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Sustainable representation through electoral quotas: evidence from India

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ABSTRACT

Do electoral quotas promote or impede candidates moving up the political ladder? While quotas facilitate initial entry into politics, their impact on subsequent career advancement remains understudied. We experimentally examine voters' preferences toward upward mobility of candidates who previously held quota-based positions in the Indian context. Our results demonstrate a clear pro-women bias. However, this positive disposition does not extend to all quota beneficiaries – we find significant negative bias against candidates from traditionally marginalized groups, especially men who accessed political office through caste quotas. These findings suggest that the “pipeline effect” of quotas operates differentially across identity categories, with gender quotas potentially facilitating upward mobility while caste quotas may inadvertently create additional barriers. More broadly, our findings contribute to understanding how different types of quotas – gender and caste – intersect to shape sustainable political representation and career advancement in democratic systems.

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There is a long history of examining the impact of quotas, or affirmative action policies meant for improving the representation of women and traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in politics. This literature has informed our understanding of how quotas shape diversity in political representation (Barnes and Holman 2020; Tan 2014), interpersonal relations (Brulé and Toth 2022; Chauchard 2014), voter stereotypes (De Paola, Scoppa, and Lombardo 2010), electoral participation (De Paola, Scoppa, and De Benedetto 2014), policy directions and developmental outcomes (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2007; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Dunning and Nilekani 2013; Gulzar, Haas, and Pasquale 2020; Htun, Lacalle, and Micozzi 2013), the effectiveness of quota beneficiaries (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2017), and the spillover effects on political representation (Karekurve-Ramachandra 2020; O'Brien and Rickne 2016). One remaining question is how quota politicians progress in their careers, and whether that trajectory differs from non-quota politicians. If electoral quotas serve as a signal of political

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experience, they may break down common negative stereotypes, which, in turn, can help quota beneficiaries advance their political career prospects. In contrast, if negative views about affirmative action are intensified by a politician benefiting from a past quota, then political quotas could hinder opportunities for their intended beneficiaries. Additionally, if quota politicians fail to advance their careers, their capacity to drive policy change is restricted, which may further cast doubts about quota effectiveness.

In this paper, we use a pre-registered survey experiment in the context of India to investigate how voters evaluate political candidates who have entered politics through electoral quotas in higher-level elections.¹ We first present randomized vignettes to prime respondents about electoral quotas, varying the beneficiary groups (either gender, caste, or both) for treatment groups.² Not only should such priming make quotas salient for respondents, it also enables us to examine how the presentation of quotas – framed similarly but targeting different demographic groups – makes some candidate attributes more favorable than others. After presenting the vignette, we analyze respondents' vote choice through a conjoint experiment where we vary the personal attributes of fictional political candidates, including whether they used a political quota in the past to enter local politics.

Our results demonstrate that respondents show greater support for women candidates in state-level legislative elections; however, they neither reward nor penalize candidates who previously held local-level positions through gender or caste quotas. Intersectional analysis reveals a clear hierarchy of preference: gender quota beneficiaries emerge as the most favored candidates, while men from Scheduled Tribes – a historically marginalized group in India – and men who accessed positions through local caste quotas face the strongest voter resistance. Notably, experimental priming regarding quota systems yielded null treatment effects, suggesting that voters' preferences regarding candidates' identity and quota background remain stable.

Our findings offer several contributions to the literature on gender, minorities, and politics. First, by focusing on both gender and ethnic quotas, we study voters' opinions from both a comparative and intersectional perspective about the extent to which quotas can address persistent inequities in political representation. Our results show that the least preferred candidates are ethnic minority men, and men who used a local caste quota. Second, while previous literature has expanded our understanding of electoral quotas' impact on the substantive (i.e. the extent to which elected officials act on behalf of their constituents) and symbolic effects (i.e. the extent to which elected officials shape societal values and aspirations), it is unclear how the moniker of a 'quota politician' might affect their career progression. We study this question by centering on how voters evaluate quota beneficiaries' prospects of career advancement. Our analysis shows that while respondents are more supportive of women candidates, as opposed to ethnic minority candidates, they neither reward nor punish those who have held local-level political positions either through gender or caste quotas. However, respondents prefer gender quota beneficiaries when they are primed to think about quotas. These findings complement the literature examining "sustainable representation", or the lasting impacts of electoral quotas (Bhavnani 2017; Darhour and Dahlerup 2013; Kaur and Philips 2022; Motghare 2023; Wang and Yoon 2018), especially those focused on the developing country context.

Electoral quotas, public opinion, and sustainable representation

Public opinion and need for electoral quotas

Public behavior literature has sought to identify whether and how the presence of women and ethnic or racial minority politicians affect the attitudes and beliefs of voters. As social role theory suggests, traditional gender roles inform voters' preferences for political leaders, as voters associate men with leadership positions (Schneider and Bos 2019). Similarly, voters tend to favor candidates from their own social groups who share similar ascriptive traits (Greenwald et al. 2009; Peyton and Huber 2021; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Scholars propose that, due to voters' limited experience with women and under-represented ethnic groups in leadership roles, they may rely on these visible identity markers to infer candidate competence and viability. This tendency is especially prominent when voters have limited information about the candidates (Hajnal 2001). Others suggest that biases may be more deeply ingrained, with voters exhibiting inherent prejudices or even hostility towards out-group candidates (Peyton and Huber 2021; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Streb et al. 2008). Such attitudes and biases can reinforce a negative feedback loop, as women and ethnic minority politicians – already facing limited political opportunities – may be further discouraged from running for office (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Perhaps due to persistent voter biases, women and ethnic minorities continue to comprise a small fraction of the elected officials in most legislative bodies. To address this underrepresentation, many countries have adopted quota systems, such as reserved seats or party or candidate quotas, for women and/or minorities (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Hughes 2018). Of the two discussed in our paper, gender quotas are more prevalent than ethnic or racial quotas (Hughes 2011). Consequently, greater gains have been made in improving women's political representation than ethnic representation. For instance, while about one-third of political positions are held by women in most Latin American countries (Piscopo and Wylie 2020), the proportion held by Indigenous and Afro-descendants remains in the single digits (Htun 2016), despite comprising about one-third of the population in Latin America (World Food Programme 2022).

Electoral quotas and representational effects

What does it mean for politics and policies to achieve inclusive representation through electoral quotas? A rich literature has explored the effects of quota implementation on a variety of outcomes. Scholars have generally found that voters like to see 'people like them', or those with similar backgrounds in politics (Hankla et al. 2023). This literature on quota effectiveness shows that while quotas can significantly improve the descriptive representation of the groups they are intended to support, their success varies based on institutional factors, including quota design and the specific electoral system (Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Salmond 2006).³

Scholars have also explored how quota adoption influences substantive representation, investigating whether and how policy priorities shift with the inclusion of under-represented groups. Political representation of marginalized communities has been linked to tangible gains for these communities, such as increased legislative attention or greater budget allocations to relevant areas, or greater provision of public goods

and other welfare services (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Funk and Philips 2019; Gulzar, Haas, and Pasquale 2020; Htun, Lacalle, and Micozzi 2013). Electoral quotas have shown positive effects in other domains, including public employment opportunities (Gille 2018) and improved educational outcomes (L. Beaman et al. 2012). In this way, increasing the descriptive representation of marginalized groups in politics can promote social and economic inclusion more broadly (Mansbridge 1999).

Another crucial dimension of representation that has received significant scholarly attention is the role of descriptive representation in shaping public beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Some argue that the symbolic effect of descriptive representation – the sense of being represented itself – is empowering (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). Persistent political exclusion, conversely, fosters distrust and discontentment with the political systems (Mansbridge 1999). Thus, using quotas to improve symbolic representation may serve as a meaningful end in itself, as this representation provides psychological benefits and allows leaders from underrepresented groups to become role models for their communities (L.A. Beaman et al. 2009a). This symbolic effect helps to build a sense of fairness and trust in political systems (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019; Hinojosa, Fridkin, and Caul Kittilson 2017), which may, in turn, boost the political engagement of women and minority groups (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2019).

Given such wide-ranging effects of quotas on voters' perceptions, one might expect that quotas also have more indirect or long-term effects. Darhour and Dahlerup (2013) term the long-lasting impacts of quotas 'sustainable representation'. Evidence towards the role of quotas in furthering sustainable representation appears mixed; in India, local gender quotas have a positive impact as women's numerical representation persists when quotas are removed in subsequent elections (Bhavnani 2009; Sekhon and Titunik 2012) or women's representation increases in the higher-level political office where gender quotas are not present (Goyal 2020a; Karekurve-Ramachandra 2020; Kaur and Philips 2022). Or consider Switzerland, where gender quotas led to more women occupying intraparty leadership positions (O'Brien and Rickne 2016). In contrast, Darhour and Dahlerup (2013) find that women's representation in Morocco remains limited only to reserved seats.

This review of a burgeoning body of work demonstrates that quotas act as a disrupting force and have wide-ranging effects within and outside politics. From the perspective of sustainable representation, the focus of this manuscript, we seek to add to the literature discussed above through the lens of how voters perceive quotas and quota beneficiaries in order to understand how such characteristics might be rewarded or punished from an individual-level standpoint.

Theorizing about voters' attitudes and sustainable representation of quotas

Before turning to our theory of voters' attitudes towards quotas, we acknowledge that the extant literature has a mixed view on how quotas might shape attitudes. On the one hand, quotas provide the opportunity for voters to witness political leadership of non-dominant groups including women and groups marginalized on race and ethnicity. As a result, their beliefs about quota-receiving groups could get updated. For example, L. Beaman, Chattopadhyay et al. (2009b) find that gendered stereotypes towards

women weaken among men in the presence of women's political leadership and, thus, the exposure to women's leadership can be effective in reducing gendered biases. Moreover, quota representatives target improving welfare outcomes for their constituents (L. Beaman et al. 2011; Besley, Pande, and Rao 2007). On the other hand, however, such improvements may lead to a backlash if dominant or non-targeted groups perceive quotas as a mechanism for extending political power to others at their expense. As status discontent theory predicts, dominant groups may perceive a loss of power and status (Morgan and Buice 2013). For instance, Deininger, Nagarajan, and Singh (2020) find that gender quotas have improved women's participation in employment guarantee programs, likely at the expense of men's participation. As a result, dominant groups may have antagonizing attitudes towards minority groups, which may explain why minority groups sometimes face a backlash (Gangadharan et al. 2016; Kanthak and Krause 2012). If so, dominant groups may become less supportive of quota policies, and engage less politically.⁴

Another source of negative attitudes is that groups benefitting from quotas may be perceived as incompetent or under-qualified for political office (Jensenius 2015; Nanivadekar 2006).⁵ Clayton (2014) finds that quota women in the Ugandan parliament receive less recognition compared to their non-quota counterparts. Quota beneficiaries deal with power dynamics from their colleagues, family, and society, thereby affecting their ability and effectiveness in carrying out their legislative agenda and their desire to continue to be in politics (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Burnet 2011). As a result, voters may hold quota politicians to a higher standard (Fulton 2012), or perceive them as less competent compared to their non-quota counterparts. Existing literature also shows that voters draw cues from politicians, and male politicians typically disapprove quotas as a measure of bringing gender parity in politics (Meier 2012).⁶

In sum, current research raises the possibility that the sustainable effects of quotas can be different for different groups. In terms of sustainable representation, Darhour and Dahlerup (2013) propose three tests: comparing the representation of reserved seats with open seats, considering whether reserved seats are a stepping stone for contesting on open seats, and testing whether quotas systems have consolidated over time. We extend this by arguing that the ultimate test of sustainable representation is to track the career trajectory of quota beneficiaries. Below we causally explore this by focusing on voters' perceptions about quota beneficiaries when they seek office in non-quota elections. In doing so, we focus on both gender and ethnic quotas.

Theoretical argument

There are reasons to expect that not all quotas are created equal; gender quotas might be more tolerable than other types such as ethnic quotas, since the former is much more prevalent. Moreover, evidence suggests that voters might have different levels of acceptability towards quotas. Finally, there is evidence of both beneficial effects from increasing representation of historically underrepresented groups through quotas, as well as a 'backlash' effect.

What is even less clear is how voters might perceive political candidates who may have benefited in a past election from a quota. In other words, is past political experience – facilitated through a reserved quota seat – perceived negatively or positively by voters when that candidate continues on their political career? We illustrate this concept in

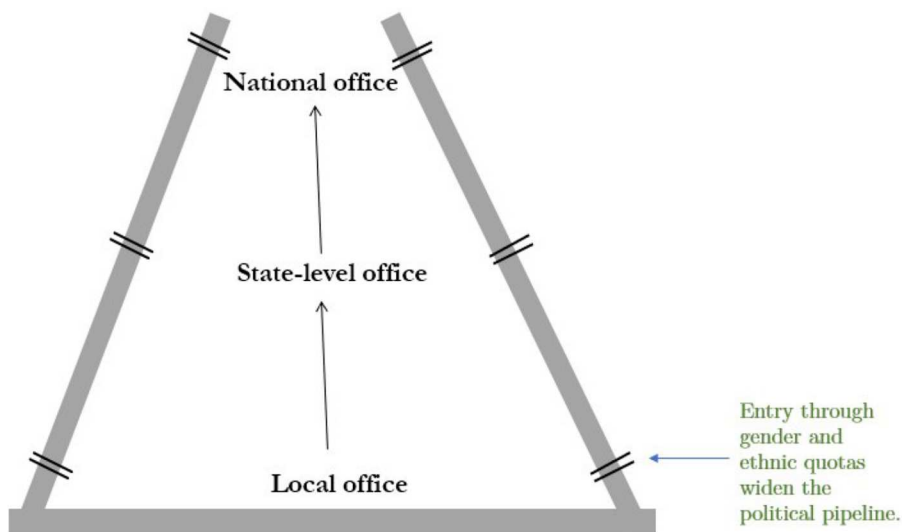


Figure 1. An illustration of political pipeline of career progression facilitated through entry-level gender and ethnic quotas.

Figure 1 for a case such as India, whereby women and ethnic minorities enter politics through quotas at local levels, gain opportunities to strengthen their profile and, thereby, can enter into the candidate pool for higher levels of office, such as state- and national-level elections. While observational data has answered this question at a more aggregate level (Goyal 2020a; Kaur 2024; Kaur and Philips 2022), does having benefited from a quota in the past lead an individual voter to punish or reward a political candidate in the future? It is also unclear whether such quotas may have more indirect effects, whereby voters either become more predisposed (out of a sense of equity, competency, and fairness) or less (the “backlash” effect) towards supporting women or other minority groups – regardless of whether or not a specific politician benefited from a quota – after being made aware of the purpose of such quotas in politics. A similar question remains as to whether certain types of voters might be especially likely to reward or punish quota beneficiaries.

We argue that not all quota beneficiaries face similar levels of voter support for their career progression and that the mention of quotas can make these corresponding identities salient. Therefore, voters’ support (or lack thereof) for quota candidates will be based on the identity that quotas make salient. For instance, informing about gender quotas should make the gender of a political candidate as well as a gender quota salient. Thus, even if we frame the same information on quotas, but advocate for different quota beneficiaries, the effects of such framing will be different. Therefore we categorize our hypotheses along both of these aspects. We present our theoretical expectations in three parts as follows.

First, we expect voters who are primed about gender quotas to prefer not only gender quota beneficiaries – but also women in general – compared to those who are not specifically primed about gender quotas. Our expectations are based on the literature examining the spillover effects of gender quotas. For instance, O’Brien (2015) shows that gender

quotas constituted at the municipal level expand women's presence in party leadership. Similarly, O'Connell (2020) finds that women's leadership at the district level due to gender quotas improves women's representation at both the state and parliamentary levels. Such increased representation persists even when gender quotas are withdrawn (Bhavnani 2009; De Paola, Scoppa, and Lombardo 2010). One explanation for this is that bringing women into political positions through gender quotas helps update voters' attitudes about women's ability to lead (L.A. Beaman et al. 2009a).

We argue that even though vote choice is gendered, women nevertheless persist, partially because voters begin to find women's political leadership competent. This leads us to expect that *priming respondents on the need for gender quotas* will not only benefit women who received a quota seat in the past (H_{1b}) but also women candidates in general (H_{1a}):

- H_{1a} : Gender quota priming makes voters more likely to support women candidates.
- H_{1b} : Gender quota priming makes voters more likely to support women candidates who have benefited from electoral quotas in the past.

Second, we expect that priming voters about ethnic minority quotas can elevate their support for political candidates who are minorities in a similar manner to our expectations for women. We expect such a positive effect to occur for both quota beneficiaries as well as non-beneficiaries:

- H_{2a} : Priming respondents on ethnic minority quotas makes voters more likely to support ethnic minority candidates.
- H_{2b} : Priming respondents on ethnic minority quotas makes voters more likely to support ethnic minority candidates who have benefited from electoral quotas in the past.

However, there are reasons to believe that voters might be more supportive of gender quotas rather than ethnic quotas when they are primed about them simultaneously. After all, women constitute roughly half of the population, and “whereas gender tends to be crosscutting, ethnicity tends to be coinciding” (Htun 2004, 439). In other words, the presence of ethnic and racial minorities tends to be concentrated in certain geographic pockets, while the presence of women is ubiquitous. This is partially the reason why candidate or statutory quotas are more popular for expanding women's representation, while reserved seats are more popular for improving ethnic representation (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2017; Htun 2004). Voters may also view ethnic quota candidates as underqualified and ineffective (Jensenius 2015), and continue to hold negative stereotypes against them (Chauchard 2014), which also reflects in their discriminatory behavior towards ethnic minorities (Girard 2018). Parties may be less supportive of minority quotas than gender quotas (Freidenvall and Dahlerup 2019). In addition, historical context may explain why quotas are supported differently, since ethnic quotas sometimes date back to colonial times, while gender quotas are more recent (Hughes 2018).

Another reason for differences in quota perceptions is that ethnic quotas are generally implemented by creating special districts. Unlike in the case of gender quotas, voters do

not get as many opportunities to update their biases and stereotypes about ethnic minorities through the implementation of ethnic quotas. Moreover, in hierarchical societies, high-rank groups oppose policy instruments that tend to redistribute political power and economic resources to low-status groups (Suryanarayan and White 2021). We, therefore, expect that respondents primed about *both* types of quotas will make voters relatively more supportive of women candidates than ethnic minority candidates (Hypothesis H_{3a}), as well as for candidates who were actual quota beneficiaries (Hypothesis H_{3b}), leading to our third set of theoretical expectations:

- H_{3a} : Priming on gender and ethnic quotas makes voters more likely to support women candidates than ethnic minority candidates.
- H_{3b} : Priming on gender and ethnic quotas makes voters more likely to support women candidates who have benefited from a gender quota than ethnic minority candidates who have benefited from a quota.

Data and methods

Separating voter perceptions from any underlying predispositions towards supporting or punishing those who previously benefitted from electoral quotas would be difficult using observational data for several reasons. Voters might use other heuristics when deciding whether to support a candidate, while quota beneficiaries may have characteristics that make untangling causal effects difficult. To get around these challenges, we use a pre-registered (see the SI) online survey experiment of Indian voters to test our hypotheses.

India is an ideal case given its historical experience with both gender and caste (historical minority groups facing discrimination) quotas. Post-independence, electoral quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were adopted in the form of reserved seats in the national Parliament (for electing the Members of Parliament, MPs) as well as in state assemblies (for electing Members of Legislative Assembly, MLA). Later, these were expanded to local governments with two amendments to the Indian Constitutions in 1993 and 1994. These amendments also have provisions for gender quotas in the form of reserved seats at the local level; one-third of seats were reserved for women. After 2005, many states started to expand this proportion to 50 percent. Thus at the local level, gender and caste quotas operate simultaneously, as the caste-based reserved seats proportionally overlap with the seats reserved for women. For example, if 10 percent of seats are reserved based on caste, and 50 percent of seats are reserved for women, then, 50 percent of those caste-based reserved seats will be reserved for women. Very recently, the Women's Reservation Bill was passed in 2023 outlining the provisions for gender quotas at the state and national level, although its timeline of implementation is uncertain.

We consider these aspects to examine the upward mobility of local-level quota beneficiaries in the state-level elections for MLA positions. Given the history of both caste and gender-based discrimination in India, our analysis allows us to better understand any intersectionality between these two characteristics in terms of voters' attitudes. Of course, local-level quotas exist elsewhere, such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Namibia, Chad, and Italy (c.f., Bird 2014).

Reserved seats offer a hard test case of voters' evaluations of quota beneficiaries as the candidate pool is artificially constrained; only candidates from the target group would be eligible to contest elections. Thus, compared to other quota types such as voluntary party quotas or mandatory legislative quotas, groups who gain political positions through reserved seats may face additional stigmatization as such electoral competition can be seen as less competitive, or competition between undeserving candidates, and the winner of such contests can be perceived as undeserving for progressing further in political career trajectory. Thus, reserved seat systems provide a strong case to test women and other marginalized groups' ascension in their political careers.

Priming vignettes

We implemented our survey experiment from March to May 2022, on Amazon's MTurk, which is cost-effective and is relatively high in quality (Boas, Christenson, and Glick 2020). We first asked respondents a series of basic questions, including socio-demographic information, political engagement, and attitudes toward women and ethnic minorities. We then primed respondents to think about quotas by randomly assigning them to one of four vignette groups: gender, caste, gender *and* caste, and a control vignette about an unrelated topic (an Indian sports icon). Our treatment vignettes are as follows:

“[Women/Some caste groups/Both women and oppressed caste groups] have been historically excluded leading to their underrepresentation in politics. To address this, a series of reservation policies have been enacted, whereby seats in local-level governments are reserved only for them. As a result, [at least one-third of the seats are occupied by women/ these caste groups occupy seats proportional to their population/women and persons of these caste groups occupy seats proportional to their population] in local political councils (panchayat or municipal councils).”

The vignette priming helps us examine how the same information about the need for quotas might affect vote choice in the conjoint experiment below, depending on whom quotas are being advocated for in the vignette (gender, caste, or both). Priming should help amplify any pro/negative effects of quotas since respondents are being reminded about quotas and the role they play in politics.

Conjoint experiment

Following the vignettes, each respondent was shown a series of 12 conjoint pairs. In each of the pairings, respondents were shown two hypothetical political candidates and asked

Table 1. Conjoint attributes manipulated in the study.

Variable	Attributes
Gender	Male, Female
Caste category	General, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe
Age	28, 44, 61
Party Type	Regional, National
Religion	Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian
MLA Constituency Status	Reserved, Unreserved
Dynastic Status/Family Has History in Politics	Yes, No
Was Previously a Local-Level Politician	Yes, No
Held Local-Level Political Office on a gender-based reserved seat ⁸	Yes, No, N/A
Held Local-Level Political Office on a caste-based reserved seat ⁹	Yes, No, N/A

to choose between the two profiles: “Which candidate will you vote for?” Table 1 describes the key characteristics of these hypothetical profiles, which we randomly varied. Key to our study are gender, caste, and whether the candidate previously held local-level office through a reserved seat, although we included additional attributes to mitigate social-desirability bias. Since male and non-minority candidates cannot have benefited from these respective quotas, we created relevant profile restrictions. While a total of 1497 respondents took the survey, our analysis is based on 946 respondents who (1) completed the survey, (2) had a unique Indian IP address, and (3) are at least 18 years of age.⁷

We combine a conjoint experimental design with a vignette to leverage their advantages. The former simultaneously assesses causal effects across multiple dimensions and has been used in gender and politics research (de Geus et al. 2021; Ono and Yamada 2020). Unlike standard experiments that face limitations with manipulating items (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), conjoint experiments enable us to examine numerous attributes as causal drivers. This design isolates the causal effect of past political experience gained through quotas for women and ethnic minorities, reducing social desirability bias (Horiuchi, Markovich, and Yamamoto 2022). Conjoint experiments are also uniquely suited to our context with single-member electoral districts (SMDs) where voters cast a single vote for their preferred candidate. Furthermore, our conjoint experiment gains leverage through vignette priming, enhancing quota salience and aiding trait identification as outlined in our hypotheses; priming assesses how maintaining the same quota framing for different groups shifts voters’ assessment of quota beneficiaries.

The dependent variable in our model is a dummy variable indicating whether a respondent selects candidate “A” instead of candidate “B” from the hypothetical pair of profiles. Independent variables are dummy variables of the candidate’s attributes (e.g. a variable equal to one if the candidate was a woman and zero otherwise). Following Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020), we estimate marginal means, which have an advantage in allowing us to directly compare effect magnitudes across both the attributes and priming scenarios. In our case, we are interested in a subgroup analysis based on each of the four vignettes respondents received in our survey experiment. Therefore, marginal means offer an easy way to examine the relative effects of priming on the probability of being favored as an MLA based on gender, caste, local gender quota, and the local caste quota status of politicians.

Results

In Figure 2, we show marginal means for *all* respondents (i.e. not splitting by vignette). While all attributes are included in the analysis, we present our key attributes in this figure: gender, caste, local gender quota, and local caste quota (full results are in the SI). The horizontal axis represents marginal means, or the preference of respondents towards a given candidate’s attributes (shown vertically); above 0.5 indicates a respondent is more likely to prefer a candidate possessing a given attribute, and below 0.5 indicates that a candidate possessing this attribute makes them less likely to be preferred by voters, and 0.5 would represent a random chance. 95 percent confidence intervals are shown based on robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level since each evaluated 12 pairs of candidates.

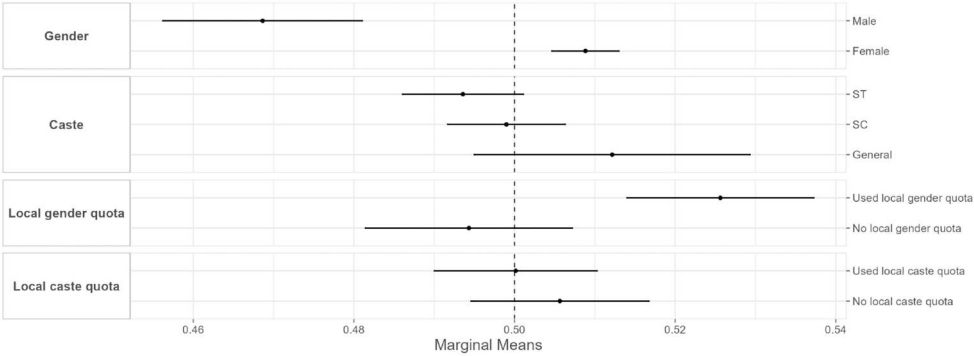


Figure 2. Marginal means for full sample.
Note: Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors.

Figure 2 indicates a positive bias towards women in selecting candidates for state-level MLA elections, while showing no particular preference based on the caste of candidates. Given the substantial literature on the role of caste in Indian electoral politics (Chandra 2007), these findings are somewhat unexpected. Notably, respondents expressed a preference for candidates who had gained political experience through local government gender quotas, yet demonstrated neither preference for nor aversion to candidates who used caste quotas. These findings imply that voters may be more supportive of women’s political advancement when supported by prior experience through gender quotas, a support not equally extended to caste quota beneficiaries.

Effect of quota priming on evaluating quota beneficiaries for career progression

To evaluate the impact of vignette treatments on candidate attribute preferences, we analyze differences in marginal means between each treatment and the control group in Figure 3. The analysis reveals that none of the treatments produced statistically significant effects on the candidate attributes of interest relative to the control. These findings suggest that our priming has no measurable effect – positive or negative – on the selection of specific candidate attributes. We turn to these results in the discussion section.

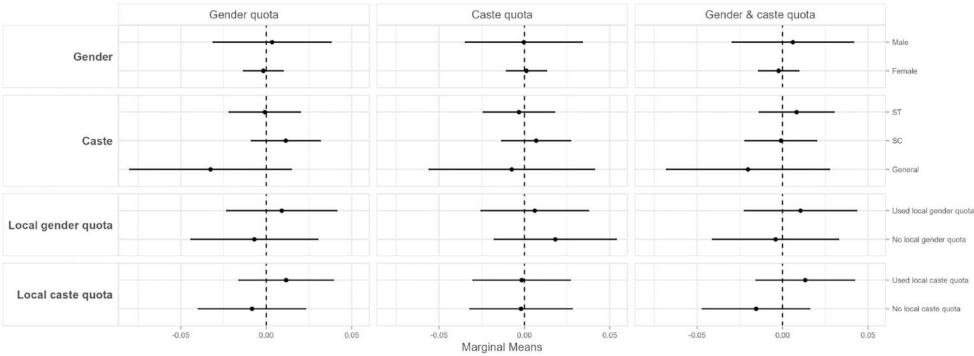


Figure 3. Differences in marginal means relative to the control group.

An alternative approach to interpreting these results is to present the marginal means within each treatment group, allowing us to analyze how respondents evaluate candidate attributes across different priming conditions. This approach highlights how each priming type individually influences voters' relative favorability toward specific candidate attributes. In [Figure 4](#), we illustrate the effect of quota priming by segmenting results according to vignette categories. Column 1 displays the control condition, providing a baseline of “clean” effects of electoral quotas on career progression. Column 2 presents the results when respondents are primed about gender quotas, column 3 for caste quotas, and column 4 for both gender and caste quotas combined. This breakdown offers insight into how specific quota-related priming types can shape voter perceptions of candidate attributes, capturing nuanced shifts in favorability that are otherwise less apparent.

Starting with the far-left column, we observe that in the absence of any quota vignette, respondents exhibit a statistically significant preference for women candidates. This finding aligns with previous experimental studies suggesting a pro-women bias among voters in political contexts ([Schwarz and Coppock 2022](#)). Although not statistically significant at conventional thresholds, the direction of marginal means is positive (greater than 0.5) for General caste candidates and local gender quota beneficiaries. However, this trend does not extend to local caste quota beneficiaries, who do not receive similarly favorable responses.

Turning to the second column in [Figure 4](#), we observe that priming respondents on gender quotas increases support for gender quota beneficiaries. However, women MLA candidates in general are not statistically more likely to be supported post-priming, in contrast to the control group, where women had an advantage over male MLA candidates. The third column illustrates the effects of caste priming, which shows that this form of priming does not significantly alter support for Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) candidates, nor for local caste quota beneficiaries. Although respondents do not penalize SC/ST candidates in response to information on caste quotas, they also do not offer additional support to these candidates unlike the support seen with gender quota beneficiaries. Interestingly, caste quota priming still leads to increased support for women and local gender quota beneficiaries in higher political positions, suggesting that even when focused on ethnic quotas, priming may inadvertently enhance support

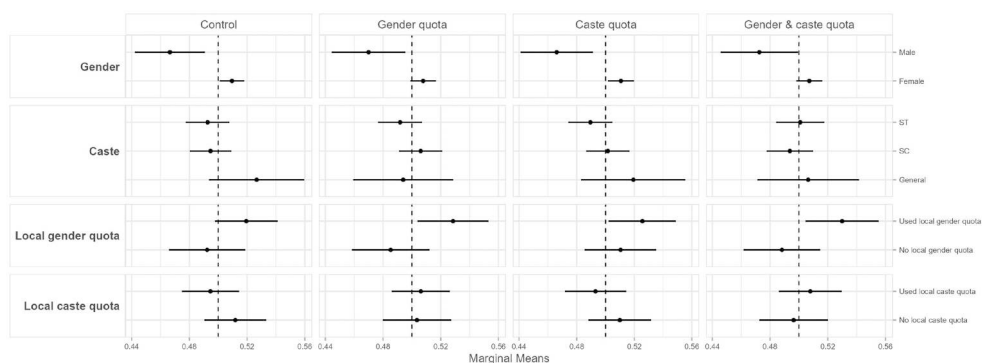


Figure 4. Marginal means conditional on priming.

Note: Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors. Sample size for vignettes: Control = 251, Gender quota = 228, Caste quota = 244, Gender and caste quota = 233.

for women. In the final column, we examine responses from the group receiving information on both caste and gender quotas. Here, women MLA candidates who previously gained political experience through local gender quotas are more favored for MLA elections, while caste quota beneficiaries do not show a statistically significant advantage or disadvantage relative to the control. Overall, these findings indicate that women may be the primary beneficiaries of quota priming.

Intersectional effects

We further analyze respondents’ preferences across vignettes, considering candidates’ intersectional traits. In Figure 5, we display marginal means for various candidate profiles. For example, ‘Male ST’ indicates marginal means for a hypothetical candidate who is both male *and* belongs to an ST group. Within the control group, male ST candidates and male local caste quota beneficiaries are the least preferred for MLA positions. Priming respondents with information about gender quotas increases the likelihood of success for women who have previously benefitted from either or both local-level gender and caste quotas, indicating a general advantage for female candidates. Under caste quota priming, male ST candidates and local caste quota beneficiaries remain less favored for MLA positions. However, when respondents are primed on both gender and caste quotas, we observe the same patterns as observed with the priming of gender quotas.

These findings suggest that gender quota priming generally benefits women candidates for MLA positions. Caste quotas, however, seem to negatively impact perceptions of male candidate quality. This aligns with findings by Belschner and de Paredes (2021), who suggest that the representational benefits of intersectional quotas – such as those based on both gender and youth – tend to favor young women over young men.

Robustness checks

We also conducted several robustness checks to validate our findings, with details provided in the SI for brevity. First, we divided the sample by gender, caste, and age to investigate sub-group differences. Second, we applied survey weights based on gender, caste,

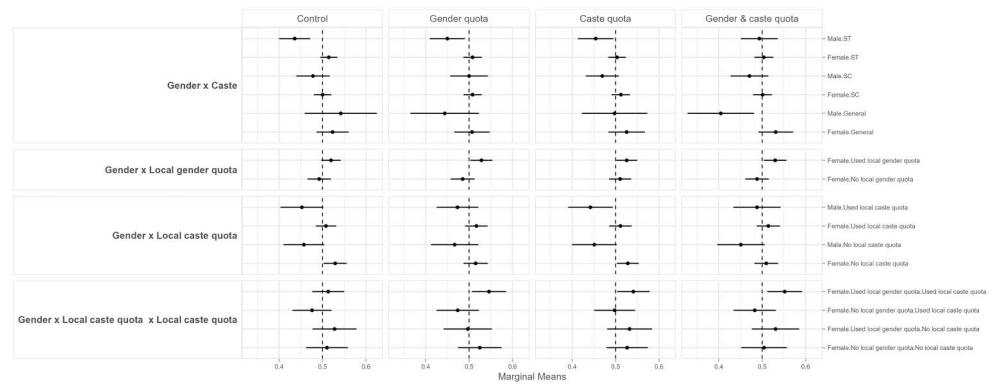


Figure 5. Conditional marginal means of priming on intersectional traits of candidates. Note: Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors.

and religion to enhance the representativeness of our sample. Third, we restricted the analysis to respondents who completed the post-treatment attention check. Fourth, we examined sub-groups based on their self-reported attitudes toward women and SC/STs in pre-treatment stage. Overall, these robustness checks show consistent results across different specifications. Additionally, we assessed whether the priming effects weakened across successive conjoint questions and found only limited evidence of such a decline.

Discussion and conclusion

The “pipeline effect” contends that descriptive representation at lower-tiers of political office can help diversify political representation in influential, higher-level political positions (Mariani 2008). When such pipelines operate through electoral quotas, understanding voters’ attitudes toward quota beneficiaries becomes crucial for analyzing their prospects for upward political mobility. Our experimental analysis reveals that while quotas can heighten the salience of candidates’ ascriptive traits, they generate differential impacts across gender and caste dimensions.

One of the study’s key insights is the pro-women bias evident in voter preferences. Respondents generally favored female candidates, especially those with political experience gained through local-level gender quotas. Similar patterns have been observed in other empirical work on intersectionality (Celis et al. 2014; Janssen, Erzeel, and Celis 2021; Kaur 2024). Notably, our analysis demonstrates that voters evaluate minority men least favorably, particularly those who previously held local political office through caste quotas, indicating that quotas exhibit negative signaling effects for caste quota beneficiaries compared to gender quota beneficiaries.

Our conjoint experiment illuminates significant biases against caste quota beneficiaries regarding their upward mobility within the political hierarchy. While our priming intervention on quotas showed modest success in mitigating these biases, it did not substantially enhance caste quota beneficiaries’ electability. This outcome likely stems from our specific priming approach, which included both information about electoral quotas and their historical context regarding past underrepresentation. Drawing on literature concerning the backlash effect associated with quotas (Deininger, Nagarajan, and Singh 2020; Goyal 2020b), we posit that a priming vignette limited to a factual statement about quotas – without the historical context – might have led to a negative effect on voter support for quota beneficiaries. This finding points toward a promising avenue for future research: examining how different types of priming influence voter support for quota beneficiaries’ career advancement. We hypothesize that a mere mention of quotas could provoke a backlash among voters, resulting in diminished support for both the quotas themselves and the candidates benefitting from them. However, framing quotas in terms of their historical need and social purpose may reduce or even reverse this negative effect, improving voter attitudes toward quota beneficiaries.

While we cannot ascertain the exact proportion of Indian MLA candidates who have used a local electoral quota in the past, we anticipate an increase in the proportion of politicians previously benefiting from village or municipal-level electoral quotas contesting for MLA positions.¹⁰ This projection rests on two developments: first, empirical evidence demonstrating that local-level gender quotas have enhanced women’s

representation in higher political offices (Goyal 2020a; Kaur and Philips 2022; O’Connell 2020); and second, the Indian government’s 2023 Women’s Reservations Bill, which mandates 33% women’s representation in state and national elections. This legislation addresses a persistent gender gap – women’s representation in state legislatures has historically stagnated at around 10%. The new quota requirement creates an unprecedented demand for women candidates, likely prompting political parties to seek qualified women contenders. In this context, women who have gained political experience through local-level gender quotas represent a valuable talent pool, offering parties experienced candidates who have already demonstrated their political capabilities through quota-enabled positions. In this context, our research is timely in exploring voters’ evaluations of candidate attributes, particularly their quota beneficiary status. This research agenda also holds policy relevance as it is essential to explore whether entry-level electoral quotas can serve as a potential pathway to achieving equitable political representation in higher-level offices.

While our arguments and results are most relevant to the Indian context, our findings also point to a fruitful avenue for further research on exploring intersectionality in quotas elsewhere. More than 35 and 130 countries have some form of ethnic or gender quota, respectively (Hughes et al. 2019; Tan and Preece 2022). Similarly, about 25 countries have provisions for youth quotas (Belschner and de Paredes 2021). Future work should examine how different quotas interact to shape quota politicians’ long-term career trajectories.

Notes

1. For brevity we limit this manuscript to three hypotheses presented in our pre-analysis plan (PAP), although we describe results for all the hypotheses in the Supplementary Information (SI).
2. Building off from Chandra (2012, 8)’s definition of ethnic identities in which “descent-based attributes are necessary for membership,” we use the term ethnic quotas as opposed to caste quotas. There have been some insightful scholarly discussions on whether caste is distinct from ethnicity (Lee 2020; Reddy 2005), although we agree with Reddy (2005, 571) that “the popular word ‘ethnicity’ has the advantage of not making India look peculiar, while simultaneously taking into account the tendencies of Dalit discourse to highlight locality, uniqueness, and concreteness.”
3. There are three primary types of quotas: voluntary party quotas, candidate quotas, and reserved seats, with reserved seats often leading to the highest levels of female representation in legislatures (Tripp and Kang 2008). Furthermore, placement mandates and higher quota thresholds tend to have the strongest impact on increasing the number of women in office (Hughes et al. 2019). Broader patterns in quota adoption show that candidate quotas are most frequently implemented for women, while reserved seats are more commonly used for ethnic groups (Htun 2004).
4. In the US, similar findings are documented on the political engagement of white voters with the increase in the Congressional representation of Black voters (Gay 2001).
5. Of course, better-qualified candidates may appear at the ballot box as a result of quotas (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Weeks and Baldez 2015).
6. A case in point, Indian Member of Parliament (MP) Tejaswi Surya has voiced his opposition towards gender quotas. He tweeted on June 10, 2014, “With the exception of Women’s Reservation in Parliament, Modi [government’s] agenda is inspiring. Dread [the] day when women’s reservation becomes reality.”
7. We discuss the power of our experiment in the SI.

8. Attribute is Yes/No *only* if “Was Previously a Local-Level Politician” = Yes and “Gender” = Female; if not, option was N/A.
9. Attribute is Yes/No *only* if “Was Previously a Local-Level Politician” = Yes and “Caste” = SC/ST; if not, option was N/A.
10. Obtaining such data necessitates a substantial data collection effort, given the millions holding positions in rural and urban councils in India, serving five-year terms since 1993. Although a significant amount of data regarding the attributes of candidates participating in state-level elections is available through the affidavits they are required to complete during nomination processes, this documentation does not encompass information about their political background or experience in local government roles.

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