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# The Gendered Urban Disadvantage: How Place Shapes Women’s Political Participation in Pakistan \*

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## Abstract

How do urban contexts shape women’s voter participation? Using gender-disaggregated electoral returns from Pakistan’s 2018 national election, we document a striking pattern: women in urban areas vote at substantially lower rates than their rural counterparts, despite having higher education, greater household decision-making power, and lower dependency burdens. We term this pattern the gendered urban disadvantage in voter turnout. Drawing on election returns from more than 78,000 polling stations, we show that turnout declines in urban areas for both men and women, but significantly more for women, resulting in a larger gender gap in urban areas. This pattern is robust across specifications and persists in matched comparisons of male and female polling stations serving the same electoral catchment areas, which hold many local contextual factors constant. The disadvantage is especially pronounced in large metropolitan constituencies. To interpret these findings, we propose three mechanisms: gendered patterns of partisan mobilization, constraints on women’s mobility, and intra-household divergence in political preferences. Together, these mechanisms highlight how urban environments can weaken forms of collective and family-based mobilization while leaving gendered constraints on participation intact. Our findings challenge conventional expectations that urbanization promotes gender equality in political participation and underscore the importance of place in shaping democratic inclusion in the Global South.

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## Introduction

The urbanization of low-income countries is one of the most significant structural transformations of the 21st century. The United Nations projects that more than half of the expected 986 million increase in the global urban population by 2050 will be concentrated in just seven countries: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia (United Nations, 2024). As Global South populations concentrate in cities, scholars and policymakers have increasingly asked how urban contexts transform economic opportunity, social relations, and political participation. A common expectation is that urbanization may promote greater gender equality insofar as cities provide women with expanded access to education, labour markets, information, and political networks (Lerner, 1958; Lipset, 1959; Muñoz et al., 2013), and contribute to the erosion of social norms that prescribe traditional gender roles for men and women (Cinar and Ugur-Cinar, 2018; Evans, 2019).

This paper demonstrates that the relationship between urbanization and women’s political participation may be more complex. Using gender-disaggregated electoral returns from Pakistan’s 2018 national election, we document a striking pattern: women in urban areas turn out to vote at substantially lower rates than their rural counterparts. In 2018, the magnitude of the gap between urban and rural women’s turnout ranged from 5.6 to 9 percentage points: comparable to the overall national gap between men and women’s rates of voter turnout that election year. We term this pattern the **gendered urban disadvantage** in electoral participation. We find that this pattern is consistent across subnational units (provinces), despite substantial variation in baseline turnout levels and gender gaps across regional contexts.

These findings present a puzzle for existing theories of urbanization and women’s political participation. Classic modernization theory suggests that urbanization should increase overall political participation by improving citizens’ access to resources, lowering the costs of collective action, and exposing individuals to more diverse information and ideas (Lerner, 1958; Lipset, 1959; Glaeser and Steinberg, 2017). A related literature argues that urbanization may contribute to the erosion of gender inequality by expanding women’s access to education, employment opportunities, and public life (Muñoz et al., 2013; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Chung and Gupta, 2007; Evans, 2019; Giddings and Hovorka, 2010). Together, these literatures point to an expectation of higher

political participation among urban women, a pattern observed in aggregate voter participation data from Western Europe (Teele, 2024). Using early twentieth-century Swedish data, Teele (2024) shows that women’s turnout was indeed higher in urban settings and that women comprised a larger share of the electorate in cities than in rural areas. Women in urban Pakistan have higher educational attainment, marry later, live in households with lower dependency ratios, and report greater decision-making power within the household. These are all characteristics that existing research identifies as factors associated with greater political participation among women, including in South Asian contexts such as India (Brulé and Gaikwad, 2021; Carpena and Jensenius, 2021). Yet we observe the opposite: women’s turnout is systematically lower in urban areas, especially so in large metropolitan cities.

To interpret this puzzle, we highlight a set of plausible mechanisms that may help explain why women’s electoral participation is lower in urban Pakistan. Drawing on polling-station election returns, survey evidence, and qualitative fieldwork on electoral politics in Pakistan, we consider three related dynamics: patterns of partisan mobilization, constraints on women’s mobility in urban space, and the possibility of intra-household divergence in voting preferences. In cities, partisan mobilization increasingly relies on individually targeted outreach rather than bloc-based mobilization through households and communities, which may disproportionately exclude women. At the same time, social constraints on women’s mobility can make women’s access to polling stations more dependent on male household members. Finally, greater autonomy in women’s political preferences in urban areas may introduce uncertainty about intra-household vote choice, which could reduce men’s incentives to facilitate women’s participation.

Our account highlights how gender and place interact to shape patterns of political participation. While urbanization may expand women’s access to education and decision-making autonomy, it can also weaken traditional forms of collective mobilization that previously facilitated electoral participation. In contexts where women’s mobility remains constrained and access to polling stations depends on male household members, greater uncertainty about women’s vote choices may create incentives for men to discourage women from voting. The result is an urban context in which women’s turnout is depressed relative to rural areas.

This study makes three contributions. First, it provides new empirical evidence on the relationship between urbanization and political participation. To our knowledge, this is the first

study to document the contemporary rural–urban turnout gap using polling-station level election returns and to examine its gendered dimensions. While existing research from India has documented lower turnout in urban constituencies—particularly in large metropolitan areas (Chandra and Potter, 2016; Auerbach, 2015; Chhibber and Shah, 2019)—our findings show that in Pakistan the overall rural–urban turnout gap is driven in no small part by women’s lower participation in cities.

Second, our findings contribute to a growing literature on gender gaps in political participation in the developing world. Existing scholarship has emphasized individual and household-level determinants of women’s participation, including gender gaps in political resources and efficacy (Schlozman and Burns, 1997), women’s exclusion from networks of political mobilization (Prillaman, 2023), and gatekeeping behaviour within households (Cheema et al., 2023). Other work highlights the role of contextual gender norms in shaping these gaps (Brulé and Gaikwad, 2021; Robinson and Gottlieb, 2021). We extend this literature by focusing attention on place-based mechanisms, showing how urban political environments can interact with gendered constraints to produce lower levels of participation among women.

Our study also contributes to scholarship examining how urbanization transforms politics and political behaviour in the Global South. While classic modernization accounts associate urbanization with greater political participation, programmatic politics, and declining salience of ethnic cleavages, recent research suggests these expectations do not always travel neatly. Instead, rapid urbanization in contexts of low state capacity, informality and segregation can generate new forms of political equilibrium that sustain disengagement, clientelism, and other forms of non-programmatic politics (Nathan, 2019, 2025). Consistent with this broader reassessment, recent work from South Asia and Africa documents unexpected patterns in electoral participation (Auerbach, 2015; Chandra and Potter, 2016), partisan ties (Harding and Michelitch, 2019), clientelistic relations (Rains and Wibbels, 2023), and citizens’ political expectations (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner, 2020). Our paper advances this literature by highlighting the gendered dimensions of urbanization-induced political change in a developing context.

Finally, our findings have implications for efforts to increase women’s political participation. Policies designed to improve women’s turnout often focus on individual-level barriers such as resources, information, or social norms. Our findings suggest that these constraints are highly

context-specific: the mechanisms limiting women’s participation may differ substantially across urban and rural settings. Recognizing this variation is essential for designing effective interventions aimed at increasing women’s electoral participation.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides background on urbanization and gender gaps in social and economic indicators across rural and urban Pakistan. We then describe the data and measurement strategy and document the rural–urban turnout gap using administrative data of election returns from 2018. The following section discusses a set of plausible mechanisms that may help interpret this pattern, drawing on additional electoral data, and qualitative insights to consider the roles of partisan mobilization strategies, mobility constraints, and intra-household preference divergence. The final section discusses limitations, policy implications, and directions for future research.

## Context: Urbanization and Gender in Pakistan

The growing concentration of population and economic activity in urban areas is a key feature of Pakistan’s structural transformation. Recent projections suggest that Pakistan will become an urban-majority country by 2030 (Haque, 2014; Kugelman, 2013; Shaikh, 2019).<sup>1</sup> A striking aspect of Pakistan’s urbanization pattern is the concentration of population in a small number of large cities. The number of cities with populations exceeding one million increased from ten in 2017 to thirteen in 2023. These metropolitan areas now account for 26.3% of Pakistan’s total population and 56.6% of its urban population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017, 2023). Population growth in these large cities has kept pace with growth in smaller towns and cities, and has outstripped growth in rural areas over the past two decades.

We turn next to the implications of this urban transformation for women’s socioeconomic outcomes and gender equality in Pakistan. Although Pakistan continues to rank among the lowest countries globally on several measures of gender equality,<sup>2</sup> this national picture masks substantial variation across provinces as well as between rural and urban contexts. Table 1 presents a set of

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<sup>1</sup>Studies using the agglomeration index to measure urbanization estimate that this has already happened (Ali, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>Pakistan ranked last among 148 countries on the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index in 2025, and 145th among 172 countries on the Gender Inequality Index according to the 2025 UNDP Human Development Report

stylized facts on socioeconomic differences between women living in rural and urban Pakistan, drawing on the most recent nationally representative data available from the 2023 National Population Census, the 2024-2025 Pakistan Labour Force Survey, and the 2017-18 Demographic and Health Survey. The table highlights key indicators associated with political participation, including educational resources, access to information, household time constraints, and women’s intra-household agency.

**Table 1:** Socioeconomic Differences Between Rural and Urban Women in Pakistan

Indicator	Rural Women	Urban Women
<b>Education</b>		
No education (%)	59.3	32.5
Secondary or higher education (%)	11	33
Literacy rate (%)	41.7	69.7
<b>Economic Participation</b>		
Female labour force participation (%)	29.3	14.8
Time spent in unpaid domestic and care work (mean hrs/week)	18.5	16.7
<b>Information Environment</b>		
No exposure to newspaper, radio, or television at least once a week (%)	52.5	24.4
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>		
Median age at first marriage (yrs)	19.8	21.3
Total fertility rate	3.9	2.9
Mean number of children ever born (women 40-49)	5.3	3.9
<b>Agency and Norms</b>		
Participates in all three household decisions (%)	26	37.7
Wife beating justified for at least one reason (%)	50.5	26.7

*Notes:* The table reports socioeconomic differences between women in rural and urban Pakistan. Values are national-level averages for women by rural and urban residence. Education, media exposure, age at first marriage, fertility, children ever born, household decision-making, and gender norms indicators are from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18. Literacy rates are from the Pakistan Population and Housing Census 2023. Female labour force participation and unpaid domestic and care work estimates are from the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2024–25.

Several patterns emerge that, based on existing theories of political participation, would lead us to expect higher levels of political engagement among urban women. Women in urban Pakistan appear advantaged on several socioeconomic correlates of political participation. Educational attainment is substantially higher among urban women: 69.7 percent of urban women are literate compared to 41.7 percent of rural women, and urban women are three times as likely to have secondary or higher education. Urban women also enjoy greater access to information environments relevant for political participation—only 24.4 percent report no weekly exposure to newspapers, radio, or television compared to 52.5 percent of rural women. Classic resource-based models of political participation would therefore predict higher levels of participation among women in urban

areas (Baxter and Lansing, 1983; Brady et al., 1995; Schlozman and Burns, 1997). Demographic indicators likewise suggest fewer time constraints on participation: urban women marry later and have substantially lower fertility rates. Later age at marriage has been linked to greater women’s political engagement in similar contexts (Carpena and Jensenius, 2021). Similarly, lower fertility and smaller numbers of children may reduce time and caregiving burdens that can limit participation in public life (Goldin, 2006; Sartori et al., 2017). Measures of intra-household agency and gender norms point in the same direction. Urban women are more likely to participate in key household decisions, and are considerably less likely to agree that violence against women by a partner is justified.

At the same time, the comparison also reveals important countervailing patterns. Female labour force participation remains low in both contexts and is substantially *lower* in urban areas. Women across urban and rural contexts continue to spend considerable time in unpaid domestic and care work, and research suggests that the mental and temporal burdens associated with unpaid care responsibilities can crowd out engagement in public and political life (Helgøy and Weeks, 2025). Taken together, the balance of these indicators would lead us to expect higher, not lower, levels of political engagement among women in urban contexts. Yet, as our empirical findings show, the pattern runs in the opposite direction.

## Data and Measurement

This paper combines administrative election returns and census geography to examine subnational rural–urban variation in gender gaps in voter turnout in Pakistan.

Our primary analysis relies on polling-station–level electoral returns from Pakistan’s 2018 national election made publicly available by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). These data report, for each polling station, the number of registered voters and valid votes cast separately for men and women. We use the digitized dataset compiled by Sonnet (2019), which aggregates these returns for more than 50,000 polling stations nationwide. By linking these returns to census block classifications used in electoral delimitation, we construct a fine-grained measure of whether each polling station serves an urban or rural population. This allows us to estimate rural–urban differences in turnout separately for men and women across the entire national electorate.

The public availability of gender-disaggregated turnout data is the result of a recent institutional reform. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, women’s electoral participation became a prominent issue in Pakistan following reports that informal agreements among local elites had prevented women from voting in several rural constituencies during the 2013 election. Civil society organizations, women’s rights groups, and members of Pakistan’s Women’s Parliamentary Caucus advocated for the systematic reporting of gender-disaggregated turnout data to better monitor such practices. In response, the Pakistan Elections Act of 2017 mandated the collection and publication of gender-disaggregated turnout statistics at the polling-station level.<sup>3</sup> This reform makes it possible to systematically examine granular patterns of subnational variation in women’s electoral participation across the country for the first time. The resulting dataset provides gender-disaggregated turnout information for more than 50,000 polling stations and over 30 million registered voters, enabling a fine-grained analysis of rural–urban differences in participation. Gender-disaggregated turnout data at this level of detail are rarely available in developing democracies, making Pakistan a particularly valuable case for studying gender gaps in electoral participation.

Pakistan’s polling station structure provides an additional opportunity to examine gendered turnout patterns while holding many contextual factors constant. Across constituencies, polling stations may be either combined—serving both men and women at the same location with separate polling booths—or segregated by gender, with separate stations designated for male and female voters but serving the same electoral area. Segregated male and female polling stations are typically located in close proximity and draw voters from the same set of census blocks within a constituency. Gender-segregated polling stations are common across the country and account for a substantial share of polling stations in both rural and urban areas.

We exploit this institutional feature to construct matched comparisons between male and female polling stations serving the same electorate. By pairing segregated male and female polling

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<sup>3</sup>As per Chapter 5(91:1-3) of the Pakistan Elections Act 2017 Statement about turnout of women voters: “(1) The Presiding Officer shall prepare a gender disaggregated statement of voters showing total number of men and women voters at the polling station and the total votes cast by men and women voters. (2) The Presiding Officer shall send the gender disaggregated statement of voters to the Returning Officer and to the Commission at the time of communication of result to the Returning Officer and the Commission. (3) The Presiding Officer may, at any stage on the polling day during or after the polling, prepare and send a special report to the Returning Officer and to the Commission if he has reason to believe that women voters have been restrained from exercising their right to vote based on any express or implied agreement” and Chapter 2(13:6): “The Commission shall publish the documents received under subsection (3) along with gender disaggregated data of turnout on its website.”

stations within the same constituency that correspond to the same electoral census areas, we are able to compare turnout among men and women facing similar local political environments, party competition, and administrative arrangements. This design holds constant many constituency-level factors that may influence turnout, allowing us to more closely examine how the gender gap in turnout varies across urban and rural contexts.<sup>4</sup> While this approach does not constitute a causal identification strategy, it provides a useful matched comparison that isolates variation in turnout across gender and place within otherwise similar electoral settings.

To classify polling stations as urban or rural, we exploit the geographic information used in Pakistan’s 2018 electoral delimitation. Following the 2017 Population Census, constituency boundaries were redrawn using census blocks as the basic building unit. Importantly, the Election Commission records which census blocks are assigned to each polling station and whether those blocks are officially classified as urban or rural. We use the digitized polling scheme compiled by Sonnet (2019) to link each polling station to the rural-urban designation of its underlying census blocks.

In the Pakistani census, areas are classified as urban based on administrative status as urban local governments rather than strictly demographic criteria such as density or economic structure (Ali, 2002). As a result, our measure captures differences between places governed as urban municipalities and those governed as rural jurisdictions. While this administrative definition may not perfectly correspond to socioeconomic characteristics of urbanization, it closely reflects the institutional context within which electoral mobilization and voting take place.

In addition to the rural-urban distinction, we examine variation within urban areas by distinguishing large metropolitan cities from other urban locations. Prior research in India shows that patterns of electoral participation often differ between large metropolitan areas and smaller towns (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner, 2020; Chandra and Potter, 2016), though this scholarship has not examined gendered dimensions of this variation. Using the list of cities with populations exceeding one million in the 2023 Population Census,<sup>5</sup> we identify constituencies corresponding

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<sup>4</sup>Our approach builds on recent work that compares women’s turnout across mixed and gender-segregated polling stations in Pakistan (Chattha and Lakhtakia, 2025; Rahman and Thompson, 2022). These studies match polling stations based on geographic proximity or co-location. By contrast, our design pairs segregated male and female polling stations that serve voters drawn from the same census blocks within a constituency. Because these stations are assigned to the same electoral catchment areas, this approach allows a cleaner comparison of gender differences in turnout by holding constant many local contextual factors.

<sup>5</sup>Thirteen cities meet this threshold: Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Peshawar, Multan,

to these cities, and where a majority of polling stations are classified as urban. This procedure identifies 47 metropolitan constituencies.

To explore mechanisms underlying the turnout patterns observed in the administrative data, we draw on further analysis of gender-disaggregated electoral returns reported for separate-sex polling stations and fieldwork conducted in Lahore during the 2017–2018 electoral cycle, including focus groups with women and shadowing of a by-election campaign.

## Rural–Urban Variation in Voter Turnout

We begin by examining how voter turnout varies across rural and urban locations for men and women in Pakistan’s 2018 national election. Figure 1 shows average turnout rates (calculated as the number of votes polled divided by the number of registered voters) by gender across the national electorate as well as across rural and urban polling stations. Nationwide, turnout among men exceeds turnout among women, producing a gender gap of nine percentage points. This gap varies systematically across place. While turnout is lower in urban contexts for both men and women, the decline is larger for women, resulting in a wider gender turnout gap in urban locations than in rural ones.

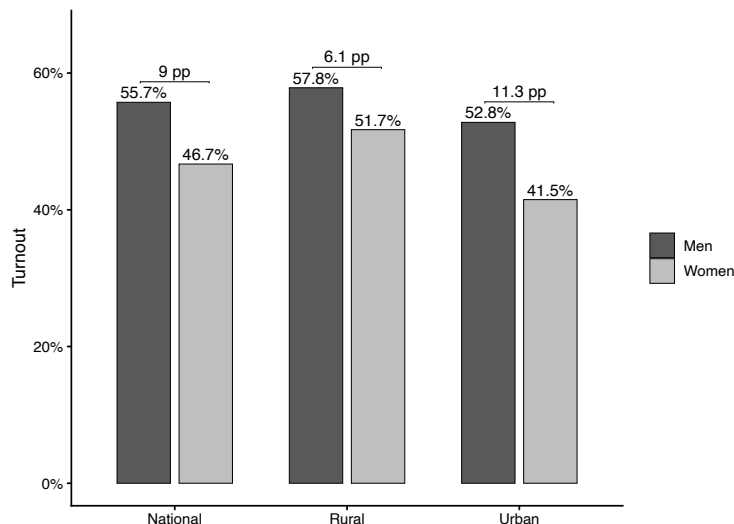
To examine these patterns more systematically, we estimate polling-station–level regressions of male turnout and female turnout on an indicator for whether the polling station serves an urban population. Baseline models include only the urban indicator, while adjusted models additionally control for polling station type and include constituency fixed effects, allowing comparisons between urban and rural polling stations within the same constituency. Figure 2 reports the estimated urban coefficients from these models. Turnout is lower in urban polling stations for both men and women, but the decline is substantially larger for women. In the adjusted specification, urban polling stations exhibit only a modest decline in male turnout but a considerably larger decline in female turnout. These patterns suggest that urban contexts depress electoral participation for both men and women in this setting, with a disproportionately larger effect for women.

Pakistan’s provinces differ substantially in levels of socioeconomic development, patterns of party competition, and gender norms. To examine whether the gendered urban turnout penalty is

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Hyderabad, Islamabad, Quetta, Sargodha, Bahawalpur, and Sialkot (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023)

**Figure 1:** Voter turnout in 2018 national election, by gender and location



*Notes:* The figure reports male and female voter turnout across three categories: national, rural, and urban. Turnout is defined as votes cast divided by registered voters for men and women separately. National turnout rates are calculated using constituency-level totals from the 2018 election. Rural and urban turnout rates are calculated using polling-station-level election returns. Polling stations are classified as rural or urban based on the administrative classification of the census blocks they serve. The bracket above each pair of bars reports the gender turnout gap, defined as male turnout minus female turnout in percentage points.

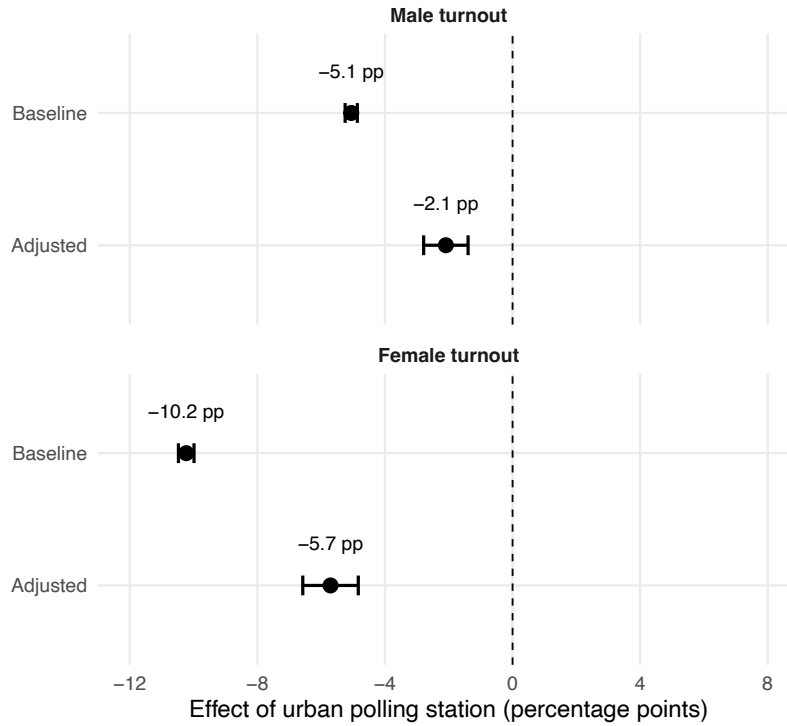
driven by any particular region, we estimate the relationship between urban location and turnout separately for each province.

Figure 3 reports the estimated urban turnout penalties for men and women from the adjusted polling-station regressions. The pattern of a larger urban turnout penalty for women than for men is most pronounced in Pakistan’s most populous provinces: Sindh and Punjab, where women’s turnout declines significantly more than men’s in urban polling stations. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the estimates follow the same directional pattern but are less precisely estimated.<sup>6</sup> In Balochistan, the estimates for men and women are similar in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, these results suggest that the gendered urban disadvantage documented above is not confined to a particular regional context, which is notable given the substantial socio-economic disparities and differences in cultural norms and political dynamics

<sup>6</sup>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa contains relatively few urban polling stations compared to other provinces. In our data, only about 15 percent of polling stations in the province are classified as urban, limiting the amount of within-constituency rural-urban variation available to estimate the urban turnout effect once constituency fixed effects are included.

<sup>7</sup>Balochistan has far fewer constituencies than the other provinces in our sample (15 in total), which reduces statistical precision when standard errors are clustered at the constituency level.

**Figure 2:** Urban turnout penalty for men and women in the 2018 national election



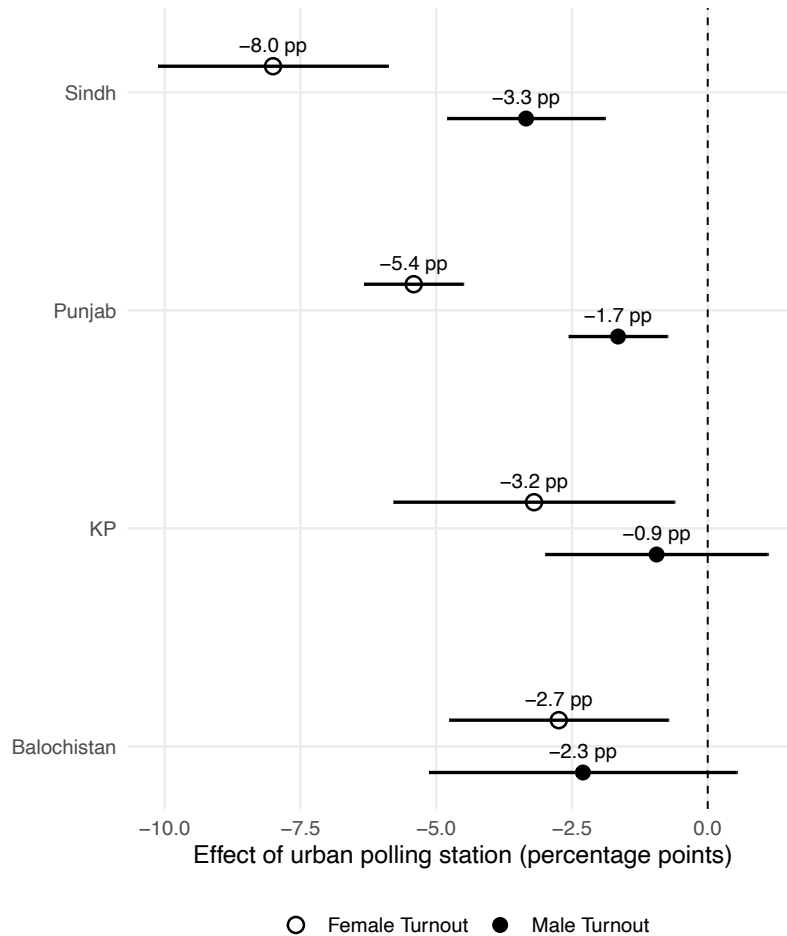
*Notes:* The figure reports coefficient estimates for the urban polling station indicator from polling-station-level regressions of male turnout and female turnout in Pakistan’s 2018 national election. Turnout is defined as the share of registered male or female voters at a polling station who cast valid ballots. Baseline models include only the urban indicator. Adjusted models additionally control for polling station type (male-only, female-only, or combined) and include constituency fixed effects. Polling stations are classified as urban based on the administrative classification of the census blocks they serve. Coefficients are expressed in percentage points and are interpreted relative to rural polling stations (the omitted category). Horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors in adjusted models are clustered at the constituency level.

across the provinces.

## Measuring the Gender Gap

To examine disparities in men and women’s turnout more directly, we analyze the gender turnout gap at the polling-station level using two complementary features of Pakistan’s electoral administration. In some polling locations (combined), men and women vote at the same polling station and turnout is recorded separately by gender. In others, polling stations are segregated by sex, with separate male-only and female-only stations serving men and women. These institutional arrangements allow us to measure the gender turnout gap within the same local voting populations using two distinct strategies.

**Figure 3:** Urban turnout penalty for men and women in the 2018 national election, by province



*Notes:* The figure reports coefficient estimates for the urban polling station indicator from polling-station-level regressions of male and female turnout estimated separately for each province. Turnout is defined as the share of registered male or female voters at a polling station who cast valid ballots. All models control for polling station type (male-only, female-only, or combined) and include constituency fixed effects. Polling stations are classified as urban based on the administrative classification of the census blocks they serve. Coefficients are expressed in percentage points relative to rural polling stations (the omitted category). Horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the constituency level.

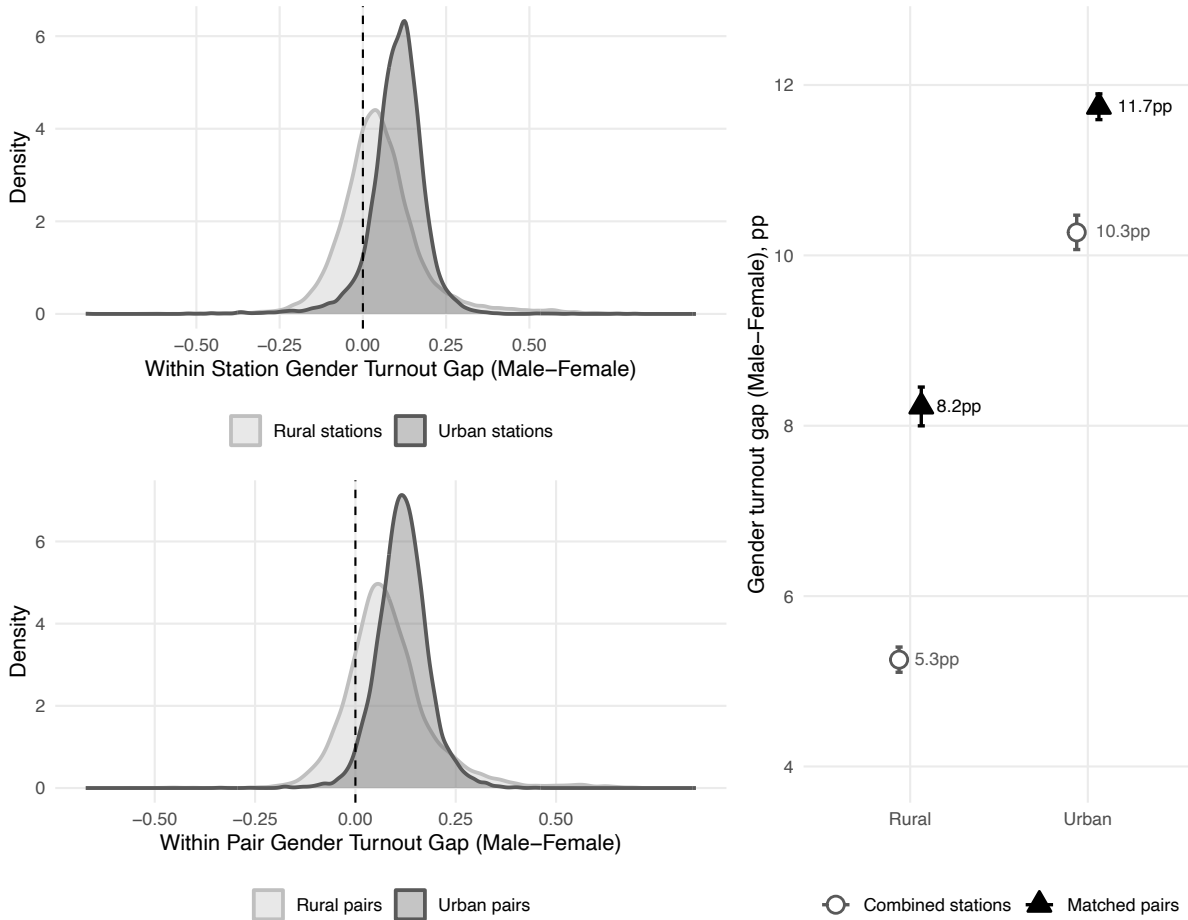
The first strategy relies on combined polling stations, where men’s and women’s turnout can be observed directly within the same polling station, allowing us to calculate the within-station gender turnout gap. The second exploits a distinctive feature of Pakistan’s polling scheme: segregated male-only and female-only polling stations frequently serve voters drawn from the same set of census blocks and are typically located in close proximity, or even within the same building. Using the polling scheme data described above, we identify pairs of male and female polling stations within the same constituency that correspond to identical sets of census blocks.

In total, we identify 15,917 matched male–female polling-station-pairs after excluding pairs with missing turnout or ambiguous urban classification. This matched sample covers 82% of segregated polling stations for which turnout data were available. We then estimate the difference in men’s and women’s turnout between the two stations within each pair. Because the matched polling stations serve voters drawn from the same census blocks and operate within the same constituency-level electoral environment, this comparison approximates a within-location design that holds many local contextual factors—including party competition, administrative arrangements, and neighborhood characteristics—constant. This approach therefore provides a close comparison of men and women’s participation rates among voters drawn from the same electoral catchment areas, while allowing us to examine how the gender turnout gap varies across rural and urban settings.

Figure 4 presents the resulting comparisons. The left panels show the distribution of gender turnout gaps measured using the two administrative arrangements. The top panel shows the distribution of gender turnout gaps observed directly in combined polling stations, while the bottom panel shows the distribution of gaps constructed from matched male–female polling-station-pairs serving identical census blocks. Across both measurement strategies, men’s turnout systematically exceeds women’s turnout (a positive gap), with the disparity clearly larger in urban polling stations.

The right panel summarizes the mean gender turnout gap across rural and urban polling areas under both measurement strategies. In rural areas, the gender turnout gap is approximately five percentage points in combined polling stations and roughly eight percentage points in matched segregated polling-station-pairs. In urban areas, however, the gap is substantially larger—about ten percentage points in combined stations and nearly twelve percentage points in matched segregated polling-station-pairs. Both approaches reveal the same pattern: the gender turnout gap is significantly larger in urban contexts. This is especially striking given that prior work shows that women’s turnout tends to be lower in segregated polling stations than in combined polling stations, suggesting that institutional arrangements governing electoral administration themselves shape gender disparities in participation (Chattha and Lakhtakia, 2025; Rahman and Thompson, 2022). Our analysis demonstrates that the gendered urban disadvantage persists even when accounting for these institutional arrangements.

**Figure 4:** Gender turnout gaps within polling areas, by rural and urban



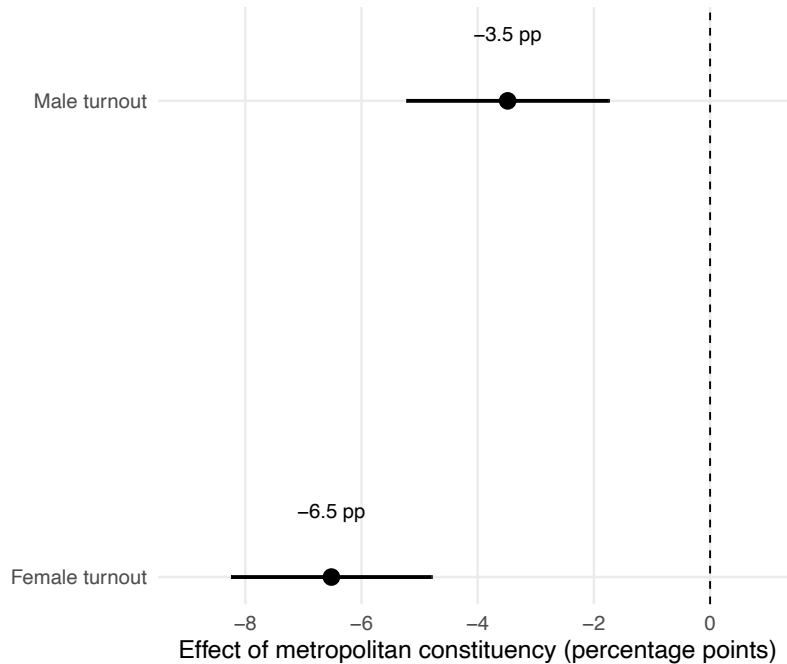
*Notes:* The figure reports gender turnout gaps in Pakistan’s 2018 national election. The gender turnout gap is defined as male turnout minus female turnout, where turnout is measured as the share of registered voters casting valid ballots at each polling station. The top-left panel shows the distribution of gender turnout gaps in combined polling stations that serve both male and female voters. The bottom-left panel shows the distribution of gender turnout gaps constructed from matched pairs of male-only and female-only polling stations serving voters drawn from the same set of census blocks within a constituency. The right panel reports mean gender turnout gaps for rural and urban polling areas under both measurement strategies. Polling stations are classified as rural or urban based on the administrative classification of the census blocks they serve. Vertical lines denote 95% confidence intervals.

## Gender Gaps within Urban Areas

Urban areas in Pakistan vary widely, ranging from small towns to large metropolitan cities. We therefore move beyond the rural-urban binary to examine whether the gender turnout gap differs across types of urban locations. This distinction is motivated by research from India showing that patterns of political participation often differ between large metropolitan cities and smaller

urban centres (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner, 2020; Chandra and Potter, 2016). To do so, we restrict the sample to urban polling stations and compare polling stations located in metropolitan constituencies to urban polling stations located in non-metropolitan constituencies. Figure 5 reports the estimated effect of metropolitan location on male and female turnout. Turnout is lower in metropolitan constituencies for both men and women, but the decline is substantially larger for women. Relative to urban polling stations in non-metropolitan constituencies, male turnout in metropolitan constituencies is approximately 3.5 percentage points lower, while female turnout is about 6.5 percentage points lower. These results indicate that the gendered urban disadvantage is especially pronounced in Pakistan’s largest metropolitan areas, which account for the majority of Pakistan’s urban population, and nearly a quarter of the country’s total population.

**Figure 5:** Metropolitan turnout penalty for men and women in the 2018 national election



*Notes:* The figure reports coefficient estimates for the metropolitan constituency indicator from polling-station-level regressions of male and female turnout estimated on the sample of urban polling stations. Turnout is defined as the share of registered male or female voters at a polling station who cast valid ballots. Metropolitan constituencies are defined as those corresponding to cities with populations exceeding one million in the 2023 Population Census and where a majority of polling stations are classified as urban. All models control for polling station type and include province fixed effects. Coefficients are expressed in percentage points relative to urban polling stations located in non-metropolitan constituencies (the omitted category). Horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the constituency level.

## Understanding the Gendered Urban Disadvantage

Our findings establish an important puzzle within existing accounts of women’s political participation. Indeed, scholars have documented the opposite pattern in other contexts. Research on suffrage extension in early twentieth-century Sweden finds that turnout was higher in cities for both men and women, and that the urban advantage was especially pronounced for women (Teele, 2024; Boix et al., 2025). Scholars advance different explanations for these findings. Teele (2024) attributes the urban advantage to the dense, information-rich environments of cities, where women may have greater exposure to political discourse and shorter distances to travel to polling stations. In contrast, Boix et al. (2025) emphasizes the role of family-based mobilization, arguing that in cities, which are characterized by more modern gender norms than rural areas, women’s political participation is less tied to men’s turnout, therefore unmarried women are more likely to turnout to vote, hence lowering the gender gap. The shared implication is that urban contexts should decrease, rather than exacerbate, gender gaps in electoral participation. Moreover, as we show in Table 1, the individual and household-level factors commonly associated with political participation and emphasized in these two accounts—including exposure to information, gender-related attitudes, and women’s role in household decision-making—are in fact more favorable to women in urban Pakistan. Despite these advantages, the gender gap in turnout is considerably larger in urban settings.

What mechanisms drive the gendered urban disadvantage in our context? Rather than attempting to identify a single explanation or adjudicate between competing ones, we propose a set of plausible mechanisms that can be explored in future research. In particular, we focus on three place-based dynamics that may shape women’s participation: patterns of partisan mobilization, constraints on women’s mobility, and intra-household dynamics surrounding women’s vote choice. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and likely interact in practice. Together, they underscore the broader idea that women’s participation in politics often depends not only on their own willingness and capacity, but also on whether and how political organizations, social norms, and household dynamics—which may exhibit considerable variation across space—facilitate or constrain their participation.

## Partisan mobilization

Gender gaps in partisan and network-based mobilization are central to theories of gender differences in political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Prillaman, 2023). While existing literature suggests that denser social networks in urban environments should make it easier for parties to mobilize voters, we propose that the different nature of rural and urban mobilization in Pakistan may instead exacerbate gender gaps in partisan contact and mobilization in urban settings.

Accounts of party strategy in rural Pakistan, particularly in the most populous province of Punjab, establish that parties generally mobilize collectively through kinship networks and “vote blocs” (Mohmand, 2019; Wilder, 1999). Cities, by contrast, tend to be characterized by more fragmented social networks, greater residential mobility, and weaker community ties. As a result, partisan mobilization in urban settings relies more heavily on individualized voter outreach by party workers rather than community-level coordination. This pattern was reflected in our field observations while shadowing a by-election in Pakistan’s second largest city, Lahore, in 2017, where the president of a local party chapter described their campaign strategy as primarily “D2D” (door-to-door) outreach conducted by party workers. However, as documented by Liaqat (2019), party workers in Pakistan are overwhelmingly male.<sup>8</sup> Because social norms in Pakistan often restrict interactions between unrelated men and women, it can be costly for male party workers to engage directly with female voters. Mobilization strategies that rely on direct worker–voter contact – more common in urban settings – may therefore leave women less fully incorporated into campaign outreach. Focus groups conducted with female residents in Lahore in the lead-up to the 2018 election provide further evidence that this sense of being left out of partisan contact is deeply felt by women: As one woman explained, “Most political party members and workers talk to the men in our families and do not attempt to engage with us.”<sup>9</sup> Another participant similarly noted, “No one talks to women when it comes to asking for votes; all the persuading and luring tactics are used on men.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Goyal (2024) documents a similar gender imbalance among party workers in India.

<sup>9</sup>FGD-5, NA 124, PS Shadipura, 2 January 2018

<sup>10</sup>FGD-8, NA 124, PS Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018

## Mobility constraints

Physically reaching the polling location to vote is a commonly recognized cost of turning out to vote. Even if men and women have to traverse the same physical distance to the polls, gendered constraints on mobility can disproportionately raise the material and social costs associated with turning out for women. As [Jayachandran \(2015\)](#) notes, “Concern for women’s and girls’ safety and ‘purity’ constrains their physical mobility in many developing countries.” Studies across a range of Global South contexts—including Mexico, India, Egypt, and Pakistan—document the gendered costs of physical mobility for women and their implications for women’s educational choices and labour force participation ([Aguilar et al., 2021](#); [Borker et al., 2021](#); [Christensen and Osman, 2023](#); [Field and Vyborny, 2022](#)). We should therefore expect mobility constraints to matter for women’s political participation as well.

While constraints on women’s mobility may contribute to the overall gender gap in turnout, understanding the gendered *urban* disadvantage requires considering how women’s mobility differs across rural and urban contexts. Existing accounts suggest that urban density could reduce the physical distance that voters have to travel to get to the polls relatively to rural areas (e.g. see [Teele \(2024\)](#)). However, as [Mumtaz and Salway \(2005\)](#) emphasize in their study of women health workers’ mobility in Pakistan, “women’s construction of space is not determined by physical geography but rather by social geography.” We focus therefore on how the social construction of distance and spatial boundaries rather than physical distance differs across urban and rural contexts.

In rural areas, village boundaries often constitute a meaningful *social* boundary for women’s mobility. Women may enjoy relative freedom of movement within a village, while crossing the village boundary can be prohibitively costly. Scholars have documented the implications of such boundaries for women’s access to education and labour markets in Pakistan. For example, [Jacoby and Mansuri \(2015\)](#) find that girls’ school enrollment declines sharply when attending school requires crossing village-settlement boundaries, regardless of physical distance.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, [Cheema et al. \(2025\)](#) document a “village boundary” effect in women’s uptake of job-training programmes in rural Punjab.

Urban environments differ in important ways. In cities, particularly large metropolitan

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<sup>11</sup>[Burde and Linden \(2013\)](#) find similar effects in Afghanistan, where village-based schools disproportionately increase girls’ enrollment.

areas, people are more likely to live among strangers and non-family members, and neighborhood boundaries do not necessarily correspond to socially meaningful or safe spaces for women’s mobility. As a result, the socially acceptable radius within which women can travel independently may be considerably smaller than a village or settlement boundary in rural contexts.

These differences in social geography have implications for electoral participation. In the 2018 election, polling schemes were constructed using urban and rural census blocks from the 2017 population census as the basic units for delimiting constituencies and assigning voters to polling stations. Electoral law required that these enumeration units not be divided (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2017). In rural areas, such units often roughly correspond to socially meaningful settlement boundaries. As a result, women could typically reach polling stations without crossing the socially salient village boundaries that constrain mobility.

In urban areas, however, enumeration units do not correspond to similar social boundaries. In the absence of a socially recognized “safe” radius of mobility, women may therefore be more dependent on male accompaniment or facilitation in order to travel to polling stations. Evidence from two canvassing field experiments supports this interpretation. Gine and Mansuri (2018) find that a canvassing targeted solely to women in rural Sindh was effective in increasing women’s turnout in 2008 elections, while Cheema et al. (2023) find that canvassing campaigns aimed at increasing women’s turnout in 2018 elections in urban Lahore were successful only when men were also targeted.

This raises an important question: if women’s participation in urban elections often depends on men enabling their mobility, why might men fail to do so?

### **Intra-household political divergence**

A third mechanism concerns intra-household dynamics surrounding women’s electoral participation. In many parts of Pakistan, women’s ability to vote depends not only on their own willingness to participate but also on whether male household members (“gatekeepers”) facilitate their participation by giving them “permission” to engage, accompanying them to polling stations, or otherwise enabling their participation (Cheema et al., 2023). Under such conditions, women’s turnout may depend in part on whether men perceive women’s participation to be aligned with their own political preferences.

If men expect women to vote differently from themselves, they may be less likely to actively facilitate women’s participation. Even if voting is not considered socially inappropriate, men may be less willing to incur the costs of enabling participation when women’s electoral choices are uncertain or potentially divergent from their own. This dynamic parallels the strategic logic of suffrage extension highlighted by Teele (2018), whereby male political elites were more likely to support suffrage reform when they expected newly enfranchised women’s votes to benefit them electorally.

Our matched polling-station design for segregated male-only and female-only polling stations allows us to examine this possibility in a novel way.<sup>12</sup> Leveraging this design, we examine whether male and female voters differ systematically in their voting preferences. To do so, we focus on differences in support for political parties rather than individual candidates, since party labels provide a more consistent measure of electoral choice across constituencies. Specifically, we compare party vote shares across matched male and female polling stations serving the same electoral areas. This approach allows us to assess gender differences in partisan preferences while holding several contextual features constant, providing a rare opportunity to study gendered voting behaviour using administrative election data rather than surveys.

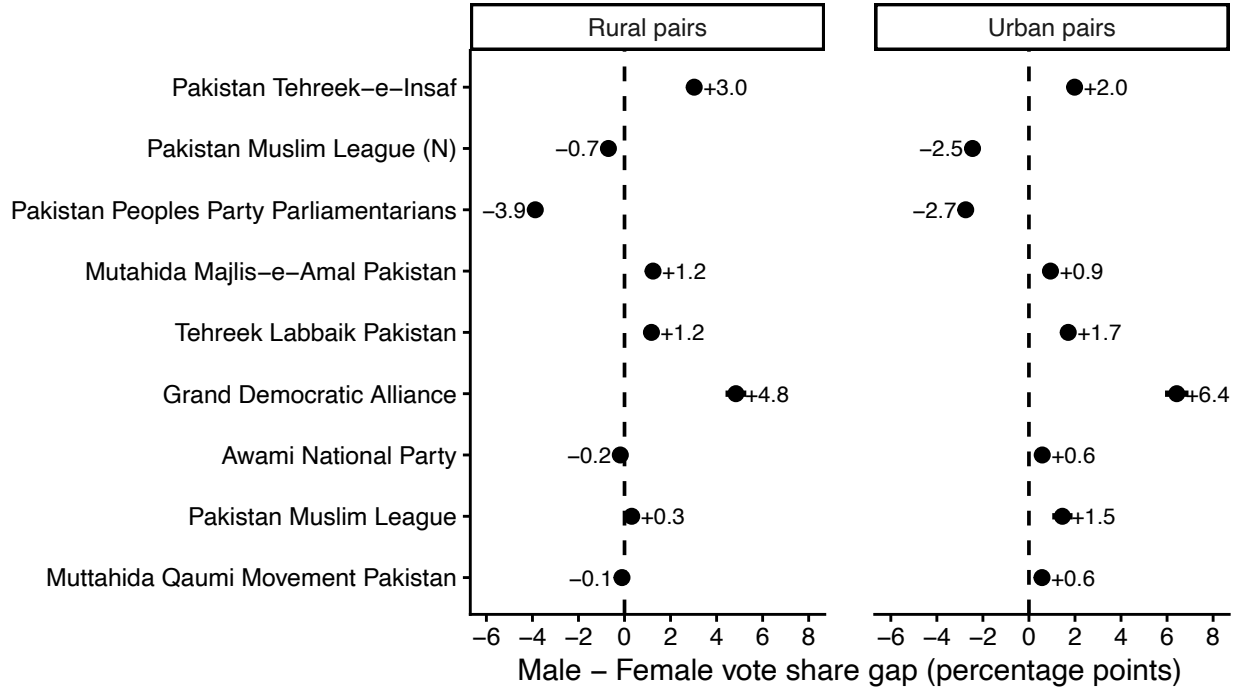
The results, visualized in Figure 6 suggest modest but non-negligible differences in partisan support between men and women. Focusing on the largest parties by vote count in the 2018 elections, we find that male voters in our data are somewhat more likely to support the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), while female voters show relatively higher support for the Pakistan Muslim League-N (the PTI’s main competitor in Punjab) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (the GDA’s main competitor in Sindh). We also see a pattern of relatively greater male support for religious parties: the Tehrik-e-Labbaik (TLP) and the Mutahhida Majlis e Amal (MMA). These differences in party vote shares are generally small: typically on the order of one to three percentage points, and do not vary systematically across rural and urban settings.

While these differences are unlikely to explain the urban turnout gap directly, they suggest that some degree of gender divergence in partisan preferences exists. In settings where women’s

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<sup>12</sup>While combined polling stations report sex-disaggregated turnout totals, which we use to measure the gender gap in turnout, they do not report sex-disaggregated vote totals by candidate. For sex-segregated stations, however, reported vote totals for candidates are necessarily sex-specific.

**Figure 6:** Gender differences in party vote shares, by rural-urban



*Notes:* The figure reports gender differences in party vote shares using matched pairs of male-only and female-only polling stations that serve the same census blocks within a constituency. The horizontal axis shows the difference in party vote share between male and female stations (male minus female), expressed in percentage points. Positive values indicate greater support among male voters, while negative values indicate greater support among female voters. Panels separately report estimates for rural and urban polling-station pairs. Points represent mean vote share gaps across matched polling-station pairs and horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Independent candidates are excluded because they do not represent consistent party labels across constituencies.

electoral participation depends on male facilitation, even modest uncertainty about women’s vote choices may influence whether men actively enable women to vote. This dynamic may be particularly relevant in urban environments, where women may have greater autonomy in political decision-making but are also more likely to depend on men enabling them to reach polling stations through accompaniment or transport.

Together, these mechanisms, which are likely to be mutually reinforcing, provide a plausible account of why women’s turnout may be particularly depressed in urban settings in our context. Constraints on outreach to women in individual partisan mobilization reduces parties’ engagement with women in urban settings, while mobility constraints increase reliance on male household

members to access polling stations. When women’s political preferences can diverge from those of men, uncertainty about vote choice may reduce men’s incentives to facilitate women’s participation. Directly testing or adjudicating between these explanations is beyond the scope of this study. Our analysis relies primarily on administrative election returns, and we do not directly observe intra-household dynamics, women’s mobility at the time of voting, or patterns of partisan outreach at the individual or polling-station-level to be able to evaluate its link to turnout. Future work combining administrative data with targeted data collection on these factors could advance our understanding of what drives the gendered urban disadvantage.

## Discussion

Given the ubiquity of urbanization in the Global South, understanding how this transformation reshapes democratic participation across different groups of citizens is increasingly important (Chandra and Potter, 2016; Auerbach, 2015; Kumar, 2009; National Election Study, 2014; Palshikar and Kumar, 2004). Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner (2020) highlight the value of place-based analysis in revisiting conventional expectations about urbanization and democratization. Our paper underscores the importance of gender as an important dimension to consider in such analysis.

We document a clear and substantively large pattern: women’s electoral participation in Pakistan is significantly lower in urban areas than in rural ones. This result is robust to several specifications and persists in matched polling-station comparisons that hold local conditions constant. This finding runs counter to standard expectations that urbanization should facilitate political participation by expanding access to resources, information, and public life. While women in urban Pakistan are advantaged on many socioeconomic dimensions associated with participation, these advantages do not translate into higher turnout. Instead, urban contexts appear to introduce constraints that disproportionately depress women’s participation.

We identify a set of such constraints that have direct implications for policy and stakeholders in the electoral process. First, if women’s participation in urban areas depends in part on male facilitation due to the specific mobility constraints, interventions that target women alone may be insufficient. Efforts to increase turnout may need to engage both women and men within households, particularly in settings where women’s mobility or access to polling stations is mediated by male

gatekeepers (Cheema et al., 2023). Second, the shift toward individualized, worker-based partisan mobilization in urban areas may leave women excluded in campaign outreach. Working directly with parties to expand the role of female party workers or designing outreach strategies that more effectively reach women may therefore be important for improving women’s political inclusion in cities. Third, if mobility constraints are more binding in urban contexts, policies that reduce the social and logistical costs of reaching polling stations—such as safer transport or more accessible polling locations—may be especially consequential.

More broadly, our results suggest that strategies to increase women’s political participation must be tailored to local context. Much of the policy and scholarly focus has centred on rural areas, where gender gaps in voter registration and explicit restrictions on women’s voting have been most visible. Our findings indicate that urban areas—particularly large metropolitan constituencies—present a distinct set of challenges that are less visible but equally consequential for democratic inclusion.

While we are able to robustly establish this empirical pattern, we are limited in our ability to adjudicate between the mechanisms that generate it. The gendered urban disadvantage we identify thus raises several questions for future research. Does this pattern generalize to other rapidly urbanizing contexts? Under what conditions do urban environments amplify or mitigate gender gaps in participation? And which types of interventions are most effective in increasing women’s turnout in urban settings?

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