

Do peer solidarity groups improve women politicians’ political agency?

Evidence from a pilot RCT in rural India

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Abstract

Despite women’s increasing representation in politics, their political agency, once in office, is challenged by household and institutional gatekeepers alike. Female politicians are often perceived as “proxies” for male elites, particularly in settings like South Asia where gender quotas have given rise to women’s candidacy at an exceptionally large scale. In conjunction with an NGO in Maharashtra, India, we form peer groups amongst elected women politicians to provide governance training and improve female solidarity. We further test the efficacy of this intervention to an alternate treatment that engages not only women politicians but men to understand the importance of forming cross-gender solidarity towards women’s political empowerment. We present suggestive evidence that participation in peer groups improves elected women’s political agency. Women-only peer groups appear to improve elected women’s self-confidence and independence through increasing gendered solidarity, support for gender-egalitarian norms, and professional networks. In contrast, mixed-gender solidarity groups have limited impact on official’s confidence and independence, and may actually reduce gendered solidarity, support for gender-egalitarian norms, and attenuate women’s professional networks. This intervention provides the first exploratory evidence of how peer groups alter women’s political agency amongst elected officials, showing the ability of peer groups to alter agency, with divergent effects dependent on their gendered composition.

1 Introduction

When underrepresented groups such as women are elected to office, most prominently through quotas, their governance capacity is often blocked by a variety of actors—including

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