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## Lower the barriers

Abhijit Banerjee  
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I learnt from reading the Indian press recently that the Upper House of the Parliament had passed a Bill reserving 33 per cent of the seats in Parliament for what the press described as the 'fair sex', or more evenhandedly, the 'fairer sex'. Given that this Bill entitles women to at least a third of the most-powerful directly-elected positions in the country, one might want to believe that this was a reference to women's superior commitment to justice. But I suspect that it had a lot more to do with the aesthetics of their bodies. The passage of the Bill was not easy and its prospects in the Lower House remain fraught. Its opponents —inspired no doubt in part by concerns about the effects of spending too much time in the unhealthy confines of the Parliament on feminine beauty (and the social order) — tied themselves into knots explaining that they really did not have anything against reservations for women, just the particular type of reservation that was being proposed. The Bill's supporters held on to the moral high ground, insisting that women deserve representation commensurate with their presence in the population (but then why not a quota for those born into poor families, who are clearly also underrepresented?). Very little of the argument, on either side, had to do with what I consider to be the central questions: do reservations work? Do they actually empower women? What do they do to the quality of governance?

This is particularly surprising given that India has had reservations in panchayats and municipalities for more than a decade and these have been extensively studied. About 10 years ago, Raghav Chattopadhyay from Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and my Massachusetts Institute of Technology colleague Esther Dufo asked whether women in panchayats, who got elected because of reservations, were better able to deliver what their female constituents want than their male counterparts? Or were they reluctant stooges for their husbands and fathers, powerless to do anything different from that their male backers would have chosen? To answer this question Chattopadhyay and Dufo compared villages that were reserved to have a female pradhan with unreserved villages.

Since both Rajasthan and West Bengal chose the villages to reserve by lottery, there was no systematic prior difference among these villages. The results show a clear difference in spending patterns. In West Bengal, reserved villages spent significantly more on both roads and drinking water, which were the two things that women most asked questions about in panchayat meetings.

In Rajasthan, they spent more on water, which, likewise, was the subject of most questions by women, which was perhaps even more striking, given that many of the women pradhans keep purdah and villagers routinely refer to pradhanpati (pradhan's husband) as the go-to person in the village. The women in power may not show their faces, but they seem to have their hands on the steering wheel.

This, of course, suggests a different concern — perhaps women leaders do exercise power, but do so incompetently. After all they are less likely to be educated and less likely to know the ways of the world. In work with Lori Beaman of Northwestern University, Rohini Pande of Harvard and Petia Topalova of the International Monetary Fund, Chattopadhyay and Dufo look at this question. In West Bengal, households in panchayats reserved for women are less likely to report that they had to pay a bribe to get something done. Using data from 13 states, Kaivan Munshi of Brown University and Mark Rosenzweig from Yale, conclude that women representatives are significantly better at claiming public resources for their constituency.

But if women are so great why do they need reservations to get elected? The answer, Rikhil Bhavnani of Stanford University suggests, is that most people have no experience of women running things outside

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the home and, therefore, dismiss the possibility out of hand. Once they have experience with women legislators, the prejudice diminishes noticeably.

In elections to the Mumbai municipal corporation, women are five times more likely to be elected in wards that had been reserved for them in the past but were no longer reserved, than in wards with no history of reservation. Beaman and company find the same pattern in rural West Bengal and, in addition, show direct evidence of declining prejudice, though they conclude that it may take two rounds of exposure rather than one to fully get rid of prejudice. The experience is Rwanda, where an initial 33 per cent reservation lead over a few years to a woman majority parliament, is entirely consistent with this view.

The most important reason why we should want reservations may, therefore, be that they help shake people out of their ignorant prejudices against women in politics and open the way for the country to draw upon a much bigger pool of political talent. Indeed, one might argue that politics is one place where, if this Bill were to pass, we might expect to eventually see more talented women than men just because — the movie Aandhi notwithstanding — there is probably less social prejudice against a mother and a wife becoming a politician than a factory manager or a travelling saleswoman.

If this is the right way to think about reservations, then it would be important to have the reservations rotate through across various constituencies so that everyone gets a chance to experience female leadership. And maybe a day will come when people will get so used to voting for women that men will be clamouring for reservations for the (unfair?) sex.

*Abhijit Banerjee is Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics and Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT*

*The views expressed by the author are personal.*

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nupur 5 months ago

interesting argument - thank you for bringing this forward. listening to the debates on tv the argument of rotating constituencies was criticised as a disincentive for candidates to nurse their constituencies - but of course there is another way to look at it - thank you for letting us know of the variety of field research on this subject.

Like Reply

VINOD 5 months ago

33% reservation is nothing but a MUSICAL CHAIR for the politician's family. It is better to call it the BABU, BIWI , AUR BETI bill. It is better to mandate 50 % reservation at the PARTY level and let them contest, instead of COMPROMISING

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DEMOCRACY by mandatory reservation at the PARLAMENT LEVEL ,IRRESPECTIVE of ACTUAL MANDATE.

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Mohammed 5 months ago in reply to VINOD

Vinod

we all know that this happens. there would be babu and biwi and bahu etc but can you really say that this will happen in the all seats contested by women? all 33%.? ofcourse the answer is NO. We can have abt 10% (just an assumption) of women who dont come from a political family coming out to rule. is it that bad then? considering what our present system has given us already. i welcome the reservation for women because this is for Change even though it is not going to make a big impact in the first year of implementation.

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VINOD 5 months ago in reply to Mohammed

Another way of justifying it is to say BIWI,BAHU and BETI, are all WOMAN.....Well , MOST of the time !!!

Like Reply

Rajen Kaushal 5 months ago

Congress brought Women Reservation bill just to divert Public attention from rising Food prices and has been successful. However, directionless bill has several flaws which needs to be curtailed and Govt. has decided not to bring up the bill in Lok Sabha means they accepted those flaws.

What was the hurry to bring up the bill in Rajya Sabha, obvious intention was to divert PUBLIC attention from rising food prices.

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