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Women's Pathways to Politics: Political Participation, Representation, and Local Governance in India

Abstract: In India there persists a striking gender gap in political participation and representation, despite several decades of targeted policy interventions. Women's political participation is important not only on normative grounds of inclusion, but because past research shows that when women do participate, politics often changes. Yet we know little about how to increase women's political participation and electoral representation as well as about the link between women's path to participation/representation and their policy priorities thereafter. This leaves us asking: How do women in developing contexts become active political agents and overcome the high barriers to entry into political decision-making and political action? Once women become active participants in local politics, how do their interactions with the political system differ from those of men? Having been excluded from traditional political networks, how do women organize politically and what does this mean for the execution and performance of local politics and economic development? This paper studies the consequences of the way that women reach political office by looking at the intersection of women's political participation and electoral representation in shaping local politics and service delivery. Specifically, I focus on local governments in the India state of Madhya Pradesh, leveraging two natural experiments: the first creating arbitrary variation in women's representation via gender reservations and the second creating induced variation in women's political participation via the arbitrary allocation of a female-targeted welfare scheme. First, gender-based reservations for electoral office are mandated in the Indian constitution and quasi-randomly assigned by the state electoral commission. This paper leverages the assignment of gender reservations overlaid with as-if random variation in access to an NGO program shown previously to have a large and positive impact on women's political participation to estimate the relationship between women's political representation and women's active political participation and resultant effects on governance and service delivery. This paper utilizes the positive shock to women's political participation in villages that had received the NGO intervention, empirically shown in Artiz Prillaman (2016). It then compares administrative data on public goods provision and economic development across four types of villages: (1) villages with no gender reservation and low female political participation, (2) villages with no gender reservation and high female political participation, (3) villages with a gender reservation and low female political participation, and (4) villages with a gender reservation and high female political participation. This comparison elucidates the relationship between female political engagement, both as citizens and representatives, and local governance and development.