

Social Media Agenda-Setting and Evolving Political Communication Strategies: A Study of the 2026 General Election of Nepal

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Abstract

Social media platforms have driven an evolution in the political communication landscape and election campaigns. This research focuses on the political agenda-setting role of social media, particularly Facebook, during Nepal's 2026 general election. It examines how parties used Facebook to shape campaign agendas, stimulate public engagement, and potentially influence electoral outcomes. Employing a mixed-methods content analysis, the study analyses 1,498 Facebook posts published by four political parties between January 20 and March 2, 2026. The analysis identifies evolving patterns in political communication, campaign agendas, forms and levels of public engagement, and their relationship to election results. The findings indicate that major political parties are prioritising social media campaigning to set election agendas, primarily through photo and video-based posts related to election campaigns, candidates, policy plans and promises, and voter awareness messages. The study demonstrates that parties exhibiting stronger strategic adaptation to the social media ecosystem generate higher levels of public engagement, which can subsequently be reflected in voting behaviour and election outcomes. The March 2026 election represents a notable shift in Nepalese political communication, in which social media platforms, particularly Facebook, served as powerful tools for agenda-setting, political branding, voter mobilisation, and overall voter participation, with measurable effects on election outcomes. The findings suggest that future elections in Nepal will become more digitally oriented. That adaptation to platform dynamics and online public behaviour could be a key determinant of majority wins.

Keywords: political communication, social media, political parties, agenda setting, Facebook, election of Nepal 2026

1. Introduction

Social media has become a popular tool of communication in all sectors of human life. With technological advancements and increasing usage by communities, social media has become a powerful tool for political campaigns. The development of social networking sites has altered the political landscape and become an infinite source of political communication to update the public (Momoc, 2013). Electoral participation and social media campaigns on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms have become more prominent in recent years.

Political campaigns on social media can set the election agenda, drive public engagement, and change the result. The most popular and successful example of social media use in an election campaign is Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign demonstrated how social media platforms such as social networking sites, microblogging services, and weblogs could be effectively utilised by political actors to disseminate information to constituents, foster political engagement, and facilitate discussions on a wide range of political issues (Stieglitz et al., 2012). Obama's successful use of social media in his presidential campaign has spurred growth in its use in elections, a trend that has now spread worldwide. These platforms allow both citizens and politicians to participate in political discussions or to share political content publicly (Stieglitz et al., 2012). The popularity of social media platforms is not limited to developed countries; developing and underdeveloped countries like Nepal also have significant user bases and share opinions and connect with family, society, politics, and the world.

With the growing popularity, social media platforms have emerged as a dominant tool for political activities and election campaigns in Nepal. It seems to be an alternative to traditional media gatekeepers, enabling political parties to reach voters directly. The 2026 general election in Nepal was held after the two-day Gen Z protest, led by youth and inspired by information and announcements shared on social media. Nepal's election campaign is unfolding through a hybrid model that blends traditional grassroots mobilisation with advanced digital strategies, reflecting the country's high-stakes political climate following the 2025 Gen Z-led uprising and the growing dominance of social media in shaping voter outreach (Open Magazine, 2026). Social media platforms have presented both opportunities and challenges for political communication. These developments have accelerated political awareness and public participation on the one hand, while also contributing to misinformation, polarisation, hate speech, and emotionally driven political narratives on the other. A study found the growing spread of manipulated information and AI-generated content during the March 2026 election campaign period in Nepal (United Nations Development Program, 2026).

Compared with earlier campaigning instruments such as posters, brochures, newspaper advertisements, and TV commercials, social media like Facebook can help political parties inform, interact with, and mobilise voters more comprehensively, and directly target them (Christenson et al., 2014). Following the global trend, Nepali political parties are also changing their way of political communication and election campaigns. There are some empirical studies about the digital strategy of political parties in elections, the use of social media platforms during the local election of 2022, and online platforms, polling, and misinformation as electioneering strategies (Baral, 2022; Dahal, 2022; Pathak & Prajapati, 2023). However, there is a research gap regarding how Nepali political parties utilised social media and set their agendas during the 5 March 2026 House of Representatives (HoR) election campaigns. Similarly, researchers have not found any studies on public engagement with political parties' social media election campaigns and their effects on the results. This research has analysed the election campaign agendas of four major parties: Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), commonly known as CPN-UML, and Nepali Communist Party (CPN). Similarly, this study examines public engagement in political parties' election agendas and their impact on the results of the March 2026 general election in Nepal.

1.1 Scope and Significance of the Study

Nepal has a large youth population, most of whom actively use social media. Young people play an influential role in shaping the voting decisions of their families and society. To reach younger voters, political parties in Nepal are increasingly turning to social media. In this context, there is a need for scientific research on how social media is used in election campaigns, including the agendas promoted, levels of voter engagement, and the impact on the election results. This study is significant because it not only identifies trends in social media use and agendas during election campaigns but also determines influential content that resonates with young voters and its impact on the election results, generating insights applicable to other electoral contexts beyond Nepal.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyse election campaign strategies and social media agendas of major political parties during the 2026 election in Nepal.
2. To explore the significance and impact of the Facebook campaign on the 2026 election in Nepal.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do major Nepali political parties use and set agendas on social media during the 2026 election campaign?
2. What are the significance and impacts of the Facebook campaign on the 2026 election in Nepal?

Nepali political parties and leaders use social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, for their regular activities and election campaigns. However, this study has a defined scope, focusing on the Facebook election campaigns of four major political parties and covering the period from 20 January to 2 March 2026, which corresponds to the active election campaign window.

2. Social Media and Political Communication

Social media is an invaluable communication tool that enables users to share content, connect with others, build networks, and engage in two-way interaction. Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is particularly fascinating because it differs from traditional media such as newspapers and television in three ways: (1) it can facilitate two-way interaction with a large number of people at the same time; (2) actors are

connected directly; and (3) popular social media websites are relatively inexpensive or free to join, making the cost of usage very low (Tham & Zauddin, 2014). Many social media platforms have regularly added and updated features, allowing users to share photos, text, videos, live streams, messages, and more. Even some social sites offer features for pay, advertising, shopping, ticketing, and many other daily services.

As a widely accessible platform, social media has also expanded its role in political activities and interactions. Social media makes it easy for politicians to evaluate their counterparts' actions; therefore, it is beneficial to incorporate it into an electoral strategy (Hotham, 2021). Governments, political parties, and politicians are utilising social media to share their regular activities, engage directly with the public, and run election campaigns. Thus, social media has become increasingly central to political activity, enabling politicians and parties to communicate directly with the public and voters, mobilise support, and shape political discourse in real time.

2.1 Election Campaign in Social Media

The significance of social media became particularly evident during the 2008 US Presidential election, when Barack Obama's campaign leveraged digital platforms to build a grassroots movement, mobilise volunteers, raise campaign funds, and empower supporters across the United States (Bruhl, 2023). Obama had his own political campaign page, political blogs, emails, SMS and all other platforms available on the internet. Compared with John McCain's campaign, Obama's team employed approximately 10 times more online staff, attracted 5 times more Facebook friends, achieved 24 times more Twitter followers, received 4 times more YouTube views, and accumulated more than three million users on his campaign website, barrackobama.com (Aaker & Chang, 2009). When the results came out, Obama won with more than 900,000 popular votes and 192 electoral votes. Since then, social media has revolutionised the campaign process globally as the number of related platforms, features, users, and followers has increased.

2.2 Social Media and Political Agenda-Setting

Many studies have argued that the media can set the public agenda in political decision-making. Agenda-setting theory was first proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) to explain the outsized influence of mass media on the agenda in public discourse. They studied the US Presidential elections of 1968, 1972, and 1976, as well as the main issues taken up by the media. Their investigation concluded that the mass media significantly influenced what voters considered the campaign's major issue (McQuail, 2010). Agenda-setting theory was initially conceptualised for mainstream media such as TV, radio, and newspapers. This theory posits that the media serve as gatekeepers between the sender and receiver of messages. After the innovation of social media platforms, the sender and receiver can communicate directly with each other. Although the basic communication model of traditional and social media can be described through the same elements, i.e., source, message, channel (media), and receiver, the distinctive feature of social media lies in its participatory nature. By allowing users to generate, share, and circulate content without relying on established media organisations, social media has expanded alternative information networks and weakened the influence of traditional gatekeepers (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). The internet and social media have created a new 'hybrid media system' that has expanded the number and types of actors who can shape political discourse and agenda. Social media, as a communication platform, creates new challenges and opportunities for political agenda-setting. Gilardi et al. (2022) have examined connections among three agendas: the traditional media agenda, the social media agenda of parties, and the social media agenda of politicians, and the study finds that these agendas influence one another.

Political parties, candidates, and leaders actively promote their agendas to the public during elections through various media and strategies. Social media is one of the effective platforms where politicians are directly exposed to users rather than to specific demographic characteristics and political interests (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). As a result, social media has become a transformative tool in political communication, serving as a key medium through which political parties shape election agendas and influence public opinion. Political content on the platform attracts high levels of user engagement, and its potential to rapidly go viral enables political communications to reach even individuals who are otherwise disengaged from political affairs (Hotham, 2021).

Digital media is becoming more routinised and effective worldwide for political communication and election campaigning. Various studies show that smart and effective use of social media can help election results. The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign showed how political parties can use social media platforms to circulate information to constituents as well as to engage and discuss various political issues (Stieglitz et al., 2012). After that, social media campaigning increased in subsequent U.S. presidential elections and in elections of other countries. In India, it is stated that social media played a vital role in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s massive victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha election (Rao, 2020). Similarly, the 2024 Indian elections serve as a testament to the transformative power of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilising the citizenry (Mir, 2024). In Pakistan, leading political parties used social media in the 2018 general election and had a remarkable effect on the result (Iqbal et al., 2020). Another study of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election indicates that digital campaign messages significantly influenced online political conversations and public engagement (Jun, 2024). These

findings highlight the growing importance of social media agenda-setting in emerging democracies where digital platforms have become major sources of political information. But there are limited studies looking into engagement metrics of political campaigns held during elections across the world, especially from a communication perspective to study themes of narratives employed to form discourse through political rhetoric (Goswami & Singh, 2025).

2.3 Social Media in Nepal's Political Communication

As of January 2025, Nepal had approximately 39 million active cellular mobile connections. Among these, 16.5 million individuals were internet users of whom 14.3 million were active social media users, accounting for 48.1% of the total population (DataReportal, 2025). Data published in Meta's advertising resources indicates that Facebook had 14.3 million users in Nepal in early 2025, which means almost all social media users are on Facebook (DataReportal, 2025). The number of Instagram users was 3.9 million, Messenger reached 10.9 million, LinkedIn had 2 million, and X (Twitter) had 390 thousand users (DataReportal, 2025). Researchers have not found exact data, but a large number of people in Nepal use TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Viber, and WeChat. The above data shows the penetration of active mobile phone users, internet, and social media users in Nepal. Nepali political parties began joining social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X) in 2012, and now they actively use their pages, particularly during election times. The first political party of the federal parliament after the 2026 general election, RSP created a Facebook page and joined X in June 2022. NC, the second largest party, launched its official Facebook page in August 2013 and joined X in September 2013. The third largest party CPN-UML created a Facebook page and joined X in May 2013, and the fourth largest party, NCP, created a Facebook page and joined X in December 2021 (see Table 1). Similarly, political parties are using TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Viber, etc. Since joining these platforms, political parties have utilised social media to communicate their regular activities, engage with the public, and intensify their online presence, particularly during election campaigns.

This research specifically focuses on the election campaigns of the four major political parties in the 2026 general election through Facebook. There are some related studies on the 2022 federal, provincial, and local elections of Nepal. Pathak & Prajapati (2023) explored the use of social media platforms, the increasing use of polling and other forms of data collection among voters, and attempts to manage misinformation, drawing on experiences from the 2022 elections. Baral (2022) found that political parties lacked 'proper management and transparency' while using digital media. Dahal (2022) identified that since the 2022 elections, Nepali political parties had used digital media platforms as an informal means to communicate about their activities, without a formal party decision. Another study highlighted the importance of social media in election campaigns and found that elections are being influenced by social media in Nepal (Guragain, 2024). However, there is a clear gap in scholarly studies regarding how parties utilised social media to reshape their political communication strategies and set the agenda during Nepal's general election, particularly focused on the 2026 election campaign. Research is also needed to understand which types of content drive greater public engagement and shape voter behaviour. This study addresses the above research gap by examining Facebook posts of four major political parties in Nepal: RSP, NC, CPN-UML, and NCP during the 2026 election campaign. This research provides a broader understanding of the changing nature of election campaigns by offering insights into campaign practices, engagement trends, and their influence on Nepal's election results.

Table 1. X and Facebook followers of four political parties

Accounts	Accounts Name	Created Date	Followers
Twitter (X)	Rastriya Swatantra Party	2022, June	30,148
Facebook	Rastriya Swatantra Party	2022, June	851,000
Twitter (X)	Nepali Congress	2012, September	21,650
Facebook	Nepali Congress	2013, August	357,000
Twitter (X)	Communist Party of Nepal (UML)	2013, May	8,626
Facebook	Communist Party of Nepal (UML)	2013, May	375,000
Twitter (X)	Nepali Communist Party	2021, December	716
Facebook	Nepali Communist Party	2021, December	8,800

Note: Data compiled by the authors from X and Facebook pages of parties is accurate as of 10 May 2026.

3. Methodology

This research adopts mixed-methods content analysis, combining quantitative methods to evaluate frequency and engagement with qualitative thematic analysis of posts and their impact on the election results. For this purpose, data were collected from Facebook posts of four major political parties: RSP, NC, CPN-UML, and NCP. These four parties have been chosen through purposive sampling because they have more than 95% of their members in parliament. This research chose Facebook posts because Nepali political parties use this platform for their election campaigns, and 48% of Nepali people use it (DataReportal, 2025).

This research extracted data from the official Facebook pages of four political parties via the Graph API between 20 January

and 2 March 2026. The Graph API is the primary way to get data into and out of the Facebook platform (Graph API, 2026). The selected time frame was the period of the election campaign. The unit of analysis in this study is the election-related posts published on each respective Facebook page during the study period. This research employed an explanatory sequential mixed design, which first involved quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative analysis (Creswell et al., 2003). It conducted an empirical test of their election agenda, public engagement, and impact through quantitative and qualitative content analysis from the perspective of agenda-setting theory. Figure 1 presents the flow diagram of this research.

This study has addressed the use of Facebook by Nepali political parties for election campaigns, public engagement with their posts, and the impact on election results. In the first stage, this research does quantitative frequency and engagement analysis of election-related posts from four major parties ($n=1,498$), which excluded election-unrelated posts ($n=52$) of a total of ($n=1,550$) posts during the election campaign period. The frequency has been measured through the analysis of the number of posts by parties and post categories. The public engagement metrics have been measured through the analysis of likes, comments, and shares, which are established tools to observe interaction and the effectiveness of Facebook communication (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). In this study, these metrics provide a reliable measure of how effectively Nepali political parties' Facebook posts capture attention, stimulate interaction, and facilitate the diffusion of campaign messages. For the next stage of thematic analysis, this research has chosen 50 posts from each party's account through disproportionate stratified random sampling because each party contributes the same number of posts, even though their population differ substantially. In disproportionate stratification, the sampling fraction is not the same across all strata, and some strata will be oversampled relative to others (Lemm, 2022). The purpose is to ensure that every party is equally represented. Fifty posts have been chosen because that number is the minimum base of each account during the selected time period.

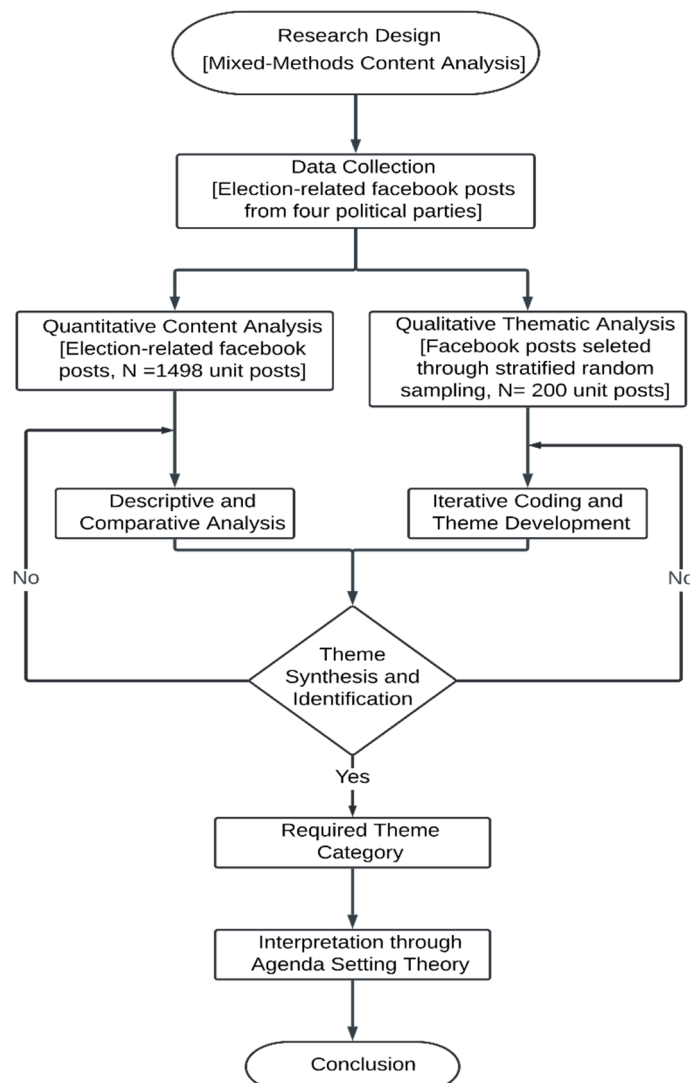


Figure 1. Flowchart of research design

To identify five themes, sampled posts (n=200) were iteratively coded into categories and inductively grouped into five themes: election campaign, election candidate, election activities, plan and policy, and election awareness (see sample in Table 2). In the election campaign theme, posts featuring digital campaign videos, pictures, designed posts, and voting-appealing songs, candidates' campaigns, voting appeals by leaders of different sectors, etc., are incorporated. In the election candidate theme, posts related to candidates' introductions, commitments, digital campaigns, news coverage, voting appeals by party and leader, etc are included. Election activities, as the third theme, included posts about the party's and leaders' election activities, press releases, news coverage of parties, interactions with leaders, statements by the party, etc. In the plan and policy theme, posts related to parties' policies, election promises, and manifesto contents are included. Lastly, within the election awareness theme, posts on voting procedures, digital awareness, media interviews with leaders, and content on parties' history are covered. To assess inter-coder reliability in content analysis, two coders conducted a reliability test. For that, we have used Holsti's (1969) simple agreement formula. The reliability score is 0.93.

Table 2. Coding Sample. (Theme: Election Campaign: 1 Election Candidate: 2 Election Activities: 3, Plan and Policy: 4, Election Awareness: 5)

S.N.	Party Name	Post (Translated)	Code	Theme
1	RSP	The bell should ring in the next 48 hours. #VoteForChange #voteforghanti #RSPNepal	Digital Election Campaign	1
16	RSP	Dr Bikram Timilsina, an honest, capable, and fearless personality who understands geography, is our Bell electoral sign candidate from Constituency No. 1 of Nuwakot district.	Introduction of Candidate	2
40	RSP	A wave of people was seen when the senior leader of the National Independent Party, Balendra Shah, reached Butwal. #VoteForChange #Balenshah #RSPNepal	Election Activities of the Leader	3
39	RSP	RSP's Pledge Part-9, Education, Health and Sports #VoteForChange #voteforghanti #RSPNepal	Content about Manifesto	4
54	NC	Let's vote for the tree symbol on both ballot papers and make the Nepali Congress victorious 🌳🗳️	Digital Election Campaign by Candidate	3
67	NC	Congress 2.0 in the eyes of the youth #NepaliCongress #Congress2.0 #VIS10N	Youth about Congress	5
84	NC	Right person, right place. Bishnu Bahadur Khadka, Surkhet Constituency No. 1 #NepaliCongress #Congress2.0 #SahiWyaktiSahiThau #Vis10n #Surkhet1	Introduction of Candidate	2
103	NCP-UML	Some things can never be changed.	Digital Election Campaign	1
125	NCP-UML	"We will connect all teachers to a contribution-based social security fund. We decide and we act!"	Content of Election Manifesto	4
145	NCP-UML	Today's Surya Khabar 2082 Magh 09	News of Election Activities	3
160	NCP	NCP's 12 goals: The foundation of a prosperous and independent Nepal	Development Plan	4
178	NCP	Nepali Communist Party: Let's vote for the star symbol!! #voteforTara #nepalicomunistparty	Digital Election Campaign	1

Note: Coding sample was randomly selected from the sample population of thematic analysis.

4. Analysis and Finding

4.1 Social Media and Nepali General Elections 2026

Nepal is a federal democratic republic with a three-level government system: federal, provincial, and local. At the federal level, Nepal has two parliaments: the House of Representatives (HoR) and the National Assembly (NA). In the HoR, 165 members are elected from single-member constituencies via first-past-the-post (FPTP), and 110 members are elected from a proportional representation (PR) election; the NA has 59 members. This study focuses on the HoR election. After the new constitution was promulgated in 2015, Nepal has seen three general elections to the HoR: in November 2017, November 2022, and March 2026. In the March 2026 election, 64 political parties and some independent candidates participated, and only six parties and one independent candidate secured seats in parliament. RSP won 182 of 275 seats, nearly a supermajority in parliament. Similarly, NC won 38 seats, CPN-UML 25, NCP 17, Shram Sanskriti Party (SSP) 7, Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) 5, and *Mahabir Pun* won as an independent candidate (see Figure 2). This research

has focused on the social media election campaigns of four parties that secured more than 10 seats in the election.

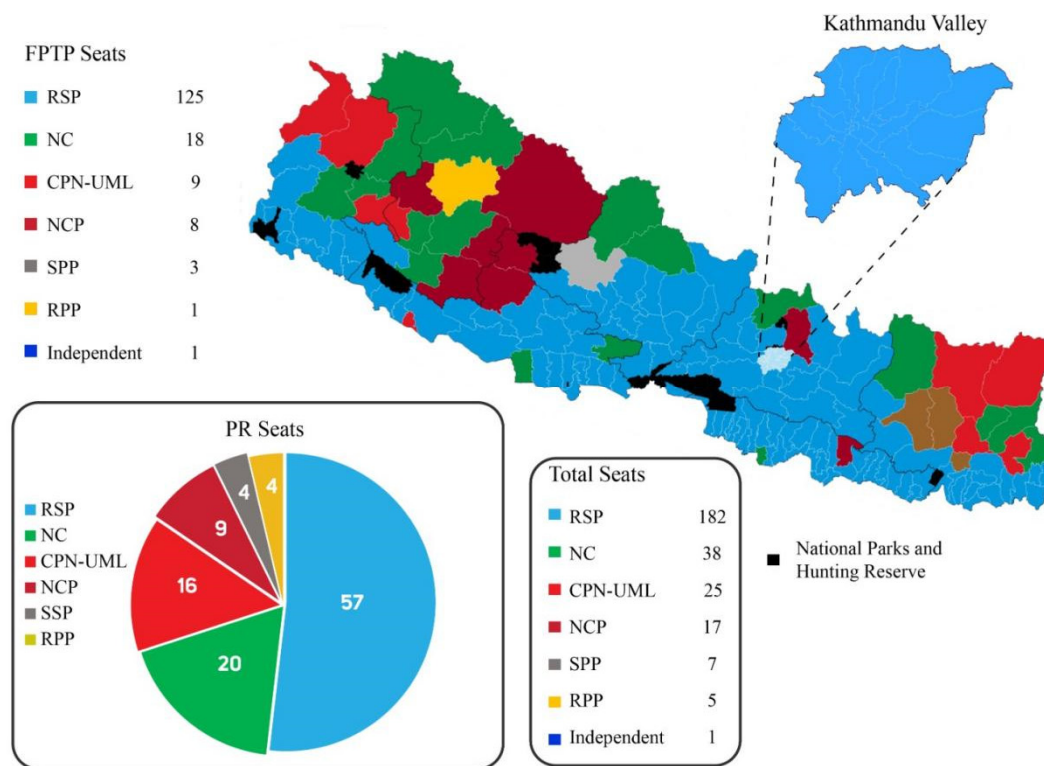


Figure 2. Parties winning seats in the House of Representatives of Nepal (HoR). Note: The map is updated from the 2026 Nepalese general election results by constituency (Wikipedia, 2026) and election outcomes (Election Commission, Nepal, 2026)

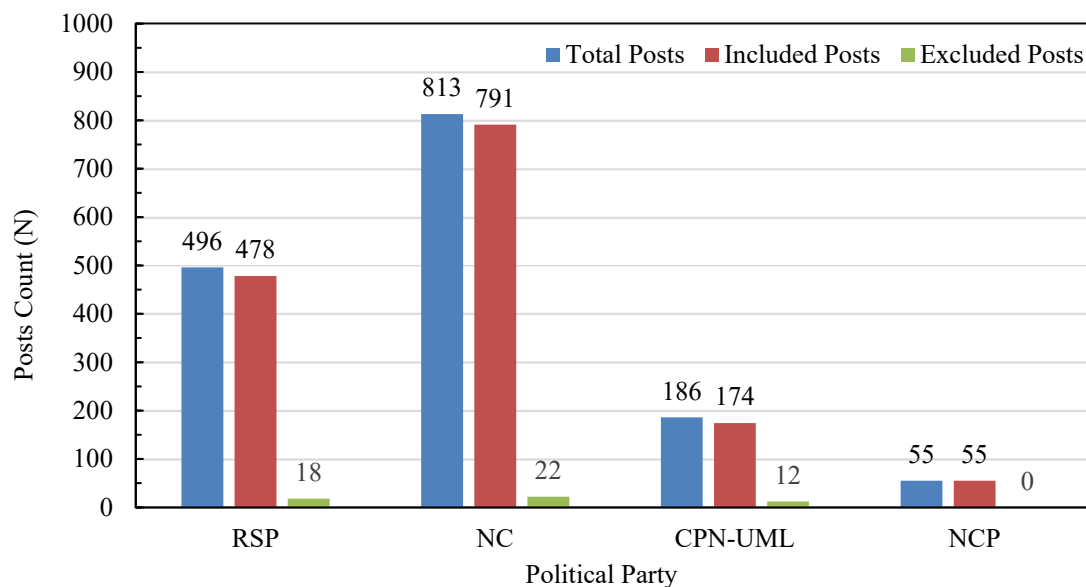


Figure 3. Facebook posts of parties from 20 January to 2 March 2026. Note: The data compiled by the authors using the Graph API and calculated in Excel is accurate as of May 10, 2026

During the election campaign period, four major parties published 1,550 Facebook posts in total. After excluding 52 posts that were not related to the election, 1498 posts were retained for analysis as election-related content. The data shows NC posted the most election-related posts (813), RSP (478), and CPN-UML (174). NCP posted the fewest (55) (see Figure 3). Overall, these figures suggest substantial differences in posting intensity across parties: the frequency of Facebook use by NC and RSP relied much more heavily on Facebook as a campaign communication tool than CPN-UML and NCP

during the 42-day campaign period. This research categorised election campaign-related content as posts with text and photos, posts with videos, and shared posts, respectively (see Table 3). According to the data, NC had posted 503 videos with creative content and 285 designed posts, photos, and texts. Similarly, RSP posted videos and text posts with more attractive designs to explain its plan and policy, introduce candidates, and promote campaign activities. On the other hand, CPN-UML posted 61 videos, 53 text/photo posts, and 60 shared posts from party leaders' Facebook and other election-related activities. NCP posted 55 items in total: 31 text/photo posts and 24 videos. Overall, NC was more active on Facebook, followed by RSP.

One way to assess the effectiveness of social media is by studying engagement with activities in posts. This research has analysed likes, reactions, comments, and shares on parties' posts, which are known as key factors of users' interaction with social media content (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013). These indicators represent increasing levels of audience participation: reactions indicate immediate affective responses, comments reflect active discussion and opinion expression, while shares signify the highest level of engagement by redistributing content to wider audiences (Kim & Yang, 2017). In this analysis, researchers have calculated the average number of likes and reactions, comments, and shares for sampled posts (see Table 4). Based on the average engagement analysis of posts, RSP has received more responses, while NC has received the second-highest number of likes, reactions, comments, and shares. Then CPN-UML is in third position in terms of engagement, and NCP is fourth with a low average count in each activity.

Table 3. Posts Category

Category	RSP	NC	CPN-UML	NCP	Total
Posts with Text and Photos	272	285	53	31	641
Posts with Videos	206	503	61	24	794
Shared Posts	0	3	60	0	63
Total	478	813	174	55	1498

Note: The data compiled by the authors using the Graph API and calculated in Excel is accurate as of May 10, 2026.

Table 4. Activities and engagement on selected Facebook Accounts

Activities	RSP	NC	CPN-UML	NCP
Posts	478	791	174	55
Likes and reacts	706,254	813,350	127,319	8,206
Average Likes and Reacts	1477.5	1028.25	731.7	149.2
Comments	157485	66,333	12,190	384
Average Comments	329.5	83.85	70	6.98
Shares	173558	44,258	6,715	1,794
Average Shares	363.1	55.95	38.6	32.61

Note: The data compiled by the authors using the Graph API and calculated in Excel is accurate as of May 10, 2026.

4.2 Agenda Setting in Nepali General Election 2026 Through Social Media

Social media, particularly Facebook, played a significant role during the 2026 Nepali general election. Traditionally, agenda-setting theory argues that the media may not directly tell people what to think, but it significantly influences what people think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the digital era, social media platforms like Facebook have expanded this role by allowing political parties and leaders to communicate directly with citizens, shape political narratives, and influence public perception. It matters for political communication because politicians can express themselves much more freely on social media to a much broader audience (Gilardi et al., 2022).

This section analyses the agenda-setting role of social media during the 2026 election by examining the thematic priorities of major political parties on Facebook. During the election, four major parties- RSP, NC, CPN-UML, and NCP- actively used Facebook as a main social media platform to construct and promote different political agendas to convince voters. Through text and photo posts, creative videos, digital campaign materials, and political messaging, these parties sought to direct voter attention toward issues that advanced their electoral goals. The thematic categorisation demonstrates that political parties used Facebook strategically to develop distinct election agendas and communication priorities. This systematic and continuous posting, highlighting issues, leaders, campaigns, plans, and policies, increased the visibility and importance of those topics among voters. The findings reveal notable differences in how new and old parties framed their campaign communication. There are quantitative differences in the parties' issue priorities (see Figure 4). This research has been discussed in each party's posts separately to identify how each party framed its election agenda on Facebook to convince voters to support its candidates.

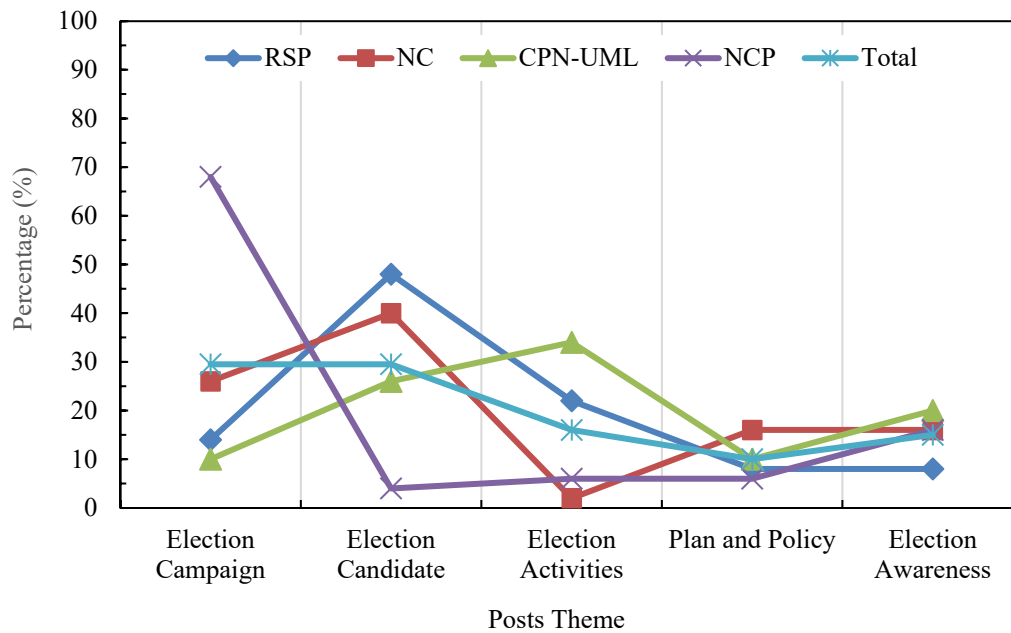


Figure 4. Posts by parties on different themes. Note: The data compiled by the authors using the Graph API and sampled posts were iteratively coded into categories and inductively grouped into five themes

4.2.1 RSP: Agenda of Change and New Leadership

The RSP is a new political party in Nepal, registered at the Election Commission in July 2022, with *Rabi Lamichhane* as its founding president. RSP is a pluralistic democratic party that believes in a liberal economy with social justice and is committed to the equitable progress of all Nepalis (Rastriya Swatantra Party, 2026). The party contested the November 2022 election for the first time and won seven direct seats and 13 proportional seats to the HoR. In the 2026 election, the party became the largest national party following a landslide victory, securing almost a supermajority of 182 out of 275 seats, and its senior leader, *Balendra Shah*, became Prime Minister in March 2026. As a senior party leader and former Mayor of the capital city, Kathmandu, Shah is widely popular among Nepali youth. Similarly, party president *Lamichhane* is equally popular, and the two have focused on youth-oriented, anti-corruption, and good governance as major agendas during election times. RSP took ownership of the September 2025 Gen Z movement, which forced the Oli-led government out within 28 hours of protest and set the stage for the March election. *Shah* and many young leaders then joined the RSP and entered the election. RSP used social media, including Facebook, to promote its agenda of political reform, anti-corruption, youth participation, and alternative leadership. The party focused heavily on candidate-centric communication, highlighting new and educated candidates, public accountability, transparency, and dissatisfaction with traditional politics and working style that resonated with youth voters. This research shows that RSP focused on the movements of President *Lamichhane*, senior leader *Shah*, and election candidates, which reflects the party's broader political branding as an alternative and reform-oriented force. Rather than relying heavily on ideological narratives and planning, RSP appeared to use Facebook as a platform to construct a modern political identity centred on transparency, accountability, and individual leadership.

4.2.2 NC: Candidate Visibility and Planning

The Nepali Congress (NC) is Nepal's oldest political party, with almost eight decades of political history. It was the largest party in Nepal before the Gen Z movement, with 88 seats in the HoR, and had a coalition government with CPN-UML. After the Gen Z movement and political change, NC changed its party leadership through a Special Convention, and *Gagan Thapa* became the president. Despite all that, in the lead-up to the election, the party remained unpopular. In the election, NC won only 38 seats in the HoR, a historic setback for the party. During the election campaign, NC used Facebook to reinforce its historical identity, democratic legacy, and leadership credibility. The party's agenda-setting strategy focused on new young leadership as the Prime Minister candidate. The data shows that NC was also focused on digital campaigning and sought to convince voters through revised agendas. The party frequently posted about its election manifesto, background, contributions, and the vision of the new leadership and the PM candidate. Similarly, Congress had given priority to individual candidates' content in various election constituencies and to the views of various social and professional leaders about the party. Through Facebook, NC attempted to convey its long political history and role in Nepal's democratic movement. Through leadership exposure and plan-focused content, the party sought to position itself as an experienced political force capable of governing the country.

4.2.3 CPN-UML: Limited Election Activities

The Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) is the largest left-wing party in Nepal and the third-largest party in parliament, with 25 members after the March 2026 election. Before the Gen Z protest, CPN-UML was the second-largest party in parliament with 78 seats, and its Chairman, *KP Sharma Oli*, was the Prime Minister. After the Gen Z movement, the CPN-UML held an early General Convention, and *Oli* once again became Chairman for a third term. Under *Oli's* leadership, this party participated in the general election but has found itself in a historically weak position in parliament. Like other parties, CPN-UML also used Facebook for the election campaign, but was less active than RSP and NC. It focused on and emphasised the party's election activities across various constituencies, shared campaign news, and mobilised the party structure and cadres. Based on the thematic analysis of the election agenda, the CPN-UML did not prioritise a social media campaign on its official Facebook page. Due to limited activities on their Facebook page, their engagement and influence were also lower than those of other parties. CPN-UML emphasised the development narratives of its previous governments, and the party's policy agenda of 'prosperous Nepal, happy Nepali.' In some video content, CPN-UML praised itself for the country's prosperity and blamed others for the derailment of development.

4.2.4 NCP: Party Identity Centrist Agenda

The Nepali Communist Party (NCP) is another leftist party in Nepal that contested the election by merging 10 leftist parties and groups in November 2025. *Puspa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda)* serves as the coordinator of this party. NCP became the fourth-largest party, with 17 seats in the HoR. Like other competing parties, NCP also used Facebook for its election campaign, but irregularly. Similar to UML, the party prioritised organisational visibility over candidate-related posts. Its Facebook agenda emphasised party activities, campaigns, meetings, and historical political identity. The party's agenda-setting strategy relied heavily on collective party representation rather than individualised candidate branding. This reflects the continued influence of traditional party-centered political communication in Nepal, even on digital platforms.

Based on the above analysis, this research finds that four Nepali parties used Facebook in their election campaigns. However, their agendas and priorities were different. It finds that RSP emphasised reform, new, young leadership, and an anti-corruption agenda. NC focused on democratic legitimacy, the plan and policy of the party, the capacity and contribution of leadership, with a future vision. Similarly, UML highlighted organisational strength, previous contributions, and the party's stance on nationalism and good governance. NCP prioritised political mobilisation, contribution, priority, and capable leadership to lead the government.

Overall, the election campaign, election activities and election candidate-related content received greater priority. However, policy-oriented and election awareness content received less attention across all parties. Although some posts discussed development plans, governance issues, economic reforms, or public welfare, such content was not dominant in the overall communication pattern. This finding suggests that social media campaigning during the election was more focused on visibility, mobilisation, and political branding than on substantive policy deliberation. Instead of engaging voters primarily through issue-based political education, parties often prioritised promotional and event-centred communication. Similarly, election-awareness posts encouraging democratic participation, voter education, or civic responsibility were limited. This indicates that parties mainly used Facebook as a campaign promotion tool rather than as a platform for broader democratic dialogue.

Their different agendas and priorities reveal that Facebook was not only a communication tool but also an active political agenda-setter, where parties competed to influence voters' priorities and public attention. This research finds that Facebook's agenda-setting role during the 2026 Nepali general election was significant, as it increased the visibility of political narratives, enabled personalised political communication, amplified election campaigns, influenced issue salience among voters, encouraged digital political participation, and transformed election campaigning into a continuous online public discourse. Thus, Facebook became one of the central platforms through which political agendas were constructed, circulated, and contested during the 2026 election campaign.

4.3 Effect of Digital Campaign on Election Results

Digital campaigning reduced reliance on traditional outreach, as parties shifted to professional content teams, content creators, and sometimes to paid social media advertising. The March 2026 general election in Nepal reflects a major transformation in political communication from a one-way model to an interactive, highly visual process. From this election, social media became a central platform for political agenda-setting, voter engagement and campaign mobilisation in Nepal. Traditionally, political parties had relied on mass programs, leadership speeches, rallies, door-to-door outreach, posters, newspapers, radio, or television to influence voters. However, the 2026 election employed a different strategy, relying heavily on social media campaigns by parties and candidates themselves. During the 2026 March election, Nepali analysts observed that social media significantly influenced political discourse, particularly among young and urban voters, by rapidly spreading campaign messages and creating online political momentum (Paudel, 2026). This transformation of political communication changed voters from passive receivers of information to active participants. They actively reacted, commented, shared, and debated political agendas online. Some previous studies found that there is a strong positive correlation between engagement of posts

and election outcome. Brito & Adeodato (2022) examined more than 65,000 Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts across presidential elections in four Latin American countries, and results demonstrated strong correlations between the defined metrics and the votes received, particularly the engagement per post. Another study of Facebook engagement in political elections with political candidate campaign success found that social media users' engagement can be used to help inform election outcomes (Bilson et al., 2025). This research also finds that the reflection of social media engagement was evident in the results of the March 2026 Nepal election. RSP was more active on social media and saw greater public engagement, which was reflected in the election result. RSP won by a landslide victory, securing 182 of 275 parliamentary seats. On the other hand, NC was active and produced creative content, but its posts received lower average engagement than RSP's. This appears to be reflected in the election results, with NC limited to 38 seats. Similarly, CPN-UML and NCP, which are less active in social media campaigns, received lower average engagement than RSP and NC, as reflected in the election results. This study also found a strong correlation between social media engagement and election outcome. This study does not claim that the entire election result hinged on social media campaigns. However, the 2026 election demonstrated a major transformation in Nepal's political communication landscape, with digital campaigning reducing reliance on conventional outreach strategies, increasing digital engagement, and a strong reflection found in the election outcome.

From the above analysis, we can conclude that social media has transformed political agenda-setting from a centralised, one-directional communication process into a participatory, interactive, and networked form of political discourse. Social media, particularly Facebook, has enabled the rapid dissemination of messages, shaped public priorities and agendas, mobilised supporters, engaged with voters, and influenced election results.

5. Conclusion

This research examines the dynamics of political communication during Nepal's March 2026 general election and shows that electoral campaigning is undergoing rapid digital transformation. Among the available digital platforms, Facebook has emerged as a central tool for election campaigns, functioning not only as a dissemination channel but also as a strategic space for agenda-setting, voter mobilisation, and interactive engagement. The research finds that parties are increasingly using social media, particularly Facebook, for campaign communication. Rather than relying solely on traditional one-way broadcast models, parties used Facebook to disseminate information rapidly, coordinate messaging, respond to issues in real time, and engage audiences through comments and shares. In this sense, Facebook functioned as both a communication tool and an agenda-setting mechanism, shaping which issues gained attention and how that influenced the public.

In the March 2026 election in Nepal, parties increasingly employed creative digital content, such as short videos, graphics, slogans, and live streams, to capture attention and influence voter perceptions, political engagement, and campaign visibility. This study finds that parties with stronger and more effective communication strategies can achieve public attention, engagement, and electoral victory. The weaker and less engaging digital campaigns experienced lower levels of public interaction and comparatively weaker election performance.

The election success cannot be explained solely through social media activity. It has depended on other political factors, such as party policy, leadership, public perception of candidates and parties, organisational strength, and broader political circumstances. So, digital campaigning is one component of a larger political environment. The study concludes that social media has altered political agenda-setting in Nepal from a largely centralised, top-down process to a more participatory, networked, and interactive form of political discourse. This interactive environment reshaped the dynamics of political communication by making engagement and visibility increasingly dependent on online public behaviour and networked amplification.

The findings suggest that future elections in Nepal can be more digitally oriented, requiring political parties to continuously adapt to evolving communication technologies and online public behaviour. Further research could focus on comparative studies of agenda-setting in traditional and social media, as well as on the challenges of using social media during election campaigns.

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Author contributions

Ashok Poudel conceived and designed the study and was responsible for data collection, data analysis, manuscript drafting, and formal analysis. Lok Bahadur BK and Dipak Devkota assisted with data collection, reliability test, and manuscript drafting. Bidur Pathak contributed to data visualisation, formal analysis, and writing–review and editing. Professor Dai Yonghong provided supervision, critical revisions of the manuscript, and funding acquisition. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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