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Urbanisation and women's voter participation: Evidence from Pakistan

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- The 2017 Election Act mandates the collection and publication of **gender-disaggregated turnout data** in Pakistan, enabling precise measurement of gender gaps across locations and assessing subnational variation.
- Analysis shows that women in urban areas across provinces vote at **significantly lower rates** than women in rural areas, with the gap largest in major metropolitan constituencies.
- This pattern challenges expectations that urbanisation promotes gender equality in political participation.
- Likely explanations include urban-rural differences in partisan mobilisation, constraints on women's mobility, and intra-household differences in voting preferences.
- Policies aimed at improving women's voter participation should prioritise **urban areas, engage partisan actors, and target barriers beyond voter awareness.**

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Policy motivation

Urbanisation is one of the most important structural transformations underway across the Global South. Cities are expanding rapidly, reshaping labour markets, social networks, and political engagement. Scholars have argued that cities can serve as engines of women's empowerment and gender equality (Evans, 2019). However, the relationship between urbanisation and women's political participation has received limited empirical attention. We know relatively little about whether urbanisation strengthens or weakens women's electoral participation in developing democracies.

Pakistan provides an important case for examining this question. National election statistics reveal large and persistent gender gaps in voter turnout. Understanding **where these participation gaps are largest—and why**—is critical for designing well-targeted policies that promote more inclusive democratic participation.

Analysing gender gaps in political participation is often difficult because election data are rarely reported separately for women and men at the subnational level. The 2017 Election Act mandated **the collection and publication of gender-disaggregated statistics on voter turnout** in Pakistan, allowing for precise measurement of gender differences in voter participation. Using these data from the 2018 general election, this brief analyses how gender gaps in voter turnout vary across rural, urban, and metropolitan areas.

Overview of research

This study uses polling-station data from Pakistan's 2018 general election to examine subnational patterns of gender differences in voter turnout.

Pakistan's electoral administration provides a unique opportunity to study gender differences in voting. In many polling locations, women and men vote at **separate polling stations**. In contrast, in others, they vote at **combined polling stations** where turnout is reported separately for female and male voters.

Combined polling stations allow us to observe **sex-disaggregated turnout within the same polling location**. In the case of segregated stations, we construct matched pairs of male-only and female-only polling stations serving the same electoral catchment areas. We identify these pairs using information on the **census blocks assigned to each polling station**, which allows us to compare turnout for men and women living in the same localities. Comparing turnout across these locations allows us to estimate gender gaps in voting while holding local electoral conditions constant.

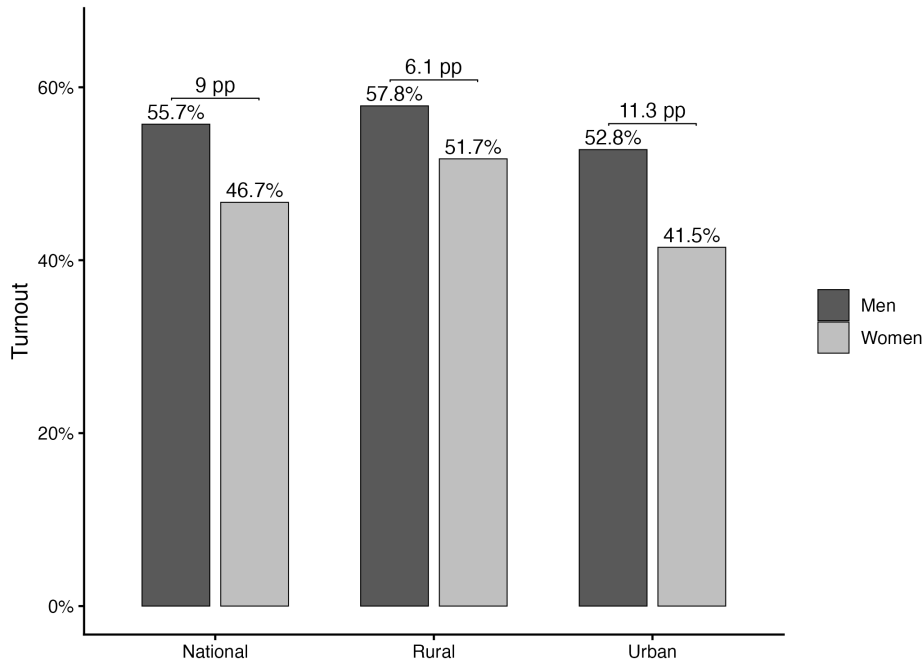
The resulting dataset includes tens of thousands of polling stations across Pakistan, enabling analysis of turnout patterns across rural areas, smaller towns, and large metropolitan cities.

The analysis reveals a striking pattern: women's turnout is significantly lower in urban areas than in rural areas, and the gender gap is particularly large in Pakistan's major metropolitan constituencies.

Key finding

The analysis reveals a striking pattern. Voter turnout for both men and women is significantly **lower in urban areas** than in rural areas, but the urban penalty is nearly twice as large for women (Fig 1).

FIGURE 1: Voter turnout in 2018 national elections, by gender and location

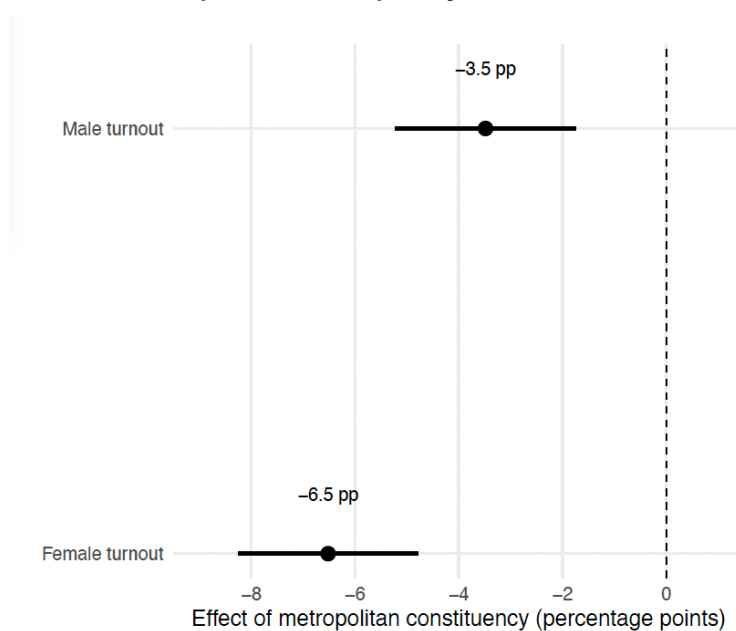


Note: Figure reports male and female voter turnout across three categories: national, rural and urban. Rural and urban turnout rates are calculated using polling-station-level election returns, where turnout is measured as the share of registered male or female voters who cast valid ballots at each polling station. 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 the difference between male and female turnout expressed in percentage points.

Moreover, this pattern is exacerbated in **large metropolitan constituencies**, which are associated with an additional 3.5 percentage point decrease in men's and 6.5 percentage point decrease in women's turnout (Fig 2).

This pattern is unexpected. Cities typically offer advantages that should facilitate political participation. As Table 1 shows, **urban women have higher education, literacy and greater exposure to political information than their rural counterparts**. In addition, urban women report spending slightly **less time in unpaid domestic work** and are **more likely to report participating in household decision-making** (37% versus 27%). These factors are commonly associated with greater political engagement. Our findings challenge the common assumption that urbanisation, even as it may facilitate socioeconomic advances for women, automatically leads to greater political inclusion for women.

FIGURE 2: Metropolitan turnout penalty for men and women in the 2018 election.



Note: The figure reports coefficient estimates for a metropolitan constituency indicator from polling-station-level regressions of male and female turnout estimated on the sample of urban polling stations. Turnout is measured as the share of registered male or female voters at a polling station who cast valid ballots. Metropolitan constituencies are defined as constituencies 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 province fixed effects. Coefficients are expressed in percentage points relative to urban polling stations located in non-metropolitan constituencies. Horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the constituency level.

TABLE 1: Select socioeconomic differences between rural and urban women in Pakistan.

Indicator	Urban Women	Rural Women
Secondary or higher education	33%	11%
Literacy	69.7%	41.7%
No weekly exposure to newspapers, radio, or television	24.4%	52.5%
Hours of unpaid domestic work per week	16.7	18.5
Participation in household decision-making	36.7%	26.5%

Note: Education and household decision-making indicators are from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18. Literacy rates are from the Pakistan Population and Housing Census 2023. Unpaid domestic and care work estimates are from the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2024–25. Values report national level averages for women by rural and urban residence.

Explaining the puzzle

Differences in political mobilisation

Political parties in rural areas often mobilise voters through **kinship networks and community leaders** (Mohmand, 2019). These networks can facilitate women's participation indirectly as part of household or community mobilisation.

In cities, campaigns rely more heavily on **individual outreach by party workers**, who are overwhelmingly male. Social norms restricting interaction between unrelated men and women may limit women's exposure to these campaigns. As a result, urban mobilisation strategies may reach women less effectively than rural forms of collective mobilisation.

Mobility constraints

Women's mobility in public space can be shaped by safety concerns and social norms. In rural areas, village boundaries often define limited spaces within which women can move relatively freely. Polling schemes indicate that polling stations are often located within village boundaries, i.e. within an accessible social radius for women.

Urban environments lack such clearly defined boundaries. Women may therefore be more reliant on male accompaniment and facilitation for travel to polling stations or participation in public activities. These constraints may raise the practical costs of voting for women in cities.

Household dynamics

Women's participation in elections may also depend on support from male family members. In contexts where women's mobility is constrained, male household members often play an enabling role—for example, by accompanying women to polling stations.

Using the matched polling-station design described above, we examine whether men and women differ systematically in their **party vote preferences**. The analysis finds **modest differences in support for some political parties**, typically on the order of one to three percentage points. While these differences are small, they suggest that men and women do not always vote in the same way.

If men expect women to vote differently from themselves, they may be less willing to incur the time or effort required to facilitate women's participation. Even modest uncertainty about women's voting preferences may therefore reduce men's incentives to enable women to vote.

Policy implications

The findings suggest several considerations for policymakers seeking to strengthen women's political inclusion.

Prioritise large urban areas

Efforts to increase women's voter participation should prioritise large cities, where the gender turnout gap is largest. Urban constituencies—particularly major metropolitan areas—appear to be locations where women face the greatest barriers to electoral participation. While voter registration campaigns often target remote rural locations, targeting turnout initiatives in metropolitan areas may yield large gains in closing participatory gender gaps.

Engage partisan actors in mobilisation

Differences in parties' rural and urban mobilisation strategies may contribute to the urban participation gap. Campaign strategies in cities often rely on party workers conducting door-to-door outreach, which may limit direct engagement with women voters when the majority of workers are male. Supporting political parties to recruit and train **female campaign workers** to improve outreach to women voters could promote greater inclusion.

Reduce mobility-related barriers to voting

Policies that lower the practical costs of reaching polling stations to cast ballots may also help increase women's participation in urban areas. While one effective strategy is to encourage men to do their part to enable women's participation (Cheema et al, 2023), alternate strategies might include the kind of women-only transport options that are demonstrably effective in increasing women's labour market access (Field and Vyborny, 2022).

References

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