

Nepal's Proportional Representation System: An Analysis of Its Misuse and Impact

Santa Bahadur Thapa¹

Abstract

Nepal's 2015 Constitution introduced Proportional Representation (PR) with the expectation of allowing more socially excluded groups to participate in politics. This paper argues that chronic systemic abuse has rendered the PR system virtually ineffective at translating numerical representation into political power. To understand this failure, take a hard look at the structural weaknesses of democracy in Nepal. The methodology utilises a reflexive synthesis of post-2015 voting data and literature, within the context of an Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap model, to understand operational diversity. The important point is that the number of diversified counterparties and political weight are not in proportion. The gap is blamed on two main mechanisms: flawed internal party democracy, in which an elite picks candidates for loyalty and money; and corrosive external geopolitical competition from the neighbours, which intensifies ethnic and regional inequalities. The bottom line is that the PR system is fundamentally broken and needs systemic electoral reform. The originality of the study lies in thoroughly combining internal partisan corruption and external geostrategic influence as disabling elements of the system, thereby delivering real, decisive power to specific legislative interventions.

Keywords: Geopolitical competition, inclusion-effectiveness gap, intra-party democracy, political inclusion, proportional representation

Introduction

The PR system was a significant legislative chess move made after the 2015 constitution was issued to make politics more inclusive and to ensure proportional representation of historically marginalised groups in Nepal. However, this analytical paper claims that, despite its noble theory as an empowering mechanism for the weak, in practice it has been grossly misused and therefore has become only a pale shadow of what was hoped for – an effective vehicle for mass political integration. This paper critically reviews the technology-related problems that led to the failure. The focus of the study is on (in) equality in terms of numbers and political power, and on the numerical expansion representing elected members, considered relative to actual Political Power⁴ (Mandhar, 2021, pp. 34-48).

There are a range of other issues that the paper addresses such as how party control and lack of internal democracy have subverted candidate selection (Joshi, 2014, pp. 223–238), the

1. Department of Political Science, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus, T. U., Email: drsantabthapa7@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3515-3835

destabilising influence exerted by external geopolitical rivalries on Nepal's development (Thapa, 2023, pp.73–84) and systemic failure to dismantle established ethnic/regional inequalities within the system (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp.45–67). This selective review highlights that a universal electoral reform is urgently needed if the PR system is to correspond to the reality of democratic expectations.

Background of the Paper

This paper examines the limitations of Nepal's proportional representation electoral framework established by the Constitution of 2015, which has been claimed to be explicitly designed to enhance political inclusion among historically marginalised groups. Ideologically speaking, PR is a means of injecting diversity into our politics. However, an underlying working hypothesis in the subtext of this paper is that its efficacy has been massively neutralised through widespread abuse, structural failures and a general lack of an environmental medium by which it could attain its democratic potency (Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116).

This history is a dense matrix of multi-scaled disaffection: the representational-minimalism that is representation with low accountabilities (Manandhar, 2021, pp. 34–48); how candidates were not elected but assigned via rigged lottery rather than intra-party democracy and obeisance to political bosses (Joshi, 2014); external politics as practiced by India and China in Nepal's politics (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84); and in chilling opposition—not exactly encouraging amplification- wanting state gerrymandering support for prior existing ethno-regional divisions (Pokharel, 2024, pp. 27–38). These overlapping realities will also help determine the urgency of the proposals in this paper and represent a potential barrier to system-wide electoral reform.

Significance of the Paper

The value of this paper is that it provides a substantial, italicised critique of PR in Nepal—one that goes beyond descriptive narrative on how the practice has developed to reveal a potentially democratic watershed and the reality—in between lies an abyss. The argument reprises an understanding that inclusion is mainly symbolic, focusing on the structural abuse within the system of the Privileged Party bosses (Joshi, 2014, pp. 223–38), and this primacy of lack of political capital in del-to-pol within the quantitatively represented collectivity, Manandhar's submission (Manandhar, 2021:34–48). The paper, however, conjectures that India and China's blasted nations' foreign policies gave voters an escape route from confronting local electoral incompetence (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84). In this way, this comprehensive gaze also incorporates existing differences in ethnic and regional patterns (cf. (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp. 67–71) that prove stable and, as such, offer policymakers and reformers a picture of them. The results indicate an urgent need for institutional electoral and legislative reform to unambiguously redefine the contours of the PR system to promote integrity and inclusion.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is an analytical-critical synthesis of the literature, empirical electoral analyses and conceptual models on the PR system in Nepal. This research does not present new empirical data but rather provides a rigorous, qualitative review using the Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap frame to understand systemic failures (Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116).

The methodological steps of research included (1) determining the basic functions of PR in Nepal as stated in the 2015 Constitution. Second, a systematic gathering and synthesis of academic research, governmental reports and news analysis on election results since 2015. Third, considering the synthesised evidence through the prism of an established school of thought, grouping misuse mechanisms (internal party manipulation) and external restraints (geopolitical competition) (Joshi, 2014). The methodology concludes with a critical analysis of the IOM—specifically, the perpetuation of ethnic and regional inequality and the formulation of focused reform recommendations (Pokharel, 2024, pp. 27–38). This methodical process enables the diagnosis of the PR system's operational divergence from democracy in a broader perspective.

Research Questions

1. How does numerical representation translate into real political power in the context of Nepal's PR system?
2. How does intra-party manipulation corrupt the integrity of the Nepali PR system?
3. How do geopolitical pressures and PR system breakdowns entrench ethnic and regional divides?

Research Gaps

The paper addresses three significant gaps in the existing literature concerning Nepal's proportional representation (PR) system.

The paper fills three central voids in the literature on Nepal's PR system.

1. **Gap in Qualitative vs. Quantitative Inclusion:** Although numerous studies concur that the numerical representation of historically marginalised communities has increased (Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116), limited research scrutinises this level of increase and to what extent it has translated into actual political claim over party and governmental mechanisms for decision-making (Manandhar, 2021, pp. 34–48). This research bridges the Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap.
2. **Systemic Misuse Analysis Gap:** although many analyses describe party control, there has not been a systematic effort to connect the absence of internal party democracy and elite-imposed selection bias with the institutional corruption of PR as a mechanism that prioritizes loyalty and merely 'having done something for' politicians in terms of securing financial contributions over merit (McDonald & Vaughn, 2013, pp. 153–168).
3. **Geopolitical Trust and Deeply Imprisoned Disparities:** The literature has little to say about the corrosive effect of direct external geopolitical contest (India, China) over elections' integrity (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84). In addition, only a handful of studies clearly show that the PR system, rather than mitigating, caters to and perpetuates ethnic and regional inequalities (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp. 45–67).

Conceptual Framework

The analytical framework of this study is based on the Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap model, which empirically maps the gap between PR-formal numerical accomplishments in diversity and its silent/quiet failures to deliver appropriate political power to diversity groups (Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116). This gap is described and interpreted in terms of the interplay between two main classes of variables.

The first is that Systemic Misuse Mechanisms and internal party structures are the primary corrupting agents, with terrestrial gatekeepers. This collection includes the well-documented lack of intra-party democracy and elite-dominated candidate-list manipulation that favours loyalty/financial contributions over competence/authentic representation (Joshi, 2014). The second group, External and Structural Restraints, presents external obstacles to the PR system's potential success. These limitations are the corrosive impact of great-power geopolitical rivalry (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84) and the fact that the system tends to produce pre-existing ethnic-based and regional imbalances rather than neutralising them (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp. 67–71). Extending its articulation, the essay utilises this integrated framework to contend that genuine representation can occur only with systemic shifts in response to both internal abuses and outside structural pressures.

Findings and Discussions

The Perils of Proportional Representation in Nepal: Problems and Prospects

The paper reveals several problems, including an apparent loophole in Nepal. Also, while most see this as a movement forward in power-sharing and enhancing the ability of those with no clout to get a seat at the big people's table (PR), it has suffered from real-world issues which have kept it from meeting its goal. Deals with these concerns by reviewing the specifics of representation, political parties' and external actors' contributions, and ethnic/regional variations.

I. The Meaning of Political Power

One of the significant issues it identified is the chasm between numbers and real political power. Nevertheless, the PR system has expanded the number of women and minorities in Congress. However, this increase in numbers has not translated into their (women's) decision-making power within parties or governing bodies (Manandhar 2021:34–48). For example, proportional representation (PR), which was implemented in the 2017 elections in Nepal, has made it easier for women to participate. However, anecdotal evidence and early research suggest they face a variety of factors that hold them back from shaping their parties, especially in leadership positions. It is a symptom of endemic problems that the contemporary power structures and conservative discourses have done nothing over the centuries to open women – or other marginalised groups – up to meaningful participation in politics. It will direct further research to consider pathways that preserve this bias (e.g., whether party leaders and central party structures are the source of resource allocation, and community norms affect data realities). Learning to engage with these intermediaries productively to uplift them and appreciate their incredible work is critical.

II. Political Party Functions: Control and Internal Democracy

Another factor contributing to the abuse of the PR system is the role of political parties. Some political parties in Nepal have been accused of using PR to entrench their party leadership and monopolise the candidate selection process (McDonald & Vaughn, 2013, pp. 153–168). It is rigging even its own nominating process by coming up with a list of candidates and concentrating on shipping the ones who raise the most money or have the best contacts into that spot, making democratic voting irrelevant, etc. It is an assault on democracy itself, and it slays any trust in the political system.

The reason aid can be used in this manner is that most Nepali parties lack internal democracy. Candidates are not chosen based on their ability to express the full range of interests within their party, but rather as flunkies for the party leadership. As the losing nominee, they will not have you say anything substantive about anything anytime soon until it is time for your subsequent loss. This lack of internal party democracy means that the clique not only lives under the party leadership's control but also cannot be expressed; it stifles alternative opinions and ultimately diminishes the important connection between the party and the people that it presumably serves. It creates a situation where there is little accountability because party leaders are not directly accountable to the general membership for their decisions. However, as one of the significant reform planks is to counter anti-democratic incentives inherent in PR (and provided for within mitigation measures such as open candidate selection for elections), the emphasis on approaches to strengthen internal party democracy is central — such as transparent processes for selecting candidates, regular intra-party elections, and participatory policy-making.

III. Foreign Stake: Geopolitical Competition and National Interests

The impact of external players, primarily anthropogenic international institutions, also significantly contributes to Nepal's electoral composition. The competition between India and Chinese hegemony, two powerful neighbours, is reflected in the political dynamics of Nepal, which are generally shaped by the political and electoral party tendencies that work in the interests of India and China (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73-84). When the policy of a foreign power begins to take shape in a country through its political system, the PR system will worsen, as the political party will prioritise the foreign power's votes over those of its citizens. Such foreign interference may take various forms, including monetary influence on parties' politics, foreign diplomacy, military alliances, and covert operations. Analysing the mechanisms of this foreign influence and its magnitude is vital to the integrity of the electoral process and the authentic democratic self-determination of the Nepali people. The complex relationship between foreign actors and domestic political dynamics, and to develop strategies that, in theory, can mitigate the adverse effects of foreign interference on the Nepalese electoral system.

IV. Entrenched Power Structures: Ethnic and Regional Disparities

The research also demonstrates that the PR system has singularly failed to tackle the deep-seated problems of ethnic and regional representation. Despite being anticipated to promote inclusion and representation, resulting in greater inclusiveness for underrepresented communities, it has instead reinforced existing power structures that privilege major ethnic communities and established

political parties (Pokharel, 2024, pp. 27–38). For instance, if PR means that more of the estimated 220 ethnic groups in the country will have numerical representation in parliament, this need not mean anything in terms of political power, nor does it contribute to changing the socio-economic conditions that keep these groups marginalised. These inequalities are frequently in the form of lack of access to resources, employment and education discrimination and participation limitations in decision-making. Prove the situation is unsustainable as well as that its solutions (electoral revolt, vote reform and Norwegian bottom for fuckups) do not fall under a social contract. It calls for sustained dismantling of unjust structures, equalising the access to resources and opportunities for all, and cultivating a spirit of mutual respect in diversity and inclusivity.

V. Paucity of Public Awareness and Understanding

The PR system will also be seriously hampered in its performance, as it is supposed to be, by public consciousness and acceptance. Most voters do not know all the nuts and bolts of PR, how candidate lists are compiled, seats allocated, or votes turned into representation. This ignorance leads to the “absence of voters’ interest, preference towards election and support for the democratic system” (Khanal, 2022). This lack of information must be countered by introducing impactful public awareness and civic education campaigns to increase citizens’ awareness of electoral issues. Moreover, that is a good thing for citizens, because it might help them understand electoral politics and a culture of accountability. Furthermore, those who have not yet graduated, the Battlehouses, and the upperpermen should know what rights/privileges/lack during the voting season.

VI. Transparency and Accountability

The research also recommends greater transparency and accountability in the PR system. The search for candidates, the seat distribution system, and the manner in which election funding was managed should be examined further, as it seemed to have been played unfairly; unfairness did not show them respect. That is vital, as all parties and election intermediaries should be held to account at every stage. Independent election-monitoring bodies, together with civil society and a free, unrestrained media, can play their role there. The more these institutions become entrenched, and a transparent media culture develops, the more we can expect PR system failures to increase and push us towards responsible massified electoral politics.

VII. The Wider Political and Social Background

It also implies that, though the PR system has been adopted in Nepal, its actual enforcement may be to some extent affected by the country’s political and social context. Among these are political development, the level of democratic institutions and democracy as such in a country, the level of corruption and quality or character of social capital, as well as the extent to which the rule-of-law principle is observed. The design of the PR system (which consists of both national and local voter lists) is more than a mere correlation / immediate effect; it is a deeper preference. It has to be resistant to sources of variation outside the PR system that may influence this model. This will necessitate an integrated approach that promotes the building of strong democratic institutions, good governance, and the removal of corruption; upholds trust in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms; and reduces disparities that hamper the democratic process.

Impact of Misuse

The abuse of Nepal's proportional representation (PR) has had many adverse effects, including negating its inclusiveness. First, the numerical increase in women overseas and in the representation of oppressed communities in the decision-making machinery (as reflected in election results such as in 2017) has not been translated into real political power or clout within the corridors of power, such as parliament and pavilions. However, it remains limited (Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116). Such paltry influence stems from the conservative political hegemony deeply enshrined within party structures, which suffocates the relevance of these groups (Shrestha, 2024).

Second, internal party democracy and party elite manipulation of the PR selection process have poisoned political accountability to a fatal degree. It is widely believed that when candidates are chosen for their loyalty to or financial support of the party, these nominees feel obligated to follow the tenets set by party leadership rather than address the multiplicity of constituents' needs (Joshi, 2014, pp. 223–238). Such perversion of the nomination process diminishes confidence in it and eliminates critics or other dissenting views from serving.

In addition, foreign intervention - principally political competition between India and China - undermines the integrity of the electoral process. This external factor has been instrumental in political parties prioritising foreign powers and money over the democratic aspirations of Nepalis, thereby undermining national interests (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84). Finally, rather than undermining the socio-economic dominance of established parties and ethnic groupings, elite powers under a new PR system tend to reproduce existing hierarchies based on ethnicity and region, with damaging consequences for access to resources and notions of justice (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp. 67–71; Pokharel, 2024, pp. 27–38).

Results

The study of PR in Nepal demonstrates that rampant misapplication has led to many serious negative consequences, manifoldly transforming (and contradicting the purpose and potential) of a system which was meant to be universally inclusive politically. The key result is the existence of an Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap, i.e., the increase in the numbers of marginalised groups and women, as demonstrated in the elections, has not been translated into qualitative political power or authentic influence on decision-making processes within governance mechanisms (Manandhar, 2021, pp. 34–48; Shrestha & Mishra, 2024, pp. 101–116). This divide results from traditional, conservative hierarchies and the established political culture within the mainstream parties, which, in effect, stunts the political ascent of newly elected members (Shrestha, 2004).

The second, related critical discovery is that political accountability has been corrupted. The absence of internal party democracy permits party elites to interfere with the list-determination process in PR (McDonald & Vaughn, 2013, pp. 153–168). Candidates are often selected for their loyalty to leadership or to their donors, rather than for their ability to authentically represent the varied interests of constituents (Joshi, 2014). This is antithetical to maintaining popular trust in the political process, stifling required domestic dissent and blocking diverse opinions from reaching the federal legislature.

Moreover, the electoral process itself is irreparably damaged by outside influence. In particular, the geopolitical competition between India and China in a neighbouring, related form materialises internal pressure and financial influence on political parties to subsume the goals of the true democratic right of self-determination for all Nepalis by Nepal, as well as supposedly progressive national interests grounded in reality (Thapa, 2023, pp. 73–84). This undermines the very sovereignty of the electoral process. Finally, rather than breaking down existing inequalities, under the current PR system, these power relations tend to be upheld, with ethnic and regional disparities in resources and socio-economic opportunities continuing (Lamsal et al., 2023, pp. 45–67). These interlocking findings, combined, reflect a functional “disconnect” from the PR democratic aspirations of the system.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Nepal’s proportional representation (PR) system. At the same time, it carried the initial democratic potential of inclusive governance for marginalised groups, but has been subject to severe abuse and structural constraints. This failure is, above all, to be found in the Inclusion-Effectiveness Gap: institutions might make quantitative leaps in terms of women and marginalised groups’ representation, but that figure very often does not translate into real power or influence within decision-making bodies. This vacuum is the product of conservative hierarchies and political cultures running the big parties.

A key reason it has not is the absence of serious intraparty democracy, which allows political power brokers to rig the results in favour of their anointed candidates. One candidate is the other only so far as he or she has “sworn fealty” (Ward) and proved helpful when you have so unwired any politics except what is carried out virtually from the ostensible base-constituent, political accountability appears absurd, public life highly untrustworthy. Furthermore, electoral sanctity is compromised by foreign policy pressures, such as the India-China competition, which forces parties to prioritise foreign money and influence over their national interests. In the end, far from deconstructing age-old power structures and institutions, the PR system exacerbates extant ethnic and regional inequalities, thereby entrenching imbalances in resource distribution and access. Comprehensive electoral and legislative change is desperately needed to bring the operation of the PR system into line with its founding purpose of pan-political integration.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this research, the following are a few recommendations to address challenges and improve the effectiveness of the PR system in Nepal:

1. Increased democracy within the party

- Political parties must establish internal democracy by enforcing transparent candidate selection processes, ensuring representation of all types of diversity, and promoting merit and competence over favouritism and belongingness.
- Regular intra-party elections shall be held, including the top leadership, to demand accountability and prevent party leaders from becoming autocratic, acting as if there is no one to hold them accountable.

- Establish participatory policy formulation mechanisms to ensure that the voices of marginalised communities and diverse groups are duly integrated into the policy-making process.

2. Pre-Flood Accountability Mechanisms

- Reinforcement of independent election monitoring bodies to guarantee detached oversight of the electoral process and protection from corruption
- Thus, based on data as of October 2023, Civil society organisations need to be more active in monitoring elections, pushing for electoral reforms, and promoting transparency and accountability.
- They should support free and vibrant media to deliver critical coverage of the electoral process, expose irregularities, and hold political parties and electoral officials to account.

3. Promote public awareness and understanding:

- Schools must have strong programs in civic education to improve the public's understanding of the alternative system and of how party lists, allocations of seats and votes become representatives.
- Educating voters about the process and making sure they understand the people and issues on their ballots.
- Such measures should also include outreach to marginalised groups, teaching the PR system and how to cast a vote.

4. Tackling Ethnic and Regional Disparities:

- It is to say that “targeted” policy interventions should be put in place to combat the structural social and economic inequalities that contribute towards ethnic regional under-representation.”
- To prevent populism from filling the void left by equality and for representation wherever power lies, affirmative action measures need to be implemented, including quotas.
- Participatory development strategies addressing the requirements and aspirations of marginalised communities need to be enforced.

5. Fostering a Culture of Inclusivity:

- Political leaders, civil society organisations and media should encourage a culture of accommodation and collaboration across a variety of communities.
- Inter-ethnic and inter-regional dialogue and engagement should be promoted to foster trust and understanding.
- Educational interventions are needed to sensitise people about the importance of rolling out diversity and inclusiveness in a democratic society.

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