

Policy-Practice Gaps in Polling Station Determination in Nepal: Implications for Voter Rights and Democratic Integrity

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Abstract

This article assesses gaps in Nepal's election-related laws and procedures and the current state of polling stations and polling centers, using pragmatic data collected through a qualitative approach. A widely accepted principle in a democratic system is that every vote holds equal value. Therefore, the state should create a ground that ensures all voters have an equal and accessible opportunity to cast their votes. The findings from the fifty-six polling stations included in this article have demonstrated that many are in a weaker condition than required by the prescribed standards or work procedures. Incorporating these findings reinforces the claim that, in Nepal, rules and criteria governing the location of polling stations are not merely technical issues but are fundamental to inclusive participation and electoral integrity. Consequently, the state bears a responsibility to determine polling stations in consultation with local voters, in such a way that ensures every eligible voter can exercise the right to vote easily, safely, and effectively.

Keywords: polling station, polling center, voters' accessibility, voter rights, electoral participation, policy gaps, democratic integrity

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Introduction

The history of democracy is closely intertwined with the history of elections. Periodic elections are often described as the lifeblood of democracy. The credibility and integrity of the government depend on how it is formed and on the number of votes cast in the election, which together determine whether it can genuinely be considered a representative democracy or just a so-called democracy. Representative democracy emphasizes citizen participation primarily through the election of representatives who make binding decisions on behalf of the public (Schumpeter, 1942; Dahal, 1971).

To strengthen democracy and build public trust in the electoral system, the percentage of citizens who vote is of significant importance. One key factor shaping voter turnout is the accessibility of polling stations and the comfort with which citizens can cast their ballots, regardless of their diverse capacities. Free, fair, and accessible elections depend essentially on how polling stations are mapped, located, and administered. In Nepal, formal commitments to democratic participation (Teorell, 2006) coexist with institutional weaknesses and politicized electoral practices, creating gaps between policy and practice that can undermine voter rights and electoral integrity (Norris, Frank, & Martinez i Coma, 2015).

This article examines the gaps between the legal provisions and the policy framework governing elections and their execution in practice, with particular attention to how diverse territorial localities and citizens' capacities are incorporated into processes of democratic participation (Michels, 2011). With this perspective, the study assesses the state of election management in Nepal by selecting sample polling stations and evaluating them against existing laws,

regulations, and work procedures. The findings aim to provide an empirical basis for developing an advocacy strategy to address these gaps and propose measures to improve election management in Nepal.

Voter Turnout Patterns

When examining voter turnout rates globally, participation ranges from around 24% to 92%. The data are drawn from multiple reputable online sources. The following table presents illustrative examples of voter turnout in various countries worldwide.

Table 1

Voter Turnout in Nepal's National Elections (1999-2022)

Country	Voter Turnout (%)	Remarks/Source
Belgium	88-92	A very high turnout is often linked to compulsory voting laws.
Australia	80-90	Higher turnout in the national election in 2015 under its compulsory voting system
Sweden	82-84	Strong participation in parliamentary elections
Denmark	80-85	Among Nordic democracies with high civic engagement
Norway	75-80	Consistently above global averages (International IDEA, n.d.)
France	73-77	Presidential and parliamentary elections,
Germany	69-75	Typical turnout for federal elections
United Kingdom	63-75	Varied by election year, often lower than Nordic/Western Europe peers. (Pew Research Centre, n.d.)
Nepal	61.85	General Election (House of Representatives and provincial assembly) in 2022.
Canada	60-70	Below are some comparable democracies (Pew Research Centre, n.d.)

Country	Voter Turnout (%)	Remarks/Source
United State	55-66	Lower than most Western democracies (varies by election types). (Pew Research Centre, n.d.)
Japan	54	2024 Japanese general election turnout: Voter turnout was 53.84 %, marking one of the lowest participation rates in post-World War II elections in Japan
South Africa	85	One of the highest in Africa per comparative data. (International IDEA, n.d.)
India	60-68	Large electorate but moderate relative turnout. (International IDEA, n.d.)
Colombia	33-35	Lower turnout in some national polls. (International IDEA, n.d.)
Senegal	24	Very low turnout in the comparative table

Source: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database>

Comparing voter turnout data in Nepal from 1999 to 2022, participation in most national elections has ranged between 60% and 80% of eligible voters. The effective management of polling stations and polling centers has played a crucial role in achieving this level of participation. Several factors directly influence voter turnout, including the distance voters must travel to reach polling stations, the extent to which polling stations are senior citizen-friendly, accessibility for persons with disabilities, and the provision of appropriate places for pregnant or postpartum women. Addressing these factors offers significant opportunities to increase voter participation in upcoming elections. The following table demonstrates the voter turnout patterns in the last 25 years of electoral history in Nepal.

Table2*Voter Turnout in Nepal's National Elections (1999-2022)*

Election	Year (BS/AD)	Eligible voters' turnout (%)	Data source
General Election (House of Representatives and provincial assembly)	2022 (2079 BS)	61.85	Official result: Published election result in 2079 on ECN's website
General Election (House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly)	2017 (2074 BS)	68.63	Official result: Published election result in 2074 on ECN's website
Constituent Assembly Election	2013 (2070 BS)	79.82	Official result: Published election result in 2013 on ECN's website
Constituent Assembly Election	2008 (2064 BS)	61.69 Lowest since 1991	Official result: Published election result in 2008 on ECN's website
General Election	1999 (2056 BS)	65.79	Official result: Published election result in 1999 on ECN's website

Source: Election Commission Nepal, <https://election.gov.np>

A comparison of the above two tables indicates that Nepal does not necessarily exhibit an exceptionally low voter turnout when only resident citizens are taken into account. However, this picture is substantially shaped by the fact that a large proportion of Nepali citizens reside outside the country. According to the 2021 National Census of Nepal, approximately 2.1 million Nepali citizens are recorded as living abroad, representing roughly 7.4-7.5 percent of the total population. According to the Election Commission Nepal (ECN)'s estimated data, 4-5 million voters have been living abroad.

Viewed from this perspective, the number of voters residing abroad appears

substantial; however, the population of eligible voters living within the country who did not cast a vote is more than twice as large. Ensuring that these domestic voters can effectively exercise their right to vote, through appropriate institutional and administrative arrangements, is therefore a central concern of the government and the Election Commission of Nepal. The Election Commission is mandated to conduct, supervise, direct, and oversee elections (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). It is also responsible for preparing and updating voter lists, as well as for locating, relocating, and determining polling stations in accordance with legal provisions and the needs of citizens.

This study identifies the maximum distance prescribed under the election laws framework for reaching a polling station. However, concerns have been raised that in many remote polling areas – and even in some geographically accessible locations – polling stations have not been designated in accordance with established standards to ensure that all citizen can exercise their voting rights.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the extent to which polling stations comply with the legal provisions and standards governing their determination. This study has covered all seven provinces and three ecological regions of the country. Sampled polling stations were purposively selected, primarily from rural and geographically remote areas; however, some urban and plain land locations were also included to ensure comprehensive coverage. In total, 56 polling stations were selected from 54 wards belonging to 26 local levels across 22 districts in all seven provinces.

A comprehensive review and systematic analysis of the relevant legal framework governing polling stations in Nepal was undertaken. This includes the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the Election Commission Act, 2073, the Election Constituency Determination Act, 2073, and the Work Procedure for the Determination of Polling Stations and Polling Centers, 2077. In addition, all other legal instruments related to the establishment and regulation of polling stations in

Nepal were reviewed.

Primary data were collected through telephone interviews with elected representatives and social leaders from respective wards and municipalities. The interviews were focused on assessing the distance between polling stations and the most distant voting communities, identifying voter inconveniences, and exploring potential measures to enhance accessibility and inclusiveness in the voting process. The data were verified through consultations with officials of the ECN, who provided insights into election-related laws, procedures, including mechanisms for the review and revision of polling stations and polling centers, as well as the determination of polling stations. This process also facilitated the identification of polling stations and the relevant ward or Rural/Municipality representatives to be contacted.

This multi-pronged methodology enabled a comprehensive examination of the ECN's legal provisions and operational practices, while systematically incorporating stakeholder perspectives. Such methodological triangulations enhanced the study's credibility, contextual relevance, and evidence-based rigor by cross-validating findings from multiple data sources and methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Denzin, 2012; Yin, 2018).

Literature Review

Standards and Criteria for Determining Polling Stations

This section examines the procedures and key criteria for determining polling stations, in line with the existing legal and policy framework. Polling stations are a core institutional site of electoral participation, as they are the physical locations where voters are cast and counted by the election administration, and thus directly shape how citizens' formal political rights are translated into actual participation. In Nepal, the determination and placement of polling stations are guided by the existing constitutional, legal, and policy framework on elections, including provisions on representation and access embedded in the electoral system (Mallik & Pokhrel, 2024).

International and comparative evidence shows that decisions about polling

station location, capacity, and assignment can significantly affect voter turnout by altering the costs of voting, such as distance to the polling center, congestion, and the need to search for a new location (Abramson & Thrower, 2025). Harris (2020) argues that even relatively small increases in distance or changes in assigned polling sites can reduce in-person turnout, with particularly pronounced effects in elderly people, people with disabilities, women, and marginalized minorities and geographically tough locations.

The determination of polling stations is primarily guided by constitutional mandates, statutory provisions, and administrative guidelines issued by ECN. In Nepal's context, marked by difficult geography, caste and ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, and varied local political cultures and power dynamics, these administrative decisions are therefore likely to be a key determinant of who votes, overall turnout numbers, and whether elections proceed peacefully or are marred by tension and violence (Guragain, Pokharel, & Adhikari, 2024). In some cases, the placement of polling stations and centers can determine voter demographics, such as caste, ethnicity, gender, or settlement-based voting patterns. This, in turn, can significantly impact a candidate's or party's chances of success. As a result, the Election Commission often faces pressure from political parties, communities, and candidates to relocate, retain, establish, or remove polling stations in specific areas.

In practice, the ECN considers multiple criteria when determining polling stations. These include voter population size, geographical accessibility, administrative boundaries, physical infrastructure availability, security conditions, and inclusivity considerations for women, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, and marginalized communities. The distance between voters' residences and polling stations is a crucial factor, particularly in Nepal's mountainous and remote regions, where terrain and transportation limitations can significantly affect voter turnout and electoral participation.

Additionally, the determination of polling stations is influenced by ward-level boundaries, settlement patterns, and recommendations from local

governments, election officials, and political leaders. However, empirical studies and election observations in Nepal suggest that gaps often exist between policy provisions and implementation, resulting in long travel distances, voter inconvenience, and unequal access to voting facilities - especially for rural, remote, and disadvantaged communities. These challenges underscore the need for evidence-based, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches in determining polling stations to ensure voter rights and democratic inclusivity.

Overview of Legal Framework

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 grants ECN the authority to conduct, supervise, direct, and manage all elections organized by the Government of Nepal. In addition to these responsibilities, the ECN is mandated to prepare voter lists, determine and periodically review polling stations, and conduct referendums on issues of national importance. To effectively carry out these responsibilities, the ECN operates systematically and consistently within its constitutional and legal framework.

Article 24 of the Constitution specifies provisions related to the ECN, while Article 246 outlines its duties, powers, and functions. The promulgation of the Constitution by the Constituent Assembly established Nepal's federal governance system and structure, comprising three tiers - federal, provincial, and local. Administratively, the nation is divided into seven provinces, 753 local levels, and 6,724 wards.

Apparently, before each periodic election, the ECN undertakes a comprehensive review of polling stations and centers (ECN, 2077). Following the election laws and polling station determination procedure, the ECN has revised polling stations for the House of Representatives election scheduled for 5th March, 2026, in Nepal. For this purpose, a total of 10,967 polling stations are designated to facilitate voter participation across the country. Additionally, the ECN finalized the establishment of 23,112 polling centers associated with these polling stations as part of its election preparedness measures. However, previously there were 10,756 polling stations and 22,272 polling centers across Nepal.

This review evaluates critical factors, including geographical remoteness, voter population, migration trends, electoral security, and administrative requirements. Based on this assessment, the ECN makes informed decisions regarding the establishment of new polling stations, the relocation of existing ones, or the removal of stations deemed unnecessary.

This structured and evidence-based approach underscores the ECN's commitment to ensuring an inclusive and efficient electoral process while addressing logistical and accessibility challenges across diverse regions of the country.

Policy Review

Article 48 of the Election Commission Act, 2073 provides the Commission with the authority to frame rules, stating: *"The Commission may frame necessary rules to carry out the objectives of this Act."* Similarly, Article 50 grants the Commission the power to prepare directives and manuals, stating: *"The Commission may, according to this Act and the rules formed under it, prepare and enforce directives or procedures, as necessary."* Exercising the legal authority conferred by this Act, the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) has formulated the *Polling Station/Booth¹ and Polling Centre² Determination Procedure, 2077*. The ECN utilizes this procedure to perform tasks such as establishing, modifying, adding, or relocating polling stations and polling centers, ensuring they align with legal and procedural requirements.

The objectives of the work procedure are stated in the preamble,

To facilitate easy movement and accessibility for voters to the polling station and polling centers, to ensure arrangements for higher voter turnout, and to make access to the Polling Station safe. ' It has become necessary to determine

1 Polling Station: "Polling Station" refers to a place designated by the Commission for voting in an election. This term also includes the area occupied by the voting location or the polling premises.

2 Polling Center: "Polling Centre" refers to a polling centre established in accordance with the prevailing federal laws for the purpose of voting in an election. This term also includes sub-polling centres.

Polling Stations and polling centers. Therefore, in the exercise of the powers conferred by Section 50 of the Election Commission Act, 2017, the Election Commission has formulated these procedures. (ECN, 2014).

Chapter 2 of this procedure provides the basis for determining polling stations and polling centers. According to this procedure, Section 3, polling places and polling centers are to be determined based on the following criteria³. Chapter 4 of the 'Work Procedure, 2077' states the standards for determining polling stations and centers. According to this section, the key provisions for determining polling stations are given below. While determining polling sites, the provisions under Clause 3 must be adhered to along with the set standards⁴.

3 (a) Polling places and polling centres established for the Local Level Member, Provincial Assembly Member, and House of Representatives elections of 2074 (B.S.). (b) Density of voters. (c) Availability of transportation facilities. (d) Accessibility through alternative routes and ease of access. (e) Condition of infrastructure such as buildings, communication facilities (telephone, internet), electricity, drinking water, and toilets. (f) Security arrangements. (g) Geographical location. (h) Availability of public spaces. (i) Possibility of arranging vote counting at the polling place itself. (j) Agreement of stakeholders involved in the election.

4 (a) At least one polling site must be established in each ward of a rural municipality or municipality. (b) If more than one polling site needs to be established in a single ward, the polling site shall be determined based on the details provided by the District Polling Site and Centre Recommendation Committee.

(c) Polling sites should generally be established no more than two kilometers from one side in urban areas and no more than four kilometers in rural areas.

(d) If multiple polling sites are located within the distance mentioned in clause (c) and it is possible to merge them into one suitable site, then only one site should be selected as the polling site.

(e) Polling sites should be established at least one kilometer away from international borders. Sites where routes from other countries are used should, as far as possible, not be selected as polling sites.

(f) If a previously designated polling site's physical structure has deteriorated or is insufficient for polling, another polling site within the same ward should be selected to facilitate all voters.

(g) If it is not possible to move all voters as per clause (f), a portion of voters may be moved to another suitable polling site, ensuring that the voter numbers are explicitly mentioned.

(h) If a previously designated polling site at a community school has been closed or merged with another school, the polling site should be designated at the former school or another suitable nearby location.

(i) Except in cases mentioned in clauses (d), (e), (f), (g), and (h), previously designated polling sites shall generally remain as they are.

(j) Polling sites should be selected where enough space is available to construct the required number of polling centres as per the sample structure in Schedule-3.

(k) As far as possible, open spaces (such as grounds, fields, courtyards, etc.) and religious sites should not be selected as polling sites.

Polling sites established earlier and recommended by committees with geographic information system (GIS) data, voter-friendly ramps, and details of available physical infrastructure, as well as published electoral maps, should be retained unless necessary to merge them elsewhere.

Subsequently, according to this work procedure, the 'Standards for Determining Polling Centers' are set. It states that 'while determining polling centers within the polling sites established under Clause 10, the following standards must be followed⁵'.

Reviewing the mechanisms and provisions under election management laws, working procedures, and mechanisms for polling station determination has not found many lacks and gaps. However, the discourse surrounding voter turnout has highlighted concerns from various perspectives, particularly among voters and stakeholders, that inappropriate polling locations have been a contributing factor to low voter turnout in past elections. This study seeks to examine the reality of polling station allocation by comparing the ECN standards with the actual practices of establishing polling stations and polling centers nationwide.

However, if it is necessary to select such locations, specific details regarding additional materials required for constructing polling centres should be mentioned under the remarks section.

(I) As far as possible, polling sites should be selected in locations with alternative routes for accessibility.

5 (a) Generally, one polling Centre should be designated for up to 1,000 voters.

(b) If the number of voters at a polling site exceeds 1,000, additional polling Centres should be established at the same site, with one polling Centre for every additional 1,000 voters.

However, no polling site shall have more than seven polling Centres.

(c) Based on the recommendations and details provided by the District Polling Site and Centre Recommendation Committee, the Commission shall determine the number of polling Centres at each polling site. These Centres shall be named sequentially, such as the first polling Centre (i), second polling Centre (ii), third polling Centre (iii), and so on.

(d) The voter details for each polling Centre determined under clause (c) shall be prepared by the Commission's Secretariat and submitted to the Commission.

(e) The final number of polling Centres at any polling site, as determined by the Commission, shall be based on the final voter list, the number of voters, the polling process established by the Commission, and the technology used in the polling process.

Results and Discussions

Polling Station Accessibility and Complications

The comprehensive results from the sampled polling stations are presented in tabular form, with descriptions provided in the associated narrative. The review results are disaggregated by province, with key remarks offering insights into the specific logical and contextual challenges encountered at each polling station. However, most respondents reported the time required to travel to the polling stations rather than the precise distance or spatial measurement between the community and the polling station, a limitation also noted in previous field-based electoral studies (ECN, 2014).

Empirical Evidence from Sudurpashim Province

Across the districts of Bajhang, Darchula, and Kailali, voters navigate rugged landscapes, steep hills, and long distances to cast a vote. Yet, these challenges also highlight the pressing need for more accessible and inclusive polling infrastructure.

Table 3

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Sudurpashchim Province

District	Name of Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters
Bajhang	Bungal	2	Dahabagar	Surma boarder	5-6 hrs	50 approx.
		5	Danda Gau, M.V. School	Kanda	2 hrs	20
Bajhang	Saipal RM	1 & 2	Ghalan, ward-1	Jima	5-6 hrs /1 day	20-25
Bajhang	Saipal RM	5	Thalara	Neuna and Balauni	2 hrs from both village	150

Darchula	Api Himal RM	1	Site Polling Station	Ghusa	3 hrs	40
Darchula	Api Himal RM	2	Dhura	Daibhat	2	80
Kailali	Chure RM.	1	Bhagawati Basic School Nigale Station	Sayal, Babaina, Bhasu	2-3	NA
Kailali	Chure RM	4	Sajahpur school Sayala	upper sahajpur	4-5 km	200-250
Kailali	Chure RM	2	Salle Khola	Nigali	4-5 km	150
Kailali	Chure RM	5	- Shukra Ma Vi & Thanidanda	Khairala. Thanidanda	8-9 km	NA
Kailali	Chure RM	6	- Shantinagar - Bayala	<u>Gwase</u>	8-10 km 10-12 km	440

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

Bungal Municipality in Bajhang district provides a clear illustration of the challenges faced by voters. In Ward No. 2, the polling station at Dahabagar serves the Surma border area, but reaching it requires a five- to six-hour walk for 50 voters. Similarly, in Ward No. 5, the polling station at Danda Gau, located at the local public school, serves a small village situated atop a hill. The steep and arduous two-hour journey to the station discourages many of the 20 eligible voters from making the trip.

The Saipal Rural Municipality in Bajhang faces its own set of challenges. In Wards 1 and 2, voters from Jima must travel five to six hours—or even a full day—to reach the polling station in Ghalan, located in Ward No. 1. This unresolved dispute has left voters frustrated, as they feel their voices are marginalized by the lack of a polling station in their own ward. Meanwhile, in Ward No. 5, the polling station at Thalara serves the villages of Neuna and Balauni, both two hours away. Voters from these settlements must cross the

formidable Yarangneury hill, a physically demanding journey that underscores the need for more accessible voting locations.

In Darchula District, the Api Himal Rural Municipality grapples with similar issues. In Ward No. 1, voters must trek three hours to reach the polling station, prompting demands for a separate station within their village. The same sentiment echoes in Ward No. 2, where voters from Daibhat face a two-hour journey to the polling station at Dhura. These communities have repeatedly called for polling stations closer to their homes, but their pleas remain unanswered.

Kailali District's Chure Rural Municipality presents a complex tapestry of challenges and resourcefulness. In Ward No. 1, voters from Sayal, Babaina, and Bhasu must navigate a two-to-three-hour journey up and down steep hillsides to reach the polling stations at Bhagawati Basic School and Nigale Station. For those coming from Nigale, the journey is particularly taxing. The polling station's location above the settlements forces residents to travel three to four kilometres, a hardship that could be alleviated by relocating the station closer to the marketplace where many reside.

In Ward No. 4, voters from Upper Sahajpur must travel four to five kilometres to reach the polling station at Sajahpur School. To manage this, families often send one or two members a day earlier to stay overnight with relatives or friends. These individuals cast their votes early in the morning and reunite with their families on the way back. While some families arrange private transportation to facilitate voting, this practice has been met with protests, leaving many to rely on their own physical endurance.

Ward No. 2 in Chure Rural Municipality sees voters from Nigali trekking four to five kilometers to the polling station at Salle Khola. Similarly, in Ward No. 5, voters from Khairala and Thanidanda face an eight to nine-kilometer journey to reach the polling stations at Shukra Ma Vi and Thanidanda. The longest distances are faced by voters in Ward No. 6, where those from Gwase must travel 8 to 10 kilometers to Shantinagar and 10 to 12 kilometers to Bayala. With 440 voters in this ward, the logistical challenges are immense.

Empirical Evidence from Karnali Province

Geographically, this province is difficult to travel in, and the high Rocky Mountains, huge hills, and deep river basins exhibit its remoteness. Road services are not good enough yet. Even for the general people, there are various types of difficulties in the polling station for senior citizens, disabled people, special needs women, and others have a scary situation. This study randomly selected 4 local levels of 4 different districts and included 9 wards. The distance to the polling station of the sampled wards from the community/settlement and the time taken to reach the place are presented in the table below.

Table 4

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Karnali Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters
Mugu	Mugum Karmarong	5	Shera	Shera, Daura	3 hrs	300 approx.
		7	Thaila	Chimada	2 hrs	300
Humla	Namkha RM	6	Jang, Haljee, Til	Jang, Haljee, Til	30 min (1:00) hrs	100 approx.
Jumla	Guthichaur	1-5	All	all	Less than 1hr, 30 min	80 approx.
Surkhet	Chukune RM	1	Dhansen and Dhansara	Talgau, Talchaghat, Simali	3:30 hrs.-4:00 hrs.	200 approx.

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

Empirical Evidence from Lumbini Province

In the rugged terrains of Rukum (East) and Gulmi districts, the challenges of democratic participation are vividly illustrated through the narratives of local leaders and residents. In Putha Uttarganga Rural Municipality of Rukum (East), Ward No. 2 is a unique geographical puzzle. The ward is shaped like a

'C', encircling another ward in its Centre. This peculiar layout creates significant challenges for voters, as the two polling Centres - Luptunge School and Hardiwang Ground in Pelma - are located far from the settlements of Dulya and Jhulyang. Residents must trek for 3 to 6 hours through steep uphill and downhill paths to cast their votes, as there are no transportation facilities available. With 300-400 voters in the area, the distance and terrain make voting a daunting task. Recognising this issue, the ward chairpersons of wards 1, 2, and 3, along with ward members and local intellectuals, travelled to Kathmandu to advocate for adjusting ward boundaries and addressing other pressing demands with the government.

Table 5

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Lumbini Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance/ Time to reach	No. of voters
Rukum (East)	Putha Uttarganga RM	2	Luptunge school, Hardiwang ground Pelma	Dulya & Jhulyang	3-5/6 hours	300-400
Gulmi	Kaligandaki RM	1 & 5		3	2 hrs. (Up-Downhill)	400-500

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

Meanwhile, in Gulmi's Kaligandaki Rural Municipality, a similar struggle unfolds. Ward No. 1 and Ward No. 5 share a polling station that is 2 hours away on foot, involving arduous uphill and downhill travel. Khim Bahadur Thapa, the chairperson of Ward No. 2, highlights the irony of his situation: while the polling station for his ward is conveniently located next to his house, he is required to vote in his own ward's designated Centre, which is a 2-hour walk away. The stories from Rukum (East) and Gulmi serve as a call to action for policymakers

to address these challenges, making voting a more inclusive and less burdensome experience for every citizen.

The case of Putha Uttarganga Rural Municipality, Ward No. 2, highlights the broader issue of polling accessibility in Nepal's rural and mountainous regions. The ongoing advocacy efforts by local leaders demonstrate the importance of government responsiveness in ensuring fair and inclusive elections. If successful, their lobbying could set a precedent for similar administrative adjustments in other regions facing geographical and infrastructural challenges.

Table 6

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Gandaki Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters approx.
Manang	Manang Nyismyang	1	Pisang	Talekhu	2-2:30 hrs.	60
Manang	Manang Nyismyang	4	Bhumde	Manang	2-2:30 hrs.	150-200
Myagdi	Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality	4	Buddi Bikash Mavi	Naura, Techung, Nerwang and others	4- 5 hrs.	300-400
Nawalparasi (Purba)	Hupsekot Rural Municipality	4, 5,6				

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

In the remote and mountainous district of Manang, the challenges of accessing polling stations are a recurring theme. In the municipality of Manang Ngisyang, Ward No. 1, the polling station in Pisang serves the settlement of Talekhu. However, voters must endure a 2 to 2.5-hour journey to reach the polling Centre. With approximately 60 voters in the area, the limited accessibility

highlights the need for better arrangements, such as allowing vehicles to operate in designated areas with special passes. Additionally, increasing the number of polling stations could significantly ease the burden on voters. Similarly, in Ward No. 4, the polling station in Bhumde serves the settlement of Manang, requiring another 2 to 2.5-hour trek for 150-200 voters. These long travel times underscore the logistical difficulties faced by residents in this high-altitude region.

In Myagdi district, the challenges are equally pronounced. In Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality, Ward No. 4, the polling station at Buddhi Bikash Mavi serves settlements like Naura, Techung, and Nerwang. Voters here must travel 4 to 5 hours to cast their ballots, and as a result, voter turnout is only around 50%. Compounding the issue is a systemic problem: individuals who obtained their identification cards while living with their parents often face difficulties voting after marriage, as they are required to return to their parental home to vote. Traveling back is often impractical, disenfranchising many. Additionally, some families find themselves split across different wards, with siblings assigned to separate polling stations. This disorganization has left many voters frustrated, as those who once had nearby polling stations now face long journeys. This issue is not unique to Dhaulagiri but is common across many rural municipalities in Myagdi.

In contrast, the situation in Nawalparasi (Purba) offers a more positive example. In Hupsekot Rural Municipality, Wards 4, 5, and 6 have relatively accessible polling stations, with most voters needing to travel no more than 1 hour and 30 minutes. This accessibility has been noted by Ms. Laxmi Devi Pandey, Chairperson of Hupsekot Rural Municipality and the National Federation of Rural Municipalities. Her insights and experiences, documented in a brief case study within this report, highlight the importance of thoughtful planning and infrastructure in ensuring that democratic processes are inclusive and efficient. Her leadership serves as a model for other rural municipalities striving to improve voter accessibility.

The explanation of the findings from Manang, Myagdi, and Nawalparasi

(Purba) shows the stark contrasts in voter accessibility across Nepal's diverse landscapes. While some areas struggle with long travel times, systemic disorganization, and low voter turnout, others demonstrate that with proper planning and leadership, voting can be made more accessible. These stories call for targeted interventions, such as increasing polling stations, improving transportation options, and addressing systemic issues in voter registration, to ensure that every citizen can exercise their democratic rights without undue hardship.

Empirical Evidence from Bagmati Province

In the diverse landscapes of Nepal, the journey to cast a vote is often a testament to the resilience and determination of its citizens. From the high-altitude regions of Rasuwa to the rolling hills of Sindhuli, the narratives of voters and their struggles to reach polling stations paint an intense picture of the challenges and successes of democratic participation.

Table 7

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Bagmati Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters Approx.
Rasuwa	Gosainkunda RM	5	Saprubesi	Barkhu	6 km, 1 hr 30 min	600
Rasuwa	Naukunda RM	2	Yarsa	Doklaynga	1hr 30 min	130
Dhading	Rubi valley RM	1	2 polling stations	3 villages	1-2 hours	100
Lalitpur	Konjyosom RM	1	Chaughare, Siddhikali High School	Thosne Khola area	30 mins	200
Lalitpur	Konjyosom RM	1	Chaughare, Bagbhairab High School	Gurdung Pakha	1.5 hrs	300

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters Approx.
Lalitpur	Konjyosom RM	3	Dalchoki, Ward Office	Bhaise, Khoptedanda, Bimire	2-3 hours	250
Lalitpur	Konjyosom RM	5	Bhardeu		1	
Dolakha	Gaurishankar	1	Ibithan	Suri, Tinekhu, Mulabari	1 hour and more	
Sindhuli	Golanjar	1	Dhansar	Gun gaun and others	2-3 hrs	400
Sindhuli	Golanjar	3	Gwaltar	Okhle	3 hrs	200
Sindhuli	Golanjar	4	Kirate Mavi	Khokri	2-3 hrs	200
Sindhuli	Golanjar	6	Ghoksila		around 3 hrs	200

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

In Gosainkunda Rural Municipality, Ward No. 5, of Rasuwa district, voters from Barkhu must travel 6 km, it takes 1.30 hours to reach the polling station in Saprubesi for about 600 voters make this journey, crossing steep paths and unpredictable weather. Consequently, approx. 130 voters of Naukunda-2, have a polling station in Yarsa that serves the settlement of Doklayga, and need to walk about 1.30 hours. However, the absence of a bridge over the river complicates travel during the rainy season, though winter brings some relief. These challenges highlight the need for infrastructure improvements to ensure year-round accessibility.

In Dhading, the Rubi Valley Rural Municipality, Ward No. 1, has two polling stations serving three villages. While the distance is manageable, taking 1 to 2 hours depending on one's pace, the journey is particularly strenuous for senior

citizens and pregnant women, who require up to 2 hours to reach the polling Centres. This disparity underscores the importance of considering the needs of all voters, especially those with limited mobility.

In Lalitpur, the Konjyosom Rural Municipality presents a mixed picture. Ward No. 1 has two polling stations: one at Chaughare's Siddhikali High School, serving the Thosne Khola area, which is a relatively easy 30-minute walk for 200 voters. However, the second polling station at Bagbhairab High School requires approximately 300 voters from Gurdung Pakha village to walk 1.5 hours on poor roads. In Ward No. 3, the polling station at Dalchoki Ward Office serves settlements like Bhaise, Khoptedanda, and Bimire, where 250 voters must trek for 2 to 3 hours. For senior citizens, disabled individuals, and pregnant women, there are no alternative routes, making the journey particularly challenging. In contrast, Ward No. 5's polling station in Bhardeu is within an hour's walk from all settlements, offering a more accessible voting experience.

In Dolakha, Gaurishankar Rural Municipality, Ward No. 1, voters from Suri, Tinekhu, and Mulabari must travel over an hour to reach the polling station in Ibithan. To ease the burden, a multi-party meeting decided to arrange vehicles to transport voters up to 500 meters from the polling station. This collaborative effort demonstrates the potential for local solutions to improve accessibility.

In Sindhuli, Golanjar Rural Municipality faces significant challenges in ensuring accessible polling stations. In Ward No. 1, the polling station in Dhansar serves Gun Gaun and other settlements, requiring 2 to 3 hours of travel for 400 voters. Gaupalika Chairman Shankar Raj Baral emphasizes the importance of accessible polling centres, noting that approximately 10% of votes are lost due to inaccessibility, particularly affecting targeted groups like the elderly and disabled. Similarly, in Ward No. 3, voters from Okhle must trek 3 hours to reach the polling station in Gwaltar, while in Ward No. 4, the journey to Kirate Mavi from Khokri takes 2 to 3 hours for 200 voters. In Ward No. 6, the polling station in Ghoksila is around 3 hours away for another 200 voters. These long travel times highlight the urgent need for better infrastructure and more strategically located polling stations.

Empirical Evidence from Madhesh Province

Madhesh Province, primarily situated in Nepal's southern plains, faces significant electoral accessibility challenges, particularly in municipalities extending into the Chure range. The remote and scattered settlements in these hilly areas require voters to travel long distances, often through difficult terrain, to reach polling stations located in lowland areas.

Table 8

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Madhes Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time to reach	No. of voters
Dhanusha	Ganeshman Charnatha Municipality	9	Ma.Vi. Barmajhiya	Village of Chure Range	9 km	More than 300
	Ganeshman Charnatha	5	Basic School	Village of Chure Range	6-8 km	400
Siraha	Lahan	16	Barjabar Basic School, Tarigana	Bhamare Rumjatar, Maina	1.30 hours – 2 hours	400
	Lahan	15	Tarigana High School		1hour 30 min	300
	Dangadhimai	14	Bishnupur	Chure range	1.30 min	350
		13	Lalpur	Chure Range		
Parsa	Thori Rural Municipality	2	Saraswati H. School, Gautam Nagar	Ichchha Nagar	3 km	300
		3	Wadarbas	Sikaribas	4 km	300

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

In Dhanusha District, voters residing in the Chure-range settlements of Ganeshman Charnatha Municipality experience substantial travel burdens in accessing polling stations. In Ward No. 9, more than 300 voters must walk approximately 9 km to reach their designated polling station at Barmajhiya Higher Secondary School. Likewise, in Ward No. 5, around 400 voters from the Chure region are required to travel 6–8 km to access the polling station located at the Basic School.

Siraha District faces similar accessibility challenges. In Lahan Municipality, about 400 voters from Bhamare, Rumjatar, and Mainain Ward No. 16 must walk 1.5-2 hours to reach Barjabar Basic School, Tarigana. Likewise, approximately 300 voters in Ward No. 15 travel around 1.5 hours to vote at Tarigana High School. In Dangadhimai Municipality, voters from Chure-range Wards 13 and 14 face comparable difficulties in accessing polling stations in Danda Tol and Bishnupur.

A unique challenge exists in Thori Rural Municipality of Parsa District, where voters from Ichchha Nagar (Ward No. 2) and Sikaribas (Ward No. 3) must cross a national park to reach polling stations at Saraswati High School, Gautam Nagar, and Wadarbas, respectively. The risk posed by wild animals makes the journey unsafe and discourages voter participation. To mitigate this, officials have proposed establishing a shared polling station at a more accessible location within the ward boundaries.

Empirical Evidence from Koshi Province

In Panchthar District, voters in Yangwarak Rural Municipality, Ward No. 2, must travel 4 to 5 hours to reach their designated polling station in Narayani, Varma. Many of these residents are livestock farmers living in high-altitude regions. To ensure they can cast their votes, some leave their homes a day in advance, while others make the long journey on the day of the election.

Similarly, in Sankhuwasabha District, approximately 850 voters from the villages of Barngdak, Mangdakha, and Pokhuwa-Pangdanda in Makalu Rural Municipality, Ward No. 6, must walk 3 to 4 hours to vote at Deepjyoti Basic School, Dadanda Gaun. The ward office has requested that the polling station be

relocated to its premises, as the voting process disrupts school activities. However, even if the polling station is moved, the fundamental issue of long travel distances for voters remains unresolved.

Table 9

Distance, accessibility, and voter distribution of selected polling stations in Koshi Province

District	Municipality	Ward No.	Polling Station	Settlement	Distance / Time	No. of voters
Panchthar	Yangwarak RM	2	Narayani	Varme	4-5 hrs	100
Sankhu-wasabha	Makalu RM	6	DeepJyoti Basic School, Dadanda Gaun	Barngdak Mangdakha Pokhuwa-Pangdanda	3-4 hrs	800-900
Morang	Letang Municipality	7	Mahendra High School, Waranggi, Ward Office	Phurketar	2-3 hrs	150
				Khedarjung	2-3 hrs	350
				Samala	2-3 hrs	150
Morang	Letang Municipality	7	Jyoti Basic School, Simana			

Source: Telephone interview, 2025

In Morang District, the restructuring of ward boundaries has created new accessibility issues. In ward no 7 of Letang Municipality, voters from Phurketar, Khedarjung, and Samala must now travel 2 to 3 hours to reach the polling station at Mahendra High School, Waranggi. Previously, these settlements belonged to

different wards with more accessible polling locations, but after merging into a single ward, the increased travel distance has posed a significant challenge for voters.

However, in ward no 7 of Letang Municipality, voters assigned to Jyoti Basic School, Simana, face no major accessibility concerns, as all voters in this area need to travel less than an hour to reach the polling station. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that all eligible voters, regardless of their location, have equal opportunities to participate in the democratic process.

Gaps Analysis

Legal Framework and Standards

The ECN operates under a robust legal framework, including the Constitution of Nepal, the Election Commission Act, and the Polling Station/ Booth and Polling Centre Determination Procedure. These laws and procedures provide clear guidelines for determining polling stations and centres, emphasising accessibility, voter density, infrastructure, and security.

Moreover, the ECN has established standards for polling stations, such as proximity (2 km in urban areas and 4 km in rural areas), infrastructure requirements, and the need for alternative routes. Polling Centres are to be allocated based on voter numbers, with one centre for every 1,000 voters, covered at seven centres per polling station.

Realities on the Ground

Despite existing legal standards, significant accessibility challenges persist in remote and rural areas. In Panchthar District, voters in Yangwarak Rural Municipality must walk 4-5 hours to reach polling stations, with some leaving home a day in advance. In Sankhuwasabha District, voters from Barngdak, Mangdakha, and Pokhuwa-Pangdanda walk 3-4 hours to cast their votes, and the use of school buildings as polling stations disrupts regular classes. In Morang District, ward mergers have increased travel times for voters in Phurketar, Khedarjung, and Samala to 2-3 hours, despite the ECN's proximity standards.

Similar conditions exist elsewhere: voters in Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality-

4, walk 4-5 hours; Putha Uttarganda-2, 3-5 hours; Chaukune Rural Municipality-1, over 3 hours; Mugum Karmarong-5 (Shera), about 3 hours; Saipal Rural Municipality-1 and 2, 5-6 hours; and Bungel Municipality-2 (Dahabagar polling station), 5-6 hours. Such cases illustrate a clear disconnect between the ECN's standards and the practical accessibility of polling stations, particularly in geographically challenging areas.

The difficulty in accessing polling stations is a contributing factor to lower voter turnout in remote areas. Voters in high-altitude and rural regions face significant logistical challenges, which discourage participation. However, many of the enquire polling stations, such as Jyoti Basic School in Morang, Guthichaur Municipality's polling stations, and others are easily accessible, while others fail to meet the ECN's proximity and infrastructure standards, undermining the principle of inclusive elections.

During this assessment process, many ward chairs and stakeholders, including voters and local authorities, have raised concerns about the appropriateness of polling locations. For instance, the use of schools as polling stations disrupts education, and relocating polling stations does not always address the core issue of voter accessibility. The ECN's reliance on District Polling Sites and Center Recommendation Committees for decisions sometimes leads to inconsistencies in implementation, as local realities are not always adequately considered.

Recommendations

By addressing these challenges through enhanced accessibility measures, infrastructure improvements, stakeholder engagement, and policy revisions, the ECN can strengthen its commitment to inclusive and participatory elections. Ensuring that every voter, regardless of their geographic location, can exercise their democratic rights with ease and dignity is essential for the continued success of Nepal's federal governance system and democratic institutions.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhance Accessibility Measures:** The ECN should prioritize the selection and placement of polling stations to minimize travel time and physical challenges for voters, particularly in remote and hilly areas. Mobile polling units or temporary stations could be considered for hard-to-reach communities.
2. **Invest in Infrastructure Improvements:** Adequate infrastructure, including safe pathways, signage, and basic facilities at polling stations, should be ensured to make voting more convenient and secure for all citizens.
3. **Engage Stakeholders in Decision-Making:** Local communities, ward representatives, and civil society organizations should be actively consulted when determining polling station locations to ensure that decisions reflect the needs and preferences of voters.
4. **Revise and Strengthen Policies:** The ECN should review and update existing legal provisions and operational guidelines to incorporate evidence-based standards for polling station placement, prioritizing inclusivity and accessibility.
5. **Promote Voter Awareness and Support:** Public awareness campaigns should inform citizens about polling station locations, travel options, and available support services to encourage higher voter turnout.
6. **Use of Technology:** In such contexts, the introduction of e-voting and early voting systems could help mitigate accessibility barriers and enhance voter participation.
7. **Monitor and Evaluate Implementation:** Continuous monitoring and evaluation of polling station accessibility and voter experiences should be conducted to identify gaps and inform future improvements.

Implementing these measures will help ensure that every voter, regardless of geographic location, can exercise their democratic rights easily and with dignity, thereby strengthening Nepal's federal governance system and democratic institutions.

Conclusion

This study indicates the notable challenges related to Polling station accessibility in Nepal, mostly for voters residing in geographically remote, hilly, and mountainous regions. Despite the legal frameworks and provisions established by the ECN, practical gaps remain that hinder voter participation and inclusivity.

Selecting a sample of fifty-six polling stations from a total of ten thousand seven hundred fifty-six represents a small percentage; however, a purposive sampling approach was applied to identify the most remote and least accessible polling stations in the country. The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address issues such as physical inaccessibility, lack of road access, difficult terrain, and administrative barriers in voter registration transfers.

The study emphasizes that without targeted restructurings, these challenges will remain to hinder citizens' ability to exercise their democratic rights effectively.

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