

She wins

Electing women in ethnically divided societies



In brief

- We conducted survey experiments across 2,000 respondents living in four districts in the state of Bihar and, within them, eight state legislative assembly constituencies equally divided between low and high communal violence districts.
- We find that women voters prefer women candidates, all candidates who offer protection, and especially women candidates who offer protection. By contrast, men have no gender preference in their selections, and they tend to prefer candidates who offer public goods.
- These results indicate that women voters do indeed care about descriptive representation, that they feel more vulnerable to personal security threats than men, and that they tend to believe women leaders may understand and act on these threats more effectively than men.
- While parties can play an important role in nominating more women candidates, voters prefer women over men candidates only when these candidates are not affiliated with political parties.
- Finally, our research shows that voters living in districts plagued with violence tend to be less supportive of women candidates. But voters who have personally experienced caste discrimination tend to prefer women. This may reflect a sense that women leaders are more sensitive to issues of bias and discrimination.

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Overview and context

Over the decades, India has made significant progress in improving women's participation in electoral politics. This is especially visible in female voter turnout in the 2019 Parliamentary Elections, which improved by 27 percent as compared to male voter turnout, which increased by a meagre seven percent.¹ While this improvement is a much-needed step towards increasing the representation and participation of women, not much has improved in terms of women contesting elections. We know from previous research that women's political participation and representation is a fundamental contributor to gender equality (Childs and Luvendusky 2013, O'Connell 2018, Iyer and Mani 2019) and a prerequisite for women's direct engagement in public policy and legislative decision making. Certain measures have been taken in the past to enable increased participation of women in contesting elections. A constitutional amendment passed in 1993 that mandated reservation of one third of the seats at Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)² for women is one such example. Recent studies (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004, Deininger et al 2017) show that reserving seats for women has led to better outcomes in terms of allocation of resources and public service delivery. However, the question of how women win electoral offices in the first place remains under-investigated.

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The evidence on women's representation in electoral politics will remain incomplete without understanding the factors that shape the electoral success of women. In this regard, candidate caste and religion, constituent characteristics, campaign strategies and political parties can play a key role. The study focuses on exploring questions around the intersection between gender, caste, campaign strategies and the presence of political parties. The questions it seeks to answer include exposure to women incumbents at the village and state levels shapes the willingness of voters to elect a woman at the higher, state level. Given the importance that parties play in shaping the electoral success of women candidates in India (Jenselius 2016, Bhavnani 2009), the study examines whether the presence of political parties on the ballot reduces the impact of gender in voting decisions and how the ideology of particular political parties might matter. The study also sheds light on how caste, religion and gender intersect to shape the attractiveness of candidates and how the appeal of different campaign messages varies by the gender of the candidate and by respondents' exposure to violence and discrimination. The study aims to contribute to promoting significant and inclusive gains in local socio-economic growth and improved gender parity.

1. <https://jgu.edu.in/jslh/blog/women-voters-and-the-2019-indian-elections/>

2. PRIs are a system of three tier governance at the local administration comprising three levels of governance at village, block and district levels.

About the study

Data collection for the study was conducted in four districts of Bihar. Bihar is one of India's largest and poorest states, and it has a history of caste violence. However, in the recent past it has not only experienced a period of unprecedented growth and development, but has also become, since 2006, one of India's nine states to have constitutionally mandated 50% reservations for women in all elected positions within the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's). That said, this project was concerned specifically with elections for the position of Member of the State Legislative Assembly or MLA, where women's representation is poor and perhaps getting poorer (see Figure 1).

The districts were chosen according to the level and prevalence of ethnic (caste) violence and civil rights discrimination.³ Gaya and Madhubani are categorised as districts with high caste atrocities whereas Jamui and Supaul have low caste atrocities (See Figure 2). The selection based on this categorisation is important to understand the role played by ethnic violence and discrimination in conditioning the success of a candidate. It helps to explain whether voters choose to elect candidates who offer to curb violence in their campaign strategies in a gender differentiated setting. Further, two assembly constituencies were chosen in each of the four districts for data collection. Four out of the eight constituencies had female MLAs. A conjoint survey experiment was conducted to collect data for this study.

Figure 1: Overview of women elected representatives in Bihar state assembly

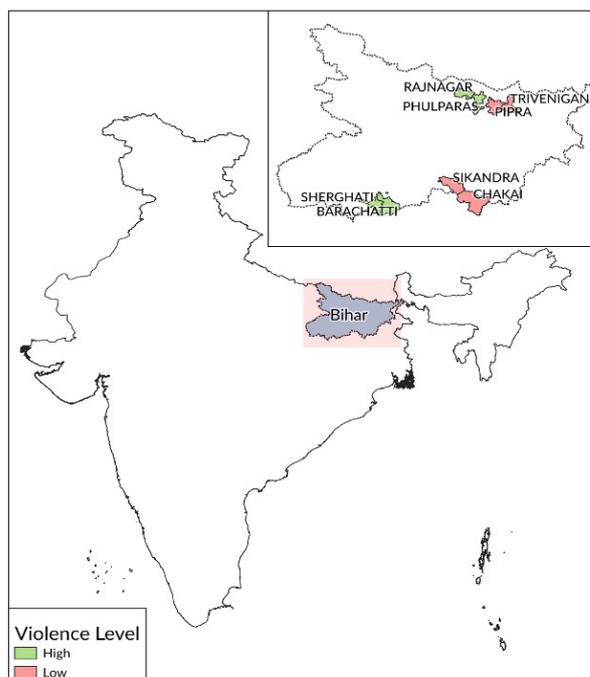


It is a widely used technique to collect information on multidimensional preferences to obtain causal effects of multiple attributes for a given set of hypotheses. Approximately 2000 respondents participated in the experiment through random selection from 10 polling booths in each of the constituencies. The respondents were shown two pairs of hypothetical MLA candidates and were asked to choose between the two based on their individual preference. The hypothetical candidates were randomised

3. According to the provisions of Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes/Tribes Act, 1989.

according to attributes on gender, caste and appeal. Respondents were then shown another two pairs of candidates randomised in the same way, but this time the candidates were associated with either the BJP or the RJD. Additionally, a set of information on socio-economic characteristics was collected using a structured questionnaire.

Figure 2: Field site



The survey experiments were complemented with in depth qualitative interviews of fifty political party functionaries, NGO members, and current elected representatives in Bihar. The findings based on these data shed interesting light on the role of ethnicity, caste, parties and of existing women’s representation in shaping the success of women MLA candidates.

Significant findings

First, we find no evidence that local Panchayati reservations help women succeed in elections at the higher tier. Indeed, regardless of whether respondents perceive their local women representatives – either at the village or state level - as effective, women’s representation at these levels have limited consequences for the success of assembly level women candidates. Further, many women mukhiyas we interviewed in fact stated that they did not aspire to contest the Vidhan Sabha elections. In some cases, they were not aware of the process of contesting the state level elections. Observations from the field also suggest widespread prevalence of mukhiya patis, referring to the husbands (or, sometimes, male family members) of the elected women PRIs who are in charge of taking major decisions on behalf of the elected

female candidate, thus reducing the elected woman representative to a figurehead role. That said, some women mukhiyas were clearly exercising real authority and intended to contest elections at higher tiers.

Second, political party affiliation does seem to trump gender effects as expected. What is less expected is that women do better than men when no parties are listed, so the overall effect of including parties is to reduce support for women. Perhaps more surprising, our results indicate that forward caste women candidates affiliated with the BJP gain significantly less support than similar candidates affiliated with the RJD. Given Hindu upper-caste gender norms which dictate the greatest social restrictions for upper-caste women, we speculate that voters expect BJP leaders and functionaries to treat their upper-caste women candidates less favourably in terms of intra-party allocations of support, and that they therefore perceive upper-caste women affiliated with the BJP as relatively weak candidates. Meanwhile, since the leadership and core support base of the RJD is predominantly lower-caste, voters should not expect the RJD leadership and functionaries to discriminate against its upper-caste women candidates in the same way.

Third, voters who live in more violent districts tend to prefer male candidates more than those who live in peaceful places. Contrary to expectations, however, voters who have experienced caste discrimination also tend to prefer women. These findings may indicate the operation of stereotypes that men are better at offering protection whereas women are more sensitive to issues of injustice. The preference for women candidates is reinforced among voters who have experienced caste atrocities once they experience women MLAs in their respective constituencies.

Finally, we find that women prefer women candidates, all candidates who offer ethnic security, and especially women candidates who offer security. By contrast, men have no gender preference in their selections and they tend to prefer candidates who offer public goods. These results indicate that women voters do indeed care about descriptive representation, that they feel more vulnerable to personal security threats than men, and that they tend to believe women leaders may understand and act on these threats more effectively than men. In terms of ethnicity, we find that Muslim candidates do worse than other candidates and that Muslim women in particular experience a “double disadvantage” amongst respondents with strongly held preferences. That said, Muslim respondents rate Muslim candidates more favourably than other candidates and this preference for co-ethnics holds amongst Scheduled Caste respondents as well.

Policy significance

For both political parties and organisations with an aim to promote inclusion of women within the space of electoral politics in India, the case of Bihar appears as an excellent model from which possible points of action can be extrapolated. The highlights of the study help us to suggest the following:

- 1. The study reveals that reservations for women at the PRI or local level do not guarantee a spillover or a natural edge at higher tiers.** Women aspiring as assembly election candidates must invest to promote an election agenda which is based on delivering ‘public goods’ (the preferred appeal of men voters) as well as on security from communal or caste violence and discrimination. Women may also be at a greater disadvantage in more violent constituencies. Still, our results suggest that women voters favour women candidates who promise security and protection over men who promise the same, and that those who have experienced discrimination also prefer women candidates. All of this suggests that women may have a special role to play in terms of safeguarding the interests of vulnerable constituents.
- 2. The Women’s Reservation Bill, also known as the 108th Amendment Bill, 2008 that seeks to reserve one third of the total seats of Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women is still pending at the Lok Sabha. This bill can provide the much-needed push to make the political space more inclusive for female candidates.** Indeed, voters in the lower end of the social structure, who have experienced discrimination, do prefer women candidates once they become accustomed to women MLAs. While reservations for Scheduled Castes are a step in the right direction, these reservations have had no spillover benefits for women candidates, at least at the level of short-run voter preference.
- 3. State Assembly Level elections are still dominated by men, muscle and financial power used for clientelism and campaigning. Parties can help level the playing field by nominating more female candidates, but our results suggest that party affiliations can, all else equal, actually undermine voters’ preferences for women candidates. Parties thus must not only nominate more women but also do more to support women while they campaign and when they are in office.** Such a commitment from parties can do much to offset concerns among voters, especially on the right, that if they elect women representatives, they will be ineffective in delivering on their promises.
- 4. Women-centred social mobilisation programmes like JEEVIKA, i.e. Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society, create a strong cadre of grassroots women leaders working closely with the community.** Panchayat-level reservations have also contributed to the creation of such a cohort. This village-level women leaders are willing to take up stronger positions of responsibility through electoral politics not only at local levels but also at state levels.

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