

# Who *Actually* Governs? Gender Inequality and Political Representation in Rural India

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## Abstract

Research on representative democracy often assumes that elected officials from disadvantaged and dominant groups have equal input into decision-making *once in office*. Drawing on an original survey in 320 Indian village councils, we leverage both reputational and behavioral measures to show that this assumption does not hold. Women elected through gender quotas do not equally participate in decision-making processes within village councils. We additionally show that these inequalities owe to both discrimination and selection mechanisms. Recognition of this underappreciated form of political inequality is imperative for scholars to accurately identify the strengths and limitations of descriptive representation. From a policy standpoint, this suggests that reforms aiming to increase the representation of members of traditionally excluded groups (quotas) may not be sufficient to enable individuals from long-excluded groups to play a role in decision-making.

**Keywords:** political inequality, influence, representation, quotas, India

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# 1 Introduction

One of the most basic assumptions about representative democracy is that those elected to govern actually shape government decisions (Dahl 1961). In democratic institutions which require collective decision-making (elected councils, assemblies, and other deliberative bodies), variation however exists in the degree of centrality of elected members. Social inequalities lead some to play a more decisive, central role in decision-making than other actors (Cruz and Tolentino 2019; Parthasarathy, Rao and Palaniswamy 2019).

In this article, we draw on original data from the world's largest democracy, India, to map the extent to which members of marginalized groups - women with varied levels of skills and privilege - play a central role once elected, via quotas, to village councils. We document this variation in centrality, focusing on the *processes* rather than the *outcomes* of decision-making: the extent to which these elected officials voice their preferences in political deliberation, and are seen as occupying a central role, enabling them to influence collective decisions (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Vera and Vidal 2021).

Prior research documents the many disadvantages that individuals from marginalized groups experience in political decision-making processes, as citizens and candidates (Schlozman et al 2001; Kalla and Broockman 2016; Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Bernhard, Shames and Teele 2021). Research has mainly focused on high-income countries, and evidence suggests that political gender inequality might be even more acute in low-income countries (Carpena and Jensenius 2021). When political exclusion occurs alongside social and economic oppression, state intervention may be required to disrupt hierarchy and ensure marginalized groups substantive political representation (Mansbridge 1999).

We build on this scholarship and document the extent to which officials elected via gender quotas play an equally central role in decision-making *after* they are elected. Measuring how central a role individuals play in collective decision-making bodies is notoriously difficult. To overcome this challenge, our analyses leverage both behav-

ioral and reputational measures to shine light on this underappreciated form of political inequality among already-elected officials. Across eight measures of voice and reputation in decision-making, we find that women elected via quotas do not play an equally central role *after* they reach office. Additional data suggest that this underappreciated type of political inequality owes to interference and discrimination by others; underlying structural inequalities may also constrain the leadership ability of quota-elected officials.

## 2 Context

As the democracy with the largest set of quotas for traditionally excluded groups, India presents an important test of whether or not political institutions can alter longstanding patterns of political dominance (Chauchard 2017; Brulé 2020). In 1992, the 72nd and 73rd Indian Constitutional Amendments devolved considerable power to the local level. These mandated that states “reserve” seats for women and members of lower castes.

Quotas have allowed women the chance to access the position of village council presidents (*sarpanches*), our focus here. At present, most states *randomly* allocate half of village president seats for women during any electoral period. In this article, we study a cross-section of village councils in the Indian state of Maharashtra, India’s second largest state. Successful political movements have led to the election of all-women panchayats in rural Maharashtra and successful candidates in urban centers (Omvedt 1990; Bhavnani 2009), making the state a *relatively* progressive setting in terms of gender equality.

## 3 Theory and hypotheses

While much work highlights the positive effects of gender quotas (Beaman et al. 2009; Bhavnani 2009; Brulé 2020), with this mode of election has come speculation that female officials elected via quotas in India are mere “proxies” for traditional elites (Ban and Rao 2008). In another context, Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) find evidence that quotas reinforce negative stereotypes about women politicians. In line with this, our central

hypothesis is that officials in gender-reserved seats are unequal *after* they are elected, in the degree to which their voice is heard and recognized as central in decision-making.

We hypothesize that gender-related political inequality may owe to several mechanisms. First, this may be due to several types of discrimination. Indeed, quota-elected women often face political exclusion (Htun 2016) and bias from higher-level authorities or bureaucrats (Purohit 2021). In keeping with a common distinction (Bertrand and Duflo 2017), this may be either “statistical” discrimination driven by assumptions about the average characteristics of women elected under quotas in a context of imperfect information<sup>1</sup>—or “taste-based” discrimination: bias driven by distaste for an entire, gender-based class of elected officials. We observed such bias in the frequent unwillingness of peers (elected officials and appointed bureaucrats) to acknowledge the presence of *female* elected officials in local government meetings, and through their frequent refusal to share crucial documents and resources—from local government budgets and circulars detailing policy changes to government pocketbooks—with quota-elected women. Beyond discrimination, selection effects may operate, if officials in gender-reserved seats play a less central role not because they are discriminated against, but rather because they are less motivated or able, due to structural disadvantages. We explore each channel, as both *discrimination* and *selection* mechanisms likely play a role—probably interacting (Grodsky and Pager 2001; Anzia and Berry 2011)—in the inequality we posit exists.

Notably, the vast majority of female officials operating at the local level in rural Maharashtra are elected through quotas (Priebe 2017). Thus, we cannot disentangle the impact of quotas mandating the electoral representation of women from our measurement of elected women’s centrality in collective decision-making. What we learn about women’s centrality in decision-making *after quotas* is likely to be the result of—at least in part if not entirely—formal quota mandates, as the main channel for women’s electoral

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<sup>1</sup>This would be the case for instance, if discrimination more generally occurred against officials with less experience, less information on their precise roles and how to enact them, and fewer networks, all characteristics that female officials have been shown to have, on average, at higher levels than men in other contexts (Schlozman et al 2001; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Cruz and Tolentino 2019).

representation, *rather than* gender differences in political decision-making *per se*.<sup>2</sup>

## 4 Research Design & Identification Strategy

To test these hypotheses, we rely on surveys carried out in 2020-21 in 320 villages across three districts of Maharashtra. Appendix A details our sampling strategy. The data used for this article's main analysis draw from four interrelated instruments. The first is an interview of the council president (*sarpanch*) in each village; we use this instrument to determine the personal characteristics of this elected official. The second targets six key informants in each village,<sup>3</sup> and is used to generate several reputation-based measures of the *sarpanch's* centrality. The third is an interview of the village bureaucrat (*gram sevak*), to develop reputation-based measures of centrality and collect administrative data. The last instrument - described in Appendix B - is based on a standardized group meeting between the *sarpanch*, the council vice president (the *upa sarpanch*, an individual chosen among council members), and the *gram sevak*. Using this material, we generate several behavioral measures of each participant's centrality in decision-making. To assess the *sarpanch's* centrality within the village council, we rely on eight behavioral and reputational measures, which Appendix E describes and justifies. Our measures build upon work showing the importance of voice and reputation for influence in collective deliberation institutions (Sanyal and Rao 2018; Parthasarathy, Rao and Palaniswamy 2019).

Our analyses explore the effect of gender quotas that "reserve" the *sarpanch* position for women on these measures of centrality in decision-making processes. Because gender quotas are *randomly* allocated, the policy guarantees that communities with quotas are on average no different from those without them (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Dunning 2012).<sup>4</sup> In Maharashtra, quotas are randomly selected with replacement every

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<sup>2</sup>In the future, we hope this analysis encourages a broader body of comparative work on the unintended consequences of quotas, as in Htun (2016), Brulé (2020), and Purohit (2021).

<sup>3</sup>To guarantee diversity in that sample of informants, we by design required interviews to be balanced by gender and caste. Full details on our sampling strategy for this instrument in Appendix C.

<sup>4</sup>We provide evidence of this in Appendices D and J.

electoral cycle (Priebe (2017), as we document in detail in Appendix J. This randomization strategy enables us to causally identify whether women elected through quotas play as central a role in decision making as those (overwhelmingly men) selected via open elections in similar communities. Our main tests compare average levels of centrality on our eight measures by the gender quota status of the *sarpanch*.

## 5 Results

Figure 1 evaluates the gender disadvantage, with means by gender reservation status displayed on the left panel and differences on the right (numerical estimates are in Appendix F). Relying on the set of behavioral and reputational indicators detailed in Appendix E, Figure 1 presents striking evidence that the voice of *sarpanches* elected via quotas is less central to village councils' deliberations than that of their counterparts elected in open seats, as is elite recognition of their input. Behavioral and reputational measures of centrality align: across all eight measures, *sarpanches* elected via quotas — our treatment group ("t" in Fig. 1) — are always significantly less central, or seen as less central, than *sarpanches* in the control group (open seats, "c" in Fig. 1). We detect a gender gap of between 10-25 percentage points, depending on the measure.<sup>5</sup> This provides clear support for our hypothesis: after their election, representatives in seats reserved for women do *not*, on average, enjoy equal voice in decision-making processes within the institutions they are elected to lead, nor are they recognized as being equally central to decision-making by informants aware of council workings. Given random allocation of quotas, this can only be due to the gender quota, and not to underlying village characteristics (see also Appendices H and I for robustness tests).

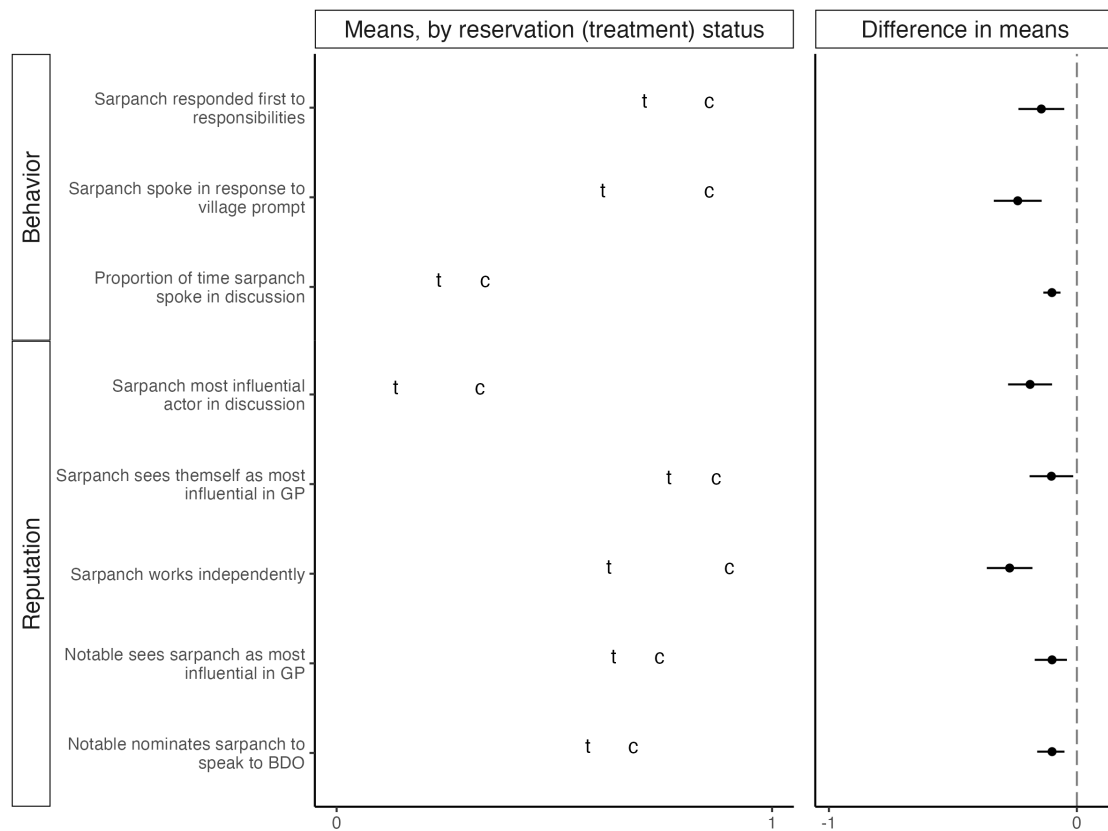
As noted above, this gender gap may be driven by a variety of mechanisms. Selection effects—i.e. distinctive characteristics of women elected via quotas—and/or sta-

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<sup>5</sup>This is despite the fact that some respondents likely misrepresent the reality because of social desirability. We would expect this bias to work in the direction of finding no effect - as respondents would likely feel pressured to report that all *sarpanches* are indeed central, as they are *legally* expected to be.

tistical discrimination—i.e. discrimination motivated by the assumption that women elected via quotas do, on average, govern distinctively—may lead to this gap. Appendix G.1.1 shows that women elected via quotas are strikingly different from officials elected outside quotas: they are younger, less experienced, less educated and less connected to political institutions. Qualitative evidence in turn suggests that the characteristics of sarpanches in quota seats contributes, in multiple ways, to the gap we detect (Appendix G.1.2).

Figure 1: Evaluating the Gender Disadvantage



Note: Means for treatment (t) groups with women’s quotas, control (c) without, and difference in means with Neyman standard errors. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. These are results from 320 gram panchayats.

Other data however suggest that taste-based discrimination also contributes to these inequalities. While carefully testing this would require a different type of data, our design allows us to present important suggestive evidence. First, turning to interviews of the actors in village politics (gram sevak, upa sarpanch<sup>6</sup>) in a subset of our data,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>This is from our fifth instrument, a survey of village council secretaries.

<sup>7</sup>These items were asked in only one of the 3 districts sampled, hence the smaller overall N.

we show that these actors have biased opinions about the ability of women to serve as political leaders (“When comparing women to men, do you think women make better or poorer leaders?”). We also ask these local elites to comment on local behavioral norms indicative of tolerance for interference.<sup>8</sup> Results in Table 1 demonstrate that both bias and interference are widely tolerated, and hence likely frequent. We see this as suggestive evidence of taste-based discrimination. Finally, we show in Appendix G.2 suggestive qualitative and quantitative evidence of discriminatory behaviors plausibly driven by biased gender attitudes, rather than beliefs about quota-elected sarpanches’ characteristics.

Table 1: Bias and Tolerance for Interference Among Local Political Actors

Actor	Outcome	Overall (SE)	Reserved (SE)	Unreserved (SE)	N
Upa sarpanch	Women worse leaders	0.17 (0.378)	0.19 (0.397)	0.155 (0.365)	100
	Interference acceptable	0.54 (0.501)	0.571 (0.501)	0.517 (0.504)	100
	Not frowned upon	0.433 (0.498)	0.45 (0.504)	0.421 (0.498)	97
	Sanctions unlikely	0.646 (0.48)	0.548 (0.504)	0.719 (0.453)	99
Gram sevak	Women worse leaders	0.21 (0.409)	0.19 (0.397)	0.224 (0.421)	100
	Interference acceptable	0.212 (0.411)	0.262 (0.445)	0.175 (0.384)	99
	Not frowned upon	0.388 (0.49)	0.537 (0.505)	0.281 (0.453)	98
	Sanctions unlikely	0.845 (0.363)	0.805 (0.401)	0.875 (0.334)	97

## 6 Discussion

These analyses highlight a consequential yet underappreciated type of political inequality. Combining eight behavioral and reputational measures of elected officials’ voice and recognition in decision-making allows us to show that these inequalities are not merely subjective: local elites’ perceptions match the behaviors of elected *sarpanches*.

<sup>8</sup>We ask three questions: “Around here, is it socially acceptable for someone else to do the sarpanch’s work instead of the sarpanch?”; “If other people do the work of the sarpanch (instead of the sarpanch), is this likely to be frowned upon by panchayat members?”; and finally, “If other people do the work of the sarpanch (instead of the sarpanch), is it likely that block or district level officials will sanction those individuals?”



Further, we show that these disadvantages likely owe to several reinforcing mechanisms. Quota-elected women have different characteristics. The inequalities we uncover cannot however be purely blamed on differences in motivation or abilities (selection effects) and/or purely “statistical” discrimination, as our quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest village elites harbor biased attitudes that credibly lead to discrimination on the basis of gender (Appendix G). The presence of either statistical and/or taste-based discrimination coupled with the absence of sanctions for interference likely drives inequalities among already-elected officials.

We complement existing work which documents the disadvantages individuals from marginalized groups face *prior* to elections (Schlozman et al 2001; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Bernhard, Shames and Teele 2021). We find that social exclusion does not stop at the doorstep of political office. This likely prevents democratically elected members of disadvantaged groups from influencing governance: if they lack voice or perceived centrality in elected office, we cannot expect the state to be impartial in designing or implementing policy. This also likely exerts a chilling effect on broader political engagement by members of disadvantaged groups, confirming fears about the ineffectiveness of their political voice (Mansbridge 1999; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008).

Social scientists and policy-makers should acknowledge this underappreciated type of political inequality in order to accurately identify the impact of descriptive representation. The gender of officials may have a larger effect than has so far been assessed if elected women play – by force or by choice – a less central role in decision-making. This suggests that quotas may not suffice to enable individuals from traditionally-excluded groups to have an equal say in policy. Complementary interventions to help women overcome initial disadvantages in experience and networks are likely necessary. So are sanctions against elites’ propensity to appropriate female representatives’ role. Both steps are likely necessary to ensure that gender quotas translate into substantive change.

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