



Will Women Decide India's 2019 Elections?

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Article

India Elects 2019

When India and the United States held their inaugural 2+2 summit in September 2018, pictures from the press conference in New Delhi spoke a thousand words. The U.S. side was represented by two older white men—Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Meanwhile, two veteran female politicians sat on the dais representing India—External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Swaraj and Sitharaman preside over not just any two portfolios in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet but arguably two of the most consequential.

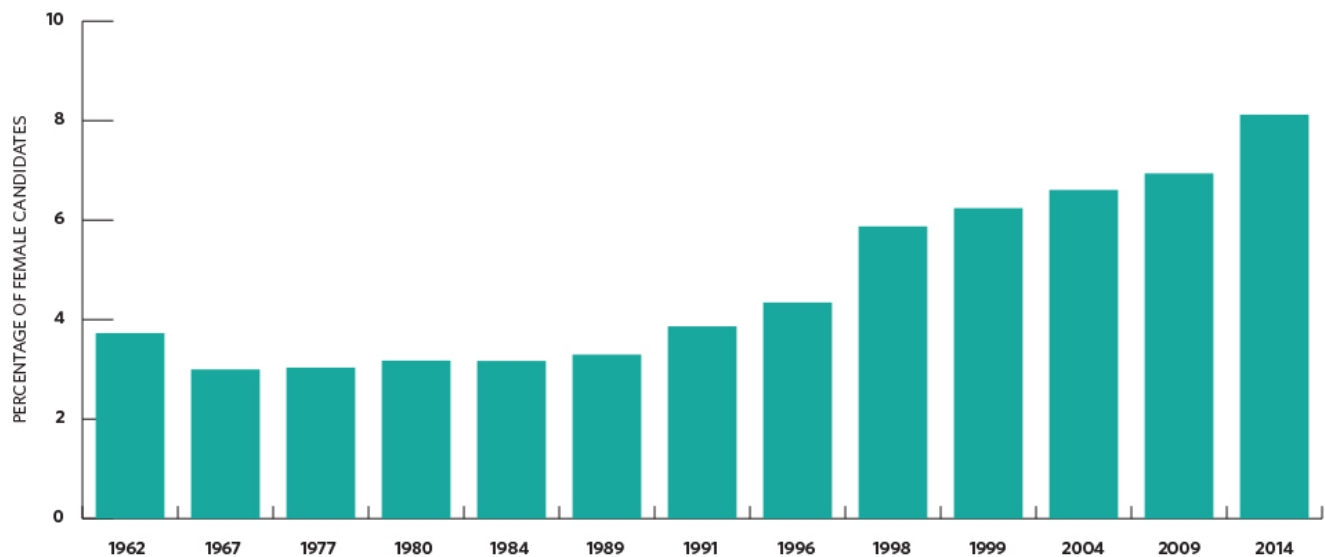
Powerful women are no strangers to Indian politics. Indira Gandhi, the daughter of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and a formidable politician in her own right, first became prime minister in 1966 and held the position for a total of fifteen (nonconsecutive) years. Today, several prominent women dot India's state-level political landscape, including Mayawati, the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and Mamata Banerjee, the incumbent chief minister of West Bengal. And until December 2017, the president of the Indian National Congress, the country's principal opposition party, was none other than Sonia Gandhi (Indira's daughter-in-law).

Despite these high-profile examples, the role of women in contemporary Indian politics is far more complex. Seven decades after India gained independence, women are still woefully underrepresented as political candidates in state and national elections. Although they comprise nearly half of the country's population, women make up just over one-twelfth of parliamentary candidates and one-tenth of eventual winners. Yet despite their gross underrepresentation as politicians in the upper echelons of India's electoral system, women have made great strides as voters. Even as female candidacy has grown anemically, female voter participation has surged. Today, in most states, female turnout is surpassing that of men—no small feat in a conservative, patriarchal society.¹ This electoral awakening of women has important ramifications for how India's 2019 general election battle will be waged and won.

Indian Women as Candidates

Although women constituted a small fraction of all candidates in India's most recent general election in 2014, it was actually a banner year for women in politics. Admittedly, just 8.1 percent of candidates for the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) were women (see figure 1), but this figure was the highest on record.² Between 1962 (the first year for which gender-specific data is available) and 1996, women did not once account for more than 5 percent of the candidate pool. Following a sharp increase in 1998, women have enjoyed modest incremental growth as a share of total candidates seeking political office.

FIGURE 1. FEMALE CANDIDACY IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS (1962-2014)



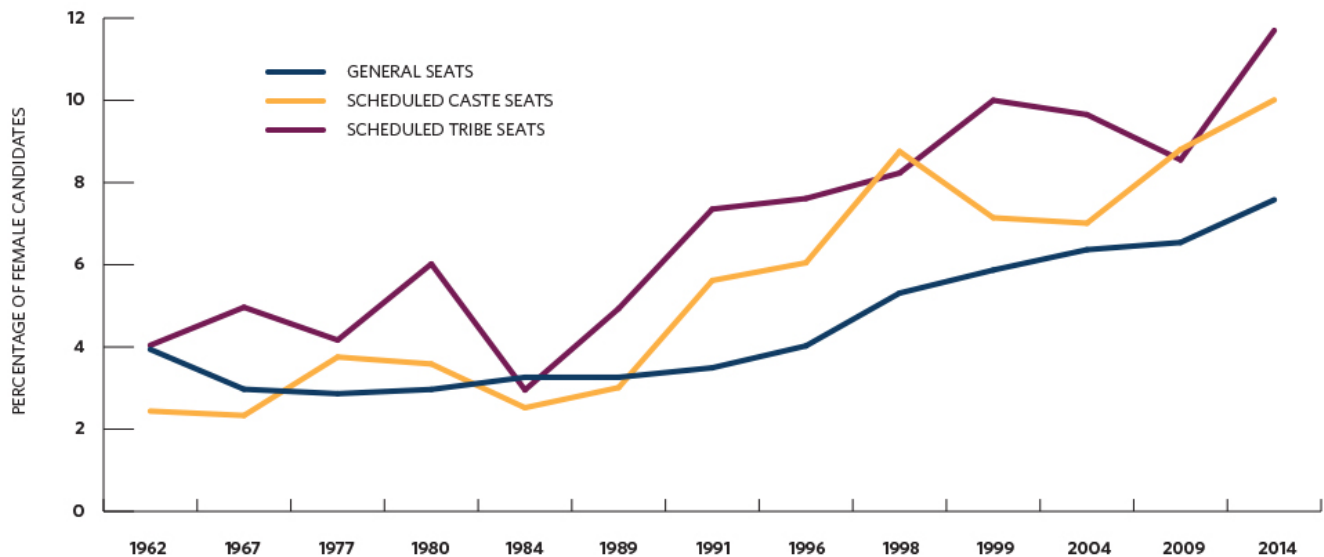
Source: Authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 - Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.



This gradual rise in female candidacy has been most pronounced in races designated for members of marginalized communities. Under the Indian Constitution, nearly one-quarter of state and national legislative seats are reserved for individuals hailing from one of two historically disadvantaged groups. First, there are Scheduled Castes (SC), also known as Dalits (and formerly called untouchables), who occupy the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy. The second such group is Scheduled Tribes (ST), often referred to as Adivasis, who make up India's native, indigenous population.

Given the historical discrimination these communities have experienced at the hands of Indian elites, both groups benefit from quotas that bolster their political representation. In recent years, women have been much more likely to run for parliamentary seats reserved for SC/ST candidates than in general races where there are no identity-based restrictions on the candidate pool (see figure 2). Between 1980 and 2014, 7 percent of parliamentary candidates in these reserved constituencies were women. During the same period, women comprised only 4.8 percent of candidates seeking unreserved (or general) seats.

FIGURE 2. FEMALE CANDIDACY FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF LOK SABHA SEATS (1962-2014)



Source: Authors' analysis of Jensenius and Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 - Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.



There could be multiple reasons why the growth in female candidacy has been concentrated in reserved constituencies. One possibility raised by political scientist Francesca Jensenius is that most parties tend to view male politicians in caste- and tribal-dedicated seats as more dispensable than other male officeholders. In a sense, parties often reproduce the hierarchical pathologies of the caste system within their own organizations. After facing heightened pressure in the 1990s to field more female candidates, many Indian political parties seem to have chosen the path of least resistance—improving women's representation by replacing their least powerful men. After all, there were no significant differences in female candidacy rates between reserved and unreserved seats prior to the late 1980s. The gap emerged only when demands on parties to nominate more women intensified.

Another possibility is that women might lack access to resources that are necessary to finance electoral campaigns that have become increasingly expensive. An analysis of affidavits submitted by candidates contesting India's 2004 and 2009 parliamentary elections indicates that the median wealth of male candidates is three times that of their female counterparts.³ If the costs of campaigning are lower in reserved areas, poorer candidates would stand a greater chance of winning.

Notably, the prevalence of female candidates varies in counterintuitive ways from state to state. Economists Mudit Kapoor and Shamika Ravi have found that, contrary to expectation, Indian women are much more likely to contest elections in places where the gender ratio of the electorate is *less* favorable toward women or, in other words, areas where there is a proportionally greater male population.⁴ One might expect that female candidates would spring from areas where there are relatively more women as a share of the population, but the opposite appears to be true. Women tend to contest elections in states with adverse sex ratios, such as Uttar Pradesh, in greater proportion than in states that boast a much more favorable sex ratio, such as Kerala.

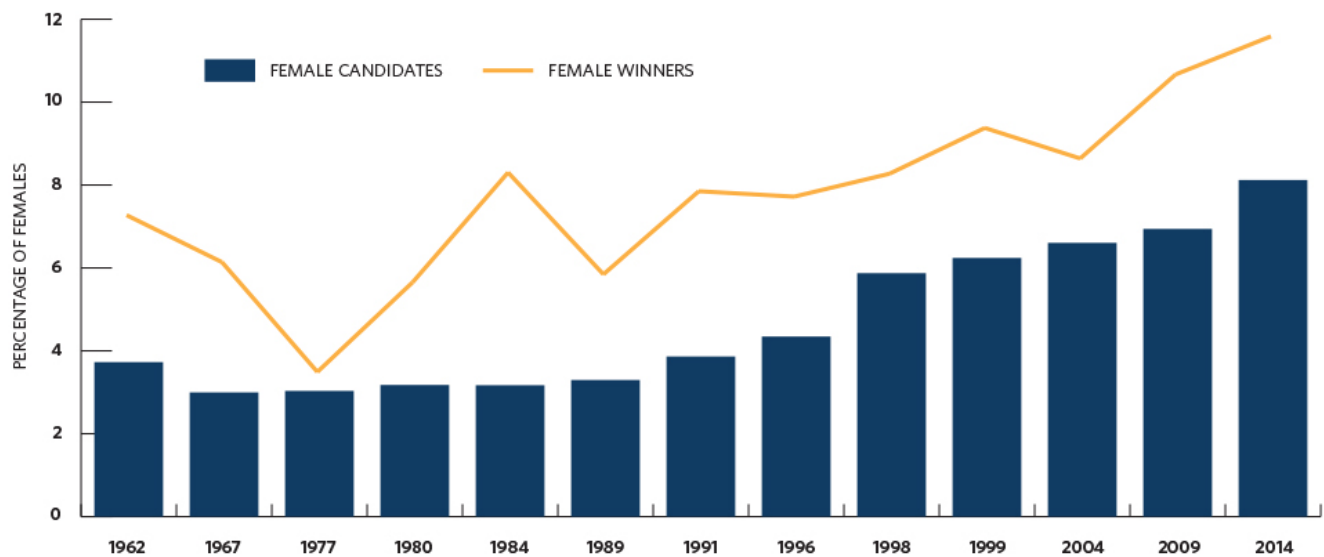
What might account for this surprising finding? Kapoor and Ravi hypothesize that this counterintuitive result is a product of social stratification. They posit that in states where women enjoy greater equality, they may not feel compelled to throw their hats into the ring as candidates and assume the financial burdens of campaigning. Meanwhile, in states where women feel underrepresented, getting actively involved in politics may represent an important route for making their voices heard.

In sum, there has been only incremental growth in female candidacy at the higher levels of Indian politics. Yet there are clear patterns driving where women contest elections. Women are more likely to run for office in states where they are systematically underrepresented in the general population. Political parties, for their part, have accommodated women by fielding them in areas reserved for historically disadvantaged groups.

Indian Women as Representatives

Once Indian women enter the electoral fray, they tend to perform fairly well. This was true in every general election held between 1962 and 2014. Other things being equal, one would expect that the percentage of female parliamentarians would closely mirror the percentage of total candidates who happen to be women. In fact, female candidates have consistently outperformed this baseline. Women occupy a higher percentage of seats in the Lok Sabha than what one would predict based solely on their share of candidates (see figure 3).⁵ Nevertheless, female representation in the Lok Sabha is meager and only surpassed 10 percent for the first time in 2009. Today, women make up a paltry 11.6 percent of directly elected members of parliament.

FIGURE 3. FEMALE CANDIDATES AND WINNERS IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS (1962-2014)



Note: The percentage of female candidates is calculated as a share of the total candidate pool, while the percentage of female winners is calculated as a share of successful candidates.

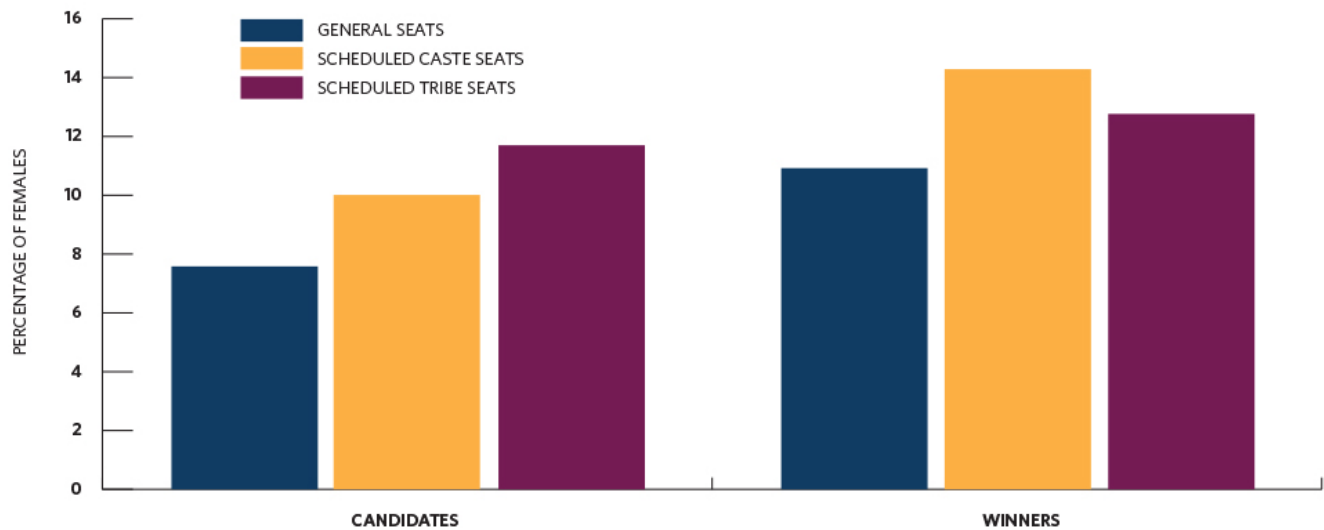
Source: Authors' analysis of Jensenius and Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 - Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.



Given the aforementioned empirical evidence that women are more likely to run for office in SC/ST constituencies, it is worth asking whether female candidates are also more likely to win in these reserved constituencies than they are to win general seats. The data from national elections suggest they are. Since 1980, 16.2 percent of female candidates in reserved seats have emerged victorious, while only 11.5 percent of women running for unreserved or general seats have won.

Figure 4 offers a single snapshot of this gap for the 2014 general election. That year, women were both more likely to contest *and* more likely to win races in reserved constituencies than in open constituencies. While 7.6 percent of candidates in unreserved races were female, women constituted 10 percent and 11.7 percent of candidates for caste- and tribal-designated constituencies, respectively. This gender gap persisted among the victors. Only 10.9 percent of elected parliamentarians in unreserved constituencies were women, while female politicians held 14.3 percent and 12.8 percent of seats reserved for SC and ST candidates, respectively.

FIGURE 4. PROPORTION OF FEMALE CANDIDATES AND WINNERS IN THE LOK SABHA ELECTION (2014)



Note: The percentage of female candidates is calculated as a share of the total candidate pool, while the percentage of female winners is calculated as a share of successful candidates.

Source: Authors' analysis of Jensenius and Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 - Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.



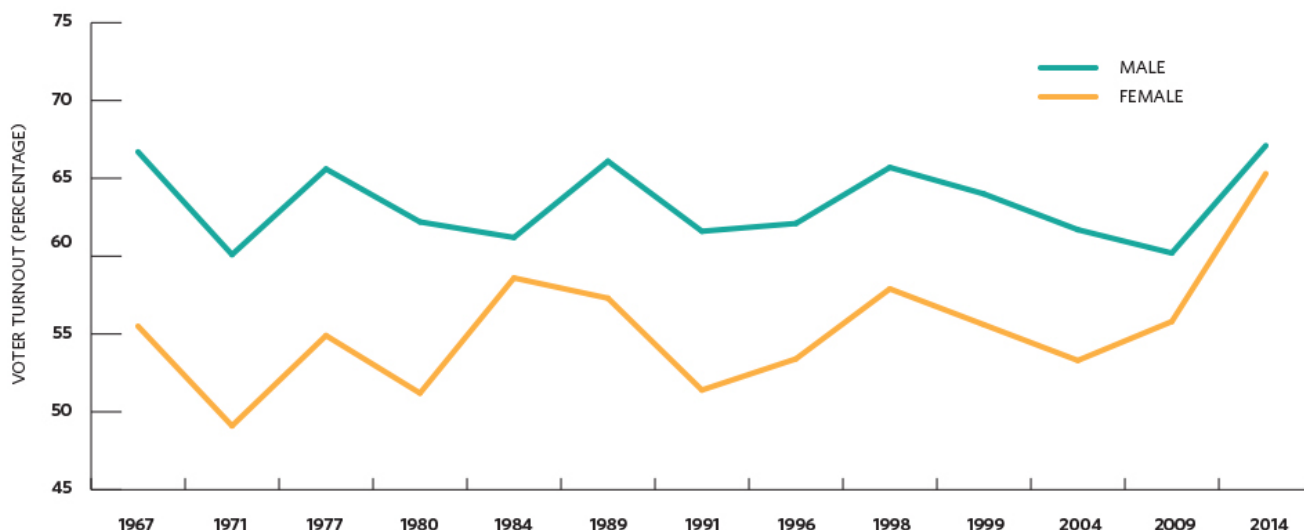
Interestingly, Kapoor and Ravi's finding that women are more likely to contest elections in areas with adverse gender ratios does not extend to winning elections. Although female candidates are more prevalent in constituencies where there are more male than female constituents, they are *less* likely to actually win in these areas. This suggests that while a male-dominant electorate might spur women to contest elections, this same factor may work against them on election day.

Indian Women as Voters

While women are still contesting and winning elections at low rates, ordinary female voters are playing an increasingly outsized role in India's democracy. In 2014, overall voter turnout hit a record high: 66.4 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the elections that brought Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power. This was a significant jump from the participation levels seen in the 2004 and 2009 polls, when turnout stagnated around 58 percent.

Amid the country's widespread voter mobilization, fewer observers noticed the historic narrowing of the gender gap in turnout (see figure 5). In 1967, female turnout lagged behind male turnout by 11.3 percentage points. With the exception of 1984 (an anomalous election that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination), the male-female turnout gap remained stubbornly in place through the 2004 elections. Yet between 2004 and 2009, an 8.4 percentage-point gap between male and female turnout fell by nearly half to 4.4 percentage points, although overall turnout hardly changed.

FIGURE 5. MALE AND FEMALE VOTER TURNOUT IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS (1967-2014)

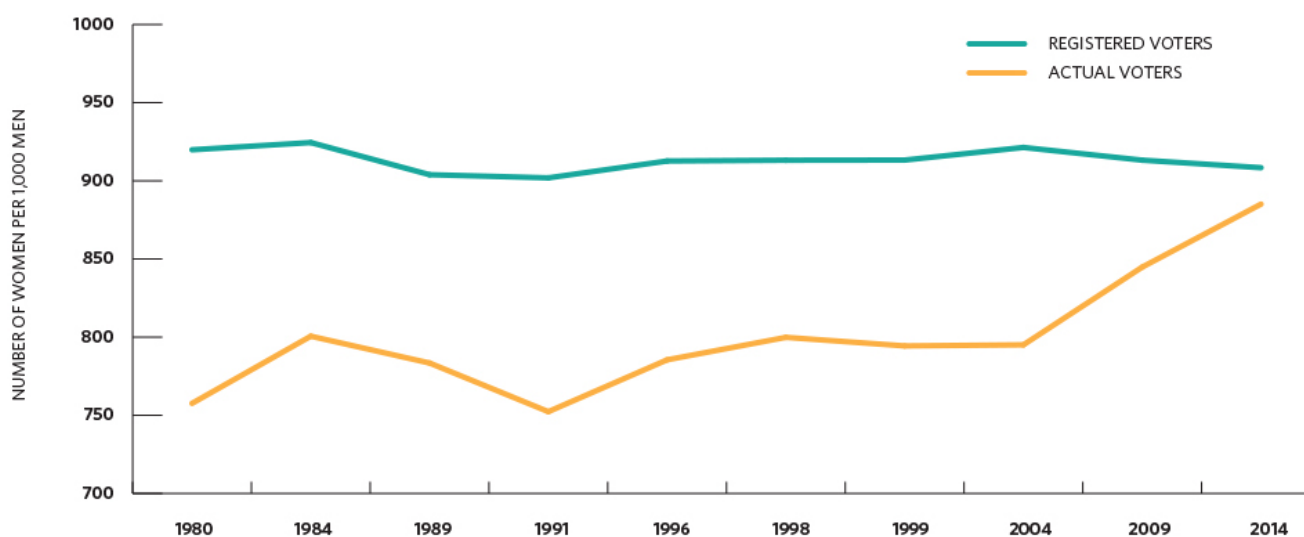


Source: Election Commission of India.



In the subsequent 2014 election, Indian men’s voter turnout advantage stood at its narrowest margin on record—just 1.8 percentage points. In fact, in half of all states and union territories, female turnout actually surpassed male turnout. This convergence is not merely a product of national elections. For twenty-three of India’s thirty states, female turnout exceeded male turnout in the most recent state assembly elections (held between 2012 and 2018) for which there is gender-specific data. This does not mean that more women vote than men numerically, as Rithika Kumar points out: men still outnumber women on voter registration rolls and in the general population. However, the increase in female voter participation is not driven by increases in female voter registration; on the contrary, the shift is a result of greater female turnout among those already registered to vote (see figure 6).

FIGURE 6. SEX RATIOS OF REGISTERED AND ACTUAL VOTERS IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS (1980-2014)

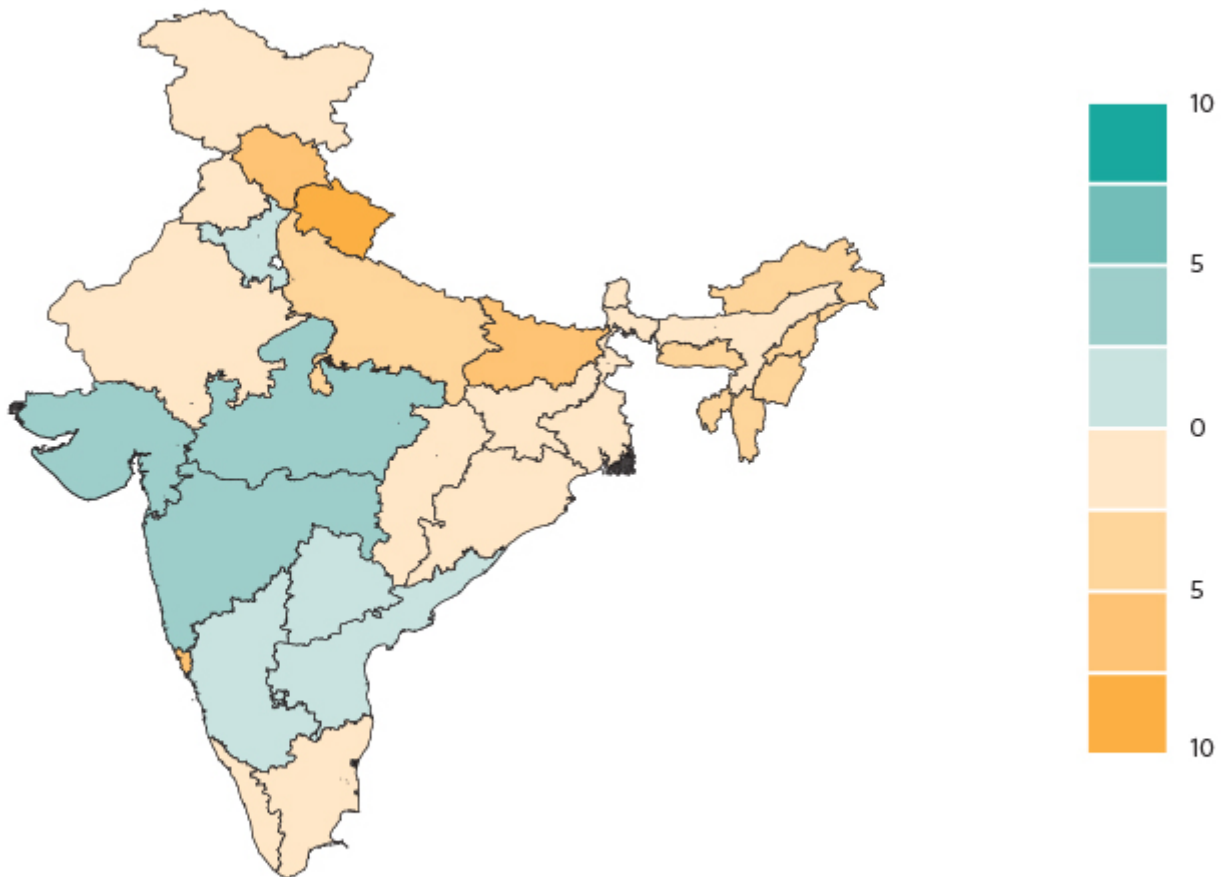


Source: Authors’ analysis of Jensenius and Verniers, “Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today,” Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.



Across the country, the female turnout advantage (among registered voters) tends to be larger in state than in national elections (see figures 7a and 7b). For both types of polls, however, the same group of states enjoys the greatest edge in female turnout. At first glance, it is not clear what sets these states apart. For instance, some of India's poorest states, like Bihar and Odisha, exhibit a clear female advantage, while men in the more prosperous states of Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra tend to cast their ballots with greater frequency than women. General election data from 2014 reveal no clear relationship between the prevalence of female candidates and female turnout. There is a modest, positive relationship between the sex ratio and turnout, insofar as areas with populations that exhibit greater gender equity see higher turnout, but this is true for the turnout rates of male and female voters.

FIGURE 7A. GENDER TURNOUT GAP IN INDIA'S MOST RECENT STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

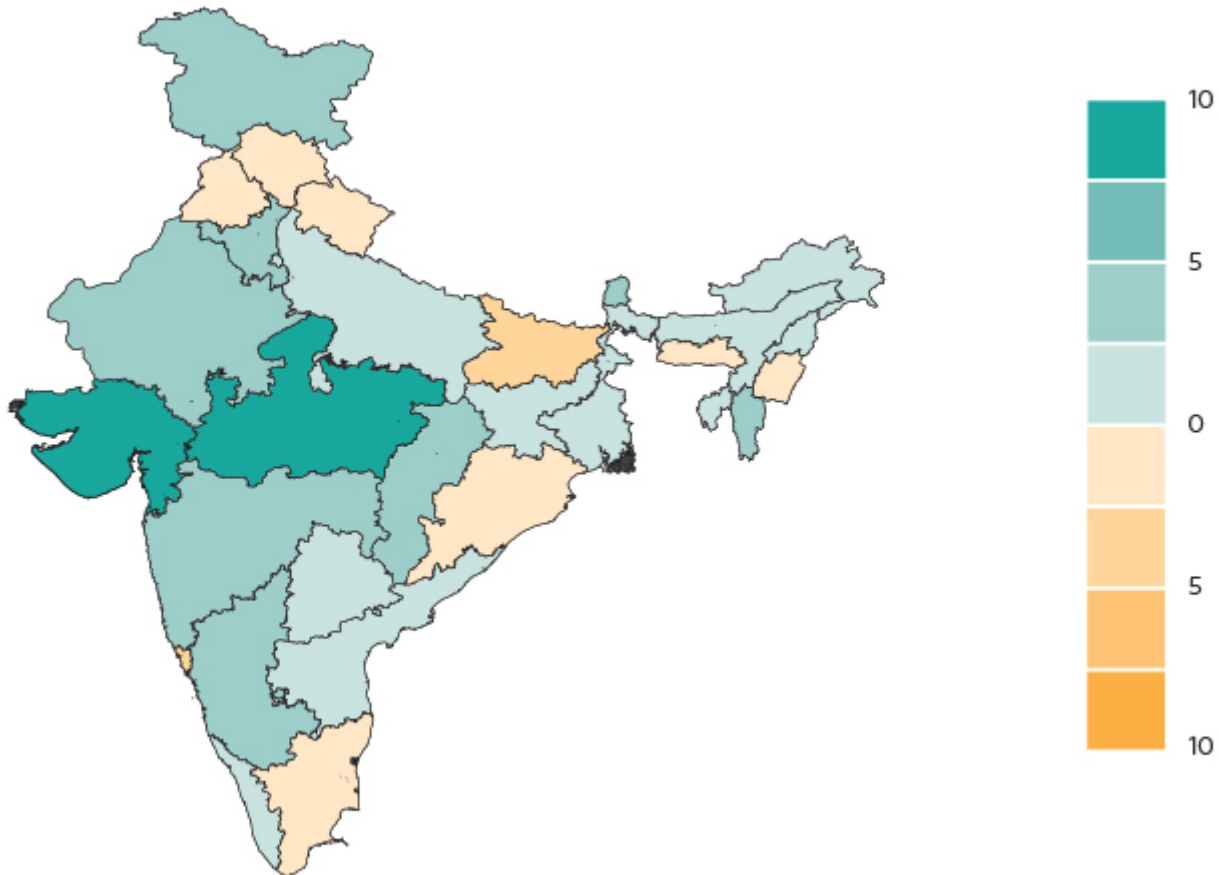


Note: Shades of green indicate a male advantage in voter turnout, while yellow shading indicates a female turnout advantage.

Source: Election Commission of India



FIGURE 7B. GENDER TURNOUT GAP IN THE 2014 LOK SABHA ELECTION



Note: Shades of green indicate a male advantage in voter turnout, while yellow shading indicates a female turnout advantage.

Source: Election Commission of India



Irrespective of the precise factors that are behind the increase in women's polling percentage, rising female participation at the ballot box represents a remarkable trend in India's domestic politics. By 2019, it is plausible that female turnout will meet—or even exceed—that of men.

Implications for 2019

These findings have profound implications for women's changing role in Indian politics ahead of the country's 2019 general election. For starters, the rising voter turnout and growing political assertiveness of Indian women is making their voices and policy preferences increasingly noteworthy on the country's political stage.

For example, shortly after his reelection in 2015, the chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, fulfilled a campaign promise to ban alcohol in the state. According to media reports by the *New York Times* and other outlets, many observers perceived that Kumar enacted the ban under pressure from women's groups to curb alcohol consumption, which they associated with social ills such as gender-based violence and poverty. Other states, such as Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, have jumped on the bandwagon; shortly after Kumar's move, both states announced their own plans to implement a phased prohibition of alcohol.

Admittedly, not all analysts are convinced that prohibition actually addresses the most pressing concerns facing women in India, but a ban on alcohol does have the virtue of being both highly visible and administratively easier than tackling deep-seated issues such as sexual violence or police reform. Still, the recent explosion of the #MeToo movement in India has the potential—if public pressure is sustained—to advance issues regarding the endemic harassment of women (in and out of the workplace) onto the front burner of political discourse in the run-up to next year's general election.

In addition, women have become a focal point of the BJP's 2019 reelection campaign. In the previous 2014 election, Modi positioned himself as a CEO-like prime minister—pledging to create millions of jobs, lure foreign investors to India, and renew the country's moribund investment cycle. Four years later, the BJP government has struggled to live up to sky-high economic expectations.

Whether to parry criticism that his government is too business-friendly or to otherwise shift the country's political narrative, Modi's 2019 pitch is centered on issues of welfare and social insurance. Since coming to power, the prime minister has invested a great deal of financial and political capital in building what the BJP hopes are the modern foundations of the Indian welfare state. The party believes that this social welfare-oriented platform will endear it to India's voting masses, especially women. This platform has included campaigns to improve sanitation (Swachh Bharat), provide universal healthcare (Ayushman Bharat), and furnish cooking gas cylinders for millions of poor households across the country (Ujjwala). In the past, the BJP has trailed the Indian National Congress in terms of winning women's votes; party leaders believe the government's development schemes can help reverse this historical disadvantage.

Modi's rallies have reflected this shift in focus. On the campaign trail in Karnataka earlier in 2018, he declared: "For us, whether it is the organisation or the government, or framing of programmes, it is women first." It is no coincidence that Modi himself often harps on the gender dimensions of his government's social policies when he is selling their finer points to Indian citizens. In a February 2018 appearance in Tamil Nadu, Modi explained his women-first focus, saying:

"When we empower the women in a family, we empower the entire house-hold. When we help with a woman's education, we ensure that the entire family is educated. When we facilitate her good health, we help keep the entire family healthy. When we secure her future, we secure the future of the entire home. We are working in this direction."

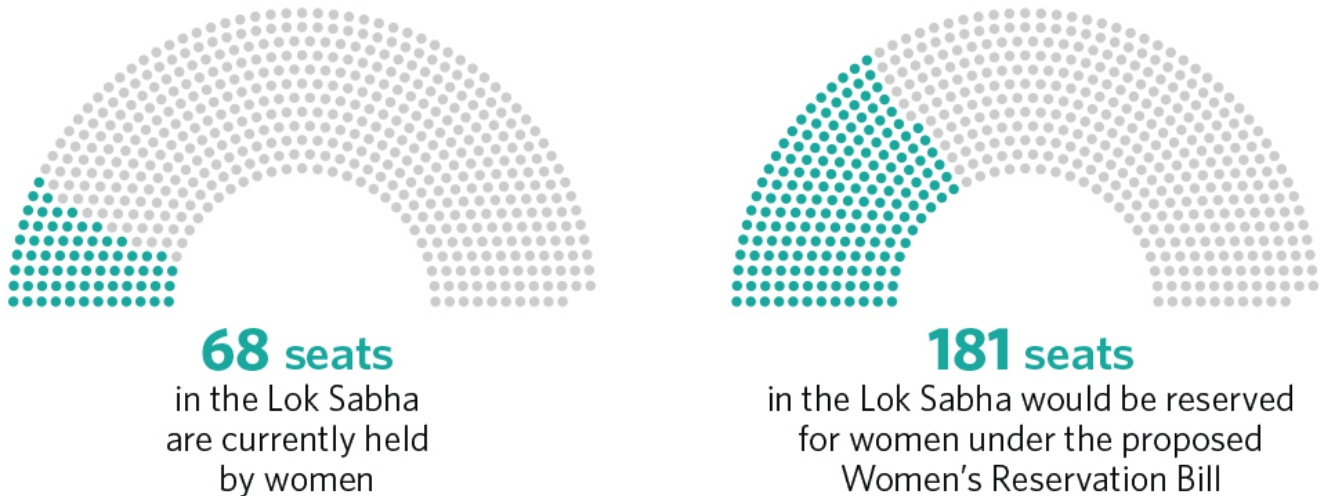
Notably, the BJP's outreach to women is not restricted to welfare schemes. Modi has also bet on legal changes that he believes will win over female voters—such as introducing an executive ordinance in September 2018 that bans the practice of triple *talaq* (or instant divorce) in India's Islamic community.⁶ This practice allows Muslim men to legally divorce their wives by merely stating the word *talaq* (the Arabic word for divorce) three times. The prime minister has pitched this move as an effort to protect the constitutional rights of Muslim women across India, who require permission either from their husbands or a religious authority to seek a divorce.

This electoral focus on women is not restricted to the BJP, however. Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi also has been highlighting the demands of women as he campaigns for upcoming state assembly elections slated for November and December 2018. Gandhi has criticized Modi for promising to improve women's safety while pursuing a majoritarian agenda that incites violence, saying: "Women today in India are scared to come out. They do not know what will happen to them . . . Today, the Prime Minister is trying to divide the country by spreading hatred." Gandhi has even gone so far as to pledge that his party will ensure that women will be chosen as chief ministers in at least half of Congress-ruled states by 2024—a push that he says will begin by increasing women's representation at lower levels of political office.⁷

A second implication of changing gender dynamics in Indian politics is the clear gap that has opened between women's participation as voters and their underrepresentation in the political class. Under the Seventy-Third Amendment to the Indian Constitution, passed in 1993, at least one-third of local village council president positions must be reserved for women. But such quotas are not operative at either the state or national levels.

Or at least not yet. The representational gap experienced by Indian women may compel parties to finally pass a Women's Reservation Bill, a legislative act that would reserve 33 percent of all seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women (see figure 8). The bill, first introduced in 1996, was passed in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of parliament) but has remained stalled in the lower house. Rahul Gandhi has urged Modi to revive the bill, assuring full Congress support. This is a significant development because the BJP previously blamed Congress for dragging its feet on the bill while the latter was in power between 2004 and 2014. While some insiders speculate that Modi plans to revive the reservation bill as a pre-election concession to women, the two major parties have so far done little except blame each other for delaying the bill's passage. While most politicians support the bill in principle, they are deeply divided as to whether there should be caste sub-quotas built into the quotas for women.

FIGURE 8. THE WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE LOK SABHA



Note: Under the Women's Reservation Bill, one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in state assemblies would be reserved for women. These seats would be assigned on a rotating basis for fifteen years (three election cycles), after which this practice of reserving seats for women would end. The bill requires that one-third of both SC/ST-reserved and unreserved (general) seats be held by women.



Even if the bill does not pass, there is some cause for optimism about the growing prevalence of female political candidacy in India. Reserved seats for women in local politics create a pipeline effect: women in reserved local positions can eventually use their political experience to launch state or national campaigns. Recent research by Stephen D. O'Connell finds that the introduction of quotas for women at lower levels of government accounts for approximately half of the increase in female candidates in Indian assembly and parliamentary races between 1993 (when the quotas began) and 2007. Another study authored by O'Connell and other colleagues finds that, when women win state assembly elections, more female candidates are motivated to run in the next parliamentary election. This study finds that each additional female state legislator increases the number of female parliamentary candidates in the next election by over 30 percent—a sizable bump.

If this positive pipeline effect continues to boost the supply of female candidates in Indian elections, one should expect to see a continuation of or even an increase in the rate of women getting elected to state and national office. But gender parity—under even the most optimistic of scenarios—remains a long way off. In the meantime, more encouraging is the unprecedented mobilization of female voters in India, a trend that is shaping how parties campaign and—increasingly—govern.

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Notes

¹ Although female voter turnout regularly outpaces male turnout in most Indian states, women are still underrepresented on voter rolls. This means, in practice, that the absolute number of male voters is often larger than that of female voters despite the latter's turnout advantage.

² According to figures compiled by political scientist Francesca Jensenius, as of 2014, women account for a nearly identical share of the candidate pool for state legislative positions (known, in Indian parlance, as members of the legislative assembly): 7.3 percent. While the growth in women's share of state-level positions has been more linear, that increase has been quite modest too.

³ Authors' calculations using data compiled in a previously published book. See Milan Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴ An examination of data from the 2014 parliamentary elections does not show any clear relationship between reserved constituencies and the sex ratio, which would connect the two arguments. The sex ratios of SC-reserved and general seats are roughly similar, while the sex ratio of ST-reserved seats is

much less skewed toward men. In other words, there is no evidence that the sex ratio is *worse* in reserved constituencies.

⁵ The fact that the share of female parliamentarians is greater than the share of female candidates does not necessarily mean that voters prefer female politicians to their male counterparts. For instance, it is possible that women are given party tickets to contest elections in “safer” seats or where there is a greater likelihood that they might win for other contextual reasons.

⁶ The ordinance needs to be passed by both houses of parliament if it is to become law. Some legal commentators believe the bill is superfluous because the Indian Supreme Court already ruled in August 2017 that the practice of triple *talaq* is unconstitutional.

⁷ Gandhi's promise is less impressive than it sounds when one considers that the Indian National Congress only directly rules three states in India today (Mizoram, Puducherry, and Punjab).

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