

The Electoral Participation of Women

Abstract

The women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and the state legislatures for women, is yet to become law despite being passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010 itself. Other pending reforms to the electoral system include the Constitution (110th Amendment) Bill for reserving half the seats in panchayats for women and the Constitution (112th Amendment) Bill reserving one-third of elected seats in municipalities for women. Will such changes to India's electoral democracy in fact benefit women as a whole? How can women's political representation be increased? In this essay, I provide some answers to these questions, based on rigorous empirical research.

Keywords : Women Researvation, Election, Legislatures

Introduction

In this context, we should remember that India has a poor record on the treatment of women. The United Nations ranked India 134th out of 187 countries in its 2012 Gender Inequality Index. Several statistics bolster this fact. The 2011 population census of India shows only 940 women per 1000 men, a result of selective abortion, female infanticide and neglect of girl children. Only 65 per cent* of women were literate, compared to 82 per cent of men. Several recent cases of horrific sexual assaults have rightly generated a sense of outrage among Indian citizens. India's crime statistics recorded 2,28,650 First Information Reports (FIR) registered for rapes in 2012 or a rate of 0.39 rapes per 1000 women, which is much lower than the 0.54 rapes per 1000 women reported in the United States. This is most likely a result of many crimes against women not being registered, either because the victims do not approach the police or because the police refused to register FIRs for gender-based crimes. For instance, rape cases are often characterized by policemen as cases of consensual sex, and kidnapping cases are not registered if policemen are of the opinion that the woman has eloped. A study in the state of Rajasthan found that only 50 per cent of sexual harassment cases and 53 per cent of domestic violence cases were registered by the police and that too when a male relative tried to report it on behalf of a female victim (Banerjee et. al., 2012). On the other hand, India also boasts of having the largest number of elected women representatives in the world, thanks to the 1993 Panchayati Raj constitutional amendment. This mandated that all states had to constitute directly elected councils at the village, intermediate and district levels (panchayats, panchayat samitis and zila parishads, collectively known as Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs). Further, one-third of all seats in these councils, and one-third of chairperson positions, were to be reserved for women. This is a dramatic increase in the representation of women in political office. By comparison, in a setting in which there are no quotas for women, only 5.9 per cent of Vidhan Sabha members over the past three decades have been women.

How does the increased political representation of women affect crimes against women? To find out, my coauthors and I leveraged the fact that different states in India conducted Panchayati Raj elections at different time periods. For instance, West Bengal instituted the 33 per cent reservation for women in the 1993 Panchayat elections, even before the constitutional amendment was officially in force. But Bihar conducted its first Panchayati Raj election only in 2001, since a lawsuit had been filed regarding the representation of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs).

We compared crimes against women in each state before and after the elections which elected women in large numbers to the PRIs, using data from the National Crime Records Bureau. We found, to our initial surprise, a large increase of 26 per cent in the documented crimes against women after the increased political representation of women. This included an 11 per cent increase in the number of reported rapes and a 12 per cent increase in the kidnappings of women. Notes: Crime data obtained from annual Crime in India publications of the National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi. Crime incidence is measured as number of crimes per 1000

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population (gender-specific population for gender-specific crimes). Total crimes against women includes rape, kidnapping of women and girls, dowry deaths, sexual harassment, molestation, cruelty by husbands or relatives, importation of women and girls, prostitution, pornography, giving and receiving dowry and sati (widow-burning). Results control for demographic characteristics, real per capita state GDP, policy strength per capita, state and year fixed effects and state-specific time trends.

Could this simply be the result of electing relatively inexperienced women leaders and a consequent decline in law and order? This does not appear to be the case. We do not see any similar increases in crimes where the victims are men (such as kidnapping, which is reported for men and women separately), or crimes which are gender neutral (such as property crimes). More tellingly, we also do not see any increases in murder rates after the implementation of Panchayati Raj—the crime category where under-reporting is least likely to be a problem. In fact, we see decreases in the incidents of all these crime categories (Figure 2).

Notes: Crime data obtained from annual Crime in India publications of the National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi. Crime incidence is measured as number of crimes per 1000 population (gender-specific population for gender-specific crimes). Results control for demographic characteristics, real per capita state GDP, policy strength per capita, state and year fixed effects and state-specific time trends. The fact of increased reporting of crime, rather than an actual rise in crimes against women, is corroborated by our analysis of an individual crime victimization survey conducted in Rajasthan, in which women are asked if they have been the victims of a crime in the past two years.¹ There is no difference in crime victimization rates between places which have panchayats headed by women and those which do not. But women in villages with women-headed panchayats are significantly more likely to say that they will approach the police if they are the victims of a crime—an effect not seen for the male respondents in the survey.

Women in villages with female panchayat heads reported greater satisfaction with the police and a lesser likelihood of being asked to pay bribes. Again, there was no difference in the experience of men. Most importantly, we find that arrests for crimes against women increased by 31 per cent in a state after Panchayati Raj elections were held, particularly for the kidnapping of women. This is an important first step towards obtaining justice for these crimes.

We find evidence that police behavior is also changed by the presence of local women leaders. A nationwide survey assessed actual interactions of women and men with the police.² Women in villages with female panchayat heads reported greater satisfaction with the police and a lesser likelihood of being asked to pay bribes. Again, there was no difference in the experience of men. Most importantly, we find that arrests for crimes against women increased by 31 per cent in a state after Panchayati Raj elections were held, particularly for the kidnapping of women. This is an important first step

towards obtaining justice for these crimes. This result is particularly notable because the PRIs do not have any formal authority over the police. Law and order is not among the list of functions to be devolved to PRIs, and decisions on police budgets and staffing are decided by the state government.

Several other studies find that elected women to political office results in benefits not just to women, but to society as a whole. Having more women in Indian state legislatures leads to improvements in infant mortality rates (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras, 2013) and primary school completion (Clots-Figueras, 2013); a similar result is observed in Brazil, where female mayors act to reduce infant mortality rates (Brollo and Troiano, 2012).

Given these positive results, it is important to understand why there are so few elected women representatives in the first place, and what measures can be put in place to ensure women's greater representation. We should note that women's participation as voters has increased dramatically over time. In the 1962 Lok Sabha elections, women's voter turnout was only 46.6 per cent compared to 63.3 per cent of men. In the most recent 2014 Lok Sabha elections, women's voter turnout was only 1.46 per cent lower than that of men. In fact, more women than men turned out to vote in nine states/UTs. However, women's representation in the Lok Sabha has only increased from 6.3 per cent in 1962 to 11.3 per cent in 2014.

An important barrier to women's political representation is women's participation as political candidates. Using data from Vidhan Sabha elections over the period 1980-2013,¹ we find that only 5.9 per cent of India's state legislators were women. But only 4.7 per cent of election candidates were women. In other words, conditional upon becoming a candidate, women have a slightly higher probability to win elections compared to men. Research from the United States suggests that women are much less likely to view themselves as viable political candidates, and much more likely to view politics as an extremely competitive field. Furthermore, women are very rarely encouraged by others (peers, mentors, party activists, party leaders) to put themselves forward as political candidates (Lawless and Fox, 2010).

What might hold back women from political candidacy in India? Based on interviews with politicians from several political parties, we find that the primary criterion for being chosen as a candidate appears to be "winnability" or the ability to win the election, for which name recognition, party service, financial resources, caste identity and internal party support are all considered relevant. If "winnability" is the relevant criterion, perhaps observing a woman actually winning a competitive election will open the door to more women candidates in subsequent elections. Does this happen in practice?

My coauthors and I compared the presence of women candidates in Vidhan Sabha elections in constituencies where women had won the previous election and in those where women had lost the previous ...the primary criterion for being chosen as a candidate appears to be "win ability" or the ability to

win the election, for which name recognition, party service, financial resources, caste identity and internal party support are all considered relevant. If "win ability" is the relevant criterion, perhaps observing a woman actually winning a competitive election will open the door to more women candidates in subsequent elections. election (Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras and Iyer, 2013). Of course, places where women won elections are likely to be different in many ways from places without a woman winner. For instance, they might be more women-friendly in general, or have higher level of education. So to examine the pure impact of the woman winning, we focus on close elections between men and women candidates, where the margin of victory was less than 5percent of total votes cast. The idea is that such places are likely to be similar along many dimensions, and that the outcomes of close elections are decided by many somewhat random factors.

We find that the victory of a-woman in an election increases the likelihood of having woman candidates in the subsequent election. (Table 1). Constituencies in which a woman wins a close election have a 79per cent probability of having a woman candidate in the subsequent election, while constituencies where a woman candidate narrowly lost the election have only a 62per cent probability of having a woman candidate. This difference is statistically significant at the 5per cent level of significance.⁴Consistent with this, the share of major party candidates who are women increases from 19.5 per cent to 28.5 per cent when a woman wins a close election, compared to cases where a man wins the close election.

We should note that this increased probability of having a woman candidate is primarily driven by the woman winner from the previous election contesting for re-election. We see that the share of new female candidates remains unchanged at 4.8 per cent, regardless of whether a man or a woman wins the election. And there is only a very small increase in the share of women among independent candidates, suggesting that observing a woman's electoral victory does not lead to a large-scale participation of women in the political process.

Does a woman's electoral victory change women's chances of winning the next election? This does not appear to be the case. Women are 6 per centage points less likely to win the next election, even after winning the current one (though the difference is not statistically significant i.e. could have occurred purely by chance). There is also no difference in voter turnout, of men or women, following a woman's electoral victory.

As discussed above, the "demonstration" effect of a woman's electoral victory does not extend to changing voter behavior, or encouraging the entry of new women into the political process as a whole. A natural question then arises: in the absence of directly reserved seats for women at the Vidhan Sabha level, how can women's political presence as candidates be increased? Can existing electoral reforms at lower levels of governance, in particular, the Panchayati Raj reforms, play a role in increasing women's representation at higher levels?

I examined the share of women candidates in Vidhan Sabha elections held before and after each state had held elections under the Panchayati Raj rules, similar to the approach used in assessing the effects of the Panchayati Raj on crimes against women. I find that the share of women among political candidates among national parties at the Vidhan Sabha level increases by 1.43 per centage points after the Panchayati Raj provisions are implemented. The increase is still significant at 1.2 per centage points when major state and regional parties are included, but declines to a statistically insignificant 0.74 per centage points when all parties and independent candidates are taken into account. Importantly, about 35 per cent of the increase in political candidacy among national parties, and 46 per cent of the increase among national and major state parties, is driven by an increase in the share of new women candidates i.e. those who did not contest the previous election (Figure 3). These results mean that electoral reforms targeted at one level of government can have effects on the progress made by women at other levels too.

To summarize, our analysis of electoral reforms in India indicates that having more women in political office can have a very important effect on outcomes such as crimes against women. The current level of under-representation of women is also...our analysis of electoral reforms in India indicates that having more women in political office can have a very important effect on outcomes such as crimes against women. The current level of under-representation of women is also inconsistent with the principles of representative democracy. Research also shows that the key barrier to women's representation is their involvement in electoral politics as candidates, and that demonstrated electoral success by women does not spur entry by new candidates inconsistent with the principles of representative democracy. Research also shows that the key barrier to women's representation is their involvement in electoral politics as candidates, and that demonstrated electoral success by women does not spur entry by new candidates. Several questions nevertheless remain to be answered. Can women-friendly policies ("substantive representation" of women's interests) be achieved even if women are not themselves elected to office? How can parties be encouraged to field more women candidates? And how can a political career be made more attractive/ welcoming to women? Pipeline quotas, such as the Panchayati Raj reforms, are a step in the right direction but more needs to be done to address both the political under-representation and the socio-economic disadvantages faced by women in India.

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 12. J-PAL Indian Crime Survey conducted by Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; see Banerjee et. al. (2012) for details.
 13. Millennial Survey conducted by the Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore.
 14. Many other studies find, in India and other countries, that electing women to political office changes spending priorities towards areas preferred by women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Rehavi, 2012).