

Nepal's Electoral System: Challenges, Democratic Implications, and Reform Priorities

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Abstract

Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic following the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) marked a critical shift in the country's electoral governance. Central to this transformation was the adoption of a mixed electoral system combining First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and Proportional Representation (PR), intended to balance political stability, geographic accountability, and inclusive representation. Drawing on constitutional provisions, electoral laws, official reports, public opinion surveys, and comparative democratic theory, this article provides a systematic analysis of the evolution, structure, and performance of Nepal's current electoral system. The study finds that while the mixed system has significantly expanded descriptive representation particularly for women and historically marginalized groups it has not translated consistently into substantive representation or stable governance. Persistent party system fragmentation, weak coalition governance, elite dominance in candidate selection, rising electoral costs, and deficiencies in campaign finance regulation continue to undermine democratic accountability and public trust. Moreover, the complexities of federalism have intensified coordination challenges across federal, provincial, and local levels, further complicating electoral administration and governance effectiveness. Based on these findings, the article argues that Nepal's democratic consolidation depends less on wholesale electoral redesign and more on targeted reforms that strengthen electoral integrity, institutional capacity, internal party democracy, and substantive inclusion. By situating Nepal's experience within broader comparative insights, the article contributes to ongoing debates on mixed electoral systems in post-conflict and federal democracies and offers a phased reform roadmap to enhance democratic quality, legitimacy, and governance performance in Nepal.

Keywords: Nepal, Electoral system, Democratic consolidation, Proportional representation, Federal governance.

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Introduction

The current electoral system in Nepal has to be interpreted in the context of the wider curve of

the democratization process of the nation, transformation after the conflict, and the process of the federalization of Nepal. After the revival of multiple party democracy in 1990, Nepal was



characterized with long political instability which was characterized by weak institutions, centralized governance and poor political inclusion. The armed conflict that occurred during the decade (1996-2006) essentially transformed the discussion on the restructuring of states, their representation, and their participation in politics, leading to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006 and the subsequent abolishing of the monarchy (Upreti & KC, 2018; Lawoti, 2020). These trends led to the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, which formalized the principles of federalism and the introduction of a mixed electoral system as one of the key mechanisms in the democratic process and inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2015; Acharya, 2021).

With the introduction of federalism, Nepal was changed in several ways in terms of politics because it established three levels of government federal, provincial, and local each headed by elected representatives. This reorganization put the electoral system in an unprecedented value as a means of transforming the preferences of the citizens into political power on many different levels of governance (Acharya, 2021). Therefore, the electoral reforms were not only technical changes, but they were the core elements of the larger state-building and democratization agenda in Nepal (Hachhethu, 2018; Upreti and KC, 2018).

Electoral systems are critical in determining the outcome of democratic representation, accountability and governance. The literature on comparative political science proves that the electoral design determines the party system, political stability, voter turnout, and trust in democratic institutions (Powell, 2016; Lijphart, 2018; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and Proportional Representation (PR) models have been viewed as majoritarian in nature, where the former focuses on constituency-level accountability and decisiveness in government, whereas the latter is typically linked to inclusiveness and fairness in electing members of parliament (Blais and Massicotte, 2017; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017). Nevertheless, both systems also imply certain trade-offs, especially when one has to deal with divided or post-conflict societies where the

process of representation and stability should be brought to a balance (Reilly, 2016; Gerring et al., 2016).

In Nepal, the combined electoral system which is a combination of FPTP and PR was clearly developed with a view to historical exclusion but at the same time maintain geographic representation. According to the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the seats occupied by members of the House of the Representatives are to be filled by means of both the constituency-based FPTP and PR lists, which would guarantee the representation of women and marginalized groups. This design is based on the normative obligations to the representative democracy and social justice, responding to the historical needs of communities which were historically marginalized (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019). Meanwhile, the system will ensure political stability and accountability because direct connections between voters and representatives will be preserved (Government of Nepal, 2015; IDEA, 2022).

With all these intentions, the mixed electoral system in Nepal has elicited repeated controversies on its effectiveness and democratic implications. Political instability, failing party systems, the lack of accountability under PR lists, the dominance of elites in the selection of candidates, increasing election expenses, and a loss of trust in political institutions have been identified by scholars and policy analysts (Baral, 2022; Katz and Mair, 2018; Transparency International Nepal, 2023). Full reports on election observations and public opinion surveys also show an increasing level of dissatisfaction among the citizens with electoral procedures and results, which is a problem of democratic legitimacy and trust (Birch, 2015; Asia Foundation, 2023; IFES, 2022). The above challenges promote the systematic analysis of the functioning of the electoral system in Nepal in practice and the way it defines the principles of democratic governance under a federal arrangement.

The interest in analyzing the mixed electoral system in Nepal is based on the empirical and normative grounds thus. Nepal empirically gives a case in point to comprehending the role of

hybrid electoral designs in post-conflict, multi-ethnic, and federal circumstances (Reynolds et al., 2016; Norris, 2017). In a normative sense, the performance of the system should be evaluated in order to see in which areas reforms may help make it stronger regarding the representation, accountability, and electoral integrity without compromising political stability (Powell, 2016; Norris, 2015). Mixed systems do not necessarily create proportionality and stability; their effect on success is determined by the institutional design, party behavior, and the norms of governing (as the international experience demonstrates) (Blais and Massicotte, 2017; Lijphart, 2018).

It is within this background that this article has threefold objectives. First, it attempts to examine the constitutional, legal and institutional basis of the present electoral system of Nepal. Second, it raises important issues related to the major problems of political representations, electoral integrity and democratic governance in the mixed FPTP-PR model. Third, based on comparative knowledge and Nepal-specific data, the article establishes the priorities of reforms to improve the quality of democracy, popular confidence, and effectiveness of governance in federal Nepal (Acharya, 2021; Baral, 2022; IDEA, 2023).

The article is organized in the following way. Section 2 identifies the conceptual and theoretical framework of electoral systems and democratic performance. In Section 3, the author examines the development and legal underpinnings of the electoral system in Nepal. The section 4 discusses how the system of the existing mixed system is organized and functions. Section 5 examines several critical challenges and Section 6 addresses the democratic implications of the same. Section 7 puts the experience of Nepal in comparative contexts. Section 8 suggests priorities of reform and policy alternatives, and finally, Section 9 provides concluding considerations of the future of electoral democracy in Nepal.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This part places the electoral system of Nepal in the context of well established theories of electoral design, democratic performance and electoral integrity. Based on the existing literature in comparative political science, it describes the way in which the various electoral systems can affect the dimensions of representation, accountability, political stability and public trust, and why these dimensions are especially relevant in transitional and federal democracies like Nepal.

Electoral Systems and Democratic Performance

Electoral systems are one of the most significant institutional variables in democracy regime since they establish the process of converting the votes into the seats and the allocation of political power between the parties and a representative. Typically, comparative scholarship identifies three broad categories of electoral systems: majoritarian (or plurality) systems, proportional representation systems, and mixed systems of electoral systems that blend both (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018; Blais and Massicotte, 2017).

Most of them are majoritarian systems, the most famous one being the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), which gives victory to the candidate who gets the greatest number of votes in a constituency. The advocates claim that this kind of systems makes choice clarity, builds effective voter-representative connections, and leads to government stability by generating clear legislative majorities (Powell, 2016; Gerring et al., 2016). There is another aspect of FPTP that is considered to be the administrative simplicity and voter comprehension, which can be highly crucial in a low-literacy or limited resource situation (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). Nevertheless, research grounded in a large amount of empirical evidence shows that majoritarian systems have a tendency to produce disproportional results, marginalize smaller parties, and systematically underrepresent minorities and women, in particular, in socially diverse societies (Lijphart, 2018; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017).

On the contrary, proportional representation (PR) systems have the goal of apportionment of seats in near proportionality to the votes

attracted by parties with the benefit of fostering fairness, inclusiveness, and descriptive representation. It is often claimed that PR systems are linked to the increased voter turnout, more women and minority representation, and ideological diversity of legislatures (Lijphart, 2018; Blais and Massicotte, 2017). In normative democratic view, PR is often treated as more fair due to the reduction in wasted votes as well as a greater scope of political preferences is represented in policymaking (Powell, 2016). However, PR systems also have been criticized because they undermine the direct accountability relationship between voters and the representatives of the individual parties, create party fragmentation, and unstable coalition governments are a possible outcome (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018; Katz and Mair 2018).

The mixed electoral systems have also become institutional compromises meant to weigh the strong and the weak sides of majoritarian and proportional electoral designs. Mixed systems aim to maintain local accountability and maximize inclusiveness and fairness by balancing elections based on constituencies with the allocation of seats in proportion (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2016). There is limited research which points to the idea that mixed systems may be able to moderate disproportionality and enhance representation without necessarily compromising governability, but they are inconsistent in terms of their democratic performance, based on system design, party behavior, and institutional context (Blais and Massicotte, 2017; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018).

One of the key themes in the electoral system theory is that there exist trade-offs between representation, accountability and political stability. Lijphart (2018) underlines the fact that the electoral system will never be able to optimize all democratic values at the same time, and an institutional decision-making always comes at the cost of normative privileging. Representative fairness systems can undermine decisiveness and stability, whereas the ones that support stability and accountability can lead to the exclusion of minority voices (Powell, 2016; Gerring et al., 2016). Such trade-offs are acutely felt in the post-conflict and

divided societies, in which inclusive representation is required to attain legitimacy, but which are at the same time overly fragmented, making effective government administration difficult (Reilly, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2016).

In this theoretical framework, the mixed FPTP-PR system that Nepal chose to participate in indicates that it is trying to balance between these two competing democratic goals. The system tries to preserve the accountability of the constituency and decisiveness in the government, whereas the PR elements would help address the historical exclusion and bring social inclusivity (Government of Nepal, 2015; Lawoti, 2020). It is hence imperative to understand these theoretical trade-offs in order to determine the performance of Nepal in democracy through its electoral system.

Electoral Integrity and Democratic Quality

Although the design of the electoral systems is important, the quality of democracy is finally determined by the quality of the electoral processes and institutions that govern the electoral process. Electoral integrity is the degree to which elections are orchestrated in compliance with international electoral rules of transparency, fairness, inclusiveness, and accountability during the full electoral procedure (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017). Electoral integrity at high levels is the main source of the trust of the population, and the perceived legitimacy of the democratic institution, and the electoral malpractice can weaken even the democratic institutions formally (Norris, 2015).

Birch (2015) imagines electoral malpractice as a continuum between administrative anomalies and campaign finance malpractice and more explicit varieties of manipulation, including the purchase of votes, and the misuse of resources belonging to the state. Empirical evidence proves that such practices are disproportionately weakening trust in transitional democracies, whereby institutions are in the process of consolidation and political competition is usually high (Birch, 2015; Upreti and KC, 2018). This has led to electoral integrity being a feature of democratic performance as an extension of representation and stability.

Norris (2017) also claims that the concept of electoral integrity is influenced by not only the formal rules but also by the whole governance context, the independence of the election management organs, the actions of the political parties, the freedom of the press, and the norms of the citizens. The election commissions are institutions that are critical in the promotion of procedural fairness, enforcement of electoral laws, and resolution of disputes. But they have to be effective based on autonomy, capacity, and public credibility (Norris, 2017; IDEA, 2022).

Political parties also play a main role in determining electoral integrity and quality of democracy. The parties act as brokers to political office, organizing voter preferences and recruiting candidates. The elites may capture the processes of candidate selection where the internal party democracy is weak, which compromises representational fairness and accountability (Katz and Mair, 2018; Hachhethu, 2018). Electoral rules also operate in practice according to the norms of governance like the respect of the rule of law, tolerance of opposition, and acceptance of the electoral results (Lijphart, 2018; Reilly, 2016).

In theoretical terms, the relationship between electoral system design and electoral integrity leads to democratic quality. Even well-designed systems are not able to compensate the presence of weak institutions or corrupt practices, as well as strong institutions may fail to achieve democratic results through poorly designed rules (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017). The issue of electoral reform in the case of Nepal thus needs to be not only the mechanics of FPTP and PR but also the institutional ability of the Election Commission, party governance practices, and some general norms of political responsibility (IFES, 2022; Transparency International Nepal, 2023).

Overall, the study framework adopted in the paper is based on the theories of electoral system design and the research on electoral integrity and the quality of democracy. This combined outlook is an effective analytical framework of evaluating the electoral system of Nepal, determining their structural and governance

issues and reform priorities to enhance the effect of democratic legitimacy and performance.

Evolution of Nepal's Electoral System

The electoral system in Nepal has experienced various phases of politics based on change of regime, conflict and constitutional restructuring. This evolution is important to know to place the current mixed electoral system in context and the arguments of its democratic performance and reform.

Historical Overview

Electoral Arrangements Before and After 1990

Before the year 1990, the electoral processes of Nepal had had a very centralized and repressive political system. In Panchayat era (1960-1990), the elections did not have political parties and hence there was no political competition, representation, and accountability. Though there were periodic elections, these were more of a tool of legitimating the regime, as opposed to a tool of democratic choice (Lawoti, 2020; Hachhethu, 2018). The number of people who were drawn to electoral participation was limited at this time and even the marginalized groups of people were largely excluded in the formal political power.

The electoral history of Nepal changed greatly in 1990 when there was a restoration of multiparty democracy. In 1990, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal restored competitive party-based elections utilizing First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system of electing parliamentary representatives. The transition was also accompanied by strengthening political freedom and increasing the electoral competition, yet the FPTP system still gave disproportionate results and raised descriptive representation of women, Dalits, Indigenous nationalities, and other disadvantaged groups (Lawoti, 2020; Lijphart, 2018). Although FPTP made the representation of the constituency and alternation of power possible, it did not consider the socially and regionally entrenched inequalities in the political system of Nepal (Hachhethu, 2018).

In the 1990s, the nature of electoral politics in Nepal was marked by a change of government

quite often, ineffective management in coalitions and increased displeasure of the political elites by the masses. These failures of governance, coupled with the continuing marginalization, helped to sink the credibility of democratic institutions and created an ample space to continue the development of an armed conflict in 1996 (Upreti & KC, 2018). As a result, the shortcomings of the Nepal pre-conflict electoral arrangements were even more visible and the necessity to have more inclusive and representative ones.

Post-Conflict and Constitution-Making Period (2006–2015)

The armed struggle that was experienced over the decade (1996-2006) essentially transformed discussion on representation, restructuring of the state and electoral restructuring in Nepal. Exclusion and unequal representation as the root cause of conflict and the inclusion of political participation as the foundation of sustainable peace were explicitly noted in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2006 (Upreti & KC, 2018). In the peace process, Nepal embraced proportional representation in electing the Constituent Assembly in 2008, which was the first mass rejection of a majoritarian method of election.

Constituent Assembly elections in 2008 and 2013 also presented a hybrid system of election using a mix of the FPTP and Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems, with a quota of preference given to women and disadvantaged groups. This change has expanded the political involvement to a larger extent and changed the social structure of elective institutions, increasing the descriptive representation in accordance with the international democratic standards (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2016). There is empirical evidence that PR was instrumental in ensuring that the historically marginalized groups were heard in the constitution-making process (Acharya, 2021; IDEA, 2022).

The constitution-making process (2006–2015) was thus not merely exercise of the law, but also reimagination of the institution of democracy in Nepal. One of the key tools that appeared to

solve past disputes, encourage inclusion, and endorse the new political framework was electoral reform (Hachhethu, 2018; Norris, 2017). Nevertheless, the intermediate nature of mixed electoral setup also brought to light the issue of party fragmentation, elite bargaining, and effectiveness of governance, which would remain prominent in the latter half of 2015 (Baral, 2022).

Constitutional and Legal Framework

Constitution of Nepal (2015)

The most detailed redefinition of the electoral system of the country was made in 2015 by the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal. The Constitution officially asserted Nepal as a federal democratic republic and put universal adult suffrage as the basic right. Article 84 recognized a hybrid electoral system to the House of Representatives, where members are elected by both FPTP and PR to bring about a balance between representation of the constituency and inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2015).

The Constitution provides the necessary proportional representation of women and marginalized populations in PR lists, which is a normative obligation to inclusive democracy and social justice (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019). The same concept forms the basis of electoral systems at provincial and local scales and, as a result, elections are one of the key elements of the federal system of governance in Nepal (Acharya, 2021). Institutionalizing the lessons of experiencing the post-conflict transition, Nepal aimed to constitutionalize the mixed system and make the electoral governance attuned to the overall objective of federalism and democratic consolidation (IDEA, 2022).

Election Commission Act and Political Parties Act (2017)

In order to operationalize the provisions in the constitution, Nepal passed the Election Commission Act (2017) and the Political Parties Act (2017). The Election Commission Act stipulates the authority and specified functions and independence of the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN), which is given the power to organize voters, to oversee and manage the elections, to decide the resolutions of the

disputes, as well as to implement the electoral laws (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017). This law system is supposed to protect the electoral integrity, whereby administrative autonomy and procedural clarity are to be upheld within the international practices (Norris, 2017; IFES, 2022).

Political Parties Act (2017) controls the registration of parties, their internal affairs, selection of candidates and the election process. It aims at enhancing domestic democracy, economic disclosure and responsibility among political parties, which is a key factor in determining the electoral results under both FPTP and PR elements (Hachhetu, 2018; Katz and Mair, 2018). However, legal loopholes and inconsistencies between the laws and the practice of the parties, especially on the PR list creation and the control of campaign funds, have been observed by the scholars and oversight institutions (Transparency International Nepal, 2023).

Role and Mandate of the Election Commission of Nepal

The constitutionally defined independent body, which undertakes free, fair and credible elections in all the three levels of government, is the Election Commission of Nepal. Its responsibility is to educate voters, conduct election logistics, overseeing political parties and contenders, and resolving of electoral disputes (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024). The annual reports use administrative capacity and technological adoption, yet, still, there are issues related to the campaign finance oversight and adherence to codes of conduct and coordination across the federal levels (IFES, 2022; IDEA, 2023).

Theoretically, the success of the electoral system in Nepal could not be solely reliant on constitutional design, but also on the ability and independence of the institutions, including the ECN, to apply electoral rules without any bias (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017). Institutionalization of Nepal electoral democracy is therefore dependent on the reinforcement of the legal framework as well as institutional practices that perpetuate the election integrity and the citizen trust.

Overall, the electoral system of Nepal has developed over time to be an exclusionary, centralized system to a constitutionally entrenched mixed system influenced by the needs to resolve conflicts, include, and restructure the federalism of the country. The subsequent sections are based on this historical and legal development that allow evaluating the challenges of the current system, its democratic implications, and its priorities in reform.

Structure and Operation of the Current Electoral System

Nepal's current electoral system is a constitutionally mandated mixed model that combines majoritarian and proportional principles across federal, provincial, and local levels. Its structure reflects an explicit attempt to balance democratic inclusion with constituency accountability while operating within a newly established federal framework. This section examines both the design of the mixed electoral system and the institutional mechanisms responsible for its administration.

Mixed Electoral System Design

FPTP and Proportional Representation Components

A mixed electoral system of the House of Representatives incorporates the first-past-the-post (FPTP) and the proportional representation (PR) aspects. Article 84 provides of 165 members being elected on a FPTP constituency and of 110 members being elected on a PR party list on a national level (Government of Nepal, 2015; IDEA, 2022). Mixed arrangements are used in provincial assemblies and similar mixed arrangements are also used in local elections which are based primarily on majoritarian rules with compulsory gender representation.

The FPTP element focuses on geographical representation and accountability of the voter representative, which is in line with the majoritarian theory of electoral representation. FPTP, which brings about electing representatives in the single-member forms, makes it easier to have a better accountability between voters and elected leaders and is commonly linked to more robust constituency

representation and legislative accountability (Powell, 2016; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). In Nepal, FPTP is also stabilizing, which means that it favors bigger parties and could prevent too much fragmentation within legislatures (Gerring et al., 2016; Baral, 2022).

On the contrary, the PR element is established in such a way that it would increase inclusiveness and proportionality as political parties would be allocated seats in proportion to their national votes. Nepal has a closed-list PR that is where voters vote not for a candidate but for a party, and the leadership of a party decides who will be ranked on PR lists (IDEA, 2022; Reynolds et al., 2016). Normatively, this system is consistent with global best practices of preventing the waste of votes and making sure that various political preferences are represented in the legislative bodies (Lijphart, 2018; Blais and Massicotte, 2017).

Seat Allocation Mechanisms and Quota Provisions

One of the most notable aspects of the PR system in Nepal is the comprehensive inclusion system that is based on quota. Political parties are mandated by the Constitution and later electoral laws to make sure that the PR lists have a proportional representation of women, Dalits, Indigenous nationalities, Madhesis, Tharus, Muslims and other minority groups (Government of Nepal, 2015; Nepal Law Commission, 2023). Federal and provincial legislatures will also require at least 33 percent of elected members to be women, which has drastically changed the descriptive composition of elected bodies since the period before 2006 (Tamang, 2019; Lawoti, 2020).

The allocation of seats under PR is calculated on the proportional formula according to the shares of parties in the national votes, which is not violated by the legal requirements and finalized according to inclusion requirements. According to International IDEA (2022), the inclusion model in Nepal is one of the most ambitious ones in the global context reflecting the post-conflict social justice and political equality commitments. The empirical data also indicates that the provisions have increased the political office access of historically marginalized groups,

especially women and marginalized communities (Acharya, 2021; IDEA, 2022).

Nonetheless, researchers also warn that the inclusion in quotas does not necessarily imply the substantive representation. Closure PR systems may be characterized by the centralization of authority among the leaders of the party and allow capturing the leadership of the candidates and restricting the independence of the electors chosen by the PR (Katz and Mair, 2018; Hachhethu, 2018). In Nepal, there have been disagreements on whether the mixed system has reached an effective combination of inclusion, accountability, and democratic responsiveness (Lawoti, 2020; Baral, 2022).

Electoral Administration and Management

Election Commission Capacity and Performance

The constitutionally independent authority that is mandated to conduct, supervise and regulate elections at all levels of government is the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN). Its duties are voter registration, drawing of constituencies, election arrangements, political parties and candidates, voter education and resolution of electoral conflict (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017).

According to annual reports released by the ECN, there were more positive changes in administrative capacity following the introduction of federal elections; in particular, voter rolls grew, the utilization of information and communication technologies increased, and logistical coordination at federal, provincial, and local levels improved (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024). Generally, international observers recognize that the elections in Nepal have been competitive and peaceful to a large extent and are of a minimum standard of procedural integrity (IFES, 2022; IDEA, 2022).

Still, there are institutional issues. The ECN competes in a multi-level federal context, where various levels of government must coordinate themselves, frequently within stringent deadlines and under politics (Acharya, 2021). The ability to monitor campaign finance, impose codes of conduct, and address electoral disputes in a timely manner is still restricted, which still seems

to influence the trust of the population in the electoral management (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017).

Election Financing and Administrative Costs

The issue of election financing is one of the most urgent areas of operation of the existing Nepal electoral system. The hybrid FPTP-PR, along with high frequency election of the three levels of government, has significantly added the financial strain on the state. According to International IDEA (2023), the expense of conducting elections in a system that is federally based is more likely to be expensive as it requires overlapping elections, duplication of the logistics, and different levels of institutionalization.

The administrative cost is increasing in Nepal, and the cost is magnified by poor regulation of the campaign financial funds and expenditure by parties. According to reports by IFES (2022) and Transparency International Nepal (2023), the primary indicators of difficulties in expenditure monitoring, unfair distribution of resources among the competitors, and misuse of the state resources during the election times were identified. These practices negatively affect the integrity of elections and increase inequalities in the political competition, especially among the independent candidates and small parties (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017).

In the context of democratic governance, proper electoral administration requires sufficient financial resources, but also transparency, accountability and enforcement powers. Comparative research emphasizes that even a well-developed electoral system may not bring any democratic results when election management authorities are not independent or do not have the power to enforce their decisions (Norris, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2016). The case of Nepal demonstrates that financial and regulatory capacity of the ECN therefore needs to be strengthened to guarantee that the mixed electoral system works as it was.

In a nutshell, the current Nepal electoral system is a form of FPTP and PR, aimed at maintaining a balanced accountability, inclusion and stability.

Though its design corresponds to progressive constitutional undertakings and global best practices, operational issues to do with seat allocation, party hegemony, administrative strength, and funding of the elections still influence democratic performance. These are the structural and functional dynamics on which the issues of the system, and democratic implications are studied in the following passages.

Key Challenges in Nepal's Electoral System

Although progressive in constitution and inclusive in its aim, the mixed electoral system in Nepal has a number of challenges, which are related to each other and threaten the democratic performance. Such difficulties lie in the party system affairs, practices of representation and lack of electoral integrity and accountability. This part is an analytical discussion of these challenges, based on Nepal-specific evidence and theoretical comparisons.

Political Instability and Coalition Governance

Political instability based on a divided set of parties is one of the most long-term issues that have been experienced in Nepal because of the mixed system of elections. The proportional electoral system theory indicates that proportional elements in electoral design usually stimulate multiparty rivalry, which, although more productive in representation, makes coalition-building and government stability more difficult (Lijphart, 2018; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). The PR element has helped the growth of political parties and factions in Nepal, which has added to the fragmentation of legislatures (Baral, 2022).

The post-2017 federal elections in Nepal have shown a trend of regular governmental change and weak coalition despite the fact that the elections yielded reasonably clear mandates under the FPTP element. Baral (2022) records the nature of coalition governments during the federal period in Nepal marked by brief durations of office, alliances, inconsistency in policies, which negatively affect the performance of governments and public trust. Such dynamics

coincide with the more general theories of party system change, which suggest that loosely-institutionalized parties are more likely to engage in elite negotiation and opportunistic coalition types (Katz & Mair, 2018).

The mixed FPTP-PR system was supposed to counter the instability as it would balance proportionality and majoritarian decisiveness. But, as a matter of fact, this stabilizing effect has been watered down by internal party divisions, factionalism, and the PR-seat playing field (Baral, 2022; Hachhethu, 2018). The short-term politics of coalitions put coherent policy agendas third in line to power-sharing deals, undermining legislative accountability and executive performance (Gerring et al., 2016; Katz and Mair, 2018). Political instability is therefore an institutional problem that constrains democratic payoffs of the Nepalese electoral system.

Representation, Inclusion, and Elite Capture

One key normative argument that can be used to justify the mixed electoral system in Nepal is that the system focuses on inclusion and representational fairness, especially the PR bit of it. Mandatory quotas guarantee women and marginalized groups a numerical representation in the elected institutions much higher in comparison to the pre-conflict era (Tamang, 2019; Lawoti, 2020). On a descriptive representation front, these results indicate a significant advance of inclusive democracy (Lijphart, 2018; IDEA, 2022).

Nevertheless, there is a growing literature which points out a disjunction between descriptive inclusion and substantive representation. Lawoti (2020) holds the view that even though the social make-up of legislatures has been diversified as a result of PR lists, the elite within the party continues to make decisions, leaving the policy representation of the marginalized groups to a limited scope. Tamang (2019) also indicates that a significant portion of PR-elected representatives are limited in their ability to influence the agenda of legislation, which supports the belief of tokenism instead of empowerment.

This is a problem that is closely associated with poor internal party democracy. The closed-list PR system in Nepal gives the party leadership the major power of influencing the choice of candidates and the ranking of lists, which allows the elite to gain access to electoral advantages (Hachhethu, 2018; Katz and Mair, 2018). As formal as it is, the Political Parties Act (2017) requires the internal democratic practices, but the enforcement is still low, and party organizations still use the centralized and personalized structures of leadership (Hachhethu, 2018; Transparency International Nepal, 2023).

According to comparative studies, PR systems can increase the inclusivity only in the context of open and democratic party governance (Scarraw, 2015; Norris, 2017). Under conditions other than these, proportional systems can re-create established power structures against the normative logic of proportional systems (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019). The experience of Nepal is therefore an indication of the constraints of quota-based inclusion without the institutionalization of wider reforms.

Electoral Integrity and Corruption Risks

The other significant problem facing the Nepal electoral system is electoral integrity. Despite the fact that most elections are peaceful and competitive, there still are structural vulnerabilities in the regulation and enforcement of the campaign finance. Campaign finance is one of the most susceptible areas of the Nepal electoral process as defined by Transparency International Nepal (2023), which states the lack of disclosure mechanisms, poor monitoring, and penalties in case of breach.

According to Birch (2015), transitional democracies that have uneven institutional capacity and where political competition is high tend to foster electoral malpractice. Nepal A case of vote buying, abuse of government resources, and unfair pressure by the rich or interest groups have been reported in various elections (IFES, 2022; Transparency International Nepal, 2023). These practices skew the electoral competition and unreasonably disadvantage smaller parties, independent candidates and marginalized communities.

Introducing accountability gaps further increases the issues of integrity. Although the Election Commission of Nepal has the formal power to enforce the laws which relate to elections, there are practical limitations, including limited capacity to investigate and political pressure, as well as delays of the judicial system, which makes the effective enforcement of electoral laws impossible (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024; Norris, 2017). Birch (2015) explains that even minor irregularities happening during elections that citizens view as systemic or not punished by the law can undermine the public trust, which is also reflected in the surveys conducted among people in Nepal (Asia Foundation, 2023).

Electoral integrity is a requirement rather than a procedure to legitimacy and trust in a democratic system of governance. Normative relationship between representation and participation, sustained corruption risks destroy the confidence of citizens in elections, and make the process less worthwhile (Norris, 2015; Birch, 2015). These integrity issues are thus important to be dealt with in the mixed electoral system of Nepal so that reforms in the electoral system can have substantial democratic measures.

To conclude, the electoral system of Nepal encounters interrelated issues as far as political instability, the domination of the elite in the country in terms of representation, and the lack of electoral integrity. These issues underscore the weaknesses of the institutional design in the lack of strong institution of party governance, strength of regulation and accountability. These constraints are critical to the evaluation of democratic implications of the system and establishment of plausible reform priorities, as examined in the next section.

Democratic Implications

The operation and structure of the hybrid system of the Nepal elections have very far reaching implications to both democratic representation, accountability, trust among the people and governance in the context of a federal system. Although the system has increased the level of inclusion and participation in politics, its actual experiences have demonstrated that there is always tension between representation and

accountability and there is a problem in ensuring that the citizens do not lose confidence in the system and that governance can be coordinated at various levels.

Representation and Accountability

A key democratic suggestion of the Nepal mixed electoral system is related to the type of voter-representative connections in the FPTP and PR aspects. The approach of electoral theory is that with FPTP systems, there is a tendency to create strong and personal connections between voters and elected representatives, with representatives directly responsible to geographically demarcated units (Powell, 2016; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017). Local demands, delivery of constituency services to citizens, and constant contact with voters are also anticipated to make FPTP-elected members of parliament and provincial assemblies accountable vertically in Nepal (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018).

Conversely, the PR aspect undermines the direct voter-representative ties by focusing on party but not on individual responsibility. The Nepalese PR system is closed, which means that the voters vote for parties and not candidates, and seats are distributed by the party leadership (IDEA, 2022; Reynolds et al., 2016). Although this design is more proportional and inclusive, it tends to raise the responsibilities upwards to the party elites instead of downwards to the citizens (Powell, 2016; Katz and Mair, 2018). Consequently, PR-elected officials might emphasize the party over the constituency responsiveness and provide citizens with little chance to reward or sanction a single legislator (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017).

There is empirical evidence showing that this dual accountability, has had unequal democratic practices in Nepal. Though FPTP representatives are typically viewed as more accessible and responsive, PR representatives typically have restrictions in a policy agenda and direct voter engagement (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019). This imbalance makes it hard to comprehend what it means to be represented in this way and confuses accountability, making it a threat to democracy (Powell, 2016; Norris, 2017).



Public Trust and Political Participation

Another important aspect of democratic performance is the trust of the citizens in the electoral processes and the democratic institutions. According to Norris (2015), the belief of the citizens in the democracy does not only lie in the election results but also in the views of fairness, transparency, and integrity during the process of election. In Nepal, survey research of the population indicates a dualistic situation of high turnout of electorate with the concomitant loss of trust in political institutions.

According to the evidence of the Survey of the Nepali People 2022, the voter turnout is relatively high, but many citizens are unsatisfied with political parties, elected officials, and the perceived effectiveness of democratic governance (Asia Foundation, 2023). This tendency is consistent with the general trends in transitional democracies, in which the participation is commonly associated with a sense of normative commitment or a voting habit instead of trust in political responsiveness (Norris, 2015; Birch, 2015).

The fears of electoral corruption, campaign finance anomalies and the dominance of the elite also undermine levels of trust. Even small-scale electoral malpractice has been shown to be disproportionately influential on the democratic legitimacy in cases where institutions are seen as not willing or capable of enforcing rules fairly (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017). Vote buying and abuse of state resources, frequent abuse of control, and laxity in control by the regulating institutions are recurring concerns in Nepal, which has generated doubt over the substantive worth of elections (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; IFES, 2022).

Democratically, the loss of trust becomes dangerous in the long term both to political participation and to civic engagement. Norris (2015) warns that the ongoing disparities between the expectations of the citizens and the outcomes of governance may encourage apathy, lack of interest, or even promote extra-institutional types of political activity. As experience in Nepal demonstrates, it is necessary to build up electoral integrity and accountability

to achieve procedural legitimacy, but also to maintain a meaningful political participation.

Federalism and Multilevel Governance

The newfound complexity to electoral politics and democratic governance has arisen in Nepal because of the adoption of federalism. Federalism necessitates that there is proper coordination between federal, provincial and local governments with elected representatives and specific mandates (Acharya, 2021). Electoral systems are also important in determining the distribution and exercise of power, at these levels, both in policy coherence and accountability.

Multilevel and interdependent electoral politics in federal Nepal have more frequently become the norm as national party politics determine national elections and the other way round (Acharya, 2021; Baral, 2022). Although this integration will lead to policy congruence, it will create problems in coordinating, especially when the coalition governments are operating differently at different levels. According to Upreti and KC (2018), the post-conflict federalism requires robust institutional mechanisms that could oversee the intergovernmental relations, which are not developed in Nepal.

Multilevel governance is also complicated by the scheduling of elections, the organization of administration, or budget limitations. Occurrences of multiple elections on all levels put pressure on administrative resources and finances, and duplication of mandates may lead to confusion of responsibilities and bewilderment of voters (IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024). These problems highlight the role of matching electoral design to the rest of the federal system of governance to make it democratic.

Theoretically, federal democracies need both a system of territorial representation in elections and a coherent policy (Gerring et al., 2016; Lijphart, 2018). The mixed electoral system in Nepal is a partial measure of such requirements by incorporating both the constituency representation and proportional inclusion. But unless more formidable coordination systems

and better accountability structures exist, the democratic advantages of federalism will be watered down (Acharya, 2021; Upreti and KC, 2018).

To conclude, the electoral system in Nepal has great democratic values in terms of representation, accountability, public confidence and federal governance. Although the mixed FPTP-PR model has widened the sphere of inclusion and participation, it has brought about the accountability gaps, lack of trust, and coordination problems. To respond to these implications, reforms including the coordination of electoral design and institutional capacity, party leadership and multilevel coordination are necessary as explored in the next section on reform priorities.

Comparative Insights and Lessons

The comparative analysis offers an effective structure to evaluate the output of the Nepal electoral system and find the way of reform. The egalitarian theory of electoral systems underlines that there is no single model that is most effective in all cases of socio-political systems; however, comparative experience can shed light on how various institutional designs can influence the quality of representation, stability, and governance in various socio-political situations (Lijphart, 2018; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). It is based on international experience in order to draw major lessons used elsewhere in democracies and assess the extent to which they can be applied in a post-conflict, multi-ethnic, and multi-ethnic and federal environment like Nepal.

Electoral Stability and Reform Experiences in other Democracies.

Comparative study always shows that the design of electoral systems is important in determining the stability of politics and the stability of governments. The majoritarian systems, as employed in such countries as the United Kingdom and India, have been frequently linked to the definite outcomes of the election and comparatively stable governments of one party. Nevertheless, these systems also often create disproportional representation and leave out the voices of minorities, especially in socially diverse

societies (Lijphart, 2018; Powell, 2016). In comparison, proportional representation systems are more likely to increase inclusivity and fairness and might lead to coalition governments and policy fragmentation when party systems are loosely institutionalized (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018; Katz and Mair, 2018).

In a number of democracies, mixed electoral systems have become reform-based trade-offs in a bid to manage these trade-offs. The Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system in Germany is often viewed as an example of a successful model by combining the elements of accountability in the form of a constituency and the proportional results. Empirical analysis shows that the system of Germany has provided not only representational fairness but also political stability; this is explained by the high institutionalization of the parties, clear regulations of seat allocation, and effective electoral governance institutions (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017; Lijphart, 2018). In the same vein, the example of New Zealand switching to MMP in the 1990s shows how electoral reform can be used to increase both inclusion and trust among the population provided such reform is supported by the prevalent political consensus and voter education success (Reilly, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2016).

There are also risks of poorly calibrated reforms that are also shown by comparative evidence. Fragmented legislatures, unstable coalitions, and elite bargaining have been caused by the introduction of PR or mixed systems without parallel party change and institutional capacity in a number of transitional democracies (Gerring et al., 2016; Katz and Mair, 2018). These instances provide relevance to the use of context-dependent factors like the maturity of the parties, the norms of governance, and the capacity of the administration, which influence the outcomes of the elections (Lijphart, 2018; Norris, 2017).

Applicability of Comparative Lessons to Nepal's Socio-Political Context

To apply comparative lessons to the country of Nepal, one must pay close attention to the specifics of the past, social, and political context of this country. Nepal is similar to other post-conflict and divided societies in which the electoral systems were employed as an inclusion and conflict management tool (Reilly, 2016; Upreti and KC, 2018). Like in other of these instances, the introduction of a mixed system in Nepal is the result of a conscious attempt to achieve stability and representation in a diverse society (Government of Nepal, 2015; IDEA, 2022).

According to comparative studies, it is said that mixed systems are best when they are combined with high party institutionalization and internal democracy. Germany and New Zealand indicate that the key to avoiding elite capture and ensuring citizens to trust the government is the clarity of the selection of candidates, effective accountability, and disciplined parties (Katz and Mair, 2018; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017). In Nepal, where parties are very centralized and personalized, these lessons highlight how reforms aimed at party governance and not electoral formulas should be alone (Hachhethu, 2018; Lawoti, 2020).

The other major lesson is that of electoral integrity and the capacity of the institution. Effective democracies spend a lot of money on independent election management institutions that are effective and credible to the citizens (Norris, 2017; Birch, 2015). It has been shown, based on comparative experience, that mixed systems do not necessarily ensure integrity; their functionality is determined by how well the institutions dealing with its implementation and supervision do their work (Reynolds et al., 2016). In the case of Nepal, it means enhancing the independence, resources, and enforcement power of the Election Commission of Nepal to make sure that electoral regulations perform as planned (IFES, 2022; IDEA, 2023).

Lastly, comparative analysis shows the relevance of elections systems in relation to the wider governmental framework especially in federal states. The example of federal democracies like Germany and Canada shows that electoral design should be supplemented by obvious

intergovernmental coordination mechanisms in order to prevent overlapping mandates and gaps in accountability (Gerring et al., 2016; Lijphart, 2018). The experience of Nepal indicates that electoral reform must also come with reforms in federal administration, decentralization of fiscal and intergovernmental relations so as to have coherent democratic results (Acharya, 2021).

To sum up, the comparative experiences add to the perception that the Nepal electoral problems are not exceptional, but are seized through the trade-offs inherent in the design of the electoral systems. Global experience emphasizes that a successful change should be based on holistic strategy, integrating changes of electoral design with party restructuring, enhancement of the institution and coordination of the governance. These lessons establish a critical background of stating Nepal-specific reform priorities, which are discussed in the next section.

Reform Priorities and Policy Options

The requirement of reforming the Nepal electoral system is in a balanced manner that takes into consider both the electoral system and the governance ecosystem under which the elections will take place. The comparative studies indicate that electoral rules technical amendments are scarcely relevant in addressing the underlying democratic shortcomings in the absence of institutional reinforcement and party reform as well as safeguarding integrity (Norris, 2017; Lijphart, 2018; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). The reality-based, legally informed, and institutionally workable reform priorities in the context of federal restructuring, coalition volatility, inclusion commitments, and integrity concerns in Nepal have to be realistic (Government of Nepal, 2015; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; IDEA, 2023). This section provides the reform possibilities in three pillars: (1) legal and institutional reforms, (2) political party and campaign finance reforms, and (3) inclusion and strengthening electoral integrity.

Legal and Institutional Reforms

Simplification of Electoral Design

One of the key policy priorities is to streamline electoral design, which will minimise voter confusion, enhance accountability and financial efficiency. The mixed system in Nepal was implemented to achieve a balance between representation and inclusion but due to its complexity (particularly, the combination of both FPTP and PR systems and quotas) it may worsen accountability and obscure the public perceptions of what representation is (IDEA, 2022; Norris, 2017). Simplification does not imply that the mixed system should be abandoned; on the contrary, it may include the efforts to make the system's operation rules clear, enhance the transparency of seat allocation, and reevaluate the aspects that introduce complexity that might be avoided (Reynolds et al., 2016; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018).

Policy options for simplification include:

- **Clarifying the relationship between FPTP and PR mandates** by improving public communication and legal definitions of representative roles (Powell, 2016; Shugart & Taagepera, 2017).
- **Reducing procedural complexity** through streamlined ballot design, clearer voter instructions, and standardized election procedures across levels of government (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; IFES, 2022).
- **Reassessing technical rules that intensify fragmentation** (such as low thresholds for PR representation) if evidence indicates disproportionate coalition instability, while protecting inclusion goals (Baral, 2022; Lijphart, 2018).

According to International IDEA (2023), the reform must also take into account the system costs of repeated elections and the complicated administration, particularly in the federal systems where the election cycles increase the administrative pressures. Accordingly, there is a democratic and fiscal justification of simplification (IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024).

Strengthening Independence and Capacity of the Election Commission

The other priority is enhancing the institutional independence and enforcement power of Election Commission of Nepal (ECN). According to the research on the subject of egalitarianism, election management institutions should be autonomous, staffed professionally, adequately financed, and mandated by the law to impose compliance especially on the conduct of parties and the funding of campaigns (Norris, 2017; Birch, 2015). Being constitutionally autonomous, the performance of the ECN in Nepal is limited to practical capacity and political insulation (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024).

Key reform options include:

- **Enhancing enforcement authority:** clearer legal mandates and stronger sanctions for violations of campaign and party regulations (IFES, 2022; Norris, 2017).
- **Strengthening institutional resources and professionalization:** training, staffing, and technical systems for monitoring, auditing, and dispute resolution (IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024).
- **Financial autonomy:** ensuring predictable budgeting and timely resource release to reduce political dependence and logistical constraints (IDEA, 2023; Norris, 2017).

In Nepal's federal context, ECN capacity must also expand for multilevel coordination—standardizing procedures, ensuring consistent oversight, and managing election timing efficiently (Acharya, 2021; IDEA, 2023).

Political Party and Campaign Finance Reform

Internal Democracy and Transparency in Candidate Selection

The electoral problems of Nepal are also related to party politics. Evidence on comparative party politics demonstrates that in highly centralized and domineering leadership party systems, party members, particularly closed-list PR, can make

candidate selection non-transparent, exclusionary, and prone to elite capture (Katz and Mair, 2018; Scarrow, 2015). A country-specific evidence shows that the PR mechanisms have increased the descriptive inclusion, yet the party leadership has held a strong hold on the list formation, which substantively empowers the marginalized representatives (Hachhethu, 2018; Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019).

Reform priorities should therefore include:

- **Mandating transparent PR list procedures** (published criteria, internal elections or consultative processes, independent party-level review committees) (Hachhethu, 2018; Norris, 2017).
- **Strengthening compliance with the Political Parties Act** by enforcing internal democracy provisions and requiring documented selection processes (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017; Nepal Law Commission, 2023).
- **Promoting merit inclusion balance:** ensuring that inclusion quotas do not become symbolic placements but translate into meaningful legislative roles (Tamang, 2019; Lawoti, 2020).

Such reforms are crucial because mixed systems rely heavily on party behavior; without party democracy, the PR portion can reinforce elite dominance rather than broaden political empowerment (Katz & Mair, 2018; Hachhethu, 2018).

Regulation of Campaign Financing

Reform in campaign finance is also necessary to even out competition in politics and guard integrity of elections. Transparency International Nepal (2023) claims that a low-quality campaign finance oversight is one of the significant weaknesses, which is connected to vote buying, clientelism, and the inappropriate impact of wealth in elections. The same situation applies to electoral integrity scholarship, which highlights the fact that unchecked money subverts democratic decision-making and the legitimacy of the choice (Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017).

Policy options include:

- **Mandatory disclosure and auditing** of party and candidate expenditures with real-time reporting during campaigns (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; IFES, 2022).

- **Spending caps and enforcement:** strengthening legal sanctions and ECN monitoring capacity to ensure limits are meaningful (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; Norris, 2017).

- **Public funding or subsidy reforms** tied to transparency and inclusion performance, which can reduce reliance on illicit financing while incentivizing compliance (IDEA, 2023; Norris, 2017).

Because Nepal's electoral cycles are frequent under federalism, campaign finance regulation is especially important to prevent persistent monetization of politics and recurring integrity risks (Acharya, 2021; IDEA, 2023).

Enhancing Inclusion and Electoral Integrity

Moving from Symbolic to Substantive Inclusion

The inclusion system in Nepal is constitutionally ambitious, and PR quota has enhanced descriptive representation (Government of Nepal, 2015; Tamang, 2019; IDEA, 2022). However, when the marginalized representatives are not given actual empowerment to make decisions or set the policy agendas of the parties, the results of inclusion are usually seen as symbolic (Lawoti, 2020; Hachhethu, 2018). Thus, reform should cease to make sure that there is a presence to make sure there is power and participation.

Options to strengthen substantive inclusion include:

- **Institutionalizing leadership opportunities** for women and marginalized representatives within parliamentary committees, party structures, and executive roles (Tamang, 2019; Lawoti, 2020).

- **Capacity-building and support mechanisms** for PR-elected members, enabling effective legislative participation and constituency engagement (IDEA, 2023; Norris, 2017).

- **Transparent inclusion compliance:** publishing detailed inclusion reports and party list justifications to improve accountability (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; IDEA, 2023).

Substantive inclusion strengthens legitimacy in post-conflict societies by demonstrating that democratic institutions deliver meaningful political equality rather than procedural compliance (Reilly, 2016; Upreti & KC, 2018).

Strengthening Electoral Integrity Mechanisms

Democratic legitimacy and popular trust are based upon electoral integrity. According to Norris (2017), integrity should be upheld at all stages of the electoral process: registration, the course, voting, counting, and dispute resolution. In Nepal, the issues of integrity are associated with the lack of monitoring, the irregularity of enforcement, and corruption risks (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; IFES, 2022).

Priority reforms include:

- **Stronger monitoring and enforcement** of codes of conduct for parties and candidates (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024; IFES, 2022).
- **Improved dispute resolution** mechanisms to ensure timely, impartial adjudication of electoral complaints (Norris, 2017; Birch, 2015).
- **Technology with transparency safeguards:** expanding secure voter rolls, standardized result reporting, and public access to election data while ensuring cybersecurity and accountability (IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024).

The perceptions of fairness are very delicate to the population trust, and minimal anomalies can weaken the legitimacy in case citizens think that violations are not punished (Norris, 2015; Birch, 2015). Therefore, integrity reforms are not technical supplements, but fundamental democratic needs.

In general, the electoral reform agenda in Nepal ought to be seen as a wholesome governance

reform. The priorities of simplifying the electoral design, enhancing ECN independence and capacity, transforming party democracy and campaign finance, and transitioning to the substantive mechanisms of inclusion and robust integrity are reinforcing. Such reforms do not contradict the evidence or recommendations highlighted by the international institutions of democracy and integrity research (IDEA, 2023; Norris, 2017; Transparency International Nepal, 2023) but are in line with constitutional commitments to inclusive federal democracy of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015).

Way Forward: A Reform Roadmap

An effective reform agenda of Nepal must be in phases. Since the electoral results are not only determined by the rules but also institutions, parties, and political norms, the electoral reforms have to include the administrative fix, legal reinforcement, and behavioral change over the time period (Norris, 2017; IDEA, 2023). The following roadmap suggests short-, medium-, and long-term priorities that can be achieved in the federation of Nepal and tend to meet the commitments to integrity and inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2015; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017-2024; Transparency International Nepal, 2023).

Short-Term: Administrative and Legal Reforms (0–2 years)

Goal: Improve election credibility and operational effectiveness quickly before the next election cycle.

1. Strengthen enforcement of existing rules

- Tighten implementation of codes of conduct, campaign restrictions, and reporting requirements.
- Increase the certainty of sanctions for violations (e.g., fines, disqualification procedures where legally applicable). (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; IFES, 2022; Norris, 2017)

2. Immediate campaign finance monitoring upgrades

- Standardize expenditure reporting templates and deadlines for parties/candidates.
- Launch rapid audit and verification mechanisms (risk-based audits, spot checks).
- Publish compliance summaries to improve transparency. (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; IDEA, 2023; Birch, 2015)

3. Operational simplification and voter education

- Simplify ballots and voting instructions; strengthen voter education using clear, multilingual, and locally relevant materials.
- Clarify roles of FPTP vs. PR-elected representatives to reduce accountability confusion. (IDEA, 2022; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; Powell, 2016)

4. Improve election dispute resolution efficiency

- Establish fast-track procedural timelines and standardized complaint-handling protocols.
- Strengthen evidence standards and transparency of decisions (publicly accessible summaries). (Norris, 2017; Birch, 2015; IFES, 2022)

5. Targeted legal updates (not full redesign yet)

- Amend specific gaps identified in election laws and regulations—especially on disclosure, sanctions, and enforcement authority—without destabilizing the entire system. (Nepal Law Commission, 2023; IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017)

Medium-Term: Party System and Governance Reforms (2–5 years)

Goal: Address systemic causes of instability and elite capture by improving party governance and accountability.

1. Institutionalize internal party democracy

- Require transparent rules for PR list formulation, candidate selection, and leadership elections.
- Audit internal compliance with party governance provisions and publish key indicators. (Hachhethu, 2018; Katz & Mair, 2018; Scarrow, 2015; Norris, 2017)

2. Reform PR list accountability

- Introduce clearer, enforceable criteria for inclusion and merit-based selection.
- Reduce discretionary dominance of party leadership through internal review bodies or mandatory consultation procedures. (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019; IDEA, 2023)

3. Strengthen campaign finance regulation (structural reforms)

- Create stronger reporting systems, independent audit capacity, and deterrent sanctions.
- Consider transparent public funding models tied to compliance, inclusion performance, and audited accounts. (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; IDEA, 2023; Norris, 2017)

4. Promote coalition governance standards

- Encourage formal coalition agreements with published policy priorities, timelines, and accountability mechanisms.
- Improve parliamentary oversight and committee performance to stabilize governance regardless of coalition change. (Baral, 2022; Lijphart, 2018)

5. Federal coordination for election cycles and administration

- Improve coordination frameworks among federal–provincial–local bodies for budgeting, logistics, and staffing to reduce duplication and costs. (Acharya, 2021; IDEA, 2023; Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024)

Long-Term: Democratic Consolidation Strategies (5–10 years)

Goal: Build stable democratic norms, strengthen institutions, and ensure inclusion becomes substantive rather than symbolic.

1. Build a culture of electoral integrity

- Normalize compliance through civic education, party training, and sustained enforcement.
- Promote ethical leadership norms and intolerance of vote buying and misuse of public resources. (Norris, 2015; Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017)

2. Substantive inclusion and leadership pipelines

- Move beyond descriptive representation by strengthening leadership opportunities and policy influence for women and marginalized groups.
- Invest in long-term political leadership development and mentorship programs. (Tamang, 2019; Lawoti, 2020; IDEA, 2023)

3. Institutional strengthening across the electoral cycle

- Professionalize election management further (data systems, monitoring capacity, dispute resolution competence).
- Ensure sustained independence and predictable funding of the ECN. (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017–2024; Norris, 2017; IDEA, 2023)

4. Evidence-based evaluation and periodic reform review

- Establish a permanent electoral reform commission or review mechanism that evaluates each election cycle using credible indicators (cost, fairness, inclusion outcomes, trust).
- Use survey evidence to track citizen confidence and political attitudes over time. (Asia Foundation, 2023; Norris, 2015; IDEA, 2023)

5. Align electoral governance with federal democratic maturity

- As federal institutions mature, revisit deeper structural reforms only after stable party governance and integrity safeguards are in place.
- Ensure reforms strengthen representation and accountability without triggering excessive fragmentation. (Acharya, 2021; Gerring et al., 2016; Lijphart, 2018)

Table 1. Democratic Reform Roadmap Across Short, Medium, and Long Term Horizons

Reform Area	Key Actions	Responsible Institution	Time line	Expected Outcome
Enforcement and Transparency	Strengthen law enforcement. Publish decisions and budgets. Ensure rule compliance.	Election Commission. Judiciary. Anti corruption bodies.	Short term	Public trust restored. Governance credibility improved.
Operational Governance	Standardize procedures. Monitor implementation. Penalize non compliance.	Line ministries. Oversight agencies.	Short term	Efficient and predictable governance.
Political Parties	Reform internal democracy. Enforce leadership accountability. Regulate candidate selection.	Political parties. Election Commission.	Medium term	Representative and program based parties.
Political Finance	Enforce spending limits. Audit party finances. Disclose donors.	Election Commission. Auditor General.	Medium term	Reduced corruption. Fair political competition.

Coalition Governance	Formal coalition agreements. Clear policy priorities. Conflict resolution rules.	Parliament. Prime Minister Office.	Medium term	Stable governments. Policy continuity.
Democratic Norms	Civic education. Media freedom protection. Respect dissent.	Education sector. Media councils. Civil society.	Long term	Strengthened democratic culture.
Substantive Inclusion	Increase participation of women and marginalized groups. Inclusive policy design.	Parliament. Local governments.	Long term	Broader representation. Social legitimacy.
Institutional Maturity	Strengthen checks and balances. Build professional bureaucracy.	Constitutional bodies. Civil service.	Long term	Resilient and accountable institutions.

Conclusion

The article has discussed the electoral system of Nepal in an analytical perspective which merges the theoretical framework of electoral system, post conflict democratization, and federal governance. As it is shown in the analysis, a mixed electoral system where Nepal incorporates the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and the Proportional Representation (PR) is a constitutional attempt to balance the conflicting democratic goals, including representation, inclusion, accountability, and political stability (Government of Nepal, 2015; Lijphart, 2018; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). Although the system has recorded significant gains in expanding descriptive representation particularly among women and historically disadvantaged groups, its democratic effectiveness has been limited by its structural, institutional, and governance factors, which have remained a thorn in its flesh.

Summary of Key Findings

First, the research establishes that mixed design of the elections in Nepal has increased the scope of the political inclusion and the social structure of elected institutions than during the pre-conflict era. Constitutional quotas have empowered the historically marginalized groups to have their presence in formal political institutions more than ever before, thanks to the PR aspect (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019; IDEA, 2022). Yet, they are not evenly spread and eventually tend to be descriptive rather than substantive representation since the power of making decisions is still strictly in the hands of the party leaderships (Hachhethu, 2018; Katz and Mair, 2018).

Second, it can be seen that the electoral system has failed to provide a prolonged political

stability. The weaknesses in party system fragmentation, and the low quality of coalition government have led to the frequent change of the government and inconsistency of the policies, which reduces the level of trust in the democratic institutions (Baral, 2022; Gerring et al., 2016). Centralized party control, factionalism and small internal party democracy have undermined the compromise between proportionality and governability that is intended in the mixed system.

Third, the research has noted that there are gross weaknesses in electoral integrity and accountability. The continued failure to regulate campaign finance, enforce it, and provide the means to control it have left elections vulnerable to corrupt practices and elite interference (Transparency International Nepal, 2023; Birch, 2015; Norris, 2017). Together with the lack of accountability due to PR lists, these issues of integrity have led to the deterioration of trust in the population in spite of quite high turnout on the electorate (Asia Foundation, 2023; Norris, 2015).

Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nepal

The results have significant implications to the democratic consolidation of Nepal. Electoral systems are not some isolated technical tools but establishments that predetermine the working of democracy in real life (Powell, 2016; Lijphart, 2018). Democratic consolidation in the specific situation of federal and post-conflict Nepal hinges on the ability of elections to provide legitimacy and performance that is, inclusive representation and effective and accountable governance (Acharya, 2021; Reilly, 2016).

The discussion implies that the democratic consolidation process in Nepal will be weak

unless electoral reform is undertaken as one of the their governance reform agenda. The restoration of trust and a stabilization process of democratic institutions is based on strengthening the autonomy and capacity of the Election Commission, a mechanism of institutionalizing internal party democracy, regulating the financial aspect of campaigns, and shifting to substantive inclusion (Norris, 2017; IDEA, 2023; Transparency International Nepal, 2023). The absence of such reforms would make the electoral system perpetuate elite control and political cynicism, which would defeat the very inclusionary objectives that informed its implementation (Lawoti, 2020; Tamang, 2019).

In addition, the case of Nepal highlights the significance of harmonizing electoral governance to federal forms. The proper coordination between federal, provincial, and local governments is the key to minimizing the administrative overhead, specifying accountability, and promoting the coherence of policies in a multilevel democracy (Acharya, 2021; Gerring et al., 2016).

Directions for Future Research and Policy Engagement

The future challenges of the research would be to evolve beyond descriptive evaluation of electoral results to causal evaluation of electoral design, party actions, and governmental performance in Nepal. Comparative research examining the workings of mixed electoral system in other post-conflict and federal democracies may provide better understanding of possible reforms that would be appropriate in the context of Nepal (Reilly, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2016). Survey-based longitudinal research based on electoral indicators and changes in public trust and participation and democratic attitudes would also be desirable to monitor the changes in these variables (Norris, 2015; Asia Foundation, 2023).

At the policy level, there is the need to have a long term interaction between the legislators, election management agencies, political parties, civil society and the international community in order to translate the principles of reforms into practice. Evidence-based policymaking dialogues, open assessment of every election

cycle, and open consultation procedures could be used to make sure that reforms consolidate other than subverting the Nepal democratic system (IDEA, 2023; IFES, 2022). Finally, the effectiveness of the Nepal electoral system and the general process of democratic consolidation will require the institutional design, as well as the stronger devotion of the political players to the principles of democracy, accountability, and inclusive governance.

Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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