

# Research Statement

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I am a political scientist and a scholar of comparative politics whose research examines democratic institutions in developing democracies through two distinct research agendas, with an empirical focus on India. My primary research on local governance investigates how institutional design choices—such as electoral quotas, candidacy requirements, and executive selection methods—create unintended spillover effects on democratic representation. My second research agenda studies misinformation, focusing on how information quality and transmission patterns affect citizen beliefs and behavior. My work combines rigorous causal identification strategies with original data collection from field experiments, surveys, and administrative records.

## Local Governance and Political Representation

### Dissertation: The Spillover Effects of Local Institutions

How do local institutions shape political representation beyond their intended scope? While scholars have extensively studied the direct effects of institutional design, we know surprisingly little about the unintended consequences of these choices on democratic participation. My dissertation develops a theoretical framework for understanding these *institutional spillovers*—how reforms in one area systematically affect outcomes in others. The central argument is that institutional choices often produce differential effects across social groups because they interact with pre-existing norms, incentives, and power structures in unexpected ways.

Focusing on India’s village council (panchayat) system—which governs over 600 million rural citizens and represents the world’s largest experiment in local democracy—my three dissertation papers trace how different types of institutional reforms create spillover effects that can either reinforce or challenge existing patterns of marginalized group representation. Together, these three papers establish institutional spillovers as a crucial but understudied phenomenon in democratic governance. They demonstrate that effective institutional design requires attention not only to direct effects but also to how reforms interact with existing social structures and institutional arrangements to produce unexpected patterns of political representation. My dissertation has received the *Best Dissertation Prize in Comparative Politics* from UW-Madison (2025) and also, the *Best Dissertation Prize in Diversity, Equity, Justice & Power* from UW-Madison (2025).

### Paper 1: Do Electoral Quotas for Marginalized Ethnic Groups Improve Women’s Representation?

In my job market paper, I ask how caste quotas affect women’s descriptive political representation in India’s village councils. Theoretically, the contribution of the paper centers on the concept of *intersectional institutional effects*—how quotas designed for one dimension of identity can have unintended consequences for another. I argue that the effectiveness of electoral reforms depends critically on how they interact with existing socio-political norms that vary across group boundaries. Specifically, I propose a theory with two interacting channels explaining the implications. First, caste-based social hierarchies create differential gender norms across groups. Privileged-caste women face stricter mobility restrictions designed to maintain caste hierarchy, while marginalized-caste women encounter fewer social barriers to political candidacy. Second, caste quotas structurally reduce political competition by restricting eligibility to historically disenfranchised groups. The combination of more favorable gender norms among marginalized castes and reduced com-

petition in quota seats creates conditions that enhance women’s political candidacy and electoral success.

My empirical analysis leverages a novel design that uses quasi-random variation in caste quota assignment within 4,800 village wards in Maharashtra, comparing women’s representation across seats with identical electorates but different quota statuses. The results confirm my theoretical predictions: women’s candidacy is approximately 1.5 times higher in seats with caste quotas compared to seats without any quotas, and electoral success is 2 times higher. This paper demonstrates how the interaction of intersectional identities with institutional design can reveal unexpected positive spillovers across different dimensions of marginalization, with direct implications for designing inclusive electoral systems.

## **Paper 2: Do Electoral Eligibility Laws Hurt Political Candidacy of Specific Groups?**

Building on the spillover effects framework, this paper examines how electoral requirements can systematically exclude certain groups from political participation in India. I develop a theory of *norm-institution conflict*, arguing that when electoral laws challenge prevailing social expectations, marginalized groups face a particularly acute dilemma. They must choose between legal compliance and social conformity, but unlike advantaged groups, they face both higher social sanctions for norm deviation and lower probabilities of electoral victory to compensate for these costs. This creates a systematic bias against marginalized group participation even when the laws are applicable to everyone.

My empirical context is electoral laws that disqualify citizens with more than two children from contesting local government offices in India. I uncover the mechanism through which ostensibly universal rules produce differential outcomes: the social cost-benefit calculus that potential candidates face when institutional requirements conflict with community norms.

My analysis of fertility limits for local politicians demonstrates this mechanism in action. Using difference-in-differences analysis of law adoption across Indian states, I show that these requirements reduce Muslim political candidacy while having minimal effects on other groups. Survey evidence with 1,200 potential candidates reveals that this occurs precisely through the social cost mechanism I theorize—Muslim candidates face community pressure around family size decisions that other groups do not experience as acutely. This paper contributes to our understanding of how institutional barriers can be effectively invisible to advantaged groups while creating substantial obstacles for marginalized communities.

## **Paper 3: The Effects of Executive Selection Methods on Political Entry and Exit**

This paper extends the spillover effects framework to examine how changes in one electoral institution (executive selection) affect incentives in another (legislative candidacy). My theoretical contribution centers on the concept of *institutional complementarity*—how the value and attractiveness of political positions depend on their relationship to other offices within the same system.

I argue that shifting from indirect to direct election of village heads fundamentally alters the incentive structure for council member positions. Under indirect election, council members hold significant power because heads depend on their support and remain vulnerable to no-confidence votes. I argue that Direct election breaks this dependency relationship, reducing the instrumental value of council seats and making them less attractive to potential candidates, particularly those from marginalized groups who may have relied on coalition-building strategies.

My empirical analysis uses administrative data on different stages of the electoral process across 23,495 village councils to trace how institutional changes affect candidate entry, exit, and final competition patterns. The results show that direct election reduces the number of candidate nominations, withdrawals, and total candidates for legislative seats. This paper demonstrates how

electoral reforms can have unintended consequences that undermine their democratic objectives when policymakers ignore institutional complementarities.

## **Beyond the Dissertation: Local Governance Research Agenda**

### **Mere Proxies or Genuine Leaders?** (with Apurva Bamezai and Rithika Kumar, *under review*)

While gender quotas clearly increase the number of women in office, whether this descriptive representation actually gives women power or whether power remains with traditional elites—male household heads—remains contested. We develop and validate a low-cost, scalable phone-based measure of proxy leadership by examining whether a female politician personally responds to a governance-related phone survey.

Phone surveys of over 1,100 local politicians across two Indian states reveal a striking gender gap—female politicians are 37.5% less likely than male politicians to respond to our survey themselves. An in-person citizen survey (N=969) in a subset of village councils shows that citizens in councils where the representative responded to our survey themselves were 66% more likely to correctly identify their female leader, validating the phone measure as a robust predictor of proxy leadership. This methodology offers researchers and policymakers a cost-effective tool for monitoring quota effectiveness and identifying variation in substantive representation among female politicians.

### **Climate Extremes and Democratic Participation** (with Patrick Behrer, Anwesha Bhattacharya, Shweta Bhogale, Ting Liu, Bhavya Srivastava and Tanya Vaidya)

We investigate how extreme weather affects electoral participation and outcomes. Using polling day temperature variation across Indian elections, we find that both extreme heat and cold reduce voter turnout by up to 8%, with differential effects by gender and social group. Extreme temperatures also reduce political competition by increasing winners' vote margins. This work contributes to understanding climate change's threats to democratic institutions.

## **Misinformation**

My second research agenda examines how information quality and transmission patterns shape citizen beliefs and political behavior. This work investigates both the individual-level mechanisms of misinformation vulnerability and the social processes through which false information spreads through communities.

### **Countering Misinformation Early** (with Simon Chauchard, Sumitra Badrinathan, and Florian Sichart, *Forthcoming at American Political Science Review*)

This project tests whether sustained educational interventions can build citizens' capacity to navigate complex information environments. We hypothesize that misinformation vulnerability stems not just from individual cognitive limitations, but from lack of systematic exposure to critical thinking tools and media literacy skills.

Our randomized controlled trial across 583 villages implemented a 4-month curriculum with over 13,500 students in Bihar, India. Results show substantial and persistent effects: treated students maintain 0.32 standard deviation improvements in discerning true from false information four months post-intervention. They show reduced reliance on alternative medicine and decreased dependence on unreliable news sources. Crucially, these effects extend to political misinformation, suggesting that educational interventions can build generalizable critical thinking skills.

The project’s most striking finding concerns spillover effects within households—parents of treated students show 0.25 standard deviation improvements in information discernment without direct treatment. This demonstrates that democratic capacity-building can have intergenerational effects, suggesting that investments in youth education may be particularly powerful tools for strengthening information environments. This research has been recognized with the APSA Experimental Research Section Best Paper Award (2025) and received Honorable Mention for the APSA Comparative Politics Section Sage Best Paper Award (2025).

### **Social Identity and Information Transmission** (with Chauchard, Badrinathan, and Sichart)

Using experimental methods, I examine how social identities shape information sharing patterns. Through a conjoint experiment with over 6,000 adolescents, we manipulate information characteristics (topic, veracity, source identity, social endorsement) across online and offline contexts.

We find systematic discrimination in information transmission: respondents are 22% less likely to share information from Muslim sources and penalize Muslim sources more severely for transmitting false information, while Hindu sources face no such penalty. These patterns vary between online and offline contexts, with bias intensifying in digital environments. This research reveals how identity-based discrimination in information sharing can limit certain groups’ ability to participate effectively in public discourse.

## **Future Research Directions**

My research agenda will continue to examine how institutions shape democratic governance, expanding in three directions:

**1. Comparative Institutional Analysis:** I plan to develop my institutional spillovers framework into a book-length project that extends beyond India to examine how different institutional configurations shape political representation across Global South democracies. This comparative work will advance a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how identity and institutional rules interact to produce unexpected outcomes in diverse political contexts.

**2. Linking Information and Governance:** A natural next step is to examine how information environments interact with local institutions to shape governance outcomes. Do areas with better information ecosystems see more effective implementation of institutional reforms? Can improving information quality enhance the representational gains from electoral quotas? This research would bridge my currently distinct research agendas.

**3. Technology and Political Participation:** As digital tools increasingly mediate political engagement, I will investigate how technology reshapes traditional barriers to political participation. Can digital platforms help marginalized groups overcome the institutional barriers my dissertation identifies? Or do they create new forms of exclusion?

Through continued focus on causal identification, original data collection, and policy relevance, this research aims to inform both academic understanding and practical reforms in governance systems worldwide. My goal is to identify when and why democratic institutions fulfill their representative promise, contributing to more inclusive and resilient democratic systems.