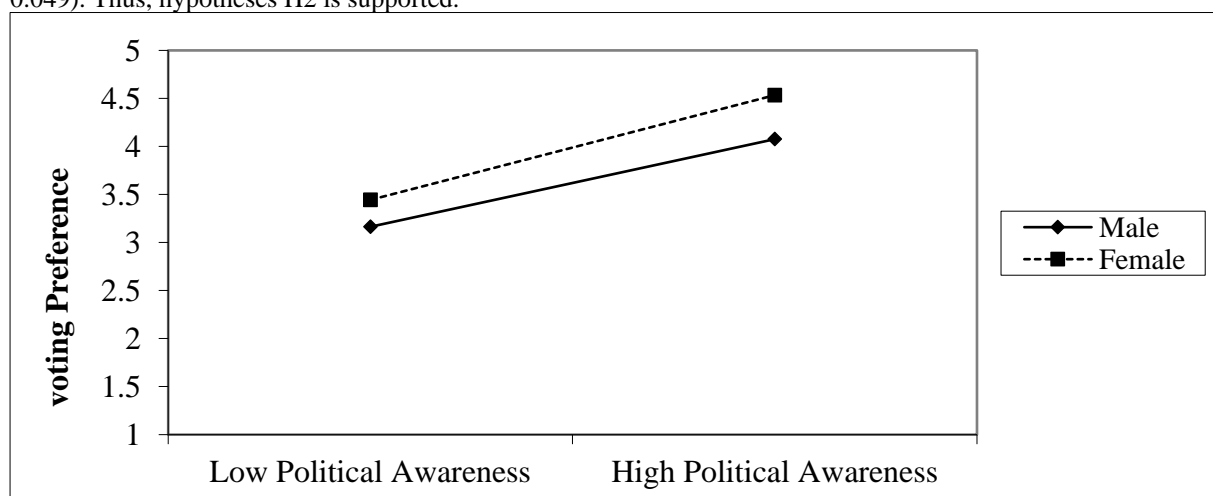


Figure3. Political Awareness and Gender

Moreover, Figures 2 shows the slope to check the effect of moderator i.e., gender. The slope showed that the relationship between political awareness and voting preference was stronger for female as compared to male. Therefore, H2 Was also supported.

5. Discussion

The structural regression analysis results also showed the positive and significant effect of political awareness with voting preference. Therefore, based on these findings we may argue that political awareness has influence on the voting preference. The persons having more political awareness will have more voting preferences because awareness shows the true picture of the political parties and it make easy for the voters to vote their favorite party. The findings of the study are consistent with the previous researches (Azhar, Sutiana, & Tresnayadi, 2024; Shino & Smith, 2022).

Moreover, the results of the study depicted that gender plays the moderating role between the political awareness and voting preferences. The female has stronger influence on the relationship of political awareness and voting preference than males and vice versa. Consistent with our proposition, we found that the relationship was stronger for female as compared to male which mean that women are experiencing more voting preferences as compare to males. Females are utilizing family support more for improving their voting preferences as they need more support due to more family morals. These results are also consistent with work family enrichment studies testing gender as the moderator (Baral & Bhargava, 2011; McNall, et al., 2010). Further, these results are also consistent with our cultural context and similar to study of McNall, et al.(2010). They argue that females have more role in the preferences.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this study proposed and found the significant role of political awareness on voting preferences. Further, gender was also found as the significant moderator of the relationship between political awareness and voting preference. Furthermore, the implications, limitations and future directions are elaborated.

6.1. Limitations & Future Direction

This research used the cross sectional data which may give birth to common method variance. The other factors such as social media, party policies, and ethnicity may be used as antecedents. For more generalizability, the relationships proposed and tested in current study can be repeated with different samples and in different context. Moreover, other demographic variables other than gender can also moderate the relationship.

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