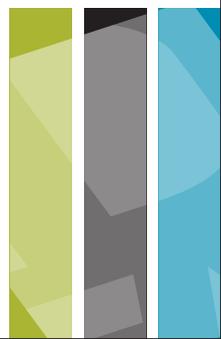


# Dynastic Politics in Punjab: Facts, Myths and their Implications



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**Dynastic Politics in Punjab:  
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## **Dynastic Politics in Punjab: Facts, Myths and their Implications**

**Ali Cheema<sup>1</sup>, Hassan Javid<sup>2</sup> and  
Muhammad Farooq Naseer<sup>3</sup>**

A fundamental paradox of Punjab's politics is the coexistence of competitive electoral contests with a deeply held belief among the electorate that the political system is extremely uncompetitive. The highly competitive nature of Punjab's elections can be seen from the fact that a 5 percentage-point swing against incumbent parties in the coming election, all else equal, can topple as many as 30% of the national assembly seats in the province. A resolution of this paradox is provided by the claim that the political class in Punjab is heavily dominated by dynasties, held together by ties of blood and marriage that impede the participation of non-dynastic aspirants to public office. Proponents of this view argue that, while Punjab's politics appear competitive as members of dynastic factions aggressively compete against each other using different party platforms, they are simultaneously uncompetitive because the dynasties, and the pursuit of their interests, trump other concerns in political party, public policy and development-related matters.

To what extent does the evidence support this view? We address this and other questions related to dynastic politics in Punjab, using a unique and original database of familial linkages among the top three contestants in national and provincial assembly races in all elections between 1970 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> By the term 'dynastic politicians', we refer to those electoral candidates who had multiple family members contesting national or provincial elections in Punjab between 1970 and 2008. Our aim here is to provide key facts about dynasticism in Punjab as well as to challenge some myths about it.

What are the key facts about dynastic politics in Punjab? The first is that, over the past three decades, dynastic politicians belonging to approximately 400 families have been instrumental in shaping policies, programmes and legislation that have impacted the lives of 176 million Pakistani citizens. On average, approximately two-thirds of the elected legislators and around half of the top three contestants in the national assembly elections in Punjab, between 1985 and 2008, were dynastic (Figure 1). A related fact is that dynasticism has remained remarkably stable over this period, which testifies to the incredible resilience of this enterprise.

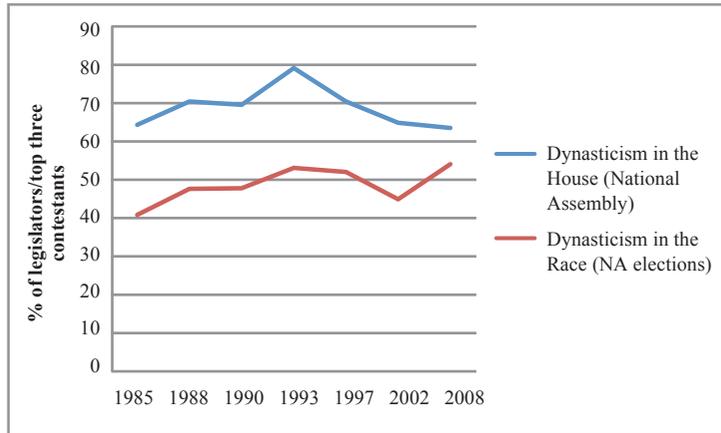
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<sup>4</sup> This database, herein referred to as Cheema and Naseer (2013), was created with financial support from the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS) as part of an ongoing research study. The database was put together by reviewing extensive primary documentation, including newspaper archives and public profiles of members of Parliament, as well as other secondary sources; its entries were subsequently verified by the district correspondents of the Dawn Group of Newspapers. The database was put together with the able support of Hammad Haq, Omar Qasim, Umair Javaid, Anum Malkani and Hassan Murtza Khan.

**Figure 1: Dynasticism in the National Assembly (Punjab seats only)**

Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013).

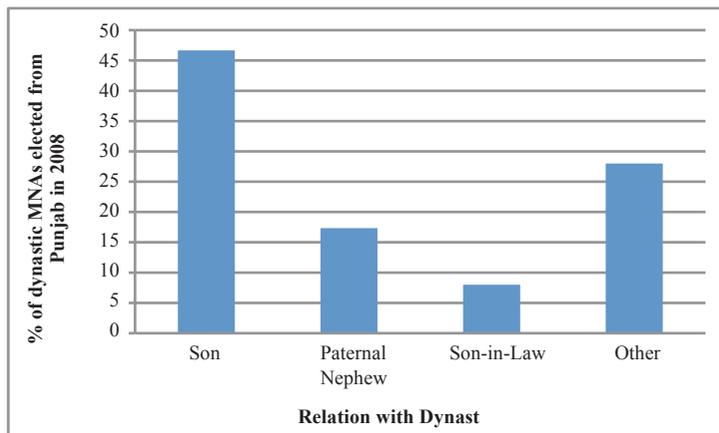
The fact that politics in Punjab is heavily dynastic is brought into sharp relief when we compare the incidence of dynastic politics in Punjab to India and to the historic levels found in the United States (Table 1). The incidence of dynastic politics among Punjab's elected representatives is nearly double the incidence found in India and five times the incidence found in the US during the Civil War period.

**Table 1: Dynastic Politics across Countries**

Country	Legislature and Period	Percentage of Dynastic Legislators in the House
Pakistan	Members of the National Assembly from Punjab in the 2008 Parliament	53.4%
India	Members of the Lok Sabha in 2010	28.6%
United States	Legislators in Congress in 1860–65	10%
United States	Legislators in Congress in 1966–96	6.2%

Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013) for Pakistan; French (2011) for India; and Dal Bo et al. (2007) for the United States. All three studies use the same definition of dynastic politicians, which excludes the first political entrant in each family from 'dynastic politicians'.

It is also a fact that dynastic organizations in Punjab are held together by ties of blood and marriage (Figure 2). The organizational form of politics that has emerged in Punjab is a hybrid with political party apparatuses being built on an edifice of dynastic families and their networks rather than political party machines organized around ideology, ethnicity, class and/or programmatic platforms. While analysts typically focus on the dynastic nature of the high command of political parties, these results suggest that dynasticism is deeply rooted in constituency politics.

**Figure 2: Relations with the Dynastic Predecessor in Punjab**

Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013).

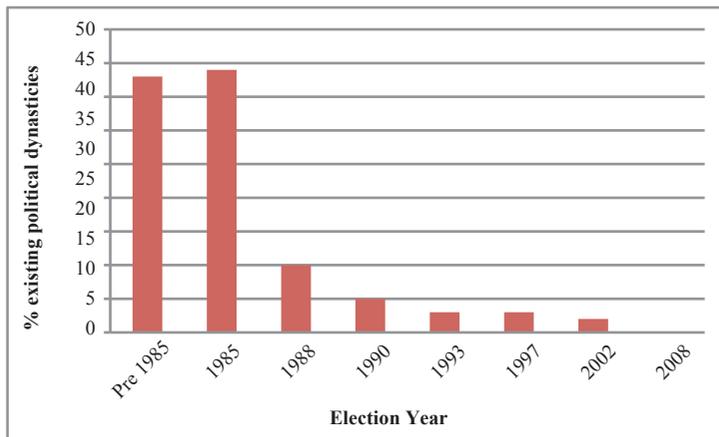
Dynastic families enjoy tremendous power in the political system because of the fact that being “dynastic” substantially increases the chances of winning an electoral contest. We find that, since 1985, two out of three electoral races in Punjab that have involved a contest between a dynastic candidate and non-dynastic contenders, were won by the dynastic contender. These races accounted for approximately 50% of all races fought from 1985 to 2008. We also find that, in another third of the electoral races, the real competition was between members of dynastic families and there was no effective competition from non-dynastic contenders.

It is also a fact that dynastic families in Punjab have been successful in making the generational transition, which suggests that they are not only resilient but also relatively stable enterprises that owe their success to more than just the personal ability of their first-generation politicians. This is best exemplified by the fact that over 50% of Punjab’s dynasties were able to introduce new family members into electoral politics to cope with the bachelor’s degree requirement that was imposed in the 2002 elections, and that approximately 35% of the families achieved success with the rookie contender.

It is, therefore, no surprise that conventional wisdom among political parties has been to win over the ‘electables’, which is synonymous with winning over members of these dynastic families. Therefore, parties have, in the past, chosen to forge alliances with dynastic politicians rather than build effective party machinery around a dedicated party cadre. The absence of effective cadre-based structure significantly increases the likelihood that dynastic politicians will win races and this expectation perpetuates their power in the system. This vicious cycle feeds both the success of dynasties and the weak organizational structure of political parties. Given the importance of dynastic organizations, it is no surprise that bargaining between these organizations and political party leadership is incessant, and the frequent switching of political parties by members of these families, or the sprouting of various ‘like-minded’ factions, has become the norm in politics.

The presence of this structure has a number of important implications for politics in Punjab, which we will discuss after challenging some conventional myths about dynastic politics in the province. The first myth is that the composition of families that constitute the dynastic pool is stagnant. This is not true. There was a substantial infusion of new entrants into the dynastic pool after the elections of 1985 and 1988 (Figure 3). What is true is that a large share of these individual non-dynastic entrants into politics thrived and formed successful dynastic families in their own right. This suggests that the emergence of a new pool of politicians may not imply a weakening of the dynastic system of politics and, instead, may only result in the replacement of one set of dynastic families by another.

**Figure 3: Dynastic Entry into Punjabi Politics**



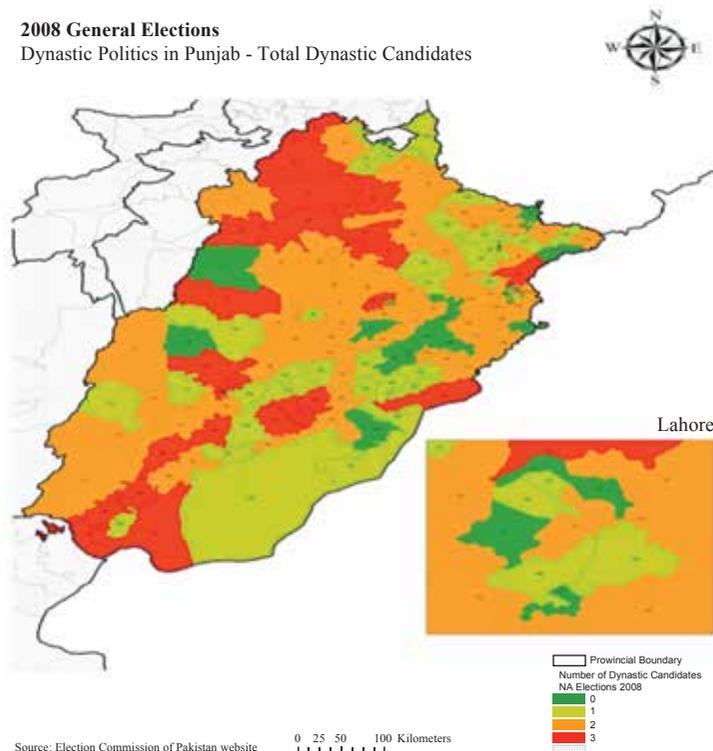
Note: The above figure reports political dynasties whose first member ('the dynast') entered politics in a given election year as a percentage of the total political dynasties in Punjab. Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013).

The second myth is that dynasticism is integrally tied to feudal or landed power. This is a gross oversimplification of the changes that have taken place in Punjab. While we do find that the number of dynastic contenders among the top three candidates in electoral races is higher in the more landed and unequal southern and western regions of Punjab (Map 1), the presence of significant dynasticism is also found in the less landed and more equal central-eastern districts of the province. In fact, there is considerable evidence to suggest that, since the elections of 1985, business-owning, trading and professional elites have been as successful as their landowning counterparts, if not more, in forming dynastic families, and that the power of capital appears to be as potent as the power of land.

### Map 1: Dynastic Politics in Punjab

#### 2008 General Elections

Dynastic Politics in Punjab - Total Dynastic Candidates



Source: Election Commission of Pakistan website

0 25 50 100 Kilometers

Source: Center for Economic Research in Pakistan and Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives Database of Election Maps of Pakistan.

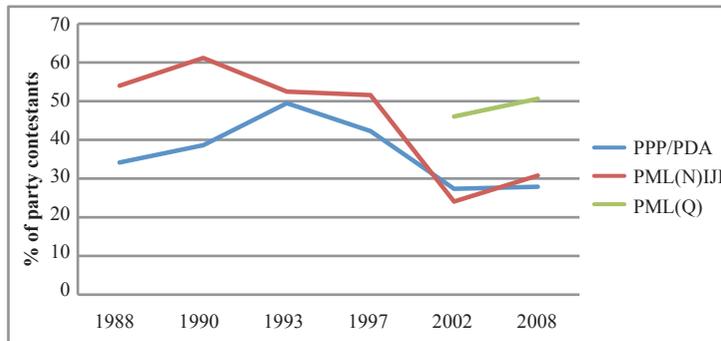
Note: The map shows the number of dynastic candidates among the top three contenders in Punjab's national assembly constituencies in 2008.

The third myth is that the episodes of military rule have led to a decline in the political power of dynastic families. We find that the opposite is true, and that military rule actually appears to perpetuate dynastic politics. While a third of Punjab's current crop of dynastic political families entered the political arena prior to the imposition of martial law by General Zia-ul-Haq, more than a third began their careers with Zia's nonparty elections of 1985. We have already shown that the measures ostensibly taken by Musharraf to reduce the power of entrenched politicians in 2002, such as the bachelor's degree requirement, did little more than induce the entry of the next generation of these dynasties into politics, whereby sons and nephews stepped in to fill the voids left by the disqualification of their fathers and uncles. It was completely unsuccessful in making even a small dent in dynastic politics.

In fact, Musharraf was able to get a significant number of dynastic politicians to defect and form the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), in 2002, providing this new party

with a solid base of ‘electable’ candidates that could be relied upon to deliver victories in their constituencies. We find that the proportion of dynastic contenders in the PML-Q, which average around 50% in 2002 and 2008, was more than 20 percentage points higher than the incidence of dynasticism found in the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) during these years (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Dynasticism in the PPP, PML-N, and PML-Q**

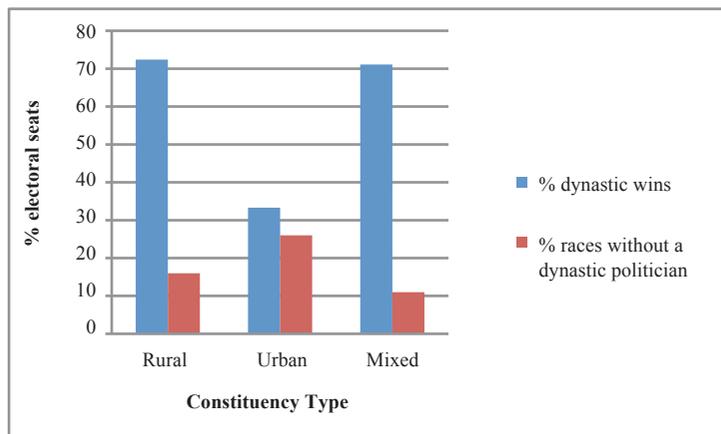


Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013).

The final, and perhaps the most persistent, myth is that dynastic families have absolute dominance in Punjabi politics. This is, again, a gross oversimplification with the actual picture being far more complicated. The urban areas of Punjab have begun to witness a weakening of dynastic politics. In comparison with their rural counterparts, urban dynastic politicians are 40 percentage points less likely to win in the constituencies where they stand for election (Figure 5). Furthermore, the number of races without any dynastic contender is almost 10 percentage points higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

There are a number of possible reasons why this may be the case. Punjabi cities differ from villages in several important respects that have a bearing on electoral contests. The ties of kinship and economic dependence that often characterize rural social relations are weaker in cities, thus decreasing some of the electoral advantage that underpins the electability of rural dynastic candidates. The physical space of cities, consisting of high population density levels, as well as the presence of a relatively mobile and fluid population of inhabitants, is less conducive to the mobilization of vote blocs similar to those that characterize local-level village politics. Cities are also more plural spaces than villages, with a diverse range of organizations and interest groups facilitating a freer exchange of information and ideas that can make it harder for dynastic politicians to rely upon their traditional sources of power when campaigning for votes. Given the changing demographics of Punjab, with the province becoming increasingly urban, we may see a decline in dynasticism over time and the emergence of political party machines.

**Figure 5: Urban vs. Rural Dynasticism in Punjab**



Note: The above figure reports the percentage of seats of a given type (urban/rural/mixed) won by dynastic politicians Source: Cheema and Naseer (2013).

### Implications for the Future

Is accommodating members of dynastic families in the distribution of party tickets the most effective election strategy available to the leadership of the main political parties in Punjab? Or is it time to begin the process of rewarding party cadres and non-dynastic members of party machines, no matter how incipient? These are questions that the leadership of the main political parties has struggled with during the recent process of distributing party tickets. These questions have no simple answer, which is, perhaps, why many parties appear at a crossroads.

On the one hand, there is ample reason for parties to be reluctant about moving away from their traditional reliance on dynastic politicians, as doing so would require the presence of a party-based vote that may be difficult to mobilise, given the weakness of existing party organizations. The vicious cycle that reproduces dynastic power also makes it difficult to break free of it. Lowering the barriers to entry for non-dynastic political aspirants would also increase the costs of organization for Punjab's political parties, forcing them to invest in building party machines that may or may not be able to deliver votes as effectively as the dynastic candidates. These factors provide strong reasons for the continued reliance on dynastic politicians.

On the other hand, the investment in building organized, non-dynastic and non-familial political party structures could deliver much higher electoral returns, if not in the present, then certainly in the future. Looking ahead, it is possible to identify a few sources of change that could potentially lead to a decline in dynastic politics in Punjab and give rise to the need to build organized party machines.

The first of these has to do with the rising urbanization in the province. We have already discussed that this trend is weakening dynastic politics. The adverse impact of urbanization on dynastic politics will be catalyzed by the next delimitation exercise, which will come into force after the next population census. The next delimitation will have two effects, both of which will weaken dynastic politics. It will reduce the imbalance in rural and urban seats, which will open up more spaces for non-dynastic urban contenders. It will also increase the total number of seats in the national and provincial legislatures, which will have an independent effect on dynastic politics by mechanically increasing the number of slots that need to be filled by political parties, especially if the number of 'natural' new candidates available within the existing dynasties is limited.

The opening up of political space through local government elections, if it happens, is also expected to weaken dynastic politicians. There is some evidence to suggest that increased levels of electoral competition, triggered by the greater availability of seats at the local level, can act as an entry point for non-dynastic politicians. This is particularly true at the local level, where the sheer number of positions and posts that could potentially be made available would inevitably lead political parties to induct candidates lacking the electoral advantage conferred by dynasticism. While this could serve as a breeding ground for 'new' dynasties, it might also facilitate the development of more effective party machines that could serve as a platform upon which to initiate a more policy-based mode of politics.

Finally, parties have begun to realize that accommodating dynastic politicians comes at a price. While these candidates are more electable than their counterparts, parties have to bear the cost of their participation in terms of having to compromise on their political and policy agendas. Given that dynastic politicians use their position to entrench their own economic and social position, essentially extracting rents from parties in exchange for their support, parties may be starting to see the wisdom of fielding non-dynastic candidates campaigning on more programmatic platforms. The impetus for this change may come from increased competition in an urbanizing electorate, and also through the induction of non-dynastic candidates at the margins of the current electoral system. In addition, the large increase in first-time voters between the ages of 18 and 22 is a "wildcard" that has the potential to adversely affect dynastic politics in the upcoming elections. This is because these voters are weakly integrated into dynastic political networks and may be more open to voting along party rather than factional lines.

The forthcoming elections, especially the performance of dynasts in electoral contests that involve a contest between them and de novo non-dynasts, will be critical in determining the future of dynastic politics in Punjab. The most important barometer in this regard will be the performance of candidates from the different factions of the PML-Q and the de novo candidates of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the 2013 general elections.

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