

The Honesty Puzzle

Political Attitudes in Lahore & the 2018 Election

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Since our publication of the policy brief, “Political Attitudes in Lahore and the 2018 Election,” which reported the results of our survey of political opinion in Lahore’s three constituencies and the 2018 elections, a number of generalizations have surfaced in the media that require clarification. To start with, the survey, the brief, and any other results published based on the survey are not products of Harvard University nor the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). They are part of research conducted at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS) by Ali Cheema (Senior Research Fellow at IDEAS and Associate Professor of Economics at LUMS) and Asad Liaqat (PhD Candidate at Harvard University). As a general rule, research is not attributable to universities but to the faculty and researchers who conduct it. This disclaimer was explicitly stated in the last paragraph of the executive summary of the brief.

It must also be clarified that our survey is only representative of four provincial assembly constituencies (PP 146, 147, 148 and 149) in three national assembly constituencies (NA 121, 122 and 124). This means that no statements should be made at the South Asia, Pakistan, Punjab and even all Lahore level based on these results. This was mentioned unambiguously in the second sentence of the executive summary of the published brief.

We are a group of non-partisan researchers who are primarily interested in understanding how urban politics really functions in Pakistan after almost a decade of rule by civilian political parties. This we believe remains a severely understudied area of research in Pakistan, and any efforts in this direction stand to benefit scholars, policy actors, and political parties on all sides. The aim of our research is to go deep into the politics of a small number of competitive and uncompetitive constituencies in Lahore to present evidence-based insights about voter attitudes in areas with varying levels of competition. Among the 13 NA constituencies in Lahore, NA-122 was the second most closely contested (PTI lost this seat by a vote margin of less than 5% in the 2013 general elections), NA-121 was the fifth most closely contested, and NA-124 was the second least competitive in the 2013 General Election. Out of the four provincial assembly constituencies in our sample, PTI holds the MPA seat in two constituencies (147 and 148) and PML-N holds the MPA seat in the other two constituencies (146 and 149). Our study covers an interesting variation of constituencies within Lahore and provides rich insights about voters, which has the potential to inform researchers, media and political parties. Therefore, it is completely false to claim as some have that the IDEAS survey was conducted in three National Assembly constituencies of Lahore

where the PML-N won by substantial margins in the 2013 general elections. However, making generalizations beyond the specific constituencies will disincentivize serious researchers from engaging in rigorous research on politics and from making their results public. We feel that in the long run this will not only limit our understanding of how politics functions in Pakistan and how voters connect with political actors, but will also harm democratic engagement.

We also want to explain what lies behind our ‘honesty’ result, which has become the subject of debate. The result is driven by the fact that party supporters are more likely to declare the leaders of their own party as honest. 57% of declared PML-N supporters rate Mr. Sharif as honest (**Figure 2**). On the other hand, 83% of PTI supporters rate Mr. Khan as honest (**Figure 4**). The higher overall honesty rating for Mr. Sharif is in large part due to the fact that there are many more declared PML-N supporters (44%) in our constituencies at the moment than declared PTI supporters (16% - **Figure 1**).¹

Our results also present a potential challenge for Mr. Sharif as there are a higher proportion of his own supporters who are giving him an ambivalent or negative honesty rating (43% - **Figure 2**) than there are PTI supporters who are giving an ambivalent or negative honesty rating to Mr. Khan (17% - **Figure 4**). This suggests that if honesty in public office becomes a key issue for voters in the next general election, this may harm PML-N’s prospects. The question many people have raised is that in spite of this ambivalence, why is the support for Mr. Sharif so high? Our analysis suggests that this is because the perception that Mr. Sharif is capable of development is high (84%) among his supporters (**Figure 3**). The big challenge for PTI is that Mr. Sharif’s positive perception on development is also very high among undecided respondents (66% - **Figure 7**). The problem for Mr. Khan is not a perception of dishonesty, which is consistently low among all groups – PTI supporters (4% - **Figure 4**), undecideds (9% - **Figure 6**), and even PML-N supporters (11% - **Figure 2**). Instead, his problem is the low rating given by undecided constituents on development (24% - **Figure 7**). If the PTI is to succeed in these constituencies it has to make a convincing case that it is a party of development.

At the heart of this story is the large proportion of undecideds (32%) that both parties need to sway in order to win in these constituencies, which represent important battlegrounds for the 2018 General Election. Given the large proportion of undecideds, it would be tragic for PTI supporters if their party claims that these are heartland constituencies of PML-N and concedes them before the battle has commenced. Similarly, it would be foolish for PML-N to think they are going to get a walk-over and stop putting in effort. The tragedy of the current debate, which has boiled down to a comparison of ratings, is that no one is asking who the undecided citizens are and what matters to them. Shouldn’t this really be the question we are asking? Our forthcoming note to be published next week will show that there are important surprises here.

¹ Our data does not allow us to claim causality i.e. we cannot state whether they think a leader is honest and can develop because they support the leader’s party, or whether they support the leader’s party because they think the leader is honest and can develop. Our data does, however, allow us to establish a strong correlation between support for a party and the perception that its leaders are honest and can develop.

Figure 1: Voting Intentions by National Assembly Constituency

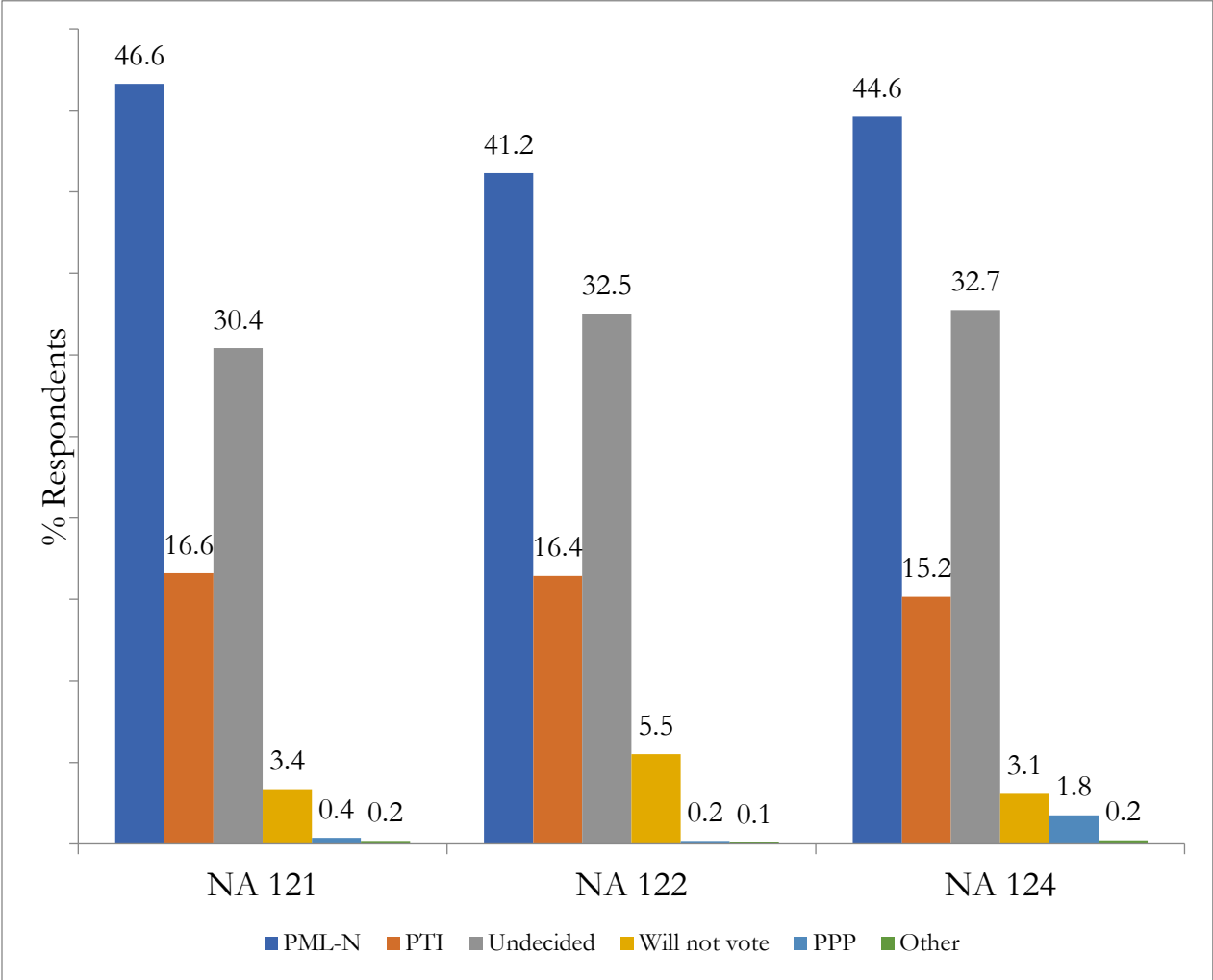


Figure 2: Honesty Perceptions among PML-N Declared Supporters

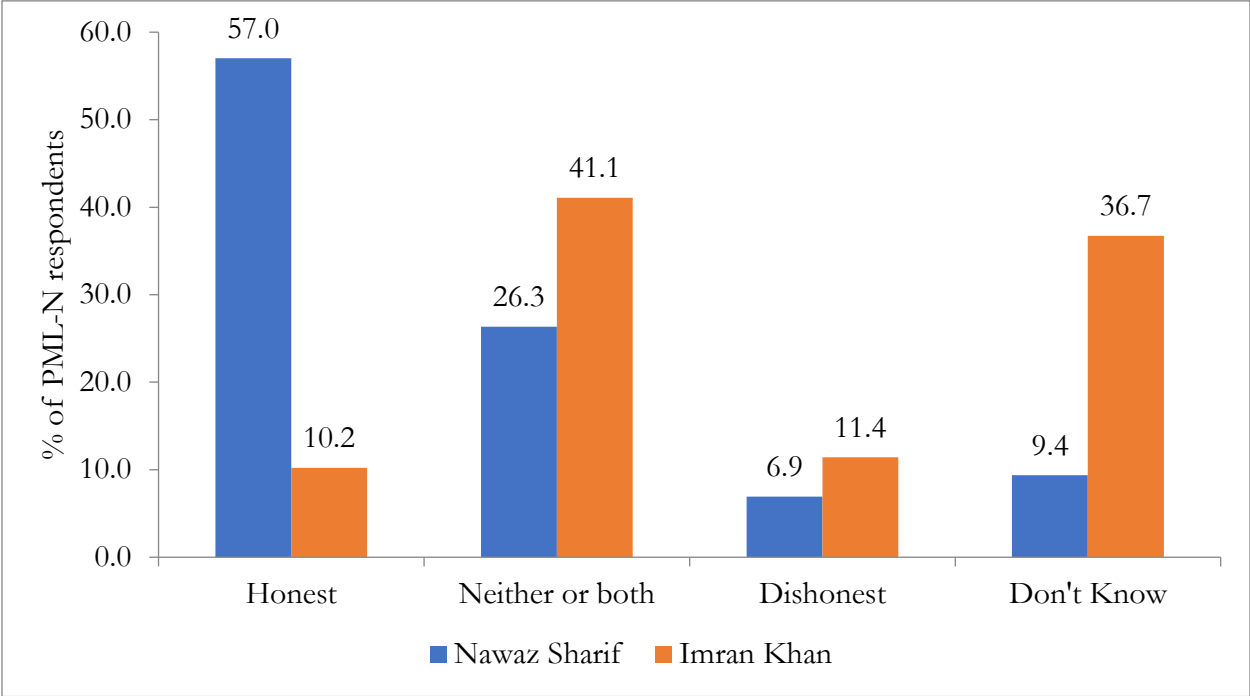


Figure 3: Development Perceptions among PML-N Declared Supporters

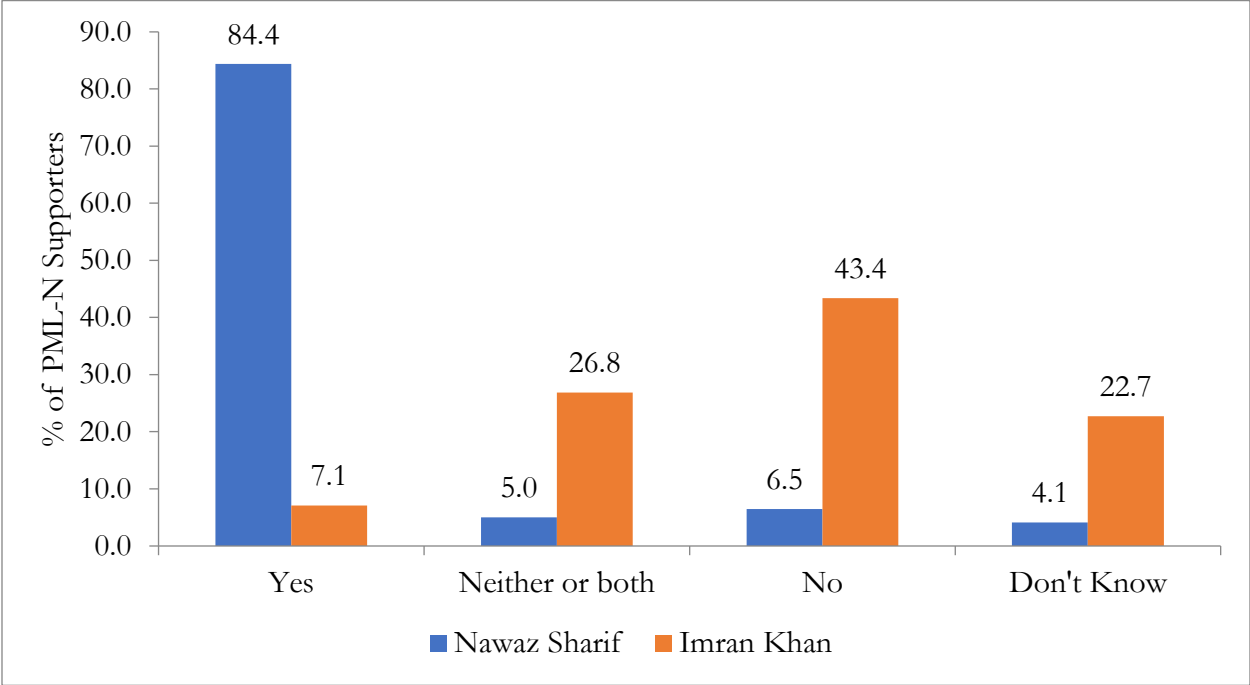


Figure 4: Honesty Perceptions among PTI Declared Supporters

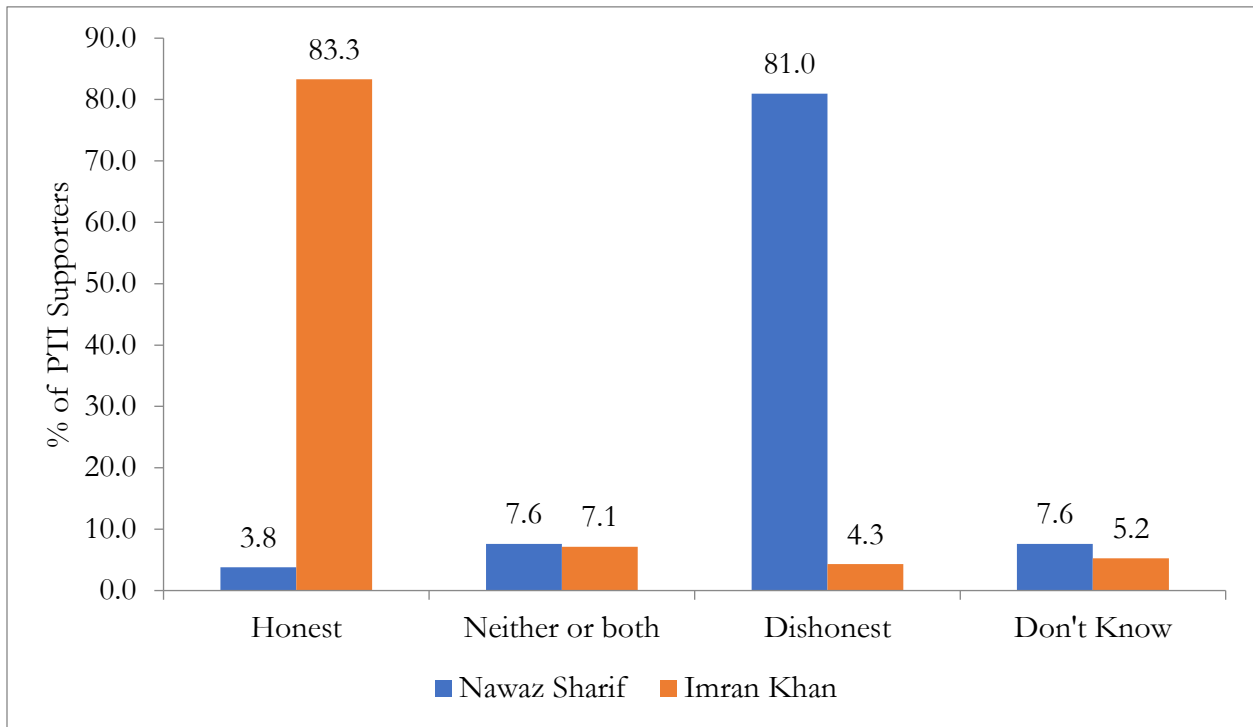


Figure 5: Development Perceptions among PTI Declared Supporters

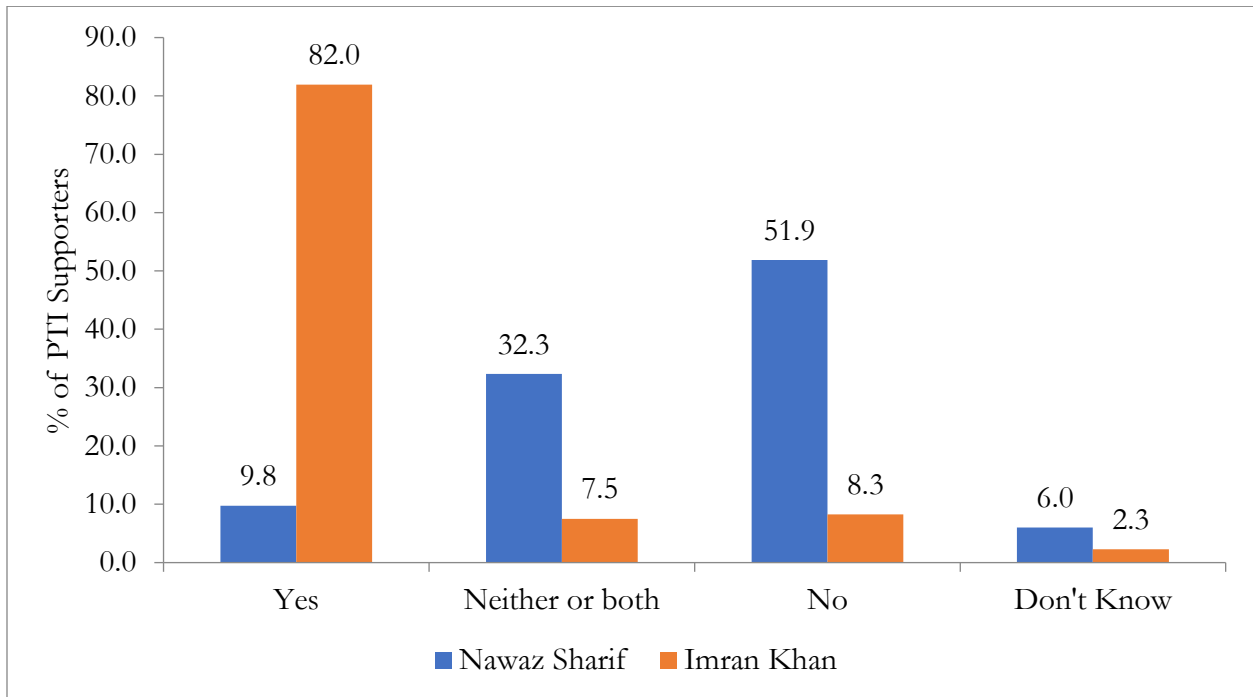


Figure 6: Honesty Perceptions among Undecideds

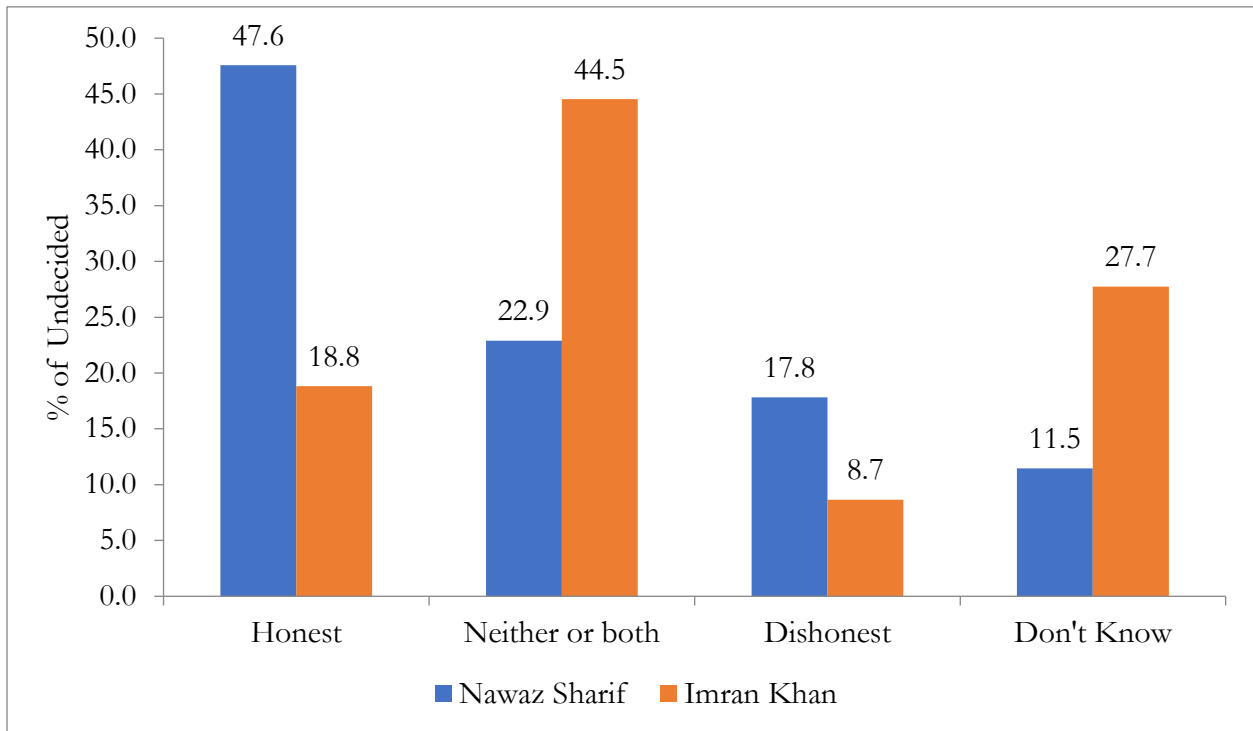


Figure 7: Development Perceptions among Undecideds

