



Habermas's Legitimation Crisis and Democratic Trust: Analyzing Political Accountability in Contemporary Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and sociologist associated with the second generation of the Frankfurt School, developed the concept of legitimation crisis to explain situations in which political institutions lose public confidence because of weak performance, accountability, and responsiveness. This framework is particularly relevant to contemporary Nepal, where declining political trust, governance challenges, and changing



electoral behavior indicate growing tensions between democratic institutions and citizens' expectations.

Objective: The study aims to analyze political accountability in contemporary Nepal through Habermas's Theory of Legitimation Crisis, focusing particularly on its implications for democratic trust following the 5 March 2026 federal election.

Methods: The study adopts a qualitative approach and descriptive research design. Primary data were collected through purposive sampling by interviewing five voters from diverse occupational backgrounds during April and May 2026. The analysis further draws on interpretations of three political analysts, three institutional election review reports, and relevant scholarly literature to examine the relationship between democratic trust, political accountability, and legitimation crisis in Nepal.

Findings: The findings indicate that declining democratic trust is associated mainly with corruption, weak governance, ineffective public service delivery, and inadequate political accountability. The 2026 federal election demonstrated changing voter preferences, with citizens increasingly emphasizing transparency, accountability, and governance performance rather than traditional party loyalty. Habermas's theory therefore provides a useful framework for explaining the erosion of political legitimacy and democratic trust in Nepal.

Novelty: The study contributes to contemporary political sociology by applying Habermas's Legitimation Crisis Theory to Nepal's post-election context. It demonstrates how perceived weaknesses in accountability, governance performance, and institutional responsiveness can undermine political legitimacy and highlights the importance of transparent, accountable, and responsive governance for democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Democratic trust, federal election, governance, Habermas's Legitimation Crisis, political accountability.

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas is widely recognized as one of the most influential sociologists and critical philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Associated with the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School, Habermas developed a comprehensive theory of modern society that examines the relationship between democracy, communication, legitimacy, and social integration (Baxter, 2011). His work builds upon earlier critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, while also extending the critique of modern capitalist societies and state authority. Habermas' theoretical contributions, particularly his ideas on communicative rationality, the public sphere, and democratic legitimacy, have become central to contemporary debates on democracy, governance, and political accountability. These ideas are elaborated in his major works, such as *Legitimation Crisis* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, which remain influential in social and political theory (Habermas, 1975; Habermas, 1984).

Habermas' concept of the legitimation crisis provides an important framework for understanding tensions between state authority and public trust in modern democratic



systems. In his influential book *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas argues that advanced capitalist societies may face crises when political institutions fail to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. According to him, legitimacy depends not only on economic performance or administrative efficiency but also on the capacity of political institutions to justify their decisions through democratic participation and rational public discourse (Habermas, 1975). When governments fail to meet citizens' expectations for accountability, transparency, and participation, a gap emerges between the state and society, potentially leading to declining political trust.

Jürgen Habermas further elaborated the importance of communication and public deliberation in sustaining democratic legitimacy through his theory of communicative action, presented in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas argues that democratic legitimacy is rooted in open, rational, and inclusive communication within the public sphere, where citizens actively debate issues, express preferences, and influence collective decision-making (De Angelis, 2021). Effective democratic governance thus relies on sustained dialogue between the state, civil society, and other social actors to ensure accountability, transparency, and responsiveness (Friedland, 2001). This framework provides a normative benchmark for assessing the quality of democracy and has been applied widely in both developed and developing countries to analyze citizen participation, institutional legitimacy, and political accountability (Habermas, 1984; Dryzek, 2000). It highlights the interdependence of communication, trust, and legitimacy in functional democratic systems.

Legitimation crises have been extensively examined across diverse political contexts, highlighting the critical role of legitimacy in sustaining democratic governance. Scholars such as Claus Offe, David Beetham, and Seymour Martin Lipset argue that declining legitimacy directly undermines political trust and threatens the stability of democratic institutions (Offe, 1984; Beetham, 1991; Lipset, 1960). In emerging and developing democracies, challenges such as institutional inefficiency, corruption, and unresponsive governance exacerbate public dissatisfaction, weakening citizens' confidence in political processes. These conditions create a gap between the expectations of the populace and the performance of political institutions, increasing the likelihood of political cynicism, reduced participation, and social unrest. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing the interplay between legitimacy, democratic trust, and accountability in contemporary governance (Budhathoki, 2026).

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. This highlights that political authority originates from citizens, who participate in governance and benefit from government actions (Lincoln, 1863). Democratic norms refer to the fundamental principles, rules, and practices that sustain democratic governance, ensuring political equality, accountability, and citizen participation. These norms include respect for the rule of law, free and fair elections, protection of civil liberties, transparency, and inclusive decision-making processes (Diamond, 1999; Dahl, 1989). Adherence to democratic norms fosters public trust in political institutions, strengthens legitimacy, and enables the effective



functioning of representative democracy. Violations or weakening of these norms, such as corruption, arbitrary decision-making, or restrictions on political freedoms, can generate legitimacy deficits and contribute to political instability (Beetham, 1991; Lipset, 1960). In emerging democracies, including Nepal, institutionalizing democratic norms is critical to bridging the gap between formal democratic structures and citizens' expectations, promoting accountability, and ensuring participatory governance. Scholars argue that consistent enforcement of democratic norms is essential for sustaining legitimacy and public confidence in governance systems (Offe, 1984; Diamond, 1999).

The relevance of Jürgen Habermas's framework becomes particularly significant when analyzing emerging democracies such as Nepal. Following the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal after the Nepalese Civil War and subsequent political transitions, Nepal has undertaken efforts to institutionalize democratic governance through federal restructuring, decentralization, and periodic elections (Connell, 2008). Despite these measures, public dissatisfaction persists, reflecting concerns over political leadership, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and limited accountability of elected officials. These developments further demonstrate the applicability of Habermas' legitimation crisis framework for analyzing gaps between formal democratic procedures and citizens' perceptions of legitimacy, trust, and political accountability in Nepal (Sharma & Bhattarai, 2021; Upreti, 2020).

Lincoln's (1863) definition of democracy, articulated in his famous Gettysburg Address, describes it as a government "of the people, by the people, for the people." This concise formulation underscores the fundamental principle of popular sovereignty; wherein political authority originates from the citizens themselves. In a democratic system, citizens not only elect representatives but also participate in governance processes, either directly or indirectly, ensuring that policies and decisions reflect the collective will. Lincoln's definition further emphasizes accountability, as the government exists primarily to serve the welfare and interests of the people, rather than the ambitions of a ruling elite. In contemporary scholarship, this conceptualization remains foundational for understanding democratic legitimacy, citizen engagement, and political accountability (Dahl, 1989; Diamond, 1999). By situating authority, participation, and service at the core of governance, Lincoln's perspective provides a normative benchmark for assessing the quality and effectiveness of democratic institutions worldwide, including emerging democracies.

This study analyzes political accountability in contemporary Nepal, covering the period from the Gen-Z Movement of Nepal on September 8 and 9, 2025 (2082 Bhadra 23 and 24), through the formation of the interim government, the conduct of the Federal Parliament electoral processes, and culminating in the announcement of the Federal Parliament election results on March 5, 2026 (2082 Falgun 21). It examines institutional responses, patterns of governance, and mechanisms of public oversight during a phase of political transition. By situating events within a broader socio-political context, the study evaluates the extent to which accountability norms were upheld, challenged, or reconfigured, offering insights into



democratic consolidation and state-society relations in Nepal. It further reflects on implications for transparency, legitimacy, and participatory governance frameworks overall ([Field survey, 2026](#)).

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on democratic norms, legitimacy, and citizen trust, there is a notable research gap concerning the application of Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis to emerging democracies such as Nepal. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of democratic principles such as participation, accountability, transparency, and protection of civil liberties for sustaining legitimacy and public trust ([Lincoln, 1863](#); [Diamond, 1999](#); [Dahl, 1989](#)), few studies empirically examine how legitimacy deficits manifest in Nepal's post-constitutional, federal democratic context. Moreover, there is limited research linking citizen perceptions of political accountability with Habermas' conceptual framework, particularly regarding how institutional inefficiency, corruption, or weak enforcement of democratic norms affects democratic trust. Addressing this gap can provide insights into the mechanisms through which legitimation crises emerge, offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications for strengthening democratic governance in Nepal.

Research Objective

The study focuses on political accountability and democratic trust in Nepal, particularly in the context of legitimacy challenges emerging after the 5 March 2026 federal election.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine political accountability in contemporary Nepal through the lens of Jürgen Habermas's Theory of the Legitimation Crisis.
2. To assess the relationship between political accountability and democratic trust following the 5 March 2026 federal election in Nepal.

Significance of the Research Study

The significance of examining Habermas' theory of legitimation crisis in the context of contemporary Nepal lies in its potential to illuminate the relationship between institutional legitimacy, citizen trust, and political accountability. Nepal's democratic transition, following the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and subsequent federal restructuring, has established formal democratic institutions, yet persistent challenges such as corruption, weak enforcement of democratic norms, bureaucratic inefficiency, and public dissatisfaction suggest gaps between institutional performance and citizen expectations ([Sharma & Bhattarai, 2021](#); [Upreti, 2020](#)). By applying Habermas' framework, this research can provide a theoretical lens to assess how legitimacy deficits emerge and how they affect democratic trust and civic engagement. Understanding these dynamics is critical for policymakers, political actors, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen governance, enhance accountability, and improve citizen participation. Moreover, the study contributes to scholarly debates on democracy in emerging contexts, offering both theoretical and practical implications for sustaining democratic stability in Nepal.

Limitations of the Study



This research study was carried out under the following limitations:

1. Habermas's Legitimation Crisis Theory may not fully capture Nepal's complex political realities shaped by historical, psychological, cultural, and institutional factors.
2. The research is confined to the specific objectives and methodological framework defined for this study, which limits the scope of analysis and interpretation.
3. The article has been prepared in accordance with the rules and guidelines of the concerned journal and thus remains bound within those academic and publication constraints.

Literature Review

Literature review embraces both theoretical and empirical studies.

Theoretical Review (Theory of Legitimation Crisis: 1973)

Jürgen Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis offers a critical framework for understanding the challenges faced by modern democratic and capitalist societies. According to Habermas, political legitimacy depends not only on institutional efficiency and economic performance but also on the capacity of state institutions to justify their authority through public participation, transparency, and rational deliberation ([Habermas, 1975](#)). When governments fail to meet citizens' expectations for accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness, a legitimacy deficit emerges, creating a disconnection between the state and society. This deficit can manifest as declining public trust, political apathy, social unrest, or institutional instability. Habermas further argues that legitimation crises are exacerbated when structural problems such as bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, or weak enforcement of democratic norms persist over time ([Habermas, 2018](#)). The theory provides both a diagnostic and normative lens, enabling scholars to assess the quality of governance, citizen trust, and democratic accountability, particularly in emerging democracies where institutional consolidation is ongoing ([Habermas, 1984](#)).

The relevance of Jürgen Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis to Nepal lies in its potential to elucidate the relationship between institutional legitimacy, citizen trust, and political accountability. Following the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal and subsequent federal restructuring, Nepal has established formal democratic institutions intended to consolidate governance and ensure representation ([Wikipedia, 2025](#)). However, persistent challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, weak enforcement of democratic norms, and public dissatisfaction, indicate a significant gap between institutional performance and citizen expectations. These conditions reflect potential legitimacy deficits, undermining democratic trust and political accountability. Applying Habermas' framework allows a critical assessment of how these deficits emerge, the mechanisms through which citizen trust is eroded, and the implications for governance reforms aimed at strengthening democratic consolidation, transparency, and participatory engagement in contemporary Nepal ([Britannica, 2025](#)).



ürgen Habermas's Theory of Legitimation Crisis provides a useful framework for understanding Nepal's Gen Z Movement and the 2026 federal election. Habermas argues that legitimacy weakens when political institutions fail to meet citizens' expectations for accountability, participation, transparency, and effective governance. In Nepal, persistent corruption, weak governance, limited employment opportunities, ineffective public services, and unfulfilled political commitments have contributed to growing dissatisfaction, particularly among younger citizens. The Gen Z Movement can therefore be interpreted as an expression of a growing legitimacy deficit, reflecting demands for responsive leadership, institutional reform, transparency, and meaningful political participation. Similarly, the 2026 federal election can be understood as an electoral manifestation of this crisis, as changing voter preferences and support for emerging political forces reflected dissatisfaction with established parties. Thus, Habermas's theory helps explain the relationship between youth mobilization, declining democratic trust, political accountability, and electoral change in contemporary Nepal.

Empirical Literature Review

This theoretical perspective can be linked to Nepal's 2026 federal election by interpreting declining public trust in traditional political parties as an expression of a legitimation crisis. Persistent corruption, weak governance, inadequate public service delivery, and failure to fulfill electoral commitments have increased the distance between citizens and political institutions. The growing support for emerging political forces can therefore be understood as a demand for accountable, transparent, and effective governance. Consistent with Santos (2025), when political institutions fail to adequately respond to citizens' expectations, institutional legitimacy comes under pressure. In this context, Nepal's 2026 federal election can be viewed as an expression of public dissatisfaction with established political institutions and a demand to restore democratic legitimacy through greater accountability, responsiveness, and effective governance.

Murphy's (2025) argument can be linked to Nepal's 2026 federal election by viewing the election as an expression of growing demands for institutional responsiveness and political accountability. The election followed a period of strong public dissatisfaction with corruption and poor governance, while the subsequent political transition was accompanied by calls for stronger accountability and reform. In this context, declining confidence in established political parties can be interpreted as a legitimation deficit, where citizens increasingly question whether existing political institutions adequately represent their expectations and social demands. The election therefore reflects not merely a change in political leadership but also a broader demand for transparent, accountable, and effective governance. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence showing that citizens' perceptions of party honesty, transparency, rule adherence, and corruption control are important determinants of perceived political accountability in Nepal.

The Nepal Red Cross Society (2025) provides a comprehensive situational overview of the September 2025 Gen Z protests, highlighting the scale, motivations, and consequences of the



youth-led demonstrations. The report identifies corruption, nepotism, and abrupt social media restrictions as primary triggers for mobilization, particularly among students and young citizens across major urban centers. It documents the rapid escalation of protests, including widespread participation, confrontations with security forces, and resultant casualties. The study emphasizes the role of decentralized coordination through digital platforms in sustaining momentum and amplifying demands for transparent governance. Furthermore, the report links the protests directly to political outcomes, notably the resignation of the prime minister and the formation of an interim government. By systematically detailing both human and institutional impacts, this document provides essential empirical evidence of the legitimacy crisis confronting contemporary Nepalese governance.

Cambridge University Press (2025) examines the Gen Z protests in Nepal from September 8–10, 2025, emphasizing the critical role of social media in shaping youth-led political mobilization. The report argues that restrictions on social media platforms acted as an immediate catalyst for widespread demonstrations, while underlying grievances, including corruption, nepotism, and perceived governmental unaccountability, sustained momentum across major cities. It highlights the decentralized and networked nature of the protests, facilitated by digital communication, which allowed rapid coordination and real-time dissemination of information. Furthermore, the study analyzes the interplay between online activism and offline civic engagement, demonstrating how digital tools amplified political demands and heightened public scrutiny of institutional legitimacy (Budhathoki & Upadhyay, 2026). The report concludes that social media not only facilitated protest organization but also strengthened broader youth participation, ultimately influencing the resignation of the prime minister and prompting calls for systemic reform.

Al Jazeera (2026) analyzes the political impact of the September 2025 Gen Z protests in Nepal, emphasizing the unprecedented influence of youth activism on national politics. The article highlights how young citizens and students, frustrated with corruption, nepotism, and weak governance, mobilized in large numbers to challenge traditional political parties. It notes that these protests contributed to the resignation of the prime minister and the collapse of the incumbent government, reflecting a broader legitimacy crisis. Furthermore, the report examines the implications of this generational mobilization for subsequent elections, questioning whether youth engagement would translate into sustained political participation and electoral influence. By linking protest dynamics with electoral behavior, the article provides insight into the transformative role of Generation Z in shaping democratic accountability, civic expectations, and party responsiveness in contemporary Nepalese politics.

Dhiman (2025) provides a critical analysis of the 2025 Gen Z protests in Nepal, framing them as a central manifestation of a legitimacy crisis within the country's republican system. The study argues that persistent corruption, entrenched elite privilege, and state repression severely undermined public trust in political institutions, creating fertile ground for youth-led mobilization. The report highlights how students and young citizens organized mass



demonstrations, utilizing both traditional and digital forms of activism to challenge governmental authority. By situating the movement within the broader framework of legitimacy theory, Dhiman demonstrates how generational discontent and the rejection of established political elites reflect deeper systemic weaknesses in governance and institutional accountability. The study underscores the transformative potential of youth activism in reshaping political discourse and pressuring institutions toward transparency, responsiveness, and democratic reform.

Mulmi (2025) explores the 2025 Gen Z protests within the broader context of Nepal's constitutional and democratic fragility, emphasizing the persistent challenges to political legitimacy. The study argues that the intersection of mass youth protests, judicial interventions, and constitutional ambiguities highlighted structural tensions between state authority and citizen expectations of accountability. Rather than treating the demonstrations as isolated events, Mulmi frames them as symptomatic of deeper systemic weaknesses in governance, where institutional inefficiency, elite dominance, and legal uncertainties eroded public trust. The article underscores how the protests illuminated the gaps between formal constitutional provisions and practical governance, particularly in maintaining democratic norms and legitimacy. By linking civic unrest to constitutional interregnum, the study demonstrates how contemporary political crises in Nepal reflect enduring struggles over legitimacy, accountability, and the balance of state–society relations.

The 2026 federal election in Nepal revealed significant shifts in party dynamics and voter expectations. Coverage of the election aftermath highlights how the decisive victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party disrupted traditional party dominance, prompting introspection among established parties such as the Nepali Congress and left-leaning political organizations. Analysts argue that the electorate, particularly young and first-time voters, communicated a “silent message” prioritizing change, stability, and viable alternatives in leadership (Budhathoki, 2025b). This emerging pattern reflects not only voter dissatisfaction with historical governance practices but also a demand for enhanced political accountability and responsiveness. The election outcomes indicate that citizen engagement now plays a pivotal role in shaping political legitimacy and policy priorities. Consequently, the 2026 elections exemplify the interplay between generational expectations, electoral behavior, and evolving governance structures in Nepal's federal democracy (OnlineKhabar, 2026).

The 2026 federal election in Nepal, held in 2082 Bagan (March 5), demonstrates electoral outcomes that extend beyond mere party victories or seat counts. Analysis of the results indicates that the decisive success of the Rastriya Swatantra Party reflects a historic realignment of voter preferences and political loyalties following the Gen Z protests, signaling widespread demand for systemic reform and innovative leadership approaches in federal governance. Observers argue that the election represents a structural shift in Nepal's party system, highlighting evolving citizen expectations regarding transparency, stability, and governmental accountability. By emphasizing the interplay between voter behavior, protest-induced political consciousness, and institutional responsiveness, the analysis situates the



2026 election as a transformative moment in Nepalese democracy, indicating a potential reconfiguration of traditional power structures and long-term governance trajectories (Madanibeat, 2026).

Devkota (2026) examines Nepal's post-election political environment through the theoretical framework of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the legitimation crisis. The author argues that the declining public trust in Nepal's traditional political parties is rooted in persistent governance failures, corruption, weak accountability, and the inability of political institutions to address citizens' growing expectations. According to Devkota, the 2026 federal election reflects a broader crisis of political legitimacy, as voters increasingly question the effectiveness and credibility of established parties and shift their support toward alternative political forces. The article further suggests that restoring democratic legitimacy requires transparent governance, responsive leadership, meaningful citizen participation, and stronger institutional accountability. By applying Habermas's theory to Nepal's contemporary political context, Devkota provides a valuable theoretical perspective for understanding the relationship between democratic trust, political accountability, and electoral change in Nepal.

Research Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on a descriptive research design. It examines Nepal's federal election held on 5 March 2026, in which a newly established political party came to power by surpassing the long-dominant traditional political parties. The primary objective of the study is to analyze, from a sociological perspective, the factors that led to the legitimacy crisis of these established political parties. The analysis further explores the relationship between public trust in democracy in Nepal and Jürgen Habermas's Legitimation Crisis Theory.

The study adopts a mixed method and uses purposive sampling for data collection and analysis. Primary qualitative data were collected during April and May 2026 through interviews with five voters from diverse occupational backgrounds who changed their voting preferences in the 2026 election. The study also analyzes the post-election interpretations of four political analysts and three institutional election review reports. In addition, relevant books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and other scholarly literature were reviewed to strengthen the theoretical and analytical framework of the study.

Data Analysis and Presentation

This section of the study is divided into three parts. The first part examines Habermas's concept of the legitimation crisis, the second part analyzes the nature and extent of Nepali citizens' trust in democracy, and the third part provides a contemporary analysis of the recent election results held on March 5, 2026.

Habermas's Legitimation Crisis

According to Jürgen Habermas, political legitimacy in modern democratic societies is sustained through a reciprocal relationship of trust between the state and citizens. When



governments ensure public services such as education, health care, legal protection, and responsiveness to citizens' grievances, individuals in return comply with laws, pay taxes, and participate in civic responsibilities. This mutual obligation forms the basis of a social contract that helps maintain the stability and continuity of the political system. However, when political leaders fail to fulfill these responsibilities through corruption, poor budget management, unfulfilled promises, and weak implementation of development policies, public trust gradually erodes, as observed in contemporary political debates in Nepal ([Habermas, 1975](#)).

Habermas further argues that capitalist democratic systems are particularly vulnerable to what he terms a "legitimation crisis." In traditional societies, authority was often derived from religion, caste, or hereditary status, whereas modern democratic leadership is expected to be justified through competence, rational policy-making, and accountability. When governments fail to demonstrate these capacities, citizens may withdraw support and search for alternative political actors, often expressing dissatisfaction through protests, strikes, and social movements. Such dynamics illustrate how weakening institutional performance can transform political discontent into broader legitimacy challenges within democratic governance ([Habermas, 1975](#)).

Main assumptions of Habermas's Legitimation Crisis

- 1. Legitimacy of the State:** Modern states must maintain legitimacy by gaining public acceptance and trust. Citizens must believe that political institutions and decisions are justified and serve the public interest.
- 2. Crisis in Advanced Capitalist Societies:** Habermas argued that modern capitalist societies face crises when governments cannot effectively manage economic and social problems while maintaining democratic legitimacy.
- 3. Disconnection Between System and Lifeworld:** A crisis occurs when state institutions and bureaucratic systems become disconnected from people's everyday experiences, values, and expectations.
- 4. Ineffective Government Performance:** When governments fail to deliver welfare, social justice, economic stability, and public services, citizens begin to question the legitimacy of the political system.
- 5. Decline of Public Trust and Support:** As legitimacy declines, citizens lose trust in political leaders and institutions, which can lead to political instability, protests, or demands for systemic change.

Democratic Trust

Democracy is a system of governance in which citizens hold the power to choose their leaders. In this system, people exercise their voting rights and actively participate in decision-making processes. Democracy is founded on the principle that leadership should be transparent, accountable, and oriented toward public welfare ([Dahl, 1989](#)). Since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Nepal has made notable progress in expanding democratic governance and citizen rights ([Government of Nepal, 2015](#)). The promulgation of



the Constitution of Nepal has guaranteed fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, press freedom, and the protection of human rights. In 2008, Nepal was transformed into a federal democratic republic, formally abolishing the monarchy and strengthening the principle of popular sovereignty. Democratic reforms have also promoted inclusive political representation by increasing the participation of women, Dalits, Indigenous nationalities, Madhesis, and other marginalized communities in state institutions ([International IDEA, 2017](#)). Moreover, the implementation of a federal structure with federal, provincial, and local governments has decentralized authority and expanded local development opportunities. Regular elections, active civil society, and an independent media have further strengthened political accountability, transparency, and public participation in governance ([Budhathoki, 2025a](#)).

Public Perceptions of Legitimacy Crisis

The study of public perceptions of legitimacy crisis examines how citizens evaluate the credibility, performance, and trustworthiness of political parties and governing institutions. It is grounded in political sociology and democratic theory, both of which emphasize that legitimacy is essential for stable governance and public compliance. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to declining trust in traditional political parties, largely due to corruption, poor governance, and weak public service delivery. In the context of Nepal, rapid socio-economic changes, youth migration, unemployment, and persistent inequality have further shaped public attitudes toward political legitimacy. Citizens from diverse backgrounds increasingly assess political actors based on performance rather than ideology or party loyalty. This shift reflects a broader transformation in voting behavior and democratic expectations, where accountability, transparency, and responsiveness are seen as key indicators of legitimacy in contemporary political systems. The following table presents the related findings.

Table 1: Public Perceptions of Legitimacy Crisis and Voting Behavior

Respondent Profile	Major Concerns	Perception of Traditional Parties
25-year-old Returnee Migrant Worker	Favoritism, corruption, and irregularities	Traditional parties ignored ordinary citizens and lacked accountability
48-year-old Bookseller	Misuse of state resources and the self-interest of leaders.	Old parties lost public trust and moral credibility.
44-year-old Associate Professor of Mgt.	Political arrogance and exclusion of intellectual voices	Parties disconnected from democratic accountability.
56-year-old Farmer	Lack of agricultural support and youth foreign migration.	Governments failed to address rural problems.
47-year-old Grocery Shop Owner	Economic decline and weak local markets.	Governance failure weakened political legitimacy.



Source: Field survey, 2026

The data reveal a growing legitimacy crisis of traditional political parties among respondents from diverse occupational and social backgrounds. The findings indicate a clear pattern of declining public trust in these parties. Key factors such as corruption, poor governance, economic decline, political exclusion, and ineffective public service delivery have collectively contributed to this erosion of legitimacy. Respondents from varied socio-economic backgrounds consistently associated traditional political actors with self-interest, lack of accountability, and failure to address public needs. These governance shortcomings have not only weakened institutional credibility but also intensified public dissatisfaction across both urban and rural populations. As a result, there is a growing demand for political change and alternative leadership perceived as more responsive, transparent, and accountable. The findings further suggest a significant shift in voting behavior in the recent election of 2026, as citizens increasingly moved away from established parties toward new political alternatives. Overall, this reflects an emerging legitimacy crisis in the political system driven by unmet expectations and persistent structural governance failures.

Review of Political Analysts on Nepal's 2026 Federal Election

Nepal's 2026 federal election has been widely interpreted as a significant turning point in the country's democratic development, reflecting major changes in voter preferences, political attitudes, and electoral behavior. Baral (2026) describes the outcome as "unexpected and unprecedented," attributing the success of emerging political forces to widespread dissatisfaction with traditional parties concerning corruption, weak accountability, poor public service delivery, and ineffective leadership. Sharma (2026) similarly interprets the election through the "Gen Z Movement 2082," emphasizing young voters' growing demand for transparency, accountability, innovation, and responsive leadership. Acharya (2026) argues that the election represented a strong public demand for political accountability and effective governance rather than merely a change in political leadership, while Subedi (2026) links voter dissatisfaction to economic hardship, governance failures, and declining confidence in established parties. Collectively, these analyses suggest a shift toward performance-based politics in Nepal, where citizens increasingly assess political legitimacy through governance effectiveness, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness rather than traditional ideological loyalty or historical party affiliation. However, as Baral (2026) cautions, electoral success alone cannot guarantee long-term political legitimacy; sustained democratic trust ultimately depends on the capacity of new political actors to deliver effective governance, institutional reform, and meaningful policy outcomes.

Institutional Analysis of Nepal's 2026 Federal Election

Nepal's 2026 federal election marked a significant turning point in the country's democratic and political development, reflecting substantial changes in voter behavior and political expectations. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2026), the election represented a "generational rupture," characterized by the emergence of younger political actors and the growing influence of a new generation of voters seeking accountable



and responsive governance. Similarly, the Institute of South Asian Studies ([2026](#)) observed a notable transformation in electoral preferences, arguing that declining public confidence in traditional political parties contributed to the fragmentation of Nepal's electoral landscape and strengthened the position of alternative political forces. The institute further suggested that this shift reflected broader demands for institutional reform, transparency, and improved democratic performance. Furthermore, the Asian Network for Free Elections ([2026](#)) assessed the electoral process as generally credible and competitive while emphasizing that the post-election period would present significant challenges in maintaining political stability, strengthening democratic institutions, and sustaining public trust. These institutional assessments collectively indicate that the 2026 election was driven not only by dissatisfaction with corruption, ineffective governance, and weak public service delivery but also by increasing public expectations for political accountability and policy responsiveness. Consequently, the election signifies an important transition in Nepal's democratic trajectory, where political legitimacy is becoming increasingly dependent on governance performance, institutional accountability, and the ability of elected leaders to fulfill citizens' expectations through effective and transparent public administration.

Result Analysis

The result of this study indicates that Jürgen Habermas's theory of legitimation crisis provides a useful framework for understanding the changing dynamics of democratic trust and political accountability in contemporary Nepal. Data from the field survey demonstrate that respondents across different socio-economic backgrounds expressed declining confidence in traditional political parties due to persistent corruption, weak governance, economic stagnation, poor public service delivery, and the failure to fulfill electoral commitments ([Habermas, 1975](#)). Rather than relying on ideological affiliation or long-standing party loyalty, citizens increasingly evaluated political actors based on their capacity to deliver effective governance, transparency, and accountability. This pattern reflects Habermas's argument that democratic legitimacy depends on governments' ability to meet citizens' expectations through responsive and competent governance; when these expectations remain unfulfilled, public trust declines, and legitimacy is weakened ([Baral, 2026](#)).

The analysis further reveals that the 2026 federal election represented a practical manifestation of this legitimacy crisis. The electoral success of emerging political forces reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with established parties and growing demand for political reform, accountable leadership, and institutional renewal ([Sharma, 2026](#)). Reviews by political analysts and institutional reports consistently support the finding that youth participation, performance-based voting behavior, and aspirations for transparent governance significantly influenced electoral outcomes. Overall, the study concludes that Nepal's democratic future depends not only on regular elections but also on the capacity of political institutions to strengthen accountability, improve governance, and sustain citizens' trust.



Without tangible improvements in institutional performance and public service delivery, the crisis of political legitimacy identified by Habermas is likely to persist, posing continuing challenges to democratic consolidation in contemporary Nepal ([Dahl, 1989](#)).

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study demonstrates that Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Legitimation Crisis provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between democratic trust, political accountability, and political change in contemporary Nepal. Habermas argues that a legitimation crisis emerges when political and administrative institutions fail to meet citizens' social, economic, and political expectations. The findings reflect this proposition, as persistent corruption, weak governance, ineffective public service delivery, economic challenges, and unfulfilled electoral commitments have contributed to declining confidence in traditional political parties and political institutions. Citizens are increasingly evaluating political actors not through ideological loyalty or historical affiliation, but through transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and governance performance. This indicates a growing gap between citizens' expectations and the capacity of political institutions to satisfy them, creating a legitimation deficit.

The 2026 federal election can therefore be interpreted as an empirical manifestation of this legitimation crisis. The electoral success of emerging political forces reflects citizens' demand for political reform, institutional accountability, responsive leadership, and effective governance. From a Habermasian perspective, this shift represents more than a change in electoral preference; it signals growing dissatisfaction with established political institutions and their inability to maintain democratic trust. The study consequently concludes that democratic legitimacy cannot be sustained through elections alone but requires continuous institutional responsiveness and accountable governance. Strengthening transparency, political accountability, public service delivery, and meaningful policy outcomes is essential for rebuilding citizens' trust and addressing the legitimacy deficits that may otherwise undermine the long-term consolidation and stability of democracy in contemporary Nepal.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. Political leaders should adopt responsive, transparent, and performance-based governance practices to meet citizens' expectations and reduce the risk of a legitimacy crisis.
2. The government and civil society should create meaningful opportunities for public participation in policy formulation and decision-making to strengthen democratic trust and political legitimacy.
3. Independent constitutional bodies, oversight agencies, and anti-corruption institutions should be empowered to ensure accountability and protect democratic governance.



4. Traditional political parties should undertake internal democratic reforms, promote merit-based leadership, and increase responsiveness to citizens' concerns to restore public trust.

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