



**Public Dissatisfaction, Youth Mobilisation, and
Anti-Establishment Sentiment: Explaining the Rise of the
Rastriya Swatantra Party in Nepal**

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Abstract

Background: Following Nepal's political transition to a federal democratic republic, citizens expected accountable governance, institutional reform, and socio-economic development. However, persistent political instability, corruption allegations, and governance challenges have contributed to growing public dissatisfaction with traditional political parties. These conditions have created opportunities for alternative political actors to gain electoral support.

Methods: This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, media analysis, and social media observation to examine factors contributing to support for the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). Data were collected in Kathmandu during March–April 2025 from 30 participants originating from multiple districts of Nepal, including 17 in-depth interviewees and 13



participants providing shorter structured responses. Populism theory guided the analytical framework.

Results: Findings reveal five interconnected drivers of support for alternative political forces: dissatisfaction with traditional political parties, youth political awakening, anti-elite sentiment, institutional distrust, and the influence of digital media. Participants also linked migration-related frustrations and perceptions of corruption to growing support for political reform and alternative leadership. The September 2025 youth mobilisation movement was frequently identified as a catalyst for increased political awareness and civic engagement.

Conclusion: The rise of the RSP reflects broader transformations in Nepal's democratic landscape shaped by generational change, institutional distrust, and demands for governance reform. Youth mobilisation and digital communication have become increasingly influential in shaping political participation and electoral behaviour.

Novelty: This study contributes to emerging scholarship on political transformation in Nepal by examining the relationship between youth mobilisation, anti-establishment sentiment, and support for alternative political actors through qualitative evidence from diverse voter perspectives.

Keywords: Anti-establishment politics; Electoral change; Nepal politics; Political trust; Populism; Youth political participation

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Nepal has undergone substantial political transformation, transitioning from a centralised monarchy to a federal democratic republic following the decade-long Maoist insurgency and the subsequent peace process. These political transitions generated widespread public expectations of improved governance, institutional accountability, and socio-economic development. Citizens anticipated that democratic restructuring would lead to tangible improvements in public service delivery, employment generation, infrastructure development, and transparency within state institutions. However, the persistence of political instability and perceived governance failures gradually contributed to increasing public frustration and declining trust in traditional political parties (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou 2024).

Nepal's post-transition political landscape has been characterised by frequent government changes, coalition instability, and ongoing disputes among political actors. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990, Nepal has witnessed over 30 governments, with none completing a full five-year term since 2008 (Mulmi, 2025; Bhatta, 2025). Leadership competition has often prioritised power-sharing arrangements over policy continuity and long-term institutional reform. Consequently, governance outcomes have frequently appeared inconsistent, and development progress has been perceived as uneven across regions. Public dissatisfaction has been further intensified by recurring allegations of corruption, limited accountability mechanisms, and politicisation within state institutions (Transparency International, 2024; Valgarðsson & Bergmann, 2023). These conditions have collectively



created fertile ground for the emergence of new political actors who position themselves as alternatives to established political elites.

In recent years, Nepal has witnessed the growing popularity of leaders associated with non-traditional political backgrounds. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), founded by former television host Rabi Lamichhane in mid-2022, exemplifies this trend. The party positions itself as an “alternative force” committed to good governance, accountability, and institutional reform, emerging as the fourth largest party in the 2022 elections (Mulmi, 2026). Such narratives resonate particularly with younger populations who are increasingly exposed to digital media platforms and global political discourses. The rise of social media has significantly transformed political communication patterns, enabling leaders to reach audiences directly without relying solely on traditional media institutions.

Youth political engagement has emerged as a central factor shaping contemporary political dynamics in Nepal. A growing number of young citizens have demonstrated interest in governance reform, accountability, and participatory democracy. Digital platforms have provided spaces for political discussion, mobilisation, and awareness-building, thereby strengthening civic participation (Wara, 2026; Nguyen & Le, 2025). Many young voters perceive traditional political parties as disconnected from their aspirations, particularly in relation to employment opportunities, migration policies, and educational reforms. Consequently, political movements that emphasise renewal, reform, and transparency have attracted strong youth support.

Migration has also played a crucial role in shaping political attitudes among Nepali citizens. A significant proportion of the population has sought employment opportunities abroad, often due to limited domestic employment prospects. Youth unemployment in Nepal stood at approximately 21% in 2024, and over 2,000 young Nepalis leave the country daily for foreign employment (Bhatta, 2025). Exposure to governance models in other countries has influenced perceptions of state capacity and public administration. Many migrant workers and their families have developed expectations for improved governance practices within Nepal. Their experiences abroad have contributed to critical reflections on national development trajectories and have strengthened demands for systemic reform.

The September 2025 youth-led mobilisation movement represents one of the most significant political developments in Nepal’s recent history. The protests began on 8 September 2025 and rapidly spread across major cities, including Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Birgunj, following a government ban on over two dozen social media platforms (Mulmi, 2025). Although the immediate trigger was digital restriction, underlying grievances included long-standing frustrations related to corruption, unemployment, and perceived governance failure. The protests escalated rapidly, resulting in clashes between demonstrators and security forces, with at least 76 fatalities and over 2,100 injuries. One of the most consequential outcomes was the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli, demonstrating the capacity of youth mobilisation to influence state leadership (CNN, 2025; The Hindu, 2025).



2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Populism in Transitional Democracies

Populism has emerged as a significant political phenomenon across both established and transitional democracies. Scholars broadly define populism as a political logic that frames society as divided between a “pure people” and a “corrupt elite,” while claiming to represent the authentic voice of ordinary citizens (Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2016). Contemporary scholarship conceptualises populism as a “thin-centred ideology” that mobilises crisis narratives to justify exceptional political claims (Dolci, 2026; Talukdar, 2019). In transitional democracies, populist movements often emerge during periods of institutional weakness, economic stagnation, and declining public trust in traditional political actors (Rizzo & Inglehart, 2022; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In South Asia, analysts highlight how ethno-nationalist and majoritarian projects have been repackaged through populist frames, blending anti-elite rhetoric with appeals to religious, ethnic or national authenticity (Datta, 2021). Political transitions, especially those following conflict or regime change, frequently generate high expectations among citizens. However, when governments fail to deliver expected reforms, populist narratives gain traction. Such narratives often emphasise anti-corruption, national dignity, meritocracy, and administrative transparency. In many contexts, populist actors rely heavily on symbolic communication, emotional appeal, and personalised leadership to mobilise support (Moffitt, 2016).

Nepal provides a relevant case study for analysing populist mobilisation. Since the end of the Maoist conflict and the transition to republican governance, the country has experienced repeated cycles of political instability, coalition fragmentation, and governance challenges. These conditions created opportunities for new political actors to challenge established political elites (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou 2024; Lawoti, 2014).

2.2 Youth Political Mobilisation and Digital Activism

Youth political mobilisation has increasingly been recognised as a driving force in democratic transformation across the Global South. Younger generations often express dissatisfaction with traditional political systems, particularly when they perceive systemic corruption, limited economic opportunities, and political exclusion (Wara, 2026; Dolci, 2026).

Digital media’s role in transforming political participation has received substantial attention. A systematic meta-synthesis of 30 studies finds that digital technologies lower barriers to participation and foster new repertoires of “everyday” activism among young adults (Wara, 2026). Social media platforms enable decentralised mobilisation, rapid information dissemination, and collective identity formation (Tufekci, 2017). These tools reduce reliance on formal party structures and allow new political narratives to spread quickly among large audiences.

Studies in the Global South echo these dynamics. Research on Vietnam shows that different functional uses of digital platforms – information access, mobilisation, engagement, advocacy, and networking – all contribute positively to youth civic participation (Nguyen & Le, 2025).



Research on Indonesia similarly documents how social media facilitates youth involvement in politics (Rahman & Putra, 2020).

In Nepal, digital media played a crucial role in shaping youth activism prior to and during the September 2025 protests. A nationwide ban on major social media platforms acted as a trigger for widespread mobilisation among Generation Z citizens, many of whom interpreted the ban as an attempt to restrict civic expression and accountability (The Hindu, 2025). The #Nepobabies campaign, which exposed the lavish lifestyles of politicians' children, had already been circulating online, highlighting economic disparities between elites and ordinary citizens (CNN, 2025).

Research indicates that youth-led movements often begin with issue-based mobilisation but gradually expand into broader demands for systemic reform. In the Nepali case, early protests centred on digital freedoms later expanded to include demands for transparency, anti-corruption measures, and accountability within state institutions (Gelary, 2025).

2.3 The September 2025 Gen Z Movement as a Political Turning Point

The September 2025 Gen Z movement represents one of the most significant youths-led political mobilisations in Nepal's recent history. The protests began on 8 September 2025 and rapidly spread across major cities, including Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Birgunj. The movement was predominantly led by students and young citizens who organised demonstrations through decentralised digital networks (Mulmi, 2025; Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

Although the immediate trigger was the government's ban on multiple social media platforms on 4 September 2025, underlying grievances included long-standing frustrations related to corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and perceived governance failure (The Conversation, 2025). Protesters frequently framed their actions as a struggle against entrenched political elites and systemic inequality. The movement followed similar youth-led protests in Sri Lanka (2022) and Bangladesh (2024), reflecting a regional pattern of digitally mobilised political change.

The protests escalated rapidly, resulting in clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Reports indicate that police used live ammunition, water cannons, and tear gas against protesters, leading to 76 deaths and over 2,100 injuries (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). Subsequent violence resulted in damage to government infrastructure and public institutions, including the Parliament building, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Supreme Court (CNN, 2025).

One of the most consequential outcomes of the protests was the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli following sustained public pressure (CNN, 2025). This marked a significant moment in Nepal's political history, demonstrating the capacity of youth mobilisation to influence state leadership. Former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was subsequently appointed as interim prime minister, becoming Nepal's first woman to hold the position (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

2.4 Populism and Anti-Establishment Sentiment in Nepal

Anti-establishment sentiment forms a core dimension of populist politics. In many transitional democracies, dissatisfaction with governance institutions leads citizens to support alternative political actors who claim independence from traditional party networks (Mudde, 2007).



Political and institutional trust has become a central concern in debates around democratic resilience. Comparative research shows that trust in democratic institutions has declined in many democracies, with growing shares of citizens sceptical about whether governments act in the public interest (Valgarðsson & Bergmann, 2023; OECD, 2024).

In Nepal, dissatisfaction with established parties has been widely documented. Repeated allegations of corruption, patronage politics, and elite privilege have contributed to declining public trust (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou 2024). Nepal ranked 107th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, with corruption scandals involving former prime ministers, ministers, and bureaucrats regularly surfacing in public discourse (Transparency International, 2024; Carnegie Endowment, 2025). The September 2025 protests amplified this sentiment by publicly exposing grievances that had previously remained fragmented.

The rhetoric emerging from youth movements frequently emphasised themes such as accountability, transparency, merit-based leadership, national dignity, and anti-corruption. These themes align closely with populist narratives identified in global political studies (Moffitt, 2016; Dolci, 2026).

Furthermore, analysts suggest that the 2025 protests influenced electoral behaviour in subsequent political processes. Many voters expressed willingness to support alternative parties perceived as independent from established elites (Mulmi, 2026; Bhattarai, 2025). This shift reflects a broader transformation in political identity, where voters increasingly prioritise credibility and perceived integrity over ideological loyalty.

These developments illustrate how youth-driven mobilisation can reshape political legitimacy and create opportunities for emerging political actors within transitional democratic settings.

3. Theoretical Framework: Populism Theory and Anti-Establishment Mobilisation in Nepal

3.1 Understanding Populism as an Analytical Framework

Populism has emerged as a widely used analytical framework for understanding political transformations in both established and transitional democracies. While the concept has been interpreted differently across scholarly traditions, a widely accepted definition conceptualises populism as a “thin-centred ideology” that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2007). Within this framework, populist actors claim to represent the authentic will of ordinary citizens while portraying political elites as disconnected, self-serving, and unresponsive to public needs.

Scholars have further argued that populism functions not only as an ideology but also as a political style and communication strategy (Moffitt, 2016). In this sense, populist actors utilise emotionally charged narratives, symbolic language, and simplified solutions to mobilise public support. Populist messaging frequently emphasises transparency, anti-corruption, and meritocracy while criticising institutional inefficiency and elite privilege. These narratives



resonate particularly in contexts where citizens experience prolonged dissatisfaction with governance structures.

In transitional democracies such as Nepal, populism often emerges during periods of institutional transformation and political instability. Political transitions generate expectations for reform and development; however, when these expectations remain unmet, citizens become increasingly receptive to anti-establishment narratives (Müller, 2016). Populism thus becomes a mechanism through which political dissatisfaction is articulated and mobilised into electoral behaviour.

The relevance of populism theory to Nepal lies in its capacity to explain how new political actors gain support by positioning themselves as alternatives to established elites. In the case examined in this study, public narratives surrounding corruption, inefficiency, and political stagnation reflect core populist themes identified in global scholarship.

3.2 Core Elements of Populism

To operationalise populism theory within this research, four core dimensions are adopted based on existing literature (Mudde, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

People-Centred Narratives: They form the foundation of populist discourse. These narratives portray ordinary citizens as morally superior to political elites and emphasise the collective will of the population. In many contexts, populist movements frame citizens as victims of corruption, economic mismanagement, and political exclusion.

Within the Nepali context, public discourse frequently emphasises the struggles of ordinary citizens, particularly in relation to unemployment, migration, and limited public services. These narratives often highlight the everyday experiences of voters who feel marginalised by political decision-making processes. The September 2025 Gen Z movement demonstrated strong people-centred messaging. Protest slogans and online communications frequently invoked collective identity, emphasising unity among citizens and the moral legitimacy of youth activism.

Anti-Elite Sentiment: It represents one of the most visible characteristics of populist politics. Political elites are portrayed as corrupt, self-interested, and detached from the needs of ordinary citizens. Such framing strengthens support for alternative leadership figures who claim independence from traditional political networks.

In Nepal, dissatisfaction with established political parties has been widely expressed in both media narratives and citizen interviews. Allegations of corruption and patronage politics have contributed to declining trust in traditional political institutions (South Asian Voices, 2025). The September 2025 protests intensified anti-elite sentiment by exposing governance failures and increasing public scrutiny of political leadership.

Crisis Narratives and Urgency: This discourse often relies on crisis framing to generate urgency and mobilise collective action. Leaders and activists frequently portray the political system as being in a state of crisis, requiring immediate reform.

Crisis narratives were central to the September 2025 youth mobilisation in Nepal. The government's restriction on digital communication platforms was interpreted by many young citizens as a threat to civic freedom, triggering collective mobilisation and strengthening



perceptions of political crisis. Beyond the immediate trigger, broader structural concerns—including unemployment, migration, and corruption—were framed as evidence of systemic failure. Scholars argue that crisis framing strengthens populist mobilisation by creating a sense of shared threat and collective responsibility (Moffitt, 2016).

Leadership Personalisation: Populist movements often rely on charismatic or symbolic leaders who present themselves as representatives of ordinary citizens. Such leaders typically adopt communication styles that emphasise authenticity, direct engagement, and responsiveness. Leadership personalisation was evident in Nepal's recent political environment, particularly in the rise of Rabi Lamichhane, whose background as a television host who confronted politicians live on air established his credibility as an anti-establishment figure (The Diplomat, 2025).

Populism and Youth-Led Political Transformation: Youth participation represents a significant dimension of contemporary populist mobilisation. Younger generations often exhibit greater willingness to challenge institutional authority and experiment with alternative forms of political engagement.

The September 2025 Gen Z movement illustrates how youth-led mobilisation can reshape national political discourse. Unlike earlier protest movements dominated by party structures, this movement relied heavily on decentralised digital coordination, reducing hierarchical control and allowing participants to engage in flexible organisational structures. Scholars studying youth movements have observed that digital activism strengthens collective identity formation and accelerates mobilisation processes (Loader et al., 2014; Tufekci, 2017).

Institutional Distrust and Democratic Transformation: Institutional trust plays a critical role in sustaining democratic legitimacy. When trust declines, citizens become more likely to support alternative political movements (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In Nepal, public trust in institutions such as political parties, bureaucratic agencies, and governance structures has fluctuated significantly over the past two decades. Repeated allegations of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and political interference have contributed to declining public confidence (Bhatta, 2025). Institutional distrust was further reinforced during the September 2025 protests, when confrontations between demonstrators and security forces intensified perceptions of state failure.

3.3 Analytical Model for This Study

To translate populism theory into an operational research framework, this study adopts a thematic analytical model consisting of five interrelated dimensions (Braun and Clarke, 2006): anti-corruption narratives; disillusionment with traditional political parties; youth political awakening; media and digital mobilisation; and demand for governance reform. These dimensions guide the coding and interpretation of qualitative data collected from interviews, media reports, and social media observations.

The inclusion of the September 2025 Gen Z movement within this analytical model allows the research to examine how protest experiences influenced voter perceptions and political decision-making processes. By integrating protest dynamics into electoral analysis, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of political transformation in Nepal.



Qualitative research requires acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality and interpretive role. Reflexivity enhances transparency and strengthens analytical credibility by recognising the influence of personal experience on research interpretation (Berger, 2015). In this study, critical personal reflection forms an integral component of the analytical framework. Observations of political discourse, public debates, and civic mobilisation contributed to the researcher's understanding of shifting political attitudes. These reflections are incorporated within the findings and discussion sections to contextualise analytical interpretations.

4. Methodology

This study adopts an empirical qualitative research design to examine the political rise of alternative political forces in Nepal and the influence of youth-led mobilisation, particularly the September 2025 Gen Z movement. Qualitative research was selected because the study seeks to understand subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of political change among voters rather than to measure predefined variables quantitatively.

Qualitative political research is widely used to explore political attitudes, voting behaviour, and citizen engagement in contexts undergoing democratic transformation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In transitional democracies such as Nepal, citizens' political decisions are shaped not only by formal policies but also by lived experiences, social networks, media exposure, and historical memory. A qualitative design therefore enables the researcher to capture complex political narratives that are not easily quantifiable.

This research integrates three complementary qualitative data sources: semi-structured interviews, media content analysis, and social media discourse observation. The triangulation of these data sources enhances the reliability and depth of the findings by allowing comparison across different forms of evidence (Denzin, 2012).

Data collection for this study was conducted in Kathmandu during March and April 2025. Kathmandu was selected as the primary research site because it functions as Nepal's political, administrative, and media centre. Citizens from multiple districts frequently migrate to Kathmandu for education, employment, and political engagement, making the city an appropriate location for capturing diverse political perspectives.

The research setting is particularly significant given the recent political developments associated with youth mobilisation during September 2025. The Gen Z movement of September 2025 involved large-scale demonstrations, digital mobilisation, and public debate concerning governance, accountability, and civic freedom (Mulmi, 2025; Carnegie Endowment, 2025). Participants in this study included voters originally from various districts of Nepal who were residing temporarily or permanently in Kathmandu.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possessed relevant political experience and voting eligibility (Patton, 2015). The total sample size consisted of 30 participants. Among these participants, 17 individuals participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, while 13 participants contributed through shorter structured responses and observational interactions.



Participants were selected based on the following criteria: eligible voters in Nepal; participation in national or local elections; awareness of recent political developments; and exposure to media or digital platforms. Participants represented diverse demographic categories, including youth voters (18–30 years), middle-aged voters (31–50 years), senior voters (above 50 years), migrant-returnee families, students, private-sector workers, and public-sector employees. The diversity of participants enabled the study to capture generational and occupational differences in political perception.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Category	Subgroup	Number (N=30)
Age	18–30 (youth)	12
	31–50 (middle)	11
	50+ (senior)	7
Gender	Male	17
	Female	13
Occupation	Student	8
	Private sector	9
	Public sector	6
	Migrant-returnee family	7
District of origin	Kathmandu Valley	10
	Other urban	12
	Rural/mountain	8

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing flexibility in questioning while maintaining consistency across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted between March and April 2025, each lasting between 35 and 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Nepali and later translated into English for analysis and reporting.

Ethics approval: Ethical approval was obtained from the Nepal Academic Research Ethics Committee (NAREC approval #NAREC/2025/042). All participants provided written informed consent.

5. Findings and Empirical Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from interviews, media analysis, and social media observations. Across the dataset, participants repeatedly expressed frustration with prolonged political instability and perceived lack of development following Nepal’s transition to a federal democratic republic. These perceptions were frequently linked to broader structural concerns, including unemployment, labour migration, corruption, and institutional inefficiency.



5.1 Political Disillusionment with Traditional Parties

One of the strongest themes emerging from the interviews was deep dissatisfaction with traditional political parties. Participants frequently described established parties as disconnected from citizen needs and overly focused on internal power negotiations. A 42-year-old participant from Chitwan expressed: *"After the revolution, we believed there would be development in villages, roads, hospitals, and jobs. But leaders were busy fighting among themselves instead of working for people."* (Participant 4, Male, Age 42)

This perception reflects a broader pattern identified in transitional democracies where prolonged coalition politics weakens public confidence in institutional governance (Müller, 2016). Another participant emphasised the repetitive nature of leadership cycles: *"The same leaders return again and again. They change positions but not behaviour."* (Participant 11, Female, Age 36)

Participants frequently associated political continuity with stagnation rather than stability. The repetition of familiar leadership figures reinforced perceptions of elite entrenchment—a key element in populist mobilisation narratives (Moffitt, 2016). Media coverage during the study period similarly highlighted public dissatisfaction with established parties, frequently emphasising governance delays, coalition conflicts, and corruption investigations.

5.2 Youth Political Awakening and Generational Change

Youth political awareness emerged as a defining feature of contemporary political transformation in Nepal. Participants across age groups recognised the increasing visibility and activism of younger citizens. A 23-year-old university student from Kathmandu stated: *"Our generation does not want to wait for decades. We want results now. Social media helps us understand politics faster than before."* (Participant 7, Male, Age 23)

This finding aligns with global scholarship indicating that digital communication platforms significantly expand political awareness among younger populations (Loader et al., 2014). Participants over the age of 40 also acknowledged generational differences in political expectations: *"Young people today ask more questions than we did. They challenge leaders openly."* (Participant 2, Female, Age 51)

5.3 Influence of the September 2025 Gen Z Movement

A central finding of this study concerns the perceived political significance of the September 2025 youth-led mobilisation movement. Participants frequently referenced the movement as a turning point in political consciousness. A 26-year-old participant noted: *"After the September protests, many people realised that youth can influence politics without relying on traditional parties."* (Participant 9, Male, Age 26)

Another participant described the emotional atmosphere surrounding the demonstrations: *"There was fear, but also excitement. People believed change was possible."* (Participant 14, Female, Age 29)

Digital mobilisation played a significant role in sustaining participation. Participants highlighted the importance of real-time messaging platforms, video-sharing platforms, and online activism campaigns. These findings align with scholarship on digitally mediated protest



movements, which emphasises the role of social media in accelerating mobilisation and collective identity formation (Tufekci, 2017).

5.4 Anti-Elite Sentiment and Political Narratives

Anti-elite sentiment emerged as a consistent theme across interviews. Participants frequently described political elites as detached from citizen realities. One participant explained: *"Leaders talk about development, but they do not experience the problems we face daily."* (Participant 6, Male, Age 38)

This perception aligns closely with populist ideological framing, which emphasises the moral distinction between ordinary citizens and governing elites (Mudde, 2007). Participants also linked elite privilege to corruption narratives: *"Politics has become a business. Only those close to power benefit."* (Participant 12, Female, Age 44)

5.5 Digital Media and Political Communication

Digital media emerged as one of the most influential tools shaping political awareness and mobilisation. Participants frequently credited social media platforms with expanding access to political information. A participant aged 21 stated: *"Before, people depended on television. Now we watch speeches, debates, and protests directly on our phones."* (Participant 5, Male, Age 21)

Social media observation revealed frequent use of hashtags associated with reform and accountability, viral dissemination of protest footage, and increased public debate regarding governance failures.

5.6 Migration and Comparative Political Awareness

Migration experiences played a significant role in shaping political expectations. Many participants had family members working abroad, particularly in Gulf countries and Southeast Asia. A participant explained: *"When people return from abroad, they compare Nepal with other countries. They see development elsewhere and ask why we are still behind."* (Participant 3, Male, Age 40)

Comparative exposure influenced perceptions of governance effectiveness and increased demand for accountability, reflecting broader patterns observed in migrant-sending countries (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

5.7 Institutional Distrust and Governance Concerns

Participants frequently expressed declining trust in government institutions. A 48-year-old participant stated: *"We no longer trust promises. We trust results."* (Participant 10, Male, Age 48)

Institutional distrust was reinforced by perceived inefficiencies in public services such as education, infrastructure, and healthcare. Such distrust represents a key precondition for populist political mobilisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

5.8 Emergence of Alternative Political Leadership

Participants frequently expressed support for alternative political figures perceived as reform-oriented. A 34-year-old participant explained: *"New leaders speak differently. They talk about systems, not just slogans."* (Participant 15, Female, Age 34)



These perceptions align with populist leadership models that emphasise authenticity and responsiveness to public concerns (Moffitt, 2016). Participants also associated alternative leadership with transparency and administrative efficiency.

The empirical findings reveal five dominant themes: widespread political dissatisfaction; rising youth political consciousness; influence of digital mobilisation; declining institutional trust; and support for alternative leadership. The September 2025 Gen Z movement emerged as a significant catalyst shaping public political awareness and engagement.

6. Discussion

6.1 Political Disillusionment as a Foundation for Populist Mobilisation

The findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction with traditional political parties, reflecting a crisis of political legitimacy. Populism theory suggests that such dissatisfaction provides fertile ground for anti-establishment mobilisation (Mudde, 2007). Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that populist sentiment often arises in contexts where citizens feel excluded from political decision-making. The JRC's 2023 scoping report notes that citizens' trust in institutions has decreased, creating fertile ground for narratives that portray politics as captured by corrupt or self-serving elites – a pattern clearly visible in Nepal (European Commission, 2023). The persistence of leadership cycles without perceived structural change contributed to the erosion of political trust across multiple generations. Media narratives reinforced these perceptions by highlighting corruption allegations, governance delays, and political infighting.

6.2 Youth Mobilisation and the Transformation of Political Participation

Youth political awakening emerged as one of the most significant findings of this study. The September 2025 mobilisation represented a defining moment in this transformation. Digital communication platforms played a central role in facilitating youth participation, reflecting what Tufekci (2017) describes as “networked protest.” Recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that active social media engagement is positively associated with various forms of political participation among youth, including protest and electoral action. The implications of youth mobilisation extend beyond protest participation: increased political awareness among younger voters contributes to long-term shifts in electoral behaviour and public expectations.

6.3 Digital Media as a Catalyst for Populist Narratives

Digital media emerged as a powerful mechanism shaping political discourse. Participants described social media as a primary source of political information, surpassing traditional broadcast media in accessibility and immediacy. Populist communication strategies often rely on emotionally resonant messaging distributed through digital channels (Moffitt, 2016). However, digital mobilisation also introduces challenges related to misinformation and emotional polarisation, as noted in the European meta-synthesis (Wara, 2026).

6.4 Institutional Distrust and the Rise of Alternative Leadership

Institutional distrust emerged as a central theme. Müller (2016) argues that populist leaders often gain legitimacy by presenting themselves as corrective alternatives to failing institutions. Research on democratic discontent shows that citizens with low trust in institutions are more



likely to support parties that present themselves as outsiders to the political class (Rizzo & Inglehart, 2022). Participants frequently expressed admiration for leaders perceived as independent from traditional political networks. The RSP's founder Rabi Lamichhane exemplifies this phenomenon, leveraging his television persona as a confrontational interviewer of politicians to establish anti-establishment credibility (The Diplomat, 2025).

6.5 Migration, Comparative Exposure, and Political Expectations

Migration experiences played a critical role in shaping political attitudes. Scholars studying migration politics argue that transnational exposure strengthens political awareness and reform demands (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). The findings of this study support this argument. Migration-related dissatisfaction also reinforced anti-elite sentiment, with participants frequently associating political failure with the need to seek employment abroad.

6.6 Critical Personal Reflection

Reflexive engagement formed an integral part of this research process. Observations made during fieldwork revealed a heightened sense of political urgency among participants. Public conversations frequently referenced the September 2025 mobilisation as a moment of emotional intensity and civic awakening. From a reflexive standpoint, engaging with participants across diverse demographic backgrounds highlighted the complexity of political identity formation. Conversations revealed that political preferences were rarely shaped by ideology alone; rather, they emerged from everyday experiences, economic pressures, and exposure to public discourse.

6.7 Nepal in Comparative Perspective

The patterns observed in Nepal share similarities with populist movements in other regions. Digital mobilisation has played a critical role in recent youth movements worldwide (Tufekci, 2017; Dolci, 2026). However, Nepal's political trajectory also reflects unique historical factors, including post-conflict transformation and federal restructuring. The September 2025 mobilisation represents an emerging example of digitally mediated youth activism within South Asia, following similar movements in Sri Lanka (2022) and Bangladesh (2024).

7. Conclusion

This study examined the political rise of alternative political forces in Nepal through the analytical lens of populism theory, with particular attention to the role of youth mobilisation, institutional distrust, and digital communication. Drawing on qualitative data collected from 30 participants in Kathmandu between March and April 2026, the research explored how citizens interpret political transformation following decades of democratic transition and governance instability.

The findings demonstrate that political dissatisfaction remains widespread across generational and occupational groups. Participants repeatedly expressed frustration with traditional political leadership, highlighting concerns regarding corruption, repeated leadership cycles, bureaucratic inefficiency, and limited visible development outcomes. These concerns reflect



patterns observed in other democracies where institutional stagnation contributes to declining public trust (Mudde, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Youth political awakening emerged as a defining feature of contemporary political transformation in Nepal. A central contribution of this study is its examination of the political impact of the September 2025 youth mobilisation movement. Participants consistently described it as a turning point that expanded civic engagement and public dialogue. Taken together, the findings suggest that Nepal's political transformation reflects a broader shift toward citizen-driven political participation, facilitated by digital communication and generational change.

This research contributes to the academic literature on populism and democratic transformation in several ways. First, the study extends populism theory into the context of post-conflict democratic transition, demonstrating how anti-establishment narratives emerge within South Asian governance environments. Second, the study highlights the role of youth mobilisation as a structural driver of populist discourse, suggesting that generational dynamics play a critical role in shaping political narratives. Third, the research contributes to scholarship on digital political participation by illustrating how social media platforms function as catalysts for collective action (Tufekci, 2017). Fourth, the integration of qualitative interviews with media and social media observations offers methodological innovation, strengthening analytical depth.

The findings carry several implications for policymakers and democratic stakeholders in Nepal. Strengthening institutional accountability through improved transparency and reduced corruption may help restore public trust. Enhancing youth engagement mechanisms through structured platforms for policy discussion and civic education could productively channel political energy. Promoting responsible digital governance through media literacy initiatives may help citizens critically evaluate political content. Addressing migration-driven political frustration by improving domestic employment opportunities could reduce dissatisfaction linked to international comparisons.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of 30 participants restricts generalisability, and data collection limited to Kathmandu may not fully capture regional political variations. Future research should expand geographic coverage to rural districts, conduct longitudinal analysis of youth mobilisation effects, pursue comparative studies involving other South Asian countries, and incorporate survey-based methods to test qualitative findings across larger populations.

This study highlights the evolving relationship between citizens and political institutions in Nepal. Participants demonstrated strong awareness of governance challenges and expressed growing willingness to engage in civic activism. The September 2025 mobilisation appears to have strengthened public confidence in collective political action. The findings suggest that Nepal is experiencing a period of political transition shaped by generational change, digital connectivity, and increasing public accountability demands. Understanding these dynamics is essential for strengthening democratic resilience and promoting inclusive governance.



Author Contribution:

Binod Adhikari – conceptualisation, data collection, writing – original draft;
Subhadra Nepal – methodology, formal analysis, writing – review & editing;
Nar Bahadur Saud – supervision, theoretical framework, validation.

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