




Inclusive reforms as levers for social exclusion: The paradoxical consequences of quotas for women in rural India[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Why do radical institutional changes to democratize who accesses power fail to change who realizes power in practice? We argue that disjunctures between formal changes in representation and actual shifts in decision-making power do not squarely fit into narratives of unintended consequences, path dependency, or elite capture. Instead, we posit that the paradoxically inegalitarian effects of egalitarian reforms can occur when reform-writing elites design policy to be radical by the numbers, while maintaining their hold on power through less publicized features of these reforms. We illustrate this argument about incongruous policy-making with the case of one numerically spectacular gender egalitarian reform: electoral gender quotas in Indian village councils. Leveraging micro-level survey data, historical analysis, and interview data, we present two main findings. First, we document what we term the gender quota paradox: the fact that quotas brought in globally unprecedented numbers of women to power formally, while granting them limited power in practice, and more broadly delegitimizing women's political leadership on a societal scale with common acceptance of the "proxy" narrative. Second, we study the sequence and nature of the reform, and identify how the paradoxical effects we document stem from the complex and at times contradictory incentives of policy-makers.

1. Introduction

The past two centuries have witnessed a global move toward egalitarian reforms that seek to fundamentally redistribute access to political power. Such radically egalitarian reforms have also commonly produced paradoxically inegalitarian outcomes. In the United States, Black enfranchisement led to the emergence of new forms of racial exclusion like gerrymandering, the disenfranchisement of felons, and mass incarceration (Behrens, Uggen, & Manza, 2003; Eubank & Fresh, 2022). The French Revolution of 1789, often considered “the birth of egalitarian democracy”, galvanized the “universal and novel exclusion of women from formal politics” (Tudor, 2022, 47). Across Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, bringing government closer to local communities through political decentralization has engendered new forms of elite dominance over economic and political resources (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000, 2006; Chatterjee & Pal, 2021; Labonte, 2012; Mattingly, 2016).

Why do radical institutional reforms that democratize who can access power fail to change who realizes power in practice, and sometimes even generate new forms of inequality? Conventional wisdom posits three main pathways that explain the downstream consequences of such institutional reforms. The first claims these consequences to be “unintended”, unpredictable events that demonstrate an exogenous departure from the intended aim of the reform (Brulé, 2020a; Eubank & Fresh, 2022; Fouka, 2020). A second camp highlights the role of path dependency: institutions “lock in” social and political trajectories onto an equilibrium path at the outset (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Pierson, 2000). Third, particularly in reference to reforms that democratize power, researchers underline the seemingly inevitable role of elite persistence and capture in explaining reforms’ underwhelming impact (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000; Heinze, 2025; North & Weingast, 1989).

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In this article, we theorize and document another avenue through which formal changes in representation do not lead to shifts in decision-making power, and instead further entrench inequalities. We argue that the inegalitarian effects of egalitarian reforms may stem from incongruous policy-making — the coexistence of both progressive preferences and retrograde incentives within the policy coalition driving reform, and often, within the individuals driving reform. To translate these incongruous aspirations into law, reform-writing elites design policy to be numerically radical while maintaining their hold on power through less publicized features of reforms. These crucial, underpublicized features of reforms generally have teeth: they prevent radical change — and in some cases create new forms of inequality — such that *de facto* power remains firmly in the hands of incumbent elites. We posit that these institutional changes and their paradoxical consequences belong to a broader class of reforms characterized by *instrumental mismatch* between stated, explicit aims and strategic, implicit motivations of reforming elites (Faguet & Shami, 2022). Power holders instrumentalize reform in ways that do not match its explicit aims.

We illustrate this argument with one widely studied gender-equalizing reform: gender quotas in Indian village councils. The adoption of the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992 represented a revolutionary attempt to redistribute power along gendered lines: one-third of all local councils seats and local council president seats were reserved for women across all Indian states. We leverage micro-level survey data from over 600 villages in Maharashtra, historical analyses of secondary and primary resources, and interview data to substantiate two main findings. First, while gender quotas were numerically spectacular and radically gender-inclusive on paper, we demonstrate that they engendered paradoxically gender-regressive outcomes in practice. We term this the gender quota paradox. Second, to explain the gender quota paradox, we illustrate the fact that the authors of the reform — male national and state-level elites — displayed attitudes during the making of the reform that were at odds with their professed egalitarian goals. Plus, we show that many in the reforming coalition also held private motives opposite to quotas' explicit gender-equalizing goal. While veto-player preferences diverged in several ways, they overlapped in the intention to enact a numerically spectacular reform, due to the salience of the short-term electoral motives they held in common. But they likely all held a preference for reform that lacked teeth such that they could retain their grip on political institutions. These shared motives drove elites to create institutions that, in practice, produce consequences in the long run that are incongruous with their stated goals for reform.

This research makes three main contributions. First, we advance scholarship on gender quotas as a tool to advance gender equality globally (Brulé, 2020b; Brulé & Tóth, 2025; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Iyer, Mani, Mishra, & Topalova, 2012). Recent work finds that gender quotas do not fully resolve challenges of elite capture or the gendered constraints of prior political, economic and social networks, such that gender gaps remain in how elected women and men are able to preside over decision-making processes and governance more generally (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Clayton, 2021; Heinze, Brulé, & Chauchard, 2025; Prillaman, 2024). In this article, we provide theory that helps scholars to unpack the heterogeneity of gender quotas' impact by considering how a combination of elite strategic interests and structural constraints led to the selection of quota legislation that fails to align with both the global and domestic rhetoric about the purpose and predicted impact of quotas as a tool for fundamental disruption of gendered power. The fact that we observe varied impact of gender quotas in India and globally should not be understood as simply due to local variations in the capacity of women to compete for elections and subsequently govern; in this work, we shed light on the importance of constraints placed by reform-writing elites to effectively open up political space for women to govern.

Second, we help explain the striking global adoption of gender-equalizing reforms across autocratic and democratic regimes. A growing body of theory and evidence document strategic interests by authoritarian regimes to support gender quotas (Bush, Donno, & Zetterberg, 2024; Noh, Grewal, & Kilavuz, 2023; Tripp, 2019). We advance this literature by providing new theory and evidence that elites in democracies not only adopt gender quotas for equally strategic aims, but that the *design* of reforms is a key strategic tool with predictable, substantively important consequences for gender equality post-reform (Faguet & Shami, 2022). We argue that studying the making and legislative content of gender-equalizing reforms is crucial for understanding how gendered power can be disrupted by the male elites who stand to lose the most from these changes (Brulé, 2020a; Tudor, 2022).

Third, we more generally contribute to the core question of why elites ever agree to tie their hands and renounce power (North & Weingast, 1989). The dominant assumption is that elites will only renounce power when it appears central to ensuring their material and political future. Yet the strategic nature of elite concessions—in particular, design features of constitutions and other forms of commitment that enable the endurance of elite control are understudied. Building on studies that document male elite coordination in local Indian government (Anderson, Francois, & Kotwal, 2015; Heinze, 2025), we extend this literature to a crucial domain: quotas, which not only constrain the central state, but are the very foundation upon which local, village-level states are built in contemporary India.

2. Theory: From instrumental mismatch to paradoxically inegalitarian outcomes

Elites frequently implement reforms to include members of disadvantaged groups in political processes: in just a few decades, for example, over 130 countries have restructured political institutions to include some form of gender quota (Clayton, 2021). In principle, such changes allow members of groups that traditionally do not have access to political institutions to acquire greater political agency, to better influence the policy process, and to acquire greater legitimacy in the political sphere (Mansbridge, 1999). Yet, “the positive effects of quotas are not universal, and... [some] quotas have led to limited policy changes or even to more gender-inegalitarian outcomes” (Clayton, 2021). In this article, we draw on the framework of Faguet and Shami (2022) to explain the seemingly paradoxical outcome of India's gender quotas, before outlining how our own explanation differs from existing explanations.

We argue that gender-equalizing reforms can produce gender inegalitarian consequences because reformers include in the design of their own policy inegalitarian elements which curb transformational change. We further argue that reformers do so because the motives they publicly state to justify reform do not represent the entirety of their motivations, and because their other, private motivations lead them to willingly insert clauses or elements that counter, limit, or stifle the potentially gender-equalizing effects that reform is supposed to promote.

At the heart of our argument lie two simple but credible assumptions. The first is that veto-players or deciders in such reforms are mostly male elites. By definition, gender-equalizing electoral reforms become necessary when there is an underrepresentation of women. Insofar as more elected seats for women inevitably means fewer seats for men, male elites mechanically stand to lose from the implementation of gender-equalizing reform, even if losses may be partly offset by reputational gains (Bush et al., 2024; Noh et al., 2023). This adds complexity to reforming (male) elites' incentives.

Our second assumption is that two distinct sets of rationales tend to drive reforms to better guarantee women's access to political representation. The first set may be referred to as “stated”, “official” or “public” reasoning. They tend to invoke normative or developmental motivations to create space for women in political institutions: the need

for integrating women's preferences to design better policies (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004), to politically integrate actors with different practices or qualities (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001), or to display exemplary equality at the apex of society—state representatives—to facilitate changes in all ranks of society (Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2009). These stated rationales often integrate more vague normative imperatives for society to change, or, interestingly, for men to share power.

Yet, as already hinted by the literature on the adoption of quotas in authoritarian settings (Bush et al., 2024; Noh et al., 2023), official, public motivations cannot be taken at face value as private motives often play a role in such reforms. These “ulterior”, “unofficial”, or “private” motives are often reputational, though they may engage different audiences. Reformers may seek to be portrayed as progressives to benefit from foreign aid or from a positive international reputation. Alternately, private motives may be to influence domestic audiences, with an eye towards political competition, sometimes in the very short term. Gender quotas may, for instance, allow elites to present themselves as champions for female voters, or more generally as progressive, to garner political support that will extend their time in office (Htun & Jones, 2002) or restructure their electoral base. Because gender quotas tend to be visible and contentious, they may be of utmost importance as salient policy planks to forge new electoral coalitions in upcoming electoral contests (Brulé, 2020a).

Public and private motives need not be mutually exclusive. The very same male elite reformers may be motivated by the genuine “public” motivations we have highlighted as well as by these private motives. Alternatively, different veto players may have varied motivations, with some harboring gender-progressive motivations, and others harboring mostly strategic or reputational motivations. In the latter case, private motives will lead to the legal inclusion of gender-regressive elements when the progressive camp – if and when it genuinely exists – does not have sufficient bargaining power to legislate reform absent these elements' inclusion.

Private motivations, if sufficiently prominent, will thus be consequential and shape the very content of the reform. The mechanism we invoke here is mainly legal and legislative: the existence of private motives will affect the details of the act and be reflected in either the text itself, its interpretation, or both. This may be through amendments or more discrete modifications of an initially egalitarian reform, if and when such an egalitarian objective ever existed. Alternatively, private motives may be reflected in the text in its very first draft.

The inclusion in law of countervailing elements – some promoting equality and others implicitly or explicitly seeking to limit egalitarian outcomes – may lead to different types of inconsistent or incoherent outcomes. A leading version of this may for instance be the enactment of reforms that are wide-ranging in scope or in numbers in order to signal support for gender-equalizing change – for instance, the reservation of many seats for women, or the choice to allocate a large percentage of the seats in an assembly to quotas – but that lack teeth, insofar as the women elected through this mechanism are not provided with sufficient safeguards to subsequently influence decisions based on the legal text that equalizes women's access to office. Alternatively, reformers may engender a system that guarantees a small, symbolic number of women access to very powerful positions – hence reversing patterns of gendered power in a handful of cases – while making it hard for large numbers of women to gain access to political power in a similar manner. In both of these cases, the countervailing elements invoked by legal provisions may manifest themselves in the form of “sinful omissions”; or, even more clearly, through the addition of clauses, articles, and amendments which actively commit to prevent the transformational changes promised in other parts of the act.

While it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove that such sabotage of egalitarian reforms is intentional or “by design”, we argue such strategic inconsistency should be thought of as a direct reflection of male elites' incentives. The calculation on this front is simple. Assuming

male elites are not naturally inclined to limit their acquisition and retention of political power, we can infer that reforms which actually have teeth would decrease male elite utility by challenging their political power. This may be in the medium-term rather than the short-term; though either should be an equally unpleasant perspective. However, it is also notable that for male elites contemplating gender-equalizing reforms, maintaining the status quo – in this scenario, refraining from implementing reforms that enlarge women's access to political offices – would likely also decrease their utility. This is because refusing to legislate gender-equalizing reform would likely prevent male elites from enjoying the reputational gains they may otherwise derive from implementing such a reform, with downstream consequences on their electability and ability to remain in power. Cornered between these contradictory incentives, male elites frequently enact a reform, but a reform whose effects are limited either because of elements which curb its transformational effects, or because of the failure to include all necessary features to guarantee that transformational change is achievable.

While we believe such strategies to be common and to extend beyond gender quotas, our theory differs from leading rationales for apparently incongruous egalitarian reform. The problematic consequences of the reform are here not *unintended* (Brulé, 2020a; Eubank & Fresh, 2022; Fouka, 2020), as the mismatch we document occurs precisely because there never was a single, clearly identifiable, explicit, coherent intention. It is not the case here that an initially coherent, visionary strategy was unrealized, and that another outcome supplanted it due to later strategic engineering. In our account, there never was a coherent, consistent and clearly thought-out intention agreed upon by the main stakeholders. In the case we develop below, this owes to a number of factors: the attitudes of the main veto-players (e.g. paternalism and negligence during the design of the act); the fact that decisions also stemmed from aligned strategic incentives; and the fact that progressive decisions required compromises between actors (which further accentuated the incoherence of decisions taken). As a result of these combined factors, a reform meant to be egalitarian on paper was implemented without much planning or attention to the consequences of the decisions taken. While official announcements were spectacular and promised to usher in a new era of politics, none of the commitments to conduct political and administrative work that would have been necessary to allow for such (spectacular) societal transformations had been made. In that sense, it is not that the outcomes of the reform were unintended, it is instead that they lacked coherence and intentions from the beginning.

Second, our explanation is distinct from those invoking the role of path dependency (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Pierson, 2000). Here, there is no formal path dependency, insofar as reformers do in fact enact spectacular – albeit incomplete and paradoxical – changes. These reforms substantially disrupt power, breaking prior institutional structures or paths of power distribution. In fact, we argue that reforms introduce changes which open the door to unexpected consequences that are either not in reformers' favor or do not reflect their preferred option. As these types of reforms open political space in imperfect, porous ways, reformers engage in a relatively risky strategy: the minimal and limited changes they make do lead initially to minimal and controlled change, but that change may catalyze future transformations that are outside their control. Concretely, however limited access to power that gender-equalizing reforms provide to women, these reforms place male elites in a less advantageous position than they occupied prior to reform.

Finally, we distinguish our explanation from traditional arguments about ex-post elite persistence or elite capture of political institutions (North & Weingast, 1989). According to our theory, contradictory design choices lead to outcomes that constrain women's access to power. In this sense, male elites do not ex post *capture* an agenda for gender equality: they merely benefit from the – likely intentional – incongruence and inconsistency of their own reform to effectively prevent substantive gender-equalizing change. The form of elite capture which

de facto occurs in this context and which we document is particularly pernicious: its actors do not merely capture power they fought hard to maintain; they recapture political institutions that, according to the reform they themselves advertised and promoted, they explicitly aimed to democratize.

3. Context

Quotas or “reservations” for women in rural Indian local-level political institutions became law in 1992 with the adoption of 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Reservations constituted a small component of the legislation, which included measures to establish a uniform institutional structure for decentralized rural local government across India. The Amendment mandated that all states form three tiers of elected governments with five-year terms at the village, block, and district levels, “endow[ed] with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government” (Kumar, 2002, Article 243G, c.f. 11–12).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment followed three rounds of state-led decentralization encouraged by the central government: first as voluntary “Directive Principles of State Policy” (Article 40) in India’s Constitution, adopted in 1950; second in 1957 by the Balwantrai Mehta study team, advanced by Prime Minister Nehru; and third as recommendations by the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1978 (Kumar, 2006, 17–21). Notably, none of these prior versions of decentralization prioritized women’s electoral inclusion via reservations. India’s 73rd Amendment was thus a radical break, mandating women’s election to at least one-third of all positions for local village government president and member positions, alongside reserved seats for members of traditionally excluded castes and tribes based on their population proportion. This amendment required a substantial increase in the numbers of women mandated to hold office and that women be *elected* rather than selected via co-optation, as had been waived as a possibility in several of the aforementioned committees.

4. Data and design

We employ a dual strategy to substantiate the two parts of our argument.

First, we use quantitative data and designs to establish the existence of what we term the “gender quota paradox”. This refers to the fact that quotas brought in globally unprecedented numbers of women to power formally, while granting them limited power in practice, and more broadly delegitimizing women’s political leadership on a societal scale, with common acceptance of the “proxy” narrative. For this part of the empirics, we leverage original, micro-level survey data on local-level power dynamics from over 600 villages in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Appendix A details our sampling strategy, survey structure, and descriptive data on those interviewed. We draw on measures from five interrelated instruments, including interviews in each sampled village of: (1) the village council president (*sarpanch*), the actor we focus on in this article; (2) the council vice president, who is nominated from among the council members (*upa sarpanch*); (3) the council bureaucrat (*gram sevak*); (4) six citizens in each village, balanced by gender and caste; and (5) a standardized group discussion between the *sarpanch*, the *upa sarpanch*, and the *gram sevak*.² We describe the outcome variables and their construction immediately prior to their presentation in the results section, and at greater length in Appendix C.

To demonstrate the gender quota paradox, we conduct both descriptive and causal analyses of these micro-level data. To show that gender quotas have produced new forms of gendered political exclusion, we explore the *causal impact* of gender quotas that “reserve” the *sarpanch*

seat for women on several measures of gendered political exclusion. We exploit gender quotas’ *random* allocation for causal identification (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).³ In Maharashtra, half of village councils are randomly assigned to receive a gender quota for the *sarpanch* seat, with replacement, each election. This enables us to estimate the causal impact of being a quota-elected woman *sarpanch*, rather than a non-quota-elected (most often) man *sarpanch*. To demonstrate community acceptance of norms that delegitimize women’s leadership, we demonstrate descriptively the broad existence of these perceptions across our sample, in quota- and non-quota villages. This broad scope of norm acceptance is important to document beyond those villages with contemporaneous quotas because quotas rotate within every village, making the designation of “non-quota” villages temporary.

Second, we employ qualitative analysis to demonstrate that the gender quota paradox is endogenous to the incongruous policy-making that took place at the time the reform was devised. We process-trace the political dynamics that preceded and followed the legislation and implementation of quotas, for the political parties and political elites whom historical sources identify as central to the formation, structure, and impact of reservations and the broader decentralization of state power in the same legislation. To do so, we triangulate across historical political analysis, publications in popular presses across India, and face-to-face interviews with key political elites, activists, and scholars. Overall, we seek to provide a critical analysis of both the timing and structure of reservations which engages with gendered power dynamics alongside the caste- and development-focused analyses typically presented in studies of India’s major decentralization.

5. The gender quota paradox

Gender quotas as they were implemented in the early 1990s in India ushered in globally unparalleled masses of women into local office, a testament to their numerically impressive nature. Much research demonstrates that quotas opened up previously inaccessible political space to women leaders and voters in important ways (Bhavnani, 2009; Brulé, 2020b; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). At the same time, we posit that gender quotas have also produced paradoxically gender-inegalitarian outcomes. We argue that gender quotas have created new forms of gendered political subordination and gender-regressive norms around women’s ability to govern. The coexistence of these two empirical facts – quotas’ radical success in ushering women into the corridors of power and radical failure in substantially altering gendered political subordination, indeed creating new forms of gendered political subordination – is what we term the “gender quota paradox”, which we document empirically in what follows.⁴

First, our data attests to the fact that gender quotas have created new forms of gendered political subordination. In the Indian case, this has been famously termed as “proxyism”. Table 1 documents this fact, along three major axes of patriarchal political inequality: the family, the political institution of the village council, and the bureaucracy. We triangulate across data collection from 1) a group meeting of the key political actors described earlier where we collected behavioral measures of influence and participation and 2) a survey of citizens in each locality, where we measure the dominance of key household actors (here: spouses), political actors (the council president and vice president or *sarpanch* and *upa sarpanch*), and bureaucratic gatekeepers (the council bureaucrat or *gram sevak*). We focus on three measures,

³ We present evidence of the randomized nature of the allocation in Appendix B.

⁴ We note that this analysis is imperfect because we do not have the actual counterfactual – no gender quotas implemented anywhere, ever – as a comparison. Instead, we approximate this counterfactual by comparing villages with gender quotas currently to those without them. In the next section, we use historical evidence to reason further about the counterfactual.

² Additional details about these surveys is included in Appendix A.

Table 1
Gender quotas and entrenched household, political, and bureaucratic patriarchy.

	Most influential in group discussion	Prop. spoken in group discussion	More active in gram sabha
Sarpanch			
(Intercept)	0.362*** (0.027)	0.340*** (0.009)	0.728*** (0.013)
Gender quota	−0.259*** (0.033)	−0.126*** (0.012)	−0.082*** (0.021)
Num.Obs.	604	603	3143
R2	0.093	0.159	0.008
Spouse			
(Intercept)	0.003 (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)	0.036*** (0.006)
Gender quota	0.041** (0.013)	0.029*** (0.007)	0.034** (0.011)
Num.Obs.	604	604	3093
R2	0.019	0.031	0.006
Upa sarpanch			
(Intercept)	0.135*** (0.019)	0.227*** (0.007)	0.099*** (0.009)
Gender quota	0.061* (0.030)	0.041*** (0.011)	0.067*** (0.016)
Num.Obs.	604	603	3066
R2	0.007	0.024	0.010
Gram sevak			
(Intercept)	0.401*** (0.028)	0.405*** (0.008)	0.221*** (0.013)
Gender quota	0.164*** (0.040)	0.058*** (0.012)	0.048* (0.019)
Num.Obs.	604	603	3055
R2	0.027	0.036	0.003
Std.Errors	HC2	HC2	by: GP

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Each model is a linear regression of a binary indicator for gender quota on outcomes. All regressions use robust standard errors. Regressions using outcomes from the citizen survey (column 3) use GP-clustered standard errors.

collected for all actors: first, whether each is reported to be the most influential actor in the group discussion (1 if yes, 0 otherwise); second, the proportion of time that the given actor is reported to speak in the group discussion (0–1); and third, whether any given actor excluding the *sarpanch* (council president) is reported by citizens to be more active in the village-wide meeting, the *gram sabha*, compared to the *sarpanch* elected to preside over this forum (1 if yes, 0 otherwise). We compare these outcomes for the spouse, *upa sarpanch*, and *gram sevak* to those measures for the *sarpanch*.⁵

We gather two main takeaways from Table 1. First, as shown in panel one, quota-elected *sarpanches* (who by definition are all women) are strikingly less likely to preside over council decision-making in the ways intended by their *de jure* role, compared to their non-quota (mostly men) counterparts. While non-quota *sarpanches* are said to be the most influential in the group discussion 36 percent of the time (column one), speak 34 percent of the time in these discussions (column 2), and are identified as the most active gram sabha actor by citizens 73 percent of the time (column 3), these numbers drop to 10 percent, 21 percent, and 65 percent, respectively, for quota-elected women *sarpanches*. Taken together, these results indicate important forms of exclusion from governance that women leaders face when they are elected through quotas. Elsewhere, we document that differential interference leads to substantial gender inequalities in decision-making (Heinze et al., 2025).

The second main takeaway from Table 1 pertains to the question of “proxyism”, or the political interference of others in the *de jure* duties of the *sarpanch*. The second, third, and fourth panels in Table 1 demonstrate that various actors interfere in the work of the *sarpanch*, disproportionately so when she is a quota-elected woman. The second

panel in Table 1 demonstrates that relative to unreserved council seats, we observe significantly greater political interference of spouses in gender quota-reserved seats. Where gender quotas are in place (and thus women are elected as council presidents), their spouses are anywhere from twice as likely (column three) to thirteen times as likely (column one) to behave or be reported as governing in the place of their elected partner. This finding of gendered political dominance is replicated, though to a less extreme degree, when considering interference by key political actors (the elected *upa sarpanch*, appointed to serve as second-in-command to the *sarpanch*) and bureaucratic gatekeepers (the *gram sevak* or lead village bureaucrat) in panels 3 and 4. Compared to when male presidents are elected (in gender unreserved seats), gender quota-reserved seats cause an increase in reports of the *upa sarpanch* (panel 2) and *gram sevak* (panel 3) exercising political interference.

Notably, these data do not suggest that the majority of quota-elected women *sarpanches* are mere “proxies”: Table 1 shows that while women do have an increased propensity to face interference relative to men, they do not all face such forms of interference. Adding the intercept (the control mean) to the coefficients (the gender differential) yields average rates of interference (among quota-elected women leaders) that range anywhere from 3 percent (by spouses in group discussions where the *sarpanch* seat is reserved for women) to 56 percent of the time (by *gram sevak*s over discussion where seats are reserved for women heads), depending on the measure. At the same time, the fact that quota-elected women *sarpanches* are significantly and substantively more likely to face these forms of political interference when compared to their non-quota (male) counterparts indicates a system of gendered political subordination facilitated, at least in part, through quotas.

What is perhaps more significant than the levels of gendered political interference (shown in Table 1) — which, as discussed, suggest that the majority of quota-elected *sarpanches* are *not* proxies — are the results documented in Fig. 1. Here, we document the robust persistence

⁵ We provide additional details on these survey items in Appendix C.

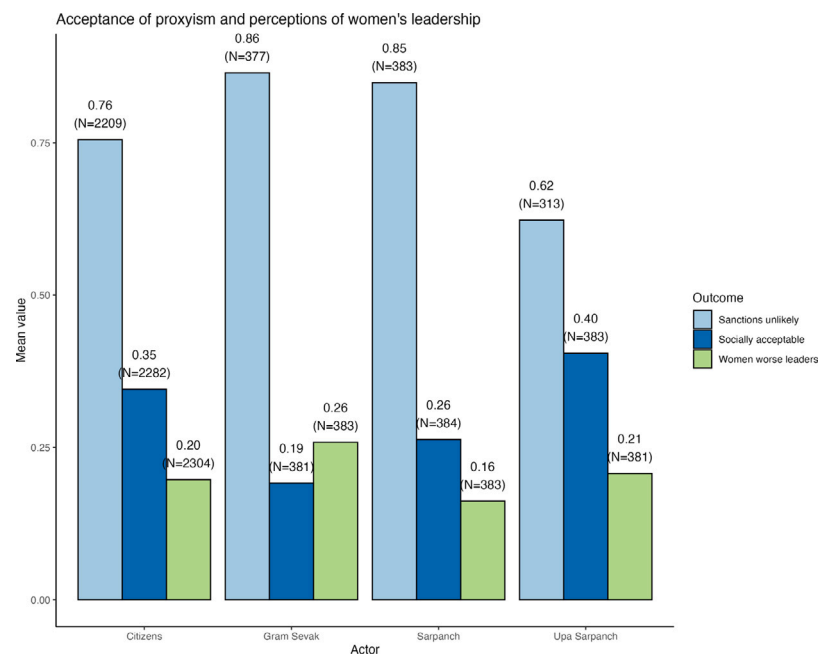


Fig. 1. Communities propagate the proxyism norm.

Note: Fig. 1 shows the mean for each outcome question (proportion of “yes” responses), by actor. This set of questions was added to the survey in a later phase, hence the overall smaller Ns.

and acceptance of gendered political interference within communities. For four types of actors in our data — citizens, the *gram sevak* (the village council bureaucrat), the *sarpanch* themselves, and the *upa sarpanch* (the council vice president) — we document their broad acceptance of proxyism and negative perceptions of women’s leadership in general. We do so by asking three questions: whether or not they perceive sanctions to be likely if someone interferes in the work of the *sarpanch*, whether or not such interference is socially acceptable, and whether or not women make worse leaders than men.⁶

The light blue bar demonstrates that for each category of actor, sanctions for proxyism are perceived as almost universally unlikely. 85 percent of sarpanches themselves report that actors who interfere in the work of the sarpanch are unlikely to be sanctioned. In darker blue, we document the percentage of each respondent category that reports that in their community, it is socially acceptable for someone to interfere in the work of the sarpanch. Anywhere from 1 in 5 to nearly 1 in 3 people perceive proxyism to be socially accepted. Finally, when asked whether or not respondents believe that women are patently worse political leaders than men, an average of around 20 percent of respondents said yes. We believe these averages are strong underestimates due to social desirability bias.⁷

Taken together, these causal and descriptive analyses are consistent with the idea that gender quotas have produced new forms of gendered political exclusion along important axes of gendered domination: the household, the council, and the bureaucratic state. Women have accessed political offices in large numbers, with many of them however facing discriminatory or exclusionary treatments. What is more, such domination is widely reported and considered socially acceptable with broad acceptance in the communities we studied. It is notable that we conducted our analysis in one of the states where women’s political activism and representation have deep roots (Omvedt, 1990). Our

findings are thus likely lower bars for levels of gendered political interference in contemporary India.

Beyond our descriptive analyses, Indian news media and pop culture frequently produce content on the prevalence of “proxyism;” Prime Minister Modi has also been quoted saying that the practice should be addressed. The fact that “proxyism” in India has become a widely held perception of women’s leadership in local government — one for which India is famous globally — that ultimately serves to delegitimize women as political leaders is one of the great failures of the 73rd amendment. In the next section, we present historical and interview evidence to substantiate our argument that this was not unintended, but rather the outcome of incongruous policy-making.

6. On quotas’ inegalitarian effect: Historical analysis

That the rapid access of hundreds of thousands of women to political office all around rural India fail to break established patterns of male political dominance overnight should not surprise us. But that the subsequent lawful implementation of these quotas over three decades fail to change these same patterns — and in turn create new gender-regressive norms that delegitimize women’s leadership — should raise concerns. To explain this paradox, we interrogate the sequence of events that led male elites to include gender quotas in the 73rd Amendment. We draw on first- and second-hand accounts of these deliberations, interviews of key stakeholders and observers, and existing academic works analyzing this process. As is often the case with historical analysis, we acknowledge our inability to fully pinpoint intentions of the actors who played a central role in the adoption of this reform. Nonetheless, triangulating across these materials, we document four stylized facts which together shape our interpretation of reformers’ motivations, and as a result help us understand why India’s gender quotas have produced paradoxically gender inegalitarian outcomes.

6.1. Stylized fact 1: Decision-makers were (almost exclusively) conservative male elites

A first stylized fact pertains to the characteristics of the actors that drove the reform, or later enabled it to pass several legislative

⁶ We provide additional details on these survey items in Appendix C.

⁷ Here, we do not ask respondents separately about their perceptions around quota-elected versus non-quota *sarpanches*. This is because we wanted to understand broad perceptions of norms of political interference — which, as we show in Table 1, is disproportionately faced by women leaders — rather than asking citizens themselves to estimate differences according to quota status.

hurdles. Legislative elites were not political radicals hoping to disrupt gendered patterns of power. The most important veto-players instead were several distinct groups of conservative male elites. A first group, operating at the national level around Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, supported and pushed a reform that would allow large numbers of women to enter office, albeit with motivations and methods that were more patriarchal than progressive. A second group – whom we refer to as local power-brokers, for lack of a better term⁸ – more transparently sought to limit or control the extent of the reform originating from the aforementioned national elites.

Rajiv Gandhi, as Prime Minister of India, showed interest in reserving one third of seats in panchayats for women soon after he entered office in October 1984. His public support for the measure came after he had requested, in 1986, the formation of a committee to draft a National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988–2000 (hereafter the NPP), a committee he formally chaired. Working in dialog with women's organizations and policy planning experts, they provided 353 recommendations to improve women's status in India. These included the reservation of seats for women in all rural, elected bodies.⁹

Due to his public advocacy for women's political inclusion in the late 1980s, a recurrent Congress party narrative portrays Rajiv Gandhi as paving the way for women's political voice or as a broad champion of gender equality (Aiyar, 2009). According to the first Union Minister of Panchayati Raj Mani Shankar Aiyar: "It was the disruptive thought of one man who happened to be a prime minister, with an unprecedented majority, unchallenged in the Congress and unchallenged in the rest of the country, that brought about this moment of disruption which has led to India having more elected women than the rest of the world together."¹⁰

Although the NPP recommendations and Rajiv Gandhi's personal involvement undeniably paved the way for the 73rd Amendment Act, the PM's record overall does not suggest a clear commitment to gender equality. Historical accounts and press reports from the time instead suggest that feminist and liberal voices were at best ambivalent about the PM's advancement of gender equality. Women's organizations heavily criticized Rajiv Gandhi's government for its flip-flop regarding Muslim women's access to civil rights, whereby it first supported a divorced Muslim woman's right to apply for maintenance under the civil code in the Shah Bano case of 1985 and then revoked such rights under the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in 1986 (Mody, 1987; Mullally, 2004). Gandhi's government was seen as equally meek and opportunistic on whether or not to ban widows' self-immolation or *sati* (Kumar, 2019).

Women's organizations united in the late 1980s to criticize the National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) draft recommendations, especially around reservations for women which included a particularly regressive provision that gender quotas, in the initial years, may be filled—instead of by elected women—rather by candidates nominated or co-opted by male elites; this condition was lifted only after women's organizations mounted a major fight (Mazumdar et al., 2000). Indeed, even the most sympathetic insider accounts (Aiyar, 2023, 2024) suggest that concerns for gender equality weighed very little in the daily decision-making of Rajiv Gandhi's government, in stark contrast to his public statements. Remarkably few lines in Aiyar's account of the years during which decentralization and quotas took shape under "panchayati raj" reforms (Aiyar, 2024) focus on women's

quotas despite the extensive attention dedicated to caste quotas.¹¹ And yet the PM's strategy to achieve gender parity in politics appears *mainly* to have relied on gender reservations, ignoring many other levers for achieving equality.¹² Despite the depth and breadth of the NPP's 353 recommendations, the PM's focus was disproportionately on reservations for elected office. Such focus ignored predictions by women's organizations during the NPP drafting process that quotas would be ineffective absent complementary legal changes to advance gender equality (Mazumdar, 1989).

Even so, Rajiv Gandhi and his central government were more progressive veto-players on quotas for women relative to the group we call local power-brokers. The later group – state-level chief ministers, partisan power-brokers in the central state and parliamentarians from the dominant Congress Party and the opposition – emerge as comparatively *more* conservative on gender quotas. As Mani Shanker Aiyar narrates, Rajiv Gandhi's willingness to include gender quotas in the Act that was to become the 73rd Amendment led to strong backlash from these actors, with several chief ministers even threatening the Center over the matter. The Chief Minister of one state approached Mani Shanker Aiyar, as a key architect of the reform, in his home and addressed him as if he were "a throng of 10,000, and thundered that 'if we are forced to have reservations for women, I am going to take [my state] into China'."¹³

Overwhelming opposition by local power-brokers may not be surprising in light of anemic prior attempts at gender quotas led by these male elites, both at state and national levels. The 1978 Mehta committee's recommendations on how to advance women's voices in local decision-making processes were far less numerically radical, suggesting the reservation of two seats for women in *panchayats* and proposing women be co-opted absent their direct election. As described in Brulé (2020a), most prior state-led efforts to provide seats for women were equally modest (ranging from 9% to 25%), and far less than what Rajiv Gandhi's administration advocated in the late 1980s, in the failed 64th amendment and later the 73rd amendment.

In sum, none of the main actors able to influence the 73rd Amendment content or to veto it during the late 1980s were clearly progressive supporters of gender equality. We maintain that this likely forms a foundational part of why gender quotas had the paradoxical consequences that they did. Why did this group of stakeholders implement reservations that were numerically more ambitious than every prior draft of women's political inclusion? How did these actors' preferences evolve in just a few years? To answer, we introduce our second stylized fact.

6.2. Stylized fact 2: Political elites had ulterior, private motives

Evidence on elite reformers' preferences yields a second stylized fact: elites were also animated by private motives, rather than being purely animated by a deep desire to upend political gender inequality. In this section, we thus differentiate between public, stated intentions for reform and private, strategic motivations.

¹¹ In the 45 pages of Aiyar (2024) covering the 73rd constitutional amendment, women's quotas are only mentioned once, in passing.

¹² The draft and final NPP reports included a variety of progressive legal proposals to improve gender equality. These included: a recommendation for universal maternity benefits (irrespective of women's marital status), the making of dowry demands grounds for divorce, the issuing of ration and other benefits cards in the name of women, the expansion of the rights of single women to open bank accounts and obtain loans, facilitating the joint registration of matrimonial assets in the name of wife and husband, and gender sensitization campaigns in the bureaucracy.

¹³ Personal interview with one of the authors, Delhi, August 2024.

⁸ We include in this group parliamentarians, state-level chief ministers, state legislators, and top bureaucrats, all of whom were in more direct contact with, and accountable to, local political and partisan elites, relative to the first set of elites.

⁹ As should become clear, proposals to reserve seats for women predate the NPP report; in numerical terms, the proposal articulated in the NPP report provided the most direct inspiration for what ended up enshrined in the 73rd amendment.

¹⁰ One author's personal interview, Delhi, August 2024.

Public, stated intentions for implementing gender reservations in India have been largely justified as “developmental”. Politicians argue that to achieve development imperatives, women need to be included as “special cases” for advancing equitable economic development (Singer, 2007, 90). Here, greater levels of women’s representation in local institutions are explained as necessary to improve the efficiency of grassroots development programs. Although the Act itself does not mention this rationale, declarations of Congress leaders at the time and subsequent interpretations of the measure do advance the narrative of descriptive representation as necessary to advance broader developmental goals to which women are typically considered more committed, such as access to clean drinking water (Singer, 2007, 142, 135).

Rajiv Gandhi, introducing the failed 64th amendment in Parliament on 15th May 1989 explained the rationale for securing reservations for women so as to fully involve them in the management of community Affairs:

“We propose the reservation in Panchayats at all levels of 30 per cent of the seats for women [for] three major reasons... First, women constitute half the population and are involved in rather more than half the economic life of rural India. Second, the sound finance of the household has traditionally been the responsibility of the women... Third, it is the women of India, in their role as grandmothers and mothers, who have been the repository of the India’s ancient culture and traditions...which have enabled our civilization to survive and flourish without a break despite vicissitudes of many kinds. It is that strength of moral character which women will bring to the Panchayats”. (c.f. Abraham 2020¹⁴)

Yet private, strategic motives appear to have driven the implementation of gender reservations at least as much as these developmental concerns.

We derive strategic motives, in part, from debates over gender reservations that began in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the early 1980s. In these states, opportunistic electoral motivations fueled the embrace of women’s reservations by elite male politicians (Brulé, 2020a). In Andhra Pradesh, the newly-formed Telugu Desam Party (TDP)’s leading politician, Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao, saw the explicit courting of women’s votes as an opportunity to gain an autonomous voter base in 1982 (Singer, 2007). In Karnataka, after a narrow victory over the Congress in 1983, the Janata Party led by Hegde went on to win a decisive victory in 1985 using a remarkably similar playbook. Within 24 hours of taking office in 1983, Hegde drafted a bill for decentralizing power via local *Panchayats* (councils) (Raghavan & Manor, 2009, 152-4). Claiming credit as the leading advocate for women, the Janata party later set aside 30 percent of seats in urban elections for women (Raghavan & Manor, 2009, 156). According to Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu, and Jayraj (1987, 591), this policy “[inspired] extremely favorable political and popular responses, first in Karnataka and later elsewhere in the country”. This suggests that from the very start, elite-led reforms to reserve seats for women in India may have been driven by electoral incentives rather than their publicly stated aim to redistribute gendered power. As Jain (1996, 9) writes, “women’s entry in large numbers into local government arose from a mixture of political opportunism and an ethical sensibility that regarded the implications of gender as integral” (Kudva, 2003, 448).

While these examples originate in state politics, it is unlikely that Rajiv Gandhi and his government ignored the importance of courting women voters by 1985, particularly given his mother and former PM Indira Gandhi’s successful prior outreach to women (Brulé, 2020b). It is equally unlikely that the conservative male elites who consented to the 73rd amendment – after significantly protesting its inclusion of gender

quotas – would have ignored quotas’ electoral value. These private motives may have facilitated agreement between two competing groups of conservative male elites – those centered around PM Rajiv Gandhi and local power brokers – who both stood to gain from claiming credit for the Amendment’s successful implementation.

Another contextual factor may have driven private, strategic motivations, and thus enabled elite male consensus around women’s quotas: caste. The desire by upper-caste and class men to maintain their hold on power was likely salient as the Mandal Commission in 1980 recommended expansion of political, economic, and educational opportunities for members of disadvantaged castes (referred to as “other backward classes”) (Jaffrelot, 2003; Kohli, 1992; Menon, 2000). Legislators may have expected that placing women from disadvantaged castes in office would pose a lesser threat to existing caste-based power relationships, compared to their male counterparts; layering gender quotas over caste quotas would achieve this, in part.

The context surrounding the development of the 73rd Amendment gives ample reason to believe that reformer motives went beyond publicly stated intentions for broader gender equality. Instead, historical precedent suggests that private, strategic incentives related to caste-related panic and electoral motives may have played a central role in building elite consensus for quotas. This suggests reason to doubt the purity of male elites’ stated ambitions to redistribute substantial electoral power to women as development experts.

If the “sudden general acceptability of women’s reservations” was in large part due to elite, upper caste male-led political party concerns about electoral success or “the vicious spectre of casteism...haunting the party system” with the potential “degeneration of parliament into a ‘caste panchayats’ union”, as Chandan Mitra later bemoaned (Menon, 2000, 3838), this explains why the most progressive recommendations by women’s movement leaders and activists were effectively dead upon arrival.

6.3. Stylized fact 3: Patriarchal gate-keeping & selective listening

Our third stylized fact is that elite male reformers consistently ignored or denied the most progressive ideas for the design details of gender quotas, especially those originating from the country’s robust women’s movement.

Gender progressive recommendations were abundant. As noted in Mani (2023), women’s movement leaders and members of women’s organizations eventually joined the core group of female parliamentarians drafting the NPP under the tutelary leadership of PM Rajiv Gandhi. The NPP collected and articulated many progressive reforms, and is the origin from which we can trace the PM’s precise recommendation for gender reservations in local elected bodies, despite the marked absence of other progressive proposals in the final reforms (Mani, 2023). The presence of women’s movement representatives at the policy-making table was consequential. They were most effective when the historic strategy of selecting women representatives via co-optation reemerged as the default proposal in the NPP: “women’s organizations’ primary objective opposed nomination [providing women’s representation via means] of co-optation” which “would be [a] subversion of the constitution and all democratic norms” ... [and] “has not, in four decades, improved women’s lot in rural areas (Mazumdar, 1989, 2795) ”.

As a result of pressure by women’s organizations, the NPP went further than simply preventing women’s overt political capture. They recommended a position long-advocated by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi, a radical peasant women’s collective founded in 1986, to declare as many constituencies in the first tier of local institutions as possible as *exclusively* women’s constituencies, with *all* executive positions in relevant jurisdictions reserved for women candidates (Menon, 2000; Omvedt, 1990, 3837). This argument in favor of geographical concentration of gender quotas was built on the broader experience of Maharashtra’s *panchayats* where women-organized all-women panels

¹⁴ <https://countercurrents.org/2020/08/tribute-to-rajiv-gandhi-a-champion-of-panchayati-raj/>

advanced gendered redistribution of property rights and economic resources (Omvedt, 1990).

Yet, advocacy for all women panels was largely ignored by the main force advocating for gender reservations: the Rajiv Gandhi government. Strikingly, the most sympathetic accounts of the government's perspective, Mani Shankar Aiyar's thorough biography of Rajiv Gandhi and his own memoir (Aiyar, 2023, 2024), at no point mention these counterproposals or the government's engagement with them. This absence is coherent with what Aiyar expressed, in a more extreme vein, during a private interview with one of us that "Indian feminism does not exist", a proposition assessed by a leading Indian feminist and scholar as entirely preposterous.

The central government's pattern of selective patriarchal listening led to a muted influence of feminist voices on the final version of the act, despite their having a seat at the table. The single most progressive aspect of these recommendations—all-women's *panchayats*—was not retained by lawmakers. In addition, the 73rd Amendment enshrined in law the principle that reservations for women were only allowable if they were associated with a principle of rotation—with time-limited quotas withdrawn after a set number of electoral rounds—in clear opposition to women's organizations' assertion during NPP deliberations that women, as new political entrants, required sufficient time to learn. Indeed, the advancement of all-female *panchayats* without any time limitation that NPP authors recommended suggests that the authors of the NPP explicitly saw the need to provide women with stable positions and to limit the influence of male elites in women's political selection and governance work.

The leap from the progressive proposals in the NPP to the final version of the constitutional reform hints at the bargaining dynamics that drove the final document's content. Women's organizations secured overt commitments to the democratic election of women *rather than their co-optation*, in exchange for severe limitations on both the number of women representatives: 30% and later "at least 33%" of seats reserved for women rather than a population-based quota of 50%, on par with caste reservations, no all-women's panels, and electoral terms severely limited by rotation (typically, at every term). The most progressive propositions for quotas were systematically ignored in national legislation. Modest recommendations that may have supported elected women or changed men's behaviors were also discarded. Instead the national, partisan, male elites writing reforms granted quotas on their own terms, based on design choices openly *opposed* by women's organizations (Singer, 2007, 122-4).

Importantly, many women members of state legislative assemblies (MLAs) advocated for complementary reforms later, during discussions in state assemblies about how to structure state-level reservations after the 73rd Amendment was adopted at the national level. For example, Shobhatai Phadnis (a BJP MLA in Maharashtra) noted "panchayat secretaries do not follow the instructions of the women sarpanches, on the contrary they take advantage of their ignorance and lack of experience. Some male members in fact take charge and rule the gram panchayat. The panchayat secretary does not say anything against such unlawful practices" and "reservation policies are not properly implemented" (Kumar, 2002, 31). Her pleas for additional, stronger reforms to support quota-elected women politicians and prevent male-led political interference have to this day been largely ignored.¹⁵

¹⁵ Instead, the central government in recent years has proposed short-term (one to three day) training programs for women politicians, which are unlikely to address structural inequalities and political dynamics at the root of gendered political subordination.

6.4. Stylized fact 4: Tough bargaining with local elites leads to more constraints

Our final stylized fact is that the central government's pattern of patriarchal gate-keeping of and selective listening to the women's movement was reinforced by pressure from state-level power brokers. The central government placed further constraints on the 73rd Amendment as a potential catalyst for genuine social change to secure support from even more conservative local power brokers. This bargaining led not only to the enactment of "feckless" or "toothless" reform, but also to a system that generated new inegalitarian outcomes and new methods of delegitimizing women's power. Three key aspects of the reform's structure suggest that political reservations for women were designed and implemented to mobilize women voters – an objective all veto-players supported – but not to grant elected women substantial powers to fundamentally alter the gendered *status quo* process and outcomes of governance.

First, from a legal standpoint, the Act yields substantial discretion to states in the modalities of quota implementation. It defines only a few broad principles which it encourages states to follow to establish a three-tier system of elected village councils. While state discretion over local governance is in line with India's constitution, the decision to grant states primary authority was actually the result of a power struggle between PM Rajiv Gandhi's core team and local power-brokers. The central government considered retaining greater control over local governance (formally, by moving local governance from the state list, onto the shared list of central and state competencies), but reneged to avoid conflict with local power-brokers.¹⁶ In leaving the details of panchayat structure to the states, the Act left many strategic decisions to predictably regressive male state-level elites. This foreshadowed predictably limited implementation of the Act with disappointing outcomes around gendered political inclusion. For example, although the Act merely stated that at least one third of elected positions ought to be reserved for women, not even one state reserved more than one third of seats for women.¹⁷

Second, pressures from local power brokers led Rajiv Gandhi's team to insert the principle of rotation in gender reservations, limiting the number of electoral rounds women occupy office, despite emphatic rejection of this principle by NPP drafters in the women's movement. Elites in all but one state have interpreted rotation in a maximally conservative manner, mandating rotation *every electoral period*. Thus, most elected women are expected to leave office after a single term. This prevents, in an entirely predictable manner, the emergence of a critical mass of experienced women politicians. Indeed, the former Union Minister of Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, conceded that "the rotation term of reserved posts for women should be extended up to two or three terms because generally the first term for women representatives has proved to be a period of learning and in the second and third term only women representatives started showing their real performance" (Tiwari, 2009). This provides additional evidence that the reform which male elites legislated *on women's behalf* did not aim to balance gendered power.

Third, the Act did not address the counter-normative nature of reform. For example, it is likely consequential that the Act entirely ignored political parties by not clarifying whether candidates for local elections may officially run on partisan planks, although legislators were well aware of partisan elites' substantial influence over village councils. Yet, neither state-based training of new representatives, let

¹⁶ From private interview with Mani Shankar Aiyar, August 2024.

¹⁷ Also notably, vast state leeway enabled new provisions implemented years after the Act's adoption. For instance, some provisions allow no-confidence motions whereby elites remove elected heads—often used by male vice presidents against women from Scheduled Castes (Brulé, Chauchard, & Heinze, 2022; Jayal, 2006)

alone heavy-handed strategies such as quotas within parties were institutionalized. Instead, quotas have created a symbolically vast but strategically “constrained space” for elected women. Indeed,

“many women argued that this political space was so artfully constructed by male politicians that it served to isolate women from the main power structures of political parties and legislative bodies and also created—rather than a minimum representation—a glass ceiling or quota that limited women’s participation” (Singer, 2007, 124).

Similarly, it is likely consequential that neither the Act nor state-based implementation processes sought to prepare the bureaucracy for the imminent arrival in office of hundreds of thousands of elected officials without political experience who were likely to enter very unequal working relationships as politicians in families, village political machines, and state bureaucracies (Buch, 2004). Last, it is telling that neither the Act nor state-level elites engaged, until recently, in serious efforts to change mentalities of men, as voters and family-members, or to encourage support for women’s political leadership (Heinze et al., 2025).

Altogether, deliberate attempts at undercutting effective proposals from women’s movements and their replacement with substantial constraints upon representatives can *at best* be considered negligence, given the absence of initiatives to ensure a radical, counter-normative reform would catalyze change. This gave birth to a paradoxical reform which allowed for both gendered political inclusion on an unprecedented scale and ensured that women’s inclusion would not fundamentally disrupt gendered power. Quotas drove women’s presence on a massive scale, with unanticipated benefits (some well-documented and others meriting further research), yet reform also facilitated new, significant forms of gendered political exclusion.

7. Discussion

These combined elements — the fact that the reform stemmed from male elites who were *also* motivated by private incentives, their patriarchal gate-keeping of and selective listening to demands by the women’s movement, and the need to compromise with even more conservative local actors — we argue, led to a form of incongruous policy-making that explains the seemingly paradoxical outcomes of the reform, as we documented in Section 5.

The paradoxically inegalitarian consequences of gender quotas occurred, in other words, because decision-making elites agreed on a policy that was radical by the numbers, while simultaneously committing to maintain their hold on power through less publicized but nonetheless crucial institutional features of reform. We argue that the disjuncture between formal changes in representation and actual—often regressive—shifts in decision-making power that we document is not due to unintended consequences. In our reading of history, state- and national-level male elites jointly designed a system to neutralize and indeed counteract the destabilizing effects of gender-equalizing reform. Coding the gender inegalitarian outcomes of quotas — and their numerical success — as accidental or unintended is inaccurate.

It is of course impossible to know the counterfactual. We do not observe outcomes absent these strategic loopholes that we argue worked to consolidate male elite control by “giving” women inherently constrained political power. Had male elite legislators enacted women’s quotas that *did not* rotate every election, or which precluded state passage of additional hurdles for elected women such as those limiting the set of valid candidates for women’s quotas and the networks from which they could draw support, such quotas may have catalyzed deeper shifts in gendered power and local governance. Our tracing of how design decisions led to predictable outcomes that had been *publicly* predicted by women’s organizations in the design process suggests that the results of this radical reform could have been far more expansive

if elites were interested in broadening gendered access to power. Our analysis also suggests that the male elites who maintained control in the form and the timing of these reforms bear a direct responsibility for the paradoxical impacts of women’s quotas that we observe.

We consider the case of women’s reservations in India as indicative of a much broader class of global behavior within the domain which Faguet and Shami (2022) characterize as “instrumental incoherence”: the simultaneous rise of radical, inclusive democratic reforms—including electoral gender quotas — and the retrenchment of increasingly unconstrained elites advancing what Riedl, Slater, Wong, and Ziblatt (2020) identify as “authoritarian-led democratization”. Where seemingly inclusive reforms are harnessed to achieve short-term objectives of maintaining or consolidating elite power, we anticipate that elite dominance will likely be maintained in the short-term. This, however, does not preclude the harnessing of inclusive policy for long-term disruption of political, social, and economic dominance.

What are the broader implications of this case? First, we explain how the heterogeneous impact of quotas—as a globally dominant policy for enabling women’s political inclusion—derive in part from the strategically-motivated elite *design* of this policy. This advances literature on the challenges of elite capture in (re)enacting gendered constraints of prior political, economic, and social networks in the presence of gender quotas (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Clayton, 2021; Cruz & Tolentino, 2019; Heinze et al., 2025; Prillaman, 2024).

Second, we build upon the literature advanced to date mainly in autocratic states on gender quotas as advancing the strategic interests of authoritarian regimes (Bush et al., 2024; Noh et al., 2023; Tripp, 2019). Here, we begin by making the point that democratic elites follow equally strategic aims (as theorists such as Mansbridge (1999) make clear are always central). However, we also argue that the *design* of reforms is an equally central object of theory-building and testing. This is true if we consider varied shapes of reform as having predictable, substantively important consequences for the reform-induced disruption or reinforcement of gender equality.

Third, this case provides insight into an ongoing debate about how we should expect states to democratize power, with what substantive effect. Existing theories of democratization diverge about whether the core processes at work are those of increasing political accountability in competitive environments, as in North and Weingast (1989) and Faguet (2012), versus increasing the capture of state power by political elites, such as Boix (1999) and Bohlken Thomas (2015). These aims are often posed as directly at odds with each other. As Bohlken Thomas (2015, 3) argues about the expansion of local democratic institutions “rather than being a means of granting more autonomy to local actors, local democracy emerges from the need of these government elites to control local intermediaries on whom they rely for political support”. Our main contribution to this literature is to analyze how elite strategic incentives to expand democratic institutions in competitive environments—with the promise of greater accountability—alter democratic representation, with divergent short- and long-term effects on democratic systems and power more generally.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Simon Chauchard: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation. **Rachel E. Brulé:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Alyssa R. Heinze:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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