

Was there a ‘unique selling point’ in the Economic Agenda of PTI: A Comparative Study of Election Manifestos of leading political parties in Pakistan

Saarma Saeed¹, Muhammad Salahuddin Ayyubi²

Abstract

This study examines Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) claim of presenting a distinct economic agenda in the 2018 elections under the slogan *Naya Pakistan*. A comparative content analysis of the manifestos of PTI, PML-N and PPP is conducted across nine themes: economic growth, employment, trade, taxation, energy, debt, industrial sector, agriculture, and state-owned enterprises. Using qualitative and quantitative techniques, the study evaluates the salience and specificity of policy pledges. Findings show that PTI dedicated the largest proportion of its manifesto (22.9%) to economic issues; however, substantial thematic overlap exists across all parties. Instead of proposing ideologically divergent policies, parties mainly varied in the degree of emphasis placed on particular issues. The analysis concludes that PTI's agenda was comprehensive but not uniquely different from its rivals.

Keywords: PTI, Election manifesto, Pakistani elections, Political parties, USP



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¹ MPhil Scholar, Forman Christian College – A Chartered University

² Assistant Professor, Forman Christian College – A Chartered University

INTRODUCTION

PTI entered the 2018 elections with the slogan *Naya Pakistan*, presenting itself as a break from past political and economic practices. This discourse, widely seen as populist, contributed to the party's electoral appeal. A key question, therefore, is whether PTI's economic agenda was genuinely distinct from that of its major competitors, PML-N and PPP. Since election manifestos remain the most authoritative expression of party positions, they offer a meaningful basis for comparison and for assessing proposed policy direction (Eder, 2016).

This study evaluates the extent to which PTI's economic proposals differed from its rivals by conducting a comparative thematic analysis of the manifestos issued for the 2018 elections. Manifestos are preferred over other sources—such as media content or elite interviews—because they reflect collective party positions rather than views of individuals or factions (Kleinnijenhuis & Pennings, 2001; Pogorelis et al., 2005).

Although Pakistan's electoral history has been irregular, manifestos have remained central to political communication. The importance of economic pledges resurfaced prominently in the 2013 and 2018 elections (Burki, 2013; Subohi, 2018). This paper is divided into five sections: a review of relevant literature, theoretical and methodological foundations, thematic analysis, and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Pakistan's manifesto-based economic agendas is limited, largely because political parties do not consistently publish manifestos and electoral cycles have been irregular. Early work by PILDAT (2002, 2007) highlighted significant variation in policy detail across parties. PTI's 2002 manifesto was noted for being comparatively balanced and detailed, whereas parties such as ANP and PML-Q adopted vague or outdated positions.

Studies of the 2008 and 2013 elections reported growing convergence among major parties on socio-economic issues, though policies remained largely rhetorical and lacked implementation details (PILDAT, 2007; Burki, 2013). Dawn (2018) and Kemal et al. (2013) described PTI and PML-N as broadly aligned on economic ideology, adopting right-leaning, growth-oriented strategies, while PPP maintained a redistributive emphasis. Despite recognizing fiscal constraints, parties rarely articulated how proposed programmes would be financed.

The 2018 manifestos again reflected strong focus on economic themes—growth, unemployment, agriculture, energy, and water shortages (PILDAT, 2018; Subohi, 2018). Studies also noted an absence of explicit ideology, minimal discussion of external debt or IMF engagement, and continued reliance on rhetorical promises (Murtaza, 2018; Kiyani, 2018). Overall, evidence suggests increasing thematic similarity among major parties, despite differences in emphasis and presentation.

Theoretical framework

Defining the “economic agenda” within manifesto documents is challenging because manifestos are not organised according to standardised thematic boundaries. A key initial task, therefore, is determining which components of a manifesto constitute economic content. Two approaches guide this classification: **deductive** and **inductive** coding.

The deductive approach applies pre-existing categories drawn from theory or earlier research. While straightforward, it can be limiting when the structure of a manifesto does not align with established classifications—potentially omitting relevant content or including irrelevant material. By contrast, the inductive approach allows categories to emerge from the document itself, ensuring closer alignment between content and analytical needs. Given the structural variation across Pakistani manifestos, inductive categorisation was deemed more suitable for this study.

A second analytical task concerns the **measurement of salience**—the emphasis a party allocates to a particular issue. The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) recommends calculating salience as the percentage of total manifesto word-count devoted to a given issue. However, because this study focuses exclusively on economic agenda, a refined measure was employed: the proportion of words in each theme relative to the total word-count of economic pledges.

Beyond salience, this study distinguishes between **rhetorical** and **specific** pledges. Rhetorical pledges express general intentions without concrete commitments, whereas specific pledges identify clear actions, targets, or programmes (Ashworth, 2000). This distinction helps evaluate the depth and policy relevance of each party’s economic proposals.

Finally, comparative analysis draws on **Downs’ spatial theory** and the **saliency theory of party competition**. Parties may differentiate themselves by adopting opposing positions (Downs, 1957), or they may avoid confrontation by emphasising different issues (Dolezal et al., 2014). A pledge-to-pledge comparison across parties is thus essential for assessing convergence or divergence in economic agendas.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **mixed-method content analysis** of the 2018 election manifestos of PTI, PML-N, and PPP. The scope is limited to economic themes; therefore, the first step involved identifying economic content through **inductive coding**, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the documents. Although earlier frameworks such as PILDAT (2018) and CMP classifications were considered, they did not sufficiently align with the structure of Pakistani manifestos. Ultimately, nine themes were extracted: economic growth, employment, trade, taxation, debt, energy, industrial sector, agriculture, and state-owned enterprises.

Unit of Analysis

The basic unit of analysis is the pledge, defined as a commitment to a specific action or strategic direction, typically signalled by phrases such as *we will*, *we commit to*, or *we promise to* (Rallings in Childs et al., 2010). Following CMP unitisation rules, each pledge was treated as a quasi-sentence containing a single message. Bulleted points were counted individually; longer sentences containing multiple messages were segmented accordingly (Volkens et al., 2015).

Classification of Pledges

Each pledge was categorised as either:

- Rhetorical (general intent without concrete policy), or
- Specific (clear action, target, programme, or measurable commitment).

This distinction enables comparison of the *substance* of party commitments rather than merely their volume.

Quantitative Component

For each theme, the following indicators were computed:

1. Word-count of pledges.
2. Pledge count (total and specific).
3. Share of each theme within the total economic agenda.
4. Economic agenda as percentage of total manifesto.
5. Specificity ratio (specific pledges ÷ total pledges).

These indicators serve as measures of salience and policy specificity, enabling cross-party comparison.

Qualitative Component

Qualitative analysis involved manifest and latent interpretation (Berg, 2000). A pledge-to-pledge comparison across parties assessed:

- Similarity or divergence in policy proposals,
- Depth of policy detail,
- Presence of ideologically distinct positions,
- Alignment with predictions of saliency theory (i.e., issue emphasis rather than oppositional stances).

This combined approach supports a comprehensive evaluation of whether PTI's economic agenda differed meaningfully from those of other major parties.

Thematic analysis

As the current study is primarily based on thematic analysis of economic agenda within the manifesto documents. This section analyses the overall features of economic agenda as well as a qualitative and quantitative analysis of which theme within in the economic agenda.

Table 1

Length of economic agenda as a % of total document length

Party	Total word count of Manifestos	Economic agenda word count ³	Economic agenda as a % of whole Manifesto
PPP	29490	3016	10.2%
PML-N	19755	3119	15.8%
PTI	14207	3254	22.9%

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto of the political parties for 2018 election

One straightforward measure of salience given by a party to any issue is the space it dedicates to discussing its economic vision in its manifesto document. The table 1 presents the

³ Based on word-count of pledges.

statistics that show relative significance given to economic agenda by all the parties in their respective manifesto documents in 2018. PTI presented the shortest manifesto but gave the most salience to its economic vision in its manifesto document. PTI dedicated 22.9% of its manifesto document to its economic agenda, which is more than twice the salience given by PPP almost two-third more than the salience given but PML-N its economic agenda. PPP gave the least salience to economic agenda even though it presented the lengthiest manifesto in comparison to other major political parties.

In order to look further into the contents of the economic agenda number of pledges within each theme are calculated. Some parties included in the current study made few yet lengthier pledges each making only one commitment. Hence looking into the number of pledges presented a fine grained picture of how much these political parties are actually committing to deliver. The table no. 2 lists the pledges made within each theme as well as the total number of pledges in the economic agenda of each party.

Table 2

Number of pledges across Themes

Party	Themes ⁴	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	Total
PPP		10	4	27	6	1	27	14	45	2	136
PMLN		39	30	10	17	0	57	16	41	8	218
PTI		0	23	30	12	0	19	33	48	4	169

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for 2018 election

PML-N made the most number of pledges in its manifesto followed by PTI and PPP. PTI not only criticized the incumbent but also all the governments throughout Pakistan's history for not taking the correct course of action. PPP which presented the lengthiest manifesto in terms of word-count made least number of pledges, indicating that most its manifesto comprised rhetorical statements. PPP manifesto mostly talked about its political and economic vision, past performances and criticism of its opponents. PML-N refrained from making direct criticism on its opponents.

A detailed analysis of pledges within each theme across parties is carried out below. The analysis probes into the extent of similarity or divergence in the stance of the political parties on each theme as well as the relative salience given to a theme by all the parties.

Economic growth

A single most important measure which can concentrate the economic performance of a government is the economic growth it achieves. Every government aims to achieve GDP growth. However, the drivers as well as the nature of this growth is a subject of debate across the political spectrum. The stance of the major political parties in Pakistan on achieving this growth is analysed below.

Table 3

Quantitative Measures of Analysis		PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on EG	10	39	0
2	Total number of Specific pledges on EG	3	23	0

⁴ T1, 2..., 9 are abbreviated for each theme, which are numbered and sequenced according to the table no. 2.

3	WC of all the pledges on EG	255	552	0
4	WC of S-pledges on EG	105	150	0
5	WC of all the pledges on EG as % of manifesto	0.8%	2.8%	0%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	8.4%	17.7%	0%
7	WC of S-pledges on EG as % of manifesto WC	0.3%	0.7%	0%
8	S-pledges on EG as % total number of pledges	30%	59%	0%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	2	1	3
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	2	1	3

Quantitative description of pledges on Economic Growth ‘EG’ (2018)

Source: Authors’ compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Table 3 shows that **PML-N assigned the highest salience** to economic growth, contributing 17.7% of its economic agenda. It also recorded the highest number of pledges, word-count, and specificity (59% of pledges were specific). **PPP ranked second**, allocating 8.4% of its economic agenda to growth, whereas **PTI made no explicit growth-related pledges**, resulting in a salience score of zero. PTI is ranked last in terms of the salience given to economic growth in its agenda. As it presented no clear stance on growth. No pledges were made specifically addressing growth or growth related issues.

Qualitative analysis

PML-N and PPP each included a dedicated section on economic growth. **PML-N presented the most structured growth strategy**, setting explicit targets such as 7% GDP growth, sectoral expansion, and making Pakistan the world’s 20th largest economy by 2030. It identified investment facilitation, credit access, and SOE reform as key drivers.

PPP’s approach was largely reform-oriented and rhetorical. It pledged to make the IT sector central to growth and proposed a “Basic National Economic Reforms Agenda” without quantifying targets.

PTI offered no articulated growth framework. Although the slogan of “inclusive growth” appears in narrative sections, no pledges or policy instruments are formally listed.

Condensed Comparative Insight

PML-N placed clear emphasis on growth targets and instruments, PPP emphasised structural reforms, while PTI did not present a growth strategy. No unique stance appears for PTI in this theme.

Employment

Employment constituted **16.1% of PTI’s economic agenda**, the highest among the three parties. PML-N followed with 11.3%, while PPP allocated only 3.5%. PPP’s four employment pledges were all specific, whereas PTI and PML-N displayed moderate specificity.

Table 4

Quantitative description of pledges on Employment ‘EMP’ (2018)

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on EMP	4	30	23
2	Total number of Specific pledges on EMP	0	12	12
3	WC of all the pledges on EMP	105	354	523
4	WC of S-pledges on EMP	105	217	302
5	WC of all the pledges on EMP as % of manifesto	0.4%	1.8%	3.7%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	3.5%	11.3%	16.1%
7	WC of S-pledges on EMP as % of manifesto WC	0.4%	1.1%	2.1%
8	S-pledges on EMP as % total number of pledges	100%	40%	50%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	3	2	1
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	1	3	2

Source: Authors’ compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Qualitative analysis

All parties addressed employment but with varying depth. PML-N and PTI both committed to large-scale job creation, targeting approximately 2 million jobs annually, though PTI framed this target across five years. PPP did not specify job targets, limiting its employment agenda to four pledges under its youth policy.

Shared Themes

- Support for *tech-based entrepreneurship*.
- Expansion of *skill development* initiatives.
- Provision of *paid internships* for youth.

PML-N’s Distinctive Features

- Detailed programmes: Common Facilities Centres, incubators, accelerator schemes.
- Clear training targets (2 million youth) and commitment to raise IT sector employment from 300,000 to 1 million.

PTI’s Distinctive Features

- Pledge to build 10 technical universities.
- Proposal for a Foreign Placement Office to help skilled workers secure employment abroad.
- Internship opportunities with parliamentarians.

PPP’s Limited Agenda

PPP’s proposals were confined to entrepreneurial encouragement through an Enterprise Development Fund, with no broader employment framework.

Condensed Comparative Insight

PTI emphasised employment more than any other party, PML-N provided the most detailed implementation roadmap, and PPP offered the least comprehensive agenda. None of these approaches constitute a unique PTI “selling point.”

Trade

Quantitative analysis

PPP allotted the **highest share of its economic agenda** (20.8%) to trade but exhibited low specificity (18.5%). PTI ranked second, while PML-N ranked third in salience yet first in specificity (40% specific pledges), indicating a more actionable trade plan.

Table 5

Quantitative description of pledges on Trade ‘TRD’ (2018)

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on TRD	27	10	30
2	Total number of Specific pledges on TRD	5	4	6
3	WC of all the pledges on TRD	626	146	560
4	WC of S-pledges on TRD	131	67	106
5	WC of all the pledges on TRD as % of manifesto	2.1%	0.7%	3.9%
6	3 as a % of WC of economic agenda	20.8%	4.7%	17.2%
7	WC of S-pledges on TRD as % of manifesto WC	0.4%	0.7%	0.7%
8	S-pledges on TRD as % all the pledges on TRD	18.5%	40%	20%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	1	3	2
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	3	1	2

Source: Authors’ compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Qualitative analysis

All parties dedicated full sections to trade policy. Broad consensus appeared around:

- Revising free trade agreements,
- Promoting exports through lower input costs and tax incentives,
- Leveraging CPEC for expanded trade opportunities.

PTI’s Focus

PTI adopted a **sector-specific approach**, giving exceptional attention to the textile industry. Its pledges included:

- Regionally competitive energy prices,
- Value-addition strategies,
- Cotton productivity enhancement,
- Lobbying for GSP+ status.

However, PTI did **not commit to export targets**, limiting its specificity.

PML-N’s Trade Strategy

PML-N presented **the strongest measurable objectives**, including:

- Target of 15% annual export growth,
- Pursuit of a free trade agreement with Turkey,
- Measures to streamline trade facilitation.

PPP’s Approach

PPP offered a broad, rhetorically strong trade vision with heavy discussion but limited actionable detail. A unique pledge was the use of **currency swaps** to stabilise trade.

Condensed Comparative Insight

While PTI and PPP shared similar trade incentives, PML-N was the only party to articulate clear export performance targets. PTI's agenda was not unique—it largely echoed the incentives proposed by its competitors.

Tax

Quantitative analysis

PML-N ranked first in both salience and specificity (88.2% specific pledges). PPP ranked second, while PTI ranked last due to a high proportion of rhetorical pledges (only 16.7% specific).

Table 6

Quantitative description of pledges on 'TAX' (2018)

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on TAX	6	17	12
2	Total number of Specific pledges on TAX	5	15	2
3	WC of all the pledges on TAX	231	302	209
4	WC of S-pledges on TAX	215	245	28
5	WC of all pledges on TAX as % of manifesto	0.8%	1.5%	1.5%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	7.7%	9.7%	6.4%
7	WC of S-pledges on TAX as % of manifesto WC	0.7%	1.2%	0.2%
8	S-pledges on TAX as % all the pledges on TAX	83.3%	88.2%	16.7%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	2	1	3
10	Specific rank (based on no. 8)	2	1	3

Qualitative analysis:

PTI's Tax Agenda

PTI focused on **institutional restructuring** rather than tax collection outcomes. Key elements included:

- Reforming FBR through increased autonomy,
- Rationalising taxes for housing, small businesses, and fisheries,
- Commitment to shift from indirect to direct taxation,
- Publishing names of major tax evaders.

This focus distinguishes PTI procedurally, though not substantively in terms of revenue strategy.

PPP's Tax Agenda

PPP proposed a **three-tier revenue authority model**—separating direct tax, sales tax, and customs authorities. It also pledged:

- Strengthening tax administration,
- Expanding agricultural taxation via the Benazir Kissan Support Programme.

However, it offered few measurable targets.

PML-N's Tax Agenda

PML-N presented the most **outcome-oriented strategy**, pledging:

- Increase in tax-to-GDP ratio from 13% to 16%,
- Doubling total tax revenue by 2023,
- Creation of a directorate for immovable property taxation,
- Corporate tax relief and devolution of property tax to local governments.

PML-N also proposed tech-based monitoring systems for tax evasion, aligning with other parties but with stronger specificity.

Condensed Comparative Insight

PTI and PPP both emphasised structural reforms, whereas PML-N focused on quantifiable revenue objectives. PTI's agenda did not offer unique substantive proposals compared to the other parties.

Debt

The external debt burden in 2018 was one of the most pressing macroeconomic challenges facing Pakistan. According to the State Bank of Pakistan, the gross public debt had reached 72.1% of GDP (SBP, 2019). Despite the magnitude of this issue and its consistent prominence in political debates, media discussions, and election campaigns, it is noteworthy that **none of the major political parties articulated a substantive debt management framework within their official manifesto documents**.

Quantitative analysis confirms this absence. **PML-N and PTI made no pledges related to debt management**, resulting in zero word-count and pledge-count for this theme. PPP, meanwhile, included only a single, **purely rhetorical** pledge suggesting the need for an *independent assessment of external debt*. This statement did not provide any policy direction, measurable commitment, or strategy for debt sustainability, revenue enhancement, fiscal consolidation, or external financing management.

The negligible representation of debt-related pledges suggests a conscious political avoidance of an issue perceived as controversial, unpopular, or technically complex. Given that robust debt management requires politically sensitive decisions—such as expenditure cuts, new revenue measures, debt restructuring, subsidy reforms, and engagement with international financial institutions—parties may have refrained from specifying policies that risked political backlash during elections.

The almost complete absence of this theme across manifestos reinforces the broader conclusion that **economic issues with high political risk receive minimal salience**, even where they pose major macroeconomic threats.

Table 7

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on DEBT	1	0	0
2	Total number of Specific pledges on DEBT	0	0	0

3	WC of all the pledges on DEBT	15	0	0
4	WC of specific pledges on DEBT	0	0	0
5	WC of all the pledges on DEBT as % of manifesto	0.05%	0	0
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	0.5%	0	0
7	WC of S-pledges on DEBT as % of manifesto	0	0	0
8	S-pledges on DEBT as % all the pledges on DEBT	0	0	0
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	-	-	-
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	-	-	-

Quantitative description of pledges on 'DEBT' (2018)

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Energy

Quantitative analysis

The energy sector received substantial attention from all three parties, although the degree of specificity and emphasis varied significantly. The quantitative results show that PML-N allocated the highest share of its economic agenda (26%) to energy policy, highlighting its focus on continuing reforms undertaken during its previous term, including addressing energy shortages and improving infrastructure. PPP ranked second (20%), while PTI allocated only 9.6%, the lowest among the three.

In terms of specificity, PPP provided the most detailed and concrete proposals, with 60% of its pledges classified as specific. PML-N and PTI demonstrated far lower specificity, with PML-N offering 30% specific pledges and PTI 32%.

Table 8

Quantitative description of pledges on Energy 'ENG' (2018)

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on ENG	27	57	19
2	Total number. Of Specific pledges on ENG	16	17	6
3	WC of all the pledges on ENG	603	811	312
4	WC of S-pledges on ENG	328	246	100
5	WC of all the pledges on ENG as % of manifesto	2.1%	4.1%	2.2%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	20.0%	26.0%	9.6%
7	WC of S-pledges on ENG as % of manifesto	1.1%	1.2%	0.7%
8	S-pledges on ENG as % all the pledges on ENG	60%	30%	32%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	2	1	3
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	1	3	2

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Qualitative analysis

All parties converged on several overarching goals: improving affordability, enhancing accessibility, increasing energy availability, and moving towards sustainable or green energy sources.

Access and Infrastructure

- **PML-N** pledged **universal access to electricity by 2023**, which reflects a direct continuation of its existing infrastructure investments. It also promised to **double transmission capacity**, signalling recognition of structural bottlenecks beyond electricity generation.
- **PPP** proposed a major modernisation of the transmission system through a combination of public, private, and foreign investment estimated between **USD 40–50 billion**. This represents the most financially detailed infrastructure plan among the parties.
- **PTI** adopted a relatively limited approach, focusing primarily on **off-grid rural electrification solutions**, without outlining a comprehensive infrastructure upgrade plan.

Affordability

All parties linked affordability to lowering generation costs and reducing inefficiencies:

- **PTI** and **PPP** emphasised reducing system losses and improving governance.
- **PML-N** and **PPP** proposed shifting from indirect to **direct/subsidy-targeting mechanisms**, such as energy coupons or income-support mechanisms for the most vulnerable.
- **PTI** uniquely pledged targeted **energy subsidies for the textile sector**, highlighting its export-driven orientation.

Energy Shortfall

- **PML-N** made the strongest pledge: **complete elimination of energy shortfall**, a continuation of its 2013–2018 policy trajectory.
- **PPP** and **PTI** made no such definitive commitment, offering no quantitative targets.

Green and Renewable Energy

Transition towards renewable energy was recognised by all parties:

- **PML-N** pledged to increase the renewable share to **10%**, reduce carbon emissions by **10% by 2023**, and create a **Clean Energy Fund**.
- **PPP** targeted a 5% renewable energy share.
- **PTI**, despite its extensive environmental agenda elsewhere, provided the weakest renewable energy proposals in this theme and relied primarily on rhetorical commitments.

Water as an Energy-Linked Theme (PTI's Distinctive Component)

A unique feature of **PTI's** energy agenda was its comprehensive **water-management policy**, which included:

- Construction of large dams, including **Diamer-Bhasha**,

- Promotion of small dams for localised water and energy needs,
- Conservation, storage, and strategic distribution plans.

Although all parties supported hydropower expansion, **PTI's breadth of water-related pledges was more detailed and distinctive** compared to PPP and PML-N.

Industrial sector

Quantitative analysis:

The industrial sector emerged as a central theme, particularly for PTI, which allocated 19.3% of its economic agenda to this theme—the highest among all parties. PPP and PML-N dedicated much smaller proportions (approximately 7%), though their qualitative emphasis differed. Specificity levels across parties were fairly comparable, with all three presenting roughly one-third of their pledges as specific.

Table 9

Quantitative description of pledges on Industrial Sector 'IS' (2018)

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on IS	14	16	33
2	Total number of Specific pledges on IS	5	6	12
3	WC of all the pledges on IS	211	229	629
4	WC of S-pledges on IS	133	100	261
5	WC of all the pledges on IS as % of manifesto	0.7%	1.2%	4.4%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	7.0%	7.3%	19.3%
7	WC of S-pledges on IS as % of manifesto	0.5%	0.5%	1.8%
8	S-pledges on IS as % all the pledges on IS	36%	37.5%	36.4%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	3	2	1
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	3	1	2

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Qualitative analysis

Shared Commitments Across Parties

A considerable overlap existed in the industrial policies of **PTI and PML-N**, reflecting broad agreement on:

- Supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs),
- Improving productivity of export-oriented industries,
- Expanding vocational and technical training for industrial labour,
- Enhancing energy affordability for industrial operations.

PTI's Industrial Policy

PTI offered the highest number of pledges (33) and the largest word-count for this theme, reflecting its strong emphasis on industrial revitalisation. Noteworthy commitments include:

- Broad-based support for **SMEs**,

- Development of industrial clusters,
- Upgrading workforce skills,
- Promoting export competitiveness through improved input costs.

While detailed in volume, PTI's pledges lacked the clarity of quantifiable targets that characterised PML-N's agenda.

PML-N's Industrial Policy

PML-N provided a more target-driven industrial strategy with explicit growth projections:

- A promised **industrial growth rate of 8–10%**,
- Focus on technological upgrading, industrial expansion, and
- Strengthening of supply chain linkages for export competitiveness.

PML-N's approach stands out for its measurable objectives, although the party provided fewer pledges compared to PTI.

PPP's Industrial Policy

PPP presented the most distinct—yet the briefest—industrial agenda. Although limited in scope, PPP:

- Proposed credit facilities for export industries via the State Bank,
- Promised rationalised energy tariffs,
- Introduced a rehabilitation programme for “sick” industrial units,
- Indicated willingness to withdraw subsidies from underperforming sectors.

This last element distinguished PPP's approach, as it signalled a stronger emphasis on financial discipline.

Agriculture

Quantitative analysis:

Agriculture received the highest salience in the manifestos of **both PTI (28.3%) and PPP (28.8%)**, while PML-N allocated 19.5%. PPP also displayed the highest specificity in its pledges (51%). PTI made the highest number of pledges (48), though these contained fewer specific commitments.

Table 10

Quantitative description of pledges on Agriculture 'AGRI' (2018)

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on AGRI	45	41	48
2	Total number of Specific pledges on AGRI	23	18	14
3	WC of all the pledges on AGRI	868	608	922
4	WC of S-pledges on AGRI	432	280	267
5	WC of all the pledges on AGRI as % of manifesto	2.9%	3.1%	6.5%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	28.8%	19.5%	28.3%

7	WC of S-pledges on AGRI as % of manifesto	1.5%	1.4%	1.9%
8	S-pledges on AGRI as % all the pledges on AGRI	51%	44%	29%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	1	3	2
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	1	2	3

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

Qualitative analysis

All three parties devoted dedicated sections to agricultural development, with broad agreement on the following key policy areas:

- Expansion of credit access to farmers,
- Construction of new dams and enhancement of water storage,
- Promotion of drip irrigation and efficient water-use technologies,
- Strengthening of value addition in agriculture.

However, important distinctions extended across four major domains:

Subsidies

- **PPP** offered the most detailed and farmer-focused subsidy framework, pledging support on fertilizers, electricity, and drip irrigation technology. It also proposed a structured price-support system covering pulses, rice, cotton, and maize.
- **PTI** made general commitments to “optimise subsidy programmes” without specifying mechanisms.
- **PML-N** did **not** focus on subsidies, instead promoting a **market-competitive agricultural economy**.

Credit and Financial Access

- PPP emphasised **State Bank–supported credit**, with reduced markup rates comparable to industrial lending.
- PML-N pledged to **double agricultural credit availability**, including interest-free loans for over two million small or landless farmers.
- PTI’s commitments in this category were rhetorical and lacked actionable detail.

Water and Infrastructure

All parties supported hydropower projects:

- **Diamer-Bhasha Dam** received consensus.
- **PML-N** further pledged construction of Mohmand Dam.
- PPP and PTI both emphasised canal lining and water conservation campaigns, with PPP providing the most detailed proposals.

Sectoral and Welfare Innovations

PPP introduced unique and socially oriented measures:

- A **crop insurance scheme** for small farmers,
- Enhanced **rights and protections for women agricultural workers**, including minimum wage guarantees and maternity benefits,
- Preferential land allotment for women through the *Benazir Women Agricultural Workers Programme*.

PML-N distinguished itself by committing to:

- **Doubling farmers' incomes by 2030**,
- Investing **1% of GDP in agricultural R&D**,
- Creating a **Food Stabilisation Fund** to reduce volatility in food prices.

PTI presented the most detailed proposals for the **fisheries and aquaculture sectors**, especially the development of *Tilapia* farming and restrictions on fishmeal exports.

State-Owned enterprises (SOEs)

Quantitative analysis

Despite their fiscal significance, SOEs received relatively limited attention across all manifestos. PML-N assigned the highest salience (3.8%), PPP followed with 3.4%, and PTI dedicated the least at 3.0%. Specificity varied, with PPP offering the highest proportion of specific pledges (100% of its two pledges), followed by PTI (75%) and PML-N (62%).

Table 11

Quantitative description of pledges on State-Owned Enterprises 'SOE' (2018)

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for election 2018

	Quantitative Measures of Analysis	PPP	PML-N	PTI
1	Total number of pledges on SOE	2	8	4
2	Total number of Specific pledges on SOE	2	5	3
3	WC of all the pledges on SOE	102	117	99
4	WC of S-pledges on SOE	102	73	84
5	WC of all the pledges on SOE as % of manifesto	0.3%	0.6%	0.7%
6	3 as % of WC of economic agenda	3.4%	3.8%	3.0%
7	WC of S-pledges on SOE as % of manifesto	0.3%	0.4%	0.6%
8	S-pledges on SOE as % all the pledges on SOE	100%	62%	75%
9	Broad rank (based on no. 6)	2	1	3
10	Specific rank (based on no.8)	1	3	2

Qualitative analysis

PTI and PPP: Convergent Reform Orientation

Both parties adopted a governance-focused approach, signalling:

- **Depoliticisation of SOEs,**
- Enhanced autonomy for governing boards,
- Transformation into corporatised and professionally managed entities,
- Adoption of modern technologies for efficiency improvement.

Their agendas aligned closely, reflecting shared recognition of SOE governance failures.

PML-N's Distinctive Approach

PML-N provided the most specific goals:

- Complete elimination of losses incurred by major SOEs,
- Full revival of **Pakistan International Airlines (PIA)** and **Pakistan Railways,**
- Clear mention of **privatisation**, specifically in the power distribution sector (DISCOs), making it the **only party explicitly supporting privatisation** in this domain.

This outcome-oriented agenda contrasts with the more structural and governance-focused proposals offered by PTI and PPP.

FINDING AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the economic agenda of PTI in its manifesto documents viz-a-viz other leading political parties, in order establish the salient feature of PTI's economic policy and see if these were any different from rest of the parties. The table no. 12 has listed the relative share of each theme in the economic agenda of PTI. The theme are arranged in order of the salience given to each theme by PTI.

Table 12

Salience-wise ranking of each theme in the manifesto of PTI

Theme	Share in Economic Agenda (%)		
	PTI	PPP	PML-N
Agriculture	28.3%	28.8%	19.5%
Industrial sector	19.3%	7.0%	7.3%
Trade	17.2%	20.8%	4.7%
Employment	16.1%	3.5%	11.3%
Energy	9.6%	20.0%	26.0%
Tax	6.4%	7.7%	9.7%
SOEs	3.0%	3.4%	3.8%
Economic Growth	0%	8.4%	17.7%
Debt	0%	0.5%	0%

Source: Authors' compilation from the manifesto documents of political parties for 2018 election

The central question guiding this study was whether PTI's economic agenda, as presented in its 2018 manifesto, offered a *unique selling point* that distinguished it from the agendas of its two major competitors, PML-N and PPP. The preceding thematic analysis, supported by both quantitative and qualitative evidence, enables a comprehensive assessment of this question. This

section synthesizes the comparative findings and draws broader conclusions about the nature of party competition and policy differentiation in Pakistan's electoral context.

The analysis of relative salience revealed that PTI allocated a significantly larger proportion of its manifesto—22.9%—to economic issues than either PML-N (15.8%) or PPP (10.2%). In terms of thematic prioritisation, PTI's top three areas of focus were Agriculture (28.3%), Industrial Sector (19.3%), and Trade (17.2%), whereas its least emphasised themes were State-Owned Enterprises, Economic Growth, and Debt, with the latter two receiving virtually no attention. An interesting and parallel pattern was observed across parties: Agriculture emerged as the most salient theme for both PTI and PPP, and it also ranked among the highest for PML-N. Conversely, Debt consistently ranked as the least salient theme, receiving negligible or zero attention from all three parties. This alignment suggests that while parties differ in the volume of attention given to economic matters, they largely agree on which issues are electorally safe or beneficial to emphasise.

Another consistent finding across manifestos was the **avoidance of politically sensitive economic issues**, particularly those involving macroeconomic constraints and unpopular policy trade-offs. The near absence of debt-related pledges, even amidst a well-documented external debt crisis, demonstrates how political parties strategically downplay or entirely omit areas that may require them to commit to austerity, subsidy rationalisation, or engagement with the IMF. A similar pattern appears in the limited attention to the reform of State-Owned Enterprises and the near silence on the broader fiscal implications of expanded subsidies, infrastructure programmes, or public development commitments.

Beyond thematic salience, the study examined the degree of **specificity** within party pledges. PTI, while offering a substantial number of pledges, frequently relied on rhetorical commitments with limited actionable detail. PPP displayed high specificity in certain areas—most notably energy and agriculture—but otherwise blended rhetorical statements with programme-oriented language. **PML-N, however, consistently offered the highest proportion of specific, measurable pledges**, especially in themes such as tax reforms, economic growth, employment, energy, agriculture, and SOE restructuring. This pattern reflects PML-N's technocratic orientation and its inclination to frame its economic agenda through quantifiable benchmarks, targets, and implementation mechanisms.

The comparative thematic analysis demonstrated a **high degree of convergence across all parties**, confirming that their economic positions were not ideologically distinct but rather variations on a shared policy framework. For example:

- All parties emphasised export-led growth and incentivising export-oriented sectors.
- All pledged to improve the energy sector through efficiency, infrastructural investment, and affordability measures.
- All supported skill development and entrepreneurship as mechanisms of employment generation.
- All recognised the need for improved agricultural productivity, water management, and rural development.

Where differences emerged, they were largely differences of **emphasis rather than substance**. PTI emphasised employment, industrial revitalisation, and a wide-ranging agricultural agenda. PPP emphasised redistributive and welfare-oriented commitments, including gender-focused

agricultural initiatives and price support mechanisms. PML-N prioritised measurable economic outcomes, including explicit growth, tax, and export targets.

This pattern supports the central proposition of **saliency theory** (Dolezal et al., 2014): rather than competing by offering sharply divergent ideological positions—as predicted by spatial models such as Downs (1957)—political parties in Pakistan tend to compete by **selectively emphasising issues that they perceive as electorally advantageous**, while avoiding direct confrontation on controversial or high-cost policy choices. In other words, differentiation occurs through **relative emphasis**, not through conflicting policy stances.

Within this competitive framework, the study concludes that **PTI did not present a distinct economic agenda that could qualify as a unique selling point vis-à-vis its major rivals**. While PTI offered the most extensive economic coverage by volume, its policy proposals—when analysed pledge by pledge—reflected the same thematic priorities, the same solution sets, and the same broad commitments as those of PML-N and PPP. In areas where PTI diverged slightly—such as fisheries, water management, or FBR restructuring—these differences were incremental rather than transformative. Even PTI’s most distinctive narrative elements, such as its anti-corruption framing or promise of institutional transformation, did not translate into substantively unique economic proposals within the manifesto’s structured pledges.

Therefore, although PTI communicated an image of economic transformation under the banner of *Naya Pakistan*, the empirical evidence from its manifesto indicates that **its economic agenda was not fundamentally different from those of other leading parties**. The similarity across manifestos highlights a broader systemic pattern: Pakistani political parties tend to adopt **convergent, risk-averse, and rhetorically appealing economic agendas** that avoid clearly articulated trade-offs and that mirror public expectations rather than challenge them.

Finally, the study underscores the value of **regular, systematic scrutiny of manifesto commitments**, both for academic understanding and for strengthening democratic accountability. By comparing manifestos across electoral cycles, researchers, policymakers, and citizens can identify patterns of continuity or change, assess the realism of policy commitments, and trace the alignment between pre-election promises and post-election governance. Such studies can also encourage political parties to shift from broad, rhetorical pledges toward **clear, coherent, and implementable economic programmes** that address the structural challenges of Pakistan’s economy.

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