

Local Gender Quotas: Measures that Facilitate or Hinder Women's Political Advancement in India

Policy Issue

Local gender quotas may not only boost women's representation at the local level, but at higher levels of government as well. Women's representation at the local level may demonstrate their competence, thus changing attitudes toward female candidates more generally. Consequently, positive spillover effects may be possible. But do local gender quotas increase women's success in higher-level elections?

"Previous research suggests not only that local government could provide an important entry point for women into politics but also that the expansion of women's local-level representation could have 'spillover effects' for women's representation at higher tiers."

(Thomas et al., 2023, p. 3)

In a recent [study](#), Anjali Thomas, Charles Hankla, Sayan Banerjee, and Arindam Banerjee seek to answer this question using a conjoint survey experiment and semi-structured interviews, investigating the effects of local gender quotas on voter support for female candidates in state-level elections in Bihar, India. While previous research has shown that the expansion of women's local-level representation could have 'spillover effects' for women's representation at higher tiers by increasing the supply of women candidates at higher levels of government, Anjali Thomas and her co-authors seek to examine whether exposure to local gender quotas increases voters' demand or preference for women candidates at higher levels of government.

The study's conclusions draw into question expectations that local gender quotas facilitate women's advancement at higher levels.

- **No Direct Correlation:** Exposure to local gender quotas did not increase support for female candidates at the state level, either amongst male or female voters.
- **No Impact of Effective Local Female Leaders:** Even when local female leaders elected through quotas were perceived as effective, this did not translate into greater voter support for female candidates at the state level.
- **Backlash Among "Partially Progressive" Men:** The study uncovered backlash from "partially progressive" male voters. These are men who were initially supportive of female candidates but who withdrew their support when exposed to local quotas.

Relying solely on local gender quotas may not effectively address voter attitudes towards female candidates at state-level politics. Gender disparities are deeply rooted in societal norms, cultural beliefs, and structural systems that vary across contexts. Failure to navigate this complexity could perpetuate gender gaps in political representation, hindering women's progression towards substantive political roles and inclusive decision-making processes.



Photo Credit: Prashanth Pinha, Unsplash

Recommendations

Beyond Parity in Local Governance: Local gender quotas contribute to some level of representation for women and aid in familiarizing voters with female candidates, but they are not a panacea for women's representation at higher levels. Policymakers should anticipate potential backlash and devise strategies to mitigate their impact. Achieving meaningful progress in women's political representation requires approaches beyond mere quota implementation.

Identify the Cutoff: Researchers and NGOs should commit to determining the threshold at which exposure to female leadership triggers backlash among partially progressive men, for instance, by analyzing voting patterns and attitudes in regions with varying levels of women's representation. It is crucial to understand the underlying reasons and conditions contributing to the perception of women's leadership as a threat to men's interests.

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