



Election 2026: Public Expectations, Electoral Transparency, and Political Preferences in Gilgit-Baltistan

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ABSTRACT: This study explores public perceptions, electoral expectations, political preferences, and attitudes toward transparency and representation ahead of Gilgit-Baltistan's elections. It aims to understand how citizens view electoral transparency, federal influence, indigenous representation, and voting behavior in this unique context. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey via Google Forms, data from 314 respondents across various districts were analyzed with SPSS. Results show moderate to high electoral excitement and participation but low confidence in transparency and fairness. Public perception indicates strong federal influence on electoral outcomes and support for indigenous representation and local leadership, reflecting regional awareness. Candidate traits like personality, reputation, and promises influenced voting more than party affiliation. The study adds empirical insights into electoral politics and democratic views in Gilgit-Baltistan, underscoring the need for greater transparency, institutional credibility, local representation, and development to enhance democratic trust and legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: Electoral Transparency, Political Participation, Indigenous Political Representation, Federal Political Influence, Voting Behavior, Democratic Perceptions, Gilgit-Baltistan

Introduction

Elections are widely regarded as one of the fundamental pillars of democratic governance because they provide citizens with the opportunity to participate in political decision-making and influence the direction of public policy (Dahl, 1971). Beyond the selection of political representatives, elections also reflect the level of public trust in democratic institutions, perceptions of political legitimacy, and expectations regarding governance, accountability, and development (Norris, 2014). Public confidence in electoral systems is particularly important in politically sensitive regions where democratic participation is closely linked with issues of identity, representation, and political autonomy.

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In the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, elections hold substantial political and social significance due to the region's unique constitutional and administrative status. Gilgit-Baltistan has historically remained at the center of debates concerning governance structures, constitutional rights, political representation, and regional autonomy (Hunzai, 2013). As a strategically important region, GB has experienced increasing political awareness and electoral participation over the years. However, concerns regarding democratic representation and the effectiveness of political institutions continue to shape public political discourse in the region.

One of the most debated aspects of electoral politics in Gilgit-Baltistan is the perceived influence of federally ruling political parties on local election outcomes. Unlike Pakistan's general elections, elections in GB are conducted separately, creating a distinct political environment in which national political dynamics may significantly shape local electoral behavior. Political analysts and public observers have frequently argued that the political party governing at the federal level tends to gain strategic advantages during GB elections due to administrative influence, political access, and development-related promises (PILDAT, 2020). Consequently, many citizens perceive electoral outcomes in GB as being closely connected to federal political power rather than entirely independent local political competition. Such perceptions have intensified debates regarding electoral transparency, democratic fairness, and local political autonomy.

Electoral transparency and trust in democratic processes remain central concerns in Pakistan's broader political environment. According to Norris (2014), perceptions of electoral integrity significantly influence citizens' trust in democratic systems and willingness to participate politically. Similarly, Schedler (2002) argued that electoral manipulation or perceived unfairness weakens democratic legitimacy and public confidence in governance institutions. In Pakistan, electoral transparency has repeatedly emerged as a contentious political issue, particularly regarding allegations of political interference, institutional influence, and administrative bias during elections (Shafqat, 2019). In the context of GB, such concerns become particularly important because perceptions of transparency directly influence voter confidence, political participation, and democratic stability.

At the same time, there is a growing public discussion regarding the need for a strong indigenous political party capable of representing the specific interests, identity, and aspirations of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Regional political identity often becomes stronger in areas where citizens perceive insufficient representation within national political structures (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Many people in GB believe that national political parties prioritize broader federal interests over region-specific issues, thereby creating a representation gap within the local political landscape. Consequently, demands for stronger indigenous political representation have become increasingly visible in public and political discourse.

Voting behavior in GB also appears to be influenced by multiple political and social factors, including party affiliation, candidate personality, local reputation, and expectations of future development. Studies on voting behavior suggest that citizens may vote either on the basis of political party identification or candidate-centered evaluations (Campbell et al., 1960; Wattenberg, 1991). In regions where political patronage and developmental expectations are prominent, voters may strategically support candidates affiliated with politically influential federal parties in anticipation of greater access to resources and development opportunities. Simultaneously, local leadership and personality-based politics continue to play an important role in shaping electoral outcomes.

The study also seeks to examine whether electoral perceptions and political preferences vary across different demographic groups, such as age, gender, education, and district. Existing political behavior literature suggests that demographic characteristics significantly influence political awareness, democratic attitudes, electoral participation, and voting behavior (Verba & Nie, 1972; Dalton, 2008). Variations in educational exposure, generational

experiences, regional political contexts, and social roles often shape how citizens perceive electoral transparency, political representation, governance effectiveness, and political accountability. Similarly, political participation and trust in democratic institutions are frequently associated with levels of education, civic engagement, and regional political experiences (Putnam, 1993). In the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, where political dynamics and development patterns differ across districts and communities, understanding demographic variations in electoral perceptions is particularly important for identifying diverse political expectations and regional democratic concerns. Therefore, the present study aims to provide deeper insights into how demographic factors contribute to differences in political attitudes, electoral perceptions, and voting preferences within the region.

Despite the growing political importance of Gilgit-Baltistan, limited empirical research has examined public perceptions regarding electoral transparency, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voter expectations in the region. Existing discussions are often dominated by media narratives and political commentary, while systematic survey-based public opinion research remains relatively scarce. Therefore, the present study aims to examine citizens' expectations and perceptions regarding the upcoming elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. Specifically, the study investigates electoral excitement, perceptions of transparency and fairness, expectations regarding political and socioeconomic change, opinions regarding federal political influence, support for indigenous political representation, and voting preferences related to political parties and candidate personalities.

The primary objective of the present study is to examine public perceptions, political expectations, and voting behavior regarding the upcoming elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. Specifically, the study aims to explore citizens' levels of electoral excitement, democratic participation, and expectations regarding governance, development, and public service delivery after the elections. The study further seeks to investigate public perceptions regarding electoral transparency, institutional fairness, and the influence of federally ruling political parties on electoral outcomes in Gilgit-Baltistan. In addition, the research examines citizens' attitudes toward indigenous political representation and the perceived need for strong local political leadership capable of representing regional interests and addressing local concerns. The study also aims to identify the major factors influencing voting behavior, including political party affiliation, candidate personality, local reputation, and development-oriented expectations. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze variations in electoral perceptions and political preferences across demographic groups such as age, gender, education, and district in order to better understand the diversity of political attitudes and democratic expectations within the region.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the broader literature on political participation, electoral trust, democratic legitimacy, and regional political identity. Furthermore, the study may provide useful insights for policymakers, political stakeholders, election observers, researchers, and civil society organizations interested in strengthening democratic processes and political representation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The present study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework consisting of Political Trust Theory, Center–Periphery Theory, and Social Identity Theory. These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a comprehensive explanation of electoral perceptions, democratic attitudes, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voting behavior in Gilgit-Baltistan. Given the unique political and constitutional context of Gilgit-Baltistan, the integration of these theories offers a multidimensional understanding of how citizens develop political expectations, evaluate democratic processes, and shape their electoral preferences.

Political Trust Theory serves as the central theoretical foundation of the study. The theory emphasizes that citizens' trust in political institutions, electoral systems, and democratic procedures plays a critical role in shaping political participation, democratic legitimacy, and governance stability (Norris, 2014; Putnam, 1993). Political trust develops when citizens perceive political institutions as transparent, fair, accountable, and responsive to public interests. Conversely, perceptions of institutional bias, political manipulation, and electoral unfairness weaken democratic trust and reduce confidence in governance systems. In democratic societies, electoral transparency and institutional credibility are considered essential for sustaining democratic legitimacy and encouraging political participation (Lipset, 1959). The present study applies Political Trust Theory to explain public perceptions regarding electoral transparency, institutional fairness, and political trust in Gilgit-Baltistan. The comparatively low public confidence regarding transparency and institutional independence observed in the findings reflects broader concerns regarding democratic credibility and governance legitimacy in the region.

The study further incorporates Center–Periphery Theory to explain public perceptions regarding federal political influence on electoral outcomes in Gilgit-Baltistan. According to Rokkan and Urwin (1983), politically peripheral regions often experience institutional dependence, unequal political influence, and dominance by central political authorities. In such contexts, political processes within peripheral regions are frequently shaped by the interests and power structures of the political center. Gilgit-Baltistan represents a politically peripheral and constitutionally distinctive region within Pakistan's political structure. Historically, elections in GB have often been perceived as influenced by the political party governing at the federal level. Because general elections in Pakistan and elections in Gilgit-Baltistan are conducted separately, federally ruling political parties are often viewed as possessing strategic political advantages in regional electoral competition. Center–Periphery Theory, therefore, helps explain respondents' perceptions that federal political dynamics significantly influence electoral outcomes in GB. The theory further explains why citizens may associate political alignment with federally ruling parties with greater access to development resources, political support, and institutional benefits.

In addition, the study draws upon Social Identity Theory to explain public support for indigenous political representation and local political leadership in Gilgit-Baltistan. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that individuals derive part of their identity from their membership in social, cultural, ethnic, or regional groups, and these identities significantly influence political attitudes and collective behavior. In political contexts, individuals often demonstrate stronger attachment toward leaders, institutions, and political movements that reflect their collective identity and local interests. The findings of the present study demonstrate strong support for indigenous political representation, with respondents largely believing that local political actors better understand the social, political, and developmental concerns of the region compared to national political parties. Social Identity Theory helps explain this preference for indigenous political leadership by emphasizing the importance of regional identity, collective belonging, and local political empowerment in shaping electoral attitudes and democratic expectations. The theory further suggests that demands for indigenous political representation tend to emerge more strongly in politically peripheral or culturally distinctive regions where citizens perceive insufficient representation within broader national political systems.

Collectively, the integration of Political Trust Theory, Center–Periphery Theory, and Social Identity Theory provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding electoral perceptions and political behavior in Gilgit-Baltistan. Political Trust Theory explains citizens' concerns regarding electoral transparency and institutional credibility, Center–Periphery Theory explains perceptions regarding federal political influence and political dependence, while Social Identity Theory explains support for indigenous political representation and local political leadership. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a multidimensional understanding of how democratic trust,

regional political dynamics, and collective identity interact to shape electoral attitudes, political expectations, and voting behavior in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Elections and Democratic Governance

Elections are widely recognized as the cornerstone of democratic governance because they provide citizens with the opportunity to participate in political decision-making and hold governments accountable for their performance. Democratic theorists argue that competitive elections enhance political legitimacy, institutional accountability, and citizen participation within democratic systems (Dahl, 1971). Huntington (1991) similarly emphasized that electoral participation represents one of the most visible indicators of democratic consolidation and political modernization. In democratic societies, elections not only determine political leadership but also shape public perceptions regarding governance quality, representation, and institutional trust.

Contemporary scholarship further suggests that the legitimacy of democratic systems depends significantly on citizens' confidence in electoral processes and political institutions. Political trust is considered essential for democratic resilience because it influences voter participation, political compliance, and institutional support (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). A recent meta-analysis by Hooghe et al. (2024) demonstrated that political trust substantially affects democratic participation, vote choice, and citizens' support for political systems. Consequently, elections function not merely as procedural mechanisms but also as instruments through which citizens evaluate the responsiveness and effectiveness of governance institutions.

In politically sensitive and administratively unique regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan, elections assume additional importance because they are closely connected with issues of identity, autonomy, representation, and regional political inclusion. Public expectations from elections in such regions extend beyond leadership selection and often include demands for development, constitutional rights, and equitable political representation. Therefore, understanding electoral perceptions in GB requires examining elections not only as democratic events but also as instruments of political legitimacy and regional representation.

Electoral Transparency and Political Trust

Electoral transparency constitutes one of the central determinants of democratic legitimacy and public trust in political institutions. Norris (2014) argued that electoral integrity reflects adherence to internationally accepted standards of free and fair elections throughout the electoral cycle. When citizens perceive electoral processes as transparent and impartial, trust in democratic institutions tends to increase; conversely, perceptions of manipulation or unfairness weaken democratic legitimacy and intensify political distrust (Schedler, 2002).

Existing empirical studies consistently demonstrate a strong relationship between perceptions of electoral fairness and political trust. Mauk (2022) found that citizens who perceive elections as fair exhibit higher levels of political trust, even when their preferred political candidates lose elections. Similarly, Marien and Hooghe (2011) showed that electoral outcomes and perceptions of procedural fairness significantly influence trust in political institutions across democratic systems. Electoral fairness therefore functions as a procedural mechanism through which democratic legitimacy is maintained.

Recent literature has also highlighted the role of media, transparency, and institutional accountability in strengthening electoral trust. Studies conducted in Pakistan indicate that public confidence in democratic institutions increases when electoral processes are perceived as transparent, accessible, and free from political interference. Conversely, allegations of electoral manipulation, institutional bias, or political interference contribute

to political cynicism and democratic dissatisfaction. These concerns are particularly relevant in regions where political competition is closely linked with state institutions and federal political dynamics.

In the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, electoral transparency remains a sensitive political issue due to widespread public discussions regarding fairness, institutional neutrality, and political influence. Public perceptions regarding electoral transparency directly influence democratic participation, confidence in governance institutions, and acceptance of electoral outcomes. Therefore, examining citizens' perceptions regarding electoral fairness and transparency is essential for understanding political trust and democratic expectations in GB.

Federal Political Influence and Electoral Outcomes

The relationship between federal political power and regional electoral outcomes has remained a significant area of inquiry within political science, particularly in federations and politically peripheral regions. Center-periphery theories suggest that regions with limited constitutional autonomy often experience stronger political dependence on central governments, influencing electoral behavior and regional political dynamics (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). In such contexts, citizens may strategically support politically dominant federal parties to secure development resources, political access, and administrative support.

Research on electoral behavior demonstrates that voters frequently make strategic political choices based on expectations regarding resource allocation and political influence. Political patronage theories argue that ruling parties often possess structural advantages in electoral competition because voters associate them with greater developmental capacity and institutional access (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In many developing democracies, electoral competition is therefore shaped not only by ideological preferences but also by perceptions regarding state resources, patronage networks, and political influence.

The political context of Gilgit-Baltistan provides a particularly important case for examining federal political influence. Unlike Pakistan's general elections, elections in GB are conducted separately, creating a distinct political environment in which federally ruling parties are widely perceived to possess strategic advantages. Public discourse frequently suggests that political parties governing at the federal level gain electoral benefits through political influence, administrative access, and development-related promises (PILDAT, 2020). Such perceptions have contributed to ongoing debates regarding democratic autonomy, electoral independence, and political fairness in the region.

Despite the political significance of these debates, empirical research examining public perceptions regarding federal political influence in GB elections remains extremely limited. Most existing discussions are journalistic or political rather than survey-based and empirical. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by systematically examining citizens' perceptions regarding the role of federal political parties in shaping electoral outcomes in GB.

Indigenous Political Representation and Regional Identity

Political identity and regional representation have long remained central themes in political science literature, particularly within regions characterized by unique cultural, ethnic, or constitutional identities. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals develop stronger political attachments to groups and organizations that reflect their collective identity, values, and regional interests (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, perceptions of political exclusion or inadequate representation often strengthen demands for indigenous political movements and regional political autonomy.

Center-periphery theories similarly explain how politically peripheral regions frequently develop demands for stronger local political representation when citizens perceive that national political institutions fail to adequately represent their interests (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Regional political parties often emerge in response to concerns regarding cultural identity, political marginalization, economic inequality, or constitutional exclusion. Studies on regional politics demonstrate that support for indigenous political parties increases when citizens perceive national political actors as disconnected from local realities and regional priorities.

In the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, debates regarding indigenous political representation have become increasingly prominent in recent years. Many citizens believe that national political parties prioritize broader federal political interests over region-specific concerns, thereby limiting meaningful political representation within GB. Public discussions frequently emphasize the need for strong indigenous political leadership capable of representing local identity, constitutional demands, and regional development priorities. Such discussions are particularly significant because political representation in GB remains closely connected with broader questions of constitutional status, governance structures, and regional autonomy.

Despite the growing visibility of indigenous political discourse in GB, limited empirical research has systematically explored public perceptions regarding regional political identity and support for indigenous political parties. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining citizens' attitudes toward local political representation and indigenous political leadership in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Voting Behavior: Personality Versus Political Party

Voting behavior has remained one of the most extensively studied areas within political science research. Classical models of voting behavior emphasize the importance of political party identification in shaping electoral preferences and long-term political loyalty (Campbell et al., 1960). According to party identification theory, voters develop psychological attachments to political parties that influence their electoral choices across different elections.

However, contemporary electoral research increasingly highlights the growing importance of candidate-centered politics and personality-based voting behavior. Wattenberg (1991) argued that modern electoral politics has shifted toward candidate-centered competition, where voters prioritize leadership personality, charisma, credibility, and local reputation over traditional party loyalty. In many developing democracies, local leadership and candidate reputation play particularly important roles because voters often associate individual politicians with direct access to resources, influence, and constituency development.

Research further suggests that voting behavior is influenced by multiple contextual factors, including political trust, development expectations, ethnic identity, and strategic political considerations. In politically sensitive regions, voters may support candidates affiliated with influential federal parties due to expectations regarding development funding and political access. Simultaneously, local personalities and community influence continue to shape electoral choices at the constituency level.

In the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, voting behavior appears to reflect a combination of party-centered and personality-centered politics. While national political parties dominate electoral competition, local political leaders and personalities also maintain significant influence within constituencies. Understanding whether voters prioritize political parties or candidate personalities is therefore essential for analyzing electoral behavior and political decision-making in GB.

Political Expectations, Governance, and Democratic Participation

Citizens' expectations regarding governance and development constitute important determinants of political participation and electoral engagement. Democratic participation theories suggest that citizens are more likely to engage in elections when they believe political processes can produce meaningful political, economic, and social change (Verba & Nie, 1972). Elections therefore represent not only democratic procedures but also opportunities through which citizens express hopes regarding governance effectiveness, public service delivery, and socioeconomic improvement.

Political efficacy literature further emphasizes that citizens participate politically when they believe their votes matter and that elected representatives can influence governance outcomes (Craig et al., 1990). Public expectations regarding employment opportunities, infrastructure development, education, constitutional rights, and governance reforms frequently shape electoral attitudes and participation levels. In developing political systems, elections are often viewed as opportunities for improving governance responsiveness and resource distribution.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, public expectations from elections appear strongly connected with governance challenges, development concerns, and political representation. Citizens increasingly expect elections to address issues such as unemployment, infrastructure deficiencies, education, economic opportunities, and constitutional rights. Simultaneously, concerns regarding transparency and political influence continue to shape public confidence in electoral processes. These dynamics make electoral expectations an important dimension for understanding democratic participation and political behavior in GB.

Although previous studies have extensively examined political trust, voting behavior, and electoral participation in broader democratic contexts, limited empirical research has specifically focused on electoral perceptions and democratic expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan. Existing discussions largely remain political or journalistic rather than systematic and survey-based. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by empirically examining electoral excitement, transparency perceptions, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voting preferences among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative research design to examine public perceptions and expectations regarding the upcoming elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed because it enables the collection of data from a large number of respondents within a specific time period and is considered appropriate for examining public opinion, political attitudes, and electoral perceptions. The quantitative approach was selected to systematically analyze citizens' views regarding electoral excitement, transparency, political trust, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voting preferences.

Research Population

The target population of the study consists of eligible voters residing in different districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. Since the study focuses on electoral perceptions and political expectations, only individuals who are eligible to vote and possess awareness regarding political and electoral processes were considered suitable respondents for the study.

Sampling Technique

The study employs a non-probability convenience sampling technique for data collection. This method was considered appropriate because of geographical accessibility issues, time limitations, and the practical challenges

associated with collecting data across diverse districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. Efforts were made to collect responses from participants belonging to different age groups, educational backgrounds, occupations, and districts in order to improve the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

Sample Size

A total of 314 respondents participated in the study. The sample size was considered adequate for conducting descriptive and inferential statistical analysis in survey-based political research. Responses were collected from participants across different areas of Gilgit-Baltistan to capture broader public perceptions regarding the upcoming elections.

Data Collection Method

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire using Google Forms. The online survey method was selected because it provided an efficient and accessible way to collect responses from participants across geographically dispersed districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. The questionnaire link was distributed through social media platforms, WhatsApp groups, and personal networks to maximize participation and response diversity.

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would be used solely for academic and research purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were strictly maintained throughout the data collection process.

Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed based on existing literature related to electoral behavior, political trust, democratic participation, and regional political representation. The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections designed to measure different dimensions of electoral perceptions and political expectations.

The questionnaire included the following sections:

1. Demographic Information
2. Electoral Excitement and Participation
3. Expectations from Elections and Governance
4. Electoral Transparency and Political Trust
5. Federal Political Influence
6. Indigenous Political Representation
7. Political Party and Leadership Preferences
8. Voting Behavior (Personality vs Political Party)

Most items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Additionally, close-ended and multiple-choice questions were included to examine political party popularity, favorite political leaders, and voting behavior patterns.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed established ethical guidelines for social science research. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from respondents before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected, and the data were used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Results and Findings

The 314 valid responses were received from participants belonging to different demographic backgrounds and districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings are organized into different sections, including demographic analysis, electoral excitement, expectations from elections, perceptions regarding electoral transparency, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, voting behavior, and overall political perceptions.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents were male (65.0%), while female respondents constituted 35.0% of the sample. In terms of age distribution, most respondents belonged to the younger age groups, particularly 18–25 years (52.2%) and 26–35 years (36.9%), reflecting strong youth participation in the study.

Regarding educational qualification, the majority of respondents were highly educated, with 57.0% holding bachelor's degrees and 35.7% possessing master's level or higher qualifications.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

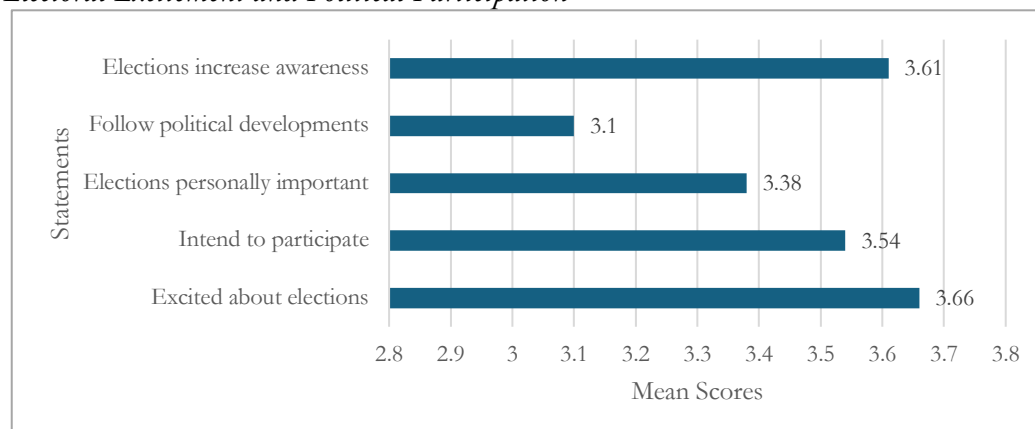
Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	204	65.0%
	Female	110	35.0%
Age	18–25	164	52.2%
	26–35	116	36.9%
	36–45	28	8.9%
	46–55	6	1.9%
Education Level	Intermediate	23	7.3%
	Bachelors	179	57.0%
	Master and Above	112	35.7%

Electoral Excitement and Political Participation

The findings indicate moderate to high levels of electoral excitement and political participation among respondents. Figure 1 presents the statements and mean values of electoral excitement and political participation.

Figure 1

Electoral Excitement and Political Participation



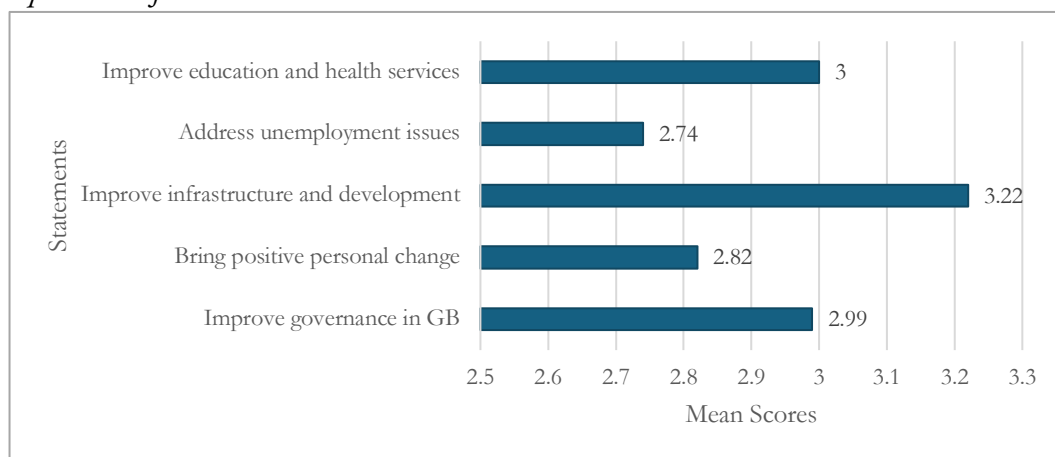
The results suggest that respondents generally showed positive interest in the upcoming elections. The highest mean score was observed for electoral excitement, indicating that participants were politically engaged and interested in the electoral process. However, comparatively lower scores regarding active political follow-up suggest that not all respondents consistently engage with political developments.

Expectations from Elections

This section examined respondents' expectations regarding governance, development, employment, and public services after the elections. Figure 2 shows the details of expectations from elections.

Figure 2

Expectations from Elections



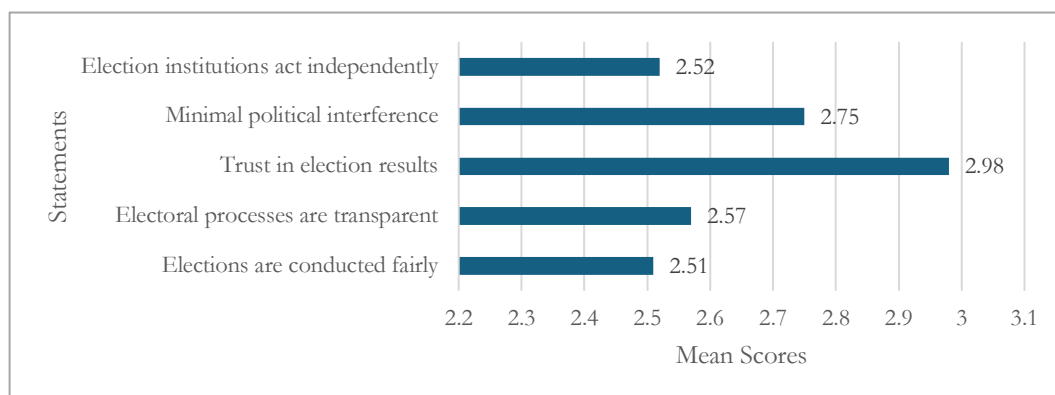
The findings reveal mixed expectations regarding the impact of elections on governance and socioeconomic development. Respondents showed relatively moderate confidence that elections could improve infrastructure and development; however, expectations regarding employment generation and personal life improvement remained comparatively lower. These findings indicate a degree of political skepticism among respondents regarding the practical outcomes of electoral processes.

Electoral Transparency and Political Trust

This section examined public perceptions about transparency, fairness, and the independence of institutions in elections. Figure 3 shows respondents' expectations concerning electoral transparency and political trust.

Figure 3

Electoral Transparency and Political Trust



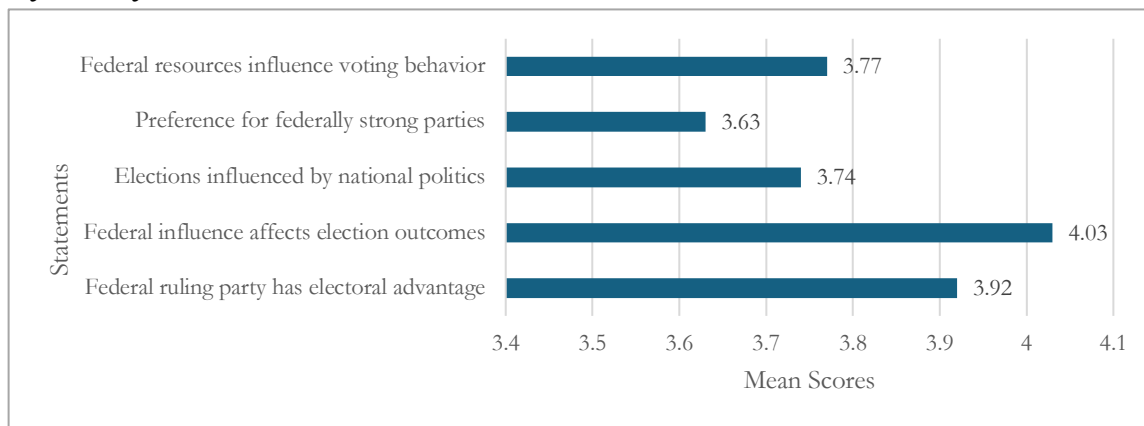
The findings indicate relatively low confidence in electoral transparency and institutional fairness. Respondents generally expressed concerns regarding political interference and the independence of election institutions. The comparatively low mean scores suggest that perceptions regarding electoral transparency remain a major concern among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Federal Political Influence

This section examined public perceptions of the influence of federally ruling political parties on electoral outcomes in GB. Figure 4 presents respondents' anticipated outcomes.

Figure 4

Influence of the Federal Government



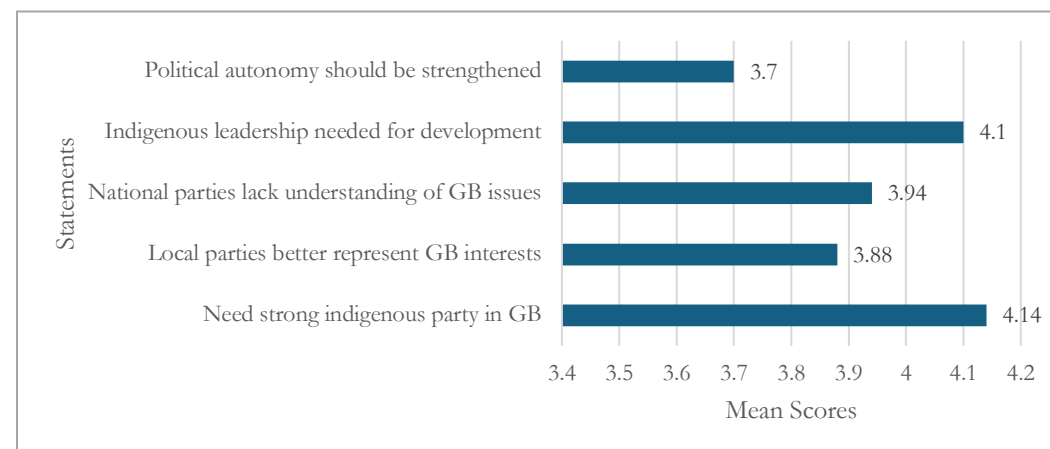
The results demonstrate strong public perceptions regarding the influence of federal political dynamics on elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. Respondents generally agreed that federally ruling parties possess electoral advantages and that national political influence significantly affects electoral outcomes in the region. These findings support the broader public discourse regarding federal political dominance in GB elections.

Indigenous Political Representation

This section examined respondents' views regarding the need for indigenous political representation and local political leadership. Details are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Need for Indigenous Political Parties



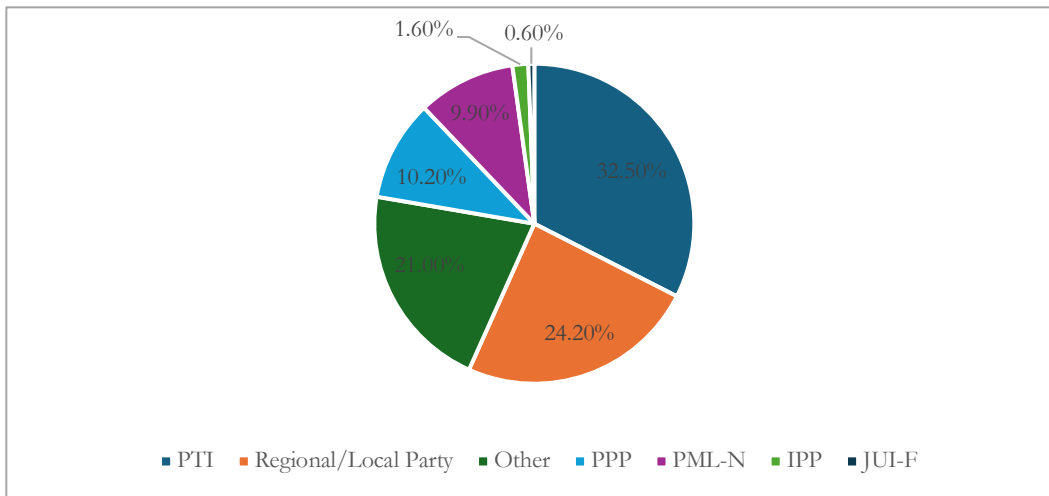
The findings reveal strong support for indigenous political representation in Gilgit-Baltistan. Respondents generally believed that local political parties and indigenous leadership are better positioned to represent regional interests and address local issues. The high mean scores indicate growing political awareness regarding regional identity and local political autonomy.

Political Party Preferences

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred political party. Figure 6 presents the details.

Figure 6

Preferred Political Party in GB



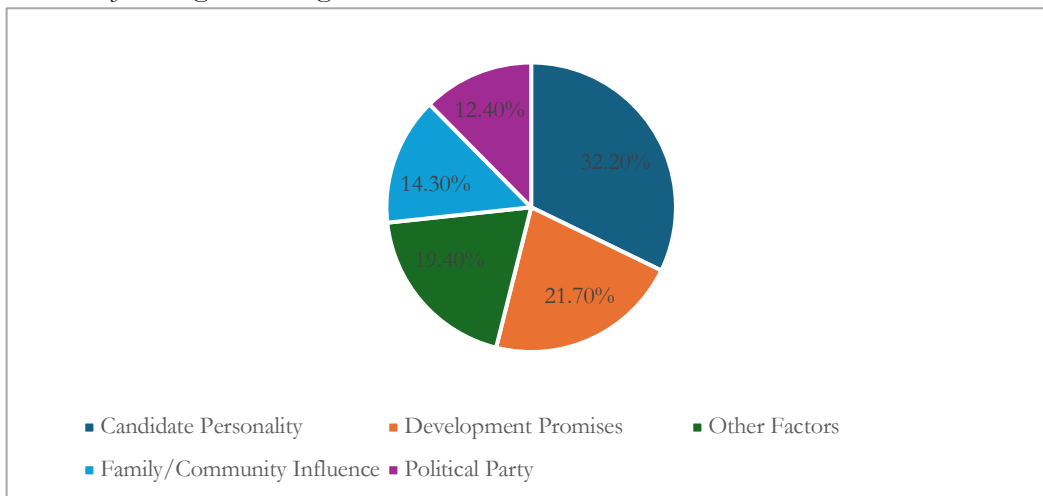
The findings indicate that PTI emerged as the most preferred political party among respondents, followed by regional/local political parties. The relatively strong support for regional parties further supports the argument that citizens desire stronger indigenous political representation in GB.

Voting Behavior and Electoral Decision-Making

Respondents were asked about the primary factors influencing their voting decisions. Details are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Factors Influencing the Voting Decision



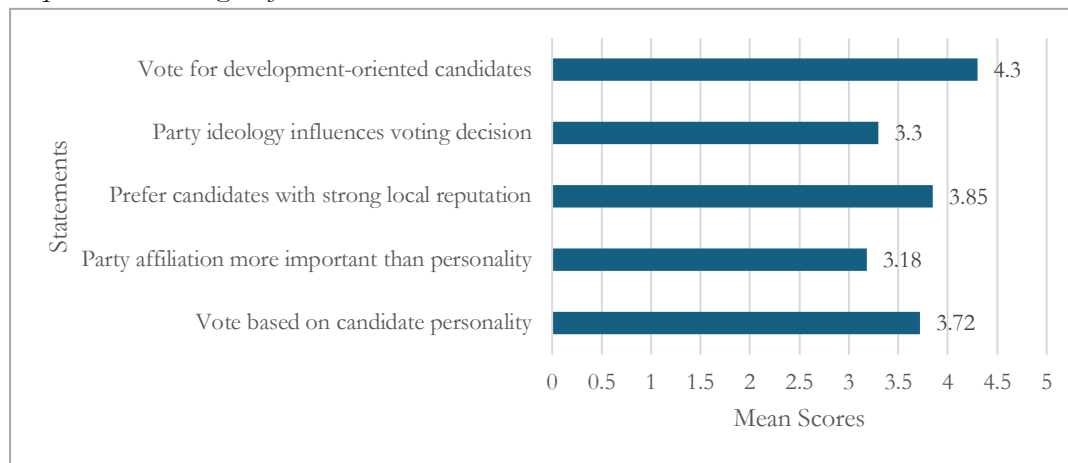
The results suggest that candidate personality is the most influential factor affecting voting behavior among respondents. Development-related promises also emerged as a major factor influencing electoral decisions. Interestingly, political party affiliation appeared less influential compared to personality and development expectations.

Personality Versus Political Party

This section further explored respondents' voting preferences regarding candidate personality and political parties. Figure 8 presents the details.

Figure 8

Respondents' Voting Preference



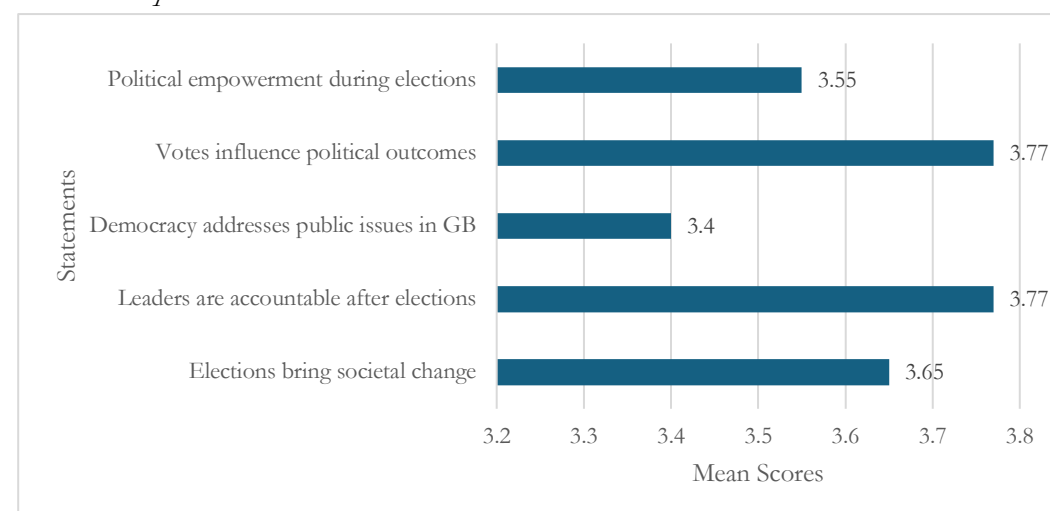
The findings demonstrate that voters place substantial importance on local reputation, personality, and development-oriented leadership. The highest mean score was observed for development-oriented voting behavior, suggesting that respondents strongly prioritize candidates capable of delivering development and public services.

Overall Political Perceptions

This section examined broader political attitudes and democratic perceptions among respondents. Figure 9 presents the details.

Figure 9

Political Perceptions



The findings indicate moderate confidence in democratic participation and electoral effectiveness. Respondents generally believed that elections and voting can influence political outcomes; however, perceptions regarding democratic effectiveness remained moderate rather than strongly positive.

Demographic Differences in Electoral Perceptions and Political Preferences

This section examined whether electoral perceptions and political preferences differed across demographic groups such as gender, age, education, and district.

Gender Differences

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine gender differences regarding support for indigenous political representation and perceptions of electoral transparency. Table 2 presents the details.

Table 2

Gender Differences in Electoral Perceptions

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	p-value
Electoral Excitement	3.68	3.61	.412
Electoral Transparency	2.55	2.49	.538
Indigenous Political Representation	4.08	4.18	.327
Federal Political Influence	3.79	3.88	.441

The findings indicate no statistically significant gender differences regarding electoral perceptions and political preferences ($p > .05$). Both male and female respondents demonstrated similar perceptions regarding electoral transparency, federal political influence, and support for indigenous political representation.

Age Differences

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences among age groups regarding electoral perceptions. Table 3 presents the details.

Table 3

Age Differences in Electoral Perceptions

Variable	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	p-value
Electoral Excitement	3.78	3.51	3.22	3.10	.038
Electoral Transparency	2.42	2.63	2.88	2.91	.072
Indigenous Political Representation	4.21	4.08	3.82	3.60	.041
Federal Political Influence	3.95	3.82	3.51	3.47	.065

The findings indicate statistically significant age differences regarding electoral excitement and support for indigenous political representation ($p < .05$). Younger respondents demonstrated comparatively higher political excitement and stronger support for local political representation compared to older respondents.

Education Differences

Educational differences were examined regarding electoral transparency and political influence. Table 4 presents the details.

Table 4*Education Differences in Electoral Perceptions*

Variable	Intermediate	Bachelors	Master & Above	p-value
Electoral Transparency	2.91	2.56	2.38	.031
Federal Political Influence	3.41	3.77	4.02	.018
Indigenous Political Representation	3.72	4.05	4.26	.024
Democratic Effectiveness	3.61	3.42	3.21	.049

The findings reveal significant educational differences regarding electoral perceptions. Respondents with higher educational qualifications appeared comparatively more critical regarding electoral transparency and democratic effectiveness. At the same time, highly educated respondents demonstrated stronger awareness regarding federal political influence and stronger support for indigenous political representation.

District Differences

District-wise analysis was conducted to examine regional variations in political perceptions and voting preferences. Table 5 presents the details.

Table 5*District Differences in Electoral Perceptions*

Variable	Skardu	Gilgit	Hunza	Other Districts	p-value
Electoral Excitement	3.84	3.58	3.47	3.39	.044
Electoral Transparency	2.49	2.61	2.83	2.54	.081
Indigenous Political Representation	4.29	4.02	3.88	3.95	.036
Federal Political Influence	4.08	3.84	3.52	3.71	.027

The findings indicate regional variations in electoral perceptions and political preferences across districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. Respondents from Skardu demonstrated comparatively stronger support for indigenous political representation and higher perceptions regarding federal political influence compared to respondents from other districts.

Overall, the demographic analysis indicates that electoral perceptions in Gilgit-Baltistan are shaped more strongly by broader political concerns such as transparency, federal political influence, and regional representation rather than by major demographic divisions.

Summary of Findings

The overall findings of the study reveal several important trends regarding electoral perceptions and political expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan.

1. Respondents demonstrated moderate to high electoral excitement and willingness to participate in upcoming elections.
2. Public confidence regarding electoral transparency and institutional fairness remained relatively low.
3. Strong perceptions exist that federally ruling political parties influence electoral outcomes in GB.
4. Respondents strongly supported the idea of indigenous political representation and local political leadership.
5. Candidate personality and development promises were found to be more influential than political party affiliation in shaping voting behavior.

6. Citizens demonstrated moderate confidence in democratic participation and the ability of elections to influence governance outcomes.
7. Demographic analysis revealed limited gender-based differences in electoral perceptions; however, significant variations were observed across age, education, and district categories.
8. Younger respondents demonstrated comparatively higher electoral excitement and stronger support for indigenous political representation.
9. Highly educated respondents appeared more critical regarding electoral transparency and democratic effectiveness, while simultaneously showing stronger awareness regarding federal political influence and indigenous political representation.
10. District-wise analysis indicated regional variations in electoral perceptions and political preferences, suggesting that local political contexts influence voting attitudes and democratic expectations across Gilgit-Baltistan.

Overall, the findings suggest that while citizens remain politically engaged and hopeful regarding democratic participation, concerns regarding transparency, political influence, and representation continue to shape electoral perceptions in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Discussion

The present study examined public perceptions, electoral expectations, political preferences, and attitudes regarding transparency and representation in the upcoming elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings provide important insights into democratic attitudes, voting behavior, and regional political dynamics within the unique political context of GB. Overall, the results indicate that while citizens remain politically engaged and hopeful regarding democratic participation, concerns regarding electoral transparency, federal political influence, and regional political representation continue to shape public perceptions.

One of the major findings of the study is the relatively high level of electoral excitement and willingness to participate in elections among respondents. The majority of participants expressed interest in the upcoming elections and demonstrated positive attitudes toward democratic participation. These findings support democratic participation theories, which suggest that elections serve as important mechanisms through which citizens express political preferences and expectations regarding governance and public representation (Verba & Nie, 1972). The findings further indicate growing political awareness among the youth population of Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly because younger respondents demonstrated comparatively higher electoral excitement and political engagement. This trend is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the increasing political involvement of younger generations in democratic processes (Dalton, 2008).

Despite strong electoral participation intentions, the study revealed comparatively low public confidence regarding electoral transparency and institutional fairness. Respondents generally expressed skepticism regarding the transparency of electoral processes, political interference, and the independence of electoral institutions. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing that perceptions of electoral unfairness reduce political trust and democratic legitimacy (Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2002). The findings suggest that concerns regarding transparency remain deeply embedded within public political consciousness in Gilgit-Baltistan. Such concerns may influence not only electoral participation but also citizens' long-term trust in democratic institutions and governance systems.

The findings further demonstrate strong public perceptions regarding the influence of federally ruling political parties on electoral outcomes in Gilgit-Baltistan. Respondents largely agreed that political parties governing at the federal level possess strategic advantages in GB elections and that national political dynamics significantly shape electoral outcomes. This finding is particularly important because elections in GB are conducted separately from

Pakistan's general elections, creating perceptions that federal political power influences local electoral competition. The findings support center-periphery political theories, which suggest that politically peripheral regions often experience greater dependence on central political structures and federal resource networks (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Similarly, patronage politics literature argues that ruling parties frequently benefit from institutional access, political influence, and development-related expectations during elections (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Therefore, the findings indicate that voters in GB may strategically associate electoral success with federal political access and development opportunities.

Another important finding of the study is the strong support for indigenous political representation and local political leadership. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Gilgit-Baltistan requires a strong indigenous political party capable of representing regional interests and local identity. Participants also believed that national political parties do not fully understand or prioritize region-specific concerns in GB. These findings are consistent with Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals develop stronger political attachment toward groups and institutions that reflect their collective identity and local interests (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The findings further support regional political representation literature emphasizing that demands for indigenous political movements often emerge when citizens perceive political marginalization or inadequate representation within broader national political systems (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983).

The study also provides important insights regarding voting behavior and electoral decision-making in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings indicate that candidate personality, local reputation, and development promises exert stronger influence on voting behavior than political party affiliation alone. Respondents particularly emphasized the importance of candidates who could bring development and public services to their constituencies. These findings support candidate-centered voting theories suggesting that modern electoral behavior increasingly prioritizes leadership personality, local influence, and perceived effectiveness over traditional party loyalty (Wattenberg, 1991). In developing political systems, where local governance and development issues remain highly significant, voters often prioritize candidates perceived as capable of delivering tangible benefits to their communities.

The demographic analysis also revealed several important patterns. Younger respondents demonstrated comparatively stronger support for indigenous political representation and greater electoral excitement. Highly educated respondents appeared more critical regarding electoral transparency and democratic effectiveness while simultaneously demonstrating stronger awareness regarding federal political influence. These findings support previous research suggesting that political awareness and institutional criticism tend to increase with educational attainment (Dalton, 2008). District-wise variations further indicate that local political contexts and regional dynamics influence electoral perceptions and political preferences across Gilgit-Baltistan.

Overall, the findings of the study contribute significantly to the limited empirical literature on electoral perceptions and democratic expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan. Existing discussions regarding elections in GB have largely remained political or journalistic in nature, whereas systematic survey-based evidence has remained scarce. By empirically examining electoral transparency, political trust, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voting behavior, the present study provides a comprehensive understanding of contemporary electoral attitudes in GB.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several important practical implications for political stakeholders, election administrators, civil society organizations, political parties, and democratic institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan.

First, the study highlights relatively low public confidence regarding electoral transparency and institutional fairness. This suggests the need for election management institutions and political stakeholders to improve transparency, communication, and accountability throughout the electoral process. Measures such as transparent vote counting procedures, independent election monitoring, voter awareness campaigns, and improved institutional neutrality may help strengthen public trust in elections and democratic governance. Second, the findings reveal strong public perceptions regarding federal political influence on electoral outcomes in Gilgit-Baltistan. Political parties and policymakers should therefore recognize that citizens are increasingly aware of political power dynamics and institutional influence during elections. Enhancing the independence and credibility of local electoral processes may help reduce political skepticism and improve democratic legitimacy within the region.

Third, the study demonstrates strong public support for indigenous political representation and local political leadership. This finding suggests that political actors operating in GB should place greater emphasis on region-specific issues, local governance concerns, and indigenous political participation. Political parties may improve public trust and electoral engagement by incorporating local voices, regional priorities, and constituency-based development agendas into their political strategies. Fourth, the findings indicate that voters strongly prioritize candidate personality, local reputation, and development promises over political party affiliation alone. Political candidates and parties should therefore focus on public service delivery, constituency engagement, and development-oriented political agendas rather than relying solely on party identity or federal political affiliation. This also indicates that effective local leadership and public credibility remain critical determinants of electoral success in GB.

Fifth, the demographic findings reveal that younger and highly educated respondents demonstrate comparatively greater political awareness and stronger support for indigenous political representation. Civil society organizations, educational institutions, and political stakeholders may therefore engage youth populations more actively through civic education programs, democratic participation initiatives, and political awareness campaigns aimed at strengthening informed political participation and democratic engagement.

Policy Implications

The findings of the study also carry several important policy implications for democratic governance, electoral reforms, and political representation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

First, the relatively low levels of public trust regarding electoral transparency indicate the need for stronger electoral reforms and institutional safeguards to ensure fair and credible elections in GB. Policymakers and electoral authorities should strengthen institutional independence, transparency mechanisms, and electoral accountability in order to improve democratic legitimacy and public confidence in electoral outcomes. Second, the strong public perception regarding federal political influence suggests the importance of reducing excessive dependence of regional electoral politics on federal political dynamics. Policymakers should consider institutional arrangements that enhance local political autonomy, democratic independence, and region-specific governance structures within Gilgit-Baltistan. Strengthening local democratic institutions may help reduce perceptions of political manipulation and increase public trust in electoral processes.

Third, the findings regarding support for indigenous political representation highlight the growing public demand for stronger local political participation and regional political inclusion. Policymakers should therefore encourage broader participation of local political actors and ensure that governance structures adequately represent the social, political, and developmental interests of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Greater inclusion of local perspectives in policymaking processes may improve democratic responsiveness and political legitimacy in the region. Fourth, the findings demonstrate that citizens place substantial importance on development-oriented governance.

Policymakers and elected representatives should therefore prioritize infrastructure development, employment generation, education, healthcare, and public service delivery in order to meet public expectations and strengthen democratic trust. Failure to address these governance concerns may further intensify political dissatisfaction and institutional distrust among citizens. Fifth, the district-wise variations observed in electoral perceptions indicate that political attitudes and governance expectations differ across regions of Gilgit-Baltistan. Consequently, policymakers should avoid adopting overly centralized political approaches and instead design district-sensitive governance and development policies that address local political realities and regional priorities.

Finally, the findings suggest that strengthening democratic participation in Gilgit-Baltistan requires not only procedural electoral reforms but also broader efforts aimed at improving political inclusion, institutional credibility, regional representation, and citizen trust in governance systems. Long-term democratic stability in the region may therefore depend on the ability of political institutions to address concerns related to transparency, representation, and equitable political participation.

Limitations of the Study

Despite providing important insights into electoral perceptions and political expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which captures respondents' perceptions at a single point in time. Public political attitudes and electoral perceptions may change before, during, or after elections due to political campaigns, media influence, political events, or changes in the broader political environment. Therefore, the findings reflect perceptions during the specific period in which the data were collected. Second, the study relied on a convenience sampling technique and online data collection through Google Forms. Although this approach facilitated access to respondents across different districts, it may have limited the participation of individuals with lower internet accessibility, limited digital literacy, or reduced exposure to online platforms. Consequently, some segments of the population may be underrepresented in the study.

Third, the sample consisted predominantly of younger and highly educated respondents. As a result, the findings may reflect the perspectives of politically aware and digitally connected populations more strongly than those of older or less educated citizens. Future studies with more demographically balanced samples may provide broader generalizability. Fourth, the study primarily focused on perceptions regarding electoral transparency, federal political influence, indigenous political representation, and voting behavior. Other potentially important factors influencing electoral attitudes, such as ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, media exposure, political ideology, tribal affiliations, and historical voting patterns, were not examined in detail. Fifth, the study adopted a quantitative survey-based approach, which may limit deeper exploration of respondents' political experiences, emotions, and contextual interpretations. Although quantitative analysis provides generalizable findings, it may not fully capture the complexity of political perceptions and democratic attitudes within the unique sociopolitical context of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Finally, the political sensitivity of elections may have influenced some respondents to provide socially desirable answers or avoid expressing highly critical political opinions openly. Therefore, some responses may reflect cautious or moderated political expression.

Future Research Directions

The present study opens several important avenues for future research on electoral politics and democratic perceptions in Gilgit-Baltistan.

First, future studies may adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how electoral perceptions, political trust, and democratic expectations evolve over time before and after elections. Such studies may provide deeper understanding regarding the long-term impact of elections on political attitudes and democratic legitimacy in GB. Second, future researchers may employ probability sampling techniques and larger district-wise representative samples to improve the generalizability and representativeness of findings across Gilgit-Baltistan. Comparative studies between urban and rural districts may also provide additional insights into regional political differences.

Third, qualitative or mixed-method research approaches may further enrich understanding of electoral perceptions in GB. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic approaches could help explore citizens' political experiences, identity concerns, and perceptions regarding representation and democratic participation in greater detail. Fourth, future research may examine the role of social media, digital political campaigns, and online political communication in shaping electoral perceptions and voting behavior among the youth population of Gilgit-Baltistan. Given increasing digital political engagement, such research may provide important insights into emerging patterns of political mobilization. Fifth, future studies may investigate additional variables influencing electoral behavior, including political efficacy, nationalism, ethnic identity, media trust, political polarization, civic engagement, and perceptions regarding constitutional status and regional autonomy. Sixth, comparative studies between Gilgit-Baltistan and other politically peripheral or semi-autonomous regions may help explain how regional identity, federal influence, and democratic participation interact across different political contexts.

Finally, future research may explore the effectiveness of indigenous political movements and local political parties in addressing governance concerns, democratic participation, and regional development in Gilgit-Baltistan. Such studies may contribute significantly to broader debates regarding political representation, federalism, and democratic inclusion in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The present study examined public perceptions, electoral expectations, political preferences, and attitudes toward transparency and representation in the upcoming elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings provide important insights into the evolving political consciousness of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and highlight the major democratic concerns shaping electoral attitudes in the region.

The study revealed that citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan remain politically engaged and demonstrate moderate to high levels of electoral excitement and willingness to participate in the electoral process. Respondents generally viewed elections as an important democratic mechanism capable of influencing governance and public representation. However, despite this political engagement, the findings also revealed comparatively low public confidence regarding electoral transparency, institutional independence, and political fairness. Concerns regarding political interference and the credibility of electoral institutions emerged as significant issues influencing democratic trust among respondents.

A major finding of the study is the strong public perception that federally ruling political parties possess considerable influence over electoral outcomes in Gilgit-Baltistan. Respondents widely believed that national political dynamics and federal political power continue to shape local electoral competition in the region. These findings reflect broader concerns regarding political dependence, democratic autonomy, and the influence of federal politics on regional governance structures.

The study further demonstrated strong public support for indigenous political representation and local political leadership. Respondents believed that local political parties and indigenous leadership are better positioned to understand and address the unique political, social, and developmental concerns of Gilgit-Baltistan. This finding indicates growing political awareness regarding regional identity, local governance, and democratic inclusion within the region.

In terms of voting behavior, the findings revealed that candidate personality, local reputation, and development-oriented promises play a more influential role in shaping electoral decisions than political party affiliation alone. Respondents particularly emphasized the importance of development, public service delivery, and effective local leadership. These findings suggest that voters in Gilgit-Baltistan increasingly prioritize practical governance outcomes and constituency-level development over traditional party loyalty.

The demographic analysis further revealed meaningful variations across age, education, and district categories. Younger and highly educated respondents demonstrated comparatively stronger political awareness, greater support for indigenous political representation, and more critical perceptions regarding electoral transparency and democratic effectiveness. District-wise differences also indicated that local political contexts and regional dynamics continue to influence electoral attitudes across Gilgit-Baltistan.

Overall, the study contributes significantly to the limited empirical literature on electoral perceptions and democratic expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings suggest that while citizens remain hopeful regarding democratic participation and electoral change, concerns related to transparency, federal political influence, political representation, and governance continue to shape public opinion in the region. Strengthening electoral credibility, improving institutional trust, enhancing local political representation, and addressing development-related concerns may therefore play an important role in strengthening democratic legitimacy and political stability in Gilgit-Baltistan.

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