Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Challenges and Dynamics of Garo Political Representation in Union Parishad Elections in Bangladesh

Md Sunbin Islam
msbislam@bu.ac.bd
University of Barishal
Mst. Nusrat Jahan Nisa
University of Barishal
Ahmed Ibrahim Farhan
University of Barishal
Ariful Islam
University of Barishal
Antor Biswas
University of Barishal
Miskatul Hossain Esha
University of Barishal

Research Article

Keywords: Garo Community, Political Representation, Union Parishad Elections, Partisan Politics, Bangladesh

Posted Date: November 17th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10999792/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

What triggers the Garos' electoral representation in Union Parishad elections in Bangladesh, particularly in partisan systems after 2015? This article explores the dynamics of barriers influencing electoral participation and the nomination strategy in local Union Parishad elections, using a mixed-methods design that incorporates survey and interview data, supplemented by semi-structured interviews, candidate election records, and official election results. Theoretically, this study draws on social inclusion theory, emphasizing the social closure and monopoly paradigm of exclusion as the key drivers shaping the Garos' participation in the electoral transition. The findings demonstrate that economic deterrents, gendered gaps, and regulated political information, as well as institutional and network barriers, are identified as the intersection associated with Garo's political representation. The findings also show that the partisan local governance competition resulted in the expanded use of party nominations, campaign financing, party political connections, and party patronage, even though the Garos remain underrepresented. Moreover, the electoral advantage is unequal, as the marginalized community faces greater challenges in the new local governance system. By unpacking these processes, this paper contributes to the literature on democratic participation, inclusive local governance, and minority rights, offering a nuanced understanding demonstrating cross-ethnic trust beyond ethnic boundaries.

1. Introduction

Although political representation of minorities is essential for inclusive democratic governance, there is evidence of underrepresentation of minority groups at the local level due to structural and social barriers, particularly in the case of the Garo people in Bangladesh (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2019). The Garo are experiencing a continuous process of "unpeopling" (Barkat, 2015), active process of undermining the rights and identity of the Garo, and at the same time, the emphasis of the nationalistic culture of the Bengali language in the educational system of Bangladesh has ignored and denied the Garo's education and history (Bal, 2007). The community is also vulnerable to land appropriation as there is not a formal recognition of land rights in the state, especially for undocumented people (Barkat, 2015). The Garo are historically undercounted, and traditional institutions have been undermined by post-colonial administrative structures, which have made the Garo 'invisible' in policy-making processes (Bal, 2007a; Barkat 2015). This study aims at tackling such omissions by exploring local governance, election strategies and electoral barriers of the Garo people of Sherpur district in Bangladesh.

This research thus questions what motivates the Garo to be involved in local politics in local governance and how this has been affected prior to and after the introduction of partisan local politics. Holding Union Parishad (UP) elections without any political agenda, we argue that the overall political representation of the Garos has been marginalized historically, irrespective of the partisan or non-partisan electoral system, due to structural issues and low political trust. This has brought a change of the political landscape since 2015 and has threatened institutional autonomy (Islam & Asad, 2024; Rahman & Nasrin, 2017), thus generating a new party-line gate keeping, albeit with differential effects on minority communities (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017). Garo candidates exist in formal equality with their Bengali counterparts, but are under-represented by economic constraints, limited patronage networks and administrative bias (International Republican Institute 2020).

Furthermore, the theory of social closure (as formulated by Max Weber) and the monopoly paradigm of exclusion (as developed by Frank Parkin) are used to explore this marginalization as a theory of social exclusion (SET). Social closure refers to the economic and political control of resources by privileged groups (Murphy, 1984), and the monopoly paradigm is a way of defining the way resources are accessed by dominant groups, in a manner that excludes outsiders (Parkin, 2013). Both lenses are critical of "unpeopling" (Barkat, 2015); while social development has been promised, the Garo continue to be politically marginalized by deep-rooted structural issues and disillusionment (International Republican Institute, 2020).

Besides, the election dynamics of the grassroots tier of the democratic system, the Union Parishad (UP), have not been analyzed among the Garo, between partisan periods, or for differences between elected and non-elected candidates or subgroups. The study sets two objectives: one is to identify the main constraints Garo candidates faced in contesting UP elections, and the other is to analyze participation in UP elections after the introduction of the partisan system between elected and non-elected candidates, women and men candidates, and Garo and Bengali candidates. This study employs mixed methods to understand the Garo representation in local governance and, empirically, to show that the underrepresentation of the Garo in the UP is systemic rather than a preference.

This paper contributes to the literature on minority political participation, partisan local government, and electoral democracy, especially in the context of Bangladesh, by analyzing the role of a partisan electoral system on the representation of a marginalized ethnic group, that has been mostly discussed on the mainstream society. The paper starts from literature on the Garo community and local governance, followed by theoretical framework to understand the theories of exclusion that obstruct the Garo electoral process, and then the empirical evidence provided by secondary and primary sources gathered through surveys and interviews are analyzed, respectively, based on the study objectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Garo Community: Historical and Socio-Political Context

The Garo trace their settlement in the Mymensingh region of Bangladesh to a migration of roughly 4500 years ago from the region of Xinjiang to Tibet and the hills of North East India (Playfair, 1975; Jengcham, 2021). In the world there are around 500,000 Garo people, around 25,000 of them reside in Bangladesh in the areas of Mymensingh, Sherpur, Haluaghat, Dhobaura, Netrokona, Dinajpur, Jamalpur, Nalitabari, Shantiganj and Modhupur (Mostofa, 2016). Politically, Garo ethnogenesis has been shaped by successive political orders (Mughal, British colonial, Pakistani, and post-independence Bangladeshi) to which it has been exposed.

The division of Garo country between India and East Pakistan in 1955 left the Garo people in East Pakistan neglected and "regarded as undesirables," and post-colonial governments weakened institutions like the Nokma and the Tribal Welfare Association, further marginalizing the Garo people. An exception was

in 1991 when Awami League MP Promod Mankin was elected from Mymensingh-1, but from 1993 onwards, organisations like BAGACHHAS have persisted in their activities despite governmental opposition and the current government's refusal to acknowledge the use of the term "indigenous" effectively undermines recognition of the community's rights (Dio, n.d.). There were some Garo groups from the lowland region who once sought to link their "homeland" to India, especially the A'chik Shongho (Bal, 2007a). Capotorti's (1979) definition places a minority at the lower numerical position, as non-dominant, ethnically, religiously or linguistically different and with a will to maintain its culture as a minority requiring attention, despite the fact that the Garo have enjoyed internal order, ruled by Chra, Songgni Nokma and Khamal (Dio, n.d.).

2.2 Political Representation and Local Governance in Bangladesh

The UP is the lowest level of government, holding legal authority for law and decision-making in governance, in Hasluck's terms (2010). The hierarchical structure of Bangladesh's governance system, driven by the country's rural population and the presence of Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Zila Parishad in rural areas, and Pourashavas and city corporations in urban areas, makes UP the most obvious location to examine minority candidacy, as it is the closest to rural voters.

The UP is, in theory, a forum of participation in that elections, ward meetings, and open budgeting can boost participation, but inclusivity is not guaranteed if it is not responded to; Uddin (2019) observed that participatory rights are not a level playing field. De Jong & Mügge (2024) make a distinction between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. The contesting for Garo candidates gives an opportunity to the candidates to become visible if elected candidates can represent for both Bengali and Garo. Recruitment, mobilization, election and power representation is used in a broad sense.

2.3 Systemic Marginalization and Exclusion of the Garo Community

There is general participation of local organisations among the Garo, however, no direct political involvement among them, both male and females are of low interest in politics due to minority status and lack of institutional support (Ahmed, 2024). Political disillusionment was also observed by the International Republican Institute (2020) among Garo people which is a part of the deprivation and poverty of Garo community in comparison to Bengali majority (Muhammed et al., 2011; Begum, 2016). Islam & Rahaman (2025) have presented voting as the arena where stigmatized groups can be incorporated in decision making, thus turning the low rate of candidacy of Garo voters into a more interesting phenomenon.

There are two types of marginalisation: historical, and identity-based, of which Garo's historical "othering" under East Pakistan and Bangladesh was exacerbated by internal colonialism, state promoted marginalisation, territorial fragmentation and negative social perceptions (Bal, 2017a; Bal & Chambugong, 2014; Raitapuro & Bal, 2016). This exclusion can be further explained on the basis of the following grievances: (Kibria, 2021; Muhammed et al., 2011; Das et al., 2005; Wazed, 2012; Begum, 2016; Datta & Kibria, 2025) Discrimination, exploitation, insecurity, health vulnerability is also reported by Khan (2014) and Dey (2007), but this convergence is shallow; none of them focus on candidacy.

Similarly, the Chakma and Tanchangya with their patron-client relationship were found to be dominant even among the indigenous population of Belaichari UP, Chittagong in the year 2011 by Roy (2014), and Marma, Tripura, Bawm, Kheyang and Pangkho are excluded. Munda are also found with patron-client relationship by Sharmeen (2012), Duffy (1995), Zaid (2010). Khan & Samadder (2012, p. 324) also reported that the voters of the Garo were pressured to vote for party preferred candidates. In the country, there are almost three million people in seven marginalized groups living in a "culture of silence", accompanied by low self-esteem (MJF, 2016).

2.4 Electoral Resources, Partisan Gatekeeping, and Minority Exclusion

In 2015, local government law was made partisan, which was previously non-partisan but in practice polarized (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017); party influence has since increased, resulted in less autonomy (Islam & Asad, 2024), low participation (Ahmed, 2016), and undermined Garo solidarity (Uddin, 2023).

Electoral competition is expensive, it requires money, mobilization, media and influential actors; social capital works both ways (Wright & Zhu, 2021), minority bonding can marginalize candidates, as it did in Rakhine (Islam et al., 2026) and majority bonding can prevent opposition. When fewer voters are relative in the same unions compared to Bengalis, they may be left out of inclusive schemes, which would disadvantage Garo voters (English, 2022).

They can be exacerbated or mitigated, for instance as a result of party strategy in Britain and Wales (English, 2022) or party gatekeepers' subjective judgement (Van Trappen, 2022), which may have worked to the advantage of Garo nomination or the disadvantage of party control in Bangladesh's 2015 reform, but not yet identified for Sherpur.

2.5 Ethnicity, Gender, and Community Networks in Political Participation

Ethnic minority candidates are at a special disadvantage: Prejudice can have an impact on descriptive and substantive representation, not uniformly (Martin & Blinder, 2021); structural failings, not personal failings, weak power, poor information access, livelihoods, security and dignity (Ahmed & Low, 2020) still marginalize minorities in Bangladesh.

Gender complexity is introduced: Reserved seats have led to greater women's participation in rural governments (Rahman, 2020), but elected women are still under-represented in decision-making capacities, and the visibility of Garo women in Bangladesh's Bengali-dominated context (UN Women, 2021) is not decision-making power. Traditionally, garo women are the holders of inheritance rights in accordance with matriarchal system but the situation with regard to garo women's candidacy is not exactly the same as that of men and is discussed together with garo women's gender.

A third dimension is community networks, with cooperative voting, trust, volunteerism, kinship, church and village links, clan (Mahari) networks and inter-clan competition able to unite and divide communities, and Garo candidates needing to strike the balance between bonding and bridging ties with Bengali voters and moves to the platform provided by Bengali parties, officials and civil society.

2.6 Research Gap

While existing literature addresses the issue of the socioeconomic and land rights marginalization of the Garo, the representation of Garo minority groups in the political sphere, electoral resource dependency, partisan control of community resources, and the impact of reserved seats on women's participation, there is less literature that combines electoral resources, institutional access, ethnic and gender identity, and community networks in a single analysis, specifically when applied to the case of indigenous candidates living in a Bengali-dominant rural area. There is no difference in comparison between elected and non-elected candidates, Garo and Bengali candidates, as well as gender-wise differences between women and men candidates. In this study, partisan and non-partisan governance of Garo candidacy has been compared, which filled this gap.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social exclusion theory, and draws more specifically on two of its constituent lenses: Max Weber's theory of social closure (Mackert, 2024) and the monopoly paradigm of exclusion (Silver, 1994), since together they capture both the general condition of Garo underrepresentation documented above and the concrete institutional mechanisms through which it is reproduced (as shown in figure-1).

In 1974, René Lenoir adopted the concept of social exclusion to describe the excluded groups in France (Sen, 2000); as cited by Francis (2002, p. 74), the European Foundation (1995) defined social exclusion as the process by which individuals or groups are totally or partly removed from society. The concept has been translated from French and has acquired new meanings in various contexts (Silver, 1994); Silver (1994) describes the concept in three paradigms: solidarity, specialization and monopoly, in which exclusion is explained and attributed to other reasons. Clavel (1998) offers a typology of four types, including population-group, economic, denial-of-rights and extreme-situation approaches. Exclusion is linked by Sen (2000) to his concept of poverty as a lack of capabilities, and Aasland and Fløtten (2001) equate exclusion with the absence of citizenship rights and of civil-society participation.

As ‘Easy Sociology’ (2024) describes, political social exclusion is the intentional and systematic process of being pushed out of formal politics (discriminatory laws and voting rules) and informal politics (demeaning cultural values, social stigma). The above-mentioned process, called a ‘gatekeeping mechanism' by Lawoti (2007), is used by the dominant elites to keep minorities out of democratic decision-making, and is demonstrated below. In Bangladesh, Ahmed (2024) argues that ethnogenesis is also a process of exclusion as the pressures from the outside have pushed the Garo to assert themselves as a separate community, only to be politically disregarded by the State, which also from time-to-time implements an identity-homogenizing “inclusion” policy (Bal, 2007a).

Moreover, Weber's concept of social closure (Mackert, 2024) is a concept that focuses on the strategy employed by groups to purposefully exclude and include members to gain privilege and control over resources. Marxist analysis tends to focus on class struggle, structural functionalism on the stabilizing force of inequality, and social closure on the mechanisms involved in groups consolidating their gains, including the central one of credentialism. In the monopoly paradigm, exclusion is a result of the unequal power that dominant groups have to monopolize institutions and resources (Silver, 1994), and social exclusion is an active denial of the right to be fully included in the political, economic, social and institutional life (Boardman et al., 2022). In politics, the dominant group can silence the voice of the subordinate group, but this may rely on the subordinate group's internal unity because the more divided a group, the more difficult it is for the group to act together (Olson, 1965; Warren & Troy, 2015). Internal fragmentation, however, as a possible alternative explanation to closure, is not taken up here but rather is seen as the condition by which external monopolistic exclusion can take place with little opposition along clan, factional or interpersonal lines. Exclusion in one field may coexist with inclusion in another (Emmerich, 2021), and this is also true of the Garo people, as they are highly involved in social organizations in their locality, but less involved in formal party politics.

In actual practice of the UP elections, party nomination and patronage systems, financial restrictions on parties and media and administrative bias are present in Sherpur district in Bangladesh. This theoretical approach is directly linked to the lived experience of candidates and the structural power, however it may not be able to account for candidate agency and cross-community partnership, as examined in this paper through the lived experience of some Garo candidates who are seeking to overcome these constraints. It is also at risk of collating the Garo population as one community, whereas another kind of analysis of the internal fragmentation might have a more profound effect on the outcome than the closure from the outside. The institutional closure with respect to dominant groups' exercise of exclusion from political resources is the best explanation of the social closure of Garo peoples by dominant groups and the gate-keeping of monopoly paradigm of exclusion. Social closure and gate-keeping by the monopoly paradigm of exclusion account best for the ways in which dominant groups have curtailed access to political resources for Garo people in Sherpur.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

Bridging the above gap, this study considers electoral representation as a dynamic process where resources, institutional access, relations of identity, community cohesion, and partisanship all interact (Wright & Zhu, 2021; Van Trappen, 2022; Uddin, 2019). Community cohesion here refers specifically to the internal solidarity of the Garo electorate: the strength or weakness of clan (Mahari) ties, village-level relationships and intra-community trust. It is conceptualized as the variable linking external closure to actual electoral behavior, in that external barriers set the constraints Garo candidates and voters face, while the degree of internal cohesion determines whether the community can still act collectively within those constraints (Olson, 1965; Warren & Troy, 2015). It acknowledges that exclusion is particularly experienced where financial inequality is the most dominant closure system (Mackert, 2024), and that only competence, integrity, and trust-based relationships that cut across lines of the community can overcome it (Wright & Zhu, 2021). Instead of lumping these varying experiences into one story, undifferentiated, of discrimination, the framework (as illustrated in figure-2) structures the analysis around four comparative dimensions: elected versus non-elected Garo candidates, Garo women versus Garo men, Garo versus Bengali, and Garo candidates versus Bengali candidates, pre- and post- the 2015 introduction of partisan UP elections.

Figure 2: *Conceptual Framework (Combined by authors)*

2.9 Case Selection Area

The comparative case selection consists of ten UPs drawn from three upazilas of Sherpur District, including Nalitabari (Poragaon, Nayabil, Rupnarayankura, Ramchandrakura Mandalia, Kakorkandi), Jhenaigati (Gauripur, Kangsha, Nolkura), and Sreebardi (Ranishimul, Singabaruna), as depicted in the accompanying map. These unions were selected because they combine a substantial Garo population with a Bengali-majority electoral environment, which together create a setting where the effect of partisan UP elections on ethnic minority representation can be meaningfully tested. Voter list data collected for this study show that individual wards within these unions carry a non-trivial Garo electorate, for example, Bakakura East in Kangsha Union recorded 450 Garo voters (234 male, 216 female), Barwamari in Nolkura Union recorded 385 Garo voters (194 male, 191 female), and Benupara in Kakorkandi Union recorded 272 Garo voters (128 male, 144 female); figures that in several wards approach or exceed 20–30 percent of the total electorate.

Despite this, the 2021 UP election results collected for the same wards show that Bengali candidates were elected in most of these constituencies even where the Garo voter share was significant, for instance in Nolkura, Gauripur, Singabaruna, Nayabil, Poragaon, Rupnarayankura, and Ramchandrakura Mandalia, while Garo candidates secured office in only a small number of cases, such as Kangsha and Kakorkandi. It is this recurring gap between the demographic weight of the Garo electorate and their actual representation on elected bodies that motivates the selection of these particular unions: they allow the study to examine why a numerically significant minority population continues to be under-represented in elected office.

The design also supports triangulation across survey responses, candidate interviews, and official candidate lists. A within-region comparison across neighboring unions in three upazilas further makes it possible to assess whether the same obstacles recur across Garo communities of similar name and setting in adjacent upazilas, rather than assuming uniformity across all Garo communities.

3. Research Design and Methods

This study employed a pragmatist approach, since it required both measuring quantifiable trends in the electoral process and interpreting the lived experience of candidates and voters. Pragmatism does not provide a philosophy; instead, it offers flexibility in the use of the methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The questionnaire and the predetermined comparisons focused mainly deductively, with the latter being used to interpret the unexpected themes that emerged during the interviews following an inductive approach.

Moreover, the design used was a convergent case-study design of a mixed-methods study, including qualitative and quantitative methods (Younas et al., 2023). The quantitative analysis included analyzing the data separately and then integrating the results with the qualitative analysis, which was in order to provide an explanation for the barriers, electoral outcomes, and pre- and post-partisan UP elections since their inception in 2015. Mixed methods were appropriate as the numerical patterns alone would not have explained the contrasting candidates' experiences (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2020).

Besides, this study was conducted in selected Union Parishads of Nalitabari, Jhenaigati and Sreebardi upazilas of Sherpur district, respectively. The unions are mapped for the presence of Garo settlement, the presence of Bengali electoral base, as well as the presence of elected or non-elected Garo candidates. Research of surrounding unions was possible to make comparisons between common challenges, similarities and geographical differences.

In addition, the target group were Garo adult voters, elected & non-elected candidates, leaders of the community, religious leaders, NGO workers and persons who have knowledge about the UP election. A quantitative approach was used in a survey with 164 Garo respondents and 54 Bengali respondents. The participants of the qualitative study were selected purposively and included some who have had relevant experience in the electoral process as well as those who were picked using snowball sampling to obtain more educated people. The number of candidates and office-holders in the Bengali community was compared with a group of six candidates and office-holders. Inclusion criteria had to include the requirement of being an adult, having either lived or been electorally engaged in the selected area or both, and being willing to be included based on giving informed consent.

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire with the following sets of questions: demographic, barriers, party system perceptions, and voting behavior. The survey covered twenty-four indicators across five dimensions of barriers, including 1) Administrative/financial barriers, 2) Socio-cultural barriers, 3) Political/institutional barriers, 4) Security barriers, and 5) Campaigning barriers, which are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = minor, 2 = moderate, 3 = major, 4 = no barrier, 5 = don't know). To document candidates' lived experiences and nomination processes before and after 2015, semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were employed, with the results of the 2021 elections added as election result sheets, voter lists and a study area map (Kerns & Wedgeworth, 2024).

Furthermore, the data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed with frequencies, percentages, means, analysis of variance (ANOVA), chi-square test and independent t-test and t-test for Welch's data (Cui, 2025). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Comparisons included those on the perception of the party system, electoral obstacles and gender, and education. Using the data from the interviews, themes were identified through a familiarization process with the data and coding, theme development, review, definition and reporting as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). Findings were triangulated quantitatively and qualitatively, and, in the case of contradictory findings, they were not imposed into one interpretation. This integration also allowed for the confirmation of the authenticity of the alleged convergence, complementarity and possible major differences regarding the trends in the survey, candidates' speeches and official documents in various scenarios and in parts of the participants (Campbell et al., 2020).

Participants are informed properly and clearly about the research purpose, academic use and voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent is obtained; withdrawal is permitted. The information of interview participants and survey records will be handled confidentially. Data will be stored securely with restricted access. There is sensitive information like vote buying, administrative bias, result manipulation, and intimidation that are reported as participants' perceptions and independently corroborated (Cohen et al., 2017).

Non-probability sampling has limitations in statistical generalization (Stratton, 2023). Retrospective accounts may contain recall or political bias; subgroup size can be unequal, and the complete 2016 election result is not available. Hence, any before-and-after conclusions made in this exercise should be backed up with quantitative supporting documents from 2021 and historical, qualitative supporting documents. It is a single-district design to unravel only a part of the Garo community in Bangladesh.

4. Research Findings

This paper mainly examines the significant dilemmas and obstacles encountered by Garo candidates in terms of competing in UP elections and the evaluation of how the participation of the Garo community has changed and compared before and after the introduction of partisan elections, and the comparisons of various groups. The results combine the quantitative survey results and the qualitative data on the KIIs to assess the structural barriers and electoral processes at the UP level.

4.1 Demographic overview of the participants

The study was a mixed methods study with both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques of surveys and interviews. The number of respondents from the quantitative survey was 218 of which Garo was 164 and Bengali was 54. To get the contextual depth, qualitative data was collected through 31 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with local Garo leaders, former candidates and community members.

In Sherpur district, 36.6%, 34.1% and 29.3% respondents (Table 2) were selected in 3 Upazilas (Nalitabari, Jhenaigati and Sreebardi) of the district by selecting 10 Union Parishads. Of the 164 respondents, Garo 59.8% were male and 40.2% female, 70.1% Christian and 29.9% Hindu. The 54 Bengali respondents were mostly male (81.5%) and Muslim (98.1%), as shown in Table 1. Both were mainly involved in agriculture or business activities and majority of this group were from the low income and agriculturist section with a monthly income of 10,000–20,000 BDT for household members (Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic profile of Garo and Bengali respondents (*N* = 218)

Demographic Category	Garo Respondents (n = 164)	Bengali Respondents (n = 54)
Gender		
Male	98 (59.8%)	44 (81.5%)
Female	66 (40.2%)	10 (18.5%)
Age Group		
18–25 years	12 (7.3%)	6 (11.1%)
26–35 years	33 (20.1%)	15 (27.8%)
36–45 years	43 (26.2%)	14 (25.9%)
46–55 years	33 (20.1%)	14 (25.9%)
56 years and above	43 (26.2%)	5 (9.3%)
Religion		
Christian	115 (70.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Hindu	49 (29.9%)	1 (1.9%)
Muslim	0 (0.0%)	53 (98.1%)
Educational Qualification		
No formal education	31 (18.9%)	3 (5.6%)
Primary (up to Grade 5)	31 (18.9%)	16 (29.6%)
Secondary (Grades 6–10)	65 (39.6%)	20 (37.0%)
Higher Secondary (Grades 11–12)	17 (10.4%)	11 (20.4%)
Bachelor's degree or above	20 (12.2%)	4 (7.4%)
Main Occupation		
Farming	70 (42.7%)	17 (31.5%)
Retail Business	6 (3.7%)	18 (33.3%)
Housewife	41 (25.0%)	7 (13.0%)
Formal Employee	17 (10.4%)	3 (5.6%)
Other (NGO/Day labor/Student/Unemployed)	30 (18.2%)	9 (16.6%)
Monthly Household Income		
Below 10,000 BDT	61 (37.2%)	14 (25.9%)
10,000–20,000 BDT	83 (50.6%)	22 (40.7%)
20,000–40,000 BDT	20 (12.2%)	10 (18.5%)
Above 40,000 BDT	0 (0.0%)	8 (14.8%)
Note: Quantitative data is supplemented with 31 KIIs with Garo community leaders		

Table 2
Distribution of Upazila where Garo respondents reside (N = 164)

Upazila	Frequency	Percent
Jhenaigati	56	34.1%
Nalitabari	60	36.6%
Sreebardi	48	29.3%
Total	164	100.0%

4.2 Major challenges and barriers in contesting Union Parishad elections

Firstly, quantitative barrier assessments are presented in order to fulfil the first research objective, followed by qualitative thematic results of the 31 KIIs, and finally a synthesis of both sets of data, to provide a general picture.

Statistical Note: A Pearson chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was used to explore whether there is any significant difference in perceived barriers to the election between ethnic groups, with a larger chi-square test value indicating greater difference within the group. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$ (95% confidence) and $p < .001$ was deemed to be a difference not likely to be attributable to random sampling variation.

4.2.1 Perceptions of electoral barriers across Garo Group

Barriers were assessed in 5 domains, including administrative/financial, socio-cultural, political, security and campaign-related barriers. The political barriers are the highest (M = 2.18, SD = 0.76), followed by administrative and financial barriers (M = 2.17, SD = 0.55), as shown in Table 3. The financial problems of the personal issue ranked highest, with 67.7% of the Garo respondents stating they faced big financial problems with the nomination fees and/or campaign expenses (Table 5).

One significant finding is that Bengali respondents' perception of the severity of electoral problems are significantly lower than those of the Garos, across all categories of electoral problems, which indicates a distinct attitude towards electoral problems in the perceptions of both groups. The extent of ethnic bias was not a big problem for Bengalis (14.8%) as compared to Garos (38.4%). Financial issues (nomination, deposits, campaign cost) were seen as a barrier by 46.3% of Bengalis but 67.7% of Garos. The political institutional factors were found to be a problem by 13.0% of Bengalis compared to 45.1% of Garos while no Bengalis felt that the nomination based bias/nepotism was a problem as compared to 27.4% of Garos (Table 5).

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of perceived barrier categories among Garo respondents *(N = 164)*

Perceived Barrier Dimension	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Political Barriers	164	1	5	2.18	0.76
Administrative & Financial Barriers	164	1	3	2.17	0.55
Campaign & Communication Barriers	164	1	5	2.14	0.63
Security & Intimidation-Related Barriers	164	1	5	2.04	1.18
Socio-Cultural Barriers	164	1	4	1.85	0.72
Note: Measured on a Likert scale (1 = Minor barrier, 2 = Moderate barrier, 3 = Major barrier, 4 = No barrier, 5 = Don't Know).					

The examination of factors that influence political literacy was done by looking at education as a proxy variable for lack of information about election rules. The Garo who had no formal education scored the highest mean score (M = 2.48, SD = 0.811, n = 31) and the Garo with Bachelor's degree or higher scored the lowest (M = 1.70, SD = 0.733, n = 20). A one-way ANOVA showed this was statistically significant; F (4, 159) = 2.617, p = .037, indicating a relationship between the higher levels of education and better political literacy (Table 4).

Table 4
Lack of information about election rules and procedures by Educational Qualification

Educational Qualification	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Bachelor's degree or above	1.70	20	0.733
Higher secondary (grades: 11–12)	2.18	17	0.883
No formal education	2.48	31	0.811
Primary (up to grade 5)	1.94	31	1.124
Secondary (grades: 6–10)	1.95	65	1.007
Total	2.04	164	0.974
One-way ANOVA	**df**	**F**	**Sig.**
Between Groups	4	2.617	.037
Within Groups	159	—	—
Total	163	—	—
Note: Measured on a Likert scale (1 = Minor barrier, 2 = Moderate barrier, 3 = Major barrier, 4 = No barrier, 5 = Don't Know).			

To find out whether the two groups (minority group Garo and majority group Bengali) differed with regard to the perceptions of barriers two types of Chi-square (χ^2) tests were conducted. As seen from Table 5, the average opinion of the Garo respondents generally was that they faced much more structural, financial and political restriction than the Bengali respondents.

Table 5
Comparative perceptions of major electoral barriers among Garo and Bengali respondents (N = 218).

Electoral Barrier	Garo Respondents n = 164 (%)	Bengali Respondents n = 54 (%)	Chi-Square (χ^2)	p-value
Financial problems (nomination, deposits, campaign)	111 (67.7%)	25 (46.3%)	33.599	< 0.001
Vote-buying practices limiting chances	74 (45.1%)	7 (13.0%)	94.832	< 0.001
Ethnic bias among Bengali voters	63 (38.4%)	8 (14.8%)	87.310	< 0.001
Lack of experience dealing with the media	60 (36.6%)	5 (9.3%)	72.833	< 0.001
Geographic difficulties (hill and plain areas)	54 (32.9%)	1 (1.9%)	74.961	< 0.001
Bias and nepotism in party nominations	45 (27.4%)	0 (0.0%)	80.011	< 0.00

4.2.2 Qualitative Evidence on Barriers to Electoral Candidacy

Thematic analysis of the 31 KIIs was performed in order to put the statistical barriers into context. Table 6 summarizes the last themes on the barriers, the mechanisms behind them, and the quotes of the participants.

Table 6
Qualitative Themes and Mechanisms Underlying Barriers to Garo Candidacy

Final Theme	Core Mechanism	Illustrative Quotation
Financial Exclusion & Exploitative Monetization	Severe economic disparities restrict campaign capacity, allowing wealthy majority candidates to monopolize elections through vote purchasing.	"While I might spend only 2 lakh Taka, my opponent might spend 20 lakh Taka... This financial disparity makes it incredibly difficult." — Theofil Chambugong "Because we face economic hardships, we cannot afford to buy votes, whereas those with more money purchase them during the night." — Protima Sangma
Party Politics & Nomination Gatekeeping	Mainstream political parties calculate "winnability" based on demographic majorities, systematically locking out minority contenders.	"Because we are a minority, parties are often reluctant to give us nominations... they simply don't want to grant us the party symbol." — Prodip Mrong
Ethnic Bias & Socio-Religious Othering	Majority campaigners mobilize religious and ethnic majoritarian narratives to actively delegitimize Christian Garo candidates.	"They said, 'She is Bedin [non-believer]... why should we vote for a Garo woman when we have Bengalis?'" — Jashinta Dofo "The Bengali candidates... would say that they do not pray namaz, do not keep roza... if you vote for them, our janaza [funeral] will not happen." — Purnima Nakhrek
Internal Disunity & Subgroup Factionalism	Clan (Mahari) and spatial divisions fragment the minority voting block, preventing the consolidation of a cohesive indigenous vote bank.	"Misunderstanding started over buying a pig. Gradually these small issues took a bigger shape... This quarrel eventually reached our religious institutions... leading to the breaking of relationships." — Udayan Dalbod

The key mechanism for external structural exclusion is through an extremely monetized local electoral process, in which the financial capital is used as a gatekeeper. In contrast, the budget and vote buying of Garo candidates are much less than that of majority candidates who are rich. This is enshrined by the mainstream parties, which make their decisions based on the "winnability" of the majoritarian candidate and they recruit new moneyed candidates to replace the ones who are not. This process is formalized by normal parties calculating the number of nominations based on the concept of “winnability” that ignores qualified minority candidates in favor of new moneyed candidates. This is being supported through socio-religious othering where the opponents view those who have converted from other faiths, such as Christians from Garo community, as non-believers and try to push Muslims away from them by not allowing Christians to enter polling centers.

The collective bargaining power of the Garo electorate is divided into parts by external pressures on them. The minority voting block is frequently divided based on traditional clan (Mahari) lines, village conflicts and personal differences, creating divisions so strong that even minor business conflicts like buying a pig can result in the splitting of family and church networks and falling out. This places Garo voters in a unique position, having had to face the division internally, and they will be compelled to do so by the majority candidate who will use it to disempower the Garo community candidate.

The quantitative and qualitative data collectively suggest that the underrepresentation of Garo is not just due to economic and political marginalization, but also because of a combination of internal fragmentation and external marginalization as demonstrated by the actual turnout in the last election for the UP. 53.7% (n = 88) reported voting for a Garo candidate (as their candidate), and a high percentage of Garo voters who did not vote for a Garo candidate because there was no one to run for office in their constituencies (32.9%, n = 54) is a direct result of structural and nomination barriers they face. There has also been a sense of community division among the 13.4% (n = 22) of Garo people who did not vote for the Garo candidate in their ward for local loyalty and/or financial benefits of the Bengali candidate (Table 7). This is also reflected by comparison with the majority group, the Bengalis, who had 67.7% of respondents who stated they were not able to pay for campaign and nomination costs and 14.8% of the Bengali respondents reported the same (Table 5).

Table 7
Voting behavior of Garo respondents toward Garo candidates (N = 164)

Response	Percentage	n
Voted for a Garo candidate	53.7%	88
Did not vote for a Garo candidate (No Garo candidate ran in their constituency)	32.9%	54
Did not vote for a Garo candidate (local loyalty and/or financial benefits tied to the Bengali candidate	13.4%	22

Internal fragmentation and external structural barriers working together to cancel collective participation, defended by social exclusion theory and social closure theory, make the work of institutionalization of the systemic social exclusion of the minority community in the local democratic apparatus.

4.3 Electoral Participation Before and After the Introduction of Partisan Elections

In order to explore the way, the introduction of partisan UP elections in 2016 impacted the participation rate and experiences of the Garo community, quantitative trends are given first, then qualitative, thematic experiences, and finally, an integrated explanation.

Statistical Note: In this section, Independent-samples t-tests (t) are applied to compare the means of two groups (e.g., Men vs. Women) to find out whether their perceptions are statistically different. Any p-value less than 0.05 means that the difference is statistically significant.

4.3.1 Continuity and Change in Electoral Participation

In order to test the hypothesis of the voting participation rate of the Garo community prior to and following the implementation of partisan elections in 2016, a frequency analysis of the 164 Garo respondents was conducted. The findings indicate that their participation in the electoral process was not destroyed by the shift to the partisan system.

Table 8 demonstrates that most of the respondents (68.9%) took part in UP elections both prior to and following 2016, with 31.1% having joined the elections after 2016. This is a pointer that a large percentage of the community continued to exercise electoral participation in both the non-partisan and partisan systems of election.

Table 8
Garo Voting Participation in Union Parishad Elections (Before and After 2016)

Voting Period	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
After 2016 Only	51	31.1%
Both Before and After 2016	113	68.9%
Total	164	100.0%
Note. Data derived from survey frequency analysis of 164 Garo respondents.		
To assess specific demographic comparisons, several statistical tests were conducted:		

Table 9
Comparative statistical results for Gender and Garo–Bengali differences in perceived electoral barriers regarding partisan election

Comparison	Measure	Group	n	M	SD	Value	df	p
Garo Women vs. Garo Men	Election participation (either of the previous two elections)	—	—	—	—	0.725	1	.394
	Perceived partisanship influence (mean score)	Women	66	13.52	3.80	-0.027	162	.978
		Men	98	13.53	3.40			
	Total perceived barrier score (equal variances not assumed)	Women	66	41.38	11.89	2.240	107.62	.027
		Men	98	37.59	8.38			
Garo vs. Bengali	Overall election participation rate	—	—	—	—	—	—	.053
	Structural barriers under the new electoral system	—	—	—	—	9.861	—	.020
	Difficulty contesting elections under the partisan system	—	—	—	—	19.737	—	< .001

- **Garo Women vs. Garo Men**: There was no difference between the percentages of women and men who had participated in any election of the previous two years ($\chi^2 = 0.725$, $p = .394$) and no difference between men and women on perceptions of partisanship influences on the previous two election events (men M = 13.53; women M = 13.52; $t(162) = -0.027$, $p = .978$). When specific barriers that were revealed by the questions were examined, however, there was a very significant difference between the mean total barrier score of women (M = 41.38, SD = 11.89, n = 66) as compared to men (M = 37.59, SD = 8.38, n = 98). The difference was confirmed by the Levene's Test significant ($F = 10.95$, $p = .001$), and then the corresponding t-test with F significant (107.62) = 2.24, $p = .027$, indicating that the difference was significant and Garo women experience harder to deal with obstacles to candidacy than men do (Table 9).
- **Garo vs. Bengali Perspectives**: If we draw data from Table 9, we can see that the perception of sheer participation rate ($p = .053$) was not statistically different between the Garo and Bengali respondents, but the structural barriers of the new electoral system was different ($\chi^2 = 9.861$, $p = .020$), with Garo respondents feeling more than Bengalis that the new electoral system created new barriers, and it also became significantly worse for Garo respondents to contest elections under the partisan system ($\chi^2 = 19.737$, $p < .001$).

4.3.2 Experiences of Electoral Competition under Partisan Elections

The 31 KIIs provided deep context into the statistical realities of the partisan shift. Table 10 summarizes the qualitative themes regarding the impact of partisan elections.

Table 10
Qualitative Themes on the Effects of Partisan Elections

Final Theme	Core Mechanism	Illustrative Quotation
Electoral Viability Shift (Elected vs. Non-Elected)	Partisan rules shifted the criteria for success from personal reputation and local community service to party patronage and financial strength.	"In the past, campaign expenses were very low... Now wealthy candidates spend heavily during campaigns, discouraging honest and capable individuals." — Kupendra Nokrek
Gendered Factionalism in Partisan Politics	Matrilineal social structures shield women from internal cultural bias, but partisan elections introduce hostile, elite-led political networks and character attacks.	"The people of the larger community want to suppress women. And when women try to rise, men start saying bad things about her character... trying to tarnish her reputation." — Bandana Chambugong
Intra-Community Unity	Denominational and religious differences are secondary; the community prioritizes candidate integrity and unity against external political challenges.	"All of us are Christians now... Everyone in our area is Christian, particularly Catholic. There was no discrimination among Hindus, Baptists, or Catholics." — Jashinta Dofo
Divergent Realities (Garo vs. Bengali)	The Bengali majority experiences a functional, merit-based system, while the Garo minority experiences structural exclusion and majoritarian gatekeeping.	"Bengali candidates actively lobby and build close relationships with officials... while we tend to remain more neutral. We simply take our position and work." — Jibon Mrong

The findings from the qualitative aspect of the research indicate a split between candidates' views of the partisanship shift in 2016. Local elections in the past were based on personal reputation and direct community relationships, and local leaders, such as the popularly elected Shukla Nabal, were allowed to continue to serve in both roles due to their personal relationships and inter-community trust. The non-elected candidates, on the other hand, described the significance party labels put on party funding and how it stripped the importance of personal integrity. Partisan rules have made local politics a partisan arena where winning elections is now more about money, party favorability and party patronage networks than anything else.

The matriarchal structure of Garo society elevates them to a higher social status and they also possess rights to property, and therefore are not subjected to any internal cultural discrimination, however, the introduction of the partisan politics has formed external discriminatory barriers against female contenders. Politically charged in-fighting and character assassination is targeted at female candidates. Commercialization of partisan politics is thus more of a problem for Garo women than gender itself. In contrast, within the church, there are no religious differences considered relevant; Catholic, Baptist and Hindu Garo voters vote together for a community candidate on a regular basis and their identity is as much about the community as it is about their religion.

As shown in Table 8, neither of these data sets shows that Garo voters have not lost heart since 2016 (68.9% still vote), but the characteristics of electoral competition have undergone a dramatic change. Table 10 shows that no significant relationship was found between internal community factors (in this case gender) and continuity of participation, and that informants indicated that religious affiliation was not a barrier to participation, which is also consistent with the qualitative theme of religious cohesion.

The qualitative narratives learn a more fundamental lesson from the fact that, as Garo voters continue to vote, the nature of electoral success has completely changed. The process of exclusion was established in the partisan elections, as observed by the Social Exclusion Theory, mostly excluding the nominations and campaign contributions of mainstream parties from the Bengali majority community, which is wealthier. This is because while the system is fair and on merit for the majority group, the integrated data shows that the system excludes the minority group's applications, thereby affecting their ability to move the high rates of participation they may have into meaningful representation in the system.

5. Discussion and Analysis

A set of inter-related informational, financial and institutional and community-level challenges to candidates' Garo candidacy addresses the first objective. The biggest obstacle faced by the Garo was financial constraints (67.7% vs. 46.3% of Bengali respondents, $\chi^2 = 33.599$, $p < .001$). Garo respondents also reported an ethnic bias among Bengalis as a much greater barrier than did other respondents ($\chi^2 = 87.310$, $p < .001$, 38.4% to 14.8%), as shown in Table 5. One of the strongest qualitative relationships, which stood out, was the weakening of electoral unity due to the divisions within them, especially the internal clan, denominational, and village-based divisions, not only by Bengali majority gatekeeping but also by the internal divisions.

The majority population's degree of political literacy also affects minority candidates' supply side constraints related to education, and so does the education level of the minority population. As detailed in the Table 4, the results of a one-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between the lack of electoral information according to respondents' formal education level, $F (4, 159) = 2.617$, $p = .037$: Respondents with no formal education level reported the highest lack of electoral information ($M = 2.48$), while those with a Bachelor's degree or higher reported the lowest ($M = 1.70$). This shows us that Education's impact goes beyond informational literacy, presenting correlation between education and awareness of voter intimidation.

As shown in Table 7, this is also reflected in the voting process: 53.7% reported voting for a Garo candidate (as their candidate) in their constituencies and 32.9% reported that they did not have any Garo candidate in their constituencies. The level of these barriers is not just with regard to whether a Garo candidate can win, but if a potential candidate has the knowledge, resources and confidence to enter and stay in the race. This agrees with Uddin (2019) who argues that participation processes provide only people with information and organisational capacity while Ahmed & Low (2020) on the institutions, livelihoods and dignity of Garo people. The Social Exclusion Theory is the best explanation for these barriers which are not the result of individual lack of ability.

This is also reflected in interview data which referenced community divisions, party connections and high campaign costs as factors for exclusion. Others, however, were successful due to their competence and trust across the communities, and others pointed to lack of funds or divided votes as obstacles, implying there is no one-size-fits-all solution. It is consistent with the social closure theory of Wright & Zhu (2021), which says that minority networks can become a political asset; the theory of internal division of the electorate explained above; and the theory of social closure of Weber, and of monopoly theory of Silver, which argues that minority actors that have the ability to control the nomination power, the patronization and the media access, sustain their position (Mackert, 2024; Silver, 1994).

The second objective is related to the partisan UP elections from 2016. Where a party nomination, factional affiliation, and finances are more important than they are now, reputation and community trust was more of a factor in a non-partisan election. This change was not uniform, with differential pressures being experienced by Garo candidates and the results from the previous elections not being a reliable indicator. Both candidates highlighted the increase in contenders, limited resources, and community divisions as some of the main challenges that limits the opportunities of minority candidates as identified by English (2022) that formal party gate keeping lessens minority candidates opportunities in Sherpur, the reasons for this was that partisanship changes the resources needed to make a successful campaign.

This is also reflected in the contestation data: while the proportion of Garo who voted before 2016 and after 2016 dropped, both the drop and the backlash was not large enough to be statistically significant (31.1% of those who voted before 2016, 30.6% after 2016) as shown in Table 8; as for ease of contestation, it was identical to the ease of contestation experienced by the Bengali respondents ($\chi^2 = 19.737$, $p < .001$), but fewer new structural barriers were experienced by the Bengali respondents ($\chi^2 = 9.861$, $p = .020$). However, participation (that is, continued) was reduced as the probability of becoming a viable candidate decreased, as shown in Table 9.

Gender was a more complex picture. Both quantitative measures for continuity of participation ($\chi^2 = 0.725$, $p = .394$) and partisan-election impact (13.53 vs. 13.52; $t (162) = -0.027$, $p = .978$) failed to be significantly different across gender. What the qualitative information showed, however, was that below this parity, gendered processes existed, with women in politics being legitimized by the matrilineal tradition of the Garo people, and intra-party factionalism and financial gatekeeping against women candidates being introduced in the post-2016 context. This is settled when mass voting becomes separate from elite level candidacy: women and men vote similarly, but when a woman runs for office, she faces different barriers when compared to men, who did report a

significantly lower mean barrier score (M = 37.59, SD = 8.38) compared to women (M = 41.38, SD = 11.89), t (107.62) = 2.24, p = .027, consistent with (Rahman, 2020)'s distinction between numerical presence and substantive power (Table 9).

The comparison between the Garo and Bengali is also context specific. The local government subjects who feel the government is functional and merit based include Bengalis and the minority Garo people feel that the majority voting block and the mainstream governments are exclusionary gate keepers and limit their access to local government. The majority of respondents felt that Garo candidates lacked the necessary place in the mainstream system, while a minority felt that it was due to their competency and/or their Garo service record that they garnered support from both communities, as also did De Jong & Mügge (2024). There was little differentiation in the religious comparisons: the Christian denominations were found to work together well and informants reported that there were few barriers to participation by the small number of Hindus, consistent with the non-significant religion-participation association. Party affiliation, campaign financing and party influence have much more of an impact on denominational preference than it does.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the situation of Garo's representation in contesting Union Parishad elections in Sherpur district and the dynamics of the situation before and after the 2016 partisan reform, which was hardly discussed earlier. It sought to uncover the key factors and draw comparisons between elected and non-elected, women and Garo candidates and Bengali candidates. It had plans to test the stringent constraints and compare the elected candidates with non-elected candidates, women candidates with Garo and Bengali candidates. The data was analyzed using a pragmatic mixed methods approach, and a case study method was used to analyze the data, with 164 Garo respondents and 54 Bengali respondents.

The competing barriers; informational, financial, institutional and network, that affect Garo candidacy give the answer to the research question: education affects Garo knowledge of electoral rules, while party competition affects the access to patronage and finance. The 2016 partisan change has made it an institutional fact that the exclusion is necessary, must be party nominated, have patronage and money to win. The central constraint is a strong qualitative barrier, and, the fact as detailed in Table 7 that 32.9% of the respondents said that they did not have any Garo candidate at all in the past, 53.7% of them said they had one if they had, indicates that the central constraint is felt at the level of the candidate, not at the level of the vote. Gender was not a central focus in quantitative terms in either barriers or continuity, although qualitatively, informants talked about gendered processes in the post-2016 system, suggesting an informal disadvantage. Although not absolute, some candidates could build a reputation across communities by building a good relationship with the institutions; thus, their reputation and trust were sufficient to secure some support from the other communities, as institutions' capacity to serve minority candidates was not equivalent and reputation and trust across communities were not guaranteed (Uddin, 2019); minority candidates' disadvantage was exacerbated by unequal access to institutional resources (Ahmed & Low, 2020). Election officials should provide elections-related information to selected unions in a convenient and accessible format, provide education for voters and candidates on electoral processes, and ensure effective monitoring of intimidation, vote buying and administration unfairness. Political parties should be based on clear rules, and be equitable in selecting minority candidates. CSOs should have a training session in campaign planning, public speaking and financial management. In the future, community leaders in villages, clans and religions should be encouraged to promote harmony, as the failure of people to live in harmony was a major problem in mobilizing coordinated action; moreover, networks can help minority candidates to connect with larger electorates and resources (Wright & Zhu, 2021).

Declarations

Author Contributions

CRediT: **Md Sunbin Islam:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing; **Mst. Nusrat Jahan Nisa:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing; **Ahmed Ibrahim Farhan:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Literature Review, Data Collection, Analysis of the Findings; **Ariful Islam:** Literature Review, Data Collection, Analysis of the Findings; **Antor Biswas:** Literature Review, Data Collection; **Miskatul Hossain Esha:** Methodology, Data Collection, Literature Review, Analysis of the Findings.

Declaration of generative AI use

This paper used Grammarly for sentence structure, grammar checking, and sentence clarity.

Acknowledgments

We thank all participants who supported providing their consent for interviews, as well as the reviewers for their valuable comments and arguments on this paper.

Clinical trial number: not applicable.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate:

All research methods and procedures complied with relevant ethical standards. As the research follows the guidelines of Discover Global Society and, in some parts, the Declaration of Helsinki, it also adheres to standard methods to ensure the quality of the research paper. The research team kept participants' anonymity and securely stored data in encrypted, password-protected files. This team carried out the research according to internationally avowed ethical guidelines and enactments for research involving human participants. As part of our independent research, we obtained permission from the Chairman of the Department of Political Science at the University of Barishal. Moreover, ethical approval was granted by the Department of Political Science, University of Barishal, solely based on the Chairman's signature. As part of a thorough process, the corresponding author guided and supervised the entire research team on research integrity and regulations. The team ensured informed consent from all participants and/or their legal guardians after explaining the research's objective, data handling, and confidentiality protocols before participation, as they voluntarily participated, and apprised of their freedom to withdraw at any phase without any adverse outcomes.

Consent for publication:

Informed consent for the publication of anonymized responses and data was obtained from all participants aged 18 and above and/or their legal guardians. The team also secured informed consent from all individual participants involved in the study and/or their legal guardians.

References

1. Aasland A, Fløtten T. Ethnicity and social exclusion in Estonia and Latvia. Europe-Asia Stud. 2001;53(7):1023–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130120085029.
2. Ahmed F. Ethnic identity and representation politics: Interpreting the perception and representation of identity of the Garo (Mandi) community. J Nazrul Univ. 2024;10(12):97–123.
3. Ahmed F, Low NP. Environmental justice dialogues and the struggle for human dignity in the deciduous forest of Bangladesh. J Political Ecol. 2020;27(1):300–16. https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.22760.
4. Ahmed T. Bangladesh reform agenda for local governance. Prothoma Prokashan; 2016.
5. Bal E. Becoming the Garos of Bangladesh: Policies of exclusion and the ethnicisation of a 'tribal' minority. South Asia: J South Asian Stud. 2007a;30(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400701714062.
6. Bal E. They ask if we eat frogs: Garo ethnicity in Bangladesh. ISEAS Publishing; International Institute for Asian Studies; 2007b.
7. Bal E, Chambugong TC. The borders that divide, the borders that unite: (Re)interpreting Garo processes of identification in India and Bangladesh. J Borderlands Stud. 2014;29(1):95–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2014.892695.
8. Barkat A. Political economy of unpeopling of indigenous people: The case of Bangladesh. Bangladesh J Political Econ. 2015;31(1):121–212.
9. Begum F. A relationship between vulnerable Adivasi Garo community and local actors in Bangladesh. Fundamental Appl Agric. 2016;1(3):152–6.
10. Boardman J, Killaspy H, Mezey G. Social inclusion and mental health: Understanding poverty, inequality and social exclusion. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; 2022.
11. Braun V, Clarke V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. SAGE. https://www.thematicanalysis.net/resources-for-ta/
12. Campbell R, Goodman-Williams R, Feeney H, Fehler-Cabral G. Assessing triangulation across methodologies, methods, and stakeholder groups: The joys, woes, and politics of interpreting convergent and divergent data. Am J Evaluation. 2020;41(1):125–44. 10.1177/1098214018804195.
13. Capotorti F. Study on the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/384/Rev.1). United Nations; 1979.
14. Clavel G. (1998). La société d'exclusion: Comprendre pour en sortir [The society of exclusion: Understanding in order to get out of it]. L'Harmattan.
15. Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K. (2017). The ethics of educational and social research. In *Research methods in education* (pp. 111–143). Routledge. https://staibabussalamsula.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Louis-Cohen-Lawrence-Manion-Keith-Morrison-Research-Methods-in-Education-Routledge-2018-staibabussalamsula.ac_.id_.pdf
16. Creswell JW, Creswell JD. (2022). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (6th ed.). SAGE. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Leopold-Hamminger/post/Can_you_help_me_clarify_what_type_of_qualitative_research_design_to_use/attachment/59d64d4579197b80779a6db2/AS%3A48747+Research+Design.pdf
17. Cui J. A Comparative Analysis of Statistical Methods in Social Science Research: ANOVA, Multi-factor ANOVA, Chi-square, and t-test. Res gate. 2025. 10.13140/RG.2.2.36197.72164.
18. Das TK, Hasan SM, Islam Z. Psycho-social dimensions of ethnicity: The situation of Garo community in Bangladesh. Asian Affairs. 2005;27(3):45–54.
19. Datta R, Kibria A. Indigenous women-led climate crisis solutions: A decolonial perspective from the Garo Indigenous community in Bangladesh. Political Geogr. 2025;117., Article 103258. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103258.

20. De Jong JC, Mügge LM. (2024). Political representation and intersectionality: Perspectives of ethnically/racially minoritised citizens. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 31(1), 151–177.
21. Dey S. The commercialisation of the indigenous economy and its impact on the environment of Modhupur Garh, Bangladesh. Int J Green Econ. 2007;1(3/4):465–77.
22. Dio A (n.d.), editor. Socio-political account of Mandis (Garos) in Bangladesh: An analysis [Unpublished manuscript].
23. Duffy K. (1995). Social exclusion and human dignity in Europe. Council of Europe. As cited in Zaid, F. A. (2010). Social exclusion and cost of discrimination: Inclusion and development among Turi indigenous community of Barind tract in Bangladesh. Grassroots Voice, 7(1), 58–69.
24. Easy Sociology. (2024). *Political social exclusion*. https://easysociology.com/sociology-of-politics/political-social-exclusion/
25. Emmerich M. Inclusion/exclusion: Educational closure and social differentiation in world society. Eur Educational Res J. 2021;20(6):758–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120978118.
26. English P. High rejection, low selection: How 'punitive parties' shape ethnic minority representation. Party Polit. 2022;28(2):294–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820973851.
27. Fetters MD, Molina-Azorin JF. Utilizing a mixed methods approach for conducting interventional evaluations. J Mixed Methods Res. 2020;14(2):131–44. 10.1177/1558689820912856.
28. Francis P. Social capital, civil society and social exclusion. In: Kothari U, Minogue M, editors. Development theory and practice: Critical perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan; 2002. pp. 71–91.
29. Guhathakurta M. (2022). The making of minorities in Bangladesh: Legacies, policies and practice. In *The emergence of Bangladesh: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 109–133). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-5521-0_8
30. Hasluck EL. (2010). Local government in England. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1936). As cited in Thapa, I. (2020). Local government: Concept, roles and importance for contemporary society.
31. International Republican Institute. (2020). The challenges facing plainland ethnic groups in Bangladesh: Land, dignity and inclusion. https://www.iri.org/resources/the-challenges-facing-plainland-ethnic-groups-in-bangladesh-land-dignity-and-inclusion/
32. Islam N, Rahaman M. People's participation in local government at the grassroots level (Union Parishad) in Bangladesh: An exploratory analysis. J Community Posit Practices. 2025;25(2):44–72. https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2025.2.03.
33. Islam S, Asad MAM. An analysis of two local government elections based on party affiliation in Bangladesh. J Social Sci. 2024;7(1):184–200. https://doi.org/10.71213/jss.july2410.
34. Islam MS, Jahan N, Dutta U, Islam N, Jewel MI, Akter U, Biswas S. Examining the barriers of Rakhine's political representation in Bangladesh through social capital. Discover Global Soc. 2026;4(1):52.
35. Jengcham S. Garo, the. In: Islam S, Miah S, editors. Banglapedia: National encyclopedia of Bangladesh. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh; 2021. https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Garo,_The.
36. Kerns C, Wedgeworth M. Barriers and facilitators experienced by undergraduate nursing faculty teaching clinical judgment: A qualitative study. SAGE Open Nurs. 2024;10:23779608241274728. 10.1177/23779608241274728.
37. Khan A. Structural violence: A tale of three women from marginalized communities in Bangladesh. Int J Minor Group Rights. 2014;21(4):547–56.
38. Khan A, Samadder M. Weeping of the forest: Unheard voices of Garo Adivasi in Bangladesh. Int J Minor Group Rights. 2012;19(3):317–26.
39. Kibria A. (2021). Understanding the social exclusion process of the Garo Indigenous community of Bangladesh [Master's thesis, Linnaeus University]. Linnaeus University Publications.
40. Lawoti M. Political exclusion and the lack of democratisation: Cross-national evaluation of Nepali institutions using a majoritarian–consensus framework. Commonw Comp Politics. 2007;45(1):57–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040601135755.
41. Levitas R. (2005). Three discourses of social exclusion. In *The inclusive society?* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511552_2
42. Mackert J. On social closure: Theorising exclusion, exploitation, and elimination. Oxford University Press; 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197781685.001.0001.
43. Martin NS, Blinder S. Biases at the ballot box: How multiple forms of voter discrimination impede the descriptive and substantive representation of ethnic minority groups. Polit Behav. 2021;43(4):1487–510. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09596-4.
44. Mostofa RA. (2016). *Achik-Mande manifestation: A cultural reflection of Garo community* [Undergraduate thesis, BRAC University]. BRAC University Institutional Repository. http://hdl.handle.net/10361/8377
45. Muhammed N, Chakma S, Masum MFH, Hossain MM, Oesten G. A case study on the Garo ethnic people of the Sal (Shorea robusta) forests in Bangladesh. Int J Social Forestry. 2011;4(2):197–211.
46. Murphy R. (1984). The structure of closure: A critique and development of the theories of Weber, Collins, and Parkin. Br J Sociol, 547–67.
47. Olson M. The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups. Harvard University Press; 1965.
48. Panday PK. (2011). Local government system in Bangladesh: How far is it decentralised? Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government, 9(3), 205–230. https://doi.org/10.4335/9.3.205-230(2011).
49. Parkin F. (2013). Strategies of Social Closure. The Social Analysis of Class Structure (Tavistock: London, 1974).
50. Playfair A. (1975). The Garos. United Publishers. (Original work published 1909).
51. Rahman M. (2020). Emerging leadership roles of women in rural local government: Experiences from Bangladesh. In *Gender mainstreaming in politics, administration and development in South Asia* (pp. 111–135). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36012-2_6

52. Rahman MM, Nasrin S. Maiden partisan rural local government elections: Bangladesh experience. J Public Adm Gov. 2017;7(1):48–60. https://doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v7i1.1063.
53. Raitapuro M, Bal E. Talking about mobility': Garos aspiring migration and mobility in an 'insecure' Bangladesh. South Asian History Cult. 2016;7(4):386–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2016.1223723.
54. Rawal N. Social inclusion and exclusion: A review. Dhaulagiri J Sociol Anthropol. 2008;2:161–80. https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v2i0.1362.
55. Roy S. (2014). Participatory democracy in grass root level: The pattern of participation in election of three unions of Chittagong Hill Tracts [Unpublished master's dissertation]. BRAC University.
56. Sen A. (2000). Social exclusion: Concept, application, and scrutiny (Social Development Paper 1). Asian Development Bank. https://www.adb.org/publications/social-exclusion-concept-application-and-scrutiny
57. Sharmeen S. Munda and political transformation from below: Local politics and power relations in Barind, Bangladesh. Asian Afr Area Stud. 2012;12(1):1–25. https://doi.org/10.14956/asafas.12.1.
58. Silver H. Social exclusion and social solidarity: Three paradigms. Int Labour Rev. 1994;133(5–6):531–78.
59. Stratton SJ. Population sampling: Probability and non-probability techniques. Prehosp Disaster Med. 2023;38(2):147–8. 10.1017/S1049023X23000304.
60. Transparency International Bangladesh. (2019). *Challenges and way forward for inclusion in rights and development of indigenous peoples and Dalits in Bangladesh* (TIB Research and Policy Series). https://ti-bangladesh.org
61. Uddin K. A study on biographies of the Garo community in terms of colonial cultural invasion and modernity in the village of Hariakona, Sherpur, Bangladesh. J South Asian Anthropol. 2023;10(1):23–40. https://doi.org/10.1000/xyz123.
62. Uddin N. Empowerment through participation in local governance: The case of Union Parishad in Bangladesh. Public Adm Policy: Asia-Pacific J. 2019;22(1):40–54. https://doi.org/10.1108/PAP-10-2018-0002.
63. UN Women. (2021). *Women's effective participation and decision-making in public life, elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality, and empowerment of all women and girls*. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/12/womens-effective-participation-and-decision-making-in-public-life
64. Van Trappen S. Candidate selection and ethnic minority aspirants: Exploring the effect of party selectors' biases in a PR system. Party Polit. 2022;28(6):1123–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211041588.
65. Warren TC, Troy KK. Explaining violent intra-ethnic conflict. J Conflict Resolut. 2015;59(3):484–509.
66. Wazed S. (2012). Gender and social exclusion/inclusion: A study of indigenous women in Bangladesh [Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham].
67. Wright K, Zhu L. When social capital becomes political capital: Understanding the social contexts of minority candidates' electoral success in the American states. J Race Ethn Politics. 2021;6(2):373–401. https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2020.12.
68. Younas A, Fàbregues S, Creswell JW. Generating metainferences in mixed methods research: A worked example in convergent mixed methods designs. Methodological Innovations. 2023;16(3):276–91. 10.1177/20597991231188121.
69. Zaid FA. Social exclusion and cost of discrimination: Inclusion and development among Turi indigenous community of Barind tract in Bangladesh. Grassroots Voice. 2010;7(1):58–69.

Figures

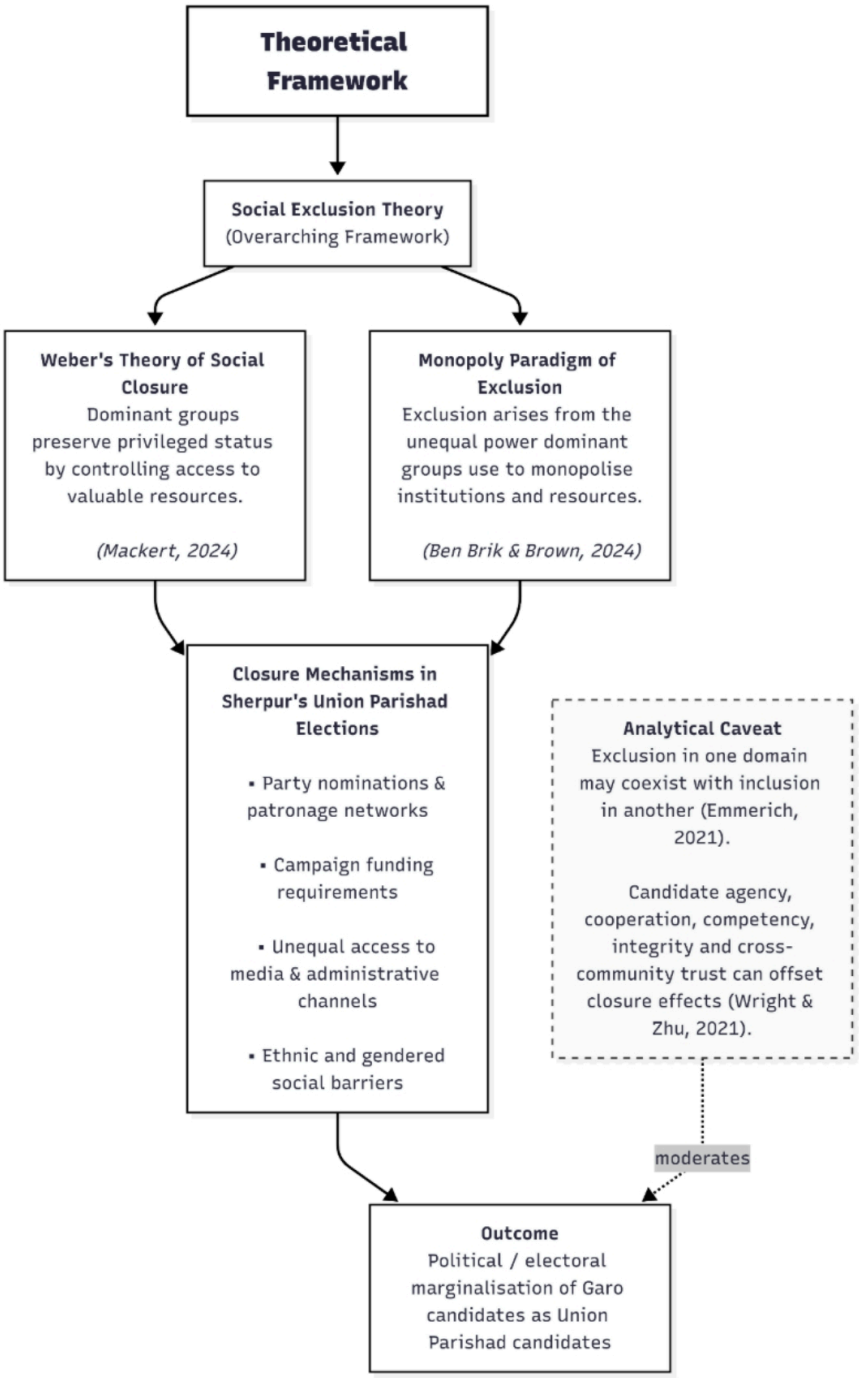


Figure 1

Theoretical Framework (combined by authors)

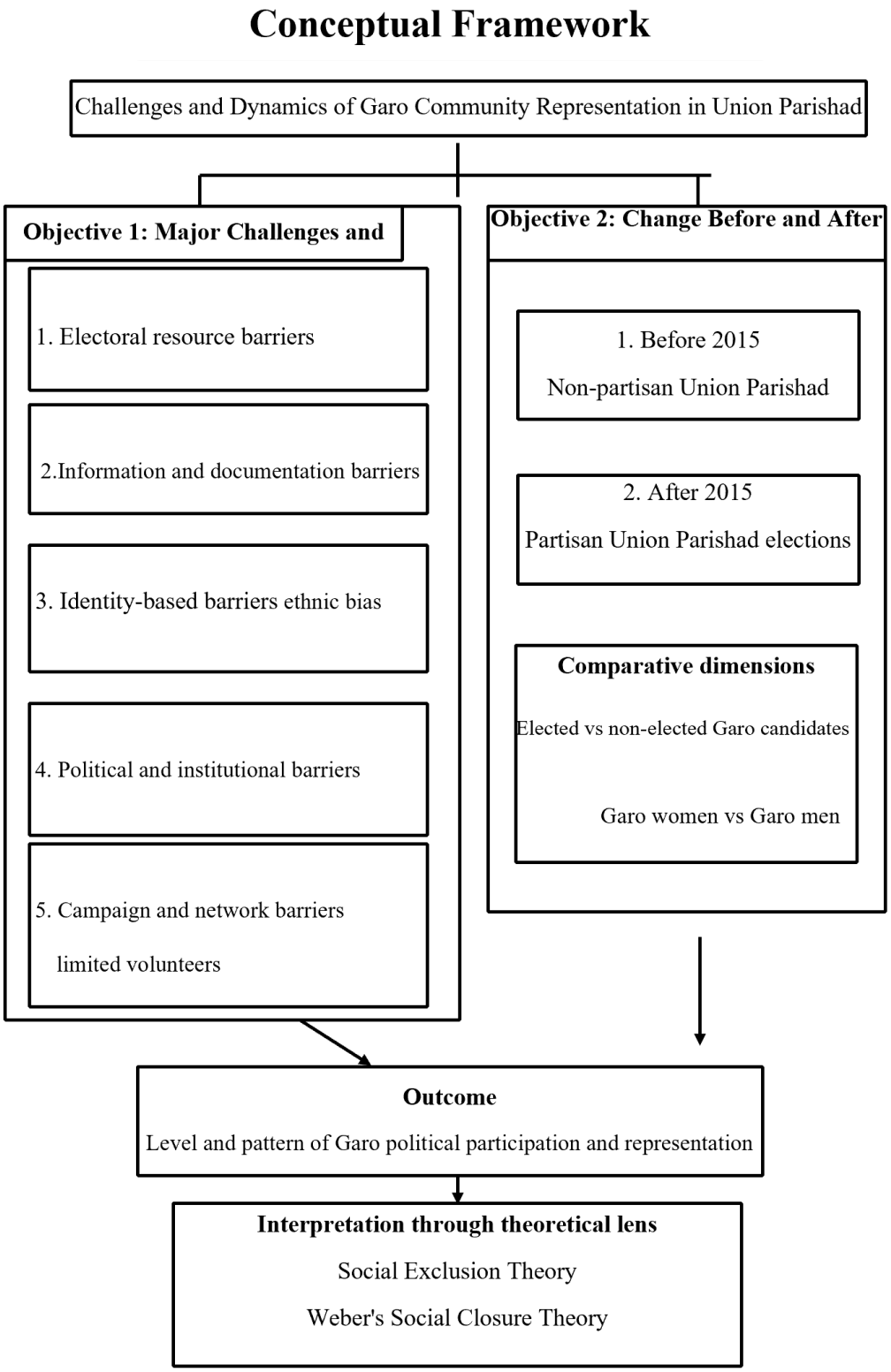


Figure 2

Conceptual Framework (Combined by authors)



Figure 3

Case study area

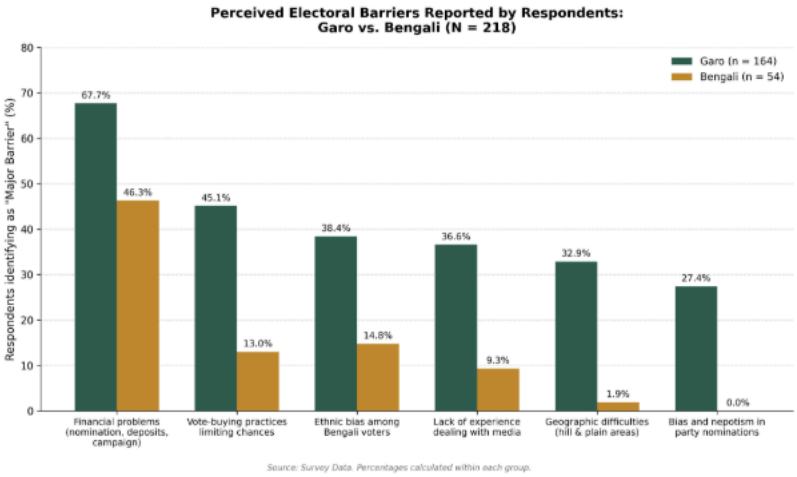


Figure 4

Comparative perceptions of major electoral barriers, Garo vs. Bengali (N=218)