# A Study on Voters' Behaviour & Voting

निर्वाचन पर्यवेक्षण समिति नेपाल
Election Observation Committee Nepal

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# Acknowledgment

After a new political and structural set-up, Nepal held a general election in 2017 for the three tiers of governance. After completion of a full cycle of their tenure, second general election including for the local level is being held in the year 2022. Since the level of political awareness of the people is rising commensurate with their socio-political and economic standing, a reflection in the voters' behavior are being noted, which has to be complemented and confirmed with the empirical findings. A structured research study for this purpose, with a grant from the Open Society Foundation, was conducted in 40 electoral constituencies for which 40 Research Associates and Assistants were deputed for interviews and collect data from the respondents, whose lists are attached with it, deserve thanks for their dedication and hard work. It is their hard work that made it possible to come up with such an excellent outcome of the study.

It is the donor, which first accepted our idea for research and provided its consent with a money grant to conduct this study. In our opinion, this is the first of its kind conducting an empirical study on voters' behavior and mapping their impulses that set their electoral choice and voting pattern. We are indebted to the Open Society not only for the financial grant assistance but also as a partner interested to work together in the field of democracy in general and electoral system and governance in particular.

# Research Team

- **Mr. Rajaram Bartaula**
  *Executive Member, EOC Nepal, Lead Researcher*

- **Mr. Ujwal Adhikari**
  *Director, EOC Nepal, Coordinator and Senior Researcher*

- **Mr. Prabhat Baniya**
  *Data Analyst*

- **Ms. Reewa Thapa**
  *Research Associate*

- **Ms. Nozomi Khatiwada**
  *Research Associate*

- **Ms. Aditi Khanal**
  *Research Associate*

- **Ms. Laxmi Khadka**
  *Research Associate*

**A Study on Voters' Behaviour And Voting**

# Executive Summary

It has become a regular phenomenon on anticipating with excitement for the electoral result in favor before the poll and blame to voters for the unexpected outcome after the poll for the behavior of the voters. There are certain factors, which play a pivotal role in guiding voters' behaviors for impulsive voting patterns in a certain given circumstance. The outcome of the electoral result is the rational decision of the people as their mandate to govern for a tenure fixed by the constitution.

There are some attempts for empirical research in the field by some academic and research oritented public institutions on measuring voters' impulse and behavior that holds their nerves while choosing candidates and political party among many with their rational thoughts as a mandate for governance. Therefore, understanding voters' behavior in a particular condition and environment, which is determined by several tangible and intangible variables is a complicated task since mapping the cognitive aspect of any individual based on social exchange or rationale choice is a complex process as it is correlated with psychology and socio-economic conditions of public life.

People vote because people are aligned towards principle, ideology, favor and ethnic affiliation, social group, ideology, money material gifts as well as religion formed major influencing factors during voting.

During the study, an increased level of voter consciousness, comparatively from the past experience with regard to civic

and political rights and duties when it comes to exercising their adult franchise, was found glaringly. The result is that many respondents wanted overseas migrants given chance to vote as their fundamental right. It was also found that people consider voting on a gender perspective, ethnicity, and cultural aspects as their genuine concern. Despite this, voter are also forced to vote under the circumstances of threat, intimidation and coercion. As in other emerging democracies of the third world countries, Nepal is not an exception to the overbearing influence of money power. Therefore, a correlation between these above mentioned factors are visibly present in the electoral behavior of the voters.

In this background, educating voters on their civic rights and duties is the primary function of the state in order to dissuade malpractice from all the stakeholders and maintain electoral integrity with utmost sincerity.

# A Study on Voters' Behaviour and Its Impact onElectoral Outcome

1. **Introduction**:

There have been research conducted on voters' behavior not only in new democracies but also in matured democracies as well since it is a complex phenomenon to understand voters' behavior in a particular condition and environment, which is determined by several tangible and intangible variables. Understanding individual behavior is a complicated process since mapping the cognitive aspect of any individual based on social exchange or rational choice is a compex task as it is correlated with the psychology and socio-economic conditions of public life. Therefore, understanding voters' behavior is a combination of attitudinal, socio-economic and psychological factors that cast influences on voting behavior. The pertinent question is what factors that motivate and determines our choices for the rational decision? Does anywhere the value system guide for the individual decision or personal gain and loss play a significant role in making particular decisions has to be ascertained through the empirical study with regards to electoral behavior of voters.

Why do people vote? It is a serious proposition to take into account and understand human behavior from voting perspective. Despite socio-economic deprivation and lack of political education, in a study in African emerging democracies in general and Zambia in particular, the research data revealed that ethnic affiliation, social group,

ideology, money material gifts and religion formed major influencing factors during voting. (J, 2002) Africans were more concerned about pocketbook issues such as their incomes and other indicators of economic well-being such as employment, living standards, and provision of public goods.(Simon) A significant factor to influence is the socio-economic deprivation of the majority of the populace. (Olanrewaju Emmanuel Ajiboye) In some countries, it was found that voting behavior was predominantly influenced by some form of identity factors such as ethnicity, family lineage and religion.(Ferree 2004, & 2008)

While considering all the relevant factors that may have influenced the outcome of the elections, one of the significant factors is social sites, media outlets including print and digital platforms, radio broadcasting, news, soap opera, debates, and sponsored and non-sponsored advertisements, dissemination of information for reaching out to the voters with their political agenda and manifestos. An empirical study conducted on Political advertisement and Voting Behaviour in a general election of 2013 in Pakistan by Noshima Saleen, Mian Ahmed, and T Tariq reached the conclusion with the quantitative findings that ascertain that the advertisement would not hold a significant impact on the voters be that of Ambivalent and non-ambivalent. However political advertising is prevalent in most of the countries including the United States for a long and a lot of money is being spent during electoral campaigns on political advertisement, which ascertain its significance. (GR, 1987) It is also increasing two folds annually believing that it would enable the voters to choose their electoral symbol. (MM, 2007)

In general, voting patterns are seriously impacted by voting behavior induced by short-term and long-term political environments with accumulated pressure and impulses as

well as instantly developed electoral environmental impulses. Age, gender along with emerging political campaign issues dictates voters' likes and dislikes. Some voters do not turn out in polling centers because of their hectic business schedule, while some may find electoral values meaningless and so uninterested to show off at the polling booths. And for low turnout, the information efficacy may also play the role in election news, publication, (JA, 2008) communication and level of civic knowledge of the people, etc. Similarly, the ability and difficulties to vote is also determining factor for voters' low turnout and exhibiting disinterest in the election.

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and race, social factors such as marital status, group solidarity, and characteristic of a particular election puts an enormous effect on voters' turnout. Regarding the age factor, in a study, it was revealed that an introduction of an electoral education in high school as an extracurricular activity impacted positively voting turnout, whereas voting in early adulthood without the involvement of adulthood caused lower voter turnout among youth(A, 2010). It is called a Social Contagion, where social interactions among young voters and social limitations influences uncommitted voter choices. (MA, 2017). From closer look and observation of the election of Nepal held since 2048, a tendency of sticking with the ideological connection and preferences is also noticed, however, there is no such empirical study, which is more like a status quo tendency prevails Nepali voters.

The process of electing officials into the various political offices begins with the announcement of the election date by the Government or in some instances election management body. Once the election date is announced, the legitimate procedures begins along with creating the electoral environment. Whereas the voter registration process is a continuous process, the election management body gives

due attention to updating the list of legitimate voters and issuing identity cards so that nobody is deprived of voting rights.

## 1. Overview of local election:

According to Election Commission, one hundred forty-one thousand 468 candidates filed their nominations for various posts for the local level election held on May 13, 2022. According to the available data, three thousand 318 candidacies were for the posts of the mayor of the municipalities, sub-metropolises, and metropolises, and 2,036 were for deputy mayors while 3,306 were for chairs of rural municipalities and 2,343 are for vice-chairs. Similarly, 33 thousand 111 filed their nominations for the post of ward chair. There were 24 thousand 283 candidacies for women members, 21 thousand 979 for Dalit women members, and 51 thousand 92 candidacies for the members.

The election took place at 753 local levels on May 13 for 35 thousand 221 posts including the mayor, deputy-mayor, chairman and vice-chairman, six thousand 743 ward chairpersons, the same number of women members and Dalit women members and 13 thousand 483 members.

A total of 17,733,723 voters participated in this democratic exercise to elect 35,221 representatives for six metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities and 460 rural municipalities from among 145,011 candidates on the day.

According to the Election Commission, the voters' turnout was 64 percent in the recently held local election, 2022, which is lesser than the previous election of 2017. In 2017, it was 72.5 percent.

What made the voters' mind disenchanted towards the election and causes the low turnout comparatively with

the 2017 elections is a concern to take into consideration. Many blame it for the political party's self-centred inward-looking attitude and failure to address the genuine concern of the people, inability to render service, and redress their grievances as well as egotism of the leaders and proliferating corruption up to the grass-root level as the main cause. The last five years have been mired in political infighting, promoting favoritism, nepotism and corruption.

One of the reasons for low turnout may be the confusing patchwork of alliance politics which might have discouraged people from voting in this election. However, there are some fundamentals that causes and affects electoral dynamism, which need to take into consideration with a wider perspective for guaranteeing electoral sanctity and credibility.

## 2. Methodology:

In order to carry out a study, an empirical means of study with qualitative and quantitative methods were applied along with field observation, and the use of secondary data from the election management body and media coverage.



Respondents Provincewise (in Percentage)
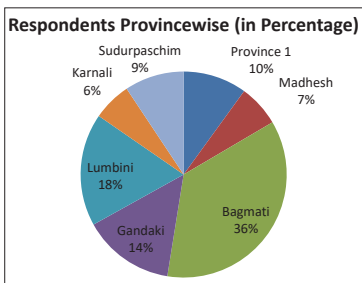
For the study, 40 long-term observers were deputed in 40 districts of seven provinces and 409 short term-observers in 74 districts. The long-term election observers were trained to fill questionnaires designed for this purpose by a team of experts, reviewed by a senior expert and accepted by the organization. They were asked to get in touch with voters' responses after they exit from voting. A population size of 611 respondents was taken from 40 districts' selected polling stations.

The enumerators or the observers were trained so that the margin of error could be minimised to a nominal.

The extracted data with first-hand observation and response of the respondents is in conformity with the required standard for any research outcome. The data analysis and extracted results there from would, in our opinion, represent the voting behavior, and, pattern in the local election in 2022.

## 3. Analysis of data:

### *Voters' education*:Invalid Votes more in Cities than in Rural Municipalities

In the local level election held on 13 May 2022, according to the preliminary data shared by the Election Commission, the rate of invalid is incomprehensibly high. And most astonishingly that the rate of invalid votes is high in cities than the rural municipalities, where city dwellers' literacy rate is thought to be higher than that of rural people.

| Metropolitan City | Position | Invalid | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Biratnagar | Mayor | 21,358 | 23.89 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 34,167 | 38.21 |
| Birjung | Mayor | 20,191 | 21.54 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 43,733 | 46.65 |
| Kathmandu | Mayor | 31,056 | 16.26 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 61,987 | 32.47 |
| Bharatpur | Mayor | 19,991 | 15.66 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 42,782 | 33.51 |
| Pokhara | Mayor | 20,781 | 14.52 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 19,672 | 13.74 |
| Lalitpur | Mayor | 10,390 | 12.08 |
| | Deputy Mayor | 25,143 | 29.24 |

(*Source: Based on data shared by Election Commission, Kantipur Tuesday, June 21, 2022*)

On average Rural Municipalities 14.31, Municipalities 15.05, Sub-metropolitan cities 20.15 and Metropolitan cities 24.12 percent of votes were invalid.

The reasons for having such a high percentage of invalid votes are attributed to the following points:

Lack of voter education, long rows of the ballot paper, 7 candidates were to choose from a single ballot, and selection of two candidates from the last column.

According to preliminary data from Election Commission, 11.33 percent of the Mayor, 9.69 percent of the Chairperson, 18.22 percent of the Deputy Mayor, and 14.07 percent of the Vice-Chairperson's Votes were invalid. 8.25 percent of Ward Chairman, 12.80 percent of Women member, 14.64 of Dalit women, and 30.52 percent of Member's Votes were recorded invalid
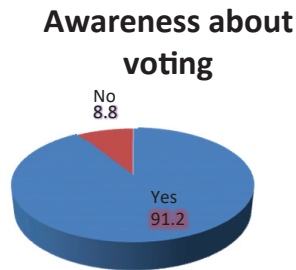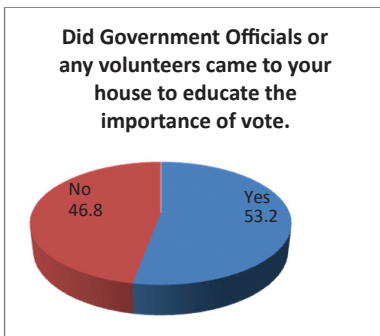


Given the pattern of voting experience of the last election, which was observed a significant percentage of invalid votes due to lack of proper and appropriate voters' education, this time around it would likely continue affecting the voters' behavior and voting pattern, since one of influencing factors would be voters education, level of consciousness of the voters and their grasping of the practical method.

Therefore the respondents were asked whether, during the electoral campaign, government personnel or social workers, volunteers, or political activists came to their house to educate on civic education, the electoral system and voting methods. 46.8 percent of respondents said that nobody came to their home to teach them voting techniques, despite the political activists, which means 53.2 percent of the household were covered for voters' education which is far below the necessity. The political cadres of the party taught voters only to stamp on their particular symbol. 63 percent of respondents said that civic society were also seen not interested to visit voters and educate on voting methods. However, despite such lapses, 91.2 percent of respondents said they were aware of the voting process and knows the voting techniques. Election management body, government and non-government organizations either did not conduct voters' education programs this time around.

**Proper impact of Voter's education conducted by the Government**

Yes
32%

No
68%
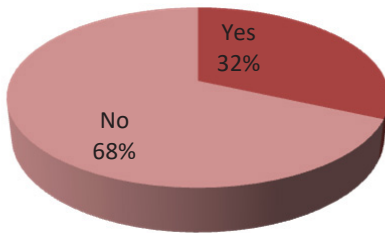
Finally, the indifference of the election management body was noticed by the respondents and voters with regard to the necessity of imparting training or educating voters on voti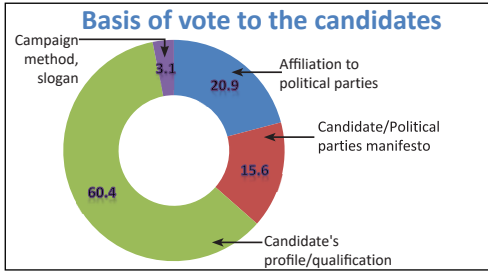ng methods and techniques. 68.3 percent of respondents were of the view that the efforts of the election management body was inadequate or virtually nonexistent either. Utter negligence on the part of the election management body, for which many voters blame the election management body for becoming a higher percentage of votes invalid.

## Other Influencing factors:

Along with the voters' education, other factors like ***civic responsibility, to see the victory of one's close connection and personal affinity, commitment and commitments to the political party, social awareness activities and programs, and publicity methods*** were taken into consideration that they would create influence on the voters' voting behavior. The respondents were asked which one of the above influenced them the most. 45.7 percent of respondents were of the opinion that they were influenced by civic responsibility followed by 20.9 percent, who cast their ballot because of their attachment to the political party. A considerable size of 19.6 percent, marginally less than the affiliation with the political party, cast their ballot to make their own relative or near one win the election.
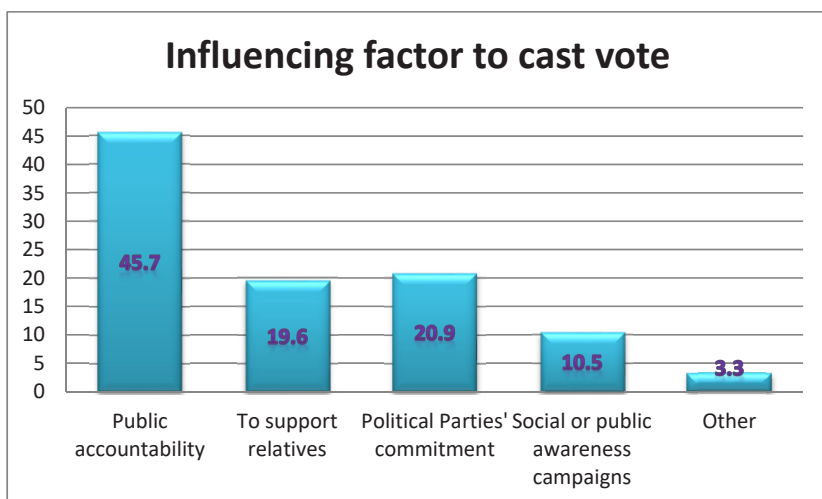


The study was also focused on mapping the attitude or behavior of the voters on alluring factors that impress the voters most towards a particular party and candidate; was it the

**Basis of vote to the candidates**

- Campaign method, slogan — 3.1
- Affiliation to political parties — 20.9
- Candidate/Political parties manifesto — 15.6
- Candidate's profile/qualification — 60.4

*affiliation with the Political Party, its political manifestos, candidates' personality/merit or publicity stunts* that strongly appeal the voters 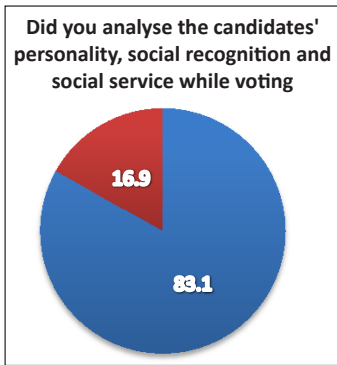prior to voting and pulled out to polling stations with selection priority? The responses were amazingly thoughtful with a majority of 60.4 percent giving priority to candidates' personality and merit, which is followed by political affiliation or ideological affection. Even less than a quarter percentage or 15.6 percent of voters were not impressed by the political manifestos and candidates' commitment papers to make their minds for candidate selection prior to voting. Publicity stunts and attractive methods were least effective to allure the voters with a nominal percentage of response.

During the study, our surveyors asked questions with the respondents *whether they read the manifestos of the political parties and the commitment paper of the contesting candidates*.



**Did you study manifesto of political parties and candidates**

- Yes
- No
- 44%
- 56%
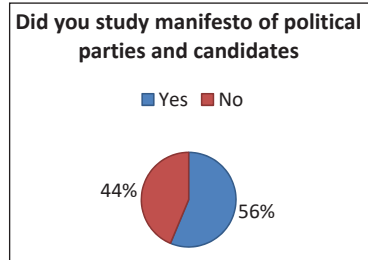
The respondents were almost equally divided, 56 percent of them read the commitment paper of the candidates and 44 percent did not attempt to read them. It was a clear indication that the majority of the voters take voting decisions using their conscious minds being aware of the political consequences.

**Social Prestige and Contribution:** While voting, along with other traits, the voters emphasize the candidates'

**Did you analyse the candidates' personality, social recognition and social service while voting**

16.9

83.1

social recognition, personality and his/her social contribution as one of the required qualifications for political representation. Responding to the questions, 83.1 percent of respondents carefully watched and evaluate candidates' social prestige and their contribution to the social cause and social upliftment.

**Does personal contact affects voting behavior?** However, the colourful procession and sloganeering do not expressively impress the voters for their voting decision, personal contact between the candidates and voters make differences that leave a positive impression on the voters towards a candidate, which may have

**Candidates and political parties visited your home asking for vote**

No
10.3

Yes
89.7
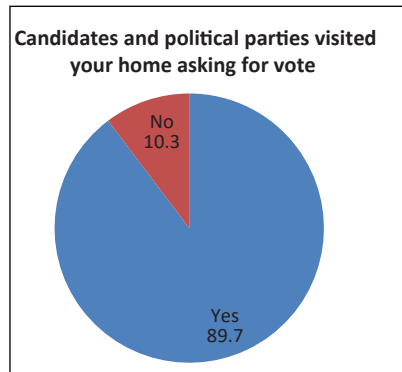
an impact on the voting behavior of the voters since almost all the parties conducted a door-to-door campaign and 89.7 percentage of candidate reached voters' door asking for their votes, while rest 10 percent did not bother to move around asking for votes.

**Evaluation of past performance:**

In this study, the respondents were seen as giving priority to the past performances of the candidate while deciding to vote for a particular candidate. 81.5 percent of respondents took voting decisions based on performance evaluation
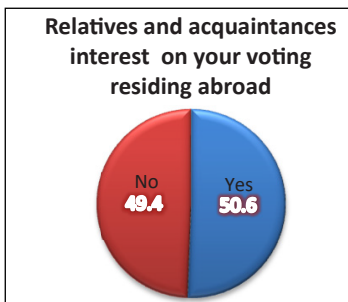
**Candidates and parties evaluation based on previous perfomance**

No 18 5 .

Yes 81.5
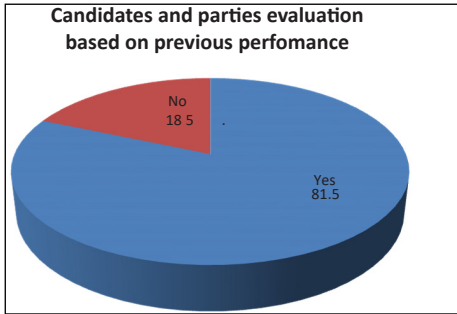
of the candidates and 18.5 voted randomly as they were impressed by some other alluring or motivating factors.

**Head of the family**: During the study, it was found that the majority of voting practices took under the influence or instruction of the head of the family or breadwinner. Although this is an ultimate truth and an unavoidable factor of our society to rule over other fundamental principles, there may be several concealed socio-cultural or economic factors behind such a practice. 65.8 percent of respondents agreed that there exists the influence of the head of the family for voting a particular party or candidate.

**Head of family's influence while casting vote**

No 34.2

Yes 65.8
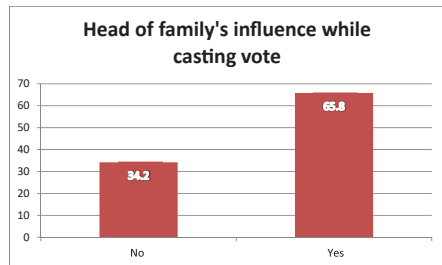
**Social acquaintances, relatives, and friends living abroad**: The impact on voting behavior causes and alters according to the communication, contact and social networking within the emerging political circumstances and environment. Realizing the ground reality and current trend of migration to foreign country for different purposes, a significant proportion of voters cast their interest in domestic political affairs including in the

**Relatives and acquaintances interest on your voting residing abroad**

No 49.4

Yes 50.6

election. In view of this, the question was asked whether their relatives, friends, or acquaintances living abroad have expressed their loyalty or interest. Nepali living abroad are not indifferent to the unfolding political events at home, the response was 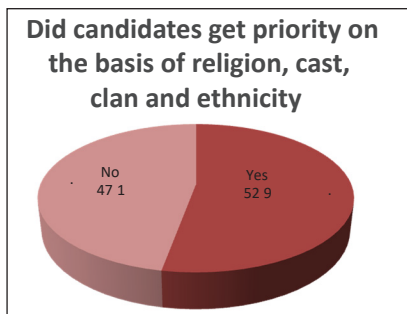almost equal with a negligent fraction of differences with the affirmative response of 50.6 percent, which could be interpreted as the existence of interest helping to form an opinion for voting.

Similarly, following the interest of the migrant Nepali, a question was also placed to the respondents whether they also urge their parents or family members categorically to support a particular political party or candidate by voting. 62.4 percent

**Did Relatves and acquaintances residing abroad requested to vote partcular candidate or partes**

No
37.6

Yes
62.4
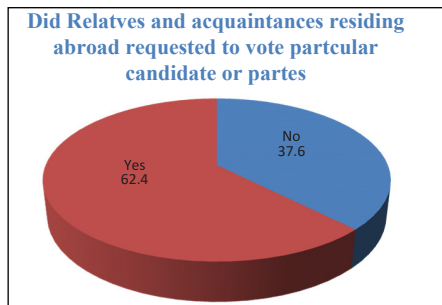
of the migrant Nepali living abroad, in any form or other, urged their relatives, friends and acquaintances to vote for a particular candidate and party. This was a significant departure from domestic politics extending its wings overseas with the political urge and support base thereby the party's extended attention.

## Cast and Creed factor:

**Did candidates get priority on the basis of religion, cast, clan and ethnicity**

No
47 1

Yes
52 9

Given the demographic heterogeneity of Nepal, the study was intended to learn whether there exists any biasness or alienation towards communal sensitivity, religious affinity, cultural or ethnicity-based cast and clan

leaning and support while selecting a particular candidate or party and making opinion for voting. As expected, the result was, with a minimum of variance 52.9 percent of respondents agreed that the cast, creed and communal harmony undeniably secured preferences and played an important role while casting their ballots.

## Influence of Social Organization:

**Influence of the social organization, social workers while voting.**

No 22%

Yes 78%
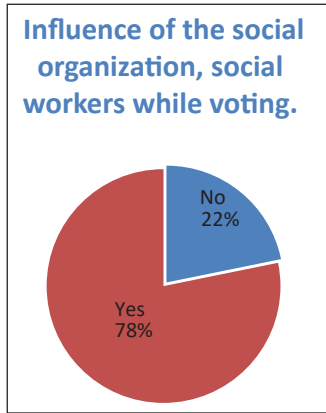
The majority of voters keep trust in the information and contents shared and communicated by the social and civic organizations and social activists, which also reflects during elections on forming opinions and views on certain political agendas and candidates. An absolute majority of 78 percent supported the idea that they were impressed and influenced by the words, statements and urges put forth by social activists, civic organizations and other social organizations alike.

## Gender perspective:

Voters are intent to look from a gender perspective and inclined towards taking decisions on their preferences while selecting the candidate. The respondents were of the opinion that the majority of voters were somehow influenced by gender issues. 78 percent of the respondents said that voters were influenced by a gender perspective.

**Did gender of candidates affects while vo ng**

No 22%

Yes 78%
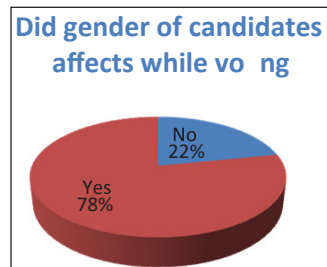
With this picture at hand, a linear correlation is seemingly intertwined between gender, the merit of the candidate and the family head. Demographically, marginally women voters are high and therefore it is looming large that any women candidate complemented with the family, merit and social recognition, would increase the probability of winning chance.

## Fear, Intimidation, Coercion and Greed factor:

In emerging democracies particularly in South Asia, the presence of threat, use of force, the offer of gainful support, and manipulation are common traits, which are prevalent everywhere, however on different scales and sizes. It is commonly known as



Did Fear, Intimidation, Coercion and Greed affects while voting

Yes 10%

No 90%
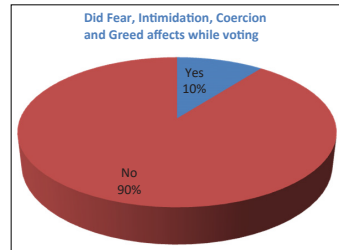
"**Highest Bidder and "Best Rigger**." However, the respondents have vehemently denied the nonexistence of such character with their response that there was not any threat factor to influence voting with an 90 percent margin. It is, in fact, an encouraging sign of democracy gradually moving towards maturity and gaining momentum in democratic exercise.

## Throwing party, feast and fancy:



Did Feast, party, get together affects while voting

Yes 16%

No 84%
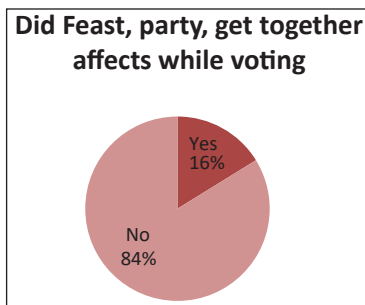
Alluring voters through throwing parties, offering lavish meals and festivities are also common characteristics of the electoral contest in Nepal, which was evident in the past as an inextricable part of the election campaign. How much of such extravagant and lavishness show off pays off while securing

the votes is simply an anticipation of the observers and candidates themselves that many believe that it works in their favor. However, only 16.2 percent contribute to securing votes through such practice, according to the respondents in their reply to a question to this effect.

### Money and Material support:

**Distribuon of money and material support for vote**
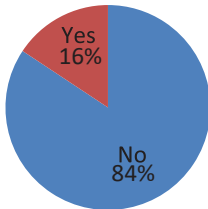
Three "M" s are popular saying in election, which is the acronym of Money, Material and synonymous Muscle synonym to extortion of vote through the application of immoral and illegal methods, which is unacceptable in any civilized society notwithstanding to the democratic governance. Candidate's wholehearted efforts for winning the election resort to any means of tactical moves going beyond the acceptable norms; distributing material support to the needy, money and providing a donation to local clubs and using goons for pressuring weak voters.

But contrary to the widespread conception of the three "M" s, the respondents responded with 84 percent that they did not notice any form of giving away of donations and material and financial support to the poor, marginalized and downtrodden people in order to secure their votes.

### Accessibility affects the turnout of voters:

During observation and direct contact with the voters, it was revealed that the accessibility of polling centers have direct connection with motivating voters with encouragement to visit polling centers and make voting decisions. Polling booths at the premises of the temple, narrow space, distance from the main centre, and rouge areas, all have

their physical and psychological disadvantages for the aged, working women, disabled, sick and alike. 5 percent of the respondents had the opinion that their polling centers were not stationed in publicly accessible areas. Thus hold the opinion that the accessibility of polling centers will carry an adverse impact on electoral participation.

**Is polling centre located in accesible and public area**

No 5%

Yes
95%
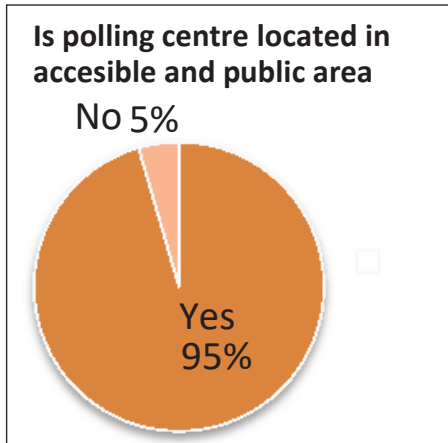
Despite several other factors, the accessibility to the polling centres is also another vital element to motivate voters to visit the polling centers and cast their ballot. For old, disabled and sick, hesitate to take the strenuous route to walk for voting. The accessibility would thus impact in overall turnout of the voters. 95 percent of respondents approached for answer out of 262 replied that the arrangements of polling booths were easily accessible and stationed in public places.

# General observation of Local Election of 2079 (2022AD)

**Continuation of patronization**:

The selection of candidates for party tickets did not go well this time without any criticism. This time around also the protectionism in selecting candidates were clearly visible and took precedence in important metropolitan cities causing the disenchanted members of the party to rebel and file candidacy as independent candidate. Nepotism became one of the favored criteria for selecting candidates which is followed by the loyalist. The capable party cadres got little attention and priority while handing over party tickets to contest elections. The process of distributing tickets was not systematic and transparent. The political parties in place of the pick-up system require to reform it with more responsibility on their local level party units to recommend the right candidate.

**Voters were tried to be lured:**

While approaching the local elections at the door, the migrant voters living in the cities were leaving in droves to their rural metropolitan cities or villages where their names were listed as voters willingly on their own and mostly using free transportation services arranged by the contesting candidates to use their franchise. Such activity should be

counted in two aspects; one genuinely being conscious of using their voting rights to choose their representatives, the other using the opportunities at the cost of the candidates, which would be counted as misuse of opportunity.

**Low turnout of voters at the polling centers to cast their ballot**:

According to the Election Commission, the turnout of the voters was 64 percent, which is lesser than in the previous election of 2017. In 2017, it was 72.5 percent, encouraging numbers from the perspective of exercising voting rights. What made the voters' minds disenchanted with the election and causes the low turnout comparatively with the 2017 elections is a concern to take into consideration.

Many blame it for the political party's self-centered inward-looking attitude and failure to address the genuine concern of the people, inability to render service, and redress their grievances as well as egotism of the leaders and proliferating corruption up to the grass-root level as the main cause. The last five years have been mired in political infighting, promoting favoritism, nepotism and corruption.

One of the reasons for low turnout may be the confusing patchwork of alliance politics which might have discouraged people from voting in this election.

**Disenchanted voters resort to voting for independent candidates:**

Fade up and disenchanted with the political infighting, squabbling between the leaders for their supremacy and glued with and hold in power, the common voters, most of the youths, are disenchanted with the established political parties for their slow and meagre performance to meet the expectation of the people. The inability to deliver the development dividend by the political parties help decline their image in the public's eyes

labeled as mere a dreamer without any concrete and promising competency. The voting trend in Kathmandu metropolitan city, Dhangadi Sub-metropolitan and Janakpur Sub-metropolitan cities were remarkable, which reflect the wind of the changed mind of the voters.

## Alliance politics impacts female candidacy in local level elections:

The share of women candidates was lower in this election than their share of victory previously in 2017. About 41 percent of women won election in 2017.

Though the Constitution of Nepal envisions proportional representation of women in all state bodies, the two alliances used a loophole in the Local Level Election Act-2017 to avoid fielding women for both the top posts in the metropolis. The Local Level Election Act-2017 has made it mandatory for each political party to field candidates for both the top positions to ensure that one of them is a woman. However, parties are free not to field women if they contest in only one of two executive positions—mayor/chair and deputy mayor/vice chair.

In three of the six metropolises, the ruling coalition has fielded male candidates for both positions. Similarly, in eight of the 11 sub-metropolis cities, the five-party alliance has fielded only male candidates for the two top positions. Not nominating a woman in both positions contradicts Article 38 (4) of the constitution which guarantees proportional representation of women in all state bodies.

## Lack of voter education leads to invalid votes:

Political parties and other stakeholders have not prioritized voter education. Leaders and activists just urged people to cast their votes in their election symbols but did not mention how the vote should be cast. The ballot paper was quite large containing innumerable election symbols. Anyone can get

confused about the right voting process. Neither the party activists nor the election officials have educated voters about the right way to cast vote.

An unexpected number of invalid votes were being reported during vote counting. The biggest metropolitan city Kathmandu has seen more than 36,000 votes invalid cast for deputy mayoral candidates. Similarly, in Tulsipur sub-metropolitan city, 9000 votes out of 40,000 counts are found invalid. In Biratnagar metropolitan city more than 40,000 votes were found invalid.

## Low Turnout of voters is indicative to change in voting trends:

The local level election held on 13 May 2022 has some indication of the voting trend which could be indicative of enhanced electoral conscience and consciousness towards the change in a larger political domain. Whereas this election is the second after the first held in 2017 under the federal democratic setup with constitutional devolution of power to each level of three tires of governance.

The turnout this year was 64 percent compared with 72.5 in the 2017 polls – a drop by 8.5 percent. Similarly, Kathmandu, where the most educated, professional, conscious and elite voters live, has shown a pathetic response with a turnout record of only 52 percent. A 52 percent turnout in Kathmandu, which has the highest number of voters (637,775) is not satisfactory with poor participation of voters.

It is, in this light, requires to be seriously taken into account by the political parties, election management body and other stakeholders including the political pundits whose thoughtful contribution would help in formulating policies to investigate and find out the reasons why a large number of people choose to abstain from voting?

## Changed Election Campaign Techniques:

The Election Commission, in view of containing and limiting the extravagance and non-essential expenditure and exposure of electoral campaign and canvassing classical methods, imposed restrictions with an order on the use of posters, pamphlets, banners, wall paintings, digital displays, colorful pictures during the election campaign by the political parties and contesting candidates, forced them for an alternative but much more influential means of campaign techniques and opted with the digital platform as one of the highly technical, sophisticated, modern and most powerful and effective means of communication to impress voters and call for electoral support. The changed technique is a transformation from the classical method of canvassing to the digital platform using social sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where the candidate post their statement, message, commitments, electoral manifestos as well as they post election songs and video clips as well.

## Seems candidates spent less on Campaign Expenditure, but hidden expenditure was unaccounted:

Since the Election Code of Conduct put limit and restricted on extravagant expenditure, the candidates were seen cautiously moved ahead the election campaign canvassing with cover-up and abstaining show off on expenditure, it is estimated that the campaign expenditure must have been decreased in comparison to the last election. The campaign costs could have come down as it was not possible to spend on hats, vests and other items. The candidates' election expenses were supposed to be decreased because of a shorter campaign time and a ban on printing clothes, distributing hats, vests and restricting rallies. But, realists believe that the hidden cost of the election campaign was unaccounted.

# Conclusion

Obviously, there has been an increased level of voters consciousness comparatively from the past experience with regard to civic and political rights and duties when it comes to exercising their adult franchise. To this end, certain characteristics, which were noticeable during the local level election of 2022 were the indications towards change cautiously but incrementally with visible voters' choice expression of their disenchantment against the existing political parties and their governance.

While extracting and analyzing the empirical data, the following variables hold an important role in forming and stimulating voters' minds to change their voting patterns and behaviors. The change in voting pattern is attributed to the following factors.

**Overseas Migrant Nepali**: Migrant Nepali distinctly preferred to have their preferences in domestic politics. A significant size of Nepali are living abroad engaged in the different professionals have their say and capability to urge their family and friends to cast a ballot for a particular candidate. This could alter the electoral outcome since people's behavior and thoughts change according to circumstances, environment, profession, and affluence. And youths who are compelled to opt for foreign employment, hold acrimony towards the system and would like to favor to see a change in the governance and system.

**Voters' education**: It was apparent that voters' education plays a significant role in decreasing invalid votes. Prudent

measures by the election management body is required with due preference.

The disproportionate invalid vote higher than the expectation is a severe blow to the democratic credential of the election and representation, which requires a thorough investigation of the lapses and possible correction for the upcoming election with the introduction of new features and methodologies in voting procedures and design of ballot papers possibly adopting into digital technology and application.

**Gender perspective**: Voters were found inclined to select their candidate on the basis of gender subject to having a competitive advantage on merit and capabilities. Women candidates have also gained confidence levels and seeking elevated positions while contesting elections. Most of the women who were elected to the post of deputy chair in the last election had staked their claim to the post of chair this time.This is a trend, which would be a guiding factor for the upcoming elections and future political endeavors.

**Ethnicity Matters**: One of the major factors that hold significant influence during the election is the ethnic factor. From this empirical study, 52.9 percent of respondents cast their ballot based on ethnic attachment. This has become a phenomenal aspect of electoral choice and preferences, which indicate that individual choices are guided by identity and family lineage.

**Cultural factor**: It is regarded that long-embedded social tradition is the deciding factor in the voting pattern. The composition of society in Tarai is basically dependent on an aged-old tradition and social net, where the community head would have deciding role in most of the social issues, which may also prevail during the elections as well. The distribution of money in the election is the reflection of age-

old tradition and the social fabric of the local community. Social and cultural perceptions and habits are the causes of excessive expenditure by candidates in the election. Despite the role of money, on rare occasion, the personality of the local leader has played a role in winning the election.

**Threat, Intimidation, and Coercion**: As the voters' level of consciousness is increasing the trend of using illegal means with retorting threat, intimidation and coercion to garner voters are gradually losing ground.

**Material support, donation and financial assistance**: These are prevalent in our society and through the application of these tactics, candidates and parties would be able to obtain certain level of votes. Buying votes, donating an amount to local club and extending financial support to local religious and cultural foundations would help in securing votes.

## Correlation between Electoral Integrity and Voters' Behaviour:

Proportionate to the voters' decision guided by the impromptu voting impulse and change in behavior whether applied with a conscious decision at the polling centers after proper thought and evaluation of political and civic significance, existing circumstances and environment would be invariably and inextricably intertwined with each other and depicts its preponderance in maintaining electoral integrity.

**Degree of correlation is uncertain**: Undeniably, there have been correlations between different variables but categorically unquantifiable with the degrees. Intangible, although, these variables hold immense significance while classifying and determining the integrity factor in elections. This is where the election observation by independent and

credible organizations and monitoring from the election management body itself is an essential component of democratic elections, which helps to understand the complexities of elections.

**Does political ideology guide voters' behavior**? Not really. A smaller number of voters are destined to follow indoctrinated campaigners or political activists while voting, while a large significant size of voters are bound to take the independent decision of selecting a candidate and casting votes. The notion that people follow political ideology is a false notion, whereas people follow their own conscious minds to vote.

**Predictable Patterns**:

Instead of objectively weighing the parties' performances, voters' choices and voting patterns in certain given circumstances, are guided by the confirmation bias that leads them is judgment of the voters. The more one is inclined toward certain behavior or belief on political ideology and its functionary voters are likely to follow their confirmation bias. Most respondents responded with confirmation of belief in their favored political parties despite their poor performances is the manifestation of voters' pre-set minds.

**The disenchantment of voters a reason for changed behavior:**

In the wider perspective from the common people's response there exists deep resentment, disappointment and disenchantment towards the functioning of the leaders and their parties for inward-looking and selfishly patronizing politics and sharing state resources amongst their coteries defying the rightful claim of the people for fulfilling their developmental aspiration.

Another reason could be the lack of enthusiasm and curiosity

like in the previous elections, which were held in 2017 after a gap of 20 years. But mainly this time, is to blame for the alliance politics for the drop in voter turnout. Because of electoral alliance in many local units, committed cadres of the parties were reluctant to vote in the local units where there was no candidate from their party for major positions, the other probable reason many keep doubt on it.

The widespread and deep-rooted corruption is the other disturbing cause for peoples' disillusionment and dissatisfaction towards their representatives, which they have seen from close proximity after the local government was formed in 2017 through elections. The extended irregularities in the local bodies, people's representatives being more money-minded, and increasing numbers of political parties and candidates, among other reasons, discouraged the voters from taking part in the electoral process.

The failure of the candidates to inspire voters has also contributed to the low turnout. There is also frustration among the public that nothing much was done for them in the last five years. That too led to absenteeism in voting.

Once elected to the post, the people's representative change their mind from being a servant of the people to the master of the people, which in close observation of the people was itching and undigested. Their changed behavior in one place and complemented by their changed living standard with sophisticated lifestyle exhibited openly in peoples' eyes pushed common people to think of a bad image of these representatives. Gradually the representatives were disconnected from the common mass with their behavior, actions and exposition of lifestyle. Unfulfilled past populist promises have also lowered the values of the political parties and leaders.

One of the contributions to the low voter turnout could be the deprivation of voting opportunities of the employees and security personnel deployed in the election, which may stand at around 500,000 including their family members.

## The change of voting pattern:

It is no doubt that elections strengthen democratic contests among political parties and candidates, but over time given the performances of the political parties during their tenure, the voting pattern and trend change the track with surprises, which was seen this time around at the local election.

At least three candidates won the mayoral race independently. Some won the polls "on their own" as they were fighting as "rebel" candidates fighting against the official candidates of their parties. In the last local elections held in 2017, independent candidates had won just four local units. This time, in the local election held on May 13, 2022, 13 have won mayoral and rural municipality chair posts as independents, a visible change in voting pattern.

The change in voting pattern is a manifestation of peoples' political behavior and expression of their frustration towards established major political parties and leaders because political parties have invariably failed on delivery but despite that, they have been voted to power every time since the restoration of democracy in 1990. But apparently, the change in voting patterns and changed political behavior this time is a clear indication of their desperation for change.

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# Recommendation

After assessing the empirical data, analyzing and evaluating them, three issues are vital to take into consideration while calibrating the impulse of the voters' behavior, ie, 1. The majority of voters prefer to stick to their preconceived notions, 2. Voters are driven by socio-economic impulses and 3. Identity matters dearly.

In order to make voters consciously participate in the electoral process and use their rational choice while voting particular party and candidate, the following steps are suggested for policy intervention.

1. Include the Electoral system and its importance on extracurricular activities in high school for youths' involvement in the electoral process.

2. Voting education through mass media, formal and informal organizations and institutions could play an important role in educating voters on value-based politics and governance.

3. Since identity is becoming not only a social issue but also a national, and therefore due credence with emphasis on national unity on diversity should be the national agenda to prophesize.

4. Political parties need to focus on delivery than mere promotional slogans since voters are less inclined to and affected by their publicity stunts and promises. While going to the electoral campaign show their progress card without any red mark.

5. Political parties and other stakeholders have to maintain electoral integrity for their credibility in order to enhance democratic credentials.

6. Discourage and close all possibilities for "**Highest Bidder**" and **"Best Rigger."**

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# निर्वाचन पर्यवेक्षण समिति नेपाल
## Election Observation Committee Nepal
### (EOC-Nepal)