Guarding the Gates: How Parties Constrain Women's Political Ambition and Rise in Urban Politics

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1 Introduction

Despite widespread adoption of gender quotas around the world, women remain persistently underrepresented in politics (UN Women, 2025). Women's representation lingers at a mere 10 percent in the Japanese parliament and 17.6 percent in local assemblies, even after the implementation of the 2018 Gender Parity Law (Louie 2023). During Kenya's 2022 election, 23 percent of elected parliamentarians were women, even though the 2010 constitution mandated that men could only hold two-thirds of parliamentary seats (Ranta 2024). In India, gender quotas in local levels of government have not produced spillover effects to higher levels of government; women representatives make up 10 percent of state assemblies and 13 percent of the national assembly. The failure of quotas to produce lasting improvements in women's political representation begs us to examine the understudied actors that gatekeep women's access to political power and, as a result, can be agents of change - **political parties and party elites themselves**.

Existing research highlights how quotas with careful institutional design (Heinze *forthcoming*), women's networks and self-help groups (Goyal 2024b; Prillaman 2023), and intentional recruitment campaigns (Gulzar et al. 2024) can enhance women's political representation, but it has left underexplored the role of political parties themselves—the key gatekeepers to power in democracies (Caul 1999; Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Pruysers et al. 2017). While some scholars have noted that parties can be biased in candidate selection, **we know little about how these biases operate within party hierarchies and why they persist**. My dissertation shifts the focus to the internal dynamics of political parties in the Global South, offering formal and informal gatekeeping by political parties as (i) an alternative explanation to why women remain underrepresented in politics and, perhaps counterintuitively, (ii) a potential site for institutional change that can produce sustained increases in women's political representation.

Focusing on political parties as the primary pipeline to electoral representation and as gatekeepers to women's representation, my dissertation asks two main questions. First, **how do political parties shape internal party promotion and candidate selection?** Second, **why does this process create gender gaps within the party hierarchy and electoral candidacy?** I argue that gender gaps in party hierarchies emerge because **parties consider a combination of party-level (loyalty, previous political leadership experience, and networks) and candidate-level (caste, gender, financial resources, ability to establish support in a constituency, ability to provide services to constituents) characteristics when making decisions surrounding internal promotions and candidacy**. On the supply side, I hypothesize that these factors interact with patriarchal gender norms to disadvantage women politicians, while on the demand side, parties' decision-making processes disadvantage women through (a) outright discrimination, (b) double standards of evaluation, and (c) a gendered division of labor that siloes women into less influential roles.

2 Study Design

To assess **how political parties constrain women's access to political power within the party and, thereby, generate gender gaps within the political hierarchy,** I use an original survey with an embedded conjoint experiment. The survey asks political elites about their socioeconomic backgrounds, experience in politics, political capital, political ambition, views on the Women's Reservation Act, and experience of vi-

olence in politics. The forced-choice conjoint experiment asks them to choose a candidate from their party for internal promotion to an organizational leadership role. Additional outcomes tested include (a) rating each candidate and (b) assigning one candidate to different roles within the party, including as an electoral candidate. Each respondent will see four pairs of candidate profiles and, thus, be asked to perform the task four times.

Table 1: Attributes for candidate profiles

Factor	**Operationalization**	**Levels**
Gender	Gender	Male (baseline) Female
Caste	Caste	General (baseline) SC OBC
Ability to establish electoral base	Mobilization power	Organized a 50 person rally in their locality (baseline) Organized a 250 person rally in their locality Organized a 400 person rally in their locality
Financial resources	Electoral campaign contribution	Less than 1 lakh (baseline) Between Rs. 1 lakh and Rs. 5 lakh Between Rs. 5 lakh and Rs. 10 lakh
Delivering Constituency Services	Ability to get work done	This candidate got (*did not get (baseline)*) the municipality to fix a broken road after residents complained This candidate got (*did not get (baseline)*) the municipality to collect trash after residents complained This candidate got (*did not get (baseline)*) the municipality to install streetlights after residents complained
Party loyalty	Party membership	Been a member of multiple parties (baseline) Been a lifelong member of your party
Party leadership experience	Highest post in the party	No post held previously (baseline) [Mandal/District] committee secretary [Mandal/District]-level Morcha President (such as Mahila Morcha, Yuva Morcha, etc.)
Party Networks	Networking ability	Got the current mandal president to speak at a rally (baseline) Got the current MLA to speak at a rally Got the current state unit president to speak at a rally

Table 1 presents the attributes for the experiment that asks elites to choose a candidate to promote to a leadership position within the party from the two profiles shown. The vignette will be prefaced with the following introduction:

> "Political parties often make decisions about which party members to promote to party leadership roles, such as ward president, election in-charge, morcha secretary etc. When doing so, parties consider many different attributes about a party member that would make them a suitable leader. I will now present to you hypothetical profiles of two candidates that your party is considering promoting to the role of a [mandal/district]-committee

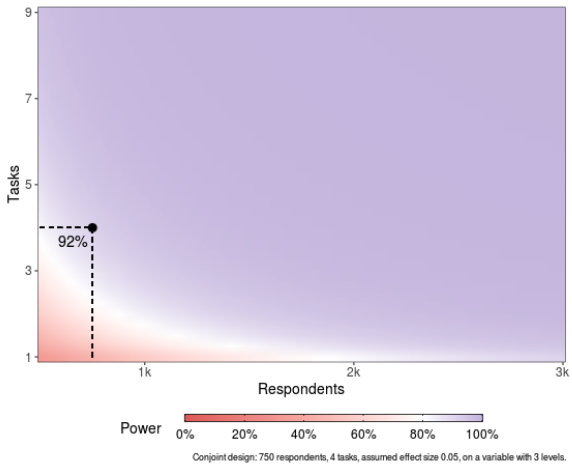
> president. The attributes of these candidates will be randomly chosen. Your task will be to choose the most suitable candidate for promotion and for appointing to different roles in the party. We will repeat this task four times. I will first read the profiles of each candidate out loud one by one. If you would like, you can then look over the profiles yourself. Then I will ask you to choose your preferred candidate."

The conjoint will be placed after a set of demographic questions and be followed by a battery of questions about politicians' backgrounds, political experience, political capital, politician quality, and political ambition. The primary heterogeneous effects analysis will be conducted using the respondent's gender. I may conduct additional heterogeneous effects analyses, but these will be based on variables collected post-treatment and will have to be interpreted with caution. This survey structure was chosen after piloting of the survey and determining the most effective way to minimize cognitive load and increase quality responses from political elites.

2.1 Power

In order for me to detect effects from the conjoint experiment and establish a causal relationship between elite decision-making and the candidate- and party-level factors, I will survey a sample of at least 750 respondents. This sample size was calculated with an effect size of 5 percent, 4 tasks per conjoint, and a maximum of 3 attribute levels (Figure 1), and would be well-powered at 92%.[1]

Figure 1: Power Analysis



3 Sampling Frame and Strategy

The survey will be conducted in Delhi. The entire state falls under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (the main urban local body) and the Delhi state assembly or Vidhan Sabha. Since I have conducted my fieldwork primarily in Delhi, I want to

[1] Calculation performed using the Power Analysis Tool for conjoint experiments developed by (Stefanelli and Lukac 2020).

triangulate between the qualitative, observational, and survey data I gather in Delhi to present the most accurate and complete findings related to my research question. The party elites I will be surveying are from the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Aam Aadmi Party. Previous research has suggested that parties that are more organized and institutionalized tend to have better outcomes for women's representation (Caul 1999) and this is because candidate selection tends to be more centralized and because rules-based processes make it easier for party workers to know the promotion and selection processes (Caul 1999; Chhibber et al. 2014), which can allow women to navigate hierarchies by the same rules as men. If true, an organized and hierarchical party like the BJP should produce best-case outcomes for women's upward mobility and candidate nominations.[2] For parties that are less organized, less institutionalized, less hierarchical, and perhaps more regional in India, it may be likely that candidate-level factors play a bigger role than party-level factors. Thus, we should observe less opportunities for women's upward mobility in parties like the AAP. Moreover, the party organization for AAP is smaller than BJP, mechanically producing fewer roles that women can occupy. Testing my theory on two different political parties will allow me to assess whether my theoretical predictions differ or travel across party types. Regardless, the BJP is the largest political party in the world, with nearly 200 million party members,[3] and the findings from this study have significant implications for women's representation.

I will use a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to recruit political elites for my survey. Those recruited will have to satisfy at least one of two conditions: (a) they will either have a post in the party or (b) have contested an election (e.g. DUSU, municipal corporation, state, or national).

4 Theoretical Framework

Existing literature has posited that political parties can act as gatekeepers by controlling who enters the party (Gulzar et al. 2024; Goyal 2024a), who is chosen as a broker in clientelist environments (Auerbach and Thachil 2023), and who is nominated as a candidate during elections (Caul 1999; Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Pruysers et al. 2017). This work, however, has not yet shown the precise mechanisms through which parties act as gatekeepers or the universe of factors that parties consider when promoting party workers to leadership positions or choosing candidates during elections. Through qualitative fieldwork and theory-building, I have deduced a set of factors that parties consider when deciding on internal promotions and candidacy. Through a survey experiment among party leaders who make these decisions, my dissertation provides causal evidence for how these factors influence decision-making and the mechanisms through which these factors disadvantage women politicians.

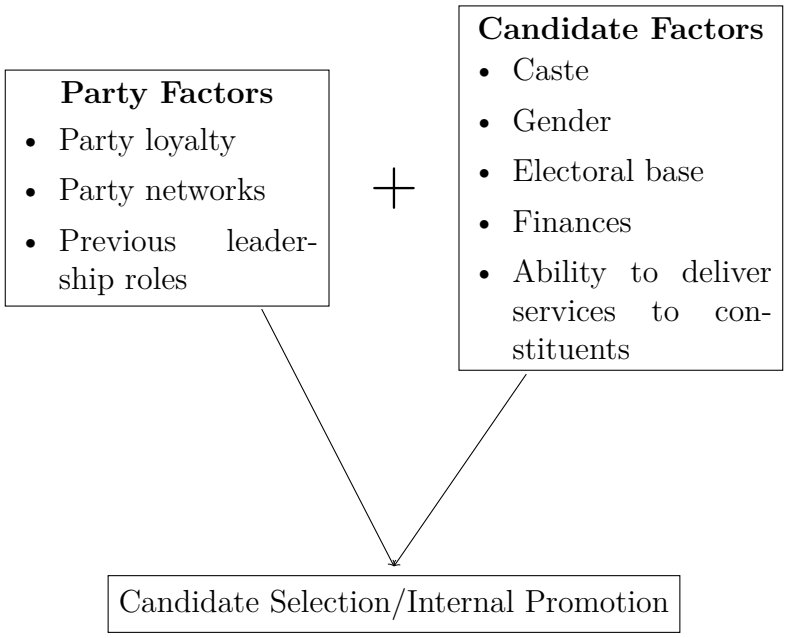
I argue that party elites consider a combination of **candidate-level (caste, gender, financial resources, ability to establish support in a constituency, ability to provide services to constituents)** and **party-level (loyalty, previous political leadership experience, and networks)** traits when making decisions about who to promote within the political party hierarchy and who to nominate as candidates during elections. Figure 2 summarizes the theoretical framework. These traits tend to constrain

[2]There may be some descriptive evidence for this because BJP has been nominating more women candidates during recent national and state elections.

[3]'In 10 Charts: How BJP became world's largest political party in 4 decades', The Times of India, April 6, 2022.

women's upward mobility within the party hierarchy, exacerbating gender gaps in political representation at higher ranks.

Figure 2: Factors Affecting Political Candidacy and Internal promotion



I test three possible mechanisms through which parties gatekeep women's access to political power: (a) **outright discrimination** against women politicians, (b) a **double standard for evaluating** women politicians for promotion and candidate nomination, and (c) **gendered division of party labor**, wherein women are siloed into roles and positions that prevent progress within party ranks.

4.1 Operationalization of Factors

1. Gender: I will randomize profiles to be male or female with equal probability, with male as the baseline.

2. Caste: I will randomize profiles to be general, scheduled castes, and other backward castes with equal probability and with general as the baseline. I do not include scheduled tribes as they are not a politically relevant group in Delhi.[4] I create an additional binary variable - caste in-group - to match respondent caste to the randomized profile caste.

3. Ability to establish an electoral base: I use mobilization power and randomize between the size of the rally the candidate can organize (50 person, 250 person, 400 person) with equal probability. The 50-person rally is the baseline. This measure is drawn from (Auerbach and Thachil 2023) who use mobilization power as a measure of political efficacy for brokers in slums. This is a relevant measure for demonstrating whether a candidate can establish an electoral base because it demonstrates the connections that a candidate has formed with people within her constituency.

[4] https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1563815

4. Financial resources: I randomize between amounts of electoral campaign contributions made by a candidate (less than 1 lakh (low), between 1 and 5 lakhs (middle), and between 5 and 10 lakhs (high)) with equal probability. The low contributions are the baseline. The measure is drawn from (Auerbach et al. 2025). They use a more granular measure whereas I am grouping contributions into three categories (which I would have done even with a more granular measure). These contributions are within a reasonable range that a candidate might be able to contribute, though wealthier candidates can probably contribute even more than Rs. 10 lakh.

5. Delivering constituency services: I randomize between three positive instances of delivering constituency services and three negatives instances of the same services (broken road, trash collection, broken street lights) with equal probability. These are also drawn from (Auerbach et al. 2025). The positive cases will be grouped into one and negative cases will be grouped into one and used as the baseline.

6. Party loyalty: I operationalize party loyalty as whether or not a candidate has been a member of one or multiple parties. The low loyalty level is being a member of multiple parties (the baseline) and the high loyalty level is being a lifelong member of one party. I randomize between these two with equal probability.

7. Party leadership experience: I randomize between not having a post (baseline), a post in the mandal/district committee, and a post in a morcha committee with equal probability. Exact specifications depend on the conjoint and can be seen in Table 1. I included morcha president as a category to be able to demonstrate that it can be a category that is seen as disadvantageous, particularly for women, when parties are making promotion and candidacy decisions.

8. Party networks: I use networking ability, in the form of who the candidate can bring as a speaker to a rally, as a signal of party networks. I use mandal president as a signal of lowest networking ability and the state unit president as a signal of highest networking ability. I randomize between the three with equal probability, using mandal president as the baseline.

5 Hypotheses

Political parties could be gatekeeping access to internal promotion and candidate nomination for women in different ways. First, they could practice **outright discrimination** and not choose women, who may be equally qualified as men, to promote internally or as candidates during elections. If true,

- **H1:** Holding all else constant, women will be less likely to be chosen to promote internally and or seen as "winnable" candidates for elections by party elites.

Second, political parties may not be discriminating outrightly, but their ideal type of woman politician to nominate as a candidate or promote in the hierarchy may not be as present in politics. One can imagine that if gender is seen as a negative attribute for women's winnability or their ability to be party leaders, then for the party to consider them as viable for promotion or candidacy, they would have to signal strength across other dimensions. In other words, political parties may be using a **double standard** to evaluate women politicians. For instance, a woman politician may have to come from

money, have family in politics, be able to dedicate more time and demonstrate more loyalty to the party to be considered. This should also tell us the conditions under which women can successfully get promoted within the party or get nominated as candidates. Thus, I would expect that:

- **H2a:** Among profiles of women, those who have greater mobilization power will be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.
- **H2b:** Among profiles of women, those who can provide high contributions to an electoral campaign will be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.
- **H2c:** Among profiles of women, those who can successfully deliver services to their constituents will be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.
- **H2d:** Among profiles of women, those who have lifelong party membership and ideological alignment will be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.
- **H2e:** Among profiles of women, those who have had a leadership position within the main party (mandal or Vidhan Sabha committee president) will be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.
- **H2f:** Among profiles of women, those who have family in politics be more likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as a "winnable" candidate.

Conversely, women politicians are also more likely to be "punished" than men politicians for seemingly negative traits. This implies that when interacting gender with all other traits that determine "winnability,"

- **H3a:** Women who have low mobilization power will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.
- **H3b:** Women with low electoral campaign contributions will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.
- **H3c:** Women who are unable to deliver services to their constituents will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.
- **H3d:** Women who have been members of multiple parties will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.
- **H3e:** Women with less party leadership experience will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.
- **H3f:** Women who entered politics through pathways other than having family in politics will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable" candidates than men with the same attributes.

Third, political parties may not discriminate against women or have higher standards for their ideal type of woman politician, but instead may assign men and women to different roles within the party, which affects their upward mobility in the hierarchy. Political scientists have documented that women party workers are used to mobilize women voters (Goyal 2024b) or may be confined to women's wings of political parties (Pruysers et al. 2017; Kittilson 2011). This **'gendered division of party labor'** may be one of the mechanisms by which parties gatekeep women's ability to rise in the party and successfully become candidates. I expect that,

- **H4:** Women who are leaders of party wings (such as youth or women's wings) will be less likely to be chosen for promotion or seen as "winnable candidates" than women who are in the main party leadership.
- **H5:** Women will be more likely to be assigned to roles that are less visible and prestigious and in the women's wing than those that are more visible and prestigious and in the main party.

6 Key Outcome Variables

I am interested in testing three key outcomes from the conjoint experiment:

- **Promotion**: Who does the party deem worthy of promoting into leadership positions? I measure this using the forced-choice conjoint.
- **Perceived Quality**: What is the perceived quality of each candidate in the conjoint? I measure this using questions used to rate each candidate's profile on a scale of 1-5.
- **Electoral Candidate**: Who does the party deem worthy of making a candidate during an election? I measure this by asking respondents to assign one of the candidate profiles to this role.
- **Gendered Division of Party Labor**: I assess whether parties assign men and women to different roles within the party by asking "In your opinion, which candidate is better suited for [role]?" The roles shown to them are: voter registration and mobilization, election in-charge, main party leadership, morcha leadership, and election candidate. I will create a dummy variable for gendered role that will take on the value 1 if a candidate profile is chosen for only voter registration and mobilization OR morcha leadership roles and 0 otherwise. This is because women tend to be disproportionately assigned roles that are less prestigious and visible within the party. I will then assess the effect of candidate gender on whether the roles they are assigned are gendered.

7 Planned Analysis

For the conjoint experiment, the quantity to be estimated, following (Hainmueller et al. 2014), is the average marginal component effect (AMCE) and the average component interaction effect (ACIE). I will use the fully non-parametric linear regression estimator presented in (Hainmueller et al. 2014), and cluster the standard errors derived from the

estimation at the respondent level. I will also use enumerator-level fixed effects and present robustness analyses with party fixed effects.

For each conjoint (party organization and election) each respondent, i, will be given k conjoint tasks ($k \in 1, 2, 3$), and choose their candidate, j ($j \in 1, 2$), with their preferred characteristics. The resulting OLS regression used to calculate the AMCE is:

$$\begin{aligned} chosen_{ijk} =& \beta_0 + \beta_1(\texttt{gender}_{ijk} = female) + \beta_2(\texttt{caste}_{ijk} = general) + \\ & \beta_3(\texttt{constituency alignment}_{ijk} = minority) + ... + \epsilon_{ijk} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

In each task, whether a candidate is chosen is represented by the variable *chosen* which is a binary variable: 1 if the candidate was chosen and 0 if the candidate was not. Because each respondent will perform four conjoint tasks, there will be eight observations for each respondent (4 for candidates who were chosen and 4 for candidates who were not). For each attribute, the baseline will be withheld (for example, for gender the variable $gender_{ijk} = male$ will be omitted). Each candidate's attribute levels are coded as dummy variables. Therefore, the AMCE for each attribute level must be understood relative to the withheld baseline.

I will conduct heterogeneous effects analysis based on the respondent's gender to assess if women political elites display different decision-making than male political elites. I will also assess the interaction between the hypothetical candidate gender with all other attributes.

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Appendix for
"Pre-Analysis Plan"

A Variables Description

raw_variable	final_variable	iv/dv	variable_description	variable_transformation	variable_space	notes
set1_chosen_candidate_district_..	task._attributes, gender, caste, mob_power, campaign_con, const_service, party_mem, highest_post, networking	iv	attribute and conjoint choice array at the district level that is used to extract attributes for each respondent	coalesced with mandal tasks		this variable resulting from this transformation is used to extract all individual profile attributes for both candidate profiles.
set1_chosen_candidate_mandal_..	task._attributes, gender, caste, mob_power, campaign_con, const_service, party_mem, highest_post, networking	iv	attribute and conjoint choice array at the mandal level that is used to extract attributes for each respondent	coalesced with district tasks		this variable resulting from this transformation is used to extract all individual profile attributes for both candidate profiles.
set1_chosen_candidate_district_..	task._chosen, chosen	dv	attribute and conjoint choice array at the district level that is used to extract chosen candidate for each respondent	coalesced with mandal tasks	binary	this variable resulting from this transformation is used to extract all individual profile attributes for both candidate profiles.
set1_chosen_candidate_mandal_..	task._chosen, chosen	dv	attribute and conjoint choice array at the mandal level that is used to extract chosen candidate for each respondent	coalesced with district tasks	binary	this variable resulting from this transformation is used to extract all individual profile attributes for both candidate profiles.
set1_candidate1_rating_district_..	rating	dv	respondent's rating of the first candidate profile on a scale of 1-5 in district conjoint	coalesced with mandal rating	scale 1-5	
set1_candidate2_rating_district_..	rating	dv	respondent's rating of the second candidate profile on a scale of 1-5 in district conjoint	coalesced with district rating	scale 1-5	
set1_candidate1_rating_mandal_..	rating	dv	respondent's rating of the first candidate profile on a scale of 1-5 in mandal conjoint	coalesced with mandal rating	scale 1-5	
set1_candidate2_rating_mandal_..	rating	dv	respondent's rating of the second candidate profile on a scale of 1-5 in mandal conjoint	coalesced with district rating	scale 1-5	
set1_district_role1_..	voter_reg	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of voter registration and mobilization in the district conjoint	coalesced with mandal outcome	binary	
set1_district_role2_..	election_incharge	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of election in-charge in the district conjoint	coalesced with mandal outcome	binary	
set1_district_role5_..	main_leader	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of leader in the main party in the district conjoint	coalesced with mandal outcome	binary	
set1_district_role6_..	morcha_leader	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of leader in the party morcha in the district conjoint	coalesced with mandal outcome	binary	
set1_district_role7_..	elec_candidate	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of electoral candidate in the district conjoint	coalesced with mandal outcome	binary	
set1_mandal_role1_..	voter_reg	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of voter registration and mobilization in the mandal conjoint	coalesced with district outcome	binary	
set1_mandal_role2_..	election_incharge	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of election in-charge in the mandal conjoint	coalesced with district outcome	binary	
set1_mandal_role5_..	main_leader	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of leader in the main party in the mandal conjoint	coalesced with district outcome	binary	
set1_mandal_role6_..	morcha_leader	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of leader in the party morcha in the mandal conjoint	coalesced with district outcome	binary	
set1_mandal_role7_..	elec_candidate	dv	binary variable capturing who the respondent assigned to the role of electoral candidate in the mandal conjoint	coalesced with district outcome	binary	
	minor_role	dv	binary variable capturing if candidate was assigned only voter registration or party morcha leadership position and no other role (election incharge, main party leader, electoral candidate)		binary	
caste	caste_resp, caste_ingroup	iv	respondent's caste		factor, binary	
gender	gender_resp	iv	respondent's gender		binary	
	gender	iv	conjoint attribute for gender with two levels: male and female			converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
	caste	iv	conjoint attribute for caste with three levels: general, SC, OBC			converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis

caste_ingroup	iv	conjoint attribute for caste with two levels: ingroup (1) and outgroup (0)	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
mob_power	iv	conjoint attribute for mobilization power with three levels: low (bring 50 people to rally), medium (bring 250 people to rally), high (bring 400 people to rally)	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
campaign_con	iv	conjoint attribute for electoral campaign contribution with three levels: low (less than 1 lakh), medium (between 1-5 lakh), and high (between 5-10 lakh)	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
const_service	iv	conjoint attribute for being able to deliver constituency services with two levels: yes (fix broken road, install streetlight, and collect garbage) and no (not fix broken road, not install streetlight, not collect garbage)	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
party_mem	iv	conjoint attribute for party loyalty with two levels: been a member of multiple parties and been a lifelong member of own party	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
highest_post	iv	conjoint attribute for highest post previously held in the party with three levels: no post, main party secretary, morcha president	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis
networking	iv	conjoint attribute for networking ability with three levels: low (invited mandal president to speak at rally), medium (invited vidhan sabha legislator to speak at rally), and high (invited state president to speak at rally)	converted to dummy variable for conjoint analysis