accountabilitylab NEPAL

Youth Participation and Citizen Election Observation Around Nepal's Snap Elections of 5 March 2026

In Collaboration With
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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANFREL	Asian Network for Free and Fair Elections
DRCN	Democracy Resource Center Nepal
DEO	District Election Officers
ECN	Election Commission of Nepal
EOC	Election Observation Committee
EOCG	Election Observation Coordination Group
EMB	Electoral Management Body
EU	European Union
FSTP	First Past the Post System
GEOC	General Election Observation Committee
HoR	House of Representatives
IRI	International Republican Institute
NA	National Assembly
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NFN	NGO Federation of Nepal
NID	National Identity Card
NEOC	National Election Observation Committee
PR	Proportional Representation System
NFN	NGO Federation of Nepal
QIA	Quick Impact Action
RSP	Rastriya Swatantra Party
UML	Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist-Leninist
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WYDE	Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative

1. Executive summary

Context

- Widespread youth-led protests over governance failures triggered the collapse of the Government, the dissolution of the House of Representatives and snap elections held on 5 March 2026, resulting in a major breakthrough for the anti-establishment Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).
- During Nepal's March 2026 snap federal elections, the independent civil society organisation Accountability Lab Nepal (ALN) implemented a Youth-Led Election Monitoring Initiative and worked with accredited citizen observer organizations to strengthen youth and Gen Z participation in election observation, contribute to post-electoral analysis and reform discussions, and promote greater youth engagement in democratic processes.
- This report reflects's ALN cumulative efforts around the past electoral process and are presented in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation. They are merely based on a qualitative analysis of the process without any statistical sample.

Legal framework and Election administration

- A constitutional body supported by a permanent administrative structure and by extensive temporary staffing during elections, the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) reflects the independent model of electoral management body, enjoying legal, administrative and financial autonomy, and is consistently perceived as exercising functional independence, including through the delivery of technically sound elections. At the same time, opportunities for further strengthening remain, including addressing operational constraints, enhancing voter education, assessing the factors leading to invalid votes, ensuring consistent observer access, publishing disaggregated results, and establishing a formal mechanism for regular stakeholder consultations.
- Vote counting is conducted at designated counting centres rather than at polling stations; while this uncommon practice reflects logistical and security considerations, it remains subject to differing stakeholder views and raises questions regarding transparency and integrity.
- The ECN adopted an Election Code of Conduct, 2025, and had previously developed a draft Election Management Act, 2023 aimed at streamlining major elements of the legal electoral framework into a more coherent and complete legal instrument.

Voter registration and demographic insight

- Promoting youth participation begins with ensuring that eligible young citizens are registered to vote. Having established a biometric voter register in 2010, the ECN operates a de facto continuous registration system complemented by targeted campaigns ahead of elections; some structural barriers remain, notably unequal access to citizenship certificates which may affect youth, minorities and marginalised groups.
- Legal and procedural adjustments ahead of the 5 March 2026 elections, including extended registration deadlines and an inclusive cut-off date, positively supported participation and contributed to avoid disenfranchisement of newly eligible voters. Further clarification of age-related provisions, together with enhanced targeted information for young people on their electoral rights and registration procedures, could further promote youth inclusion.
- Recent reforms have positively improved access, including allowing voter registration from a place of domicile, the introduction of online pre-enrolment, and progressive integration with the National ID system, reflecting a broader shift towards a more approachable and digitally integrated registration process.
- The biometric voter register is likely to contain a significant number of records of deceased and otherwise ineligible voters, which may affect confidence and turnout figures. Consequently, the overall approximately 60% voter turnout in Nepal's 2026 landmark parliamentary elections may underestimate the actual participation rate of eligible voters.
- The likely presence of records of deceased voter highlights the importance, over the longer term, to strengthen interoperability with civil registration system as its completeness improves. Internationally, similar challenges have been addressed through re-registration exercises or enhanced voter verification technologies at polling stations, with any such measures benefitting from broad stakeholder consultation and thorough feasibility assessments.
- Data comparisons conducted by ALN indicate a potentially high overall level of registration relative to the estimated adult population, but reveal a growing gender imbalance, with women increasingly underrepresented in the voter register.
- Based on demographic projections and extrapolations, youth aged 18–35 represent approximately 10.2 million people, or about 34% of the total population and 48% of the voting-age population, underscoring their electoral significance; in the absence of publicly available age-disaggregated voter registration data, youth inclusion in the voter register cannot be assessed.
- Growing migration - projected at around 2.2 million by 2026 - particularly among young people, combined with the absence of provisions for out-of-country voting, creates challenges to the inclusiveness of the voter register.
- Persistent concerns raised by citizen observer groups include unregistered eligible voters, inaccuracies including duplicate and multiple entries, misspelled names, potentially ineligible records and weaknesses in voter education, suggesting that a comprehensive audit of the 15-year-old voter register could provide valuable insights into its accuracy and completeness and help inform any future reforms.

Code of Conduct, campaign regulation and social media oversight

- The Election Code of Conduct, 2025 expanded the scope of previous provisions while also introducing greater regulatory complexity; at the same time, longstanding challenges remain in relation to clarity, operationalisation and enforcement capacity.
- Enforcement of the Code of Conduct during the 2026 elections was reported by citizen and international observer groups as limited and inconsistent, with rarely sanctioned violations including misuse of state resources, vote-buying, involvement of civil servants in campaigning, and candidate-funded voter transportation.
- Campaign finance remains a weak area, with widespread circumvention of spending limits, limited compliance with reporting requirements, and the absence of systematic public disclosure of financial information, suggesting opportunities for enhanced ECN oversight, including through independent monitoring, and the gradual introduction of accessible public reporting to promote accountability.
- The 2026 elections marked a structural shift towards digital campaigning creating a dual dynamic: on the one hand enabling new forms of political participation and an unprecedented wave of youth political engagement, on the other hand giving rise to misinformation, hate speech and online harassment, including gender-targeted attacks.
- While Code of Conduct's new regulatory provisions address digital risks, existing campaign finance oversight and reporting frameworks do not effectively capture digital campaign spending, including paid online content, influencer engagement, and informal coordinated networks, resulting in significant financial flows remaining largely outside formal scrutiny.

Women's participation, inclusion challenges and youth engagement

- High and weakly regulated campaign costs continue to create structural barriers to political participation, particularly affecting women, youth and candidates from marginalised groups.
- Although Nepal meets constitutional requirements for women's representation, this remains largely driven by proportional representation quotas, with persistently low success rates in directly elected seats, highlighting a gap between formal inclusion of women and their substantive political participation. Structural barriers to women's inclusion include party gatekeeping, unequal access to financial resources and political networks, and online campaign gendered harassment.
- Broader inclusion challenges remain, including the absence of out-of-country voting, difficulties for migrant and out-of-district voters in returning to their constituencies of permanent residence in order to vote, potential disenfranchisement of those involved in election administration and observation, and accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities and elderly voters.

- Youth emerged as key political actors in the 2026 elections, and their mobilisation significantly shaped campaign dynamics and electoral outcomes; however, youth remain underrepresented in formal political structures, reflecting ongoing barriers related to party practices, financial constraints and hierarchical decision-making.
- The sustainability of youth engagement is likely to depend on the extent to which political actors translate youth mobilisation into meaningful inclusion, while responding public expectations for governance and reform.

Citizen election observation

- The 2026 elections saw reduced international support and fewer accredited citizen observer groups, alongside accreditation requirements widely perceived as restrictive; despite constraints, observer groups deployed extensively, including increased participation of Gen Z observers supported through targeted initiatives implemented by ALN and partner observer groups.
- Observation methodologies varied, with most organisations relying on checklist-based approaches rather than comprehensive observation forms, while coordination among observer groups weakened compared to previous elections, despite some continued joint initiatives.
- Observers reported operational challenges, including restricted and inconsistent access to polling stations, limited observation time, and obstacles during critical phases such as closing and counting, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of observation.
- Citizen election observation remains a key component of electoral integrity, and observer groups continue to play an important role beyond election day; strengthening observer access and methodology, standardising procedures, and enhancing coordination remain important priorities to improve transparency and credibility in future elections.

Opportunities for post-election reform

- While the 2026 elections reflect strong public demand for change, the extent to which this will translate into effective governance and institutional reform will depend on a range of political and institutional factors including entrenched patronage networks, potential bureaucratic resistance and the evolving experience of new political actors.
- The current political context, including a strong parliamentary majority and a reform-oriented leadership with a significant youth mandate, creates a favorable window of opportunity for structural reforms. At the same time, electoral reform including the dormant draft Election Management Act, 2023 is not yet featured into the Government's 100-day programme, largely centred around digital governance, anti-corruption, and public service delivery.

- Key reform areas identified include enhancing access to registration and voting; addressing structural barriers to inclusion, particularly for women; strengthening campaign finance transparency and regulation enforcement; adapting the regulatory framework to digital campaigning, and improving dispute resolution mechanisms.
- The digital governance agenda of the new Government may provide opportunities for addressing issues related to digital campaigning, information integrity and electoral transparency, although these issues do not appear explicity within stated policy priorities.
- Ongoing discussions on constitutional reform, including the establishment of a task force to prepare a debate paper, may have relevant implications for the electoral framework.
- The 2027 local and provincial elections will be a critical test of whether current political momentum translates into sustained civic and youth engagement, and whether issue-based politics can gain ground at the sub-national level; in this context, the period leading up to 2027 represents a key window for engagement on electoral reform, citizen observation and inclusive political participation.
- Accountability Lab Nepal identified a set of priority areas for post-electoral engagement, outlined in the final section of this report.



Photo : A first-time voter casts her ballot at a polling station during Nepal's parliamentary election in Kathmandu. | BBC

2. Introduction

Accountability Lab Nepal (ALN) is a civil society organization (CSO) established in 2012, registered under Nepali law and operating independently from government institutions and political parties. ALN works to strengthen accountable governance by empowering young people as active citizens, community leaders, and agents of democratic change through civic education, leadership development, and social accountability initiatives. The organization seeks to increase meaningful youth participation in public decision-making and democratic processes, particularly among first-time voters and underrepresented groups.

During Nepal's March 2026 snap federal elections, ALN implemented a Youth-Led Election Monitoring Initiative in collaboration with the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and with support from the European Union (EU). The initiative engaged 15 young observers from all seven provinces of Nepal to monitor the electoral process, collect qualitative observations, and contribute youth-focused perspectives to electoral integrity monitoring. In parallel, ALN partnered with accredited citizen observer organizations to support the inclusion of young observers and Gen Z perspectives in data collection, reporting, and analysis, and address emerging challenges such as campaign finance, social media, and digital campaign monitoring.

In collaboration with EPD under the Civic Engagement component of the EU-funded Women and Youth in Democracy (WYDE) Initiative, ALN supported citizen observer groups in strengthening overall coordination and youth inclusion, provided comparative insights on regional good practices related to transparency and accountability, contributed to post-electoral analysis and reform discussions, and helped formulate recommendations primarily aimed at encouraging greater youth participation in democratic processes. ALN conducted a comprehensive analysis of the legal framework and relevant documents and interacted closely with the main citizen election observation organisations accredited in Nepal, including the National Election Observation Committee (NEOC), the Election Observation Committee Nepal (EOC-Nepal), the Democracy Resource Centre Nepal (DRCN) and the NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN).

Meetings were held in Kathmandu with interlocutors including representatives of several civil society organisations, and international partners such as UNDP, the EU, NDI, IRI, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), Asia Foundation and International IDEA.

Following the elections, ALN convened youth dialogues to reflect on the electoral experience, gather perspectives from first-time and Gen Z voters, and encourage sustained civic engagement beyond election day.

3. Context

Following the adoption of the 2015 Constitution, Nepal established a federal democratic republic with a bicameral Parliament consisting of a National Assembly (NA) and a House of Representatives (HoR). Requirements to stand as a candidate include being a citizen of Nepal, a registered voter, and at least twenty-five years of age for the HoR and thirty-five years for the National Assembly. Candidates for the HoR are also required to pay a deposit. Overall, at least one-third of the total number of members elected by each political party represented in Parliament must be women.

Nepal's political trajectory since 2015 reflects an ongoing process of democratic consolidation within a complex institutional framework. The constitutional framework broadened political representation and inclusion, while also contributing to more frequent coalition governments. Parliamentary elections held in 2017 and 2022 produced fragmented legislatures and shifts in political alliances, while newer political forces gained traction and parliamentary seats, particularly the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), whose anti-corruption and governance reform campaigns attracted growing support primarily among youth and urban voters.



Photo: Getting ballot boxes and election officials to all corners of the Himalayan republic is a logistical challenge | EPA

Political tensions escalated in September 2025, when widespread public frustration with corruption, nepotism, elite power-sharing, economic stagnation, high unemployment, and a Government ban on major social media platforms triggered large youth-led protests across major cities. Driven primarily by Gen Z students and young professionals, the 2025 protests were marked by an unprecedented and inventive use of still-permitted digital tools, including virtual debates and online voting for leadership. In terms of substance, the demonstrations demanded political accountability and far-reaching structural reform.

The protests destabilised the governing coalition and culminated in the resignation of the Prime Minister later that year. The House of Representatives was subsequently dissolved on 12 September 2025 amid the crisis, and a caretaker administration was established to oversee a transition towards new elections. The former Chief Justice of Nepal was selected as interim Prime Minister through an online consultation process.

The crisis led to snap parliamentary elections in early 2026, marking a significant turning point in Nepal's political landscape. Of the 107 registered parties, 65 fielded candidates under the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system and 63 contested the Proportional Representation (PR) ballot. On 19 March 2026, the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) finalised and submitted to the President of Nepal the results of the HoR election. Capitalising on the protest movement and widespread disillusionment with the traditional parties that had dominated politics since the end of the monarchy, the anti-establishment RSP achieved a landslide electoral victory. The party's success challenged the long-standing dominance of the Nepali Congress and the major communist parties and signalled a significant generational shift in Nepali politics.



Photo: A woman casts her vote at a polling station. | AP

4. Overview of preparations of the 2026 elections

4.1. Election administration

Elections and referenda are administered by the Election Commission of Nepal, a constitutional body composed of a Chief Election Commissioner and four commissioners. The Commission is responsible for managing its allocated budget, funded from the Federal Consolidated Fund. Being independent from the Government and enjoying administrative and financial autonomy, the ECN reflects the independent model of electoral management body (EMB)[1].

The Commission can seek assistance from Government at federal, provincial and local level as well as from ministries and other State organisations, including appointing officials necessary for its functions and using public facilities for electoral purposes as required. Much of the Commission's operational work is carried out through a Secretariat managing field staff across seven provincial and 77 district election offices, headed by Provincial Election Officers and District Election Officers who typically are career civil servants. These permanent offices operate on a continuous basis and support activities such as voter registration, data management, logistical planning, training and coordination throughout the electoral cycle. During election periods they coordinate and work alongside temporarily appointed officials such as Chief Returning Officers, Returning Officers and Polling Officers. Returning Officers (ordinarily career judges) in particular, play a key role in the conduct of candidate nomination, polling and counting at constituency level.

The ECN is vested with broad executive and regulatory powers. It advises the Government on polling dates and requests security arrangements from federal and provincial authorities. It is responsible for maintaining a voter register, undertaking electoral planning, research and data management, conducting polling and counting and announcing results. The Commission has the authority to register and disqualify candidates, authorise election observation, formulate and enforce a Code of Conduct applicable to electoral stakeholders, monitor campaigning and enforce compliance with the Code of Conduct, and cancel elections where undue influence or irregularities affect the process. The Commission adopted a binding Election Code of Conduct, 2025, repealing and replacing the Election Code of Conduct, 2017. The new Code entered into force on 18 January 2026 for the National Assembly and House of Representatives elections and was deactivated on 10 March 2026. The Code of Conduct, 2025 significantly expands the scope of actors covered and introduces detailed provisions on the use of social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI), campaign vehicles, media use, election expenses, and 'green elections', alongside a multi-tier monitoring and complaints system.

At the time of Nepal's 2026 parliamentary elections, the ECN was headed by acting Chief Election Commissioner Ram Prasad Bhandari, with only three members in office as two commissioner positions remained vacant.

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1. See Set out in the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the Nepal Citizenship Act, 2006 (as amended in 2007 and 2023), and the

The Commission was required to complete all logistical preparations within a 150-day timeframe, including updating the voter register, overseeing the printing of over 20 million ballot papers for both FPTP and proportional representation systems, deploying approximately 221,000 Government employees across 23,122 voting centres and 143 temporary polling sites, and coordinating the deployment of around 340,000 security personnel from the Nepal Police and Armed Police Force.

Functional independence of an EMB is shaped not only by its formal legal mandate, but also by its performance in practice and how that performance is perceived by stakeholders. Despite operating under significant time constraints and with an incomplete membership, the Commission was widely regarded as having delivered a technically sound and overall fair election. Similar assessments have been made in previous elections. This sustained level of confidence in the election management suggests that the ECN effectively exercises functional independence in practice.

Despite being widely regarded as well performing, the Commission operates under capacity constraints. Monitoring of digital campaigning remains largely reactive and dependent on coordination with security agencies, social media platforms and local administrative bodies, rather than real-time, internally managed multi-platform tracking systems. Managing a complex mixed electoral system further entails operational challenges, while a surge in voter registration applications in November 2025 placed additional pressure on the existing infrastructure, suggesting limited processing capacity. Together, these factors suggest an opportunity for investments in technology, equipment, systems and institutional capacity, to enhance the Commission's ability to address rapidly evolving electoral demands. The establishment of a formal mechanism for regular consultations with political parties, observer groups, or civil society organisations at the central level could further support transparency and stakeholder engagement.

Citizen observer groups identified some systemic shortcomings in the 2026 electoral process. Despite unprecedented efforts by the ECN, including the deployment of volunteers in each of the 6,743 wards, voter education emerged as a key concern. Observers highlighted uneven access to electoral information, particularly in remote areas, and limited engagement of CSOs in voter education efforts. A lack of materials was noted in nearly half of polling centres, possibly also contributing to a high number of invalid votes, particularly under the FPTP system.

The implementation of the Code of Conduct was widely regarded by observers and stakeholders as inconsistent. While a monitoring framework was in place, violations -particularly related to campaign conduct, expenditure, and the disclosure of financial reports - were perceived to be inadequately sanctioned, contributing to concerns about accountability. Despite the Commission's authority to impose fines up to NPR 100,000, cancel candidacies, and act under the Election Offences and Punishment Act, stakeholders reported that these powers were rarely used in practice, reinforcing perceptions of selective enforcement and impunity.

On election day, while polling was generally peaceful and orderly, operational challenges were noted, including widespread delays in the opening of polling stations and uneven accessibility for persons with disabilities. While the deployment of security forces contributed to a stable environment, observers raised concerns regarding the presence of armed personnel inside polling centres and their proximity to voting areas, and noted that coordination between election authorities and security personnel was not always consistent. Constraints affecting transparency and oversight were also highlighted, as access for observers was often limited. These preliminary findings suggest that, while the elections were effectively delivered from an operational standpoint, challenges remain in ensuring consistent enforcement of regulations, effective voter education, and full transparency and accountability throughout the electoral process.

With a view to international practice, electoral procedures in Nepal are largely standard. However, vote counting is not conducted at the polling station level but instead takes place at designated counting centres, located at the district level and organised by constituency. While such an approach is far from common international practice, it is not without precedent, as similar arrangements exist in countries such as the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka. Several factors may explain this choice, including logistical considerations, security concerns, and the centralisation of oversight. Stakeholder views on this issue are mixed, with some indicating a preference for centralised counting, and others expressing concerns regarding transparency and delays. Notably, observer groups such as NEOC have repeatedly recommended that counting be conducted at the polling centres in order to enhance integrity. The consistent publication of disaggregated polling station-level results and turnout data would further strengthen transparency, facilitate independent verification of results, and increase public trust in the electoral process.

In June 2023 the ECN finalised the draft Election Management Act, 2023, a comprehensive legislative proposal to consolidate and modernise the electoral legal framework. Structured across multiple parts, it provides an extensive and detailed codification of electoral processes, covering key areas such as voter registration, electoral systems for all tiers of Government, candidate eligibility and nomination, election operations, dispute resolution, and the powers of the Commission. The draft introduces greater procedural clarity and coherence compared to the current fragmented legal framework, notably by repealing and integrating provisions from several existing laws into a single unified statute. Developed through broad stakeholder consultations, the draft was transmitted by the ECN to the Ministry of Home Affairs. Civil society organisations, including DRCN,[2] have consistently advocated for the bill's advancement, and ALN's own engagement with these processes positions it to contribute meaningfully to any renewed consultations.

2. See https://www.democracyresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/DRCN-PSU-17-Election-Bill-2080-Provisions-and-Perspectives-English-Version-July-2025-1.pdf

4.2 Voter registration

Promoting youth participation begins with ensuring that eligible young citizens are registered to vote. As part of its core functions, the ECN is responsible for the collection, maintenance, updating and publication of the biometric voter register established in 2010. The ECN has effectively implemented a continuous voter registration system by allowing citizens to register at any time at District Election Offices (DEOs), with registration only suspended during election periods. However, eligible citizens rarely initiate voter registration or update their details outside election periods. As observed in international practice, maintaining voter engagement between elections remains a challenge. In response, the ECN organizes periodic voter registration campaigns ahead of elections, expanding access through temporary registration centers, mobile units, and targeted voter education initiatives.

Nepali citizens with permanent residence in Nepal are eligible to register as voters. A citizenship certificate is required for registration and may be obtained from the age of 16. Despite some improvements in the legal framework,[3]the criteria for acquiring citizenship remain discriminatory, particularly due to the limited ability of Nepali women to confer citizenship to their children.[4] The 2021 Census recorded approximately 1.69 million children aged 0-17 living with single mothers in Nepal, underscoring the potential scale of this issue. Concerns regarding access to citizenship certificates have also been raised in relation to minority and lower-caste groups.[5]

Voter registration procedures have evolved significantly in recent years. Under the law, voter registration ahead of the 5 March 2026 elections should have ended on 12 September 2025, following the Government's announcement of the election date. However, an ordinance[6]related to the early dissolution of the HoR allowed registration to continue until a deadline specified by the Commission. As a result, registration remained open until 16 November and was later extended to 21 November 2025, allowing for the inclusion of a significant number of newly eligible voters.

Prior to the 2017 elections, citizens could register as voters from the age of 16, while voting remained restricted to those aged 18 and above.[7] The Electoral Rolls Act, 2017 introduced the requirement that individuals applying for registration must attain 18 years of age by a date specified by the Commission and published in the Nepal Gazette. Ahead of the 5 March 2026 elections, the ECN set 4 March 2026 as the cut-off date to turn 18.

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3. Set out in the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the Nepal Citizenship Act, 2006 (as amended in 2007 and 2023), and the Nepal Citizenship Regulations, 2006
4. Under the Constitution of Nepal, a woman's ability to pass citizenship to her child depends largely on the status or identification of the child's father, whereas Nepali men can confer citizenship by descent more straightforwardly. In practice, this creates three categories of women with different rights: where both parents are Nepali, the child is entitled to citizenship by descent, though this requires identification of the father; where the father is officially "unidentified," a Nepali mother may confer citizenship by descent on her own, but only by declaring and demonstrating that the father's identity is unknown; and where the father is a foreign national, the child is generally eligible via the Nepali mother only for naturalised citizenship, a more limited and conditional status.
5. See https://seap.nationalityforall.org/region/regional-overview/south-asia/nepal /
6. Voter List (First Amendment) Ordinance, 2025
7. Most interlocutors appeared to consider the provision allowing to register as voters from the age of 16 as still being in force, suggesting that it may continue to be applied in practice - although this cannot be conclusively determined.

This inclusive approach reflects best electoral practice, avoiding disenfranchisement of citizens who turn 18 between the end of the voter registration campaign and election day. Notably, the draft Election Management Act, 2023 allows the collection of voter details from the age of 16, while maintaining full registration upon reaching 18. If retained in the final legislation, this approach could facilitate earlier engagement of young citizens and support their timely enfranchisement. More broadly, it is important that age-related requirements are clear, promote inclusion and are accompanied by comprehensive and targeted information to ensure that young people understand their electoral rights and the applicable registration procedures.

While in the past registration was tied to a voter's ward of permanent residence, citizens can now register from their place of domicile, although they are still required to vote at their permanent residence. An online pre-enrolment system introduced ahead of the 5 March elections allowed applicants to submit their details digitally before completing biometric registration in person, resulting in a surge of applications, particularly among younger voters. Another major development occurred in November 2025 with the integration of the voter register with the National ID (NID) system,[8] enabling citizens who possess a NID to complete voter registration fully online without a physical visit to a registration center or a DEO, as biometric data are already captured in the national ID database. Designed to eventually replace the citizenship certificate as the primary proof of identity in Nepal, NID registration was made mandatory by the Government for accessing essential services. These developments with voter registration reflect a broad shift from a territorially constrained and paper-based system towards a more accessible and digitally integrated process.

The Commission is required to regularly update and correct the voter register, including removing the names of persons who are no longer eligible. In practice, the removal of such records relies in part on citizens notifying registration officers and providing evidence of a voter's death or loss of citizenship. International experience shows, however, that this notification-based approach yields limited results, as citizens rarely report such changes consistently or in a timely manner. The other source for updates is the civil register,[9] which records vital events - including births, marriages and deaths - through local registrars operating under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Civil registration has been strengthened over time through digitization and the development of a centralized database under the Department of National ID and Civil Registration. Local registrars are required[10] to share relevant information with the ECN. However, the information flow is typically periodic rather than real-time and depends on coordination across institutions. In addition, despite notable progress, death registration remains incomplete - estimated at 69.9% in 2023[11]- and discrepancies in names, identifiers, or timing can complicate the matching of records between civil and electoral systems. Further increasing the completeness of the civil register and strengthening the interoperability between the systems remain important areas for improving the accuracy and integrity of the voter register.

8. The NID assigns each individual a unique 10-digit National Identification Number (NIN) which relates information across all Government systems.
9. Governed by the Birth, Death and Other Personal Events (Registration) Act, 1976, as amended in 1980, 1991 and 2006
10. Electoral Rolls Act, 2017
11. Regional Estimates of Death Registration Completeness: 2023 Update - Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) - https://repository.unescap.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/30efdc89-5f7e-45f0-8a31-a5e28c11bab2/content

Voter registers that are not integrated with comprehensive civil registration systems may accumulate records of deceased or otherwise ineligible voters over time. This gradual inflation is widely documented in both cross-national research and country-specific audits. In response, EMBs adopt different approaches to maintain the integrity of voter registers, including periodic re-registration exercises - effectively rebuilding the voter register - or technological solutions to enhance verification, such as electronic voter identification at polling station. Any such measures, particular those involving technology-driven processes, would benefit from broad stakeholder consultation and thorough feasibility assessments prior to implementation.



Photo: An elderly man is being assisted by two men as he walks near a polling station | ALN

Given that Nepal's biometric voter register was established 15 years ago and is not fully integrated with a comprehensive civil registration system, it is likely to comprise records of deceased voters. Voter registers with excessive numbers of ineligible voters, whether due to death, mobility, or other reasons, may reduce confidence in the integrity of the electoral processes, complicate the logistical task of running elections, and affect the reliability of voter turnout figures. Consequently, the approximately 60% overall voter turnout reported for Nepal's 2026 landmark parliamentary elections may underestimate the actual participation rate of eligible voters.

Questions regarding the completeness and accuracy of a voter register can be further informed through comparison between registration figures and demographic projections. According to the 2021 National Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO), Nepal's population stood at 29.16 million. Based on the medium-variant population projections,[12] the total population will reach approximately 30.1 million in 2026, including about 14.5 million men (48.1%) and 15.6 million women (51.9%). The adult population in 2026 can be estimated[13] at around 21.3 million, comprising approximately 10.2 million men (47.8%) and 11.1 million women (52.2%). In comparison, the final voter register for the 2026 elections includes 18,903,689 voters, of whom 9,663,358 are men (51.12%), 9,240,131 are women (48.88%) and 200 are registered as other (0.0011%). Aside from the register likely being inflated with records of deceased voters, this would suggest a high overall level of registration. The comparison also reveals a gender imbalance, with women underrepresented in the voter register relative to their share of the adult population of Nepal.

12. National Population and Housing Census 2021 - Population Projections for Nepal 2021-2051 – Thematic Report VIII
13. Calculations based on data sources

This imbalance is reflected in recent trends. Between the 2022 and 2026 elections, the voter register increased from 17,988,570 to 18,903,689 voters (+915,119, or 5.1%).[14] This growth was uneven across genders: the number of male voters increased by 522,552, compared to 392,552 additional female voters. As a result, the share of men in the voter register rose from 50.82% to 51.12%, while the share of women declined from 49.18% to the current 48.88%, indicating a widening of the gender gap in voter registration.

The National Youth Council[15] of Nepal has recently redefined "youth" as individuals from 18 to 35 years of age. Based on the projections, the population aged 18-35 in 2026 is estimated at approximately 10.2 million, including around 4.9 million men (48%) and 5.3 million women (52%). Nepali youth therefore represent about 34% of the total population and nearly half (48%) of the voting-age population in 2026.[16] In the absence of publicly available voter registration data disaggregated by age, it is not possible to assess youth registration rates.

Reflecting continued trends of labor and education migration, the absentee population is expected to grow, from approximately 1.82 million in 2021 to around 2.2 million by 2026, before gradually declining in the longer term. Nepalis living abroad are predominantly young men - particularly in the 20-40 age group – with the share of women expected to increase over time. Nepal is experiencing a significant outflow of young people, particularly students, who leave the country as soon as they can afford it. Those who pursue education or acquire skills in Nepal often enter the labor market only briefly, using this experience to strengthen applications for employment opportunities abroad. While the ECN conducted feasibility studies in the past, the legal framework does not provide for out-of-country voting.

Concerns regarding the voter register have been consistently reported by citizen observer groups over time. Ahead of previous elections, a significant number of eligible voters were found to be unregistered, largely due to the lack of citizenship certificates, as well as difficulties in reaching internal migrants and other mobile populations. The voter register has also been reported to contain inaccuracies, including duplicate or multiple entries, missing voters, misspelled names, and potentially ineligible records. Following the 5 March 2026 parliamentary elections, citizen observer groups continued to highlight weaknesses in voter education and ongoing concerns regarding the quality and completeness of the register, suggesting that structural challenges in voter registration are yet to be fully addressed.

A comprehensive audit of the voter register could provide a clearer understanding of the nature and extent of these issues, and support the identification of appropriate measures to further improve the accuracy and completeness of the register.

14. The voter register increased by 915,119 between the 2022 and 2026 elections, based on official ECN figures. While the Commission reported 837,094 new registrations following the pre-election registration campaign period, this figure does not necessarily capture the full number of first-time voters included in the final register.
15. National Youth Council Policy, 2025 (2082 B.S.), Article 2
16. Calculations based on data sources

4.3 Code of Conduct and electoral campaign regulation

Despite the existence of a comprehensive Code of Conduct, enforcement during the 2026 elections remained limited. Citizen and international observer groups documented violations including the misuse of state resources, vote-buying practices, involvement of civil servants in political activities, the use of of children in campaigning, and the use of fake or coordinated social media accounts to disseminate harmful content. Complaints mechanisms were in place, but follow-up actions and sanctions were reported as insufficient, suggesting opportunities to strengthen the implementation of the regulatory framework and enhance public confidence in its effectiveness.

The limited enforcement of the Code of Conduct reflects remaining capacity constraints. In this electoral cycle, the shift towards digital campaigning further exposed gaps in the regulatory framework, as many campaign activities increasingly moved beyond the scope of traditional monitoring mechanisms. This suggests that challenges relate less to the absence of rules than to the gap between an increasingly detailed regulatory framework and its consistent implementation in practise.[17] Monitoring committees and officers can in principle act on complaints submitted though various channels, including social media; however, stakeholder discussions and observer findings suggest that enforcement in the digital sphere remains particularly constrained. This in particular in terms of technical tools, staffing and platform-level cooperation needed to systematically detect and document violations across multiple platforms and closed groups.

The Nepali framework for regulating campaign spending is complex: the ECN is reportedly the only EMB known to set limits for each category of expenditure.[18] Compared to the Code of Conduct, 2017, the Code of Conduct, 2025 applied to the 2026 snap elections, significantly expanded provisions on social media platforms, AI-generated or manipulated content, online disinformation and hate speech, media use, campaign vehicles, election expenses and 'green elections', alongside a multi-tier monitoring and complaints system. This expansion has made the Code even more complex and demanding without resolving longstanding challenges related to enforcement, clarity and operationalisation.

Electoral campaign finance remains a weak dimension of Nepal's electoral governance framework. While legal provisions on spending limits, reporting requirements and financial disclosure are in place, implementation remains limited. In practice, expenditure ceilings, separate bank accounts and disclosure obligations set out in the Code were widely circumvented, with observer groups and stakeholders consistently reporting that actual expenditure significantly exceeded the prescribed ceilings, often by several multiples in competitive constituencies. At the same time, campaign finance reports are not systematically or proactively disclosed by parties and candidates, limiting public scrutiny and transparency.

17. As documented by domestic observer groups in their 2026 observation reports.
18. IFES - Following the Money, Campaign Expense Monitoring during the House of Representatives Election, 2017 - April 2018

While candidates and parties are legally required to submit income and campaign expenditure reports, there are no provisions mandating their publication on the Commission's website. Civil society organisations have consistently advocated for mandatory digital disclosure of political finance as a transparency measure.

Notably, current reporting formats and oversight mechanisms do not distinguish between offline and online spending, leaving paid content, influencer contracts and outsourced social media teams largely invisible in formal campaign finance oversight. The growing importance of digital campaigning further complicates oversight. Campaigns increasingly rely on informal networks, third-party actors, and social media amplification, including paid online content and supporter-driven messaging, which often fall outside existing reporting and monitoring frameworks. This contributes to a parallel campaign environment where significant financial flows and influence mechanisms remain largely unregulated.

High and poorly regulated campaign costs create structural advantages for well-resourced candidates and reinforce barriers for women, youth, and candidates from marginalised communities. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that unequal access to financial resources, party networks and donor support continues to shape candidate selection and electoral competitiveness.

Addressing these gaps requires not only technical improvements to monitoring capacity, but also a political commitment to consistent enforcement — one that has been absent in successive electoral cycles and that will require both institutional investment and sustained political will to address.

4.4 Social media and information integrity

The 2026 elections marked a significant shift in the role of digital platforms in Nepal's electoral process. Political actors increasingly relied on social media as a primary channel for communication, mobilisation, and voter outreach, particularly among younger voters. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in how political competition is organised, with digital tools enabling more direct, decentralised and rapid forms of engagement.

Unlike in previous electoral cycles, digital campaigning was not merely an additional communication tool but became a central component of campaign strategy. Campaigns increasingly operated through a combination of formal party structures and informal networks, including supporter-driven content, decentralised communication groups, and coordinated amplification across platforms. This contributed to the emergence of a largely unregulated campaign space, where political messaging and influence extended beyond traditional campaign channels and oversight mechanisms.

Stakeholders consistently raised concerns regarding the implications of this shift for electoral integrity. These included the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the use of coordinated online networks, and the growing role of third-party actors in shaping political narratives.

In particular, content shared by supporters or affiliated networks — including posts tagging candidates or promoting campaign messages indirectly — blurred the boundaries between official and unofficial campaigning, complicating both attribution and regulation.

Campaign activities have increasingly migrated to the digital sphere. Instances of hate speech, targeted online harassment, and deliberately misleading content were reported across platforms, often with limited accountability. The gendered dimension of this phenomenon — with women candidates disproportionately targeted by coordinated smear campaigns and online abuse — is examined in the section on Inclusion and women representation, and represents one of the most direct ways in which the digital environment reinforces structural barriers to political participation.

The Code of Conduct, 2025 introduced explicit prohibitions on fake accounts, AI-manipulated content and online disinformation — a regulatory step forward addressed in the above section. In practice, however, these provisions remained largely unenforceable. The core problem is structural: monitoring digital campaigning requires real-time capacity to track content across multiple platforms, including encrypted and closed channels – capacities that remain structurally limited. Platform-level cooperation — without which systematic detection of violations is impossible — was absent. The result is that the most dynamic and influential dimension of the 2026 campaign operated almost entirely outside meaningful regulatory oversight. The financial dimension of digital campaigning — including paid content, influencer contracts and outsourced social media operations — compounds these oversight gaps, as detailed in the section above.

At the same time, digital platforms have enabled new forms of political participation. Youth engagement in particular was strongly driven by online mobilisation, with digital spaces serving as key arenas for political debate, organisation, and expression. This is a double-edged dynamic: the same tools that enabled an unprecedented wave of youth political engagement in 2025–2026 also served as vectors for disinformation, coordinated harassment and financially opaque influence operations — with no regulatory architecture currently adequate to distinguish between them.

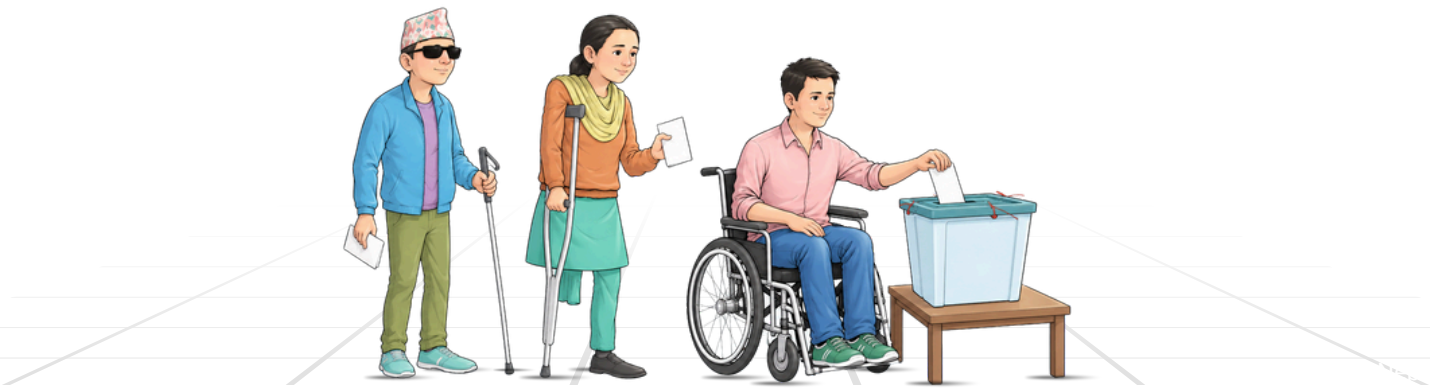
The 2026 elections are the first in Nepal where the information environment itself — shaped by algorithms, coordinated content, AI-generated material and platform dynamics beyond any national regulator's reach — was a significant factor in the electoral process. This is a qualitatively new challenge. No national actor currently appears to have both the mandate and capacity to address this challenge comprehensively. Addressing it will require not only updated legal provisions, but sustained investment in digital literacy, independent fact-checking capacity, and a regulatory dialogue with platforms that no actor in Nepal is currently positioned to lead.

Addressing it will require not only updated legal provisions, but sustained investment in digital literacy, independent fact-checking capacity, and civil society advocacy for platform accountability.

4.5 Inclusion and women representation

While Nepal continues to meet its constitutional requirement of at least 33% women's representation in parliament, this remains largely driven by the PR system rather than direct electoral engagement. The persistently low number of women elected through the FPTP system reflects structural barriers such as limited party support, financial constraints, and prevailing social norms. Early results from the 2026 elections indicate that only a small number of women secured direct mandates, reinforcing concerns that women's representation remains compliance-driven rather than indicative of substantive political inclusion.

At the same time, stakeholders noted positive developments, including the electoral success of several high-profile female candidates, particularly within newer political movements. However, this progress remains largely quota-driven and uneven, and has not translated into more substantive or competitive participation in direct elections. Under the FPTP system, women continue to be significantly underrepresented. Of 388 women candidates contesting FPTP seats, only 14 were elected (approximately 8.5%), reflecting only a marginal increase compared to previous elections.



Addressing the FPTP gap will require more than adjustments to candidate quotas. Without accompanying reforms to party nomination practices, internal financing structures and campaign support for women candidates, numerical targets will continue to mask structural exclusion.

This trend is consistent with longer-term patterns. While women's representation increased significantly following the introduction of the PR system in 2008, it has since plateaued around the constitutional threshold of 30–33%, with the majority of women entering Parliament through quota allocations rather than direct electoral competition. This plateau suggests that parties have tended to treat the constitutional one-third requirement as a ceiling rather than a floor, particularly in the allocation of safe and competitive FPTP constituencies.

At the same time, the 2026 elections reveal some emerging shifts. A growing number of women candidates contested FPTP seats, including independent candidates and those with prior parliamentary experience through the PR system. Those elected often brought diverse professional backgrounds, including law, public health, media, civil society and activism, and represented a relatively balanced age distribution across younger, mid-career and more experienced candidates.

These developments suggest a gradual, albeit limited, expansion of women's participation beyond quota-based entry points.

Despite these positive signs, structural barriers remain significant. Stakeholders consistently highlighted the role of party gatekeeping, financial constraints, and limited access to political networks in shaping candidate selection and electoral competitiveness. Campaign finance dynamics are particularly relevant in this regard. As previously mentioned, high and weakly regulated campaign costs tend to favour candidates with access to resources and patronage networks, while disadvantaging women and candidates from marginalised communities. The widening gender gap in voter registration, combined with continued dependence on PR quotas for women's parliamentary representation, points to a broader pattern in which women face compounded barriers at both entry and competition stages of electoral participation.

The digital campaign environment has compounded these barriers. As documented in the above section, women candidates were disproportionately targeted by coordinated online harassment and smear campaigns — increasing personal risk and reinforcing disincentives to stand for competitive FPTP seats.

More broadly, inclusion challenges extend beyond gender. Significant groups of voters remain effectively excluded from the electoral process, including an estimated 2.2 million overseas voters, and potentially large numbers of out-of-district voters who are unable to travel from their domicile to their place of permanent residence – often the place where they were born - in order to cast ballots. Those involved in the conduct and observation of elections, such as polling staff, security personnel, observers and party-appointed agents, may also be unable to vote on election day, as they are often deployed outside their place of residence without access to alternative voting arrangements. A partial remedy was foreseen in the draft Election Management Act, 2023 through the establishment of temporary voter lists for specific categories of individuals, enabling them to cast their vote in advance. Persons with disabilities and elderly voters also continue to face accessibility barriers at polling stations, while voter education and outreach remain uneven across regions.

The pattern across these findings highlights a persistent gap between formal inclusion frameworks and substantive political participation. While constitutional and legal provisions have succeeded in ensuring minimum representation thresholds, they have been less effective in addressing the underlying structural and political factors that shape who is able to compete, win, and exercise influence within Nepal's political system. These dynamics are likely to remain central to ongoing discussions on electoral reform, inclusion, and democratic consolidation.

Meeting minimum numerical targets - achieved largely through quota mechanisms rather than substantive political inclusion - should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence of progress. The central challenge ahead is ensuring that formal frameworks translate into meaningful political agency for women, youth and marginalised communities, rather than serving as a ceiling that contains rather than advances participation. This is a core advocacy priority for civil society actors

5. Evolving participation of Nepal's youth: translating protest into policy change



The 2026 elections marked a significant shift in the role of youth in Nepal's political landscape. Youth were not only active as voters, but also played a central role in shaping campaign dynamics, political narratives, and electoral outcomes. As previously mentioned, Nepali youth aged 18 to 35 years are estimated to represent about 34% of the total population and nearly half (48%) of the voting-age population in 2026. With over 900,000 newly registered, potentially first-time voters and a broader youth electorate representing a substantial share of the voting population, younger generations emerged as key political actors in this electoral cycle.

This shift did not emerge from within formal political structures. It was directly shaped by the 2025 protest movement, in which Gen Z students and young professionals forced the dissolution of Parliament and the installation of an interim Government. The 2026 elections were, in this sense, the electoral moment of a generation that had already demonstrated its capacity for political disruption. The critical question — one that stakeholders raised consistently — is whether that disruptive energy translates into durable institutional change, or whether it is absorbed and neutralised by the structures it sought to challenge.

This shift was reflected not only in voter behaviour but also in candidate profiles and election results. A notable increase in younger candidates and elected representatives was observed, with approximately 59 candidates under the age of 40 elected through the FPTP system, representing around 38% of directly elected seats[1]. Once proportional representation allocations are taken into account, under-40 youth representation in Parliament increased to approximately 26% of all seats[2], marking a significant change compared to previous electoral cycles.

Youth engagement also played a decisive role in campaign innovation. Campaign strategies increasingly relied on digital tools, decentralised communication, and direct engagement with voters. New political actors and candidates adopted more adaptive and interactive approaches, including the use of social media networks, real-time feedback mechanisms, and issue-based messaging. These approaches resonated particularly strongly with younger voters and contributed to the success of candidates positioned as reform-oriented or anti-establishment.

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19. Based on ECN preliminary results
20. Based on ECN preliminary results

At the same time, youth participation extended beyond formal political processes. Youth-led initiatives played an important role in election observation, digital monitoring, and civic engagement, contributing to increased visibility of electoral processes and public accountability. Findings from stakeholder consultations further underline that youth engagement was driven not only by electoral mobilisation, but also by broader dissatisfaction with traditional political structures and a demand for accountability, transparency, and systemic change.

Despite these positive developments, significant structural barriers remain. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that youth participation in politics continues to be constrained by party gatekeeping, financial barriers, and hierarchical decision-making structures. While youth were highly visible as voters and campaign actors, their representation among candidates and decision-makers remains more limited than their demographic weight would suggest.
This creates a persistent gap between mobilisation and representation, as younger generations increasingly shape political discourse and electoral outcomes but remain under-represented in party leadership, parliamentary structures and executive decision-making. In this context, youth participation risks being instrumentalised as a mobilising force without corresponding structural inclusion in political decision-making.

At the policy level, expectations towards the newly elected Government are particularly high among younger voters. The Government's initial 100-day programme includes commitments related to governance reform, anti-corruption measures, digitalisation, and improved service delivery. While these priorities align with many of the demands expressed by youth during and after the election period, timely and visible implementation will be critical to sustaining current levels of youth engagement.

At the same time, consultations suggest emerging signs of youth fatigue and disillusionment. Following the intense mobilisation of the 2025 protests and the 2026 electoral process, stakeholders warned that, without visible reform progress, youth participation is likely to fall back ahead of upcoming local and provincial elections, with many young people reverting to disengagement or emigration rather than continued engagement. This is not merely a political risk: as documented in a previous section in terms of demographic trends, Nepal is experiencing a structural outflow of young people that progressive disillusionment with politics is likely to accelerate.

What the 2026 elections make clear is that Nepal is entering a period of political transition in which youth are becoming central drivers of change. However, this transition remains fragile. Without visible reform delivery, the disillusionment already flagged by stakeholders is likely to translate into lower youth turnout and reduced civic engagement in the 2027 local and provincial elections — with direct consequences for the legitimacy of that cycle. The extent to which increased youth mobilisation will translate into long-term political transformation will depend not only on institutional openness and reform, but also on the ability of institutional actors to provide coordinated frameworks and platforms for youth engagement. For civil society organisations, supporting this transition — by connecting youth advocates to reform processes and sustaining civic engagement beyond electoral cycles — is both an opportunity and a responsibility.

6. Citizen election observation: new challenges and possible way forward

Citizen election observation is a critical component of the electoral process. A relative decline in support from international partners was reported in relation to the 5 March 2026 elections, alongside a lower number of accredited observer groups (reportedly 36) compared to previous elections. The requirements for observers set out in the Code of Conduct were widely perceived as difficult to comply with. These included provisions requiring each organisation to deploy at least 100 observers, all aged 21 or above, holding a minimum educational qualification of higher secondary education, and excluding individuals with international degrees. In addition, observers were restricted to observing within a single municipality and were not permitted to observe in the polling station where they were registered to vote, which in practice could result in their disenfranchisement. Despite these constraints, observer groups were able to deploy widely across the country.



Photo : A woman in a burqa stands in line to cast her vote at a polling station in Nepal | ALN

NEOC announced the deployment of approximately 1,300 observers to conduct comprehensive observation. EOC deployed around 500 observers and maintained a focus on campaign finance. DRC deployed a limited number of observers and complemented its field observation with social media monitoring and qualitative research on campaign finance. Other organisations - including the NGO Federation of Nepal, General Election Observation Committee (GEOC), Nepal Voters' Rights Forum, Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), Youth in Federal Discourse, Yuwalaya, Youth Advocacy Nepal, Forum for Women, Law and Development, Women Service Institute, and Nepal Samahuk Aawan - deployed an estimated 4,000 observers. With support from the Civic Engagement component of the WYDE Initiative, Accountability Lab Nepal trained and deployed 16 Gen Z observers initially accredited through NEOC, and contributed to increasing the number of young observers deployed by NEOC, EOC, and DRC.

Observation methodologies varied across organisations. Most groups relied on checklist-based approaches rather than comprehensive observation forms, which typically allow for more robust and authoritative findings. The ECN provides accredited groups with a standard checklist for election day observation. While observer groups are not required to submit these filled checklists, they must provide to the Commission a preliminary report within 15 days and a final report within one month. In practice, most observer groups use the ECN checklist alongside their own tailored tools, often combining digital formats such as Google Forms with paper-based checklists to be used in remote areas with limited connectivity.

Coordination among observer groups for the 2026 elections presented both opportunities and challenges. In previous elections, coordination was largely facilitated through the Election Observation Coordination Group (EOCG). This platform brought together domestic and international observer organisations under a common framework, promoting collaboration in areas such as training, operational approaches, geographical coverage, and joint communication. For the 2026 elections, however, observer coordination appears to have weakened. While the EOCG platform continues to exist and meetings are still convened by NEOC, participation has reportedly been limited. This reduced engagement has possibly contributed to more fragmented coordination, as reflected in multiple press conferences held by different configurations of observer groups before and after election day. Nonetheless, positive coordination efforts persisted, including the submission to the Commission of a joint preliminary report by NEOC and EOC, and the use of a shared press room by various observer organisations on election day.

Observers reported several operational challenges in the field, including restricted access to polling stations, limited observation time, and inconsistent treatment by security personnel. In this regard, the legal framework makes only limited reference to observers rights, primarily assigning Returning Officers responsibility for facilitating orderly observation, and including accredited observers among those permitted to enter polling centres. NEOC observers in particular were repeatedly stopped before entering polling stations, and in some cases were granted access for only a few minutes. Observers were also at times directed to remain at the back of queues or asked to leave during sensitive phases such as closing procedures, and were frequently absent during the transition to counting, one of the most critical stages of the process.

While digital spaces remained integral to the election cycles, observer groups faced significant barriers in tracking the digital engagement that directly and indirectly influenced voter behavior. Limitations to data-scraping tools and absence of proper guidelines on monitoring platforms made it difficult to distinguish individual candidate dynamics. The disparity between the Government and observer groups' access to advanced digital surveillance tools was hence proved.

These constraints significantly affected the ability of observer groups to fully monitor key stages of the electoral process. Strengthening observer access and standardising protocols across polling locations seems essential to enhance transparency and credibility in future elections.

The observation of the 2022 elections resulted in approximately 400 recommendations, which were later consolidated into 40 priority recommendations by the civil society organisation Samagra. Observer groups have also made meaningful contributions to the drafting and development of the draft Election Management Act, 2023, submitted by the ECN to the Ministry of Home Affairs, reflecting the potential of citizen observation to inform legislative reform. Election observation remains a cornerstone of electoral integrity and can play a significant role in informing and strengthening post-election processes.

7. Potential for post-election reforms

Stakeholders expressed a cautious optimism about the ability of the new political leadership to translate electoral success into effective governance. The 2026 election results reflect a strong public demand for change. At the same time, entrenched patronage networks, bureaucratic resistance and the evolving institutional experience of some new actors may influence the scope and pace of reform. The coming period will be decisive in determining whether the current political shift leads to substantive institutional change or whether structural constraints will limit the scope of change.

The 2026 elections have reopened discussions on electoral reform in Nepal, both at the technical and political levels. While many of the challenges identified during the electoral process are not new, the scale of political change — including the emergence of new actors and shifting voter behaviour — has renewed attention to the need for reform. At the same time, the extent to which this momentum can be translated into concrete legislative change remains uncertain, particularly given competing priorities around economic recovery and governance reforms reflected in the new Government's 100-day programme.

The most significant immediate driver of reform discussions is likely to be less the legal framework itself than the broader political context: the new RSP-led Government holds a near two-thirds parliamentary majority, is headed by a 35-year-old Prime Minister with a strong reform mandate, and faces high public expectations — particularly from the youth electorate that drove its electoral success. This creates an unusual window of opportunity for structural reform. The Government's 100-day programme prioritises digital governance, anti-corruption, and public service delivery. While the RSP manifesto includes commitments on campaign finance transparency and party law reform, broader electoral system reform — including the dormant draft Election Management Act — has not yet featured prominently in the immediate governance agenda.



Photo: Election officials and staff are actively counting and verifying ballot papers inside a secured vote-counting area | ALN

7.1 Key reform areas identified

The main reform areas emerging from current discussions reflect a convergence between the draft Election Management Act, 2023, observer recommendations, stakeholder consultations, and broader political priorities expressed in party platforms and the Government's 100-day programme. While these sources differ in emphasis, they point to a set of recurring issues that are likely to shape future reform debates.

Access to voting: Voter mobility and access emerged as a recurring concern: large populations — including internal migrants, renters, students, an estimated 2.2 million overseas Nepalis, and those involved in the conduct and observation of elections on election day — cannot easily vote where they live or cannot vote at all. These issues have been consistently highlighted in observer recommendations and stakeholder consultations. While the Government's current programme places emphasis on digitalisation of voter registration and administrative reform, its implications in terms of access to voting remain to be fully articulated.

Inclusion and representation: As the findings on inclusion confirm, structural barriers — rather than the formal quota architecture — are the primary determinants of who competes and wins in direct elections. This is particularly evident in the FPTP results, where only 14 of 388 women candidates were elected. Newer political actors have signalled willingness to move beyond compliance-based approaches to inclusion, and are now expected to translate this into concrete nomination and support practices. The reform challenge here appears to be political and organisational, not primarily legislative.

Campaign finance and transparency: Campaign finance was the single most consistently raised concern across all stakeholder consultations. Actual expenditures reportedly exceeded legal ceilings by several multiples in competitive constituencies, online spending is entirely invisible in formal oversight, and enforcement of reporting obligations was minimal. Observer reports and post-election reviews highlighted weak enforcement, limited public scrutiny of campaign finance disclosures, and the growing role of informal and digital spending. In this context, anti-corruption and integrity commitments in the Government's 100-day programme, together with reform-oriented party agendas, may provide a political entry point for advancing campaign finance reform.

Electoral integrity and dispute resolution: Observers and stakeholders highlighted inconsistencies in complaint handling throughout the electoral process, with overlapping jurisdictions and slow resolution undermining confidence in accountability mechanisms. While institutional reform is not explicitly central in current Government priorities, broader commitments to improving governance and accountability may indirectly support progress in this area.

Digital campaigning and information environment: Digital campaigning was a defining feature of the 2026 elections and the area where the gap between political reality and regulatory capacity is most acute. Leading parties deployed sophisticated and coordinated social media operations as their primary campaign tool, with digital mobilization largely displacing traditional public campaigning — a model that effectively bypassed traditional campaign monitoring entirely. The most dynamic and influential dimension of the campaign operated almost entirely outside existing regulatory and monitoring frameworks. Looking ahead, this shift raises a specific question for the 2027 local and provincial elections: local elections have traditionally been the arena of independent candidates and community-based ground campaigns, where party infrastructure is less decisive. If digital mobilization has become the dominant campaign mode, independent candidates — who typically lack party social media infrastructure and resources — face a new and significant structural disadvantage that the current regulatory framework does not address. This is an area where civil society monitoring, including ALN's observer network, is well placed to document developments and advocate for regulatory clarity ahead of the 2027 electoral cycle.

7.2 *Political feasibility and constraints*

The RSP manifesto places strong emphasis on governance reform, anti-corruption measures, transparency, and institutional accountability. These priorities align with several areas of electoral reform, particularly campaign finance transparency, integrity mechanisms, and improved public accountability. The extent to which these commitments will translate into concrete electoral law reform likely depends on the Government's broader legislative priorities, the pace of institutional reform and potential constraints. Parties emerging from protest movements face a structural challenge common to post-transition contexts: translating the mandate for change into concrete institutional reforms while managing the expectations of both their support base and existing power structures. Nepal's political history suggests that electoral law reform tends to advance when there is convergence between political priorities and reform pressure from civil society — making the current period, with its heightened public expectations, an important window for advocacy



Photo: Elderly community members gather to discuss election-related issues | ALN

The 2026 elections introduce both opportunities and constraints in this regard. The emergence of new political actors, including reform-oriented platforms, may create momentum for revisiting aspects of the electoral legal framework, particularly in relation to transparency, governance, and accountability. At the same time, the concentration of political power and the limited experience of new actors in governance may reduce incentives to prioritise complex and potentially contentious institutional reforms in the short term.

One area that cuts across all reform domains — and that sits beyond the traditional scope of electoral law — is the digital information environment. Digitalisation is an explicit priority of the new Government's 100-day programme, with commitments spanning e-governance, digital service delivery, data interoperability and the establishment of an Independent Regulatory Authority for information technology. This creates a potential opening: a Government already invested in digital reform may be more receptive to extending that agenda to electoral transparency, digital campaign regulation and information integrity. However, these connections are yet to be made, and the distance between e-governance reform and the specific challenges of platform regulation, online disinformation and digital campaign finance oversight should not be underestimated. Platform regulation, digital literacy and information integrity cannot be addressed through the ECN alone, and will require cross-governmental coordination and international partnerships. This is an area where civil society, including citizen observer groups and digital rights advocates, can play an important role in keeping pressure on the reform agenda and connecting Nepal's experience to regional and international discussions on platform accountability.

It is also worth noting that the draft Election Management Act, 2023, while containing basic prohibitions on the use of social media for intimidation and character assassination, was developed before the 2025 protest movement demonstrated the transformative political power of digital tools, and before AI-generated content, coordinated disinformation and large-scale digital campaign finance became defining features of Nepal's electoral landscape. The draft act's digital provisions amount to a general clause deferring 'other arrangements related to social media or electronic publicity' to future regulation — a placeholder rather than a framework. Should discussions around the draft act be reinvigorated, its digital dimension would require substantial development to reflect a reality that had barely emerged at the time of drafting.



Photo : Voters gather at a polling station to cast their votes, while election officials assist voters and verify voter details during the electoral process | ALN

More broadly, discussions on constitutional reform have taken on renewed relevance. While there may not be clear political consensus on the substance of potential reforms, the new Government's 100-day programme includes the creation of a task force to develop a 'constitutional amendment debate paper' (notably framed as a process of national consensus-building rather than a commitment to specific changes). This is a notable signal of political intent, even if its scope and implications for the electoral system remain unclear. Civil society actors, including ALN, are well placed to track and engage with these discussions as they develop, ensuring that civil society perspectives are represented in any consultative process.

7.3 Upcoming electoral cycle: local and provincial elections 2027

Nepal is expected to hold local and provincial elections in 2027, in a context of political transition and potentially reduced civic mobilisation and participation. The intense youth engagement of 2025–2026 cannot be assumed to carry over automatically. Stakeholders consistently warned of youth fatigue: without visible reform delivery by the new Government, disengagement — and outward migration — are likely to increase ahead of the next cycle. The 2027 elections will also be a critical test of whether newer parties can build organisational capacity and candidate pipelines at sub-national level, where patronage networks and identity-based politics remain more entrenched. The period between now and 2027 represents a very relevant window for civil society engagement on electoral reform, citizen observation capacity, and youth participation — before the timeline for next electoral process locks in current dynamics. For civil society, this period offers a concrete opportunity to consolidate the gains of the 2025–2026 cycle and sustain civic engagement ahead of the local and provincial elections.

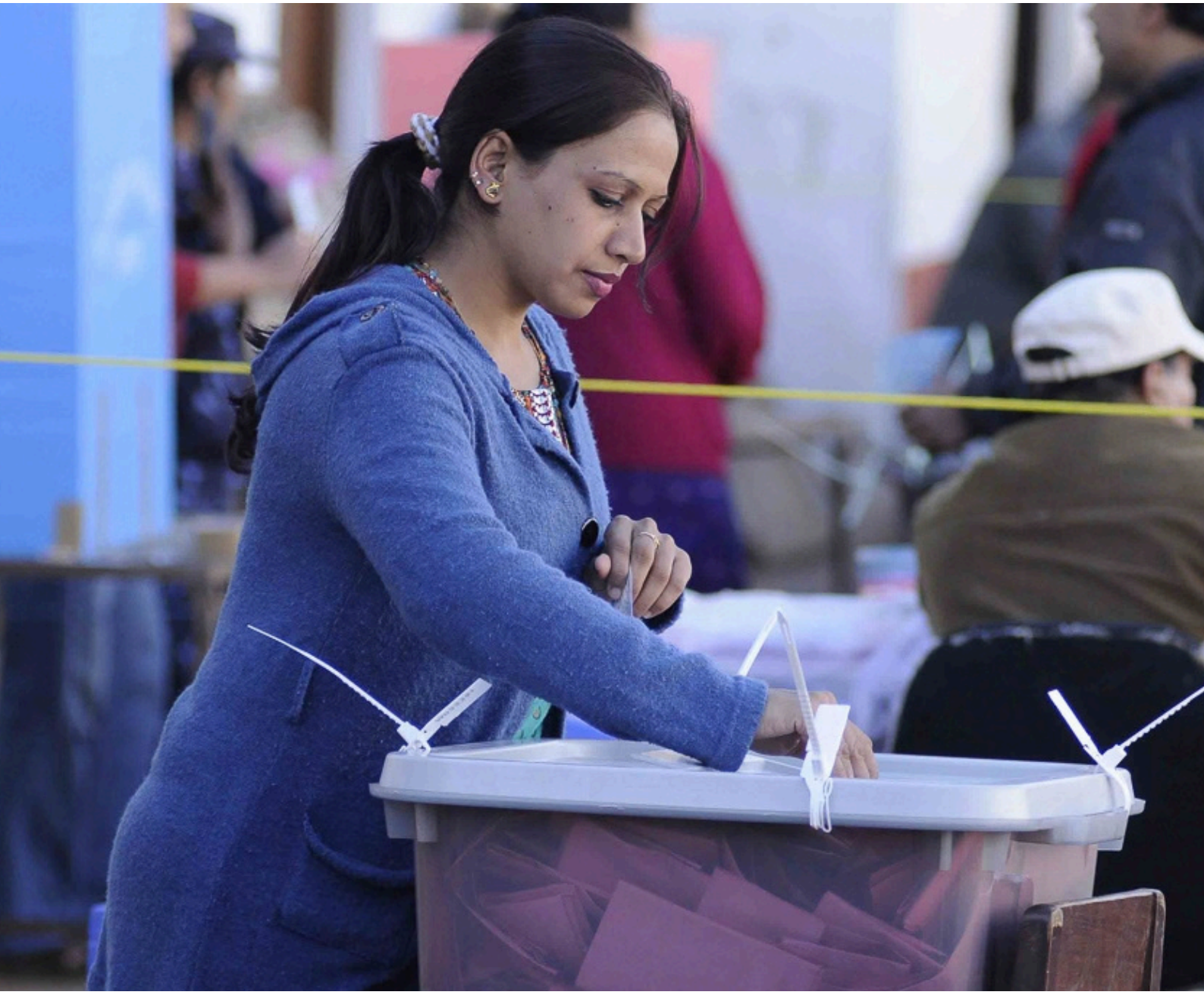


Photo : A woman casts her vote by placing her ballot into a sealed ballot box at a polling station during the election | Onlinekhabar

8. Recommendations and priorities ahead

The findings presented in this report point to a set of priority areas for democratic consolidation in Nepal. These priorities are offered as a contribution to ongoing reform discussions and are grounded in stakeholder consultations and observation reports

8.1 Implementing targeted, flexible post-election engagements

A series of focused consultations could provide a practical platform for further discussions. These would allow for open exchanges, capture urban and rural perceptions and dynamics, and generate actionable insights.

These consultations could prioritise engagement with:

- youth, including first-time voters and emerging political actors
- members of the Nepal's youth civic networks
- women involved in political and civic processes
- stakeholders from People living with Disabilities (PwDs)
- marginalised and underrepresented communities

8.2 *Advancing legal reform*

Engagement could prioritise:

- supporting an inclusive and consultative process on electoral reform promoting stakeholder and youth engagement to enhance ownership and sustainability, possibly building on the draft Election Management Act, 2023
- encouraging clarification of key legal and regulatory provisions, including age-related voter registration provisions
- fostering the introduction of inclusive registration and voting arrangements targeting overseas and out-of-district voters, as well as citizens involved in election administration and observation, PwDs and elderly voters

8.3 Enhancing transparency and stakeholder engagement by the ECN

Meaningful participation is enabled through access to reliable information and responsive institutions. Engagement could therefore prioritise:

- supporting the establishment by the ECN of regular stakeholder consultation mechanisms on key electoral processes, including dialogue with youth organisations
- encouraging systematic publication of disaggregated data, including voter registration figures by age and gender, polling station-level results and turnout, making the electoral process more accessible to young citizens and the wider public
- clarifying age-related voter registration provisions and strengthening targeted voter education efforts to young citizens
- considering measures to increase transparency in vote counting, including reviewing current counting arrangements in consultation with stakeholders.

8.4 Improving accuracy and integrity of the voter register

Civil society actors could encourage relevant institutions to consider:

- developing a long-term strategy to strengthen interoperability between voter registration and civil registration systems, also aiming to more effectively manage records of deceased voters
- facilitating broad stakeholder consultation and comprehensive feasibility assessments prior to the introduction of any technology-based solution
- promoting data-driven approaches to identify and address under-registration of specific groups, particularly youth, women and marginalised communities
- conducting a comprehensive audit of the voter register to inform evidence-based reforms

8.5 Strengthening electoral integrity and regulatory implementation

The 2026 elections highlighted a gap between the existence of regulatory frameworks and their implementation in practice. This is particularly evident in the areas of Code of Conduct enforcement and campaign finance oversight, where violations were widely reported but inconsistently sanctioned. ALN and partner CSOs are well placed for:

- monitoring and documenting Code of Conduct implementation, including complaint handling and enforcement consistency, and sharing findings with relevant stakeholders
- advocating for stronger campaign finance transparency, including improved reporting practices, mandatory public disclosure, enhanced oversight mechanisms
- drawing on regional and comparative experience to inform discussions on proportionate and credible enforcement approaches
- coordinating with citizen observer groups towards developing sound and harmonised methodologies to monitor campaign expenditures, including through mobile application–based tools drawing on regional best practices.

Such initiatives and advocacy align with broader governance and anti-corruption priorities, including those reflected in the Government's 100-day programme.

8.6 Addressing digital electoral campaigning and the information environment

The 2026 elections marked a structural shift in the role of digital campaigning, with significant implications for electoral integrity, transparency and level playing field. At the same time, they highlighted that key dynamics of the digital information environment — including platform-driven content, informal networks and third-party actors — extend beyond traditional campaign regulation and operate largely outside existing electoral oversight frameworks. At present, regulatory and institutional capacities remain insufficient to effectively monitor and regulate these developments within the electoral framework.
Engagement could prioritise:

- conducting policy dialogue on digital campaigning, including campaign finance, third-party activities and the role of online platforms while recognising the broader challenges related to the digital information environment
- supporting approaches to improve transparency and oversight of online campaign activities, while strenghtening ECN capacity to track content across multiple platforms, including encrypted and closed channels
- sharing comparative experience on regulatory frameworks for online campaigning and information integrity

Given that digital governance is already a priority for the new Government, this area may provide a particularly relevant entry point for civil society engagement.

8.7 Promoting inclusive political participation

The findings confirm that, despite formal inclusion frameworks, structural barriers continue to limit meaningful participation of women, youth and marginalised groups. These barriers are closely linked to party practices, access to resources, and broader socio-political dynamics. Civil society can advocate:

- supporting initiatives that address the gap between youth political mobilisation and representation, including dialogue with political parties on candidate selection, leadership pathways and more inclusive internal decision-making
- establishment by institutional actors of coordinated frameworks and platforms for youth engagement, enabling young people's perspectives to be meaningfully reflected in decision-making processes
- support to women's political participation beyond quota mechanisms, including candidate support and capacity development
- support to marginalised communities, particularly in relation to electoral access and participation.

These efforts would contribute to strengthening the link between political participation and effective representation, and advancing more substantive forms of political inclusion.

8.8 Supporting citizen election observation and coordination

Citizen election observation remains a key pillar of electoral integrity in Nepal. The 2026 elections demonstrated both the commitment and the constraints of the observer community, pointing to several areas where focused efforts could be strengthened:

- promoting accreditation and Code of Conduct requirements that are proportionate and do not create unnecessary barriers to observation groups
- strengthening coordination among domestic observer organisations
- investing in more robust and standardised observation methodology, and pursuing greater methodological consistency and harmonized data collection across observer groups
- advancing the recruitment and capacity building of young observers
- advocating for consistent and unhindered observer access to all critical stages of the electoral process, including vote counting, tabulation and transmission
- consolidating recommendations arising from the 2026 elections, and promoting the consolidation and prioritisation of recommendations from election observation final reports as a standard practice
- building connections with regional observers networks to exchange experience and best practices

Building on existing partnerships, including youth-led observation initiatives, could further strengthen the credibility and sustainability of citizen observation.

8.9 Preparing for the 2027 electoral cycle

The 2027 local and provincial elections represent the next critical test of whether Nepal's democratic transition delivers on the expectations that drove the 2025 protests. The intense civic mobilisation of 2025–2026 cannot be assumed to carry over automatically — stakeholders consistently warned of youth fatigue, and without visible reform progress, disengagement is likely to grow ahead of the next cycle.
For ALN and civil society partners, the period between now and 2027 is an important window to:

- promote civic engagement among youth and first-time voters beyond the electoral period, connecting political participation to visible reform outcomes
- invest in capacity-building for potential citizen observation ahead of local and provincial elections, where community-level dynamics and independent candidates play a more central role
- contribute to policy dialogue on electoral reform, helping ensure that youth and civil society perspectives are reflected before the next cycle locks in current dynamics

ALN's provisionally planned stakeholder consultations in September 2026 are a concrete first step in this direction — translating the findings of this report into practical engagement ahead of 2027.



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Accountability Lab Nepal (ALN) is a part of global translocal network that works to make governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders, and accountable institutions. We are dedicated in advancing accountability, transparency, and open governance at the local and national levels.

Our work on youth political participation and election reflects the approach. We equip young people with the skills and platforms to take part in democratic processes as observers, advocates, and decision-makers, and we conduct research to generate evidence that grounds this work. We also connect and convene communities and government, reach people through diverse communication channels, and foster narratives that support youth-led democratic change.

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Photo : A female voter casts her ballot into a secured ballot box under the supervision of an election official at a polling station in Nepal | The Kathmandu Post.