

Accountability in Rural India

Local Government and Social Equality

ABSTRACT

This article studies variation in individuals' perceived ability across India to hold local officials accountable for their performance. It finds significant gender differences in accountability perceptions, consistent with traditional social institutions. Exposure to progressive institutions of education and labor mobility is associated with the elimination and reversal of gender differences.

KEYWORDS: accountability, local institutions, gender, education, labor mobility

INTRODUCTION

When are local officials accountable to individuals in states where extreme social inequalities challenge democratic principles of equal voice for all? In India, state accountability is of critical importance to millions of citizens who are members of socially vulnerable groups with limited means to influence public decisions.¹ This article studies variation in one dimension of accountability across contemporary India: citizens' perceived ability to engage and sanction local officials.² Citizen perceptions are crucial because they represent

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1. India is ranked the 88th worst of 98 countries due to decline in socioeconomic equity between 1990 and 2009. Deepankar Basu, "Socio-Economic Inequality in India and the World since 1990," *Sanhati* (Kolkata, India), November 17, 2011.

2. The article relies on survey-based measures of accountability perceptions. Details can be found in the Data section.

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the extent to which individuals believe they are able to engage the state and hence possess political agency.

Consider the example of women, a severely disadvantaged group in many societies. Accountability encourages women's engagement with local public institutions to seek justice and improve their welfare. In India, government accountability increased following the introduction of "reservations": quotas mandating that women occupy at least one-third of local elected councils' posts. After the implementation of reservations, beginning in 1993,³ women's willingness to report crime increased by 46%, likelihood of the police registering relevant crimes rose by 27%, and women's likelihood of bribing police to resolve crimes dropped by 36%.⁴ In the US, accountability to women grew following their 1920 enfranchisement. As a result, spending on public health increased, causing an 8–15% drop in child mortality.⁵ Accountability has both an instrumental value for improving public goods and an intrinsic value as a substantive component of democratic practice.⁶

What exactly does accountability mean? Simply put: enforceable responsibility. Accountability occurs where "some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that these responsibilities have not been met."⁷ A large body of work focuses on "formal accountability" based on voters' ability to sanction politicians via elections.⁸ This article considers accountability in the broader context of citizen–state relationships that bridge formal and informal domains.⁹ This

3. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, Part IX ("The Panchayats") came into force upon notification in the Gazette of India on April 24, 1993. Sri Mani Shankar Aiyar, ed., *Towards Holistic Panchayat Raj: Twentieth Anniversary Report* (Delhi, India: Ministry of Panchayat Raj, 2013), ix.

4. Lakshmi Iyer et al., "The Power of Political Voice: Women's Political Representation and Crime in India," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4, no. 4 (2012), pp. 165–93.

5. Grant Miller, "Women's Suffrage, Political Responsiveness, and Child Survival in American History," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123 (2008), pp. 1287–1327.

6. "Voice [meaning critical engagement with a given system] is political action par excellence." Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 16.

7. Miriam Golden and Brian Min, "Distributive Politics around the World," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013), pp. 73–99.

8. For a thorough review, see Scott Ashworth, "Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 15 (2012), pp. 183–201.

9. Political accountability can be based on informal social institutions such as temple groups; see Lilly L. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 147.

broad definition of accountability is important because an individual's perceived ability to engage local officials is determined by both formal and informal interactions. Accountability is negotiated not only in the formal public meetings of a village's elected council, but also in private, in the homes of local officials and bureaucrats, and in alternative public spaces including the local government school and caste-based councils for dispute resolution.¹⁰ This article operationalizes this broad concept of accountability within a narrow frame, as a first-order input to the political system. Accountability provides citizens with a political voice: the perceived ability to enter the political system by engaging local officials to express demands and critiques.

This study's approach contrasts with a broad body of work that infers accountability based on political systems' outputs: the degree to which public goods' distribution follows political incentives or voter preferences.¹¹ Such studies examine variation in outputs across political units: electoral constituencies, districts, or states (either subnational or national).¹² Output-oriented work claims to investigate accountability rather than the quality of governance, state efficacy, or state capacity. In practice, this set of studies fails to distinguish between these concepts because they all are evaluated using a common output: government performance.¹³

What is missing in most empirical studies of accountability is a precise measure of inputs that would clarify the mechanics of responsibility. Four factors determine citizen inputs to political systems: citizen perceptions of officials' approachability; the opportunities for citizens to interact with local officials; the regularity with which citizens *actually approach* officials to request their help accessing material resources, services, and rights; and the

10. On the range of state services demanded by the poor, see Amit Ahuja and Pradeep Chhibber, "Why the Poor Vote in India: 'If I Don't Vote, I Am Dead to the State,'" *Studies in Comparative International Development* 47, no. 4 (2012), pp. 389–410.

11. Political incentives may be based on electoral institutions' structure or the geography of social institutions such as identity groups. Voter preferences may be determined according to the median voter, a general "taste" for equality, or welfare maximization. See Golden and Min, "Distributive Politics."

12. In particular, see Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Federico Estévez, and Beatriz Magaloni, *Strategies of Vote Buying: Democracy, Clientelism, and Poverty Relief in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) ADDED YEAR; James Alt, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, and Shanna Rose, "Disentangling Accountability and Competence in Elections: Evidence from U.S. Term Limits," *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011), pp. 171–86; Abhijit V. Banerjee and Rohini Somanathan, "The Political Economy of Public Goods: Some Evidence from India," *Journal of Development Economics* 82, no. 2 (2007), pp. 287–314.

13. An excellent review is Golden and Min, "Distributive Politics."

nature and effectiveness of citizens' past interactions. This article focuses on the first and most fundamental of these factors: citizens' perceived ability to approach officials.

This study builds on insights from a growing body of micro-level research on the role of "street-level bureaucracy" and "governments' street-level responsiveness."¹⁴ "Street-level" bureaucracy refers to public officials who interact with citizens daily, including healthcare providers, police officers, and teachers, as the key link between the state and the needy. The existing literature investigates citizens' formal and informal engagement with political officials and its consequences for service delivery and development. Yet we have very little systematic evidence of how individuals' place in traditional social institutions interacts with their exposure to a growing infrastructure of progressive institutions to jointly determine political accountability. We know even less about whether formal electoral institutions actually perform their intended function: enabling citizens to vote freely. To answer these questions, we require more precise empirical studies about how micro-level political accountability varies within and across villages. This paper addresses these questions by analyzing variation in citizens' self-perceived ability to demand rights and services within and across contemporary rural Indian villages.

To understand variation in accountability across contemporary India, this article relies on data from the National Council of Applied Economics Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS). This study analyzes the most recent (2006–8) round of the nationally representative panel survey, which

14. The term *street-level bureaucracy* originates with Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980). The explicit link to responsiveness is in Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 73. On state–society relations, see Merilee S. Grindle, *Going Local: Decentralization, Democratization, and the Promise of Good Governance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Judith Tandler, *Good Government in the Tropics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute Each Other* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). On India, see Thad Dunning and Janhavi Nilekani, "Ethnic Quotas and Political Mobilization: Caste, Parties, and Distribution in Indian Village Councils," *American Political Science Review* 107 (2013), pp. 35–56; Timothy Besley et al., "The Politics of Public Good Provision: Evidence from Indian Local Governments," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 2, nos. 2-3 (2004), pp. 416–26; Esther Duflo and Petia Topalova, "Unappreciated Service: Performance, Perceptions, and Women: Leaders in India," mimeo, Department of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004.

covers 8,659 households in 240 rural villages in 17 Indian states. Relevant survey questions identify individuals' socioeconomic characteristics, exposure to progressive institutions, and perceived ability to hold local officials accountable. This article uses ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis to clarify the relationship between individual accountability perceptions and three sets of institutions: impersonal political institutions, traditional social institutions, and progressive institutions (education and labor mobility).¹⁵ All regressions use village-level fixed effects to control for the influence of village characteristics at the time of the cross-sectional survey, such as caste fractionalization, political competition, and transportation and communications infrastructure. Regressions also control for predetermined family characteristics, year-of-birth fixed effects, and village-specific trends.

Why and how might local officials' perceived accountability vary among individuals in India, after accounting for village characteristics? This paper provides a conceptual framework drawn from Drèze and Sen's theory of democratic performance.¹⁶ Individual accountability perceptions will vary according to which of three institutional types dominate citizen–state interactions: traditional social institutions, such as caste, gender, and religion; impersonal political institutions; or individual exposure to progressive institutions. Traditional social institutions rely on hierarchical social status to determine access to political officials and influence. Local social institutions enforce traditional customs and hierarchies by leveraging the importance of village-level reputation for accessing a broad range of resources.¹⁷ Impersonal political institutions operate according to democratic principles of equal access to all citizens. Progressive institutions such as education and labor mobility can reduce traditional institutions' power by limiting their enforcement mechanisms.¹⁸ They give individuals access to wider conceptual and geographic networks, which provide options to exit the village as well as economic and social resources for political engagement.¹⁹ As a result, progressive institutions can

15. Analysis using logit and probit regressions yields similar results in terms of coefficients' direction, significance, and relative magnitude. Ordinary least squares results are presented here for ease of interpretation.

16. Drèze and Sen, *India*, pp. 352–53.

17. M. N. Srinivas, *The Remembered Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

18. For empirical evidence, see Mahvish Shami, "Collective Action, Clientelism, and Connectivity," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (2012), pp. 588–606.

19. Prem Chowdhry, "Inflicting, Acceptance and Resistance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 37 (2012), pp. 43–59.

reduce traditional institutions' power by limiting their enforcement mechanisms.²⁰ However, as long as traditional social institutions constrain individuals' perceived ability to hold local officials accountable, the fundamental democratic principle of civic equality is unattainable.²¹

Traditional institutions' relevance in contemporary rural India is undeniable, but the extent of their influence is debated.²² If impersonal institutions dominate, there should be no correlation between individuals' traditional social status and accountability perceptions. If traditional social institutions dominate, there should be a consistent, positive relationship between individuals' social status and accountability perceptions. If progressive institutions dominate, individuals' exposure to these institutions should eliminate or reverse the relationship between traditional social status and accountability perceptions.

This study finds that perceived accountability varies significantly by *some* markers of traditional social status, suggesting limited dominance of traditional institutions. Gender is a significant disadvantage; Scheduled Caste and Muslim identity are not disadvantages. Women are 20% less likely than men to assess officials as at least "relatively easy" to hold accountable for performing their tasks. However, women's exposure to progressive institutions reverses social institutions' influence. Exposure to educational institutions significantly reduces the gender gap in accountability perceptions. Mobility due to migration for work dramatically alters women's assessments of official accountability: migration at some point in the past year is associated with an 11% increase in women's assessment that officials are "no problem" to hold accountable—as opposed to men with labor mobility. An alternative measure of political accountability—perceived freedom to vote for the candidate or party of one's choice—yields roughly similar trends. Overall, this work suggests that social inequalities have a significant impact on individuals' perceived ability to engage, select, and sanction their political representatives. Still, the disadvantages are not monolithic. Exposure to progressive institutions of education and extra-village mobility provides women with significant capacity to increase

20. For empirical evidence, see Mahvish Shami, "Collective Action, Clientelism, and Connectivity," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (2012), pp. 588–606.

21. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

22. Patrick Heller, "Degrees of Democracy: Some Comparative Lessons from India," *World Politics* 52, no. 4 (2000), pp. 484–519.

their perceived political voice and reverse traditional social inequalities in certain circumstances. Analysis of Tables 2–5 and Figure 6 explains the conditions under which exposure to progressive institutions is meaningful for women.

This article next provides a brief outline of the data and methodology utilized, presents descriptive statistics and findings based on multivariate regression models, and concludes with an agenda for future research.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

The strong positive relationship between formal democracy and accountability—measured as the distribution of public goods—is extensively documented.²³ The relationship between democracy and social equity, or between procedural and substantive democracy, remains contested.²⁴ This article attempts to capture the empirical relationship between accountability perceptions, traditional social institutions, and exposure to progressive institutions within Indian villages. Village-level variation is significant in India’s democracy, where an ancient history of local democracy in the form of *panchayats* (local councils) exists alongside extreme intra-village disparities in social and economic status.²⁵

This article follows Drèze and Sen’s agenda in order to improve our understanding of the extent to which democratic public institutions can broaden social opportunities and support human agency.²⁶ It adopts Heller’s approach to move the focus from macro- to micro-level democracy, “where ‘everyday’ forms of democracy either flourish or founder.”²⁷ This article empirically investigates the extent to which local public officials are perceived

23. Matthew A. Baum and David A. Lake, “The Political Economy of Growth: Democracy and Human Capital,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2003), pp. 333–47; Caroline Beer, “Democracy and Gender Equality,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44 (2009), pp. 212–27; Pradeep Chhibber and Irfan Nooruddin, “Do Party Systems Matter? The Number of Parties and Government Performance in the Indian States,” *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 2 (2004), pp. 152–87; David Stasavage, “Democracy and Education Spending in Africa,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005), pp. 343–58.

24. Heller, “Degrees of Democracy,” p. 3.

25. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2013: The Rise of the South, Human Progress in a Diverse World* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

26. Drèze and Sen, *India*. This agenda also owes much to theories of civic culture, as in Sidney Verba and Gabriel A. Almond, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

27. Heller, “Degrees of Democracy,” p. 488.

as accountable to the citizens they serve. If they are accountable, local government can act as a means of reducing deeply entrenched social inequalities of political voice and access to public services across contemporary rural India. This fits within a growing body of work on micro-level variation in accountability as inputs to democratic political systems: citizens' perceived ability to engage and sanction elected representatives.

In stark contrast to the broad surveys of electoral politics conducted in the two decades following India's 1947 independence depicting majority-rural Indian voters as "inarticulate, parochial, and passive," micro-level studies are increasing our understanding of variation in citizen–state engagement.²⁸ These studies often focus on the nature of *community-wide* access to information, political voice, and public goods.²⁹

This paper's findings suggest reasons to dig deeper and examine the impact of individual-level variation in institutions, identities, and opportunities *within villages*. Most notably, the findings presented here provide striking evidence that individuals' exposure to progressive institutions of education and extra-village mobility is associated with reduction or even reversal of traditional institutions' dominance over individuals' perceived ability to hold officials accountable. Overall, this work provides an avenue for synthesis of macro-level assessments of political, social, and economic institutions with micro-level analysis of individuals' perceived agency in the context of navigating democratic rights and resources.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN NUMBERS: DATA AND MEASUREMENT STRATEGY

This study's dependent variable of interest is a survey-based measure capturing individual perceptions of local officials' accountability. This measure offers unique insights into citizen relationships with local officials, but has two weaknesses. First, it is a subjective measure of accountability. Individual

28. Narain (1978), cited in Wendy Singer, *"A Constituency Suitable for Ladies" and Other Social Histories of Indian Elections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 121.

29. See e.g. Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Exceptional work on individual and local-level determinants of political voice includes Ahuja and Chhibber, "Why the Poor Vote in India"; Radu Ban, Saumitra Jha, and Vijayendra Rao, "Who Has Voice in a Deliberative Democracy? Evidence from Transcripts of Village Parliaments in South India," *Journal of Development Economics* 99, no. 2 (2012), pp. 428–38; Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

accountability perceptions vary depending on factors such as the context used to evaluate officials, the extent of individuals' participation in politics, and individual dispositions.³⁰ Analysis of objective measures of accountability is beyond the scope of this article. A second concern is about the limits to inferences that can be drawn from the primary measure of accountability. We leverage two additional survey questions on accountability to address both concerns.

Our first measure of accountability is the most general. It asks: "How easy is it for you to hold local officials accountable for the functions they are supposed to be performing?" Responses are based on a discrete scale from 1 ("impossible") to 5 ("no problem at all"). This question's strength is its directness. Its weakness is in the limits to inferences that can be drawn from this measure of accountability, given that it is impossible to determine *which* local officials a respondent is evaluating. Local officials include elected members of the executive (the local council or *panchayat*), appointed members of the judiciary, and appointed bureaucrats.³¹

Our second measure of accountability is context-specific. It provides one method of identifying the extent to which context determines perceptions of individual efficacy. This provides insight into perceptions about one particularly relevant official's accountability: the *pradhan* or local council president. This question begins with the following scenario:

Meenakshi, the four-year-old daughter of Rajesh, fell ill after eating the food provided by the noon meal program. When Lakshmi, the wife of Rajesh, went to complain to the school, she was rebuked and told to talk to the *pradhan*. She has since asked Rajesh to talk to the *pradhan*.

The surveyor is then prompted to ask the respondent: "How easy is it for Lakshmi to hold the local officials accountable for performing their functions?" As in the general measure of accountability, evaluations range from 1 ("impossible") to 5 ("no problem at all").

30. Maria Escobar-Lemmon and Ashley D. Ross, "Does Decentralization Improve Perceptions of Accountability? Attitudinal Evidence from Columbia," *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (2014), pp. 175–88.

31. It is reasonable to assume that individual perceptions will vary alongside the type of local official considered and the identity of a given official–respondent pairing. Accountability may be easier to ensure the more that a given official's characteristics converge with the individual respondent. The survey questions do not allow this analysis.

Our third and final measure captures variation in individuals' perceived ability to hold officials accountable through casting their vote. This question asks respondents: "How free are you to vote for the candidate/party of your choice at the time of elections?" Responses also follow a five-point scale ranging from "not free at all" to "completely free." This measure of freedom to vote identifies a crucial institutional mechanism of accountability.

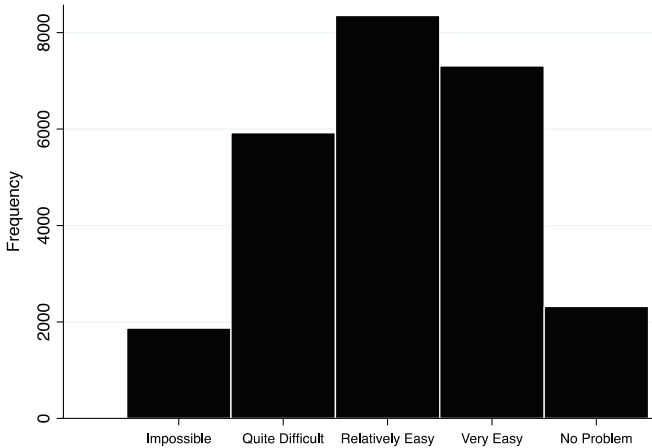
This paper's analysis is most informative when read alongside extensive micro-level research by Kruks-Wisner into how citizens make claims on a range of local officials in day-to-day arenas.³² Kruks-Wisner makes four crucial points relevant to this article. First, most people directly engage the state to demand public goods and services, including roughly three-fourths of her 2,000-person sample in Rajasthan. This suggests that widespread political disengagement is unlikely to skew accountability assessments. Second, people are most likely to approach *panchayat* members, including the *pradhan*, when making demands on the state. This suggests that both the general and the specific questions on accountability analyzed in this article present a relevant context for individual assessments of accountability. Third, socioeconomic status is not an absolute barrier to making claims on local officials. Thus, group disengagement among members of lower socioeconomic status should not drive variation in accountability perceptions. Fourth and finally, Kruks-Wisner finds that individuals' social and professional networks are significant predictors of individual claim making. These results fit well with this article's study of individuals' exposure to progressive institutions.

Analysis begins with the general measure of perceived accountability, the ease of holding local officials accountable. The survey asks this question of all adult household residents, yielding a total of 25,778 responses across 17 states. Figure 1's histogram illustrates the distribution of responses across all adults interviewed. It is notable that the distribution of responses roughly follows a normal distribution, minimizing concerns about potential bias in survey responses.

This article creates three binary measures of accountability using this scale. Each measure sets a different bar for determining what response qualifies as accountable. At the lowest bar, any official perceived as "quite difficult" or easier to hold accountable is considered accountable (2 or better on the

32. Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner, "How Rural India Negotiates with the State," *The Hindu* (Chennai, India), July 4, 2012.

FIGURE 1. Local Officials' General Accountability



Question: How easy is it for you to hold local officials accountable for the functions they are supposed to be performing?

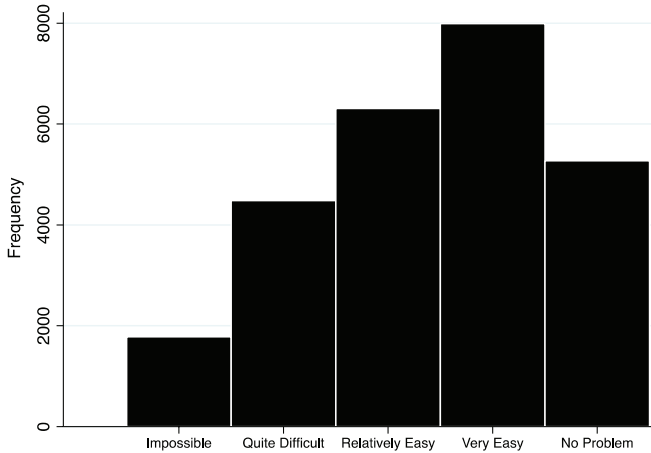
Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

5-point scale). We refer to this as the minimal bar because it categorizes as accountable anyone not “impossible” to hold accountable. At the middle bar, any official perceived as at least “relatively easy” to hold accountable is considered accountable (3 or better on the 5-point scale). At the highest bar, only officials perceived as “no problem” to hold accountable are considered accountable (5 on the 5-point scale). We refer to this as the maximal bar for accountability. These binary measures allow us to study how individuals’ self-perceived ability to hold officials accountable varies according to how we classify accountability. If the bar selected matters, we would expect a larger, more varied set of individuals to consider officials accountable using the minimal standard versus the maximal standard. The article investigates this conjecture in the following section.

The second dependent variable relates specifically to the ease with which *families* can hold local officials accountable for a child’s health, put at risk by an unsafe school meal. This is a natural domain for family action.³³ The complexity of the question also makes interpretation challenging. The interpretation

33. For evidence of familial institutions’ strong albeit diverse influence across India, see Patricia Uberoi, ed., *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

FIGURE 2. Local Officials' Familial Accountability in Context



Question: Hypothetical scenario in the respondent's village:

Meenakshi, the four-year-old daughter of Rajesh, fell ill after eating the food provided by the noon meal program. When Lakshmi, the wife of Rajesh, went to complain to the school, she was rebuked and told to talk to the *pradhan* [*panchayat* president]. She has since asked Rajesh to talk to the *pradhan*.

How easy is it for Lakshmi to hold the local officials accountable for performing their functions?

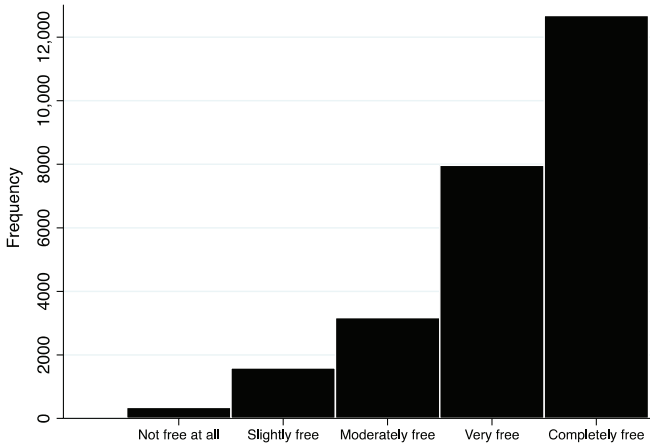
Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

presented here relies on a minimalist assumption: respondents interpret the question literally, taking the specified interests and constraints as given.

The survey asks this question of all adult household residents, assembling a total of 25,828 responses across all 17 states. The histogram in Figure 2 indicates that responses follow an approximately normal distribution, with a slight skew toward higher evaluations of officials' accountability. Potential explanations for the skew in responses are discussed in the survey analysis. We study accountability here as in the prior accountability question, using the same three binary measures of accountability. We consistently refer to these measures as minimal, middle, and maximal accountability bars.

Prominent literature on political accountability considers formal electoral institutions the key mechanism for enforcing democratic officials' accountability. If this is true, then individuals' perceived ability to voice preferences in elections determines accountability's scope. According to this logic, only individuals able to sanction and reward officials through free voting can make credible demands for officials' accountability. To the extent that electoral institutions do act as enforcement devices, the subset of individuals who can

FIGURE 3. Individuals' Perceived Ability to Vote Freely



Question: How free are you to vote for the candidate/party of your choice at the time of elections?
 Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

vote freely denotes accountability's maximum scope. We examine this measure of accountability via a third dependent variable: an individual's perceived freedom to vote for the candidate or party of his or her choice at the time of local elections. As a reminder, voting freedom is a discrete variable ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 signifies "not free at all" and 5 signifies "completely free" to vote for the candidate or party of one's choice. We have 25,754 responses to this question across 17 states. In Figure 3's histogram, roughly half of respondents perceive their vote choice as "completely free" and most others as "very free." This is promising evidence that electoral institutions give most citizens at least a self-perceived voice in the formal process of enforcing local accountability. As in the first two accountability questions, we consider three binary measures of electoral accountability. These are also referred to as the minimal bar (at least "slightly free" vote choice), middle bar ("moderately free" vote choice or better), and maximal bar ("completely free" vote choice).

Independent variables of interest include determinants of individuals' traditional social status in India: indicator variables for sex, parents' landholding status,³⁴ membership in a Scheduled Caste, and Muslim religious identity.

34. Parents' landholding status can be thought of as a one-generation lag in a given individual's landholding status. This is used to avoid the bias that state land redistribution schemes may cause in individual perceptions of local officials, at least for direct beneficiaries of such schemes.

Individuals' exposure to educational institutions and labor mobility are each captured by a dummy variable that indicates whether a respondent has completed any education, or migrated for work in the past year, respectively.³⁵ The set of independent variables allows us to capture the impact of individuals' exposure to traditional and progressive institutions on their perceptions of public officials' accountability. The following discussion explains the methodology used, before moving to the survey analysis.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the cross-sectional relationship between individual perceptions of official accountability and individual exposure to social, political, and progressive institutions, this article utilizes OLS regressions with village-level fixed effects.³⁶ Fixed effects at the village level allow us to control for the influence of village-specific institutions, resources, and common preferences on individuals' perceptions and officials' incentives and resources. Regressions also control for predetermined family characteristics, year-of-birth fixed effects, and village-specific time trends. Standard errors are clustered at the village level: the level at which survey teams operated. As mentioned above, three binary measures of accountability are used to classify responses to each subjective, survey-based question. This allows us to capture the extent to which accountability perceptions vary according to the standard selected—the use of a minimal, middle, or maximal bar. The following section presents basic descriptive statistics and interprets the OLS regression analysis results.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

This section begins by presenting the overarching analytic hypotheses and a preview of the conclusions, followed by descriptive statistics. The section concludes with an interpretation of the OLS regression analysis, discussing the three measures of accountability sequentially.

This analysis examines which of three institutional types dominates local political interactions: impersonal political institutions, traditional social

35. Binary exposure to education is preferred over education level as the vast majority of respondents' education level is 1 (primary school only).

36. Note 14 explains the presentation of OLS versus logit or probit regression analysis, which yield similar results.

institutions, or progressive institutions. The analysis finds that while *some* traditional social institutions determine individuals' perceived ability to hold local officials accountable, exposure to progressive institutions of education and labor mobility is correlated with reversals of traditional institutions' influence. In particular, women's growing labor mobility significantly reverses local officials' perceived accountability deficit to women at the maximal bar for accountability. Two other frequently marginalized groups, members of Scheduled Castes and Muslims, do not face significant disadvantages in accountability perceptions.³⁷ These trends persist when considering perceived ability to use a key enforcement mechanism for formal political accountability: free electoral participation. The remainder of this section's analysis considers each measure of citizens' perceived ability to ensure officials' accountability, moving from general to more specific measures of accountability.

How Accountable Are Local Officials to Individuals?

Traditional and progressive institutions create clear divisions among survey respondents. They are also important sources of advantage in individuals' perceived ability to hold local officials accountable. About one-sixth of respondents identify with the most socially marginalized caste grouping: Scheduled Castes (16%; see Table 1). The majority of individuals surveyed report some education (61%), but for most respondents, this is only primary school (69%). Less than one-third of respondents continue their education to complete secondary school or higher. Regression analysis uses the binary difference of any education versus none for the sake of parsimony—this single division explains the majority of the variation in rural Indian adults' educational attainment.

Table 1's descriptive statistics also provide illuminating evidence on the quality of formal electoral institutions. Respondents report 20% of the most recent local elections as being uncontested, on average. This figure remains constant for reports of prior elections. Margins of victory in recent elections have average reported values between 33% and 34%. These are not highly competitive, but they do suggest that most elections involve not-insignificant

37. Indeed, members of Scheduled Castes and Muslim women perceive themselves as marginally more able to hold local officials accountable and vote freely when using a minimal bar to measure accountability; see Tables 2 and 4.

TABLE I. Descriptive Statistics

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Median</i> | <i>Type</i> |
|---|----------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| <u>Outcome variables</u> | | | | | |
| Accountability (general measure) (1–5) | 25,778 | 3.09 | 1.08 | 3 | Discrete |
| Familial accountability (1–5) | 25,828 | 3.40 | 1.19 | 4 | Discrete |
| Voting freedom (1–5) | 25,754 | 4.21 | 0.97 | 4 | Discrete |
| <u>Individual characteristics</u> | | | | | |
| Any education (0 = no, 1 = yes) | 44,860 | 0.61 | 0.49 | 1 | Discrete |
| Secondary or higher education (0/1) | 44,542 | 0.31 | 0.46 | 0 | Discrete |
| No or incomplete primary education (0/1) | 44,542 | 0.48 | 0.50 | 0 | Discrete |
| Educated matriarch (0/1) | 40,476 | 0.05 | 0.21 | 0 | Discrete |
| Educated patriarch (0/1) | 41,300 | 0.18 | 0.38 | 0 | Discrete |
| Sex (0 = male, 1 = female) | 44,860 | 0.48 | 0.50 | 0 | Discrete |
| Parents own land (0/1) | 44,860 | 0.52 | 0.50 | 1 | Discrete |
| Scheduled Caste (0/1) | 44,860 | 0.16 | 0.37 | 0 | Discrete |
| Muslim (0/1) | 44,860 | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0 | Discrete |
| Labor mobility (0/1) | 44,860 | 0.01 | 0.08 | 0 | Discrete |
| <u>Village demographic characteristics</u> | | | | | |
| Log village population, 2001 census | 43,386 | 7.57 | 1.00 | 7.52 | Continuous |
| Village population, 2001 census | 43,386 | 3359 | 4842 | 1846 | Continuous |
| Wealth (ratio: gross-to-irrigated acres of land cultivated) | 43,396 | 3.47 | 10.12 | 1.19 | Continuous |
| Gross acres of land cultivated | 44,146 | 1418 | 1587 | 982 | Continuous |
| Acres of irrigated land cultivated | 44,146 | 643 | 872 | 380 | Continuous |
| Minutes to nearest paved road | 44,146 | 6.55 | 13.73 | 0 | Continuous |
| Minutes to district headquarters | 44,146 | 107.29 | 66.57 | 90 | Continuous |
| <u>Village political characteristics</u> | | | | | |
| Winning margin, prior-to-last <i>pradhan</i> election (0–1) | 43,033 | 0.33 | 0.36 | 0.18 | Continuous |
| Winning margin, most recent <i>pradhan</i> election (0–1) | 43,162 | 0.34 | 0.36 | 0.17 | Continuous |
| Prior-to-last <i>pradhan</i> election unopposed? | 43,162 | 0.20 | 0.40 | 0 | Discrete |
| Most recent <i>pradhan</i> election unopposed? | 43,162 | 0.20 | 0.40 | 0 | Discrete |
| <i>Pradhan</i> ever reserved for women? | 43,162 | 0.67 | 0.47 | 1 | Discrete |
| <i>Pradhan</i> reserved for women >1 time? | 44,860 | 0.14 | 0.35 | 0 | Discrete |

DATA SOURCE: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

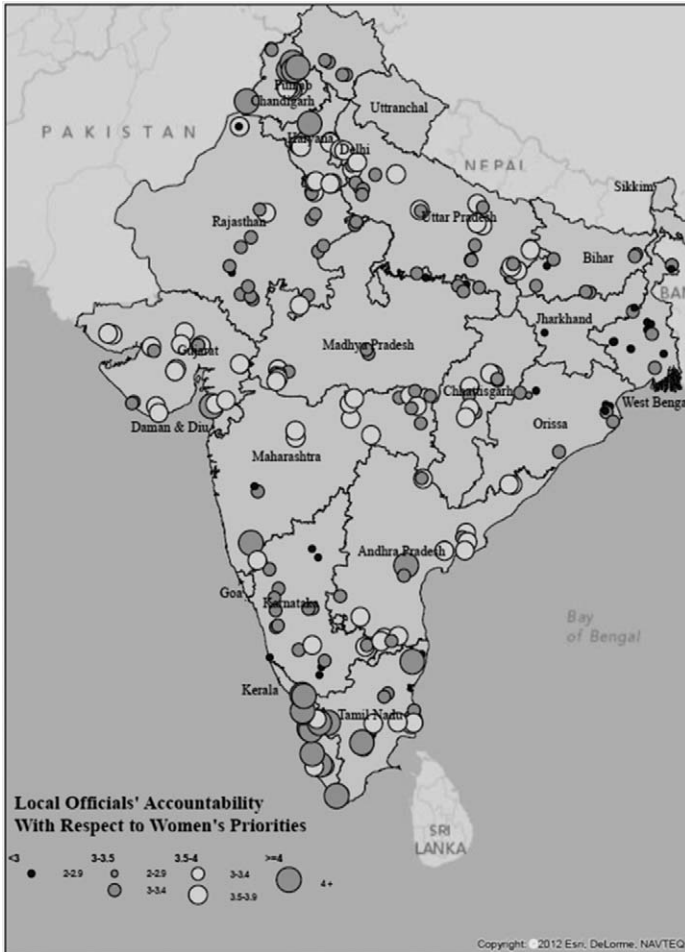
FIGURE 4. Local Officials' General Accountability, Village Averages



NOTE: Himachal Pradesh is the single unlabeled state with observations recorded in the far north. Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006). Geocoding by the author.

competition. The most promising evidence of electoral institutions' quality is based on survey respondents' subjective assessments of their freedom to vote for the candidate or party of their choice. Nearly 50% of respondents consider their vote choices to be completely free (Figure 3). Variation in village-level averages of general and context-specific accountability perceptions are displayed in Figures 4 and 5. In Figure 4, the shading of triangles indicates the

FIGURE 5. Local Officials’ Familial Accountability in Context, Village Averages



NOTE: Himachal Pradesh is the single unlabeled state with observations recorded in the far north. Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006). Geocoding by the author.

village-level average perceived ease of holding officials accountable using the general measure of accountability. Black indicates it is “impossible” to “quite difficult” to hold officials accountable (less than 3 on the 5-point scale); pale grey indicates the lower range of “relatively easy” (3–3.4); cream indicates responses that span the upper range of “relatively easy” to “very easy” (3.5–4); and dark grey indicates “no problem” (over 4). In Figure 5, dots’ shading

presents village-level accountability perceptions using the context-specific accountability measure. Here, black also indicates “impossible” to “quite difficult” (less than 3). Dark grey indicates the lower range of “relatively easy” (3–3.5), cream indicates the upper range of “relatively easy” to “very easy” (3.5–4), and light grey indicates “no problem” (over 4). By either measure, the highest accountability perceptions are clustered at the poles of North and South India. The wide range of accountability perceptions across these maps suggests that geography alone cannot explain the variation. Overall, the descriptive statistics indicate a remarkable diversity of accountability perceptions across space, social status, and both formal and informal institutions in contemporary rural India.

Accountability for All? A General Examination of Local Accountability

Three patterns emerge from Table 2’s regressions. First, traditional social institutions have distinct but limited dominance. *Some* markers of social status predict individuals’ perceived ease of holding local officials accountable. Second, exposure to educational institutions is positively correlated with increased accountability perceptions for men and women at the maximal accountability bar. Third, exposure to outside options via extra-village labor mobility reverses the traditional gender gap in accountability perceptions at the maximal accountability bar. This section explores these findings’ nature and significance.

To what extent do traditional social institutions influence individuals’ self-perceived ability to hold local officials accountable? Two markers of traditional social status are consistently associated with a greater perceived ease of holding officials accountable: male gender and parents’ landholding. Gender’s influence is most striking: women are 20% less likely than men to consider officials at least “relatively easy” to hold accountable (Table 2, columns 1–3). The mandatory inclusion of women in local government via the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution (Panchayati Raj Act) since 1993 and women’s growing electoral participation are potential tools for reducing gender gaps in accountability.³⁸ Despite improvements in women’s formal empowerment, gender is the most influential traditional social institution studied here.

38. For details of women’s electoral turnout until 1998, see Yogendra Yadav, “Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India’s Third Electoral System, 1989–99,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, nos. 34/35 (1999), pp. 2393–99.

TABLE 2. Perceptions of Local Officials' General Accountability

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Minimal</i> | <i>Maximal</i> |
| Female | -0.20*** (0.01) | -0.20*** (0.01) | -0.20*** (0.01) | -0.08*** (0.01) | -0.06*** (0.01) |
| Scheduled Caste | 0.00 (0.02) | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.01** (0.01) | 0.00 (0.01) |
| Scheduled Caste × female | -0.03 (0.02) | -0.03 (0.02) | -0.03 (0.02) | -0.00 (0.01) | -0.00 (0.01) |
| Muslim | -0.02 (0.04) | 0.01 (0.03) | 0.01 (0.03) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.02* (0.01) |
| Muslim × female | -0.03 (0.04) | -0.02 (0.04) | -0.02 (0.04) | 0.02 (0.02) | 0.02 (0.02) |
| Landed parents | 0.00 (0.01) | 0.03*** (0.01) | 0.03*** (0.01) | 0.01** (0.01) | 0.02*** (0.01) |
| Landed parents × female | 0.00 (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | 0.00 (0.01) | -0.02** (0.01) |
| Any education | | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.01) | -0.00 (0.01) | 0.05*** (0.01) |
| Any education × female | | 0.05*** (0.01) | 0.05*** (0.01) | 0.02** (0.01) | -0.03*** (0.01) |
| Labor mobility | | | 0.02 (0.04) | -0.01 (0.02) | -0.03 (0.02) |
| Labor mobility × female | | | 0.05 (0.10) | 0.04 (0.08) | 0.11*** (0.04) |
| Controls | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Cohort FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village trends | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Adj. R^2 | 0.05 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.11 |
| N | 22,876 | 22,876 | 22,876 | 22,876 | 22,876 |

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$. Robust standard errors with village clusters in parentheses. Any education is a binary indicator of completing at least one year of schooling. Labor mobility is a binary indicator of migration for work in the past year. Controls include grandmother's and grandfather's education (binary indicator of primary or higher education for each grandparent). Cohort fixed effects are time fixed effects for respondents' year of birth. Village trends are village-specific cohort fixed effects.

Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

Members of two historically marginalized groups, Scheduled Castes and Muslims, do not perceive themselves as significantly disadvantaged.³⁹ What Yadav calls the “participatory upsurge of the *shudras*” (socially marginalized groups) provides a possible explanation for this trend.⁴⁰ In this story, reforms of “*mandal*, *mandir*, and market” (caste, religious institutions, and market regulation) implemented between 1989 and 1991 created incentives for altering traditional political alliances. The results are twofold. A new political vocabulary uses the term *social justice* to address caste and communal (religious) problems of inequality, representation, and self-respect. A new set of parties and party alliances have mobilized around marginal groups, particularly Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes.⁴¹ Parties’ mobilization of Muslims has also increased in areas where Hindu nationalist campaigns emphasize communal differences.⁴² This suggests an important advantage that Scheduled Castes, and to a limited extent Muslims, possess relative to women as a political constituency: political parties’ explicit campaigns to mobilize and represent them.⁴³

The direction and magnitude of traditional social institutions’ impact are comparable across accountability bars. The advantages of land and male gender are clear in the first specification (Table 2, columns 1–3), which codes officials as accountable using the middle bar: those perceived as “relatively easy” or easier to hold accountable. The second specification (column 4) examines accountability perceptions using the minimal bar, i.e., including officials who are “quite difficult” to hold accountable. If all individuals consider themselves able to hold officials accountable to some degree, we would

39. In general, neither membership in a Scheduled Caste nor Muslim identity is a significant predictor of perceived ability to hold local officials accountable. Scheduled Castes perceive a slight advantage in holding officials accountable when the minimal bar is used; Muslims perceive a slight disadvantage when the maximal bar is used (Table 2, column 4).

40. Yadav, “Electoral Politics,” p. 2397.

41. Other Backward Castes are members of lower castes judged as “backward” by social, educational, and economic criteria. India’s Constitution (articles 15, 16) includes provisions for state-based support of backward classes, further developed by the Mandal Commission in 1980. On new parties and party alliances that benefit from Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes’ politicization, see Kanchan Chandra, “The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Hoshiarpur,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (2000), pp. 26–61; Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar, eds., *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009).

42. Mohd Sanjeer Alam, “Whither Muslim Politics?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009), pp. 92–95.

43. Singer, “A Constituency Suitable for Ladies.”

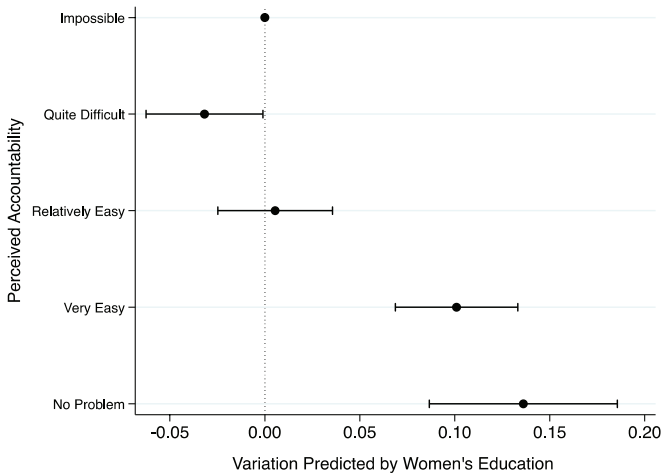
expect social status to be an insignificant predictor of variation for the “minimal” accountability specification. Indeed, the magnitude of coefficients for gender and parents’ landholding diminishes in column 4. Gender and parental landholdings’ continued significance shows that women and the landless perceive themselves as disadvantaged even at the minimum accountability standard.

The third specification (Table 2, column 5) examines the maximal bar of accountability, i.e., those who perceive “no problem” in holding officials accountable. If traditional social elites are the only individuals with perfectly unproblematic access to officials, this specification should show a particularly strong relationship between social status and accountability perceptions. The only relevant change with regard to social status is the disadvantage perceived by women relative to men from landed families. This disadvantage essentially neutralizes any advantage women might accrue from landholding parents. Two empirical trends in contemporary India explain this finding: patrilineal land inheritance and wealthier families’ more conservative views about gender roles relative to poorer families.⁴⁴ It follows that women from landed, wealthy families are most likely subject to traditional gender roles, including patrilineal inheritance norms that preclude women from inheriting familial wealth and from using familial wealth to engage in the public sphere. These findings highlight traditional social institutions’ enduring influence around gender.

Exposure to the progressive institution of education has the potential to alter traditional social institutions’ influence on accountability perceptions. Education may increase access to knowledge about three factors: the limits of local officials’ authority, individual and collective capacities for critical reflection about authorities’ actions, and the mechanisms by which individuals can engage and sanction local officials. If so, education should have a significant positive influence on accountability perceptions, particularly for women as a traditionally marginalized group. Indeed, exposure to educational institutions is consistently positively correlated with increased accountability perceptions for women when using the middle and minimal bars for accountability (Table 2, columns 2–4). At the middle bar for accountability, exposure to education is

44. On inheritance norms, see Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One’s Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On wealth and gender, see Sonia Bhalotra and Tom Cochrane, “Where Have All the Young Girls Gone? Identification of Sex Selection in India,” discussion paper no. 5381, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, 2010.

FIGURE 6. Variation in Accountability Perception predicted by Women's Education



Question: How easy is it for you to hold local officials accountable for the functions they are supposed to be performing? Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the coefficient of *women's education*. This is a binary variable where 1 indicates completion of any number of years of education, and 0 indicates none. Perceived accountability is coded on a scale from 1 (impossible) to 5 (no problem).

Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

correlated with a 5% increase in women's perceived ability to hold officials accountable. At the maximal bar for accountability, exposure to educational institutions exerts a net positive, significant influence for both women and men. This indicates that all individuals without any education perceive themselves as less able to hold officials highly accountable, relative to individuals with exposure to educational institutions. However, at the maximal bar for accountability, education has lower marginal returns for women than men. Figure 6 explores educational exposure's specific impact on women. Exposure to education is strongly correlated with women's perceived agency at the highest two levels of accountability ("very easy" or "no problem" to hold local officials accountable). It is notable that our minimal measure of any exposure to educational institutions makes women 7–18% more likely to perceive themselves as very able to hold local officials accountable.

Exposure to the progressive institution of labor mobility increases individuals' perceived ability to hold officials accountable. Hirschman's classic theory of accountability suggests that labor mobility is an important opportunity for individuals to mobilize outside resources for greater "voice" within

their village and to have the option to “exit” their village—with its associated social, economic, and political constraints.⁴⁵ The labor mobility captured in REDS—temporary migration for work within the past year—may increase individuals’ income and exposure to outside power structures and strategies for negotiating them. If temporary migrants remain engaged in their home village, we can expect them to have greater perceived leverage than non-migrants in holding local officials accountable.⁴⁶ For women, we can expect migration to have an additional impact on accountability perceptions. Labor mobility provides women in particular with experiences and material resources that they are unlikely to acquire within the village. This enables them to use nontraditional strategies of engagement in the public sphere.⁴⁷

To what extent does exposure to the progressive institution of extra-village labor mobility influence accountability perceptions? When using the middle and minimal accountability bars, labor mobility is an insignificant predictor of perceptions (Table 2, columns 3-4). In other words, extra-village labor migration does not provide individuals with resources that increase their perceived ability to hold officials accountable at the *lower end* of the accountability spectrum.

However, labor mobility has a dramatic impact on women’s perceptions at the maximal accountability bar (Table 2, column 5). While labor mobility does not alter men’s perceptions, women with extra-village labor mobility are 11 percentage points *more* likely to perceive officials as “no problem” to hold accountable. This supports findings from other countries of female migrants’ greater political participation.⁴⁸

45. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*.

46. Migration’s net impact on village-level engagement depends on which phenomenon dominates: temporary versus long-term migration. Due to survey data constraints, this article’s analysis is limited to temporary migration. Permanent migration should have a distinct effect if it involves disengaging from one’s home village in favor of investment in one’s destination village. If so, migration is likely to diminish individual perceptions of efficacy in one’s home village.

47. On traditional social institutions and gender constraints, see Erica Field, Seema Jayachandran, and Rohini Pande, “Do Traditional Institutions Constrain Female Entrepreneurship? A Field Experiment on Business Training in India,” *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings* 100, no. 2 (2010), pp. 125–29. On mobility and empowerment, see Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch, eds., *Moving out of Poverty: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Mobility* (Washington, DC: Palgrave Macmillan and World Bank, 2007); Vinay Gidwani and K. Sivaramakrishnan, “Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37, nos. 1-2 (2003), pp. 339–67.

48. M. Jones-Correa, “Different Paths: Gender, Immigration and Political Participation,” *International Migration Review* 32, no. 2 (1998), pp. 326–49.

How exactly do the perceptions of women exposed to extra-village labor mobility vary across perceived levels of accountability? At the highest level of perceived accountability (“no problem” to hold officials accountable), women’s exposure to extra-village labor mobility is significantly greater than zero. Once regressions account for additional sources of traditional disadvantage, labor migration actually reverses the gender gap. Exposure to migration makes women 5% more likely than men to perceive officials as highly responsive. It bears emphasizing that temporary migration is the only factor to reverse the gender gap in individuals’ accountability perceptions. Exposure to progressive institutions of extra-village labor mobility has dramatically different influences for women versus men: it is correlated with significantly higher perceptions of maximal ability to hold officials accountable among women versus lower perceptions, albeit insignificantly so, among men. The causal mechanism may be due to the uniquely high intra-village benefits that mobility confers on women. For women, the material and strategic resources temporary labor mobility confers present unparalleled opportunities to directly engage political officials *within* their village. For men, labor mobility offers a third, relatively low-cost option: exit from the village. If this conjecture is correct, labor mobility makes local political disengagement and engagement equally attractive to men, whereas it makes engagement *significantly more* attractive to women.

Overall, analysis of general accountability perceptions shows that exposure to progressive institutions of education and extra-village labor mobility can reduce and even reverse traditional social institutions’ influence. At the highest standard of “maximal” accountability, the persistent gender gap in perceived accountability reverses for those exposed to extra-village labor mobility. These findings leave three big questions unanswered: What are the issues on which individuals demand local officials’ accountability? Who specifically is being held accountable? And how do individuals hold officials accountable? The next two sections address these questions.

Accountability in Context: Holding Local Officials Accountable to Familial Concerns
 REDS allows analysis of a specific elected official’s accountability for one concrete task. This task is framed as requiring the husband’s and wife’s joint effort. Additionally, the survey question is nested in a series of hypothetical scenarios about events in the respondent’s village. The full text is given on page 917 as well as below Figure 2. In the scenario, a mother is concerned

about the quality of publicly provided meals at school after they make her son sick. She complains to the school and is told to approach the *pradhan*, who is the local official responsible for managing the problem and its resolution. The woman asks her husband to approach the *pradhan*. Using the same language as the first accountability measure, the question then asks: “How easy is it for Lakshmi [the wife] to hold the local officials accountable for performing their functions?” The question’s context gives us a concrete framework for assessing accountability: the issue of relevance is child health, the official accountable is the *pradhan*, and the mechanism for holding officials accountable is husbands’ and wives’ complaints.

We might expect this context to skew assessments of officials’ accountability either positively or negatively. The context may push assessments to be more positive than the “general” measure of accountability if any of the following conditions hold: child health is perceived as a universal concern with significant reputational or electoral penalties for official inaction; *pradhans* are the most influential local officials with the clearest procedures for accountability; or officials are perceived as easier to hold accountable when individuals act as a married couple versus singly. Alternately, the context may shift assessments to be more negative if child health is widely considered a low priority; if *pradhans* are more unresponsive than most local officials; or if the requisite coordination between husbands and wives makes it harder for individuals to engage local officials.

Research on individuals’ engagement with the local Indian state suggests that the *pradhan*, the official most frequently approached for assistance, is indeed the appropriate official for gauging accountability.⁴⁹ In addition, public health campaigns’ national success in mobilizing families for child vaccination suggests that child health concerns are indeed universal.⁵⁰ The framework of familial coordination to hold local officials accountable also accords with the author’s observations of typical forms of engagement with public officials over two years of research centered in rural Andhra Pradesh.

49. Kruks-Wisner, “How Rural India Negotiates with the State”; Jennifer Bussell, *Corruption and Reform in India: Public Services in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

50. Following India’s successful eradication of polio as of March 27, 2014, it is refocusing on another childhood disease: measles. See Michaelen Doucleff, “After Ending Polio, India Turns to Stop Another Childhood Killer,” NPR, March 30, 2014, <www.npr.org/blogs/health/2014/03/30/262730420/ending-polio-paves-the-way-for-india-to-stop-a-childhood-killer>.

Cumulatively, this evidence suggests that the frame for this question is both plausible and appropriate.

A comparison of the histograms in Figure 2 versus Figure 1 suggests that the second question's specific context—familial concerns about child health directed toward *pradhans*—makes accountability assessments more positive. Respondents are more than twice as likely to rank local officials as “no problem” to hold accountable within this context (Figure 2) as opposed to without it (Figure 1). The precise mechanism for this shift is unclear given the complex frame: the specific issue (child health), official (*pradhan*), and accountability mechanism (husbands' action prompted by wives) all vary, and any one or a combination of these changes may alter accountability perceptions.

Who is able to hold *pradhans* accountable for familial concerns about child health? Traditional social institutions' dominance is evident for one traditional marker of economic and social status: parental landholding. Individuals whose parents own land are more likely to perceive officials as accountable than those whose parents are landless. In contrast, religion is not a significant predictor of variation: Muslims' accountability perceptions are not significantly different from other groups.⁵¹ The gender gap in perceptions is the most consistent finding across accountability bars: women are 9–10% less likely than men to perceive officials as accountable at middle and maximal bars (Table 2, columns 1–3 and 5).

As with the general measure of accountability, traditional social institutions' ability to predict accountability perceptions diminishes when using the minimal bar for accountability. Gender and parental landholdings remain significant predictors of variation, but their coefficients' magnitude is reduced by half when using the minimal versus the middle accountability bar (Table 3, column 4 versus 3). At the maximal accountability bar, the gender gap in accountability perceptions nearly doubles when using the concrete versus general context (column 5 in Table 3 versus Table 2). Familial coordination may significantly disadvantage women in directly accessing *pradhans*. If so, we would expect women's accountability perceptions to be lower given this question's frame, which does not allow women the option of directly approaching

51. Understanding Scheduled Caste's influence is more complicated. SCs are 2% more likely than non-SCs to perceive *pradhans* as accountable when using the minimal accountability bar. At the maximal accountability bar, SC men are 3% less likely to perceive officials as accountable, but this disadvantage disappears for women.

TABLE 3. Perceptions of Local Officials' Familial Accountability in Context

| | (1) <i>Middle +</i> | (2) <i>Middle +</i> | (3) <i>Middle +</i> | (4) <i>Minimal</i> | (5) <i>Maximal</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Female | -0.09*** (0.01) | -0.09*** (0.01) | -0.09*** (0.01) | -0.04*** (0.01) | -0.10*** (0.01) |
| Scheduled Caste | -0.04*** (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | 0.02** (0.01) | -0.03** (0.01) |
| Scheduled Caste × female | 0.02 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.02) | 0.01 (0.02) | -0.01 (0.01) | 0.03** (0.01) |
| Muslim | 0.01 (0.03) | 0.01 (0.02) | 0.01 (0.02) | 0.00 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.02) |
| Muslim × female | -0.00 (0.02) | -0.00 (0.02) | -0.00 (0.02) | -0.00 (0.01) | -0.03 (0.02) |
| Landed parents | -0.01 (0.01) | 0.02** (0.01) | 0.02** (0.01) | 0.01* (0.00) | 0.02** (0.01) |
| Landed parents × female | 0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.03** (0.01) |
| Any education | | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) |
| Any education × female | | 0.04*** (0.01) | 0.04*** (0.01) | 0.02*** (0.01) | 0.00 (0.01) |
| Labor mobility | | | 0.03 (0.04) | 0.03* (0.01) | -0.02 (0.04) |
| Labor mobility × female | | | -0.09 (0.10) | -0.00 (0.06) | 0.04 (0.06) |
| Controls | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Cohort FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village trends | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Adj. R^2 | 0.01 | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.06 | 0.11 |
| N | 22,860 | 22,860 | 22,860 | 22,860 | 22,860 |

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$. Robust standard errors with village clusters in parentheses. Any education is a binary indicator of completing at least one year of schooling. Labor mobility is a binary indicator of migration for work in the past year. Controls include grandmother's and grandfather's education (binary indicator of primary or higher education for each grandparent). Cohort fixed effects are time fixed effects for respondents' year of birth. Village trends are village-specific cohort fixed effects.

Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

the *pradhan*. An alternative explanation is that this question emphasizes the popular perception of *pradhans* as less willing or able than other officials to speak directly with women.⁵²

Does exposure to the progressive institution of education influence accountability perceptions in the context of familial concerns about child health? Men's exposure to education is an insignificant predictor of accountability perceptions at all bars (Table 3, columns 1–5). It is possible that the context of child health is clear and powerful enough to make education an insignificant tool for men, as the socially privileged gender. In contrast, women's exposure to education has a significant positive relationship with perceived ability to hold officials accountable across all but the maximal accountability bar (Table 3, columns 2–4). This suggests that exposure to education can narrow the gender gap in accountability perceptions, even when wives must rely on husbands to directly approach local officials and demand accountability.

Can *individual* exposure to extra-village labor mobility alter accountability perceptions when the context is *families'* concerns about child health? In a pattern roughly similar to general accountability, men's exposure to labor migration does not significantly influence perceived ability to hold officials accountable at the middle and maximal bars (Table 3, columns 3 and 5). However, men's migration is significantly, positively tied to men's perception of efficacy at the minimal accountability bar (Table 3, column 4). This may be due to the issue at stake: a universal concern explicitly supported by one's wife. In contrast, women's labor migration has no significant impact in this concrete context (Table 3, columns 3–5). If labor mobility advantages women by increasing their ability to directly engage local officials, the question's emphasis on husbands' interaction with *pradhans* might nullify this advantage. Additionally, discussion of the husband's role may prime female respondents to assess accountability according to traditional, gender-inegalitarian social norms.

Overall, the analysis of accountability in context illuminates the perceived difficulty of holding a visible elected official—the *pradhan*—accountable for a widely prioritized problem (child health) via a popular mechanism, familial

52. On concerns that *pradhan* decision-making remains an all-male domain despite quotas for women's election, see L. Beaman et al., "Political Reservation and Substantive Reservation: Evidence from Indian Village Councils," *India Policy Forum* 7 (2010–11), pp. 159–91.

coordination. As in the general question about accountability, traditional social institutions of gender and land-based wealth explain a great deal of the variation in individuals' accountability perceptions. Exposure to education reduces the gender gap in perceptions, but women accrue no additional benefits via exposure to extra-village labor mobility. The question's context, which emphasizes the husband's traditional role of approaching the *pradhan*, may explain why women's mobility is an insignificant resource. Mobility may only advantage women when they have the option to demand officials' accountability directly.

Electoral Accountability: Voting Freedom

A final set of regressions considers an alternative measure of accountability: perceptions of individuals' voting freedom. Elections are frequently studied as sources of electoral accountability, despite two challenges: elections' infrequency and electoral incentives' likelihood of biasing politicians to focus on achieving only short-term, observable goals.⁵³ These studies generally rely on a debatable assumption: that individuals express their political preferences freely as electoral voters. In fact, individuals' vote choices may be limited due to either voter intimidation or reliance on patron-client relationships, which reduces voters' autonomy, as clients are obliged to vote for patrons.⁵⁴ To get a rough sense of individual voting constraints, the article analyzes a REDS question that asks: "How free are you to vote for the party or candidate of your choice?" Possible responses range from 1 ("not free") to 5 ("completely free"), similar to prior accountability measures.

The freedom to vote is a prerequisite for officials' accountability to citizens. Where voters cannot freely sanction local officials, officials may not have incentives to consider their constituents' daily complaints. For this reason, we focus on variation in individual perceptions of electoral accountability at the maximal bar, where voting choices are "completely free" (Table 4, column 5). Electoral accountability is meaningful in large part because electoral institutions are designed to be impersonal. If votes are anonymous, accurately recorded, and counted equally, neither traditional social institutions nor exposure to progressive institutions should predict variation in electoral accountability perceptions. Table 4 presents evidence of traditional institutions' limited

53. Ashworth, "Electoral Accountability."

54. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*.

TABLE 4. Perceptions of Local Officials' Electoral Accountability: Voting Freedom

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Middle +</i> | <i>Minimal</i> | <i>Maximal</i> |
| Female | -0.10*** (0.02) | -0.12*** (0.02) | -0.12*** (0.02) | -0.03*** (0.01) | -0.31*** (0.02) |
| Scheduled Caste | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | 0.00 (0.00) | -0.00 (0.01) |
| Scheduled Caste × female | 0.01 (0.02) | 0.02 (0.02) | 0.02 (0.02) | -0.00 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.02) |
| Muslim | -0.03 (0.03) | -0.01 (0.02) | -0.01 (0.02) | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.03 (0.03) |
| Muslim × female | 0.03 (0.03) | 0.02 (0.04) | 0.02 (0.04) | 0.02* (0.01) | 0.07 (0.05) |
| Landed parents | 0.00 (0.01) | -0.02** (0.01) | -0.02** (0.01) | -0.01*** (0.00) | 0.02* (0.01) |
| Landed parents × female | 0.02** (0.01) | 0.04*** (0.01) | 0.04*** (0.01) | 0.02*** (0.01) | -0.04*** (0.02) |
| Any education | | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.01* (0.01) | 0.00** (0.00) | 0.01 (0.01) |
| Any education × female | | 0.03** (0.01) | 0.03** (0.01) | -0.00 (0.00) | 0.05** (0.02) |
| Labor mobility | | | -0.04* (0.02) | 0.00 (0.00) | 0.01 (0.04) |
| Labor mobility × female | | | 0.04 (0.06) | -0.05 (0.04) | 0.11** (0.06) |
| Controls | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Cohort FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Village trends | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Adj. R^2 | 0.03 | 0.29 | 0.29 | 0.15 | 0.42 |
| N | 22,863 | 22,863 | 22,863 | 22,863 | 22,863 |

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$. Robust standard errors with village clusters in parentheses. Any education is a binary indicator of completing at least one year of schooling. Labor mobility is a binary indicator of migration for work in the past year. Controls include grandmother's and grandfather's education (binary indicator of primary or higher education for each grandparent). Cohort fixed effects are time fixed effects for respondents' year of birth. Village trends are village-specific cohort fixed effects.

Data source: National Council of Applied Economics, *Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, 2006 Panel* (New Delhi: NCAER, 2006).

influence over voting freedom, which broadly follows the patterns seen under the prior measures of accountability. However, as in the prior specifications, two markers of traditional social status predict significant variation in accountability perceptions: gender and parental landholdings. Neither Scheduled Caste nor Muslim identity predicts significant disadvantages in perceived accountability.⁵⁵

The gender gap explains the greatest variation in perceived voter freedom: women are 31% less likely than men to consider themselves “completely free” to vote for the candidate or party of their choice. Parents’ landholding status magnifies the gender gap, and is associated with a 4% decline in women’s perceived ability to hold officials accountable. As in prior specifications, exposure to progressive institutions improves women’s perceptions of officials’ electoral accountability. Women’s exposure to educational institutions is correlated with a 5% improvement in perceived voting freedom; exposure to extra-village labor mobility is correlated with an 11% reduction of women’s perceived disadvantages in voting freedom.

Overall, these results suggest that women perceive a large, significant disadvantage in voting freely relative to men. This pattern is unsurprising given the persistent disadvantage women face in their perceived ability to hold local officials accountable. The sheer magnitude of women’s perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis men—31%—when using the accountability mechanism designed to be the most impersonal and widely accessible—voting—suggests a strong case for further research into gender and political accountability. Muslim women’s ability to reduce the gender gap in perceived voting freedom at the minimal accountability bar (Table 4, column 4) presents a puzzle for future analysis.⁵⁶ The consistently positive, significant relationship between exposure to progressive institutions, particularly education, and women’s perceived efficacy in accountability processes is encouraging. Yet the small magnitude of its coefficient (2–5%) suggests that even women with educational

55. Muslim identity is a significant predictor for men. When using the minimal bar for accountability (Table 4, column 4), Muslim women have a small, significant advantage in perceived accountability relative to Muslim men. Muslim women remain at a disadvantage relative to non-Muslim men.

56. In Turkey, Meyersson finds Muslim women’s political participation responsive to “pragmatic [religious] policies facilitating female education.” The mix of formal and informal policies by and for India’s religious communities suggests great potential for variation in women’s empowerment and participation across and within communities. Erik Meyersson, “Islamic Rule and the Empowerment of the Poor and Pious,” *Econometrica* 82 (2014), pp. 229–69.

resources perceive significant challenges to holding officials accountable. These findings highlight the need for more research into individual-level variation in the reach and efficacy of institutions meant to ensure local officials' accountability in daily life and around elections. Indeed, exposure to progressive institutions such as labor migration may provide one means of altering enduring household-level constraints' on women's political participation.⁵⁷

CONCLUSIONS

This article's main contention is that variation in individuals' perceived ability to engage elected officials is an important dimension of the state's accountability to its citizens. Variation in accountability at this micro level determines individual opportunities to exercise political agency, which is a particularly important form of power for vulnerable citizens and communities.

We studied three institutions within Indian villages that determine accountability perceptions: traditional social institutions such as gender, caste, and religion; impersonal political institutions; and progressive institutions, including exposure to education and labor mobility. We find that traditional institutions, particularly around gender, continue to dominate the daily practice of local governance in rural India.⁵⁸ Yet the results of our analysis also provide room for hope: women's exposure to education reduces the traditional gender gap in perceptions of political accountability, and labor mobility may even reverse it. These findings contribute to a growing body of research investigating political institutions' role in the daily practice of local governance and progressive institutions' ability to challenge and remake inequalitarian social norms.

57. On household constraints' influence over women's participation, see Pradeep Chhibber, "Why Some Women are Politically Active: The Household, Public Space, and Political Participation in India," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43, nos. 3–5 (2002), pp. 409–29.

58. Despite the dominance of gender as a traditional institution, neither membership in a Scheduled Caste nor Muslim religious identity are significant sources of perceived disadvantage for accountability perceptions.