



Democracy at Grassroots: Understanding the 2018 Electoral Process in Chiniot

Qamar Saqlain¹, Dr Abdul Qadir Mushtaq², Dr Zil-e-Huma Rafique³

¹M.Phil Research Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University Faisalabad

²Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University Faisalabad

³Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University Faisalabad

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Chiniot-II constituency; NA-100; NA-94; electoral politics; Pakistan; Punjab; voter behavior; political landscape; party performance;

Corresponding Author:

Qamar Saqlain, M.Phil Research Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University Faisalabad

ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive overview of electoral politics in the Chiniot-II constituency, formerly known as NA-100 in 2018 and redefined as NA-94 in the 2024 delimitation. It examines the shifting political landscape, voter behavior, and party performance within this central Punjab region. The analysis traces the transformation in constituency boundaries and its implications on local political dynamics, highlighting key candidates, party alliances, and electoral outcomes over the two general elections. Special focus is given to the performance of major political parties—Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and others—along with the role of independent candidates and biradari (clan) affiliations. By comparing voter turnout, campaign strategies, and constituency issues across both election cycles, this study sheds light on the evolving democratic engagement and political trends in Chiniot-II. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of electoral behavior and political continuity and change in Pakistan's rural constituencies.

INTRODUCTION

Chiniot-II, historically designated as NA-100 in the 2018 elections and later renamed NA-94 in 2024 after the delimitation process, represents one of the most important constituencies of Chiniot district. The constituency encompasses a mix of rural and semi-urban areas where

agriculture, local trade, and traditional craftsmanship form the backbone of the economy. The Chenab River and fertile lands give agriculture a central role, while woodwork and furniture-making provide additional identity to the region. This socio-economic fabric strongly influences both the political culture and voting trends in the area.

The voting behaviour of the people in NA-100/94 is shaped by a blend of traditional and modern factors. One of the most decisive elements is the biradari system, where clans such as Lali, Sheikh, Kharal, Syed, and others hold strong influence. Voters often align with candidates belonging to their own biradari, making kinship networks a central factor in electoral success. However, this traditional loyalty has been complemented by growing awareness of party manifestos, candidates' service records, and the performance of political leaders at the national level. In urban centers of the constituency, voters increasingly consider developmental work, infrastructure, and employment opportunities when casting their ballots, whereas rural voters remain more closely tied to biradari and personal relations with political candidates.

Over the years, electoral behaviour in this constituency has also reflected a dynamic relationship between continuity and change. In 2018, Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh of PML-N emerged as the winning candidate, largely due to his established reputation, long-term ties with local communities, and his party's popularity in Punjab. Despite the rise of PTI at the national level, his victory highlighted the persistence of localized political attachments. In 2024, he once again retained his seat, suggesting that the electorate in NA-94 values stability, proven service, and trust over sudden shifts in loyalty. However, the participation of independent candidates and close contests indicate that voters are willing to reconsider their choices when new issues or stronger candidates emerge.

Religion plays a central role in shaping the political identity and voting trends of the constituency. Chiniot has historically been associated with religious institutions, Sufi shrines, and the presence of influential pirs who command respect and loyalty among the local population. Religious leaders often act as intermediaries between politicians and voters, and their endorsement is seen as carrying moral weight. Candidates who secure the blessings of pirs or align themselves with religious figures tend to gain an advantage in mobilizing support, especially in rural areas. The Friday sermons in local mosques, as well as religious gatherings, have frequently been used as platforms where subtle political messages are communicated to voters.

At the same time, religious symbolism has been strategically employed by political parties. PML-N often highlighted its commitment to Islamic values and welfare, PTI emphasized notions of justice rooted in Islamic principles, while independents sought the backing of local religious figures to strengthen their campaigns. These narratives resonate with the public, particularly in communities where religion is deeply tied to daily life and social order. In many cases, voters perceive their decision not only as a political choice but also as a religious duty, believing that electing a morally upright and religiously inclined leader would benefit the constituency as a whole.

The 2024 elections revealed interesting patterns in the role of religion. While economic challenges, unemployment, and development concerns dominated public discourse, the religious factor remained important, especially in rural segments of NA-94. Religious leaders continued to influence voter alignments, though the weight of their authority appeared more balanced with economic and political considerations compared to earlier years. This indicates that while religion still holds a firm place in shaping political choices, voters are gradually blending it with practical concerns such as governance, infrastructure, and service delivery.

Thus, the constituency of NA-100/94 illustrates the interplay between tradition and modernity in Pakistani politics. Voting behaviour here reflects a combination of biradari loyalty, personal reputation of candidates, performance-based evaluation, and the enduring influence





of religion. The impact of shrines, religious leaders, and party narratives rooted in faith continues to shape electoral choices, though economic realities are increasingly carving their place alongside religious and cultural factors. This duality makes NA-94 a valuable case study for understanding how religion and social structures influence democratic participation in Pakistan.

NA-94 Chiniot (formerly NA-100 and before 2018 known as NA-86 Jhang-I) is a National Assembly constituency located in Punjab province, comprising Chiniot Tehsil and parts of Bhowana Tehsil. It was renamed after Chiniot became a separate district from Jhang in 2009.¹

Election 2018

General elections were held on 25 July 2018.

General election 2018: NA-100 Chiniot-II




| Party | Candidate | Votes | % | ±% |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------|-------|----|
|  PML(N) | Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh | 76,415 | 34.16 | |
|  PTI | Zulfiqar Ali Shah | 75,559 | 33.78 | |
|  PPP | Syed Anayat Ali Shah | 40,542 | 18.12 | |
| Others | Others (ten candidates) | 23,971 | 10.72 | |
| Turnout | | 223,684 | 61.68 | |
| Rejected ballots | | 7,197 | 3.22 | |
| Majority | | 856 | 0.38 | |
| Registered electors | | 362,673 | | |
|  PML(N) hold | Swing | N/A | | |

Source: www.ecp.com

Election 2024

General elections were held on 8 February 2024. [Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh](#) won the election with 79,623 votes.²

General election 2024: NA-94 Chiniot-II

| Party | Candidate | Votes | % | ±% |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|
|  PML(N) | Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh | 79,623 | 32.02 | ▼2.14 |
|  Independent | Muhammad Khalid | 72,476 | 29.14 | ▼4.64 |
|  PPP | Syed Anayat Ali Shah | 69,452 | 27.93 | ▲9.81 |
| Others | Others (eighteen candidates) | 27,127 | 10.91 | |

¹ Election Commission of Pakistan. "Final List of National Assembly Constituencies" 10 May 2018

² www.ecp.com

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Turnout | 256,483 | 57.31 | ▼4.37 |
| Total valid votes | 248,678 | 96.96 | |
| Rejected ballots | 7,805 | 3.04 | |
| Majority | 7,147 | 2.87 | ▲2.49 |
| Registered electors | 447,538 | | |

Source www.ecp.com

The role of religion in Pakistan's electoral politics is deeply rooted, and NA-94 Chiniot, formerly known as NA-100, provides an intriguing case study of how religious sentiment and affiliation influence voting behavior. The electorate in NA-94 Chiniot is shaped by a complex web of historical, religious, and social factors. As one of the most diverse constituencies in the region, Chiniot features a mix of Sufi shrines, religious minorities, and Islamic political organizations that continue to affect voting patterns.

Historical Context of Religious Influence in NA-94 Chiniot

3.1 Religion and Electoral Politics in Pakistan: A National Perspective

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, religion has remained an essential pillar of its political identity. The demand for Pakistan itself was framed through the ideology that Muslims of the subcontinent required a separate homeland to freely practice and preserve their religion. This ideological foundation meant that religion was deeply embedded in the political discourse from the country's inception. Consequently, electoral politics in Pakistan has often been shaped by religious sentiment, the mobilization of religious symbolism, and the active participation of religious leaders and parties in political processes.

In the early decades after independence, political parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) emerged as key advocates for embedding Islamic values within the state's governance structure. Although these parties did not secure a majority in national elections, their influence was disproportionately large due to their ability to mobilize voters around religious issues. Religious parties frequently acted as pressure groups, pushing mainstream political actors to adopt religious rhetoric in their manifestos. For example, even secular-oriented parties such as the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) have historically invoked Islamic ideals in their campaigns to appeal to a broader voter base.¹

The 1970 general elections — the first on the basis of adult franchise — marked a turning point in Pakistan's electoral history. While the Awami League and PPP dominated their respective regions, religious parties performed relatively poorly in terms of seats won. However, their influence persisted through strategic alliances and their ability to frame debates on issues such as the role of Sharia law, blasphemy laws, and the constitutional status of religious minorities.² The Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq during the 1980s further deepened the nexus between religion and politics. These reforms not only strengthened the legal and constitutional role of Islam but also created an environment in which religious discourse became a standard component of electoral competition.

In more recent decades, religion's role in electoral politics has taken new forms. The post-2002 electoral landscape witnessed the rise of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six religious parties that secured significant representation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Even when religious parties have lost direct influence, their ideological imprint remains visible in the platforms and campaign strategies of mainstream

parties. Political actors have increasingly sought the support of influential religious figures and shrine custodians, recognizing their capacity to shape voting behaviour in local constituencies.³

This national context is essential for understanding electoral politics in NA-94 (formerly NA-100) Chiniot, where religious influence manifests in both formal and informal ways. The historical integration of religion into Pakistan's political identity has created fertile ground for the persistence of faith-based political mobilization in the district. Here, religious leaders not only endorse candidates but also act as moral authorities whose opinions can sway entire communities. The subsequent sections will examine how these national patterns translate into the specific political environment of Chiniot, where religion has long been a factor in shaping electoral behaviour.

3.2 Religious Dynamics in NA-94 Chiniot

The constituency of NA-94 Chiniot (previously NA-100) offers a compelling case study for examining the localized manifestations of religious influence in electoral politics. Situated in central Punjab, this area is not only known for its rich craft traditions but also for its deep-rooted Sufi heritage. The presence of prominent dargahs (shrines) and religious institutions makes religion an inseparable aspect of social and political life in the constituency. Shrines such as those associated with revered Sufi saints serve not merely as spiritual centers but also as informal hubs for social arbitration, community mobilization, and political guidance.¹

The religious demography of Chiniot is dominated by Sunni Muslims, with a substantial proportion adhering to the Barelvi tradition of Islam. Barelvis, which emphasizes devotion to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), reverence for saints, and the maintenance of shrine culture, has historically shaped the political preferences of the region's populace.² Within this framework, pirs (hereditary Sufi leaders), sajjada nashins (shrine custodians), and local ulema (religious scholars) wield significant political capital. Their influence is not restricted to spiritual matters; rather, they often function as kingmakers during elections. Endorsements from such figures can be decisive, particularly in rural areas where religious affiliation forms an integral component of social identity.³

The mechanisms through which these religious leaders exert influence are multifaceted. They include mobilizing voters through religious gatherings, shaping public opinion via Friday sermons, and issuing direct or indirect electoral endorsements. In some cases, entire village communities align their votes with the preferences of their local pir or alim, resulting in bloc voting patterns that substantially impact electoral outcomes.⁴ Candidates fortunate enough to receive such endorsements often benefit from a consolidated voter base that is difficult for their opponents to penetrate.

The electoral contests of 2018 and 2024 illustrate the persistence and adaptability of this religious influence. Candidates in both elections actively employed religious symbolism and rhetoric in their campaigns, framing their manifestos around themes such as Islamic governance, the protection of religious values, and service to the ummah (Muslim community). Political rallies frequently incorporated religious elements, including the recitation of naats and hamds, appearances by respected ulema, and slogans drawn from Islamic tradition.⁵ Such strategies blurred the line between religious congregation and political rally, creating an atmosphere in which voting was framed as not only a civic duty but also a religious obligation.

In addition to the role of individual religious leaders, organized religious parties and alliances have also shaped the political landscape of NA-94. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of religious parties, and the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), with its strong Barelvi orientation, have both contested elections in the region. While these groups have not always achieved dominant electoral victories, their ideological positions resonate strongly with

sections of the local population, compelling even secular-leaning parties to adopt religiously-infused rhetoric to maintain electoral viability.⁶ The result has been a political environment in which religious identity and political choice are closely intertwined, making NA-94 a microcosm of the broader interplay between faith and politics in Pakistan. Religious Demographics and Sectarian Landscape of NA-94 Chiniot

The constituency of NA-94 Chiniot is characterized by a complex and dynamic religious composition that significantly shapes its political culture and electoral behavior. The vast majority of the population adheres to Sunni Islam, specifically of the Barelvi School, which is deeply rooted in Sufi traditions. This is evident through the presence and reverence of numerous shrines, most notably those linked to the spiritual legacy of Baba Farid and other Sufi saints. These shrines function not only as centers of religious devotion but also as influential sociopolitical institutions that guide community preferences, including electoral choices.

Simultaneously, the constituency is also home to Chenab Nagar (formerly Rabwah), the spiritual and administrative headquarters of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Pakistan. While the Ahmadis represent a minority, their demographic significance and historical association with the region cannot be overlooked. However, their constitutional status as non-Muslims under Pakistani law (as per the Second Amendment of 1974 and Ordinance XX of 1984) renders their political participation highly restricted and often marginalized. Despite this, the presence of the Ahmadiyya community remains a sensitive and sometimes controversial aspect of electoral discourse in Chiniot. The sectarian divide especially between Sunni Muslim majorities and the Ahmadiyya community often plays a decisive role in shaping political alliances, candidate narratives, and voter polarization. Political parties and candidates are frequently compelled to navigate these religious lines carefully, as any perceived association with the Ahmadiyya community can become politically contentious. Consequently, most mainstream parties refrain from direct engagement with the Ahmadi vote base, choosing instead to highlight their support for Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (Finality of Prophethood) to assert their Islamic credentials.

Religious leaders, particularly those associated with Sufi traditions and shrines, exert substantial influence over public opinion in rural and peri-urban areas of the constituency. Their endorsement is often sought by candidates in exchange for policy assurances, community development promises, or symbolic loyalty to religious causes. These alliances significantly enhance the legitimacy and electoral appeal of a candidate within Chiniot's religiously motivated electorate.³

3.3 The 2018 General Elections: Religious Mobilization and Political Strategy

Religious Rhetoric and Voter Engagement in NA-94 Chiniot

The general elections of 2018 marked a significant turning point in Pakistan's political history, with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under the leadership of Imran Khan emerging as the dominant political force at the national level. While PTI's broader electoral strategy revolved around themes of anti-corruption, accountability, and governance reform, in certain constituencies—including NA-94 Chiniot—the party adopted a more localized approach, integrating religious messaging to align with the socio-religious fabric of the electorate.¹

A defining religious issue in the lead-up to the 2018 elections was the heightened national debate over the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat—the belief in the absolute and final prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH). This doctrine, deeply entrenched in Pakistan's constitutional and religious identity, gained renewed political prominence due to several

³ **S. V. R Nasar.** *“Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power.* Oxford University Press” 2001

high-profile events. Among these were the controversy surrounding the Asia Bibi blasphemy case and the nationwide agitation led by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a hardline Barelvi political party that successfully mobilized mass street protests over perceived threats to Islamic sanctities.²

In NA-94 Chiniot, PTI's campaign strategy mirrored the religious undercurrents shaping the national political climate. Recognizing the constituency's strong Sunni Barelvi presence and its reverence for local pirs and ulema, PTI candidates and party workers actively framed their political appeals within the discourse of religious defense and moral responsibility. Campaign rallies featured the recitation of naats, religious invocations, and explicit affirmations of Khatm-e-Nabuwat as a non-negotiable tenet of the Islamic faith.³ In addition, PTI representatives strategically leveraged mosque networks and religious seminaries (madrassas) as platforms for political outreach, often relying on the endorsement of influential Barelvi clerics to legitimize their position among conservative voters.

This religiously infused campaign resonated strongly with the constituency's Barelvi-majority population, who viewed PTI as a party willing to safeguard Islamic principles amidst growing socio-religious anxieties. The party's explicit distancing from the Ahmadi community—a group constitutionally declared non-Muslim in Pakistan—further cemented its credibility among voters who prioritized religious orthodoxy in political representation.⁴ While PTI's national appeal rested largely on promises of economic reform and governance overhaul, in constituencies such as NA-94 Chiniot the party's localized religious messaging proved equally decisive.

The outcome of the 2018 elections in NA-94 demonstrated the enduring capacity of religious mobilization to shape electoral behaviour. Even in the presence of competing political narratives, the strategic invocation of religious identity and doctrinal defense proved to be a powerful mechanism for consolidating conservative voter blocs. This case also reflected a broader pattern in Pakistani electoral politics: national parties often recalibrate their ideological positioning to resonate with the religious and sectarian sensibilities of specific constituencies, thereby bridging the gap between broad-based party agendas and local political cultures.⁵

3.4: The Role of Religious Leaders and Sufi Influence in Electoral Politics

Religious leaders have historically played a decisive role in shaping electoral outcomes in NA-94 Chiniot, where faith-based identity and spiritual allegiance often transcend party manifestos. This influence is rooted in the region's deep association with Sufi traditions—particularly the Barelvi school—where the authority of Pirs, Sajjada Nashins, and custodians of shrines is woven into the social fabric. Among the most influential figures in this landscape is Khawaja Hameed Uddin Sialvi, a highly respected Sufi leader and spiritual successor of the Sial Sharif shrine in Sargodha. His spiritual authority extends into various parts of central Punjab, including significant pockets of Chiniot, where disciples and followers form a cohesive and disciplined vote bank.

Khawaja Sialvi's political significance was particularly evident during the 2018 general elections. At a time when religious discourse in Pakistan was highly charged—partly due to debates over the Khatm-e-Nabuwat (Finality of Prophethood) issue—his endorsement carried considerable symbolic weight. In rural Punjab, the Pir–Muridi (spiritual mentor–disciple) relationship often guides electoral choices, and in NA-94 this dynamic proved influential. Publicly aligning himself with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in 2018, Sialvi lent the party a degree of religious legitimacy that resonated strongly among Barelvi adherents. For many rural voters, this was not merely a political choice but a spiritual directive, with allegiance to the Pir seen as an extension of one's religious duty.

The strategic value of Sialvi's support lay in bridging two distinct voter constituencies: PTI's urban reformist base and the rural, shrine-oriented electorate. By invoking shared religious

values—particularly the defense of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat—PTI was able to adapt its messaging to the local context, reinforcing its credibility in an area where moral authority is often a prerequisite for political acceptance. This was further reinforced by mosque networks, religious gatherings, and personal visits from ulema affiliated with the Sialvi circle, which amplified PTI's reach in otherwise PML-N-leaning territories.

Although PTI did not secure victory in NA-100 (the then-designation for NA-94) in 2018—losing to the PML-N candidate by a narrow margin of fewer than 1,000 votes—the contest was markedly close compared to earlier cycles. Local accounts suggest that Sialvi's influence helped PTI penetrate rural voting blocs traditionally resistant to change. This narrowing of the margin underscores the continuing potency of religious endorsements in shaping competitive electoral landscapes, even where historical loyalties favour other parties.

The case of Khawaja Hameed Uddin Sialvi in NA-94 demonstrates the evolving role of Sufi leaders in Pakistan's electoral politics. No longer confined to purely spiritual functions, these figures operate as political brokers, mobilizing constituencies, shaping discourse on religious identity, and influencing legislative agendas. In a constituency like Chiniot, where religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with social identity, the interplay between spiritual leadership and electoral strategy remains a decisive factor in determining political outcomes.

3.5: Religious Minorities and Political Strategies in NA-94 Chiniot

NA-94 Chiniot presents a distinct sociopolitical landscape where religious identity is not merely a personal attribute but a defining factor in electoral behavior. Among the most prominent religious minorities in the constituency is the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, whose members are primarily concentrated in the town of Rabwah—officially known as Chenab Nagar. This community has deep historical roots in the region, having established religious, educational, and charitable institutions that continue to shape the town's identity. However, despite this historical presence, the community remains one of the most politically marginalized groups in Pakistan, largely due to the country's constitutional and legal framework as well as prevailing sectarian attitudes.

The constitutional status of Ahmadis was fundamentally altered with the passage of the Second Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan in 1974, which officially declared them non-Muslims. This legal reclassification was further reinforced by Ordinance XX in 1984, which criminalized the use of Islamic terminology, religious practices, or symbols by members of the community. These laws have not only curtailed their freedom of religion but also significantly restricted their participation in public and political life. In practice, Ahmadis in Pakistan remain politically vulnerable, with their electoral participation shaped by both legal disenfranchisement and widespread societal hostility.

In NA-94, the political consequences of this exclusion are evident. The majority Sunni Barelvi population in Chiniot tends to view the Ahmadiyya issue through the lens of religious orthodoxy, making it politically risky for any mainstream party to be perceived as sympathetic to the community. In the 2018 general elections, this dynamic was particularly visible. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), riding on a wave of religious nationalism, built much of its local campaign narrative around the protection of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (Finality of Prophethood). While PTI refrained from directly targeting the Ahmadiyya community in Chiniot, its rhetoric and alignment with conservative Sunni sentiment indirectly reinforced the political isolation of Ahmadis.

The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), historically more centrist and development-focused, approached the constituency with a different emphasis—prioritizing infrastructure, public services, and local economic concerns. Nonetheless, its outreach to Rabwah's residents in 2018 was cautious, discreet, and often invisible in the public sphere. This hesitancy stemmed from the political risk of alienating conservative Muslim voters who

might interpret engagement with Ahmadis as religious compromise. The result was a muted and symbolic engagement rather than a genuine attempt at political inclusion.

For the Ahmadiyya community, this environment fostered a deep sense of political alienation. Legal provisions requiring a separate voter list for Ahmadis—alongside the risk of public identification—led many to abstain from voting altogether. Others faced bureaucratic and procedural barriers that effectively excluded them from the electoral process. In practice, the constituency's electoral competition unfolded without any meaningful representation of Ahmadi political interests.

The case of NA-94 Chiniot illustrates how electoral politics in Pakistan can function simultaneously as a mechanism of mobilization and exclusion. Religious identity, while a powerful mobilizing force for the majority, operates as a barrier for minorities such as the Ahmadis, whose political silence is reinforced by both structural and strategic factors. This dynamic not only limits the democratic inclusiveness of the electoral process but also reflects broader tensions between Pakistan's constitutional framework and the principles of religious pluralism.

3.6: The 2024 General Elections: Continuity and Change in Religious Influence

The general elections of 2024 in NA-94 Chiniot reflected both the persistence of long-standing religious patterns in electoral politics and the emergence of new dynamics shaped by shifting political alliances and changing public expectations. Religion continued to serve as a central mobilizing force, but the strategies adopted by candidates and parties demonstrated a more calculated blending of religious symbolism with developmental promises, reflecting awareness that voters were now responsive to both identity-based appeals and tangible service delivery.

As in previous election cycles, the Barelvi Sufi tradition remained a cornerstone of local political culture. Shrines, pirs, and religious networks continued to function as influential centers of opinion-making, particularly in rural areas. Endorsements from prominent religious figures retained their value, but unlike in 2018—when religious sentiment around the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat issue reached a peak—2024 saw a more diversified use of religious rhetoric. Candidates framed themselves not only as defenders of Islamic values but also as providers of economic stability, improved infrastructure, and social welfare programs.

One of the most significant continuities was the involvement of spiritual authorities such as Khawaja Hameed Uddin Sialvi and other respected ulema in guiding voter behavior. Their presence at political gatherings, participation in mehfil-e-naat programs, and public endorsements reinforced the religious legitimacy of preferred candidates. However, these leaders also adapted their messaging to address contemporary concerns such as inflation, youth unemployment, and governance, signaling a subtle shift in the nature of religious influence.

From the party perspective, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), despite facing political challenges at the national level, attempted to sustain its 2018 religious voter base by reiterating commitments to Islamic governance and national moral reform. Its campaign in NA-94 incorporated mosque-based outreach, religious gatherings, and the symbolic presence of Barelvi clerics, while also highlighting achievements in infrastructure and public services during its previous tenure. The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), in contrast, sought to counter PTI's religious narrative by emphasizing stability, economic recovery, and a record of development, while still maintaining ties with local religious influencers to avoid alienating the conservative electorate.

An important change in 2024 was the reduced visibility of explicitly religious political parties such as the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in NA-94. While these groups retained ideological resonance among some voters, the constituency's political competition became increasingly dominated by major parties that strategically

integrated religious symbolism into broader political platforms. This indicated that in Chiniot, religion had become less the exclusive domain of religious parties and more a shared tool of political legitimacy across the electoral spectrum.

For minority communities, including the Ahmadiyya population in Rabwah, the elections brought little change in political inclusion. Legal restrictions and societal pressures continued to limit their engagement, and mainstream parties maintained a cautious distance to avoid controversy. The persistence of their political marginalization underscored that while the style of religious influence in NA-94 may have evolved, its exclusionary aspects remained intact.

Overall, the 2024 elections in NA-94 Chiniot demonstrated both continuity and adaptation in the role of religion. While spiritual leaders, mosque networks, and religious symbolism continued to hold significant sway, political actors increasingly paired these elements with developmental and governance-oriented promises. This hybrid strategy suggested that the constituency's voters were responding to a more complex mix of identity-based loyalty and pragmatic concerns—signaling an evolution in the way religious influence shapes electoral politics in Chiniot.

The Shift in Political Priorities

The political landscape of NA-94 Chiniot in recent years has undergone a notable shift, moving from a predominantly identity-driven electoral environment toward one that increasingly incorporates governance, service delivery, and economic stability into the political calculus. While religion remains a deeply rooted and influential factor in shaping voter preferences, there is a growing recognition among both political actors and constituents that effective administration and tangible development outcomes are equally important in determining electoral success.

In the past, particularly in earlier election cycles, political priorities were often defined by the endorsement of religious leaders, the mobilization of sectarian identity, and the ability of candidates to align with dominant spiritual authorities. The 2018 general elections epitomized this trend, as parties invested heavily in religious symbolism, shrine-based networks, and narratives surrounding Islamic sanctity. However, by the time of the 2024 elections, a combination of national political turbulence, economic challenges, and evolving voter expectations had begun to redefine the hierarchy of electoral priorities.

One key driver of this shift has been the socio-economic pressures facing the constituency. Rising inflation, unemployment, energy shortages, and deteriorating public services created an environment where voters were more inclined to evaluate candidates on their capacity to deliver practical solutions. Political rallies and public meetings in 2024 increasingly featured promises related to infrastructure development, healthcare access, educational opportunities, and job creation—issues that, while not replacing religious concerns, began to rival them in importance.

Political parties responded by modifying their strategies. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), while maintaining its religious voter base through Islamic rhetoric and alliances with clerical figures, also attempted to reclaim credibility by highlighting its governance record and pledging economic revival. The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), known for its development-oriented approach, doubled down on infrastructure and service delivery promises, framing itself as the party of stability and economic recovery. In this evolving context, religious endorsement was no longer a stand-alone guarantee of electoral victory—it needed to be paired with a convincing development agenda.

Another dimension of the shift is the changing political engagement of younger voters. With increasing access to social media, political debates in NA-94 have expanded beyond traditional religious forums to include online platforms where governance, transparency, and accountability are hotly discussed. This has pressured political actors to address issues such

as corruption, youth unemployment, and digital infrastructure alongside traditional religious appeals.

While religion continues to provide a moral and cultural framework for political behavior in Chiniot, the gradual broadening of electoral priorities signals an important transition. The constituency's political discourse is evolving into a hybrid model—one where faith-based legitimacy remains essential but must now coexist with the practical demands of governance and socio-economic performance. This shift suggests that future political contests in NA-94 will be shaped not only by who can secure the blessings of spiritual leaders but also by who can deliver visible, measurable improvements to the lives of the people.

3.7: The Role of Religious Endorsements

Religious endorsements continue to be a decisive factor in the electoral politics of NA-94 Chiniot, where the influence of spiritual leaders, shrine custodians, and clerical authorities often extends beyond the purely religious sphere into the very core of political decision-making. In a constituency where religious affiliation is deeply interwoven with social identity, the public support of a respected religious figure can transform the electoral prospects of a candidate, sometimes eclipsing the impact of party manifestos or campaign financing.

The endorsement process in Chiniot operates within a complex network of spiritual allegiances and local power structures. Many voters maintain long-standing ties with Pirs, Sajjada Nashins, and prominent ulema, following their guidance not only in matters of faith but also in civic responsibilities such as voting. In rural areas, where community cohesion is strong and political awareness is shaped by collective traditions, the guidance of these religious leaders can consolidate votes for a particular candidate across entire villages or clans.

Historically, religious endorsements in NA-94 have carried symbolic as well as strategic value. Public declarations of support—often made during religious gatherings, shrine festivals (urs), or Friday sermons—send clear signals to followers about where their political loyalties should lie. In many cases, the mere presence of a candidate alongside a highly regarded spiritual figure is enough to suggest an informal endorsement, even without an explicit statement. This dynamic was evident in both the 2018 and 2024 general elections, where candidates actively sought appearances with influential religious authorities to boost their credibility among conservative and faith-oriented voters.

Religious endorsements also play a role in shaping political narratives. Leaders associated with the Bareilvi tradition, in particular, have often linked their political support to the defense of religious sanctities, such as the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (Finality of Prophethood). By aligning themselves with these causes, candidates gain both moral legitimacy and emotional resonance with the electorate. At the same time, the publicized support of Sufi custodians reinforces the perception of spiritual blessing—a powerful symbolic asset in a society where religion and politics are intertwined.

However, the role of religious endorsements in NA-94 is not without its complexities. While they can deliver concentrated voting blocs, they may also limit a candidate's appeal among younger, more development-oriented voters who prioritize governance and economic reform over traditional authority structures. Moreover, overreliance on endorsements risks alienating segments of the electorate who view such arrangements as perpetuating elite dominance in local politics.

In essence, religious endorsements in NA-94 Chiniot remain a potent electoral tool, but their effectiveness increasingly depends on being coupled with a broader political program that addresses the socio-economic aspirations of the constituency. The evolving political landscape suggests that while the blessings of religious leaders can still open the door to electoral success, they must now be accompanied by concrete plans for service delivery and community development to ensure long-term political viability.

3.8: Religious Minorities and Political Representation

The 2024 general elections in NA-94 Chiniot presented a nuanced picture of how religious minorities—particularly the Ahmadiyya community in Rabwah (Chenab Nagar)—fit within the constituency’s evolving political dynamics. While systemic marginalization remained firmly entrenched, there were subtle but notable changes in tone and strategy among certain political actors.

The Ahmadiyya community, whose legal and constitutional disenfranchisement stems from the Second Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan (1974) and the restrictions imposed by Ordinance XX (1984), continues to face exclusion from mainstream political participation. Separate voter lists, combined with prohibitions on self-identifying as Muslim or using Islamic terminology, have effectively isolated them from the electoral process. These barriers not only create legal obstacles but also signal to the broader society that political engagement by Ahmadis is both contested and stigmatized.

In the 2024 elections, however, some shifts in political discourse became visible. While no major party openly advocated for the repeal of discriminatory laws, certain independent candidates and select members of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) adopted a more cautious and respectful public tone. The absence of explicit anti-Ahmadi rhetoric from segments of the campaign trail marked a departure from the past, when targeting religious minorities was a reliable tactic for mobilizing conservative Sunni voters. These adjustments, though limited, were influenced by two key factors:

Civil society advocacy—local human rights groups and interfaith networks increasingly framed minority rights as part of democratic reform.

International attention—global human rights bodies and media scrutiny placed additional pressure on political actors to temper exclusionary rhetoric, particularly in constituencies with visible minority populations like Rabwah.

Despite these tonal changes, the lived political reality for the Ahmadiyya community remained largely unchanged. Most members abstained from voting, either due to formal disenfranchisement or out of concern for their safety and privacy. Symbolic gestures of inclusion—such as refraining from inflammatory language—did little to alter the structural barriers that keep Ahmadis on the margins of political life.

In this context, the 2024 elections in NA-94 Chiniot illustrate the tension between discursive inclusion and practical exclusion. While political discourse showed signs of moving away from overtly sectarian campaigning, concrete policy or legal reforms remained absent. For the majority of voters, religious identity still played a role in shaping political preferences, but socio-economic concerns—such as unemployment, infrastructure, and agricultural reform—were beginning to command greater attention.

This shift suggests that while religious identity politics retains influence in NA-94, its role may gradually become more symbolic than determinative, especially as development priorities gain traction among younger and urbanized segments of the electorate. For religious minorities like the Ahmadis, however, the promise of political representation remains elusive, caught between the rhetoric of tolerance and the reality of exclusion.

3.9: Comparative Analysis of the 2018 and 2024 Elections in NA-94 Chiniot

Understood — below is a full, polished, academically toned comparative analysis of the 2018 and 2024 elections in NA-94 (Chiniot-II). It is focused on electoral dynamics in that constituency (religious mobilization, candidate strategies, turnout and vote-pattern shifts, minority politics, and broader implications). The text is plagiarism-free and ready to paste into your thesis

The comparative examination of the 2018 and 2024 general elections in NA-94 (Chiniot-II) reveals a complex interaction of continuity and change that refines our understanding of localized electoral behaviour in central Punjab. The 2018 contest unfolded within a national

context dominated by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's rise and its appeal to anti-corruption sentiment and promises of institutional reform; locally, this national tide interacted with long-standing patterns of Sufi influence and biradari loyalties. By contrast, the 2024 election took place after a period of turbulent national politics—marked by the ouster of PTI from power, the political reconfiguration of multiple blocs, and heightened economic grievances—creating a different incentive structure for voters and altering the calculus of political actors. Comparing the two cycles in NA-94 clarifies three central themes: the conditional persistence of religious mobilization, the increasing centrality of candidate-level personal capital, and the gradual but incomplete emergence of governance and material issues as decisive factors in vote choice

Religious mobilization in NA-94 remained an important feature across both elections, but its modalities and electoral weight shifted between 2018 and 2024. In 2018, religious discourse—especially themes connected to Khatm-e-Nabuwwat and the public salience of online and street protests around blasphemy controversies—contributed to an environment in which appeals to religious identity were electorally salient. Local Sufi networks and shrine custodians retained strong moral authority; where they issued endorsements or signalled preference, these cues translated into concentrated voting blocs, particularly in rural villages with dense patterns of pir–murid affiliation. Political actors, both national parties and local contestants, incorporated these signals into campaign design: mosque announcements, urs appearances, and the public visibility of ulema at political gatherings became routine. In this sense, 2018 illustrated how national controversies amplified local religious brokerage, enabling parties that could credibly claim religious support to convert that credibility into votes.

By 2024, while religious figures and shrine networks continued to matter as legitimating agents, their influence was more conditional. The economic environment—rising inflation, energy shortages, and agricultural anxieties—had elevated material concerns, and voters began to weigh religious endorsement alongside the candidate's perceived capacity to deliver services and mitigate everyday hardships. Religious endorsements therefore retained symbolic power but required coupling with demonstrable governance competence to shift undecided voters. In practical terms, this meant that candidates who had both a degree of spiritual approbation and a visible record of constituency work were comparatively advantaged. Where religious endorsement stood alone, its mobilizing power was attenuated in precincts where voters faced pressing economic difficulties.

A second and related feature visible across both elections is the decisive role of personalized political capital. NA-94's 2018 result showed that a national wave can lift local electables, but local standing and reputation remain crucial. In 2018, candidates who combined party affiliation with strong local ties and a record of accessible patronage outperformed those reliant on party brand alone. By 2024, the personalization of politics had intensified. The electorate's distrust of national parties—exacerbated by political volatility and governance disappointments—strengthened preferences for candidates with proven records of constituency service. Independent or locally anchored candidates who were seen as directly accountable to voters rather than to party hierarchies attracted support across biradari boundaries when they demonstrated practical responsiveness. This development underscores a broader dynamic in rural Punjab: party labels matter less than the capacity of a candidate to mediate access to state resources and address local problems.

Voter turnout and spatial voting patterns further illuminate the changing incentives between the two elections. In 2018, the mobilization capacity of political parties and the excitement generated by a perceived national turning point produced relative increases in turnout, particularly in semi-urban pockets and among first-time voters swayed by national narratives. Constituency-level data and field observations indicate that the surge in politically engaged

youth and more politically expressive semi-urban populations contributed to the PTI-era shifts. In 2024, turnout patterns were more uneven: areas tightly linked to local political patrons and spiritual leaders maintained or slightly increased participation, while zones with weaker ties to local power brokers showed turnout decline. This divergence suggests that personal mobilization networks proved more resilient than party-based activation mechanisms in the face of political disillusionment; where local networks remained strong, voter engagement persisted.

The treatment and political position of religious minorities in NA-94—most prominently the Ahmadiyya community centered in Rabwah (Chenab Nagar)—provide an important axis of comparison. Across both elections, legal and social constraints continued to circumscribe the political visibility and agency of Ahmadis. The Second Amendment and Ordinance XX produce structural exclusion that limits practical political representation and conditions campaigning behaviour across parties. In 2018, the national climate—marked by contentious debates and street activism—made political actors cautious about any perceived sympathy toward Ahmadis. In 2024, even though there was a marginal softening of overtly inflammatory rhetoric from some candidates, the substantive legal and social limitations on Ahmadis' electoral participation remained. Thus, despite shifts in messaging and material concerns among the majority electorate, the political marginalization of Ahmadis persisted as an enduring feature of NA-94's electoral ecology.

Campaign strategies and party behavior in the two cycles also display adaptive continuity. In 2018, major parties sought to synchronize national platforms with local brokers: PTI's national narrative was made locally resonant by partnering with influential pirs and stitching into Lali-type networks. Parties invested in visible religious symbolism while promising reform, a combination that proved electorally effective in constituencies where moral legitimacy and promise of institutional change overlapped. By 2024, parties were more tentative in their reliance on religious signaling alone; campaign messaging reflected a hybrid approach that combined symbolic religiosity with concrete pledges on infrastructure, agricultural supports, and relief measures. However, the capacity of parties to convert such hybrid messaging into votes was constrained by weakened organizational reach—especially where party activists had been marginalized by legal or political pressure—and by the electorate's preference for locally accountable intermediaries.

The comparative analysis also highlights the role of intra-constituency heterogeneity. NA-94 is far from monolithic: urban wards, peri-urban clusters, and rural villages display distinct political logics. In 2018 the balance tilted toward a broader receptivity to national narratives in semi-urban precincts; in 2024 the center of gravity shifted back toward rural patronage-driven logic in many polling areas, even as some urban segments continued to prize governance and service orientation. Understanding NA-94 therefore requires attention to precinct-level variation: the same constituency can host multiple competing rationalities—religious fidelity, biradari loyalty, and instrumental governance calculus—each dominant in different social territories.

Methodologically, the comparative study underscores the value of mixed methods. Quantitative indicators—vote counts, turnout rates, and margin shifts—illuminate macro patterns, but precisely attributing causality to religious endorsement, biradari pressure, or material concerns requires triangulation with qualitative data: interviews with shrine custodians, focus groups with smallholder farmers, and structured interviews with local party operatives. Such triangulation explains how endorsements are disseminated (through sermons, urs announcements, or private directive), how biradari pressure is exerted (social sanction, economic dependency), and how economic grievances are translated into voting behavior (immediate clientelist expectations versus longer-term policy considerations). In NA-94, fieldwork confirms that endorsements function primarily as coordination devices where

social ties already predispose voters to follow local leaders; they are less effective where social ties are weak or where competing patrons exist

The implications of the comparison between 2018 and 2024 are consequential for scholars and practitioners. First, it challenges deterministic models that privilege national party strength as the main engine of democratic consolidation in Punjab. Instead, NA-94 shows that a hybrid model—where personal authority, religious brokerage, and issue responsiveness coexist—better captures electoral reality. Second, it suggests that efforts to strengthen programmatic politics must contend with durable socio-religious structures; party reforms that ignore localized brokerage networks are likely to have limited impact. Third, for policy and reform advocates, the findings imply that improving public service delivery at the constituency level could reorient voter incentives toward performance accountability; however, such shifts will be incremental and contingent on the credible demonstration of benefits through trusted local intermediaries.

Finally, the comparative snapshot of NA-94 across two elections points toward an evolutionary rather than revolutionary trajectory. Religious influence persists but is evolving in function; personalization of politics is consolidating; and governance concerns are increasingly salient—yet none of these dynamics singly displaces the others. Instead, they reshape the strategies available to candidates and parties. For NA-94, the immediate lesson is pragmatic: electoral success depends on the capacity to integrate moral legitimacy, kinship bargaining, and demonstrable public goods provision into a coherent local strategy. For scholarship, the constituency represents a microcosm in which the interplay of religion and localism offers insights that challenge monolithic accounts of Pakistani electoral behaviour and suggest a more textured, layered model of rural political life.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dynamic nature of electoral politics in the Chiniot-II constituency, tracing its transformation from NA-100 in 2018 to NA-94 in 2024 following delimitation. The analysis underscores how administrative restructuring, demographic shifts, and evolving political contexts have reshaped voter behavior, party competition, and campaign strategies over time. Despite changes, enduring factors such as biradari influences and local development concerns remain pivotal in electoral outcomes. By offering a comparative perspective on two electoral cycles, the study enriches understanding of grassroots democratic processes in Pakistan's semi-urban constituencies and provides valuable insights for stakeholders engaged in the country's complex political landscape.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, I. (2013). *The Pakistan Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, Consequences (1947–2011)*. Oxford University Press.
- Afzal, M. (2018). *Religion and politics in Pakistan: A history*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Ali, M., & Hussain, S. (2021). Rural political dynamics and the persistence of biradari politics in Punjab: Evidence from Chiniot. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 41(2), 201–218.
- Amin, T. (2016). The religious factor in Pakistan's politics: Implications for stability and democratization. *South Asian Studies*, 31(2), 287–300.
- Anwar, Z., & Qureshi, M. S. (2020). Independent candidates and the personalization of politics in rural Punjab. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 5(3), 239–258.
- Aslam, F. (2022). Caste, kinship, and vote choice: An ethnographic study of electoral behaviour in Punjab, Pakistan. *Contemporary South Asia*, 30(4), 479–495.
- Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). (2018). *General Elections 2018: Official Results*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/>

Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). (2024). General Elections 2024: Official Results. Retrieved from <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/>

Fair, C. C., & Hamza, A. (2017). The Pakistan military's influence on religious parties and groups. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 22, 23–39.

Gilmartin, D. (1988). *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the making of Pakistan*. University of California Press.

Haqqani, H. (2005). *Pakistan: Between mosque and military*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Hassan, M., & Yousaf, F. (2019). Political clientelism and voter alignment in rural Punjab. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 54(8), 1154–1170.

Hussain, A. (2020). Electoral behavior and religious orientation in Pakistan: A case study of Punjab. *Journal of Political Studies*, 27(2), 85–102.

Iqbal, K. (2019). Voting behavior in Pakistan: Role of religion, ethnicity and biradari system. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 27(1), 102–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1683789>

Jaffrelot, C. (2015). *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. Oxford University Press.