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Religiously Conservative Parties and Women's Political Mobilization:
Gender Norms, Party Activism, and Democratization in India

by

Anirvan Chowdhury

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Thad Dunning, Chair
Associate Professor Jennifer Bussell
Professor Edward Miguel
Associate Professor Alison Post

Summer 2023

Religiously Conservative Parties and Women's Political Mobilization:
Gender Norms, Party Activism, and Democratization in India

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Abstract

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Professor Thad Dunning, Chair

Women constitute half of India's electorate; yet politics in the country has traditionally been a forum for men to participate and articulate their interests. Studies indicate that women have distinct preferences, and that politics and policy choices change when women enter the political arena. In this context, the 2014 national election marked a watershed for Indian politics. There was an unprecedented increase in women's participation in visibly partisan ways: 27% more women attended party meetings, rallies, and canvassing activities. But paradoxically, this growth was most pronounced among women voting for the BJP, whose ideology of political Hinduism, or *Hindutva*, prescribes traditional gender roles for women. What explains the BJP's success at engaging women despite its ideology of masculine Hindu nationalism? And what are the effects of this engagement on women's agency and democratic practice?

Women's political activism in these visible ways, what I call *active participation*, is especially surprising because of the deeply patriarchal contexts in which it is taking place. When women engage with political parties in these public settings, it transgresses social and cultural norms that tie women to the home, and consider party politics as inappropriate for them. Breaching these norms can be costly, both for women and their families. Consequently, men act as gatekeepers to women's participation. The key, then, for a political party that seeks to mobilize women, is to lower these costs.

I develop a theory of norm-compliant mobilization to explain how religiously conservative parties can incorporate women without disturbing the status quo within the family, party, or society. In patriarchal contexts, framing politics as congruent with traditional gendered norms reduces the costs of women's participation by connecting the political sphere to the private. This domestication of politics helps women obtain social and familial approval for their public engagement as it is no longer perceived as challenging men's authority within the family, or patriarchal structures of power in the party, or even society at large. In the

case of India, the BJP's solution to this predicament has been to frame politics as *seva*, a powerful norm of selfless service that overlaps women's domestic care-giving roles as mothers and dutiful wives.

I test these arguments through a multi-method approach that emphasizes triangulating multiple data sources and strategies. I leverage extensive qualitative research—ethnography, participant observation, shadowing, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews—conducted over a span of three years to show how the BJP's activists describe their active participation and agentic experiences in the language of *seva*. Next, I draw on computational text analysis of social media data, together with multiple innovative surveys and experiments administered to women party activists, female citizens, and male gatekeepers to show the causal effect of *seva* in enabling women's active participation. Finally, I discuss the validity of my argument across a range of contexts, including Asia, Western Europe, and the US to show that the patriarchal separation of spheres for men and women, and norm-compliant mobilization frames have been powerful enablers for women's political participation for conservative parties across Christian and Islamic traditions.

My research provides a bridge between several traditions in the study of political participation. First, it shows how political participation is an outcome of the interaction between the political and private spheres, where political parties can shape the public perception of women's active participation. Second, it bridges institutional and behavioral approaches by highlighting the vital role of social norms in determining the political inclusion of marginalized groups. In particular, it shows how norms can normalize activities that may otherwise be deemed as subversive, and as such, are vital for the sustenance of conservatism in India and across the world.

Finally, I highlight an important but understudied tension between political engagement and democratic deepening. Much empirical research implicitly assumes higher—and more equal—participation to be positively associated with democratic health. Yet the Indian case of democratic backsliding amidst rising participation belies this. The answer to this apparent paradox, as my dissertation shows, can partially be found in the increased deployment of traditional norms like *seva* as a strategy of political engagement and recruitment. While *seva* does nurture agency, it is ultimately not antagonistic to existing structures of power. It therefore preempts the productive models of citizen autonomy—seeking accountability and claim-making—that scholars have come to highlight as a feature of robust democracies. Thus, I show that the intensive margin of *how* people engage—a function of how they are mobilized—is at least as important as the extensive margin of *how many* people participate. Hence, the mechanisms that enable inclusion can help us understand political transformations in other countries, especially as conservative, right-wing and populist movements gain traction across the globe.

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Chapter 1

The Puzzle of Women’s Participation in a Religiously Conservative Party

February 22, 2019. Jaipur, Rajasthan

“*Modi ji ki rally hai! Kal Tonk mein Modi ji ki rally hai!*”. Hastily covering her head with the end of her *sari*, a breathless Lekha informed me, “Modi *ji* is holding a rally! Modi *ji* is holding a rally in Tonk tomorrow!”

I was attending a *vridhdha seva karyakram*, a social service event for the elderly on a sunny morning at a Ganesh temple near Galta Gate in Jaipur, the capital of the state of Rajasthan in India. Galta Gate lies just outside Jaipur’s Walled City and is a gateway to a set of hilltop temples and a fountain dedicated to the sage Galav, who—legend has it—meditated for a hundred years. Today’s Galta Gate is too bustling to permit such meditation, but the Ganesh temple did allow a few minutes of peace to the handful of elderly men and women sitting on rickety plastic chairs in the shadow cast by the temple’s wall.

Lekha is an activist for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, The Indian People’s Party), India’s ruling party. She is part of the BJP’s women’s wing, the Mahila Morcha, and appears to be in charge of the small group of six to eight women who had gathered in the temple grounds for the *seva* (service) camp. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, about whose rally she was so excited, was going to flag off the Rajasthan segment of the BJP’s 2019 parliamentary election campaign in Tonk district, about 100 kilometres south of Jaipur. When I asked her if she was planning to attend, Lekha, with a glance at her group, nodded fervently, “State-level activists like me need to be active. And these days, the party wants us to bring other women too. When there is a rally in Jaipur, I will have to bring at least a bus full of women.”

February 23, 2019. Tonk, Rajasthan

About 100 kilometers to the south of Jaipur, Tonk is a small sleepy town with a population of 165,000. It is also the electoral constituency of Sachin Pilot, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress (INC). The INC is the BJP’s principal electoral rival, and barely three months ago, in December 2018, had defeated the BJP in the state-level elections labeled by India’s cricket-obsessed media as a semi-final to the all-important 2019 national election

when people would decide if they wanted to re-elect Narendra Modi as Prime Minister.¹ Smarting from this loss, and to demonstrate that the BJP was not going to back down in the face of adversity, Modi met the challenge head on.

I had been walking for nearly half an hour towards the site of Modi's rally when I stopped for tea by the side of the road. A tight-knit group of women standing beside the tea stall did little to disguise their flagging enthusiasm, "It is so hot and Modi *ji* is still not here! People at home must be getting impatient. My in-laws need lunch on time and my children will soon be home from school", a woman petulantly exclaimed. To this, a middle-aged woman with a saffron BJP sash—signifying her status as a party activist—replied soothingly, "It's just one day, I am sure your family will adjust. Each day you do *seva* (selfless service) for them, they will surely understand that taking a break to see Modi *ji* is fine!" Placated for now, the women resumed their walk towards a vast tent decked with saffron and green flags emblazoned with a large lotus. They were soon ushered into a separate line taking them to a special enclosure close to the stage where they joined the thousands of women who had persisted through the heat to come and listen to the Prime Minister.

As I elbowed my way through the crowd that was already too large for the tent to accommodate, I heard a thunderous cheer; Modi was here! Taking the stage to chants of "*Bharat Mata ki Jai!*" (Victory to Mother India!), he started with an apology to those forced to listen outside the tent in the baking sun. Pronouncing himself as a *Pradhan Sevak*, a Prime Servant, rather than Prime Minister, he recounted the achievements of his government. "Could you ever imagine there could be a government that would work to ensure smoke-free kitchens for poor women? With the *Ujjwala Yojana*, nearly 50 lakh [5 million] families in Rajasthan have received a gas connection. *Modi hai to mumkin hai!* (Modi makes it possible!)" Such large problems, he said, could only be tackled by a government that worked with *seva bhaav*, a spirit of service.

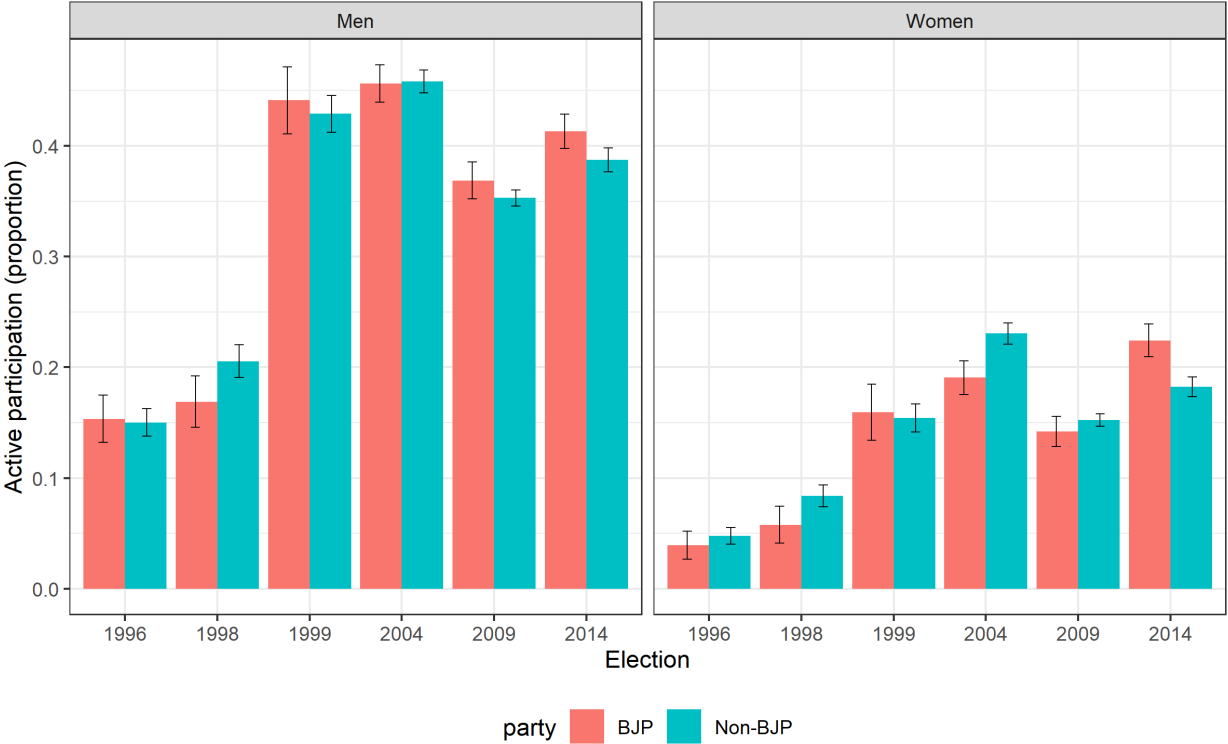
At the end of the rally, I stayed back to chat with Deepak, a former army-man who was interviewing attendees about their experience for a political consulting firm. He estimated the total number of attendees to be about 200,000, placing it above the town's population. Even so, this was hardly the largest rally that Modi had addressed. But he was struck by the number of women in attendance, nearly 40,000 per his estimate. Importantly, this was far from being an exception. Deepak had previously seen rallies with more than 50,000 women in Rajasthan, a patriarchal state where traditional social norms typically limited women's mobility outside the home.

Rajasthan is not the only state where women have entered public spaces in visibly partisan ways. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state that has roughly the same number of people as Brazil, the BJP was able to muster over 200,000 women for an address by Modi in December 2021.² Moreover, the party also enjoyed a gender advantage in rallies and public meetings vis-à-vis its rivals. In campaigns conducted in the run-up to state-level elections

¹State-level legislative elections will be referred to as assembly elections and national-level Parliamentary elections will be referred to as national or Parliamentary elections in the remainder of this book.

²<https://bit.ly/3PqsSPt>

Figure 1.1: Public political participation for men and women for BJP and other parties



Source: National Election Studies (2009, 2014), Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi
 Note: This figure shows the proportion of men and women who voted in the national elections in 2009 and 2014, as well as participated in any one of the following activities: attending rallies or public meetings, door-to-door canvassing, collecting donations, distributing posters or pamphlets. In some years, there was a slight difference in how these questions were asked. Consequently, they are not strictly comparable over time; however, they are (a) comparable for men and women within the same year, and (b) the difference-in- difference over sex and time for any two time periods is still meaningful. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

held in April 2022, Sheikh (N.d.) estimates 15 female to 85 male attendees in BJP rallies, compared to 7 women to 93 men for its closest rival, the Samajwadi Party (SP).³

Cross-country survey data supports this. In 2014, when Modi came to power, 29% more women entered public spaces in visibly partisan ways compared to 2009.⁴ But not all parties benefited proportionately from the rising tide. The growth in participation was most pronounced for women voting for the BJP. The BJP has mobilized women in large public

³These are based on enumerators' estimates at public meetings and is based on a small sample of events: 15 for the BJP and nine for the SP.

⁴National Election Studies 2009-14, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

meetings, bike rallies and even torch rallies among other events with a high degree of success.⁵ Figure 1.1 shows that in 2014, 22.4% women voting for the BJP also attended election meetings and rallies, canvassed during campaigns, and even collected donations. This was an 8.2 percentage point increase over the previous election compared to a 3 percentage point increase for other parties. Thus, even though there was an increase in women's activism across the board, it was particularly concentrated in the BJP's favor.

These figures do not belie that participation increased across the board for both men and women, and across all parties. Indeed, Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1 show that both men and women were more likely to enter public spaces to support their party of choice. However, what they also show is how women—and particularly conservative women—were increasingly more likely to transition to the public sphere for a partisan cause. Strikingly, women's public participation in favor of the BJP has never been higher than it was in 2014.

It is difficult to attribute this increase to other covariates. In fact, the magnitude of the difference increases when we take into account variables like the respondent's age, education, religiosity, and wealth, including cellphone ownership. The results of a constituency-level fixed effects regression in Table 1.1 indicates that women's participation increased by 5.4 percentage points, about the same as men. But differences in growth are more stark: 15% for men vs. 28% for women. The bulk of this increase came from women voting for the BJP whose participation increased by 8.6 percentage points, compared to 3.1 percentage points from women voting for other parties.

This book focuses on explaining women's *active*, or *visible*, political participation in favor of political parties. Although related to the more commonly studied measures of political participation like turnout and candidacy, active participation has certain conceptual and empirical features distinguishing it and rendering it more relevant as an indicator of women's political efficacy and democratic functioning. First, if democracy is to be truly conducive to human flourishing, we should examine the dimensions of democratic practice that lend themselves to expanding people's freedoms and capabilities as argued in Sen (1999). When considering this within the context of gender, it becomes imperative to explore the dimensions of political participation that enable women to have a say in determining how they are governed, and in shaping their lives. In this regard, political engagement is not simply a means to an end, but also as an end in itself. Entering the public sphere, being informed about political developments, articulating voice, engaging with representatives and leaders, and establishing networks with other women are valuable steps towards exercising personal autonomy and building public identities for women, but also improving democratic outcomes.

In the pursuit of women's emancipatory goals, it is important to examine the dimensions of politics that enable them to work towards these objectives. Let us first consider perhaps the most fundamental of these dimensions, voting in elections or turnout. Choosing leaders through free and fair elections has long been held as a cornerstone of democracy, at least in its classical conceptions.⁶ In this context, voter turnout represents the most fundamental—and

⁵See, for instance, <https://bit.ly/3SZXQA1> and <https://bit.ly/3c4KemJ>.

⁶Schumpeter (1942); Dahl (1956)

Table 1.1: Association between active political participation and voting for the BJP (2009-2014)

	Public political participation (2009-2014)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	-0.205*** (0.008)	-0.200*** (0.009)	-0.196*** (0.009)	-0.154*** (0.009)
2014	0.040** (0.017)	0.035* (0.018)	0.061*** (0.013)	0.053*** (0.013)
Voted BJP		0.016 (0.017)	0.027** (0.013)	0.026** (0.013)
Female × 2014	0.004 (0.013)	-0.004 (0.014)	-0.006 (0.014)	-0.009 (0.014)
Female × Voted BJP		-0.026 (0.016)	-0.030* (0.016)	-0.039** (0.015)
2014 × Voted BJP		0.010 (0.024)	-0.0005 (0.019)	-0.012 (0.018)
Female × 2014 × Voted BJP		0.042* (0.023)	0.041* (0.022)	0.054** (0.023)
Constant	0.356*** (0.011)	0.353*** (0.012)		
Constituency Fixed Effects	×	×	Y	Y
Covariates	×	×	×	Y
Observations	58,924	58,924	58,924	53,166
R ²	0.054	0.054	0.148	0.165

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Standard Errors are clustered at the Parliamentary Constituency × Year level. Data is from the 2009 and 2014 rounds of the National Election Survey conducted by the Lokniti research group of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. The survey is designed to predict national level party vote shares but is not representative of political participation at the state level. The percent increase in women's active participation for the BJP between 2009 and 2014 vis-à-vis men can be calculated as the ratio of the coefficient estimate on the triple interaction term of Female × 2014 × Voted BJP to the mean female participation rate in 2009.

least costly—act of political participation. It provides an opportunity to women to express their preferences in how they are governed. However, both existing literature and my own findings indicate that women's political choices are often governed by men in patriarchal settings. When women's votes amplify men's preferences, the benefits of women's participation accrue to men, leaving the implications for women's autonomy uncertain. Furthermore, it is worth noting that voting is compulsory in 23 countries worldwide, which limits its capacity to serve as a reliable indicator of autonomous political engagement.⁷ While high voter turnout may indicate a level of political involvement, it does not necessarily guarantee that women are exercising independent decision-making or actively pursuing their emancipatory interests.

Turnout aside, studies of the political gender gap recognize the importance of candidacy as allowing women significant potential to shape their political, economic, and social worlds, but also as one with perhaps the highest entry barriers. In patriarchal contexts where financial resources are concentrated in the hands of men, women can rarely make an independent decision to contest or finance their campaigns without explicit acquiescence from male gatekeepers. Indeed, the degree of gatekeeping can be so stringent that women do not include their own phone numbers when filing nomination papers.⁸ Indeed, female representatives often declined meetings—with me and even women research assistants—in the absence of male relatives. When men were present, they often blocked women from speaking. Indeed, in such cases, women run in elections because they are coerced to do so by men, who also reap the benefits of their candidacy.⁹ Consequently, men continue to be pivotal to women's ability to run, and in such cases, men continue to reap its benefits and not women. Thus, candidacy *per se* is also not a strong signal for political autonomy or efficacy.

Women's active participation in political parties, on the other hand, does not have obvious benefits for men. Rather, its benefits largely accrue to women who often lack a social network outside their immediate family or neighborhood, along with limited economic and political networks. Women's public partisan engagement through organizational work and party activities grants them access to the public sphere and expands their associational lives, networks with other women, activists, and representatives, and freedoms. At the same time, it teaches valuable civic skills that may be utilized in their political careers as well as other domains, including the private sphere of the home. In fact, robust engagement in party activities can be stepping stones towards candidacy.¹⁰

⁷World Population Review (2023)

⁸In telephonic interviews with women contesting municipal elections between 2018 and 2020 in Rajasthan, I found that 92% of female candidates' nomination forms included a male gatekeeper's phone number in place of theirs.

⁹Such men are often called *Sarpanch pati* or *Parshad Pati*, literally, a husband of a village council president or municipal councilor, who fulfills all the roles and responsibilities of his wife. During my fieldwork, I met women's fathers, fathers-in-law, uncles, and even brothers-in-law who had used women as proxies to circumvent quotas. See Basu (2016) for a broad discussion of women in dynastic politics in South Asia, and Turnbull (2022) for a detailed exploration of male gatekeeping among female representatives in local elections in Jaipur, Rajasthan.

¹⁰Goyal (2020)

Consequently, women's active participation beyond just voter turnout or candidacy can contribute significantly to their ability to govern themselves effectively. While turnout and candidacy are important aspects of political engagement, they are limited to specific election events and represent only two facets of the multifaceted nature of political participation and influence. Indeed, research by Carroll (1994); Gertzog (1995); Kirkpatrick (1974) and more recently by Cruz and Tolentino (2019) suggests that women participate in politics in distinct ways, and that their routes to political influence might be gendered and different from those of men. In fact, women have often been observed to be more actively involved in voluntary activities, community organizations, protests, and other party-related activities on a day-to-day basis, which collectively constitute active participation. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing and fostering women's participation beyond electoral cycles, acknowledging their contributions to political life in various domains.

The benefits of active participation do not accrue to women alone. Conceptually, active participation entails entering public spaces in a visibly partisan way, stopping short of contesting an election. Such activities comprise—but are not limited to—electoral activities like participating in election rallies and processions, canvassing for candidates, distributing election posters and leaflets, attending meetings, and donating for party campaigns. Elections, however, are infrequent events, and political parties sustain engagement during non-electoral periods through membership drives; service events; health and information camps about welfare programs; social, cultural and religious ceremonies; as well as contentious forms of organizing like protests, marches and demonstrations. Cadre-based political parties like the BJP that are part of larger socio-cultural movements are particularly dependent on active participation, not only for investing in creating and sustaining electoral links with voters, but also for drawing support for their ideological objectives and partisan policy positions. In addition, active participation during non-electoral times helps keep the party machine well-oiled through mutual engagement amongst functionaries. Often these events are also perceived as “shows of strength”, signaling a party's or activist's mobilization skills and support. In addition, regular mutual engagement keeps the party's organizational machinery running smoothly, obviating the need to build an election machinery from the ground up before every election.

1.1 The BJP and women's active participation: A puzzle

What was so striking about women's attendance at the BJP's rallies? The BJP is the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization that follows an ideology of *Hindutva*, or Hindu-ness. *Hindutva* is a hegemonically masculine ideology that considers India a majoritarian Hindu state, and relegates women

to their traditional gender roles within the home.¹¹ Born out of the conviction that India's history of conquests and colonization could be traced to a crisis of masculinity, the RSS focused on inculcating aggressive militaristic and nationalistic traits among men. Displays of feminine-identified traits like compassion and humility were considered signs of weakness with no place in the male-dominated *Hindutva* public sphere.

Indeed, like many right-wing movements across the world, *Hindutva* has been characterized as deeply misogynistic and advocating of violence against non-conformists. In more extreme examples, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Duterte in the Philippines, have openly displayed their misogyny through predatory remarks about political rivals, and women more generally.¹² These tendencies were amplified with the BJP's victory in the 2014 national election. According to Kaul (2021), "misogyny has become entrenched in public culture." Although Modi has been strident in his calls to honor women,¹³ he has simultaneously ridiculed political challengers' masculinity,¹⁴ addressed women rivals in misogynistic terms,¹⁵ and maintained a studied silence when other party members have done so, or when women from marginalized communities have been victims of violence perpetrated by members of dominant groups.¹⁶

Across the world, parties and leaders taking these positions have endeared themselves to certain sections of the electorate, but at a heavy cost among women. In the 2020 Presidential elections, women voted against Trump by 12 to 15 percentage points.¹⁷ This trend is not exclusive to the US. Survey data collected by the Pew Research Center and the American National Election Study in Figure 1.2 shows that across countries in the global North and South, women are less likely than their male counterparts to support a right-wing party.

Yet, India seems like an exception to this rule. Not only are approval ratings for the BJP higher than most right-wing parties, women do not penalize the party. Both women and men

¹¹See, for instance, Bacchetta (1993; 2004); Bacchetta and Power (2002); Basu and Sarkar (2022); Sarkar and Butalia (1995); Sarkar (2021; 1993; 1991; 1999b); Basu et al. (1993); Banerjee (2012; 2005); Kaul (2021)

¹²See for instance, Marron (2019); Shaw (N.d.); Koulouris (2018); Köttig, Bitzan and Petö (2016); Roose and Cook (2022); Carian, DiBranco and Ebin (2022) for the US; Assis and Ogando (2018); Araújo and Prior (2021) for Brazil; and Guevarra and Arcilla (2020); Kenes (2021); Navera (2021) for the Philippines. Kaul (2021) provides a comparative perspective across India, Brazil, the Philippines, and the US.

¹³See, for instance, <https://bit.ly/3QY1usa>. In addition, the public messaging for most welfare programs are based on protecting or supplementing women's dignity.

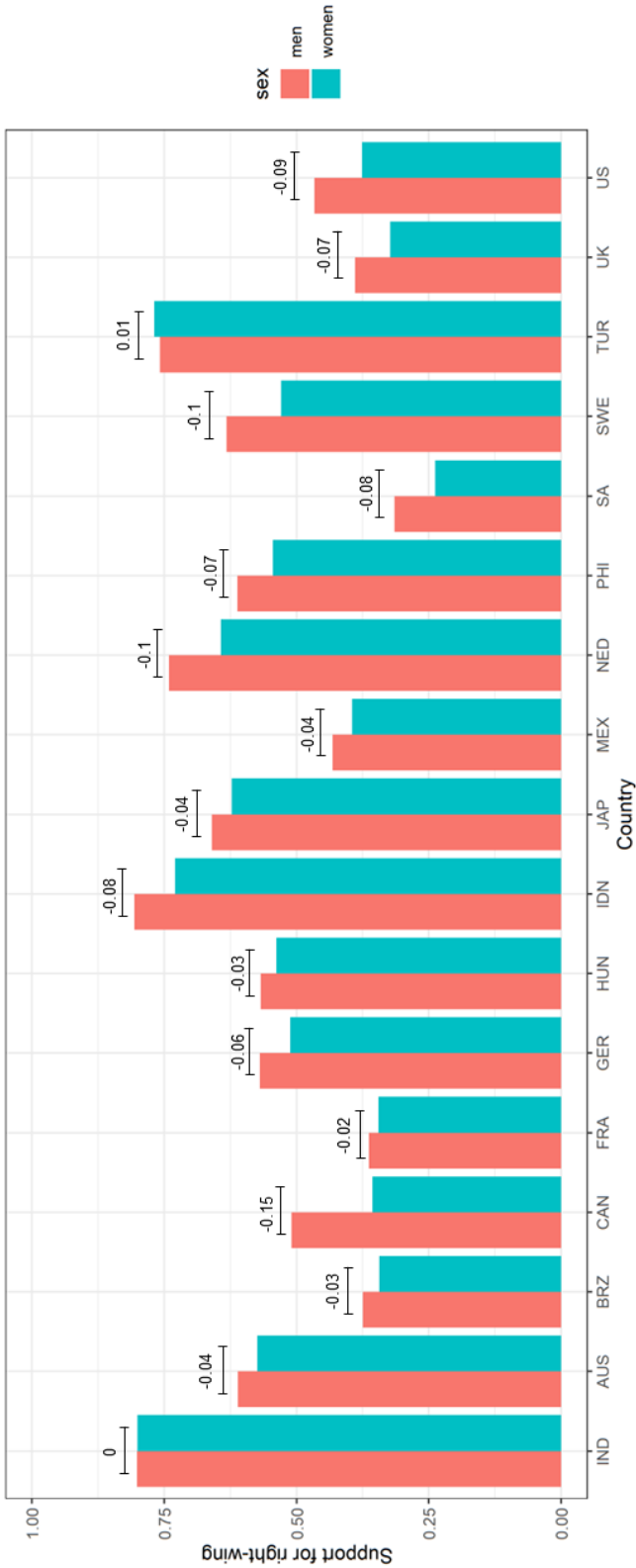
¹⁴For instance, Modi has referred to the wife an INC Member of Parliament as a "500 million rupees girlfriend" (*50 crore ki girlfriend*). However, his most trenchant criticism has been reserved for Sonia Gandhi, the former President of the INC and her son Rahul Gandhi, who he described as "a Jersey cow (owing to her foreign origin) and her calf." Rahul Gandhi was also given the pejorative moniker of *Pappu* that has been widely used to signal his effeminacy and inadequacy at leading the country. For more details, see Kaul (2021).

¹⁵<https://bit.ly/3ABbF0k>

¹⁶For instance, the BJP's national general secretary, Kailash Vijayvargiya, compared an ally-turned-rival, Nitish Kumar, to "foreign women" who "change(d) their boyfriends anytime" (ANI 2022). In another example, Yogi Adityanath (Ajay Bisht), the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh has described women as needing protection, not independence, and "women acquiring male traits turn into demons (*rakshasas*)" (Krishnan 2017).

¹⁷Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) (2022)

Figure 1.2: Gender gap in support for right-wing political parties



Source: US: American National Election Studies 2020; other countries: Global Attitudes Survey Spring 2019, Pew Research Center.
 Note: This figure shows the degree of support for right-wing parties across men and women. For countries other than the US, columns show the proportion of respondents having a favorable opinion of any right-wing party. For the US, columns indicate whether a respondent identified with or leaned towards the Republican Party. Numbers above the columns indicate the difference between women's and men's support for a right-wing party. Negative numbers indicate a female disadvantage for the party.

support the BJP in equal proportions. In fact, preliminary evidence suggests that women, may in fact be more supportive of the BJP than men. In state-level elections held in April 2022 in Uttar Pradesh, data suggests that the BJP enjoyed a 12 percentage point gender advantage over its closest rival, the Samajwadi Party.¹⁸ In this aspect, Modi and the BJP seems to have far more in common with the Erdogan and Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) both of which seem to have been able to circumvent female backlash common to right-wing movements and induce women to engage with the party in their public lives. Indeed as we will see, in Section 1.5 in brief and in greater detail in Chapter 6, both parties have adopted similar strategies to mobilize women.

This masculine hegemony has been enabled—and perpetuated—by the RSS's preference that women conform to traditional gender norms.¹⁹ A central tenet of *Hindutva* holds a heteronormative (Hindu) household—and not an individual—as the fundamental building block of the Indian nation. Consequently, there is an explicit acceptance of complementary gender roles for men and women, where men occupy the public—and political—sphere, while women are confined to the private sphere. Within the private sphere, women's primary responsibilities consist of motherhood and preserving the institution of the family. RSS chiefs; members of the RSS's women's wing, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti; as well as members of the BJP's women's wing have glorified motherhood and the nurturing of nationalistic values in children as a means of contributing to the nation.²⁰ Furthermore, the family was sacrosanct and women's "adjustment" was imperative to "keep the family united" according to Mridula Sinha, a founding member of the BJP's women's wing.²¹ "Too much freedom to women" was to be discouraged as it could "break the family."²² When the party spoke of women's economic empowerment, it did not do so for women *per se*, but for women within a family. According to the BJP's 2004 national election manifesto, "every able-bodied woman should have at least some source of livelihood, so that she can enjoy economic independence within the framework of a harmonious family."²³

Currently, the BJP has evolved to incorporating women within the party organization, but within the framework of the family and its concomitant complementary gender roles. Party activists often cite the party's record of offering prestigious ministerial positions to women as evidence of the party's commitment to empowering women.²⁴ Yet, one of these very Ministers, Nirmala Sitharaman, in a 2013 interview, "described men and women as 'two halves of a chickpea': both are equally essential, but they are different."²⁵ In addition, the BJP's 2018 training manual for fresh recruits in its women's wing states,

The man and woman together form the complete human life. Similarly, their

¹⁸Kishore (2022)

¹⁹Bacchetta (2004); Jeffery and Basu (2012); Banerjee (2012); Sarkar (1993)

²⁰See Golwalkar (1966), Iyengar (2017), and Sarkar and Butalia (1995).

²¹Sarkar and Butalia (1995:330)

²²Sarkar and Butalia (1995:173)

²³BJP (2004)

²⁴Two women have occupied the position of the Minister for External Affairs, Finance, and Defense.

²⁵Williams (2022:164)

working together is must for the progress of the society[...] The roles of man and woman are different. One is incomplete without the other. A woman has been accepted as a form of *Jagat Janani* (mother of the universe) in our life philosophy. The ideal woman in the Indian life philosophy is the mother.²⁶

But party activism places women in roles that unambiguously transgress these traditional boundaries and gender roles. In traditional settings as in much of India, women often cannot exit private spaces of their own volition. As data from the Indian Household Development Survey (2011-12) shows, a majority of women respondents require permission from domestic gatekeepers to enter public spaces—even if it is to visit doctors, relatives, friends or local stores. Furthermore, 51% of women said that it was usual in their community for husbands to beat their wives if they left the house without permission.

The situation is worse in the case of politics and party activism. During focus group discussions, men and women across cities, towns, and villages overwhelmingly shared a similar opinion—that politics was not a suitable vocation—or even avocation—for women from respectable families. *Rajneeti*, or politics was dirty, corrupt and immoral. Party activists and leaders too openly discussed how they, or their competitors, had to resort to ethically questionable means to get ahead. Women activists recounted how competitors within their own parties had circulated rumors about their moral integrity. A female activist said, "If you want to get ahead, then you need to allow yourself be exploited."²⁷

Household elders, often men, explained why they needed to act as gatekeepers to women's mobility. Pointing at his daughter, a male respondent in a focus group discussion said, "What society thinks about her is also what they think about me."²⁸ Consequently, it is not only women who are the intended targets of misogynistic rumors and slurs, but also their families. In patriarchal contexts, women's public image also reflects upon their families. The aim of spreading these rumors is not just to besmirch women's characters, but also induce their families to limit their mobility, ambition and engagement. Women's political engagement thus entails both private and social costs for women and their families.

1.2 Explaining the puzzle: A theory of norm-compliant mobilization

How then is a political party to mobilize women in such severely restrictive settings? I argue that the key to mobilizing women into public spaces is to reduce these private and social costs. Rather than highlighting the potentially emancipatory features of women's active participation, and the challenges it may pose to existing structures of power outside and inside the home, political parties seeking to engage women in visible and active ways need

²⁶BJP (2018)

²⁷Interview by author, November 4, 2019. Also mentioned by Sheikh (N.d.) in Uttar Pradesh. Also see Jakimow (2023) for an account of why politics is considered dirty in popular conception.

²⁸FGD JP-3, December 2, 2018.

to navigate social norms and domestic gender relations so that women and their families do not face adverse consequences from this participation.

I develop a theory of norm-compliant mobilization to explain why religiously conservative parties, perhaps counter-intuitively, enjoy a distinct comparative advantage in reducing the costs of women's participation in traditional settings. When women's ability to enter public spaces depends on men's acquiescence—as it does in severely patriarchal settings—women's public political engagement is a function of what men find socially acceptable. Here, religiously conservative parties like the BJP are particularly adept at obtaining men's buy-in for women's participation. The BJP's success at mobilizing women stems from framing its politics as *seva*, a powerful injunctive norm of selfless service. Although *seva* has roots in religion, its political interpretation of “organized service” and association with Hindu revivalist movements—as I explore in greater detail in Chapter 2—make it central to the Hindu nationalist project of nation-building.²⁹ *Seva* is the principal public face of the RSS and its family of Hindu nationalist organizations, the Sangh Parivar. Like its sister organizations, the BJP, and Modi in particular, have inherited this tradition of framing politics as *seva*. But crucially, *seva* is also a descriptive norm of women's domestic care-giving roles towards their husband, elders and children.

The main argument of this book is that framing politics as norm-compliant *seva* helps create the conditions that enable women to enter public spaces. There are two main mechanisms through which this operates. The language of *seva* presents politics in a familiar light to women who see it as a natural and comprehensible extension of their domestic roles. Second, because of this reinforcement of women's traditional roles, political *seva* neither challenges men's authority within the family, nor patriarchal structures of power that extend outside the family in the political party and in society. Consequently, male gatekeepers are more likely to acquiesce to women's participation when it is framed in terms of *seva*.

Active participation in the form of *seva* has both compassionate and militant aspects, both of which may be deployed strategically. The word strategic as used in this context does not refer to electoral strategy *per se* but a broader goal of social and cultural acceptance across social groups. The RSS is often perceived as an upper caste organization working towards a Brahminical Hindu hegemony. *Seva* is a key strategic tool for the RSS since it can help diminish active hostility from non-Hindus and subaltern caste groups, and even generate acceptability and goodwill towards its foundational aim—the establishment of a Hindu nation.³⁰

Indeed, understanding the compassionate aspects of Hindu nationalism are fundamental to understanding how it seeks to win over the “hearts and minds” of people not initially affiliated with, or sympathetic to, the aims and ideals of *Hindutva*. Compassionate *seva* includes public services rendered by the RSS and its affiliates to underserved communities,³¹ humanitarian assistance in response to natural disasters,³² running orphanages and women's

²⁹Thapar (1996); Beckerlegge (1997; 2006*a*; *b*); Watt (2005); Patel (2007*b*; 2010)

³⁰Thachil (2014); Chidambaram (2012); Bhattacharjee (2019); Sagar (2020*a*; *b*; *c*); Sharda (2018).

³¹Thachil (2014)

³²Bhattacharjee (2019)

hostels, finding suitable marriage partners for unwed women and mothers,³³ religious services including *gau-seva* or cow protection by women,³⁴ as well as other forms of routine outreach towards the less privileged. As Govindrajan (2021) argues, many of these quotidian activities may be undertaken by individuals from a place of altruism and dedication.

Yet, the scaffolding of love can often be constructed upon a foundation of militant-like intolerance. Drawing attention to how right-wing and fascist movements in the US and UK have reframed themselves as being motivated by love of nation or community, Ahmed (2004) argues that the “politics of hate is often written in the language of love”. This hate is legitimized by the presence of an “other” group that is perceived as a threat. Hindu nationalism as conceptualized by Savarkar (1923) considers followers of Islam and Christianity—religions whose origins and holy sites lie outside the Indian subcontinent—to constitute this “other.” *Seva* can take on far more ominous forms when deployed towards strengthening and ostensibly preserving Hindu community and ways of life against threats, real or perceived. For instance, Muslims and Dalits (subaltern Hindus) have often faced extreme violence from self-confessed “cow protectors” including lynchings and public lashings. Similarly, perceived demographic threats to Hinduism through proselytizing or inter-religious marriages, especially when Hindu women wed Muslim men, have drawn violent reactions. Yet, Hindu nationalists continue to call this *seva* since their seeming motivation is a sense of love or service towards religion and the Hindu nation.

These forms of *seva* illustrate its capacious meanings and interpretations. But in addition to these compassionate and militant forms of service in the public sphere—and critical to the BJP’s ability to engage women—*seva* also denotes a descriptively gendered norm of service within the house. *Seva*-related duties consist of domestic chores, cooking, teaching children, as well as caring for household elders, the sick, the infirm and children. This constitutes a descriptive norm because—although men are not prohibited from contributing—the burden of such care-giving duties falls disproportionately upon women. In a survey on how people used their time conducted in 2019, India’s Central Statistical Organization found that women dedicated nearly 30 hours each week to chores and care-giving activities, ten times as much as men.³⁵

I argue that the BJP draws on these capacious meanings and interpretations of *seva* to engage women outside the house. Women in the BJP, more so than other parties, describe their political work in terms of *seva*. Not only does the BJP machine engage women primarily in *seva*-based events as described in the beginning of this chapter, but activists also use *seva* as a socially permissible channel to enter the public and political sphere. Because *seva* is a familiar idea that poses no threats to traditional patriarchal power structures, men are far more likely to acquiesce to women’s political involvement if it is articulated in terms of *seva*. Moreover, because a woman’s aptitude for service (*seva bhaav*) is often considered a measure of her character and social reputation, political *seva* opens up a whole new sphere

³³Menon (2010); Mehta (2016). Interview with Rashtra Sevika Samiti members in March 2019, New Delhi

³⁴Govindrajan (2021)

³⁵Central Statistical Organization (2019)

to display—and expand upon—these character traits.³⁶

1.3 Why does the BJP seek to incorporate women?

Why should the BJP be interested in women's activism and occupation of public spaces in the first place? Is this not a departure for a party that has viewed women through a familial lens? The answer to these questions can be found in how the entry of a hitherto quiescent group of voters cutting across class and caste cleavages can ease the fundamental tension for conservative parties.

Conservative parties are elite parties, in that their core constituency comprises of the upper strata of society.³⁷ Thachil (2014) lists three main criteria for characterizing a party's core constituency: its internal composition, pattern of electoral support, and policy profile. Based on this, the BJP can clearly be classified within the broader class of conservative parties. Historically, the BJP's leadership positions and electoral nominations have been biased towards members of the social elite—Hindu upper caste groups. Even though these elites constitute a minority of the electorate, they count themselves its most loyal supporters, having disproportionately voted for the party compared to other caste groups.³⁸ Finally, the BJP's core policy agenda has served as a vehicle for the interests of its elite core. Indeed, despite initial attempts to consolidate all Hindus, the BJP was caricatured as a party of *Brahmins* and *Banias*, two groups of social and economic elite who are part of the BJP's core constituency.

The *raison d'être* of parties is to gain political power. Here, conservative parties face a fundamental tension. Elites may enjoy substantial economic and social power and be well organized, but axiomatically, they are a numerical minority. This means that parties with elites as their core constituency must reach out to voters outside these groups to create a broad-based coalition. The size of the coalition may be determined by electoral institutions and local strategic concerns. India's first-past-the-post system means that outreach efforts must be substantial enough to win a plurality of votes. In order to do so, conservative parties need to make credible concessions to non-elite groups, which in turn, may jeopardize their ability to serve as a vehicle for elite interests. Balancing these diverging interests is the core existential tension of a conservative party. To be sure, all expansionist parties face this problem, but the severity of this challenge is particularly strong for a conservative party. As a contrast with parties on the left of the ideological spectrum that can build a mass base within their core constituency, conservative parties must build their mass base outside. Thus, while Left parties seek to “slice society horizontally; conservative movements seek to slice it vertically.”³⁹

³⁶See Lamb (2000) Chapter 2 for a discussion on how parents and in-laws discuss their daughters-in-laws' (and sons') inclinations towards serving them in their old age.

³⁷Gibson (1996)

³⁸Shrinivasan (2021); Daniyal (2022)

³⁹Gibson (1996:18)

But what happens when a hitherto marginalized group of voters enters the electorate? For a conservative party, the answer of course is contingent upon whether this group is linked to the elite core—naturally or through interest groups and organizations—or the broader electorate. If not, can it be mobilized independently of existing class-based categories, and what are the costs of this? Since gender constitutes “arguably the ultimate cross-cutting cleavage,”⁴⁰ herein exists an opportunity for a conservative party. If the party can appeal to women as a group—or even differentially such that there is no backlash from core women or non-core men—then it need not depend exclusively on making costly concessions to non-elite groups.

This is precisely what happened in the mid-2000s when there was a remarkable increase in women's turnout in national and state-level elections. As Figure 1.3 indicates, the gender gap in turnout has virtually closed in national elections. From lagging behind men by nearly 17 percentage points in 1962 and mirroring shifts in men's voting patterns till 2004, women's turnout was only 0.4 percentage points behind men in 2019. The bulk of this gender gap closed between 2004 and 2014. These trends mean that political parties can no longer afford to ignore women or rely on existing means of mobilization. Indeed, women have emerged as pivotal voters in several elections, most recently, during the state elections in Bihar (2020) and Uttar Pradesh (2022).

In the light of these recent developments, women voters are in the spotlights of nearly all political parties. A stark, albeit noisy, reflection of this is the space allocated towards women within political discourse. In 1984, the women's section in the BJP's election manifesto contained 94 words spanning about a third of a page. This increased to 366 words across one page in 2004, and finally to nearly 850 words across two pages in 2019. Modi's speeches frequently feature women,⁴¹ and so does his social media handle. In April 2019, the month preceding the 2019 national election, 7.4% of the BJP's tweets contained references to women. Not to be left behind, the INC allocated one page to women's issues in its 2019 manifesto. In addition, it mentioned women in eight other sections including jobs, urbanization, sports, agriculture, internal security, judiciary and police reforms. Women were mentioned in 6.8% of its tweets in April 2019.

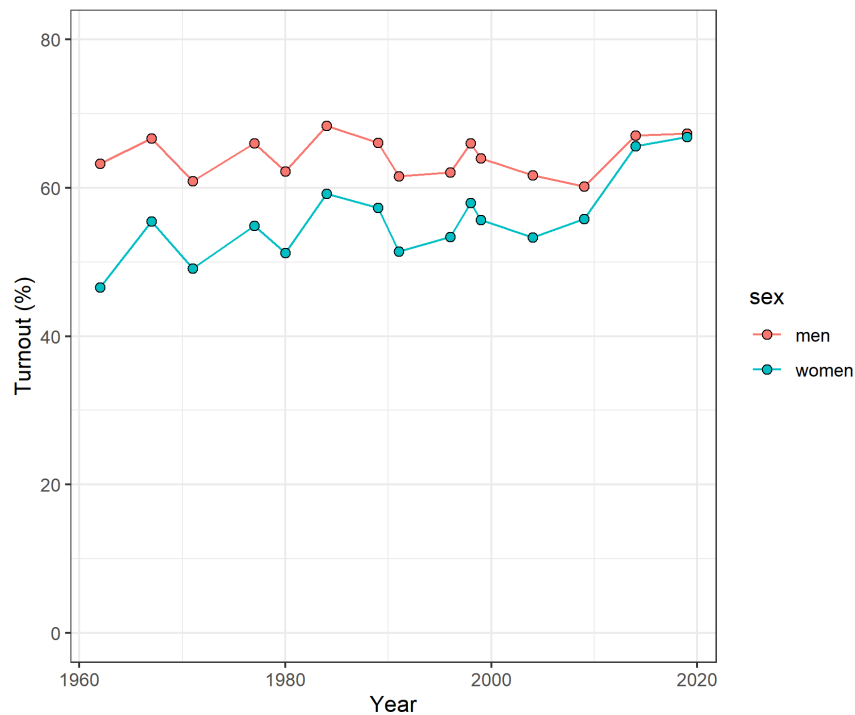
But often, women cannot be mobilized and persuaded in quite the same ways as men. In several countries, and especially in India, women exhibit lower political knowledge and spend less time outside the house. Consequently, their social networks are smaller, and economic or political networks often non-existent. In addition, they are less likely to have access to private and independent sources of information like smartphones, attend or speak at political events, make claims, or interface with the state.⁴² Existing mobilization networks, including ethnic

⁴⁰Teele (2018)

⁴¹Mehta (2022)

⁴²Apart from this book that documents these dimensions of the gender gap, see Prillaman (2021) for economic, social and political networks; Badrinathan et al. (2021) for access to information and smartphones; Goyal (2021) for the gender gap in political knowledge and participation in India; Khan (2021) and Cheema, Liaquat, Khan, Khan Mohmand and Rauf (2021) for gender gaps in political participation in Pakistan; and Kruks-Wisner (2018) for differences in claim-making.

Figure 1.3: Turnout in Indian national elections



Note: This figure shows turnout (in %) in national elections conducted in India. Sex-specific turnout data was not gathered in 1952 and 1957; hence the figure starts from the third national election conducted in 1962. Source: Election Commission of India.

and caste networks, are mediated by men. Hence, there are limits to the extent to which political parties can appeal to non-core women by leveraging these channels.⁴³ Crucially, party machines in India are dominated by men, accentuating the perception that partisan politics is a male domain.

In this light, and especially with more women going to the polls to cast their vote, women's visible presence as party activists or active participants can send several positive signals to the wider electorate. First, in an environment where women's preferences and voice have often been suppressed, their presence in party endeavors suggests that the party cares about inclusion and women's representation. Second, as Krook (2020) argues, and this book shows, party politics can often be deemed violent and unsafe for women, not only in physical terms, but also psychological, emotional, sexual and reputational. Consequently, women's presence in party activities suggests that the party cares about women. Third, pictures and videos of party events are shared widely across party channels and social media to create the impression that the party's overtures towards women are being returned. Fourth, women's presence sends a strong signal that women's admission into these public spaces can be deemed

⁴³See Chowdhury and Malhotra (2018) and Goyal (2021).

as socially acceptable, at least in a limited sense.⁴⁴ Finally, party events, especially when held during electoral times, constitute a “show of strength.” Since mobilizing women is typically a hard problem for parties, women’s presence in such events shows the party’s gendered organizational prowess in good light.

As a consequence, parties feel a need to incorporate women into the organization. Not only may this inspire other women through demonstration effects, but more usefully for a party, enable it to extend its outreach among women. Lalitha Kumaramangalam, a former national spokesperson for the BJP, was of the opinion, “People credit Narendra Modi with doing a lot for women, and it is certainly true. But the focus on women came earlier around 2009 itself, when Nitin Gadkari was the President [of the BJP]. He always said, “Women can be better mobilizers than men. Men can only mobilize other men. Women on the other hand, can reach the *chulha* (kitchen), and talk to women there.”⁴⁵ This sentiment was shared by activists in other parties too. Lekha took this one step further: “These days,” she said, “some women can even talk about politics with men within the family. One woman in my group, her in-laws were *Congressis* (INC supporters). But after I helped her child get admission to a school, she started accompanying me to my party work, and now most of her family votes for us. So this way, women can also convince their families.”

To be sure, there are limits to women’s ability to network and mobilize. Daby (2021)’s work in Argentina shows how female brokers’ networking ability is restricted because they are approached by a smaller set of clients, and primarily women and children. Hence, they “have fewer opportunities to use clientelism for building, enlarging, and sustaining political networks than male brokers.” In addition to being more susceptible to political violence, they also find it harder to orchestrate violence against opponents.⁴⁶ Yet they have other tools at their disposal. Women activists portray themselves as *samaj sevikas*—social workers—rather than politicians, and are more likely to leverage their status as outsiders or novices uncorrupted by questionable political dealings to negotiate public life. In addition, women can also employ public and visible displays of morality—even insulting men’s masculinity on occasion—to shame politicians and government officials into taking action.

Portraying oneself as a social worker disinterested in political one-upmanship is a powerful instrument that women can strategically exploit to circumvent domestic gatekeeping, enhance mobility and cloak political ambition, while at the same time, conforming with traditional ideals of womanhood. Yet, not all of this is strategic action. *Seva* is a central expectation and legitimate demand of people from their politicians. Indeed, non-contingent constituency service, as explored by Fenno (1978) in the United States and Bussell (2019) in India, is a critical aspect of the broader idea of *seva*. As a respondent during a pilot

⁴⁴I use the word “limited” here since women who engage in these political events are often very different from the rest of the population. See Chapter 4 for details.

⁴⁵Interview on February 15, 2019. Evidently this sentiment has a long lineage within the Hindu nationalist parties as evidenced by Jankibai Joshi’s efforts to constitute a women’s wing in the Hindu Mahasabha as illustrated in Williams (2023).

⁴⁶Krook (2018); Bardall, Bjarnegard and Piscopo (2020); Goyal (2021)

survey stated, “What is politics if not the service of people?”⁴⁷ Party activists’ acts of quotidian service comprised of helping other women, and occasionally men, gain access to welfare programs. Filling forms, arranging identification documents, passing requests on to higher level politicians, helping children gain admission to private schools, arranging hospital beds or oxygen cylinders during the Covid-19 pandemic can all be encompassed within this idea of constituency service. But *seva* also transcends material goods and public services to take on more intangible meanings. Being present and making an effort to know constituents (*vyavahar banana*), lending moral and emotional support in trying times (*sukh dukh mein saath dena*), lending a sympathetic ear regardless of one’s ability to help are part of the *seva* that citizens desire—if not always able to realize—from their politicians and party activists.

In keeping with this idea, politicians and activists across the political spectrum described their work in terms of *seva*. One may wonder—if styling politics as *seva* is so ubiquitous—perhaps all political entities may be equivalent in their reliance and usage of *seva*. However, some genders and parties “are more equal than others.” Across three districts in the state of Rajasthan, the setting where I collected the bulk of ethnographic and individual-level data for this book, I find female politicians were more likely than their male counterparts to describe their motivation for entering politics as *seva*. Moreover, they also outpaced men in describing quotidian public and political activities in these terms. Crucially, this finding is not restricted to my field sites, or indeed, to Rajasthan. Ciotti (2006)’s ethnographic work in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Lama-Rewal and Ghosh (2005)’s study of women politicians in four Indian metropolises, Goyal (2021)’s study of party activists in Delhi, Bedi (2016)’s ethnography of women in the Shiv Sena—another religiously conservative party adhering to *Hindutva*—in Mumbai, and Tanya Jakimow’s ethnographies in India and Indonesia,⁴⁸ all concur. Women have a stronger affinity towards describing their work as social service, and preferring a self-identity rooted in *seva* than *rajneeti*, or politics.

The BJP is particularly well-placed to recruit women based on appeals towards *seva* for two reasons. The first of these is the unique organization, or *sangathan*, it inherited from the RSS. The RSS’s own structure was modeled on the organization of religious sects arising in colonial India. These sects were integrated around congregations headed by a single leader and were geared towards *seva* and proselytisation or mass outreach.⁴⁹ Like professional volunteers (*sevaks*) in these sects, the RSS developed its own rank and file of propagandists (*pracharaks*) to undertake the RSS’s social service tasks. The BJP, created in 1980 as the RSS political wing, adopted its *sangathan* model, through which the party’s women’s wing started mobilizing women for *seva* activities around occasions of religious festivals when it was easier to “get women out of the home.”⁵⁰ Second, as social work became the mainstay of the RSS, women inspired by *seva* could find a large range of activities to occupy themselves in the thick organization around the BJP.⁵¹ This afforded women a range of ways to remain active

⁴⁷Male respondent in household pilot survey in Kota, August 2021.

⁴⁸Jakimow (2019a;b;c); Jakimow, Dewi and Siahaan (2019); Jakimow (2023)

⁴⁹Patel (2007b; 2010)

⁵⁰Interview with Mohini Garg, founding member of the BJP Mahila Morcha in Delhi in January 2019.

⁵¹Interview with Mr. Shastri, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Udaipur on December 6, 2018

in public spaces beyond merely mobilization during elections. In addition, its association with the RSS gives the BJP's calls to *seva* relatively greater credibility than other political parties. Thus, I argue that when women's political engagement showed signs of increasing, the BJP was perfectly positioned to mobilize women on the lines of *seva*. Adopting a *seva*-based approach *for women* may not have been a strategic choice by the party; it is what the party—and the RSS's thick organization—are inherently geared towards. This explains the strategic outreach towards to women given the structural benefits of doing so.

1.4 Evaluating the argument

I use a multi-method approach that seamlessly integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to provide evidence for my argument. First, in interviews and focus group discussions conducted with party activists, I find large differences across political parties with regard to their methods of choice for mobilizing women. The BJP has a stronger affinity to conceive and project its politics in terms of *seva*. Modi, in particular, has attempted to appropriate *seva* as a personal and party brand. Referring to himself as a *Pradhan Sevak* in Tonk was merely a continuation of a practice initiated in his first Independence Day address on August 15, 2014.⁵² His birthday, September 17, is celebrated as *Seva Divas*, Service Day, and the entire week as Service Week, or *Seva Saptah*. In orchestrated acts of performative service, Modi has undertaken activities normally falling within the traditional roles of women within the house, and subaltern castes in the public sphere. For instance, when launching the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Mission), he swept streets with a broom, and sorted garbage as part of a “*Swacchata hi Seva*” (Cleanliness is Service) campaign. Later, during the 2019 national election campaign, he washed the feet of sanitation workers. In this vein, the BJP's public outreach programs often explicitly adopted “*seva*” within their name—the party's Covid-19 relief effort was named “*Seva hi Sangathan*”, or “Service is our Organization”. These, I argue, are attempts to de-emphasize the unsavory aspects of politics, using idioms of public service based on feminine-identified traits, intended to correct the party's long-standing brand as a masculine Hindu nationalist elite party.⁵³

This overwhelming focus on *seva* also finds expression in the party's political discourse and communication on social media. In a computational text analysis of nearly 500,000 posts on Twitter, I find a great degree of organizational coherence: Modi, the BJP, as well as its women's wing are far more likely to feature *seva* in their tweets compared to other parties like the INC. In fact, the Rajasthan chapter of the women's wing of the BJP is more than twice as likely as its INC counterpart to feature *seva* in its tweets. Importantly, these differences persist across different states as well as the central, or federal, level of the

⁵²Modi, however, is not the first Prime Minister to refer to himself as a servitor. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had expressed a desire that he be called *Pratham Sevak* or “First Servant”. However, Modi has used this metaphor far more consistently as also embellished his *seva* credentials through highly visible acts of performative service that I discuss in Chapter 4.

⁵³See Basu (2021b).

two parties. This gives further credence that, although derived in Rajasthan, the argument proposed in this book—and its implications—hold for other settings too where the BJP has a substantial organizational footprint.

Yet, are these differences in political framing and discourse meaningful? Do they map on to ground-level differences in how party machines operate? The examination of party organizations has most often investigated patronage and clientelistic networks, and how this affects political recruitment, voter mobilization and vote buying. My focus, however, is on active participation in public spaces which leads me to investigate differences in the nature of public activities that parties channel women in. In addition, I investigate recruitment strategies since partisan selection mechanisms influence political cultures within the organization as also voluntary events that workers organize for themselves to keep the organizational wheels running.

To understand this, I turn to an original survey conducted with 128 women party activists in the BJP and the INC. Findings from the survey support my qualitative evidence: BJP women classified more than half of the events organized by the party or its members over the last three months within the category of *seva*. It is remarkable that despite constituting the opposition in Rajasthan's legislative assembly during the time of my research, most of the BJP's organizational activities were still geared towards non-contentious engagement. A former District President of the BJP's women's wing told me this was in fact a climbdown from when the BJP was in power in the state level.⁵⁴ In addition, *seva* was also essential for political recruitment. In a discrete choice experiment where I asked party activists to choose between profiles of two possible female recruits, BJP women were far more likely to deem women who had participated in social service and cultural activities—compared to contentious activities like protests—as a better fit for their party. The INC's activists, on the other hand, did not make a distinction between potential recruits on this attribute.

Finally, what is the causal effect of framing politics as *seva*? Based on my theory and qualitative findings, not only should more women be inclined to enter partisan politics when it is framed as *seva*, but also that men should be more inclined to set aside their gatekeeping roles. To provide quantitative evidence for this, I combine descriptive and experimental findings collected as part of a primary survey of 1,457 households, with two respondents—a woman and her male gatekeeper—per household.

In a discrete choice experiment, I find women were 6.4 and 10.2 percentage points more likely to prefer partisan engagement if a political party framed the event in norm-compliant terms vis-à-vis neutral or norm-undermining terms like public meetings and protests respectively. Moreover, consistent with my theory of norm-compliant frames and male gatekeeping, I find that women's participation is more sensitive to men's preferences than women's interest and conservative men are more permissive of women's participation in *seva* activities. Together, this leads women to enter the realm of party politics to a greater extent when it is framed in terms of *seva*.

⁵⁴Interview with author in October 2019.

1.5 The argument in comparative perspective

The main argument of this book is that religiously conservative parties in traditional settings can exploit the gendered separation of public and private spheres to engage women in ways that do not challenge patriarchal structures of power inside or outside the home. Indeed, in patriarchal settings where men and women occupy separate spheres, the qualities invoked by *seva*—devotion, piety, and morality—have traditionally been associated with women. To be sure, the combination of the BJP's ideology of religious nationalism, the incessant spotlight it shines on *seva*-based political rhetoric, Modi's projection of feminine-identified traits and duties together with the language in which women's domestic roles are expressed, make it especially potent in the current Indian context. Conservative ideals of service and the ideals upon which it is predicated—religion, tradition, and the gendered separation of public and private spheres that culminate in a belief in women's intrinsic moral and spiritual nature—have been powerful enablers for women's entry into politics. In countries across the world, religious and conservative parties have used these tools to engage women in the public sphere at different junctures in their political development. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, women were viewed as natural constituents of conservative parties.

Perhaps surprisingly, from a liberal perspective that emphasizes threats to women's autonomy from religion and conservatism, Christian and Islamic movements have enabled women's active participation across Western Europe, North and Latin America, Asia, and Africa.⁵⁵ Accounts of active participation in the US and the UK during the nineteenth-century show how the separation of public and private spheres restricted women to their homes, but also in very specific circumstances, also enabled their entry into the political sphere.⁵⁶ Taking place in the streets, saloons, and barber houses, politics was rough and violent, and a preserve of men unimpaired by sentiment. Women, on the other hand, were thought to have a natural affinity for the delicate and homely virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Thus, while "rational" and "materialistic" men made politics a competitive space for themselves, women "naturally" took to safeguarding the home. Denied the right to vote until the early twentieth century in both countries, women's early forays into politics were non-partisan in nature. Like the *seva* activities that women in the BJP participate in, Republican and Conservative women in the US and UK respectively, engaged in voluntary action, community work, religious groups, and charitable ventures.⁵⁷ This "voluntarist style" was befitting of prevailing conceptions of women's moral and spiritual superiority, rendering it a distinct political culture.⁵⁸

These distinctive political cultures shaped much of women's organized activism in the

⁵⁵Aviel (1981); Castillo (2022); Inglehart (2015); Lipset (1960); Lipset and Rokkan (1967); Goot and Reid (1984); Inglehart (2015); Inglehart and Norris (2000); Campbell et al. (1960); Duverger (1955); Alvarez (1990); Rinaldo (2013*b*); Mahmood (2011); Deeb (2011)

⁵⁶Welter (1966); Baker (1991; 1984); Cott (1987; 1977); McGerr (1990); Hall (1979); Wolff, Davidoff and Hall (1987); Gleadle (2000); Gleadle and Richardson (2016)

⁵⁷Cowman (2010); McGerr (1990)

⁵⁸Baker (1984); McGerr (1990)

years to come. Voluntarism, community service, and the exercise of moral authority were integral to women's involvement in the abolitionist and temperance movements in the US. Moreover, women's demands for suffrage were also grounded in the values of spirituality and moral purity that women would bring to the public sphere. Rather than obviating the private-public and moral-material divide between women and men, suffragists framed their demand for a larger political role for women in a language that subverted, yet reinforced these divisions. At this point, "the female vote was often thought to be anti-saloon, verging on prohibitionist, and closely linked to [...] the Republican Party."⁵⁹ In the years that followed, the Republican Party sustained women's growing political consciousness through women's clubs. These clubs provided a happy medium ground where women could continue their political engagement through traditional women's organizations, skirting the stigma associated with party politics.⁶⁰

Like the Republican Party in the US, the British Conservative Party mixed social events and canvassing to draw women into political spaces. The Party established a voluntary canvassing organization—the Primrose League—in 1883, which was remarkably successful in mobilizing women to take part in conservative politics. Some women did hold leadership positions, yet, most of their duties were in the realm of non-electoral social work and back-end clerical work. Like it had done with Republican women in the US, this turn to socially constructed women's roles helped break down barriers between the personal and the political, cementing associational political cultures across classes, and urban and rural habitations.

The examples of the US and the UK show that women's active participation in political parties was enabled through a non-confrontational approach where women framed themselves as possessing distinct yet complementary political styles. When women did get the right to vote, they did not issue a sharp challenge to the political elite as many of the entrenched powerful had feared. Sometimes, this could be to the detriment of parties that had actively promoted women's suffrage. Weimar Germany provides one of the starkest examples of this phenomenon. Like the US and the UK, German women won the right to vote in the aftermath of World War I. Leading up to the war, political parties had been split on the issue of women's suffrage. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) had campaigned vociferously for female inclusion, while right-wing and conservative parties had opposed this. Going into the 1920 election, women constituted the majority of the electorate and it was widely surmised that the socialists would have the most to gain from suffrage expansion. Yet, when results were announced, the SPD learnt that women had voted for the very parties opposing their inclusion.⁶¹ What explains this puzzle? Notwithstanding their initial opposition to suffrage expansion, the right wing was able to swing women to their side through women's religious groups and re-framing political participation as a national duty to safeguard the German family and nation from the communist threat.

Similar to advanced Western democracies, countries in the Global South also exhibit

⁵⁹Teele (2018:108)

⁶⁰Rymph (2006)

⁶¹Scheck (2004); Sneeringer (2003:27)

maternalism and gendered public cultures, which significantly influence how women are perceived, how they shape their political identities, and how they advocate for greater political participation and roles in their respective regions.

In addition to Hinduism and Christianity, charity and service are highly prized qualities in Islam. In fact, the act of giving alms, *zakat*, is considered one of Islam's five pillars. With the rise of political Islam, religion has increasingly been viewed as providing a moral compass through which to structure political and social interactions. Religiously conservative parties have advocated for a greater role for Islamic principles in determining legal frameworks and policies. In the case of women, political Islam encourages them to "exit the public sphere and [...] to stay at home."⁶² In doing so, political Islam consecrates biological differences and makes it a basis for the gendered separation of the private and public spheres.

But despite this assignment of the public sphere to men, women in several Islamic countries—Turkey, Indonesia, and Lebanon, to name a few—have entered political spaces for partisan causes. In Indonesia, the religiously conservative Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) ranks among Indonesia's top three parties in terms of nominating women in legislative elections.⁶³ Turkey's ruling Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) claims that with a membership of 4.7 million, its women's wing (the AKP-KK) is "the largest women's organization in the world."⁶⁴ The wing's contributions to the AKP's electoral efforts have been widely praised by party elite like Erdoğan who commended their outreach towards women voters and their families.

What explains these apparent contradictions? A closer and critical examination shows that like *sewa* in India, women's participation in these contexts is enabled—and restricted—through negotiations with patriarchal structures. Women in the PKS needed express permission from their husbands or families to enter the political sphere which could be curtailed if gatekeepers felt that women were falling behind in their domestic obligations. Moreover, the decision to contest an election was made by an all-male party leadership in consultation with women's families, particularly husbands who were often PKS politicians too. Women had little say in this process and nominees felt unable to decline out of a sense of duty towards the party.⁶⁵ The party also directs women's activism towards issues thought to be close to women, viz., education, health, and morality, reinforcing women's traditional roles in public spaces too.⁶⁶

Similarly in Turkey, women's extensive engagement with the AKP has been restricted to outreach among women that ratifies the social construction of women's traditional roles. In the run-up to local elections held in 2019, Erdoğan instructed women "to visit every town, every neighborhood, every street and make sure to knock at every door" so that there was "no woman whom they didn't reach and win her heart."⁶⁷ Yet of the 1,297 mayoral candidates

⁶²Badran (2013:112)

⁶³Prihatini (2018)

⁶⁴Çavdar (2022:69)

⁶⁵Rofhani and Fuad (2021); Kabullah and Fajri (2021)

⁶⁶Rinaldo (2013*a*)

⁶⁷Çavdar (2022)

that the AKP announced, only 24 were women, corresponding to 1.85%.⁶⁸ Moreover, the AKP-KK's outreach among women relies extensively on creating informal networks which then engage women in a wide range of activities. Like *seva*, these include women-only social service events, religious education, focus on family issues as well as recreational activities, and finally political mobilization.⁶⁹

1.6 What do women gain from *seva*?

What are the implications of political *seva* for women's agency? Feminist scholarship has long puzzled over the motivations of women who participate in the favor of parties or movements that seemingly constrain women's role in the public sphere. Here, agency is embodied in acts of resistance by an autonomous self against the weight of custom, tradition or other obstacles.⁷⁰ But what about women whose consciousness is shaped by conservative traditions? Here, Mahmood (2004) argues that women in non-liberal contexts, whose sense of self may be shaped by prevailing social arrangements, may yet exert control over their lives. Agency then is not necessarily resistance, but a capacity for action "enabled and created and enabled by specific relations of subordination."⁷¹ In a similar vein, Sen (1982) argues that agency can be defined as the ability to make and pursue choices one has reason to value. A person's social and cultural contexts shape the goals they pick for themselves. Agency is then reflected in the work and they impose upon their "thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being in order to attain a state of being."⁷²

What do women gain from *seva* in politics? This depends on women's background and political goals. For women without political antecedents and no plans of running for election or holding a party position, *seva* offers a means of entering public spaces, a break from the chores of domesticity, and an opportunity to associate with other women sharing similar values and worldviews. For politically ambitious women, *seva* helped create public identities as social workers striving for the betterment of their communities. It also enhanced civic skills, and expanded women's networks to bring them closer to structures of social and political power. Crucially, women imparting *seva* in the public sphere do so from a position of power: candidates depend on them during elections, and women—and sometimes men—approach them for help in filling forms, obtaining government identification cards, making claims, and resolving domestic and community disputes. This is in sharp contrast to *seva* in the private sphere, where women are at the bottom of the hierarchy. This reversal of power dynamics between the private and public sphere, access to power structures, and ability to get things done for others allows women to acquire greater agency through political *seva*.

⁶⁸Hürriyet (2019)

⁶⁹Çavdar (2022)

⁷⁰Mahmood (2004:8)

⁷¹Mahmood (2004:29)

⁷²Mahmood (2004)

But because *seva* does not challenge patriarchal conventions or notions of gender roles, agency stemming from this is concentrated within women's social and political circles with limited spillover into the private sphere, at least in the short run. Women continued to set store by social constructions of womanhood, femininity, and propriety that were sometimes necessary to cast aside to get ahead in politics. Activists in both parties were united in criticizing their parties for not nominating them during elections, but women in the BJP were more likely to profess greater party loyalty and lower ambition, potentially limiting their political ambitions.

1.7 Data and methods

My research design and data collection strategies are centered on the concept of triangulation. Tarrow (2004) has characterized triangulation as “the research strategy that [...] best embodies the strategy of combining quantitative and qualitative methods—the triangulation of different methods on the same problem.” Triangulating between a range of data collection strategies and methods was imperative for this study. There were two key reasons for this need. First, I was working with three sets of respondents: “active women”—politicians and party activists—responsible for mobilizing women, and their target population—female citizens who they sought to build personal and partisan links. But because members of this target population were oftentimes unable to exit private spaces of their own volition, I needed to interview a third set of respondents—male gatekeepers. In each case, I had to adopt different ways of obtaining access, as I discuss in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Second, these interactions were geared towards distinct objectives. I based my theory-building on conversations with party activists and mobilizers about the origins of their political and partisan engagement, and how they sought to mobilize women. But to test this theory, and understand the effectiveness of these approaches, I needed to speak to women who had not yet been mobilized and men in the house who would inevitably mediate their participation.

This logic of partitioning my research into two threads based on their distinct objectives of theory-building and theory-testing structures the choice of methods and analysis in this book. In each case, I use the set of methods best suited to the problem at hand. Theory-building draws on deep insights from a range of qualitative methods including ethnography, shadowing, participant observation, interviews and focus group discussions conducted over a (non-continuous) span of three years. This rich qualitative data informs my approach towards theory-testing for which I conducted additional primary data collection using surveys and experiments with (1) 128 party activists, (2) 1,457 pairs of women and men from the same household, and (3) an original computational text analysis of nearly 500,000 tweets issued by the BJP and the INC.

The rise of the BJP as a potent political force across most of northern, central, western, and to some extent, eastern India meant there were a large number of states where I could situate my fieldwork. I started narrowing it down to potential sites after examining trends in female turnout in these locations. States where female turnout had already been high had

not experienced much growth. Consequently, I turned my attention to the *rate of change* in turnout. To be sure, turnout is an imperfect indicator of active participation. However, my interlocutors among the party elite in New Delhi, many of whom had contested elections and had considerable experience with ground-level mobilization, were unanimous in their assessment that higher turnout was a function of partisan engagement and the role of local politicians and activists in bringing women out of the house. Based on this, I focused on states that had observed extensive increases in women's turnout and vote choice for the BJP. These included states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh.

At the same time, to understand the BJP's effectiveness in mobilizing women, I needed to understand how other parties were tackling this question. I needed a foil to the BJP. Even though the INC has suffered several reversals since 2014, it was still the only other national alternative to the BJP with whom it has a deep ideological divergence. The BJP believes in a majoritarian Hindu state, while the present-day INC is ostensibly secular.⁷³ Apart from their outlook on religion, there is a class and caste divide between the two parties. Unlike the BJP's elite associations, the INC, owing to its origins as a vehicle for Indian independence, has been considered an "umbrella party" drawing support from all classes for much of its existence. In terms of organizational structure, the INC's once robust institutions have eroded since the personalization of power in the hands of Indira Gandhi during the 1970s. Currently, the INC's success has largely been predicated upon individual networks and ground-level outreach of strong regional leaders.⁷⁴ On the other hand, the BJP is a cadre-based party that is part of the larger Hindu nationalist movement headed by the RSS and as such draws upon a large cadre of ideologically motivated men and women.

At the time of starting my fieldwork in November 2019, I considered two states where the BJP and the INC were relatively evenly matched, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Moreover, both states would pass through a cycle of assembly elections between November-December 2018 and national elections during April-May 2019. Consequently, I began my preliminary fieldwork in both these states. Qualitative and ethnographic work was essential to understand the foundations of visible partisan engagement. Like the exchange of cash, alcohol, or private benefits for votes, it is commonly believed that participation in rallies can be bought, and those who attend may not have any intrinsic identification with the party. Rather, they are given food, refreshments, and often money to compensate for their time. There is of course some truth to this; attendees in party events did admit to receiving one or more of these incentives. On at least one instance, women complained that the tea, *samosa* and fifty rupees they received at the end of an hour-long meeting was too little a reimbursement.

The mobilization of women is a far harder undertaking. Unlike men, who do not face private or social barriers to their participation, women need an enabling environment. As described in Section 1.5 religious and conservative parties have either directly—or indirectly

⁷³Critics of the INC have cried foul because of its involvement in anti-Sikh riots of 1984, and claimed that the INC indulges in a cynical form of secularism with an eye on "minority (Muslim) appeasement."

⁷⁴Since 2014, many of these leaders have been co-opted by the BJP. At the moment of writing this, as many as eight BJP chief ministers in states across India were formerly with the INC.

through associations—have invested in the political socialization of women, bringing politics into women's daily lives with voluntarism, social events and quotidian engagement.⁷⁵ These politics by other means ameliorated women's—and as critically, men's—misgivings about political parties. In the same way, female party activists in India expended considerable political labor to socialize women, and not in the least, their families, to the idea of women stepping out of the home. This process of socialization took longer than what the window of electoral politics afforded. Consequently, my ethnographic fieldwork with mobilizers and citizens led me to conclude that what parties do between elections is as important, if not more so, for women's ability to enter political spaces. In fact, the links that party women built during non-electoral times were vital to their ability to send, what Lekha called a “bus full of women”, to rallies and other events where the party wanted a large turnout.

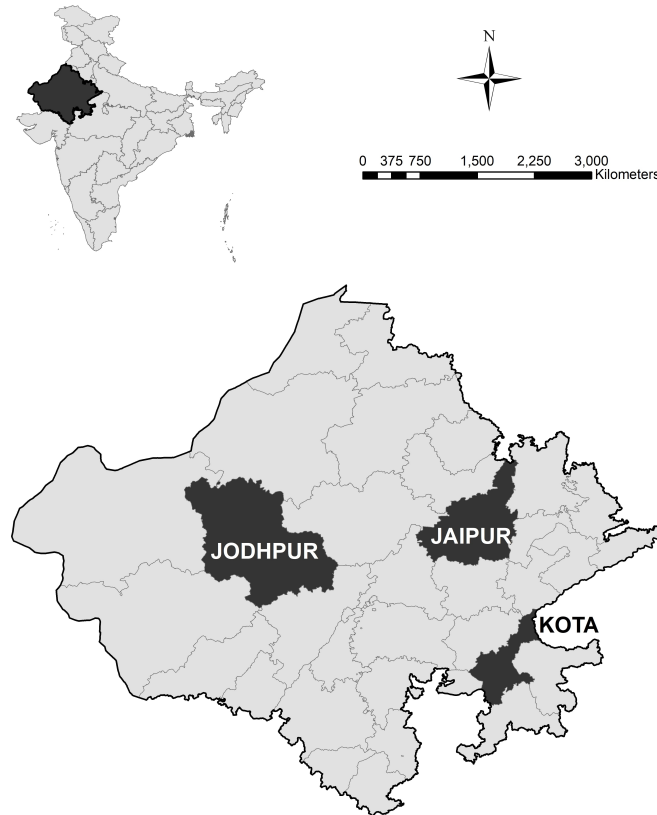
The initial stages of my fieldwork intersected with state- and national-level elections, so I was able to closely examine electoral rhetoric and mobilization. During these elections, I shadowed two candidates from the BJP and one from the INC during their day-to-day campaigns. In addition, I attended election campaigns and public meetings, rallies, canvassing sessions, and door-to-door campaigns. Election campaigns were conducted at a frenetic pace, so these times were ideal for participant observation but not interviews or conversations with party workers which needed a more leisurely ambience. I interviewed citizens, journalists, and other media personnel during these campaigns to understand how voters perceived partisan mobilization, as also to build a network of key informants for more in-depth qualitative data collection that I undertook after the din of elections had died down and people had more time on their hands. Moreover, when conducting fieldwork during elections, people were liable to suspect I was covertly working for a political party despite my assurances to the contrary.⁷⁶

Non-electoral times can also be sites of political action and contestation (Cammett and Issar 2010), but party activists and citizens were much more relaxed when not facing looming election deadlines. During these times, I joined party activists during religious and social service events, cultural programs, sit-in demonstrations, protest marches and rallies, membership drives, closed meetings, public meetings, welcome and felicitation programs, birthdays, day outings, training camps, and branch meetings of the RSS called *shakhas*. In informal settings, as well as in open and semi-structured interviews, I conversed with women activists about what motivated them to join politics, the origins of their partisan attachments, the obstacles they had faced, how they had been able to negotiate time and permission for their political work, and how they sought to engage with other women. When feasible, I also spoke with male family members to understand how they had contributed in enabling women to enter the political realm. My interlocutors were distributed across several levels

⁷⁵For Britain, see, for instance, Pugh (1988); Robb (1942); Maguire (1998); Sheets (1986); Berthez\`ene and Gottlieb (2018); Cowman (2010); for the US, see Rymph (2006); Cott (1994; 1977); Baker (1991); McGerr (1990); for Lebanon, Deeb (2011); for Indonesia, Rinaldo (2013*a*); and for Israel, Ben Shitrit (2016).

⁷⁶One evening, when visiting a family whose house had caved into the ground, an elderly man mistook me for a politician who had not responded to his entreaties for help over the last five years, and yet had the gall to ask for votes during election time.

Figure 1.4: Location of study districts within Rajasthan and India



of the party hierarchy. Some were founding members of women's wings, others were elected representatives or office-bearers at the national-, state-, district-, block-, *mandal*-, ward-, or booth-levels. Some were actively seeking opportunities to contest elections, but many others did not seek any official position or harbor any political ambition for themselves.

To reach activists, I used a respondent-driven method based on a combination of top-down and ground-level strategies. I began by spending time at the national headquarters of the BJP and the INC in New Delhi to introduce myself to high-level leaders. Based on this acquaintance, I was able to obtain references to state- and district-level party activists, and through them, to lower-level party cadre. I complemented this with re-contacting ground level party activists I had met during election campaigns, obtaining references from party offices and key informants, and forging acquaintances at party events. These conversations and interviews, along with shadowing and participant observation served to evaluate each party's outlook towards channeling women in the public sphere, and how this is reflected among ground-level activists.

The costs of conducting ethnographic work were high, both in terms of arranging logistics and resources. In addition, obtaining buy-in, building networks, and maintaining contact with informants and respondents across the national headquarters, two states, and multiple

districts took considerable time. After four months of fieldwork across Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, I decided to focus on Rajasthan, where I had been able to build strong networks across multiple stakeholders. Moreover, Rajasthan is one of the few states where the BJP and INC are evenly matched. In fact, since 1993, the two parties have taken turns to govern the state, and this trend continued in the 2018 assembly elections to the state legislature where the incumbent BJP lost to the INC. Thus, Rajasthan's political environment helped me focus on just the BJP and the INC, rather than divide it across regional parties whose outreach could have affected either or both of these parties' mobilization efforts.

The central evidence for my argument in India is based on primary data collected through qualitative methods, surveys and experiments conducted in Rajasthan, along with computational text analysis of social media posts and speeches, supplemented with secondary data from national and cross-national surveys. Within Rajasthan, I focus on three districts, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Kota. These districts correspond to the three largest urban centers in the state, as well as distinct administrative divisions (*prants*) of the RSS. As can be seen in Figure 1.4, these districts ensure adequate geographic coverage and collectively span an area of about 15,142 square miles, about the size of Switzerland. Furthermore an approximate 8.6 million people reside in these districts. In relative terms, this would be the 100th most populous country with 0.11% of the world's population. Traditionally, the RSS' organizational ability has been strongest in Kota, part of the Chittor division (*prant*) where the BJP stalwart, Lal Krishna Advani, had been stationed as a propagandist (*pracharak*). This was followed by Jaipur and finally Jodhpur, the constituency of the current Chief Minister from the INC, Ashok Gehlot.

Quantitative data collection was sandwiched between two Covid waves—Delta and Omicron—so health and safety considerations were paramount. I filed for local institutional review with Ashoka University and the implementing partner, Morsel Research and Development. In addition, I informed the district and sub-district administration and municipal authorities. Finally, enumerators adhered to COVID-19 appropriate behavior at all times, including training, travel, respondent screening, and interviewing.

1.8 Chapter outline

The next chapter provides the background for my theory on the BJP's use of *seva* in driving women's mobilization. It is dedicated to describing *seva*, my independent variable. This entails a perspectival shift where I expand the prevailing interpretation of *seva* from one of tangible services rendered to citizens—as it is perceived in much current scholarship—to a gendered norm that helps bridge women's private and political spheres.⁷⁷ I illustrate its changing meanings over the years and how it is at the heart of the politics of Hindu nationalism that has virtually co-opted the concept from other secular parties.

Chapter 3 presents a theory of women's norm-compliant mobilization. Here, I illustrate how the gendered separation of public and private spheres perpetuates women's traditional

⁷⁷Thachil (2014); Bussell (2019)

domestic roles and concomitant exclusion from politics through a self-sustaining equilibrium enforced through the high costs of public sanction and private coercion. This leaves two routes to mobilize women: normative change and norm-compliant mobilization frames. However, normative change is inconsistent with the traditional family structures underpinning the ideologies of religiously conservative parties. Hence, such parties will prefer to mobilize women through norm-compliant frames like *seva* that reduce the costs of women's public engagement.

Chapters 4 and 5 test the theory in contemporary India. Chapter 4 focuses on establishing partisan differences in mobilization methods and rhetoric. I triangulate evidence from qualitative interviews, primary surveys, conjoint experiments with party workers and text analysis of social media to show that female party activists affiliated with the BJP are far more likely than other parties like the Indian National Congress (INC) to use *seva* to frame politics, engage with citizens, and recruit workers. The INC, on the other hand, has focused on raising women's voices through a rights-based approach as well as protests on programmatic women-centric concerns like rising prices of essential commodities, and women's safety and security.

Next, Chapter 5 analyzes the effectiveness of these mobilization frames in (a) incentivizing women to enter public spaces, and (b) relaxing men's gatekeeping roles. Using a set of survey and conjoint experiments administered to men and women within the same household, I show that women express a greater proclivity to attend political events when framed as ostensibly non-contentious *seva* vis-à-vis than neutral or antagonistic terms such as public meetings or protests. Crucially, men are more permissive of this form of non-antagonist participation—even more so than women—indicating how *seva* can unlock men's gatekeeping roles within the house. Furthermore, when tracing mechanisms for this, I find women to be more sensitive to other men's preferences—even when the men in question are not family members—than they are to preferences of other women, showing the operation of patriarchal norms in public political spaces.

Chapter 6 extends the argument to a wider set of historical and contemporary cases. Using data from the World Values Survey, I show how conservative parties have traditionally faced a gender disadvantage among women compared to men. However, this disadvantage reduces for religiously conservative parties suggesting that religion or the norms invoked by religion can incentivize women to engage with these parties—or reduce the costs of women's participation—to equalize participation rates across genders. Finally, using a range of country-level case studies I demonstrate how religious and conservative parties across across Asia, Europe, and the Americas have leveraged the tools of religion and social norms akin to *seva* to mobilize women into the public sphere.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the implications of norm-compliant mobilization for questions of gender equity and women's agency. In a pivot from seeking agency in acts of resistance—by which metric, *seva* should hardly be transformative—I argue that agency lies in the ability to pursue goals one has reason to value. In this paradigm, *seva* helps women in the BJP gain a modicum of agency in the public sphere. But there are limits to this agency; women in the BJP are relatively less inclined to openly display political ambition and seek

office.

This last chapter also draws deeper lessons for democratization by highlighting an important but understudied tension between political engagement and democratic deepening. Much empirical research implicitly assumes greater inclusion and participation to be positively associated with democratic health. Yet the Indian case of democratic backsliding amidst rising participation belies this. This book shows that the answer to this apparent paradox can be found in the increased deployment of traditional norms like *seva* as a mobilization strategy. Because *seva* does not antagonize existing power structures and focuses on citizens' obligations towards the state, it preempts assertive forms of citizenship and engagement like making claims and seeking accountability that are features of robust democracies. Thus, through a broader emphasis on non-antagonistic forms of inclusion and participation, I shed light on the micro-foundations of democratic backsliding in the world's largest democracy.

Chapter 2

Seva: A Conceptual and Cultural History

Seva is a polysemous concept, and as such, lives many lives in India’s social, political, and cultural imaginations. In its most general form, *seva* refers to service. Contemporary colloquial usage may lead to *seva* being used for a range of activities. For instance, upon walking into a barbershop, you may be asked, “What is the *seva* I can do for you today?” When fretting at a train station, you may hear an announcement apologizing for delays in services. You may even be expected to thank a bureaucrat who just rendered you a service by helping you access state services. These, however, do not capture the true essence of *seva*, which is one of voluntarism and selflessness, the act of giving without requiring—and even, expecting—anything in return.

In this chapter, I examine the concept of *seva* and its moral underpinnings as it applies to exchange-based relations between individuals, entities, and organizations. I start by conceptualizing *seva* in its ideal state as a selfless but relational gift. I then trace its evolution from a specific practice of worship and relationship with divinity to its role in reorganizing the Hindu religion and consolidating Hindu society during the colonial era. Throughout this process, I highlight how *seva* has been critical to the rise of the Hindu right, and how existing Hindu nationalist organizations employ a pliable view of *seva* as a means to lay the moral groundwork for their operations and winning over hearts and minds of constituents who may be initially resistant to their overtures.

In addition to describing individual and organizational relations, *seva* is also a gendered concept. In India, cultural constructs of ideal women are based on their aptitude for domestic service. I show how the experience of colonialism and the subsequent freedom struggle led to an expansion in the vocabulary of *seva*. Under the leadership of Gandhi, *seva*—the very ideal of domesticity—became a route into the public sphere while still remaining within the confines of morality.

2.1 *Seva*: A conceptual overview

Seva has often been linked to the concepts of a gift and *dana* or charitable giving. The origins of *seva* do lie in ideas of charity and devotion, and often its outward manifestation is one of charitable giving. This giving can take several forms and be directed toward multiple beneficiaries. For instance, *seva* can be operationalized as service towards God; towards one's teacher or *Guru* (religious or spiritual preceptor); towards one's family and in-laws; towards society; or even towards an individual. With this multiplicity in targets, the forms that *seva* can take are equally flexible. People may contribute to whatever they deem as worthy causes by volunteering their physical, intellectual or emotional labor; technical and managerial expertise; time; or even donating land and capital. These outward manifestations of *seva* do resemble gifts and charity, yet the internal motivations for *seva* can diverge from gift-giving or charity, forging critical differences between these concepts.

In his seminal work on gifts in pre-modern societies, Mauss (1925) theorized that a gift could not be not freely given since it embodied the essence of the giver. Inspired by the Maoris, Mauss called this essence of spirit a *hau*. To replenish a giver's *hau*, the recipient had to reciprocate with a second gift. This idea of reciprocity was central to a gift and formed the basis of exchange in these societies. This exchange in turn created the edifice upon which individuals could be connected to a larger society.¹ A gift is thus reciprocal and relational.

However, several modern and pre-modern societies do not consider reciprocity to be fundamental to gifting. The Indian custom of *dana* refers to an offering made to a temple, deity, mendicant, or even to members of subordinate groups. At face value, *dana* can uplift both the recipient and the giver and can often be considered similar to a gift. The recipient gains a positive utility from the exchange, both from the gift and from being chosen to receive it. At the same time, the donor earns a spiritual reward, *punya*, from their meritorious actions which can be used after this (or subsequent) lifetimes to attain *moksha*. *Moksha*, or salvation, is the ultimate aim of a soul in Hindu scripture.

Yet, at its core, *dana* is tilted away from reciprocity. Originally conceived as a form of charity from dominant upper castes to lower-caste subordinates, *dana* was a route for donors to make spiritual gains. But the channel to spiritual rewards could be blocked and the power of the gift broken if receivers could reciprocate. Moreover, accepting a gift from subordinate group members could dilute the reward and interfere with the status hierarchy.² Thus, cultural domination was cemented in stratified societies by foreclosing reciprocity. In addition, *dana* could be contaminated and its spiritual reward diluted if the donor was motivated by self-interest. Effective *dana* did not contain expectations of reward or reciprocity.³ Thus, a true act of *dana* is neither reciprocal nor relational. Indeed, in a metaphysical sense, it is a way to liberate oneself from the bonds of material and relational life.⁴

¹Mauss (1925); Bourdieu and Bourdieu (1977); Yan (2020)

²Vatuk and Sylvia (1971)

³Parry (1986); Vatuk and Sylvia (1971); Heesterman (1964); Yan (2020); Raheja (1988)

⁴Parry (1986); Bornstein (2012)

There is another aspect of *dana* that complicates the giving and receiving of gifts. A gift to a temple, deity, or mendicant was often motivated by personal gain or the desire to cleanse oneself spiritually. Beneficiaries should therefore be suspicious of *dana* since it could embody the donor's sins and transfer them to the recipient. *Dana* was therefore inherently paradoxical: it threatened to forge interdependence, but reciprocity was forbidden. The only solution was then to endlessly keep passing the gift and its "evil spirit" on. As opposed to the beneficial *hau*, this evil spirit could also be a double-edged sword threatening to impale its creator. To successfully pass on this spirit, a donor had to find a worthy recipient. This placed potential donors in a quandary: a person prepared to accept a gift "is almost by definition unworthy to receive," and the most deserving person can be the one most unwilling to receive the gift.⁵

Is this perspective towards gifts unique to Indian settings? Anthropologists find this to be far from true. In fact, Malinowski (1922) whose scholarship on the gift predated Mauss (1925), did not consider reciprocity as a foundation for building social ties. Later, Derrida (1992)'s description of a real gift matched certain characteristics and was congruent to some *dana* by arguing that the only real gift is one that can be neither identified nor returned. In fact, the very acknowledgment of a gift makes it no longer a gift.⁶ Indeed Laidlaw (2000) argues that all world religions have a notion of the non-obligatory pure gift.

The concept of *seva* overlaps with those of a gift and *dana*, yet is distinct from both. The Maussian gift is reciprocal and relational; *dana* is neither. Where does *seva* lie along this spectrum? In its ideal state, *seva* borrows from the non-reciprocity of *dana*, and the relational character of the Maussian gift. Like *dana* and unlike a gift, a true act of *seva* is selfless without an expectation of reciprocity, or a desire for material or spiritual gain. An expectation of a return would reorient the act of giving into an unrequited loan, rendering it undesirable and unwelcome in the eyes of the recipient.

But akin to Mauss' conception of a gift, and unlike *dana*, *seva* is explicitly relational. In fact, the root words, "*saha*" (together with) and "*eva*" (that/them too) that constitute *seva* translate into "being together with the other."⁷ It thus invokes a commitment to devotion and togetherness with God, and empathy with fellow beings across social, economic and other hierarchies. In this sense *seva* is a manifestation of love, as *dana* is an expression of charity or obligation.⁸ It is possible that *seva* can be an obligation—or at least an expectation—in certain familial relationships, but I reserve this section to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of these concepts, rather than how they are operationalized in specific contexts.

⁵Parry (1986)

⁶The ultimate gift, for Derrida, is the gift of time.

⁷Sengupta (2022); Suhrud (2020)

⁸Juergensmeyer and McMahon (1998a)

2.2 The evolution of *seva*

Dana and *seva* are related concepts and both stem from a larger ethic of *dharma*, which is core to the Hindu religion. As a concept, *dharma*—like *seva* as we shall see later—is polysemous and has been the subject of much scholarly debate. In fact, the editor of a volume of essays on *dharma*, writes, “Unfortunately, no one is quite sure what *dharma* is... Each of the scholars... saw a different part of the elephant of *dharma*—the tail, the trunk, the legs—yet we all agreed that the elephant did exist”.⁹ Although varying by context, most common interpretations of *dharma* refer to religion or duty. But more generally, *dharma* describes a moral framework undergirding principles for leading a righteous life. Because *dharma* sets greater store on normative standards of conduct rather than prescriptive rituals, it supports some interpretations of Hinduism as a “way of life.”

Dana and *seva* are both living traditions, in that they have been imagined and practiced differently over the course of their long lifetimes. In most texts, *dana* and *seva* emerge as an ideal that one is enjoined to strive toward and not necessarily a practical descriptive of action. The first written mentions of *dana* date back to the *Rig Veda*, about 1000 BC, one of the earliest holy texts in Hinduism. Here, *dana* is described in terms of gifts bequeathed by kings and royals to God through priests in gratitude for successful campaigns, or anticipation of future success. At this time, *dana* was seen through the lens of exchange and the individual incentives were self-evident in gift-giving.¹⁰ However, by 400 BC, the notion of spiritual merit in exchange for gift-giving had become a significant part of gift-giving. By this time, other religions like Buddhism had also inculcated charitable practices of donating material wealth or food in exchange for spiritual gains. It is however not easy to determine whether the evolution of *dana* was a consequence of interactions between different religions, or an independent development as a result of changing social norms.¹¹ Ideas of selflessness as a motivator for human actions had also gained considerable shape and form by this time as is evidenced by the doctrine of *nishkaam karma*, or selfless action, in the Mahabharata and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Towards the end of the *Gita*, Krishna propounds on the nature of a true gift: a gift is pure “if it is given at a good time and place, to a fit recipient who cannot give anything in return”.¹² As a normative standard of conduct, *dana* is extensively written upon in legalistic texts, and is considered a form of philanthropy suitable for the degenerate and disorderly fourth age of mankind, the Kali Yuga.^{13,14}

Although the tradition of *seva* by some accounts is as “old as Hinduism itself,” it was

⁹O’Flaherty and Derrett (1978:xiv)

¹⁰Thapar (2000)

¹¹Thapar (2000)

¹²Eck (2013:369)

¹³Parry (1986); Ilchman, Katz and Queen (1998)

¹⁴Each of four ages in mankind was characterized by a different course of action appropriate for accumulating credit and attaining salvation: meditation and austerities in the *Satya Yuga*, divine metaphysical knowledge in the *Dvapara Yuga*, performing a sacrifice in the *Treta Yuga*, followed by charitable giving in the *Kali Yuga*.

superseded by *dana* as an ideal for living a righteous life for most of its history.¹⁵ *Seva*'s emergence to prominence began in the 12th century CE with the *Bhakti* movement of religious reform. *Bhakti* poets and mystics sought to wean Hinduism from its reliance on scriptures, priests, and rituals. Instead, they emphasized an unmediated and individualistic relationship with the divine that transcended traditional barriers segmenting people to specific forms of religious practice based on caste, class, or gender.

How would one worship God if it is not through the specialized knowledge of priests? Here, *Bhakti* poets emphasized personal devotion as the cornerstone of an intimate relationship with God characterized by unmitigated service. Indeed, most etymologies of the word *bhakti* contain references to service. For instance, in some analyses, *bhakti* comprises the root word *bhaj* (to love) and the suffix *kti* (service), with the meaning of the suffix being dominant. As a result, *bhakti* means the action of service, or *seva*. Here, loving God is incomplete without the act of service.¹⁶ In other instances, *bhakti* is a state of mind produced through love and service where one can merge oneself with God.

At this time, the key differences between *dana* and *seva* as forms of religious practice lay not only in the form that they took—*dana* primarily comprised of material donations while actions of service were emblematic of *seva*—but also in the motivations and emotions undergirding these acts. *Seva* was a reflexive and spontaneous act of love whereas *dana* was an expression of obligation. Transforming the landscape of *karmic* rewards from material donations to sacrificing time and bodily effort also had the effect of democratizing the path to salvation. The materiality of *dana* privileged the economically advantaged but the expressive aspect of service emphasized intentions, gestures, and acts which were hardly the domain of the rich. Moreover, because of the expressive nature of *bhakti* or devotion, spontaneous acts of service and giving are held in higher esteem than planned, practiced, and possibly strategic displays of giving.¹⁷ Initial manifestations of *seva* comprised of giving time and menial duties to the maintenance of temple deities. During the *Bhakti* movement, devotees started expressing their love to God through gifts, and *seva* became the dominant means of expressing religious dedication.¹⁸ Other targets of devotion and service were *gurus* who often encouraged their followers to serve society as a means of serving them.

The *Bhakti* movement had a profound influence on Indian philanthropic thought and beliefs. Pioneered by the Alvars and Nayanars, groups of poets and saints who were devoted to the Gods Vishnu and Shiva, the message of the *Bhakti* movement spread from Tamil Nadu in the south to most parts of India between the 12th and 18th centuries CE. By advocating the upliftment of lower castes and outcasts, the renunciation of idolatry, monotheism (by advocating for a single personal but not universal God), preaching in the vernacular unlike the classical and alienating Sanskrit, and teaching that people did not need priestly guidance or even scriptures to attain salvation, the *Bhakti* movement created a strong agenda to reform Hindu society and religious practice. Moreover, the movement's leaders preached against the

¹⁵Patel (2007b)

¹⁶Dasgupta (1949:351)

¹⁷Bornstein (2012)

¹⁸Juergensmeyer and McMahon (1998b:267)

subjugation of women, although their views on this subject were more ambiguous compared to their unequivocal attack on caste. Some sects continued to think of women as temptresses men had to guard themselves against, while others acknowledged them as equal to men in “purely spiritual terms” and admitted them to their inner ranks of disciples.¹⁹

The *Bhakti* movement’s emphasis on equality was revolutionary for a religion and social structure that had been tightly controlled by Brahminical ideals and hierarchies. Given this break from the past, it would not be unexpected to observe the effect of these changed beliefs on religious practice and social reform. However, several scholars including Heimsath (1964) and Desai (1977) claim the movement could only have a muted impact. Speculating about the causes for this, Desai (1977) cites four reasons. Since the *Bhakti* movement was more effective in advocating religious equality, social reform was only a peripheral outcome. Moreover, Desai (1977) claimed its appeal was emotional rather than rational and it lacked a constructive alternative arrangement for Indian society and economy. A final reason was logistical in that the movement was far too decentralized and consequently unable to build an organizational base to put its vision into action. Later, in an interview with Charles Heimsath, W.B. Patwardhan blamed the inherent pacifism of *Bhakti* saints who did not relish conflict and contest.²⁰ Yet, there was perhaps a deeper reason for the failure of the *Bhakti* movement in transforming religious practice, a reason that had to do with the very aims and objectives of Hinduism itself. Hinduism held that drawing the self away from worldly concerns was imperative to find release from the circle of life and death. Heimsath (1964:34) considered that this focus on detachment as a route to individual salvation led Hindus to neglect the larger social good.

As a consequence, the dominant form of religious giving in India till the 18th century CE continued to be based on traditional notions of *dana* and *seva*. Many of these were driven by elites and—despite the direction of selflessness—motivated by accumulating social prestige or at the very least, spiritual credit. In a study based in the city of Surat in Western India, Haynes (1987:340) finds that merchants (*sheths*) built wells, temples, resthouses, and sponsored festivals and educational institutions. Yet, these donors most commonly viewed their gifts as acts of propitiation or service to their deities and as deeds by which they could hope to acquire merit. There were economic and reputational benefits too. Acts of generosity established merchants’ reputations as persons committed to religious values and confirmed their status as guild members and trustworthy businessmen. Gifts to the ruling elite inside and outside the city cemented their political influence and helped smooth relations in times of crisis. Consequently, private philanthropic acts connected elites to the political elite, and their community, and were “symbolic of [their] power, status and legitimacy”.²¹

It would however be amiss to think that *all* benefits from charity or service were corralled by individual donors. Donations by elites had a symbolic role in developing vertical solidarities within the community and relieving class tensions and deprivation. Moreover, excessive

¹⁹Heimsath (1964)

²⁰Heimsath (1964:34)

²¹Watt (2005:68)

outward displays of charity could imperil their reputation for piety and morality, which in turn could compromise their reputation for creditworthiness.²² But overall, pre-colonial and colonial philanthropic practice within Hinduism was decentralized, individualistic, and often motivated by individual reward.

This landscape of pacificism and isolated spiritual seeking was appropriate with the prevailing organizational structure of Hinduism. At this time, Hinduism had been conceived as a “juxtaposition of flexible religious sects” with pluralistic beliefs and traditions rather than an organized religion with a single God, prophet, founder, holy book, symbol, or center.²³ This allowed the Hindu umbrella to subsume different sects with often contradictory practices. However, this pacifist and laidback arrangement received a rude shock with the advent of colonialism and Christianity in ways that it had not experienced during Mughal rule.

Mughal rule in India was more assimilative compared to the British colonial project. The Mughals did not have to repatriate their surplus, and most rulers, with the possible exception of Aurangzeb, did not interfere in Hindu religion or practices. Several Mughals had Hindu wives and employed Hindus in their courts as ministers, poets, and astrologers. Others developed an eclectic imperial ideology drawing from rituals and symbols rooted in pre-Islamic Iranian and Indo-Muslim traditions.²⁴ Some patronized Sanskrit in their courts,²⁵ and studied and translated religious texts. Indeed, Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, was the first to translate the *Upanishads*, sacred Hindu texts, from Sanskrit to Persian, and in an attempt to unite Hindu and Islamic mystic strands, speculated that the *Upanishads* were the primordial version of the revealed *Quran* in his introduction to his translation.²⁶ Aurangzeb too, a much-reviled figure in Hindu nationalist circles for his (re)imposition of *jiziya*, a tax on non-Muslim subjects in lieu of military service, and demolishing Hindu places of worship, built more temples than he razed.

British rule, on the other hand, was India’s first experience with a modern state that in addition to the extraction and repatriation of surplus, sought to change indigenous religious and cultural practices. Considering colonialism a civilizing mission, the British in India—and in England—were struck by institutions like caste and untouchability. Of particular concern was the status of women, particularly in the spheres of education, age of consent and marriage, polygamy, widow education, and the practice of *sati* or widow burning. The spotlight shone on these customs they considered primitive and regressive had a profoundly unsettling effect on a section of Indian nationalist and religious leaders. Facing religious conversions by Christian missionaries among subjugated castes and tribes, as well as within the home, Hindus were forced to take up the mantle of social reform on their own.²⁷ Indeed

²²Watt (2005)

²³Thapar (1985; 1996)

²⁴Copland et al. (2013)

²⁵Truschke (2016)

²⁶Dalmia and Faruqui (2014); Faruqui (2012)

²⁷Sarkar (1999a:1695) discusses a case in which a minor husband and wife converted to Christianity despite the objections of family elders in Kolkata in 1845.

“the fear of the Christian missionary has been the beginning of much social wisdom among us,” remarked the editor of the *Indian Social Reformer*.²⁸ The proportion of Christians in India did double from 0.73% in 1881 to 1.5% in 1921,²⁹ but it would be amiss to let the bogey of conversion claim the entire credit for the impetus of social reform.

Conversion was hardly the only goal that Christian missionaries were working towards. At least as important were their efforts, often supported by the state, in imparting Western education.³⁰ Consequently, certain categories of Indians, those who had a high social standing and could afford Western education, were exposed to radically different ideas from those prevailing within their societies—and often families. Many of them were fascinated by Western notions of liberalism and rationality and admired Britain for its remarkable scientific, technical, legal, and social achievements. Some members of this intelligentsia, upon looking inward, started questioning particularly egregious practices within prevailing Hindu society. But despite their affinity with the West, members of this intelligentsia also regarded indiscriminate reform—particularly through legal routes—and religious conversions as a threat.³¹ Rather than making a clean break with the past that could jeopardize their own social standing, they were inclined to adopt a more moderate route, that of reforming and reinterpreting religion to cleanse it of its ills, thereby saving it.

The stage was now set for Hinduism to stage its response to colonialism and Christianity. This response took the form of Hindu social reform movements. Some organizations that were at the forefront of the movement included the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Divine Life Society, the Swaminarayan movement, the Ramakrishna Mission, and the Servants of India Society among several others. These movements engineered themselves as centralized and hierarchical organizations (*sangathanas*) led by teachers or spiritual leaders (*gurus*) featuring congregational worship.³² Some Islamic sects also attempted internal reforms, notably the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* that started in northern India and later spread to the eastern part of the country, but the focus of this book will be on Hinduism, which was also the sphere experiencing the most fervent activity.³³

Sangathanas and *gurus* were not a colonial invention; Hinduism has had a litany of sects (*sampradayas*) and religious leaders over its history. Yet there was something distinct about the colonial-era *sangathanas* and *gurus*. Previously, sects had formed around temple towns with the relatively narrow purpose of nurturing particular Hindu traditions or denouncing others to posit a more legible and inclusive set of practices. The modern *sangathana* derived its name from the Sanskrit prefix *sam*, ‘together’, and the verbal root *ghat*, ‘to form or mould’, leading to a Sanskritic term, *sanghatan*, meaning ‘organization, formation, constitution,

²⁸Porterfield (1998)

²⁹Commissioner (1922; 1883)

³⁰Sarkar and Sarkar (2008); Heimsath (1964)

³¹Jaffrelot (2007:7)

³²Thapar (1985); Patel (2007a;b; 2010); Zavos et al. (2012)

³³See for instance, (Jones 1989; Pearson 2008; Khan 1967)

composition’,³⁴ as also ‘mobilization’ and ‘integration’.³⁵ In its more general Hindi form, *sangathan* is translated as ‘(the act or process of) organization (or an organized body or system or society),’³⁶ or ‘association.’³⁷ In a review of religious studies literature, Zavos (2000) finds little evidence to indicate that *sangathan*, *per se*, was a significant feature of Hinduism before the revivalists made it so.

Where then did the revivalists find the inspiration for their modernization project? They did not have to look far for this. Introspecting about why Indian—and by extension Hindu—society had been subjugated to Muslim invaders and Christian colonizers, the revivalists concluded that the root of this problem could be traced to a lack of organization within the Hindu religion and society. The apparent success of Muslim and Christian proselytization efforts also served to make Hindu revivalists aware of their weaknesses in the sphere of administration. Consequently, all they had to do was to borrow the organizational tools of these monotheistic Abrahamic religions. The modern *sangathan* modeled itself on the Christian tradition of building a congregation around a church, but instead of an institution, the organization was built around a *guru*, who was considered an authentic interpreter of Hindu religion.³⁸ The *guru*’s role and persona also changed. The *guru* who emerged during the colonial period was often well-educated, male, from an upper caste group, and with prior experience as a teacher or educator. Although the *guru*’s reformatory mission was inclusive, most of their teachings and writings were directed towards the social and economic elite, i.e., followers shared descriptive characteristics with their teachers. Despite this, the relationship between teacher and student was one of dominance rather than friendship or equality, and the *guru*’s word was law.³⁹

These *sangathanas* and *gurus* had two main goals: cleansing Hinduism of regressive practices, and recovering national pride in the face of colonial ignominy. The initial *sangathanas* started as movements to reform Hindu society of invidious practices rooted in gender and caste-based discrimination. Although movements were mostly unified about the necessity of reforms for women, opinion was a little more divided about caste. For instance, the Brahma Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission abjured the caste system without qualification, the Arya Samaj opposed caste assignment upon birth rather than upon a notion of merit. Nonetheless, it is clear that most social reformers felt caste-based divisions were holding back Indian society from experiencing a national awakening. Indeed, one of the reasons why the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement rejects the caste system nearly one hundred years after the Brahma Samaj’s initial repudiation, at least in theory, is Savarkar (1923) contention that caste-induced social stratification weakened Hindu society from mounting a

³⁴<https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/sangathan>

³⁵<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/hindi-english/%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%82%E0%A4%98%E0%A4%9F%E0%A4%A8>

³⁶<https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/sangathan>

³⁷<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/hindi-english/%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%82%E0%A4%97%E0%A4%A0%E0%A4%A8>

³⁸Patel (2007*a*; *b*)

³⁹Patel (2007*a*; *b*); Copley (2000)

serious challenge to Muslim invaders and British colonizers. Savarkar (1923)'s articulation of this idea in the 20th century was hardly original, but when it was introduced as a large-scale strategy in the 18th- and 19th centuries, it marked a significant shift from the existing perspective of charity and social service as advancing the interests of an individual or a narrow social group to a wider set of beneficiaries cutting across castes and class.⁴⁰

However, the line between reform and revivalism was thin. The leaders of these *sangathanas* were not content merely with culling opprobrious customs; they also wanted to reinstate people's pride in their religion and country. This meant that not only did they have to rationalize reform measures, but they also had to do so without undermining people's faith. This they did by turning to the fundamental texts of Hinduism to show that the religion—in a veritable state of nature—was pristine and devoid of the opprobrious practices, which they claimed were later accretions. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahma Samaj in 1827, and one of the earliest social reformers, turned to the *Upanishads* to claim that polytheism and gender and caste-based discrimination were not intrinsic to the Hindu faith.⁴¹ Later organizations followed a similar template of reinterpreting religion but emphatically dialed up the revivalist component of their founding ideologies. For instance, Swami Dayanand Saraswati who established the Arya Samaj in 1875 leveraged the Vedas, the most ancient of Hindu scriptures, to proclaim ancient Indian society as more advanced than the West in spiritual, cultural, and social terms.⁴² Consequently, people only needed to harken back to the golden Vedic age to rediscover the true nature of Hindu religion and culture.⁴³

Hindu revivalism was as much a political project as it was a religious one. One of its central objectives—and critical to its appeal—was the re-invigoration of national pride in the face of colonial ignominy. Revivalist discourse provided the foundation for national awakening, but it could have tapered off without a lasting impact on Hindu society—just as the Bhakti movement before it—without an organizational backbone to propagate and implement the ideologies, teachings, and reforms conceptualized by the leaders of these movements. Here, the 18th and 19th-century social reformers found that the centralized congregational structure they had borrowed from Christianity and Islam could be leveraged towards social service (*seva*)-based upliftment efforts, which became the principal means of nation-building. Adherents of these *Seva*-based *sangathanas* organized discourses (*pravachanas*), congregational prayers (*satsangs*), and worked as volunteers (*sevaks*) to strengthen their community, religion, and country.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Watt (2005)

⁴¹The *Upanishads* are a set of philosophical-religious texts and are the most recent part of the Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.

⁴²Jaffrelot (2007:9)

⁴³The Arya Samaj, more so than many other organizations was set up as a counter to religious conversions from Hinduism to other religions. It devised a conversion practice (*shuddhi*) that had been missing in Hinduism to mirror the Muslim practice of *tabligh* or propagation. Similarly, its *sangathan* model had a Muslim equivalent in *tanzim* or community organization (Minault 1982:192–212).

⁴⁴Patel (2007a;b); Watt (2005)

By this time, there was a growing awareness among reformers and revivalists that the existing system of charitable giving to priests and religious institutions was inefficient and unproductive. With the Western world moving towards a system of professionalized philanthropy, where donors and organizations cared about the impact of their generosity, sought to coordinate efforts, and organized conferences dedicated to the cause of social work, the contrast with Indian practices could not be more palpable.⁴⁵ The overriding concern with moksha rendered Hindu charity too individualistic and idiosyncratic to permit it to have a concrete effect in improving aggregate social outcomes. By highlighting inefficiencies inherent to traditional forms of charity, reformers sought to reorganize traditional giving to one of “organized service to humankind”.⁴⁶ This helped shift people’s motivations behind *seva* from personal reward to “the betterment of the collectivity and the polity in this world”.⁴⁷ Thus, rather than focusing on attaining salvation in an indeterminate future, *seva* towards the nation and one’s fellow beings could provide a route to salvation, or even supersede it as a more worthy goal.⁴⁸

Underwriting this shift in emphasis was the intellectual contribution of one of the most influential figures of the revivalist and social service movements in the 19th century—Swami Vivekananda. A Hindu monk who founded the Ramakrishna Mission to further the teachings of his guru, the mystic Ramakrishna Paramhansa. With his speech at Chicago’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, Vivekananda was the face of Hinduism in the West. Yet, perhaps his most important legacy was in supplying the religious and philosophical foundation to substitute *dana* for *seva*, and more specifically, equating service towards fellow humans to service towards God. He accomplished this based on the non-dualistic philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta. According to Advaitin thought, all beings are considered to possess a soul, which is not individual, but part of Brahman, the Absolute. Since all living beings are manifestations of the Absolute, selfless service towards fellow beings was equivalent to serving oneself, and at the same time, to serve the Absolute. *Seva* can thus be understood as “a form of extreme empathy (the realization of oneness), which leads to salvation”.⁴⁹

To be sure, Vivekananda was not the only person to frame community service in the same category as serving the divine. Swami Akhandananda, Vivekananda’s brother-disciple (gurubhai) to Ramakrishna Paramhansa, developed this insight independently—or perhaps in concurrence with Vivekananda—based on his travel in Gujarat and acquaintance with an Ayurvedic (traditional) healer and philanthropist Jhandu Bhat, who is said to be fond of exclaiming, “I do not hanker after that heaven of Vaikuntha where I may not have an opportunity to serve or do good to a man”.^{50,51} Vivekananda and Akhandananda’s re-framing of

⁴⁵Watt (2005:32)

⁴⁶Beckerlegge (2000*a*; 2006*b*)

⁴⁷Watt (2005)

⁴⁸Sarkar (1997); Patel (2007*a*); Kanungo (2012).

⁴⁹Pagani (2013:182)

⁵⁰Beckerlegge (2000*b*:65)

⁵¹Swami Gambhirananda, in his account of the Ramakrishna Mission, challenges the possibility of independent action by Akhandananda, claiming that his focus on service emerged after a correspondence with

seva may also have been influenced by the work of the Swaminarayan movement which undertook humanitarian work during famines and other disasters. But it is largely Vivekananda's thesis of "practical Vedanta" that operationalized the teachings of the Advaita Vedanta in ways that inspired revivalist *sangathanas* and *sevaks* to join a national awakening project corresponding to religious and spiritual emancipation.

What were the forms in which this modern concept of *seva* was operationalized? The new forms of *seva* were more broad-based than the previous acts of individual giving observed among elites. Hindu *sangathans* helped set up schools, universities, and hospitals and provided humanitarian services during natural disasters and religious fairs. Importantly, they adopted decentralized methods of fundraising where people could contribute in whichever way they could, whether it be through cash, kind, or labor. This enabled previously under-represented sections of society, including women, to enter public life and contribute towards nation-building.⁵² Some of the most visible social service activities were undertaken during large-scale fairs (melas), pilgrimages, and disaster relief during floods, famines, the plague, as well as the influenza epidemic of 1918. Others were more mundane like distributing water to travelers in third-class rail compartments, helping the elderly, and educating people about animal welfare. But perhaps the most crucial sustained contributions of the reformers were in the fields of education and health with an emphasis on uplifting the poor and "Depressed classes".⁵³ As part of this, reformers established reading rooms, libraries, schools, colleges, universities, medical camps, dispensaries, and hospitals. The Theosophical Society in particular encouraged students to share their knowledge with women within their homes. At the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of *seva* transformed from acts connoting individual, pious acts of homage and worship towards a more worldly service of society mediated by religious revivalists and specialized social service organizations.

As De Tocqueville (1835) argued in the case of America, associational experiences can have a fundamental effect on the inner, moral life of those who participate. They can build a sense of fellow feeling and efficacy among members, and a capacity to trust and influence others.⁵⁴ These *seva*-based voluntary activities constituted an important form of nation-building leading.⁵⁵ Relief work, humanitarian assistance, and social upliftment activities helped imbue a sense of common cause and forge strong horizontal ties—a form of bonding social capital—between *sevaks*. In addition to this, leaders of these *sangathans* envisaged that *sevaks*' relief work among the poor and destitute and the Depressed classes would create solidarity, thereby bridging caste and class divides. Together, these bonding and bridging functions of selfless service towards the nation created a robust culture of active citizenship.

Vivekananda, and only with the express permission of Swami Brahmananda (Gambhirananda 1957:110) This is however challenged by Beckerlegge (2000b) who notes a trend of highlighting Vivekananda's and Brahmananda's contributions by the Ramakrishna order at the expense of other monks engaged in social service.

⁵²Watt (2005)

⁵³Watt (2005:3)

⁵⁴Rudolph (2000)

⁵⁵Watt (2005)

The attraction of active citizenship was powerful, and as the revivalist movements gained ground, a large number of people were able to enter public life by framing their participation as part of a higher cause of service towards their religion and community. Because the revivalist project was inherently political, participants could transition seamlessly from serving the cause of their religion to that of their country. The skills and knowledge they gained through their voluntary *seva* served them in good stead in the political realm. They were able to inform debate public issues, enhance civic awareness, increase publicity of their efforts, mobilize people, as well as organize and manage large-scale events. Thus, the culture of cooperation and sacrifice nurtured by *seva* constituted a “reservoir of latent political material that could be activated by Gandhi’s political style.”⁵⁶ Indeed, Watt (2005:180) speculates that a large number of students who took part in Gandhi’s mass campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s were likely exposed to *seva*-based activities.

Gandhi was raised in a household that was strongly influenced by the Bhakti movement and imbibed a strong sense of duties, obligations, service, and self-sacrifice from his mother.⁵⁷ Like Vivekananda, Gandhi was also influenced by Advaitin philosophy that he extended to provide a spiritual foundation to political life. Disagreeing with secular ideas of politics, Gandhi was convinced there could be no politics without religion. This did not mean prioritizing one religion over another—all religions revealed different facets of the same truth or God—but that religion formed a moral basis for politics, and indeed all life.⁵⁸

In his efforts at reconceptualizing Hinduism, Gandhi started where Vivekananda had stopped earlier. In fact, he was able to take it to a point where it became a cogent political philosophy, something that nobody was able to accomplish before him, or has since then. In summarizing Gandhi’s political logic, I draw upon Parekh (1989:103)’s admirably succinct recapitulation. Gandhi began with the postulation that a person’s central goal was attaining salvation. This could only take place if they could identify with—or share a sense of “extreme empathy”—with all living beings, but especially humans. This empathy could only be inculcated with universal love, which was the only means of identifying with all beings. Since *seva* was a manifestation of love, attempting universal love necessitated active, dedicated, and selfless service towards fellow beings. *Seva* did not only constitute acts of social service, but also fighting inequality and injustice which in the modern era necessitated *sevaks*, or indeed anyone else with salvific motivations, to enter the political arena. Consequently, politics was inseparable from religion, and religion culminated in *seva*. This however did not mean that religion could be reduced to *seva*; for Gandhi, *seva* “had a spiritual meaning and significance only when inspired by the search for *moksha*”.⁵⁹

For all his grounding of politics in religion, Gandhi was not a revivalist. Although Hinduism had a special place in his heart, Gandhi considered all religions to reveal different aspects of the same God, which for him, was the truth. Like the reformers and revivalists, Gandhi was critical of the worldly manifestations of Hindu practices: rituals, rites,

⁵⁶Brown (1974); Watt (2005:181)

⁵⁷Rudolph and Rudolph (1970:172), Gandhi (1999)

⁵⁸Lal (2013); Jacobsen (2018); Skaria (2019); Bhattacharjee (2019)

⁵⁹Parekh (1989:109)

pilgrimages, feeding cows (*gauseva*), and giving alms to Brahmins amongst others with the hope of earning spiritual merit. He did admire certain aspects of Hinduism, in particular its emphasis on simplicity, the spirit of *dharma* and *seva*, and feeling the pervasiveness of the divine. But unlike the revivalists, he did not glorify it or think there was a golden age. In fact, he criticized Hindu thought for failing to develop a theory of morality, for defining salvation in personal terms and its passivity, which he considered as critical factors underlying the Hindus' "spiritual selfishness" and negligence of worldly suffering.⁶⁰ Gandhi's masterful use of religious principles to frame politics as a moral activity and arena of service was remarkably successful in mobilizing people towards the cause of Indian nationalism. It also inspired leading capitalists and industrialists to contribute towards nation-building long after independence and after Gandhi's passing.⁶¹

But for all its impact in reformulating Hindu thought, and more importantly, practice, *seva* as conceptualized and propagated by revivalist *gurus* and *guru*-like figures of the Indian nationalist movement including Gandhi, was a paternalistic ethic that consolidated upper caste hegemony ostensibly for the greater cause of India's freedom from British rule.⁶² Initially referring to menial tasks performed by subordinate groups for the benefit of upper castes, the new conceptualization of *seva* reversed hierarchies by allowing *sevaks*, often upper-caste men, to occupy ostensibly inferior positions. Yet, because this *seva* was voluntary unlike the coercion forced upon oppressed castes, it was still the *sevaks* who were being empowered and developing agency in this relationship. It is with this in mind that Patel (2010) says, "it is the *sevaks* whose salvation Vivekananda is interested in and not that of the masses."

Bhimrao Ambedkar's critique of Gandhian *seva* emerged from a similar position.⁶³ Although Gandhi's antipathy to untouchability was well-known, he had never advocated dismantling the caste system—the root cause of social stratification, economic deprivation, and suffering of the subordinate castes. Compared to Ambedkar's radical jettisoning of caste, Gandhi was far more conservative, only urging for gradual, internal reform through his preferred device of *seva*. This led Ambedkar to argue that Gandhi's opposition to caste was skin-deep and a ploy to prevent fractures within Hindu society.^{64, 65} The problem with the Gandhian perspective on *seva* was that it attributed human suffering to past *karma*, a failing in personal conduct in a previous life, rather than the environment into which the Depressed Classes were born.⁶⁶ This incorrect diagnosis led to an incorrect solution: blaming the

⁶⁰Parekh (1989:104)

⁶¹Juergensmeyer and McMahon (1998*a*)

⁶²See for instance, Ambedkar (1946); Srivatsan (2014); Patel (2010).

⁶³Ambedkar (1946)

⁶⁴Jaffrelot (2003); D. N. (1991); Srivatsan (2014)

⁶⁵It is possible that Gandhi's position on caste shifted with time. Although this view is not universally shared, Biswas (2018) argues Gandhi came closer to Ambedkar's views towards the end of his life. For a counter perspective, see Singh (2014). Ambedkar himself stuck to his position that Gandhi's interest in uplift was confined to drawing non-caste Hindus to the Congress, obtaining their support for his movement of *Swaraj*, and keeping them within the Hindu fold.

⁶⁶Srivatsan (2014:165)

individual for their past sins and working to foster personal virtue through “temperance, gymnasium, co-operation, libraries, schools, etc.”⁶⁷

Ambedkar could have been more receptive to *seva* had it not been grounded in pushing a Hindu upper-caste ethic and preserving their hegemony. As a member of the Anti-Untouchable League that had been constituted by Gandhi after the Poona Pact, Ambedkar suggested a three-point social service program: (1) a rural civic rights campaign; (2) an urban economic equality movement; and (3) social mixing.⁶⁸ Crucially, the *sevaks* of choice in this program would be Dalits themselves, leading to greater group solidarity. He thus re-imagined the relationship between *sevak* and beneficiary as one of comradeship and mutual respect rather than pity and condescension.⁶⁹ These requests were declined, Ambedkar resigned, and the Anti Untouchability League was renamed Harijan Sevak Sangh.

2.3 Hindu nationalism and *seva*

The late 19th and early 20th century saw the awakening of a national consciousness which greatly pleased the Congress as well as more orthodox Hindu revivalists. But, in addition, two developments greatly alarmed the latter but also gave them a fulcrum to direct their efforts: an increasing assertion by lower castes and Dalits, as well as Muslims.⁷⁰ Muslim assertion, in particular, was a *bete noire* for the revivalists since the consequences were there for them to see. With the formation of the Muslim League in 1906, Indian Muslims had a platform to represent their particular interests directly to the British. From 1906 to 1909, the League, in a series of delegations, asked for a number of concessions, some of which were granted by the British government. The most objectionable among these—for those concerned about the lack of similar Hindu representation—was the setting up of separate electorates along religious lines in the Indian Councils Act 1909, also called the Morley-Minto Reforms after the Viceroy and Secretary of State.⁷¹ Much to the consternation of the nascent Hindu nationalist movement, the Congress refused to set itself up as a Hindu counterpoint to the Muslim League and avowedly sought to continue to represent the interests of all Indians, irrespective of religion.

Matters reached a head with the end of World War 1 when a group of Indian Muslims launched the Khilafat Movement to protect the authority of the Sultan of the Ottoman

⁶⁷Moon (1990:134)

⁶⁸In 1932, the British government’s Communal Award, based on Ambedkar’s arguments, assigned separate electorates to the depressed classes. Although Gandhi’s position on caste may have changed over the course of his lifetime (Biswas 2018), he bitterly opposed this decision, even embarking on a fast unto death. Writing to Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime Minister at that time, Gandhi said that the Award would “destroy Hinduism” (Pyarelal (1932) in D. N. (1991)). This battle of wills forced Ambedkar to relinquish separate electorates in favor of a system of joint electorates with reserved seats.

⁶⁹Srivatsan (2006); Ciotti (2012)

⁷⁰Zavos (2000); Alder (2015)

⁷¹Before that, the British had also decided to recruit a greater number of Muslims in the administration Jaffreot (2007:38).

Empire, who as the Caliph, was also the supreme religious and political leader of all Sunni Muslims. Gandhi and several leaders of the Congress threw their weight behind the movement as it opposed the Allied forces and the British. This led to an unprecedented level of Muslim mobilization which had the collateral effect of a severe escalation in Hindu-Muslim conflict, including in parts of India that had been relatively bereft of religious and communal violence like in Kerala, where Moplahs (Muslim peasants) rose against their Hindu landlords.

Although the rebellion might have been rooted in class-based conflict and power relations between landlords and peasants, rather than religion *per se*, orthodox Hindus felt that the need for Hindu consolidation had never been greater. The first concrete step they took in this direction was to start a movement across several cities to create Hindu Sabhas (Councils) as pressure groups to promote Hindu interests. The principal aim of these Sabhas was to ‘protect the interests of the Hindus by stimulating in them the feelings of self-respect, self-help, and mutual co-operation so that by a combined effort there would be some chance of promoting the moral, intellectual, social and material welfare of the individuals of which the nation is composed’.⁷² Lala Lal Chand, a prominent leader of the Hindu Sabha movement and an affiliate of the Arya Samaj, exhorted the Hindu community to unite as the only means of promoting its interests. In a series of articles in 1909, he tore into the Hindu community for its disinterest in politics, which, he argued, had resulted in claims of other communities taking precedence. The blame for this, according to him, lay on the shoulders of the Congress, which “makes the Hindu forget that he is a Hindu and tends to swamp his communal individuality into an Indian ideal, thus making him break with all his past traditions and past glory.”⁷³

This stinging allegation portrays the Congress as an organization committed to a secular idea of India, but the truth is far less clear than Lal Chand’s polemic would suggest. At this time, the Congress had a number of factions jostling with each other to define the direction of the nationalist movement. The more revivalist and conservative factions also advocated for Hindu consolidation. For instance, leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Aurobindo Ghosh favored the use of religious symbols, myths, and festivals to mobilize Hindus even if it came at the cost of alienating other communities. Tilak, in particular, used public spaces as arenas to forge collective identity by organizing communal celebrations of religious (Ganpati) festivals and commemorations of Hindu Kings like Shivaji who had resisted Mughal rule.⁷⁴ Since the Ganpati festival was also organized as a counterpoint to the Muharram procession organized by Muslims, it aggravated Hindu-Muslim relations, culminating in the Deccan riots.⁷⁵

Similarly, Madan Mohan Malviya, another socially conservative Congressman, who served as the President of the Congress four times during his lifetime, also founded the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (All India Hindu Grand Council) as an umbrella group to unite individual Hindu Sabhas, and act as a pressure group within the Congress. Like Tilak and

⁷²Zavos (1999)

⁷³Chand (1938)

⁷⁴Zavos (2000:72)

⁷⁵Hasan (1980:53)

Lal Chand, Malviya too was preoccupied with schemes to consolidate Hindus. Addressing the Mahasabha in 1922 in the wake of the Moplah rebellion, he deplored Hindu “weakness” and “degeneracy”.⁷⁶ The Hindu Mahasabha, like the revivalist organizations marching before it, reached the same conclusion—it would use *seva* to ameliorate the condition of poor Hindus, untouchables, and unite them with the rest of the community. The Mahasabha and its branches, with help from local elites, were able to raise five hundred thousand rupees to uplift lower caste groups and untouchables through education, initiation, purification, and service provision.⁷⁷

By the early 1920s, the Hindu nationalist movement had managed to find answers to several existential questions. It had found a reason to subsume Hindus’ diverging identities—“in terms of schools of philosophy, debilitating metaphysical propositions, castes and a surfeit of conventions masquerading as tradition”—into one overarching political identity.⁷⁸ Starting with the external British threat, Hindu nationalists had also found a second—and for them more pressing—enemy within, the Muslim community. Its targets of consolidation were also clear: non-caste Hindus who had been subjected to centuries of oppression and were increasingly responding to the overtures of Christian and Islamic missionaries and as such constituted a real threat in diminishing the Hindu population, or by aligning with groups other than caste Hindus. How would this consolidation occur? Here too, the answer was clear. The *seva-Sangathan* model had shown that there was a proliferation of *sevaks*, emissaries of caste Hindus, eager to take up the nationalist cause through service-based upliftment efforts. Moreover, contact between these emissaries and depressed communities, as well as associational activities would forge solidarity and a sense of linked fates between communities.

There were only two only questions that remained. The first related to the specifics of the overarching identity that the Hindu nationalists sought to create. It had to be wide enough to include the depressed classes, untouchables, and tribes, many of whom might not identify as Hindus, but also narrow enough to exclude the “other”. The second question also demanded a specific answer: who, or which organization, would spearhead this effort?

It is in this milieu that Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a freedom fighter who had spent several years in prison, provided the answer to the first question. In 1923, he published the defining document explicating the tenets of political Hinduism, which he called *Hindutva*, or Hindu-ness. The essence of Hindu identity, in Savarkar’s definition, rested on three pillars: a common nation (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*), and a common culture or civilization (*sanskriti*), which also included language and rituals.⁷⁹ Consequently, *Hindutva* is a territorial, ethnic, and cultural identity. These elements were not wholly original. The notions of sacred space and cultural homogeneity were common to most forms of romantic nationalism prevailing in the West, including that of Mazzini, whom Savarkar greatly admired. But this was the first time they were threaded together in a cohesive form in the Indian context.

⁷⁶Alder (2015:74)

⁷⁷Alder (2015:74)

⁷⁸Sharma (2011:155)

⁷⁹Savarkar (1923)

By combining ethnic identity with territoriality, Savarkar at once defined who was not a Hindu, as well as provide a conduit for those converting to other religions to return to the Hindu fold. For Savarkar, followers of religions whose holy sites or lands (*pitrubhoomi*) lay outside the “the area beyond the Indus river, between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean” could not be classified as Hindus. This meant that Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and other Hindu sects were assigned a Hindu identity even if they did not identify as such. Christians and Muslims on the other hand were thought to have potential “extraterritorial loyalties” as their “holy lands” were outside the territory of India, and they could not be counted as Hindus. However, if they gave up their beliefs, they could return to the Hindu fold.

On caste, Savarkar had somewhat paradoxical views, which were not completely incommensurate with the ideas of other Hindu nationalists, and even other leaders like Gandhi. One facet of his thoughts vehemently opposes the caste system for its role in creating divisions among Hindus. In a biography of Savarkar, Vikram Sampath translates one of his later writings:

One of the most important components of such injunctions of the past that we have blindly carried on and which deserves to be thrown in the dustbins of history is the rigid caste system. This system has vivisected our Hindu society into so many micro-fragments, forever at war with one another. From temples, streets, houses, jobs, and village councils, to institutions of law and legislature, it has only injected a specter of eternal conflict between two Hindus; weakened our unity and resolve to stand united against any external threats. It is one of the biggest impediments in the conception of a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation). The liberation and unification of countries across the world, be it America or Europe has been possible only by unshackling these false divisions between peoples. Why can a similar approach not be achieved in our nation?⁸⁰

Savarkar did practice what he preached, at least in part, by working to eliminate untouchability. But despite his grand proclamation of tossing caste into the “dustbins of history”, Savarkar did not wholly reject the caste system, and even tried to rationalize it as a “harmonious ordering system in which all components had a legitimate and valuable role.”⁸¹ In this respect, Savarkar, like Gandhi emphasized amelioration and gradual internal reform. Hence, for all his opposition, Savarkar’s antipathy seems to stem primarily from the rigidity of caste divisions impeding his cherished Hindu consolidation project.

This was one of the final pieces remaining to be incorporated into the Hindu nationalist toolbox. The only piece of the puzzle that eluded the movement was to find a person or organization that would assume the responsibility of creating an organization to undertake this task. Savarkar himself did not have the inclination for sustained *seva*-based duties although he campaign against untouchability through impassioned speeches and writing.⁸²

⁸⁰Savarkar. (N.d.) in Sampath (2019:489).

⁸¹Zavos (1999:74)

⁸²Sampath (2021)

Instead, he chose to situate himself squarely in the realm of politics, going on to head the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1930s. By this time, the Mahasabha was a fully-fledged political party, which had been excised from the Congress as it had become too radical for it to sustain.

A few years before the idea of *Hindutva* was crystallized by Savarkar, a young orphaned physician, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, was volunteering at a flood relief program organized by the Ramakrishna Mission in West Bengal. Hedgewar later joined the Congress, but quickly grew disillusioned with the increasing influence of Gandhian ideals of *ahimsa* or non-violence within the organization. Moreover, the Congress's non-sectarian approach was antithetical to Hedgewar's ideas of Hindu assertion, which included the use of physical force when necessary. Inspired by the idea of *Hindutva*, Hedgewar established the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 to consolidate and strengthen Hindu society through a *sangathanist* model. The aim of the RSS in 1925 was—and continues to be—to organize the whole of Hindu society. This was an ambitious goal: the RSS did not want to be a part of society, it wanted to represent society, and eventually organize the whole of society. Hence the organization was viewed as a microcosm of society.

How would this consolidation be achieved? To achieve this, the RSS established a system of *shakhas* that were modeled upon *akharas* or wrestling arenas. A *shakha* literally means a branch, and all *shakhas* were connected to the larger tree representing the RSS. The *shakhas* were based on pre-existing forms of athletic and spiritual organization. Initially referring to an academy for instruction in martial arts, specifically wrestling, the *akhara* system later came to be used as a means to organize religion when Adi Shankaracharya adopted *akharas* to prepare a class of warrior monks in the 8th century CE to fight against foreign invaders.

Activities in these RSS branches were carefully conceptualized with the overarching goal of Hindu consolidation. RSS members, or *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) wear a common uniform—white shirts, khaki pants (previously shorts), and black Gandhi caps (*topis*)—and take part in a common set of rituals and discussions, and physical activities designed to build community amongst its members. In addition to brotherhood—although other units of the *Sangh Parivar* have space for women or are exclusively for women, the RSS is exclusively for men—and comradeship, daily attendance at these RSS branches was indispensable for the “character-building process” necessary for consolidation.⁸³ There were two main constituents to character-building, at least in terms of how it was relevant for the RSS: building physical prowess, and ideological homogenization. Physical strength and masculine assertion were deemed necessary to defend oneself and other Hindus during conflict; hence there were physical exercises, games, and training in wielding long and heavy wooden sticks (*lathis*).⁸⁴ Yet, the goal of building physical strength would be left incomplete in the absence of moral training and ideological homogenization. Consequently, many of these games have a didactic component. Although some of these taught benign lessons for unity and organization, others

⁸³Andersen and Damle (2019)

⁸⁴The heavily Sanskritized Hindi—another tool to revive pride in India and in Hinduism—used in RSS branches refers to these sticks as *dands*.

were explicitly political in terms of their messages and gameplay.⁸⁵

The didactic messages transmitted through these physical activities were then reinforced and expanded upon through “intellectual” or *baudhik* sessions. Although the stated goal of these sessions was to inculcate values such as “fidelity, fortitude, honesty, obedience to superiors, hard work, personal discipline, the need for unity, heroism through heroes or heroic events in Indian history”,⁸⁶ in practice they were often a means of creating an alternative history through the selective retelling of historical facts, or deliberate obfuscation. As Tyagi (2022) notes,

“The *baudhik* sections in the *Sangh Parivar* schema deal explicitly with disseminating the ideology through sermons, stories, and preaching monologues. Oral recitations of the story would start with the ‘theme of the day’ and at the end usually asked the audience ‘what they learned from the story’ or ‘what the moral is’. The lessons are shown to exhibit hope, give space to righteous seeming anger, and/or provide closure. Young prospective trainees are encouraged to find a message in the stories and relate it to the nationalist cause.”

2.4 The RSS and *seva*

These activities within the RSS branches—that focus more on bonding than bridging—are a far cry from the idea of *seva* envisaged by the revivalists. Yet, *seva* has often been cited as a foundational pillar of the RSS.⁸⁷ Moreover, sympathetic, and sometimes hagiographic, accounts claim the organization as displaying a long and consistent tradition of selfless service.⁸⁸ The current organizing secretary, when describing the function of the Sangh, says

The *Sangh* speaks a language that everyone understands. It covers all dimensions of humanity, politics, economy, governance, issues of language, religion, social uplift—all are equal in importance. *Seva* or devotional service to the motherland is its core. Even the *Sarsangchalak* [RSS chief] is a humble and ordinary *swayam-sevak* [volunteer] dedicated to *seva*. That is how and why the RSS grows.

What is the basis, if any, for such a claim? Hedgewar’s involvement with Ramakrishna Mission-sponsored relief efforts in West Bengal is often cited as an inspiration for the founding of the RSS.⁸⁹ In 1926, the RSS’s first public activity was to manage crowds and maintain

⁸⁵Tyagi (2022); Vachani (2022); Menon (2010); Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (N.d.); Rashtra Sevika Samiti (N.d.)

⁸⁶Andersen and Damle (2019)

⁸⁷Bhattacharjee (2021)

⁸⁸See (Beckerlegge 2004)’s discussion on this. For sources within the *Sangh*, see Malkani (1980); Kelkar (2011); Vaidya (N.d.); Sharda (2018); Ambekar (2020).

⁸⁹Deshpande, Ramaswamy and Seshadri (1981)

public order during Ram Navami, a festival commemorating the Hindu god Ram.⁹⁰ Its subsequent efforts continued this thread of community policing by patrolling Hindu-dominated neighborhoods at times of religious unrest, and protecting Hindus during religious fairs and processions. Later, during India's partition, the RSS made a name for itself by assisting Hindu refugees across the border and guarding Hindu minority homes. By nature, these incidents were episodic and did not reveal a larger commitment toward *seva*.⁹¹

The RSS's relief work gained momentum after India's independence when the organization assisted victims of the Assam earthquake of 1950, the Punjab floods in 1955, the Tamil Nadu cyclone in 1955, the Anjar earthquake in 1956, and the Andhra Pradesh cyclone in 1977, the Bhuj earthquake in 2001, the Jammu and Kashmir floods in 2014, as well as Covid relief during 2021-2022.⁹² This tradition of providing emergency relief is often the most visible aspect of the RSS's work, not only among the public but also among other RSS members, who were quick to cite these incidents during interviews. But what was the motivation behind these efforts? Were they truly selfless, or were they driven by a larger agenda aiming at Hindu consolidation? This renewed focus on *seva* after independence was driven, in large part by a set of circumstances that threatened the very existence of the RSS.

In its early years, the RSS had steered clear from associating with political parties. An armed para-military organization, it was monitored closely by the British government. Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar, into whose hands Hedgewar had placed the reins of the RSS, was extremely risk averse. As a consequence, the RSS did not engage with the Congress, although some RSS members were also part of the Congress at an individual level.⁹³ Furthermore, neither did it take part in the freedom struggle, nor did it heed Savarkar's exhortations to support the Hindu Mahasabha. This last point was a subject of much frustration with Savarkar who sneered at the RSS' aversion to radical activity, "The epitaph on a Sangha Swayamsevak will be: 'He was born; he joined RSS; he died.'"⁹⁴

Golwalkar's aversion to risk may have been well founded from the perspective of organizational survival, but the RSS nonetheless wound up facing government ire, just that it was from the Indian government, and not the British. In January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a right-wing activist and once a close associate of Savarkar. Godse had been a member of the RSS in the past, and the organization was banned on suspicion of being involved in Gandhi's assassination. As Golwalkar feverishly lobbied to get the ban overturned, he realized that staying away from politics was not in the organization's best interests. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declined to turn a receptive ear, citing the RSS's role in fomenting unrest in several letters to Golwalkar. Eventually, Golwalkar turned to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Home Minister, who was more sympathetic to the Sangh's aims. He was able to repeal the ban, making the value of a powerful political ally apparent

⁹⁰Anderson and Damle (1987:35)

⁹¹Beckerlegge (2004)

⁹²Bhattacharjee (2019); Thachil (2014). Also interviews of RSS members with the author in Rajasthan and Delhi, 2019-2021.

⁹³Andersen (1972)

⁹⁴Anderson and Damle (1987:36)

to Golwalkar. The RSS's sense of security was however short-lived. With the passing of Patel in December 1950, the RSS lost its last line of defense. Fearing similar incidents in the future, Golwalkar deputed several propagandists (*pracharaks*) to collaborate with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a former Congress politician who had parted ways with the party due to his religiously and socially conservative views. Together, they established the Jana Sangh, which later evolved into the precursor of the BJP.

At the same time, Golwalkar doubled down on the RSS's *seva*-based activities. Golwalkar had been in charge of the RSS since 1940 and was profoundly influenced by Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission's philosophy of selfless service towards the poor. In 1936, he visited the Mission's headquarters to receive guidance from Swami Akhandananda, who with Vivekananda had pioneered the Order's use of service to humankind as a means to seeking salvation. However, Akhandananda passed away merely six months later, so Golwalkar returned to the RSS in 1938. Despite this apparent inclination towards spirituality and service, Golwalkar's first book, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* published in 1939, contains no mention of service.⁹⁵ Nor did he push the RSS towards a more service-oriented approach till the 1950s even though he had been at its helm for well over a decade.⁹⁶ Correspondingly, in Golwalkar's second book, *Bunch of Thoughts* published in 1966, he combines aspects of Vedantin non-dualism, with the Bhagavad Gita's doctrine of *nishkaam karma* or desire-less action to make a case for *seva* within the RSS. Accordingly, he says

If we take out the personal attachment from our action, the motive of personal enjoyment therein, then the various actions and their fruits do not affect us...
So, our philosophy says, do your work, do your duty in a selfless spirit.

What is the nature of this duty then? Continuing with the thread of non-dualism, Golwalkar recognizes, "Every man is a spark of the same Reality."⁹⁷ Here, he modifies what the Vedanta calls the "Absolute" and Gandhi calls "Truth" to the idea of "Reality" in a bid to make the target of duty a tangible "object of worship and service."⁹⁸ Drawing on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, he argues that although, their injunction to "Serve Man" or the whole of humanity was too wide a concept to be made a tractable object of service. Consequently, he employed the organicist idea of society as a body—a recurrent feature of RSS thought—comprising of different caste groups to argue that the Hindu nation, as described below, was the "living God" who was the real and tangible object of service for the RSS.

It is clear from the following description of the Almighty in *Purusha Sukta* wherein is stated that the sun and moon are His eyes, the stars and the skies are created from His *nabhi* (navel) and '*Brahmin* is the head, *King* the hands,

⁹⁵Golwalkar (1939)

⁹⁶Beckerlegge (2004)

⁹⁷Golwalkar (1966)

⁹⁸Golwalkar (1966)

Vaishya the thighs and *Shudra* the feet)’. This means that the people who have this fourfold arrangement, i.e., the Hindu People, is our God.

This organicist vision of society, in addition to defining an object of service, also implicitly defines what is *not* the target—those who do not adhere to the vision of society as explicated above. Hence, it is not only Savarkar (1923)’s territorial criterion of “holy land” that excludes followers of other faiths, but also Golwalkar (1966)’s organicist thought. Moreover, this organicist thought is rendered possible by an active reinforcement of caste-based differences as constitutive of, and even essential to, Hindu society. Thus, unlike Savarkar whose rhetoric includes the disintegration of caste, it is essential in Golwalkar’s philosophy in terms of defining the “Reality”, or the segment of society that is the object of service for the RSS. However, when uplifting this society through service, he argued, there should be no discrimination based on the beneficiary’s caste or religion:

This supreme vision of Godhead in society is the very core of our concept of ‘nation’ (...) That vision inspires us to look upon every individual in our society as a part of that Divine Whole. All individuals are therefore equally sacred and worthy of our service. Therefore any sense of discrimination amongst them is reprehensible. Thus, in our culture, the spirit of social service has been sublimated into worship of God (...) all our individual and family possessions, however abundant they may be, do not really belong to us. There (sic, they) are only the means to worship God in the form of society. Our whole life will then be an offering in the service of society.”⁹⁹

As Beckerlegge (2004) argues, this shift in emphasis towards *seva* was part of a larger strategic shift of the RSS to repatriate itself as an apolitical cultural and social service organization after its ban. Although Zavos (2000) characterizes “the mix of organizational work with a kind of social service” as an enduring feature of RSS activity, it is only after the 1950s, and with specific strategic ends in mind, that this mix swung towards social service. To this end, RSS volunteers and propagandists took part in a wider range of humanitarian and political activities including a *Satyagraha* movement to liberate the Portuguese colonies of Dadra and Nagar Haveli.¹⁰⁰ It is also during this time that the RSS began to highlight its non-sectarian approach towards relief by recounting occasions where it offered service to Muslims afflicted by disasters and instances when Muslims and Christians have supported its cause.¹⁰¹

A second mainstreaming strategy for the RSS was through cloaking the movement in the long shadow cast by Gandhi. Even though Gandhi was assassinated by a former RSS member, and Gandhi continues to be a figure of much vilification among the far-right for his views on Hindu-Muslim unity, these ideological barriers did not preclude the RSS from selectively

⁹⁹Golwalkar (1966)

¹⁰⁰Bhattacharjee (2019)

¹⁰¹Beckerlegge (2004:114)

appropriating Gandhi's ideas to portray themselves in a more positive light for public acceptability. One of the most significant attempts in this direction was Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's thesis on Integral Humanism. Upadhyaya was an RSS ideologue who was among the first propagandists to be drafted into political activity through the Jana Sangh. Integral Humanism, which was later adopted as the BJP's official doctrine, leveraged Gandhi's religious ethic in politics including his focus on *seva*, to craft a seemingly original Indian political system in response to the failures of capitalism and socialism. The pillars around which Upadhyaya's ideas were constructed were distinctly Gandhian in their origin. For instance, Gandhi's idea of universal upliftment, *sarvodaya*, was reframed as *antyyodaya*, or the upliftment of the poorest. Similarly, principles like *swadeshi* (encouraging Indian manufacturing and consumption) and *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) were also selectively appropriated to show that the Hindu nationalists were in agreement with Gandhi on issues of fundamental importance. Indeed, this was tantamount to "an ideological hijacking and a transplant designed to appropriate the authority of the Gandhian idiom."¹⁰² Furthermore, modern Hindu nationalist rhetoric has also started to mirror Gandhian discourse in terms of its argumentative structure and themes.¹⁰³

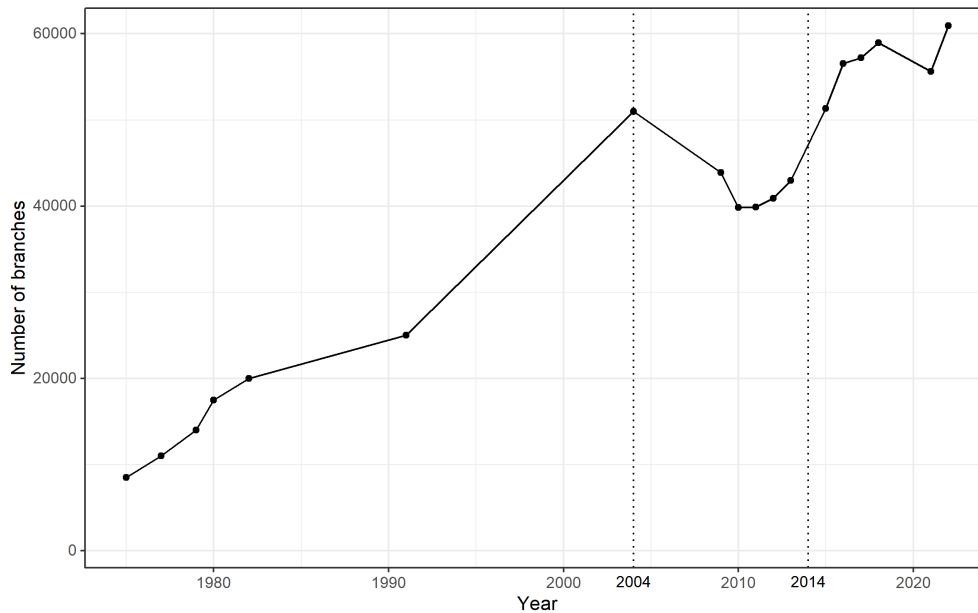
The RSS's appropriation of Gandhi did not stop with his ideas. During the early 1950s, in a bid to burnish the credentials of the RSS, Golwalkar dispatched a number of volunteers to assist prominent Gandhian Vinoba Bhave's *bhoodan*, or voluntary land redistribution, movement. Later, in 1973, Madhukar (Balasaheb) Deoras who succeeded Golwalkar as the RSS chief, guided the RSS into a more activist role. One of his first decisions was to support Jaiprakash Narayan's *Sampoorna Kranti*, or the Total Revolution movement. Narayan was a prominent Gandhian and sparked this social movement against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's misgovernance and declining standards of morality in public life. As the movement gained strength, Indira Gandhi assumed Emergency powers in 1975 and banned the RSS for the second time in its history. Deoras and a number of RSS leaders, including 186 of 1,356 *pracharaks*, were imprisoned. Like Golwalkar before him, Deoras petitioned Indira Gandhi to lift the ban, going as far as promising support to the government were this to be granted.¹⁰⁴ But despite prioritizing organizational survival over democracy, the Emergency marked a turning point in the RSS's history. It could now claim a concrete contribution to the Indian cause that it hitherto lacked by refusing to enter the freedom struggle. Second, its partnership with Gandhians based on an overlapping social work agenda legitimized the RSS in the eyes of the people, as well as other political parties, with whom it was able to forge coalitions in the coming years.

As is already apparent, Deoras was far more politically attuned than Golwalkar and played a vital role in mainstreaming the RSS. One of the key ways in which he turned the fortunes of the RSS around was by doubling down on Golwalkar's push towards social

¹⁰²Fox (1990:69–70), cited in Hansen (1999:85). Other attempts to do so include Mohan Bhagwat, the current RSS Chief, misquoting Gandhi, "In Mahatma Gandhiji's words, *Hindutva* [and not Hinduism] is a relentless pursuit for truth" (Bhagwat 2022:65).

¹⁰³Hansen (1999:247)

¹⁰⁴Jaffrelot (1999:274)

Figure 2.1: Growth in the number of RSS *shakhas* (local branches) over time

Note: This figure shows the number of RSS shakhas existing at the end of each year for which data was available. Data for 1975, 1977, and 1982 are from Basu et al. (1993:53); data for 1979, 1980, 1991, and 2004 are approximations from Andersen and Damle (2018:260). The remaining data are from RSS annual reports available on www.rss.org as of August 11, 2022. Data could not be found for other years. Vertical dotted lines represent the years 2004 and 2014. In 2004, the BJP-headed coalition government lost to the INC's coalition. In 2014, the BJP returned to power with a single majority, but as part of a coalition.

service by establishing the *seva vibhag*, or service division. This division, which contained affiliated organizations like Seva Bharti and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, was created with the explicit objective of winning the moral approval of subaltern groups through the provision of basic social services. The RSS has been considerably successful in these efforts. Going by their respective websites, currently, the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram runs 20,199 service projects spread across 13,886 locations; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) runs 115,043 *seva* activities. Vidya Bharati runs 13,067 formal educational projects, which consist of schools from the primary to the higher secondary levels and caters to nearly 3.5 million students across the country. In addition to this, it also runs 8,221 Ekal Vidyalayas (Single-teacher Schools) and 4,397 Sanskar Kendras (cultural centers). These social service efforts have helped the right wing to achieve wider legitimacy, but also expand its number of branches (*shakhas*) from 8,500 to 61,000 between 1975 and 2022. In addition, the RSS has been able to transfer the goodwill it had earned through its character-building and social service activities into electoral support for the BJP.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵Thachil (2014) and Chidambaram (2012)

However, notwithstanding these efforts at restoring the RSS's self-image, it has continued to face accusations of sectarianism in its social service provision, as well as attempting to monopolize and squeeze out other civil society players. For instance, a media report on relief activities being conducted in the Bhuj earthquake of 2001 describes RSS actors, with the backing of the BJP-led state government as monopolizing relief efforts, both in terms of resources and provision.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, RSS activists were alleged to establish relief camps in Hindu-dominated neighborhoods, and within temples as well as forcing Muslims to chant Hindu slogans as they queued up at community soup kitchens.¹⁰⁷

These tendencies of monopolizing the provision of social service have been exacerbated in recent years, especially during the COVID pandemic. At a time when most countries were easing regulations to allow outside aid and encouraging philanthropy through tax incentives, civil society players in India found themselves competing with a new government fund that offered higher tax write-offs, and allowed businesses to meet their compliance requirements, along with the possibility of earning the goodwill of the present dispensation. In addition to these, international entities also faced a change in FCRA (Foreign Contribution and Regulations Act) making it harder for them to transfer money to India. Right-wing social service organizations like Sewa International—the international arms of Seva Bharti—did not face any of these operational obstacles. This, critics argue, is a strategy to (a) prevent other entities from claiming credit, and (b) establish a monopoly in the humanitarian service provision, given the centrality of *seva* as a tool for Hindu consolidation and building a Hindu nation.¹⁰⁸

As practiced by the Hindu right-wing, critics may denounce *seva* as a strategic tool of Hindu consolidation and mobilization at best, and a self-serving cynical exercise that seeks to monopolize civil society and the humanitarian relief space at worst. As *seva* shifted from being an individualized path to salvation to an organizational strategy, there was an explicit expectation that *seva* would induce a sense of reciprocity on the part of the beneficiary. And indeed, the right wing has been remarkably successful in these attempts.¹⁰⁹ In a survey of villages with VKA activity, Thachil (2014) finds that although 87% of respondents did not actively reciprocate the service being rendered by Sangh activists, 53% felt a moral obligation to do so. This did not mean that they saw their reciprocity in electoral terms or organizational membership, but the most popular forms of reciprocity—attending VKA meetings and gifts of rice at VKA events—does suggest the effectiveness of *seva*-based strategies in thawing animosity, if not actually winning over hearts and minds. Moreover, even though villagers may have recognized organizations as strategic actors, they were nonetheless prepared to reward the patience and efforts of their ground-level activists.

This crucial difference between the organization and the activist was underlined during my fieldwork. In conversations with people availing Seva Bharti's services in Jaipur, it was clear that lower-caste beneficiaries did appreciate the effort made by ground-level activists

¹⁰⁶Shashikumar and Varghese (2001)

¹⁰⁷Bhattacharjee (2016); Shashikumar and Varghese (2001)

¹⁰⁸Srinath (2022); Trivedi (2021)

¹⁰⁹Thachil (2014); Chidambaram (2012)

who described their work in terms of community service, rather than Hindu consolidation, mobilization, or even the persuasion of lower castes. This disjuncture between the goal of the organization and activists' expressions of their role within it was also apparent in my interviews with BJP activists, who, like their counterparts in the explicitly social service wings of the Sangh Parivar, described their overarching motivations in terms of *seva*.

What motivates these avowedly self-constructed descriptions of organizational inspiration in terms of selfless service? And is this indeed selfless? And does this even matter? In this section, I will unpack RSS's relationship with *seva* to delineate what *seva* means to the organization as well as its foot soldiers, the volunteers. The dominant perspective on the role of *seva* within the RSS—in both academic and popular conceptions—examines *seva* through the lens of a tangible service—public or otherwise—rendered to needy targets in underserved areas or in times of natural disasters or even humanitarian crisis. This interpretation aligns with my conceptualization of *seva* as a non-reciprocal but associational gift at the beginning of this chapter. Yet, for a person or organization that imagines themselves as a *sevak* or a *seva-sangathan*, does there really need to be a clearly defined target for this associational role to happen? And if not, does this mean what they are indulging in is not *seva*? Does this lead us to suspend certain aspects of our definition? To be sure, this analysis is not meant to be an endorsement or even a defense of the RSS's perspective on service. It is undertaken in the spirit that it is only through a deeper understanding of the self-imaginaries of activists and organizations that one can come to terms with the true nature of changes taking place in Indian polity and society.

First, I deal with the argument that the political imagination of party activists within the right wing might be somewhat restricted to ideas of *seva* since they cannot identify with other forms of participation, or perhaps lack the means of doing so given their more conservative backgrounds. This argument is perhaps the easiest to reject. The Hindu right wing has been proficient in the use of similes, metaphors, and cultural idioms to communicate its political ideas, sometimes not in the best taste, but effective more often than not. In the 2014 election campaign, Modi played up his humble origins as a “chaiwala” or tea-seller, while derisively calling Rahul Gandhi, his principal opponent, a *shehzada*, a Muslim crown prince. In one word, he highlighted his opponent's status as a political scion with little innate merit and the Indian National Congress as a party biased towards Muslims. Similarly, during Modi's first term, Rahul Gandhi described the government's crony capitalistic tendencies as a “*suit-boot ki sarkar*”, a government for the rich. This jibe was countered by Arun Jaitley, the Finance Minister as a “*soojh boojh ki sarkar*” or a government of good sense. Similarly, in the run-up to the 2019 election, Modi called himself a *chowkidar*, a watchman who would protect the nation's borders after an air strike against a terrorist camp in Pakistani territory. Later in the campaign, Rahul Gandhi alleged a corruption scandal in aircraft procurement, and attacked Modi saying that “The watchman is a thief!” (*Chowkidar chor hai!*). Modi then turned the tables on this by running the “I, too, am a watchman!” (“*Main bhi chowkidar!*”) campaign. BJP members and supporters were encouraged to describe themselves as watchmen who would protect not only the borders of the nation, but also morals, money, cleanliness, and hygiene. At this point, many supporters of the BJP followed the example of Modi and his

ministers to add the prefix of *Chowkidar* to their names on Twitter.

It is not only political elites who use language to great effect. In an ethnographic account of Indian elections, Banerjee (2014) evocatively describes how citizens restate and manipulate complex political ideas using familiar idioms and metaphors as well as catchy neologisms and jokes. Moreover, Kaviraj (2010) argues that the quotidian—rather than scholarly—language of politics can be far more flexible in capturing popular perceptions. Consequently, it is unlikely that the *seva*-based language employed by the BJP and *Sangh Parivar* activists can be traced to a lack of political imagination on their side. Rather, *seva* is more likely employed willfully or because of a deeper identification with the concept by its ability to describe their political imaginary.

A second reason why BJP activists used *seva* extensively during conversations could be to disguise the baser connotations of their avocation.¹¹⁰ This is not far-fetched. After all, in a society that normatively values a certain morality in public life,¹¹¹ confessing an intrinsic interest in an amoral activity—especially so for women—before an unknown man (me) could hardly be considered a way to make a good impression. But, why was there variation across party lines? In other words, if women wanted to falsify their true motivations for reasons of social desirability, why would BJP activists use the *seva* norm more intensively than the INC? Moreover, it was not simply I who was noticing this. My team of research assistants—one woman and one man—were independently struck by this partisan variation in expression of motivation and activism. After one week of quantitative surveys coupled with informal conversations, sometimes culminating in lunch or dinner invitations, they remarked how their conversations with ground-level BJP activists were saturated with hues of *Hindutva* and *seva*. Finally, these differences persisted even as women grew accustomed to my presence at party events and gatherings.

More compelling reasons for BJP activists' reasons to describe their work in terms of *seva* are ideational spillovers from the *seva-sangathan* model of party organization. Inspired by Hindu revivalist and nationalist organizations, the BJP followed what Jaffrelot (1988) describes as a relatively original approach to party-building in the Indian context. Most Indian political parties, of which the Congress was the classic example, employed a model of party-building that co-opted local and regional elites or persons of influence and power. These elites would contest elections themselves, or sponsor candidates, forming several fiefs beneath the umbrella organization that was the Congress party. Myron Weiner who proposed this aggregative model described the Congress's mobilization strategy as "It does not mobilize; it aggregates."¹¹²

The BJP, or the Jana Sangh as it was called then, used a different strategy based on the

¹¹⁰Although a few women did depend on politics for their livelihood, for most it was an activity they had started pursuing after getting married and their children were old enough that they did not need to be looked after on a full-time basis. Indeed, as an activist told me, "Earlier, I had too many responsibilities to take care of to even think about doing anything outside the home, but now my children have jobs. So it was time for me to think of giving back to society."

¹¹¹Hansen (1999); Rudolph and Rudolph (1970)

¹¹²Weiner (1967:15)

RSS's mode of organization building. This strategy was also referred to as a *Sangathanist* model since it mirrored the structure of social reform organizations in the early 20th century. The key organizers within the RSS called *pracharaks*, or propagandists, were modeled on the Ramakrishna Mission's monks and the Servants of India Society's volunteers who emphasized selfless service and nation-building.¹¹³ The Mission's monks led celibate lives dedicated to spiritual upliftment, and those running the Mission's *seva* projects were called upon "to live as the lowest in the service of the nation".¹¹⁴ Members of the Servants of India Society took vows of poverty and a commitment to act as 'national missionaries'. In the same vein, RSS *pracharaks* are unmarried men who are enjoined to live simple lives to be most effective in their moral and organizational mission to consolidate Hindu society. The RSS's second tier of volunteers or *swayamsevaks* do not have similar injunctions placed upon them, but the values of "simplicity, discipline, and devotion to the national cause" are often valorized and sought to be inculcated.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the RSS sees itself as a "methodology" dedicated to "*vyakti nirman*", which it translates to "man-making."¹¹⁶ The term "man-making," which the RSS uses for the idea of character development or self-making is also prominent in Vivekananda's writings. For the RSS, it is only through "man-making" that "*rashtra nirman*" or nation-building can be performed. Consequently, the construction of what Alder (2018) calls an "ethical Hindu self" dedicated to selfless service is critical to the objective of the Hindu right.

Activist: Since childhood, we have been taught to inculcate good values (*sanskars*) and discipline. It is these [values] that unite the army. This is what helps us [RSS] when we help people during calamities. It helps us think beyond ourselves and about the nation. Thinking about the nation first, that is *seva*.

AC: How about people who are not in the RSS? Or in any NGOs? Can they do *seva* too?

Activist: Yes they can. But many NGOs are not motivated by patriotism. They have their own agenda. RSS teaches us to be nationalistic (*deshbhakt*) in our outlook, so if you can inculcate these values, that is also *seva*. Because you will be benefiting the nation by thinking like that.

Based on this discussion, we can see that two complementary forces build and sustain a *seva*-based identity construction for a ground-level activist within the Hindu nationalist project. The first of these is the nature of the work itself. For those engaged directly in the *Sangh Parivar*'s welfare projects such as a health center or a single-teacher school, it is a relatively simple matter to think about their work as social service, regardless of the larger strategic end that the organization may have devised.

Second, many of these practitioners receive little monetary compensation for their work and live in sparse accommodations of their own volition. Indeed, *Sangh* hagiographies as

¹¹³Watt (2005); Alder (2015); Patel (2010)

¹¹⁴Watt (2005); Watt and Mann (2011) in Alder (2015:60)

¹¹⁵Makarand Paranjpe in Sharda (2018)

¹¹⁶Compare ? with Bhagwat (2022:19).

well as somewhat more objective insider accounts are fond of recounting exemplars of this “simple lifestyle” despite reaching high-level positions.¹¹⁷ As a consequence, several ground-level activists in the RSS and the BJP were wont to extol the emotional and spiritual satisfaction gained from their work, which elevated their service engagement to a spiritual exercise for some.¹¹⁸ Hence, the moral universe that activists and even itinerant participants inhabit—one created by the Hindu nationalist project—amplifies their propensity to adopt an identity of *seva*.

Sangh activists also found that assuming a moral stance of selflessness—encompassed by *seva*—aided them in their social service efforts. Thachil (2014) illustrates how activists believed that seeking electoral reciprocity for their endeavors would undermine the trust they had laboriously accumulated among villagers. Doing so would diminish their work to the base level of politics, eroding their ability to assume the moral high ground afforded by the mantle of *seva*. Indeed, in my qualitative research, I found that several ground-level *Sangh* activists, including those who were associated with the BJP, had a disparaging opinion of politics, viewing their own social work as morally superior, or articulated their principle motivation for joining politics as social work.¹¹⁹

Third, and consistent with the theme of this book, *seva* provides a moral cover for activists and participants whose engagement may be perceived as transgressive to the norms of their community. Thus, although the RSS’s majoritarian stance should repel religious minorities, the organization is able to recruit and mobilize Muslims through its National Muslim Front, or the Muslim Rashtriya Manch. Facing significant opposition to their participation, members of the Manch articulated their membership and activism as a means to serve their community.¹²⁰

A final point I examine is the position of the *sevak* in the act of service. Since the concept of *seva* is a relatively recent one within Hinduism, there is little by way of literature that can guide us about what constitutes an appropriate act of *seva*. On the other hand, there is considerable explanation by way of what is an appropriate act of *dana*: here it is not only the donor, beneficiary, and substance of the gift that comes under scrutiny, but also the manner and process, including time, space, and the occasion of gifting.¹²¹ All of these are important when deciding the spiritual implications of the gift. However, the act of *seva*, at least in its revivalist and nationalist constructions, accords overwhelming importance to

¹¹⁷Based on a second-hand retelling, Singh (2022*b*) recounts an incident about Sanjay Joshi, an RSS volunteer who occupied the position of General Secretary (Organization) within the BJP, a post that was held by Modi before his elevation to chief ministership. “In 2003, Sanjay Joshi was traveling in an AC 3-tier train from Delhi to Ranchi. His close aide kept bringing him the phone, “Sir, Advani *ji* is calling you... Sir, Pramod *ji* is on the phone [LK Advani and Pramod Mahajan were prominent Ministers in the BJP government between 1999 and 2004].” After a while, a co-passenger got upset: “If you are so big, why are you traveling in an AC 3-tier?” Sanjay Joshi smiled it away.”

¹¹⁸Discussions at *Suraj Bhavan*, Kota RSS office in March 2019.

¹¹⁹Interview with members of Rashtra Sevika Samiti (April 2019, New Delhi; February 2019, Jaipur), BJP women’s wing (January-March 2019, New Delhi; Jaipur; Kota)

¹²⁰Interview with woman activist in Muslim Rashtriya Manch in Jaipur, March 2019. Also see Pal (2020).

¹²¹Heim (2004)

the *sevak*. As Srivatsan (2014:41) writes with reference to members of Gokhale's Servants of India Society, "The Servant of India towered above the people served, as their ascetic leader and exemplar." This was a quintessentially upper caste construction of the act of *seva*, which was at the very root of Ambedkar's dissent with Gandhi concerning the identity of the *sevak* during the constitution of the All-India Anti-Untouchability League. The bias towards the *sevak* can also be seen in that the spiritual credit from *seva* is channeled towards the salvation of the *sevak*, not the beneficiary. The process of "man-making" for Vivekananda and the RSS is for the physical, intellectual, and spiritual transformation of the *sevak*, not the beneficiary. Furthermore, it is the *sevak*'s largesse, dedication, discipline, and self-abnegation that must be emulated to achieve an organic society free of contradictions for the RSS. In this objectively unequal moral universe, it is the *sevak*'s construction that matters for deciding the terms of *seva* and their self-identity.

2.5 *Seva*, women, and political action

It is commonly assumed that colonization is a political and economic project. British occupation of India began with an economic motive, which later led to political hegemony to protect and further these economic interests. But in addition to this, colonization was also an exercise in psychological and cultural domination over the native population. According to Nandy (1989), the process of colonization could be said to have truly begun when the British were able to inflict a sense of cultural and psychological inferiority upon Indians. This had severe effects on the Indian psyche, especially among men, leading to a loss of self-esteem and a sense of cultural dislocation. Moreover, there was a crisis of masculinity. During the precolonial era, Indian masculinity was based on a sense of responsibility and obligation to the community.¹²² Moreover, there was greater acceptance or at least exposure to diverse forms of masculinity and sexuality. This was different from the colonial construction of masculinity that was based on the exercise of power, control, and domination based on coercion. Criticized as weak and effeminate by the British, Indians attempted to mimic this colonial "hyper-masculinity" leading to profound changes in Indian society, and ultimately the rise of Hindu nationalism.

The second implication of this psychological domination was on women. As referred to earlier in this chapter, British officials, missionaries, and reformers severely criticized what they took to be the "degraded" position of women in Indian society and the "barbaric" practices they were often subjected to. As a consequence, Britain ostensibly took it upon itself to reform these practices through a "civilizing mission." The economist and political philosopher, John Stuart Mill, while an employee of the East India Company, defended imperialism based on the potential for women's upliftment Britain offered to its colonies. Hence, the status of Indian women was considered to be a critical measure of the progress India had made under the British.¹²³ However, there was an inherent paradox in this approach:

¹²²Nandy (1989); Chatterjee (1993)

¹²³Chatterjee (1989)

implementing social reforms and raising the status of women would steadily weaken the case for colonization.¹²⁴ Thus British interest lay “both in maintaining women’s subordinate position and in liberalizing it,” contradicting itself in its approach toward women.¹²⁵

The nationalist response to this critique was two-fold. First, as has been already explained in previous sections, Indians sought modernity in tradition to show that the objectionable practices were later accretions and should be abjured since they were missing in original Hindu texts. Second, upper-caste men benefiting from British education and influence—as also more proximate objects of British derision towards native customs—sought to show that Indian culture, was in fact superior to the West. To do this, they created a dichotomy between the outer or public sphere (*bahir*) and the inner or private, domestic sphere (*ghar*). According to them, the public sphere was a material and masculine domain where superior technology and the use of force had helped the British master it. Yet, the home and the inner sphere—the domain of spirituality—remained unscathed from Western depredation and was a field where India remained unchallenged. Since the domestic sphere was also feminine, women were charged with the onerous task of upholding Indian standards of character and morality, while also showcasing their superiority to English women.

To maintain this balance of tradition and modernity, nationalists who often hailed from upper caste groups, created the model of a “new woman.”¹²⁶ The new woman would embody Indian identity and culture that was as yet unsullied by colonialism. But not content with asserting their spiritual superiority, Indian nationalists felt that women should be able to match their English counterparts in terms of education and comportment. This went hand in hand with the English-educated upper caste man’s concern about finding suitable wives blending Indian tradition with modernity. Unlike the “simpler” tastes of traditional women, these men now wanted wives who could enhance their social status, someone they could converse with about current events, and be closer intellectual matches without actively questioning their authority within the home. Convinced that educating girls would lead to better outcomes in the marriage market, parents—at least those who could afford it—enrolled their daughters in schools. But because women continued to be the custodians of the domestic sphere where India’s true identity resided, and because families were motivated by social esteem and suitable marriage outcomes and not liberation from patriarchal social arrangements *per se*, there was a general agreement that women should be taught a blend of modern Western and traditional Indian subjects. Consequently, education in English and Science was complemented by religious education and domestic science.¹²⁷

As families grew more permissive of women’s education, they were more accepting of women entering public spaces. But they were still held back by the prevailing consensus that entering public spaces could expose “respectable” women to polluting elements, leading to a loss of womanly virtues. Indeed, the only women who were relatively free from these social restrictions to their mobility from the 18th century to the early part of the 20th century were

¹²⁴Thapar-Björkert (1997); Thapar (1993)

¹²⁵Liddle and Joshi (1985*a*; *b*)

¹²⁶Chatterjee (1989)

¹²⁷Osella and Osella (2008); Nijhawan (2004)

widows and prostitutes.¹²⁸ Hence, proponents of women's education had to frame women's presence in the public sphere in alignment with traditional norms of respectability and role congruence. To this end, a large number of normative texts by Indian intelligentsia—social reformers, nationalists, nationalists, and aristocratic elites—promulgated this construct of the new woman. These texts, often written by upper caste men, propagated a code of conduct that sought to differentiate upper- and middle-class women from so-called common women, who as Chatterjee (1989:627) notes were thought to be “coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.” Instead the “new woman” fused Brahminical virtues of spousal devotion (*pativrata*)—chastity, feminine self-sacrifice, and ability to bear suffering for the cause of the family—with the Victorian emphasis on enlightened mothers to serve as able companions to men while remaining in their separate sphere of the home.^{129,130} In this process, the new woman was subjected to a “new” form of patriarchy that was thought, by its practitioners, to be more enlightened, permissive, and rational.¹³¹

The new woman may have been constructed to differentiate upper and middle-class women from their more “common” counterparts, but to be truly authoritative, this concept had to be made an aspirational standard for the masses. To this end, proponents of this new patriarchy were aided and abetted by journals and magazines published in regional languages and targeted at women. Moreover, these journals could be consumed by many who did not have the means or opportunities to benefit from formal schooling. In addition, these journals provided a wider range of information than was available in the curriculum and were important means of instructing girls on their roles within the household.¹³² Articles in these journals promulgated the view that higher education did not entail the loss of cultural heritage and womanly virtues. Instead, education would make women specialized and self-reliant in their own sphere of activity, the home. Educating women would lead to more skilled and knowledgeable mothers, who could then pass on their knowledge to their children, which was critical for raising a nationalistically minded generation. Motherhood was no longer a private affair; it was elevated to having nationalistic significance and a way for women to contribute to the larger cause even within the confines of the home. Once these primary traits of wifely and motherly virtues were inculcated, women could then turn to support their husbands as devoted—but hierarchically subservient—companions. Women's entry into public spaces was justified on the grounds that personal and children's education and companionship would require women to have an idea of the world outside the home, where they could venture as long as it did not threaten her feminine virtues, morals, and the

¹²⁸As Śinde and O'Hanlon (1994) recounts, the Marathi terms for widows and prostitutes were in many contexts interchangeable, leading to uncharitable remarks on widows' characters and sexual availability.

¹²⁹Banerjee (2010); Chatterjee (1989); Nijhawan (2011); Orsini (2009); Śinde and O'Hanlon (1994)

¹³⁰This model, it is often argued, was based on the gentle-woman (*bhadramahila*) in Bengal, who was thought to be an appropriate companion to the gentleman (*bhadralok*), and was gradually disseminated to other parts of the country.

¹³¹Chatterjee (1989)

¹³²Orsini (2009); Nijhawan (2011)

primacy of their traditional roles within the home.¹³³ Yet, there was a belief that managing household relations could become a political and administrative capability that could stand women in good stead as and when they could participate in political action.¹³⁴

Women's education gave them a new self-confidence to contribute to political action and the nation-building process more generally, but for several years, their participation remained circumscribed to educational and itinerant social service activities. Revivalist and social service organizations such as the Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, *Dev Samaj* schools, Indian girl guide troops, and Daughters of India did train young women as social servants, but prevailing gender norms limited women to 'serve' in the home.¹³⁵ For instance, Watt (2005:117) describes how these gendered differences affirmed themselves in the kinds of skills that boys and skills were taught as part of the Indian scouts and guides program.

In a 'Grand Rally' held at Allahabad in 1921, boy scouts played Indian games, formed pyramids, gave first-aid demonstrations, and engaged in sword play, fire brigade and rescue work. Indian Sister Scouts and girl guides, on the other hand, were 'a delightful spectacle' in green saris and they gave a 'special display of home nursing, first aid, cooking, drill, etc.'

This differential training led to strict limits to women's involvement in public life and the nationalist movement. When they did attempt to expand their contribution beyond the domestic sphere, it could invite significant protest and backlash from society.¹³⁶ These were, however, not very different from a global consensus of gendered roles based on biological differences: the international guide movement taught girls about hygiene, health, and managing the home.

This situation started changing with the growing influence of Gandhi on the nationalist movement. Before Gandhi's arrival, women had participated in the movement intermittently but were unable to find a sustained presence. Although Gandhi did believe in a separate sphere based on biology, he was convinced that the nationalist movement could not truly take hold of people's imaginations if half of the population remained within the home. Witnessing women's activism against discriminatory laws in South Africa, Gandhi was convinced of their greater ability to bear suffering and capacity for sacrifice. Women went to prison, underwent hard labor, and some even had a miscarriage as part of their struggle against the invalidation of their marriages.¹³⁷ Crucially, women's involvement lent a gravity and a moral impetus to the movement leading initially unwilling men to join. This moral strength and value led Gandhi to believe that women could be key players in his plan of non-violent resistance.

Gandhi's plan to include women in politics was designed with care. It allowed women—and perhaps more crucially their families—the flexibility to choose the venue and extent of their participation. Women who chose to enter public spaces were given opportunities to

¹³³Chatterjee (1989); Orsini (2009); Nijhawan (2011)

¹³⁴Sarkar (2001)

¹³⁵Watt (2005)

¹³⁶Watt (2005:104)

¹³⁷Kishwar (1986)

do so, while those who preferred to remain at home were also assigned tasks that helped them make meaningful contributions to the nationalist cause. Upon assuming stewardship of the Congress in 1921, Gandhi implemented the project of *Swadeshi*, or self-sufficiency. Taking cognizance of separate spheres, Gandhi implored women's active engagement and buy-in. Since women were in charge of the household, boycotting British goods and encouraging the family to follow an autochthonal lifestyle, especially in clothes, depended on their cooperation:

The *Swadeshi* vow, too, cannot be kept fully if women do not help. Men alone will be able to do nothing in the matter. They have no control over the children; that is the woman's sphere. To look after children, to dress them, is the mother's duty and, therefore, it is necessary that women should be fired with the spirit of *Swadeshi*.¹³⁸

Women inclined to enter the public sphere to burn British clothes in bonfires were given the opportunity to do so pending permission from their familial gatekeepers. But not all women could do so because of personal, familial, or societal constraints. Consequently, Gandhi's true genius lay in enabling all women, even those who could not leave the home, to participate in and support the freedom movement. To help the nation wean itself away from foreign cloth, Gandhi asked women to spin and weave homespun cloth, *khadi*. This low-cost way of participation allowed Gandhi to transcend barriers of caste, class, distance, and respectability to fire the political imaginations of women. Because women were given tasks that were unlikely to be dangerous or immoral, and could be carried out within the home, their gatekeepers were reassured that women's participation did not pose a challenge to their traditional roles. Women, themselves, were validated by Gandhi's ringing endorsement of their feminine qualities of courage, patience, and endurance, and were inspired to enter the political arena by spinning within the safety of the home, if not by actually venturing into the public sphere.¹³⁹ Thus, by making the private sphere a center of political activity, Gandhi was able to domesticate politics. Indeed, the spinning wheel or *charkha* became an important symbol of the freedom movement.

Here, Gandhi used all his political acumen to reframe the very terms of women's participation. He used the concept of *seva*—which was already universally recognized as an ideal trait for women—to break the divide between the domestic and public spheres while still allowing women to adhere to the limits of morality.¹⁴⁰ Gandhi had already shown how he prized women's intrinsic *seva*-based traits of selflessness, sacrifice, and ability to bear suffering without retaliating or resorting to violence. Originally, these traits were applied to women's roles in the private sphere. By framing the nationalist struggle as non-violent service to the motherland that required the very same traits that were associated with their domestic roles, Gandhi gave upper and middle-class women a channel to join his movement

¹³⁸Kishwar (1986:47)

¹³⁹Symonds (1999); Kumar (1997); Kishwar (1986)

¹⁴⁰Orsini (2009)

without fear of pollution or reprobation. Women entering public life were to see themselves as selfless, devoted social workers. In other words, the role of the “new woman” in public life was to be an extension of her domestic role of selfless service.

Gandhi’s attempts at soliciting women’s participation through *seva*-based idioms was spectacularly successful. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s first Prime Minister, described women’s involvement in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930:

Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes—peasant women, working-class women, rich women—pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police *lathi* [baton]. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed.¹⁴¹

Presenting the political arena in a familiar light was only one way in which Gandhi was able to incentivize women to join the nationalist movement. The second secret to Gandhi’s success in this venture was that he focused as much on building acceptance of women’s engagement with men in their families. This may be explained through Gandhi’s own belief in the separation of spheres—he thought that women were “Queens of the home”—but also from his need to secure support for women’s participation from their gatekeepers.¹⁴² Consequently, Gandhi’s appeals to women were grounded in rhetoric that did not threaten men’s masculinity.¹⁴³ Using oral history transcripts of Sucheta Kripalani, a prominent freedom fighter and the first woman chief minister of an Indian state, Geraldine Forbes recounts how Gandhi paid special attention to male attitudes:

Gandhi’s personality was such that it inspired confidence not only in women but in the guardians of women, their husbands, fathers and brothers. Since his moral stature was high, ‘when women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected.’¹⁴⁴

To make his *seva*-based appeals more persuasive, Gandhi communicated his messages through examples of dutiful wives who sometimes had to take over the mantle of their husbands in times of need. Returning to the *Ramayana*, Gandhi equated the British to the villain Ravana, and asked women to emulate the example of Sita.¹⁴⁵ Like Sita had refused to cooperate with Ravana when he abducted her, Gandhi reminded women that their sacred duty was to remain true to their nation by boycotting British goods. He further argued that

¹⁴¹Nehru (1946:41)

¹⁴²Gandhi (1928) in (Joshi 2002)

¹⁴³Thapar (1993)

¹⁴⁴Forbes (1988:67)

¹⁴⁵Basu (1995)

India would not progress until Sita-like women, who were “pure in body and heart” did not enter public life. Thus, a new Sita, who was not only dedicated to her husband but now endowed with a strong will and moral purity provided a blueprint for women to enter public spaces without fear of reputational concerns.¹⁴⁶

Gandhi’s views on women which led to his framing of women’s participation in terms of *seva* were very much in tune with the social and cultural zeitgeist, perhaps radical even. At this time, women leaders in the Indian freedom movement subscribed to the idea of separate spheres. For instance, Sarojini Naidu justified that women should get the right to vote based on separate responsibilities—and destinies—of men and women and that voting for women did not mean interfering with men’s execution of political tasks or undermining their power and prestige. Instead, what they sought was to “lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and instill into them the ideals of national life.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Naidu concurred with Gandhi in her belief that women’s work was “spiritual reform of the world”, and women’s political entry was justified based on psychological and spiritual differences between the sexes.¹⁴⁸

During the 1920s, the Hindi literary and public sphere was also buzzing with proclamations that women’s supreme ethic was one of *seva*. In 1925, the editor of the periodical *Chand* wrote that Indian society was organized on the basis of *seva-dharma* and its progression could be seen in terms of a gradual decline from selflessness (*seva*) towards self-interest (*svarth*). Gandhi’s arrival was a correcting mechanism and “the goddess of *Seva* is coming again in the lap of our beloved Motherland”.¹⁴⁹ This feminization of *seva* established women as central and active subjects: “The women of our country have always been committed to *seva-dharma*. Truly, a woman’s life is the concrete image of *seva*”, wrote its editor, Ramrakh Singh Sahgal.¹⁵⁰

As women entered public life based on Gandhi’s *seva*-based framework, their mythological role models changed with them. Gandhi had already shown them a path by reframing Sita as a moral agent. Periodicals now took up the challenge to redefine *seva* as challenging the traditional division between households and the world. Sahgal urged women to think of *seva* not only in domestic terms but also for the benefit of society at large. To buttress his point, he reminded his readers that Sita was not only Ram’s wife, she was also Ayodhya’s queen, with responsibilities towards its people.¹⁵¹ Other forms of literature abounded with *seva*-based ideals: Radha, the consort of the god Krishna, underwent a similar transformation to become the ideal social worker in a poem *Priya-pravas* by the Hindi poet Hariaudh.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶Orsini (2009:292)

¹⁴⁷*Report of the Special Session of the Indian National Congress*, Bombay, August 19-31 and September 1, 1918 (Bombay, 1918), pp. 109-10. Cited in Forbes (1996:94)

¹⁴⁸All India Women’s Conference, Fourth Session, Bombay, 1930, p.21 in Forbes (1996:158)

¹⁴⁹*Seva-dharma ka adarsh*, editorial in *Chand*, III, pt. 2, 1-2, May-June 1925, pp. 3-13 cited in Orsini (2009:270)

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Orsini (2009:292)

The power of *seva* did not stop at cloaking transgressive activities in the cloak of tradition. It also had immense redemptive power in the Hindi literary sphere. A range of books and articles showed how women on the margins of society like widows and prostitutes could turn to *seva* to gain moral capital and be viewed as respectable members of society. Widows in particular could be harnessed to the nationalist cause if they were morally upright. They were free of domestic responsibilities and had enormous potential to contribute to the nation by making *seva* their main field of action (*karmakshetra*). Therefore, the concept of *seva* not only enabled women to participate in the public sphere while retaining respectability but also had the power to confer it upon individuals who might not have been considered worthy otherwise (Orsini 2009:293).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter shows that *seva* was integral to women's ability to enter public spaces. But women could not have used *seva* independently to access the public sphere in the ways and numbers in which they did so. It needed a leader of the moral stature of Gandhi to inspire them, and as importantly convince their gatekeepers that taking part in mass movements would not have costs on women's reputation. Gandhi's own critique of masculinity, display of feminine-identified traits, correlating overt displays of masculinity with violence, the non-violent nature of his struggle, and his feminization of the public sphere created an opportunity structure for women's entry into politics.

However, women could not sustain the same level of momentum after achieving independence. A prominent reason for this is that the women's movement had been subsumed within the larger nationalist movement. After independence, women did not have to wage a separate battle for suffrage, and the passing of the Hindu Code bills in 1957 gave them rights over ancestral property and succession.¹⁵³ As a result, Forbes (1988:85) argues that women did not feel the necessity to establish their own political organizations, even though the Mahila Congress, the party's women's wing formed in 1940, was not fully integrated into decision-making bodies. In an examination of women who participated in the freedom movement in Bombay, Pearson (1979) finds that the movement did not have cross-cutting appeal and that many participants who had either been motivated by Gandhi, or invited by gatekeepers to join, simply returned to their domestic roles after the larger objective of independence was achieved and after Gandhi passed away.

In later years, *seva* as a tool of women's mobilization, declined in importance. The second phase of feminism in India per Kannabiran (2010) from the 1970s focused on questions of civil and political rights in relation to the state. In a marked discursive change, women started entering public spaces and making claims based on the discourse of women's rights, rather than amelioration as in the past or using the language of duty or obligation.¹⁵⁴ At

¹⁵³See, for instance, Lateef (1977); Forbes (1996; 1988).

¹⁵⁴Although I argue that *dana* rather than *seva* is closer to the idea of duty, some may conflate *seva* with the idea of duty based on its hierarchical nature that I discuss in Chapter 3

this time, issues of women's safety and security came to the fore with women's agitations through protests against rape, dowry, alcoholism, sex-selective abortion, domestic violence as well as rising prices of household essentials.¹⁵⁵ *Seva* then returned to the public sphere with the rise of the BJP and its mass mobilization efforts that I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁵Kumar (1997); Agnihotri and Mazumdar (1995)

Chapter 3

A Theory of Norm-Compliant Mobilization

In this chapter, I build a theory of norm-compliant mobilization to explain how religiously conservative parties can rally women into the public sphere. At its core, this theory is based on the recognition of the division between public and private spheres prevalent in patriarchal societies and the privately enforced public standards of behavior for men and women that emerge as a result. These standards assign distinct roles and responsibilities to each gender, with men assuming productive roles as breadwinners and being active contributors to the economic, social, and political order within the public domain. Conversely, women are assigned roles that bind them to the family and the domestic sphere. This equilibrium is sustained through the internalization of these traditional roles as well as coercive enforcement by patriarchal authority figures within the home, that I term ‘gatekeepers.’ In this context, women’s political activism, and presence in the political sphere more generally, signals a departure from this established equilibrium. Consequently, their mobilization has the potential to disrupt existing power dynamics not only within the home, but also in a party as women seek greater voice and representation, and in society at large.

Religiously conservative parties face the challenge of incorporating women into potentially norm-disruptive roles while maintaining their ideological stance and societal worldview. Two channels for their engagement emerge, each with its implications. The first channel involves religiously conservative parties acting as agents of norm change, advocating for expanded roles for women within the public sphere. However, this approach poses fundamental conflicts with the worldview of parties, such as India’s BJP, which uphold the belief in the equality of women and men while emphasizing separate functions for each gender within the home and society. By advocating for significant changes in household structures and gender roles, these parties risk far-reaching consequences that challenge deeply ingrained social norms and potentially encounter resistance from their support base.

The second channel involves religiously conservative parties incorporating women into norm-compliant roles aligning with their existing worldview. Instead of challenging patriarchal norms outright, these parties seek to mobilize women within the boundaries of

traditional gender roles and responsibilities. By framing women's participation in the public sphere as an extension of women's traditional domestic roles, these parties can mitigate the perception of—and thereby the cost associated with—norm disruption. This approach allows religiously conservative parties to maintain the existing gender order while expanding women's engagement in certain areas of public life that align with their traditional roles.

Coming to the particular case of the BJP, I argue that the party is uniquely adept at reducing the costs of women's political entry—and obtaining buy-in for women's participation—by framing politics as *seva*, a powerful religious norm of selfless service. Crucially, the concept of *seva*, when applied to the private sphere, describes women's traditional caregiving roles as mothers, wives, and crucially, in the case of South Asia, daughters-in-law. Framing politics as *seva* therefore extends women's private roles into the public sphere. Because of this compliance with traditional gender norms, participation does not challenge patriarchal power structures within the family or in society. Consequently, gatekeepers acquiesce to women's mobilization when parties frame their appeals in terms of *seva*.

3.1 Women and separate spheres

Historically, women have had a limited role in the political lives of societies, and this was often justified on account of the different dispositions of men and women. Some of the earliest philosophers believed that women were more suited to the domestic tasks of home-making and child-rearing. Indeed, Aristotle, in *Politics*, considered women to be biologically and intellectually inferior, possessing very few of the rational and moral characteristics that those active in public and political life should possess.¹ Other contemporary philosophers like Plato considered women to be relatively equal in the political sphere, but Aristotle was hardly an exception to the prevailing times. Plato too, for all his liberal views on women's participation in the public sphere, considered their primary essence to be in the sphere of reproduction.²

Similarly, ancient Indian texts, while showing reverence for women, confined their roles predominantly to the private sphere. Later philosophical texts, influenced by schools of thought such as *Nyaya* and *Mimamsa*, explicitly portrayed women as lacking intellectual and moral capabilities. One of the most significant texts in Hindu jurisprudence reflecting this perspective is the *Manusmriti*, also known as the Laws of Manu, who was believed to be the first man per Hindu thought. The *Manusmriti* promotes a hierarchical and patriarchal view of gender relations, where women are deemed subordinate to men and assigned specific roles and responsibilities within the family and society. Women are expected to be under the control and protection of their fathers in their youth, their husbands after marriage, and their sons in their old age.³ The text emphasizes women's primary duties as bearing children, running the household, and serving their husbands and families. It also provides

¹Aristotle (1998)

²Plato and Sir Henry Desmond Pritchard (2003)

³Olivelle (2004)

guidelines for women's conduct, regulating their dress, speech, and interactions with men, and imposes strict restrictions on women's autonomy, mobility, education, and participation in activities outside the domestic sphere.

Such views have hardly abated over the years. Indeed, with modernization and the Industrial Revolution, women were further confined to the domestic sphere. As workspaces became distinct from homes, and factories replaced the homestead as primary centers of economic activity, men spent increasing amounts of time away from home, while women were assigned to domestic responsibilities. The separation of spheres also received apparent scientific backing during the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries through a theory of biological determinism. Biological determinism held that men and women were inherently different due to their genetic makeup, which influenced what how people acted, and what they were suitable for. The public sphere encompassed work and politics, and later in a Habermasian sense, included the free exchange of ideas which went on to become the domain of men. Women, on the other hand, were respected through their role as guardians of the private sphere, but this respect was predicated upon their exclusion from the production process and their ability to engage in public life or nurture a political worldview. This perspective was not unusual for its time, and had several proponents. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, regarded the separation of spheres in the United States as a positive development, noting that nowhere else did women occupy such a "lofty position."⁴

Although the notion of separate spheres had corralled off the public sphere from women, a number of women were able to leverage this to their advantage and navigate their way into politics and social movements. Frances Willard who led the women's temperance movement in the US justified women's participation by employing the framework of separate spheres and essentialist arguments regarding women's innate morality and spirituality. Similarly, suffrage activists in the US, UK, and Latin America grounded their political demands through the distinctive perspectives that women could bring as mothers and homemakers.

A second way for women to have a say in politics was through influencing men. For example, women attending political rallies, despite lacking the right to vote, were able to mingle with other men of their age. In these spaces, Grinspan (2016) describes politically inclined women used their charms to sway potential suitors' political leanings, going as far as accepting or rejecting marriage proposals based on these criteria. Indeed, some anti-suffragist women justified their position based on being content to exercise their voice through this route. However, this indirect channel could hardly serve as a substitute for a more direct say since the majority of women were unable to exert influence over men, or negotiate entering the political sphere.

Empirical research on women's political participation mirrored these patterns. Initially, researchers focused on comparing men's and women's voter turnout and preferences, particularly in advanced democracies. They found that, on average, women were less likely to vote, less informed about political events, and less active in electoral and everyday political activities. This political gender gap was attributed to the internalization of the separate

⁴De Tocqueville (1835)

spheres doctrine, whereby women's participation in politics was influenced by social learning processes and the societal expectations placed on them to conform to gendered adult roles.⁵

Following the separation of spheres, a second line of research emerged, focusing on personal attributes and characteristics to explain variations in political participation, including the gender gap. For instance, Verba and Nie (1972) correlates political participation to a person's socio-economic status, political knowledge, affiliation with voluntary organizations, partisanship, and race. Building upon this work, Schlozman, Burns and Verba (1994); Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995) examined the role of resources, broadly defined as time, income, psychic space, and civic skills. In all these models, the decision to participate in politics is typically conceptualized as an individual choice made voluntarily or influenced by social learning processes. They assume that individuals possess agency in deciding whether or not to engage in political activities, either autonomously or shaped by the cultural context in which they exist. However, the overall unit of analysis in these frameworks is the individual.

3.2 Women in the private sphere: The family as a unit of decision-making

While individual-centered models offer valuable insights into the factors that influence and limit political participation, they also suggest that addressing individual-level constraints can enhance women's participation. For instance, if financial resources are seen as a constraint, these models propose that increasing income or wealth will allow individuals the ability to cross hurdles inhibiting their participation. Likewise, in the absence of civic skills, training programs designed to remedy this deficit has the potential to boost participation rates. In other words, if the key constraints to women's participation are in terms of resources, then it follows that relaxing these resource endowments can unblock women's engagement.

But often, the choice to engage in or abstain from politics may not arise from individual-level autonomy or constraints. Frequently, personal political inclinations and decision-making are molded by collective identities and shared life encounters. As a result, political decision-making can be influenced and collectively determined within a group, or by a prominent member or representative of the group. In such instances, the ultimate outcome of this decision-making process may not align with the interests of each group member.

Feminist scholarship has long held the household or the family as the most fundamental societal organizing unit, or group, that determines women's economic, social, and political lives.⁶ When individuals within a family have equal status or bargaining power, they have the potential to exercise autonomy or contribute equally to a collaborative decision-making process, resulting in a consensual outcome. Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001) presents a view that under such similar conditions, households can function as a political entity where

⁵Campbell et al. (1960); Lane (1965); Duverger (1955)

⁶See Prillaman (2023) theorization of the patriarchal political order for an overview.

individuals freely share ideas and express opinions in an egalitarian setting to collectively form political viewpoints.

However, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) highlights that status and bargaining power frequently stem from the control of financial resources and the availability of alternative options outside the household, such as the ability to exercise the option to exit the house. Apart from financial resources and employment opportunities, an individual's outside options can be influenced by cultural norms surrounding marriage, social safety nets, and legal protections, including rules governing divorce. It is in this context that the division of spheres placed significant constraints on women's access to opportunities, political information, and the ability to voice their opinions.

Indeed in societies as diverse as—but not in the least limited to—Britain and India, norms and traditional institutions considered women as the responsibility of men within their families. For instance, the principle of coverture held significant influence in English Common Law until the late 19th century. Under coverture, a woman's legal, economic, and political identity became subsumed by her husband upon marriage, symbolizing her legal ownership by him. It imposed severe limitations on the rights and agency of married women, effectively barring them from writing and signing contracts, initiating lawsuits, owning real estate or personal property, and earning their own income. As a result, married women faced significant obstacles in exercising their autonomy and retaining control over their affairs. Other countries, such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, which drew from the Common Law tradition, embraced similar legal principles that granted husbands control over their wives' legal rights and property. Furthermore, countries like France, which adopted the Napoleonic Code during the 19th century, also implemented principles resembling coverture.⁷

Similarly, before the enactment of the Hindu Code Bill in 1957, Indian women faced numerous legal restrictions stemming from traditional customs. These restrictions limited their rights and autonomy. Women had limited inheritance rights, were often excluded from inheriting ancestral property, and received smaller shares compared to male heirs. Men could be polygamous, and women's consent was often not sought when men took additional wives. After marriage, women had limited property ownership and control, relying on male family members for transactions. They were considered legal minors, with fathers or husbands as guardians. Divorce rights heavily favored men, and widows faced social discrimination and were discouraged from remarrying.⁸

The effect of these customs spilled over into the realm of politics. During elections in British India, suffrage had been restricted based on education, gender, and property qualifications.⁹ Women who owned property were *de jure* able to vote, but it was argued that since they did not take part in any other form of public life, they should nominate a

⁷While this system predominantly favored men, there were instances when men faced legal consequences for women's transgressions. Bishop (2015) for instance notes instances of men in Australia and New Zealand being fined for unlicensed sale of spirits despite the offense being committed by their wives.

⁸Banningan (1952)

⁹Washbrook (1997:36) argues that the purpose of elections in colonial India was to co-opt the elite and strengthen the colonial state.

man to vote on their behalf.¹⁰

After India's independence and the enactment of universal adult suffrage, the Central Election Commission was tasked with building an electoral roll for India's first democratically elected government. Shani (2017) notes several challenges that the Commission faced in carrying out this seemingly straightforward mandate. One of the most unique challenges arose with regard to women's identification. Rather than using their own names, women tended to identify themselves as relatives of male family members, such as "A's mother' or B's wife."¹¹ This presented a complex situation for the Commission as it wanted to register women based on their individual identities, but following an aggressive approach to this end could backfire on both women and electoral officials since this was the first time that many men would witness the unfamiliar public sight of women having an equal say in political decision-making. As a consequence, the Commission had to be particularly careful when conducting this exercise to avoid offending women or their families. But despite their best efforts, nearly 2.8 million names had to be struck off the electoral rolls because women were averse to disclosing their proper names to strangers. Practically all such cases were from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Bharat, Rajasthan, and Vindhya Pradesh, and constituted nearly 10% of the eligible women's population in these states.^{12,13} These states were given an additional month to correct this, and while there were some improvements in Bihar, there was virtually no change in Rajasthan, and a large number of women voters had to be deleted from the state's electoral register.¹⁴

These examples demonstrate how patriarchal social arrangements empower certain household members, whom I refer to as gatekeepers, to shape or restrict the political participation and agency of others. In the specific context of South Asia, an emerging body of literature highlights the significant influence of domestic power dynamics on women's political engagement. For instance, Chhibber (2002) finds that women lacking an identity independent of their families are less likely to participate in politics. Similarly, Khan (2021) presents experimental evidence from the city of Faisalabad in Pakistan to show that women assign less weight to their political preferences compared to men, limiting the extent to which women express their political preferences to their representatives when in competition with men. Of particular concern for women's substantive representation is the greater reluctance of women to articulate voice when their preferences diverge from those of their male partners or gatekeepers. Hence, if gatekeepers are the key agents regulating women's ability to access the public sphere, then it follows that interventions targeted at changing men's perceptions about women's participation are more likely to stand a chance at enabling women to participate in public and political life. In this vein, research by Cheema, Khan, Khan-Mohmand and Liaqat (2021) in Pakistan shows that educational interventions about why women should

¹⁰Shani (2017)

¹¹India. Election Commission (1955)

¹²Singh and Roy (2019)

¹³Madhya Bharat and Vindhya Pradesh were merged into the present state of Madhya Pradesh on November 1, 1956.

¹⁴India. Election Commission (1955)

vote in elections increased women's turnout when the interventions were targeted at male gatekeepers, rather than women themselves. Moreover, the effects were highest when men and women in the same household were treated, leading to more political discussion and practical support for women to vote. In my fieldwork, the majority of women I interviewed relied on their gatekeepers' decisions regarding access to public spaces. Over half of the women surveyed stated that they needed to seek permission from their husbands or other gatekeepers before making plans to visit friends, and nine out of ten believed it was necessary to obtain permission for attending political events. Additionally, women tend to place greater importance on their family's opinions when making decisions about who to vote for.

3.3 Social norms and the costs of norm deviation

Yet, households do not operate in a vacuum. Like individuals who are sensitive to social and behavioral norms, a growing body of work in the social sciences demonstrates how domestic power relations are shaped by what members consider acceptable social arrangements.¹⁵ The restrictions and limitations imposed on women are not solely determined within the confines of the household but also shaped by societal expectations. Rather than perceiving the household as a locus of coercive control, respondents regarded it as a microcosm reflecting wider social norms. Consequently, when the very same social norms that curtailed women's mobility and agency were replicated within the household, respondents perceived such constraints as inherent and did not perceive them as grounds for concern or in need of reform. Notably, during my qualitative research, discussions regarding the reasons behind women's abstention from political participation and their absence from public political events revealed that men frequently rationalized these restrictions with the assertion that "In our community, politics is for men, not women." Notably, these justifications, predicated on prevailing social norms, were not solely articulated by men but also by women themselves, underscoring the profound internalization of these restrictions by women.

The imposition of norms by men and their internalization by women can be understood by interpreting social norms as behavioral equilibria that describe stable standards of behavior. The idea that norms are equilibria or equilibrium strategies has been put forward by many rational choice theorists, including Schelling (1980); Lewis (2008); Taylor (1987), and Binmore (2005) to name a few. Norms can be either descriptive, informing us about empirical expectations of how people will react, or injunctive, telling us how we ought to act when faced with certain situations. These norms serve as behavioral standards that we believe people will follow, either empirically or normatively. A characteristic of equilibria is they are self-perpetuating, hence unilateral deviations off the equilibrium path can lead to costs that reinforce conformity.

¹⁵For research on how social norms affect individuals' political behavior, see Gerber and Rogers (2007); Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008); Lister (2007); Green and Shachar (2000); Bond et al. (2012); DellaVigna, List and Malmendier (2012); Habyarimana et al. (2009).

In traditional settings, women’s active participation flies in the face of what Prillaman (2023) calls the patriarchal political order, and as such, can hold significant costs for women. These costs can be imposed privately as forms of coercive control within the home, as well as publicly through social and reputational repercussions. Women’s political engagement deviates from the prevailing patriarchal equilibrium characterized by the gendered separation of private and political spheres. This equilibrium is often enforced by cultural norms whereby women are expected to seek the family’s—often elders and men—permission before venturing outside the home. Norm compliance is high: over 50% of female respondents said they required permission to visit the local store or even friends and neighbors.¹⁶ Hence, unilateral deviations from this equilibrium by women can threaten men’s bargaining power and masculinity, who will then attempt to reinforce the status quo. This can be manifested in various ways but the most common way is through domestic backlash against women. While the term backlash is a broad one encompassing a range of strategies that can be deployed by those fearing a loss in their position of relative privilege in the status quo, often it can take the form of violence against women. Indeed, 51% of women said that their community found it acceptable if husbands physically punished wives for leaving the home without prior permission.¹⁷

But the household is not the only site that nudges—or coerces—potential deviants to conform. Because the practice of politics is inherently public and visible, its benefits—and costs—can also be felt within the public arena. Politics, at the best of times, is considered dirty and fraught with ethical ambiguity. Indeed, Jean-Paul Sartre succinctly captures the range of ethical dilemmas inherent in politics in his play *Dirty Hands* where a politician declares, “I have dirty hands right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth and blood. Do you think you can govern innocently?”¹⁸ This statement conveys the understanding that “governing innocently” may be an unattainable ideal for those in positions of power. However, it is important to recognize that holding a seat of power is not a prerequisite for engaging in morally ambiguous actions. Indeed the pursuit of power itself can act as a powerful incentive to disregard a code of conduct that a wider population sets store by. Consequently, politicians and activists seeking to attain power are often perceived as having ulterior motives behind their garbs of sincerity and their claims of serving the people. In many parts of the world, it is not uncommon for the electorate to view politicians through a less than charitable lens, indeed anticipating their involvement in political wheeling and dealing to advance their political careers or pursue personal benefits.

Women are especially vulnerable players where the rules of the game are ethically murky, and created by those with perceived moral vacuity. Indeed, politics is overwhelmingly considered an inappropriate vocation—and avocation—for women. During qualitative interviews with citizens, a large number of respondents—both men and women—said, “Politics is dirty, we don’t want [women to have] to do anything with this.” Women activists, rather than

¹⁶IHDS (2011)

¹⁷IHDS (2011)

¹⁸Sartre (1948)

dispelling these notions, shared revelations confirming—and often exceeding—these negative perceptions. Recounting instances of one-upmanship, corruption, rent-seeking, and harassment they encountered in the course of their association with their party, they often alluded to how survival and advancement were impossible without a mentor within the organization. Despite this perceived safety net, exploitation, jealousy, and rumor-mongering were rife with the success of politically ambitious women being attributed to their ability to willingly make compromises and exchange favors, broadly conceived, in the pursuit of an election ticket or party position. Those who lost out in this race, or had to settle for lower positions often attributed this to their unwillingness to make similar compromises.

Thus, the private lives of politically active women were often subjects of idle conversation within their communities. In addition to facing backlash within their households, women activists also had to navigate the social and reputational costs associated with their character. These concerns weighed heavily on the minds of women actively engaged in political activities. Women activists shared accounts that shed light on the extent to which community members and colleagues scrutinized their actions. Every aspect of their behavior outside the confines of their homes was monitored, including the duration of their outings, the time at which they returned, the company they kept, their physical proximity to other men when undertaking party-related activities, and even the frequency and intensity of their laughter especially when they were in the company of other men. Seemingly innocent behaviors could be interpreted in complex ways with serious consequences for women in the public sphere. Thus, as we can see, the costs of women's active participation can be substantial. On the one hand, they can be subjected to a backlash within the home for their norm-deviant behavior, and on the other, the constant surveillance and judgment meted out to their public actions adds yet another layer of pressure and vulnerability on women in patriarchal families.

However, these are hardly the only costs faced by politically engaged women and their families. In patriarchal societies around the world, family honor is often embedded in women's honor and comportment.¹⁹ This is even more pertinent in the case of India where, as we saw in Chapter 2, the colonial experience positioned women as guardians of morality, spirituality, and tradition. As such, women were the key agents in preserving the cultural authenticity, superiority, and honor of the Indian family and nation.

When family honor intertwines with women's honor, the social and reputational costs that women face through their political engagement can spill over to their families. For instance, during a focus group discussion, a male participant referring to his adult daughter, also part of the group, said, "What people think about her is also what they think of me, and the values I brought her up with."²⁰ As such, men may face social sanctions for their inability to enforce patriarchal control. The social sanctions that men face are most often in the form of a loss of family honor, as well as ridicule or aspersions cast about their masculinity through their inability to enforce a patriarchal code of conduct upon women in their household. In

¹⁹See for instance Baker, Gregware and Cassidy (1999); Mandelbaum (1988); Mayeda and Vijaykumar (2016); Christianson, Teiler and Eriksson (2021); Chowdhry (2009); Hasan (2002); Cooney (2014); Cihangir (2013)

²⁰Focus group discussion in Jodhpur, November 2019.

Table 3.1: Costs of women’s participation

	Private costs	Social costs
Women	↑ Male backlash	↓ Social status/family honor, ↓ Personal reputation
Men	↓ Intra-household bargaining power	↓ Social status/family honor

more serious cases, such families may also have to bear a reduction in social, economic, and political opportunities they can access insofar as these are dependent on local networks and hierarchies. In some cases, there could also be a decline in the prospective quality of partners for unmarried members of the household as was recounted by a female INC activist in Jodhpur.²¹ As a consequence of these additional costs, household members, particularly men act as gatekeepers to women’s political involvement.²²

These costs are summarized in Table 3.1. Norm violation on the part of women leads to men facing private costs in the form of lower bargaining power. These are reinforced by social costs through a loss of family honor and a threat to masculinity since they may be perceived as unable to impose order within the home. Although the loss of family honor is shared by women, they face additional reputational costs in society and male backlash within the home. Together, these forces sustain an equilibrium where neither women unilaterally express a desire to undertake costly political action, nor do families permit this in the face of personal and socially-motivated concerns.

The visibility of women’s political entry is a critical factor in manifesting the private and social costs of their participation. When women engage in politics publicly, their actions challenge the established patriarchal equilibrium within their families and community. By being visible, their actions become evident to their families and the community, posing a credible threat to existing norms. Simultaneously, visible women can serve as role models to inspire other women to engage in political activities. As more women join in, the costs associated with engaging in activities that undermine societal norms can be shared among a larger number of participants. This shared burden helps lower the individual costs that women may face, making political engagement more accessible. This leads to a more significant threat to normative change. Moreover, the visibility of women’s political participation helps dispel the notion that women lack interest in politics or that “women in our community don’t take part in politics.” By challenging such prevailing views, the gradual dispelling of this belief undermines one of the main normative objections to women’s participation. Hence, the visibility of participation amplifies perceived costs that men face, eliciting stronger reactions by gatekeepers and other dominant elite to reinforce the status quo.

²¹Interview by author in November 2019.

²²Hasan (1993); Still (2017); Christianson, Teiler and Eriksson (2021); Baxter (2007).

3.4 How can religiously conservative parties reduce the costs of active participation?

Given the disruptive potential of women's active participation and the related costs that gatekeepers face, it is but natural that countervailing coercive forces seek to perpetuate this equilibrium. However, are there any viable pathways for women to enter the public sphere? This section explores two possible avenues: normative change and party-led mobilization that adheres to existing norms.

Normative change can occur if key players in this setup—women, gatekeepers, or political parties—can independently or collectively reach a more beneficial equilibrium where at least one party benefits without adversely affecting others. Conversely, party-led mobilization aims to reduce the perceived costs associated with women's participation without fundamentally altering restrictive norms. Religiously conservative parties, which view the family as the fundamental unit of society and nation, often rely on these structures as a fulcrum to support their existence. Hence, they are likely to resist normative change that disrupts the relative dominance of gatekeepers and patriarchal structures. Instead, I argue, such parties will prefer to mobilize women through less disruptive means that preserve existing norms. By maintaining the status quo, these parties can engage women in political processes without fundamentally transforming the patriarchal order. This approach allows them to navigate the delicate balance between accommodating women's participation to a certain extent while upholding traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

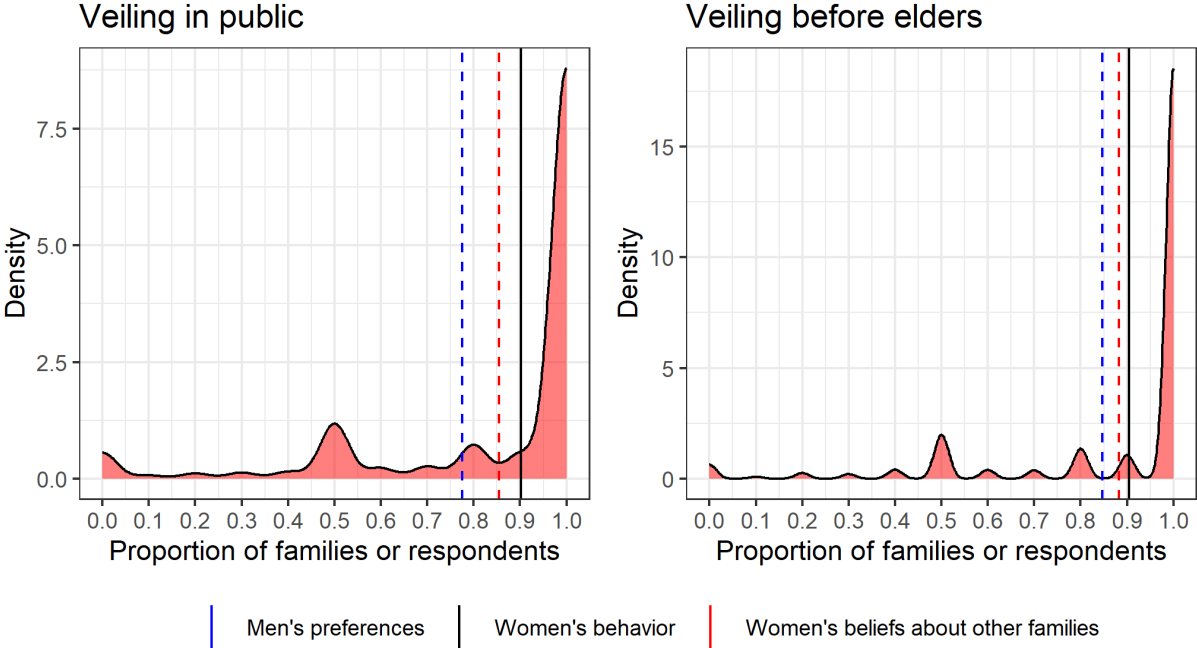
Normative change

The first channel for women's inclusion I consider is through inducing normative change. Existing literature suggests that challenging and transforming norms can create opportunities for women's expanded roles. There are two further routes through which this could take place. The first is by examining whether the pre-conditions for norm updation already exist. If there is a gap between actual behavior and perceived beliefs—a state of pluralistic ignorance—then normative change may be possible if people can be updated with new and more accurate information about perceived beliefs. A second channel to drive normative change could be through a ground-up social movement or a top-down imposition to inspire women's participation.

First, I examine the existence of a state of pluralistic ignorance. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when individuals privately hold beliefs that differ from what they perceive to be the societal norm. In this scenario, people may conform to perceived norms, even if their actual beliefs differ. However, if there is a substantial discrepancy between actual beliefs and perceived norms, there is potential to induce behavioral change by updating people's beliefs. Before implementing strategies based on this concept, it is crucial to test and determine the existence and extent of pluralistic ignorance within a given context.

Second, if there is a little gap between actual beliefs and perceived norms, then who

Figure 3.1: Actual and normative permission-seeking behavior among women and men



Note: Based on an original household survey, this figure shows the proportion of women (and men) who said they sought (or believed that women should seek) permission for taking part in the public activities listed on the x-axis. Please refer to Chapter 5 for more details about the survey, including sites, design, and sampling procedure.

should take up the mantle of normative change? One possibility is a top-down approach led by political parties or other influential entities. In this scenario, change would be initiated and implemented through policy measures and institutional reforms. Alternatively, a bottom-up process driven by individuals and societies themselves can also be effective. This approach involves grassroots movements, collective action, and advocacy efforts that challenge and reshape societal norms from within.

To assess the existence of pluralistic ignorance regarding women’s mobility, we need to analyze actual beliefs and perceived norms surrounding women’s unsupervised mobility and active participation. A compelling case to modify a state of pluralistic ignorance could be made if gatekeepers’ actual beliefs are significantly more liberal than what they perceive others to hold. However, this assumes that the new information is conveyed by a credible source and that people lack contradictory information. When the conditions of normative change are ripe and people have a mechanism to coordinate action, updating norm perceptions can have substantial implications for domestic arrangements. For instance, Bursztyn, González and Yanagizawa-Drott (2020) shows—in the severely restrictive setting of Saudi

Arabia—that updating husbands’ prior beliefs about the acceptability of women’s labor force participation can increase women’s work outside the household. Furthermore, the reverse can also be true: household arrangements can shape social norms, but only when gatekeepers (husbands of working women) update their belief that women’s work reflects poorly on them.²³

To shed light on whether pluralistic ignorance is credible in the case of women’s participation in India, I use data from an original survey of 2,914 respondents across 1,457 households that collected information on women’s mobility from women as well as their gatekeepers within the household. Ideally, to establish or reject a case for pluralistic ignorance, one would need to examine the gap between gatekeepers’ private beliefs and public perceptions about women’s mobility. As a proxy for women’s mobility outside the house and their deference to traditional authority, we collected information on adherence to a traditional norm of veiling, called *ghunghat* among Hindus and *purdah* among Muslims. Veiling not only requires women, especially young wives, to cover their faces in the presence of family elders and when in public spaces but also imposes barriers to their freedom of movement outside the home. In contrast to cases like Turkey, where lifting the headscarf ban led to increased mobility among religious women, veiling in Rajasthan—the site of the survey—and much of northern India restricts women’s mobility and contributes to gender segregation in public spaces, discouraging interactions between men and women from different households, which is particularly relevant for political spaces that often require gender intermixing.

Although the survey did not collect data on men’s beliefs about other men’s enforcement of these norms, we can surmise that the remarkably high degree of norm compliance among women strongly suggests that other men likely impose similar or even stricter restrictions. Moreover, this is a far more credible signal about men’s permissibility (or lack thereof) than could have been transmitted during the survey. This suggests that the conditions to increase women’s participation through normative change by the route of exploiting pluralistic ignorance likely do not hold in this context.

A second channel to drive normative change could be through a ground-up social movement or a top-down imposition to inspire women’s participation. In such a case the question arises as to who should drive normative change: elites—as represented through the BJP and the larger Hindu right-wing—or citizens themselves?

If citizens are to advocate for norm change, it would need to be initiated by gatekeepers or at least be implemented with their consent. Because women have limited abilities to exit the private sphere without men’s permission, their ability to effect change unilaterally is limited. Additionally, the high degree of compliance with prevailing norms suggests that women too may have internalized the existing normative equilibrium. Given this, the responsibility for normative change rests on the gatekeepers. However, we have observed that a unilateral deviation by a gatekeeper to allow for a greater role for women in the household may lead to social costs for both the gatekeeper and the woman. Moreover, since gatekeepers typically benefit from the current state of affairs, they have little incentive to allow women

²³Field et al. (2016)

to potentially undermine their relative power within the home.

Therefore, if normative change is the preferred approach to increase women's participation, the responsibility for initiating it lies with the political party involved. However, top-down normative change is generally incompatible with the ideologies and worldviews upheld by the majority of conservative parties and movements. While the BJP may demonstrate a degree of uniqueness among conservative parties due to the strategic considerations inherent in navigating the political landscape of a predominantly impoverished nation, which has resulted in a relatively more flexible approach to core conservative tenets such as limited government, fiscal responsibility, and *laissez-faire* economics, notable parallels can still be drawn between the BJP and other conservative parties worldwide.

A key tenet of the political ideology of Indian conservatism, although one that is hardly unique to it, is the idea that the authority of the state should be circumscribed to the will of society.²⁴ Consequently, conservative movements, including the Hindu nationalist movement, would be cautious about implementing initiatives promoting women's active participation and mobilization if they perceive it as a potential threat to the established patriarchal order. Instead, the preferred approach of the Hindu nationalist movement since its conception has been in pursuing gradual normative change. Key to this has been the establishment and sustenance of a network of local branches and ancillary organizations that provide physical and ideological training, foster a sense of camaraderie among members, and enhance their associational lives. This method emphasizes slow and meticulous efforts to bring about change rather than a top-down imposition from the party or the state, even when the BJP was in power intermittently between 1996 and 2004. Clearly then, normative change cannot be an explicit tool for religiously conservative parties.

How then do such parties induce women's participation without explicitly threatening the patriarchal political order? The answer to this, I argue, lies in a party's ability to frame the political discourse in ways that can reduce the perceived—and actual—costs of norm violation. I explore this in the next section.

Norm-compliant framing

The second—and more favored mobilization tool—for a religiously conservative party is to mobilize women without disrupting prevailing patriarchal power relations in the home and society. Key to this is the nature of a political party's communication and outreach strategy as well as the congruence of this communication with its organizational fulcrum.

Political parties perform crucial roles within democratic polities, such as serving as platforms for like-minded actors to compete for state power. However, their effectiveness in the electoral arena hinges upon their ability to inform, mobilize, and persuade citizens to support their respective agendas. If voters have complete information about parties and their policy platforms, there would be little point to partisan outreach and mobilization efforts.

²⁴Dasgupta (2015); Iwanek (2019); Chhibber and Verma (2019); Chhibber, Ostermann and Verma (2018); Jaffrelot (2017)

However, the costs of acquiring high-quality information can often be prohibitive, leading voters to prefer a state of rational ignorance.²⁵ A willful disregard for information may also be a function of a perceived lack of efficacy in influencing political outcomes and a lack of trust in institutions.

In such a situation, voters are often reliant on cues, labels, and stereotypes to form public opinion. Because there can be a multiplicity of contradictory stimuli, relying excessively on these signals can lead to low-quality opinions that are unstable and logically inconsistent, and consequently susceptible to influence by parties or elites. Indeed, a substantial amount of scholarship on public opinion, most prominently in the US, has examined the quality of information and preferences held by citizens, perceiving “political beliefs, demands, and attitudes, far from being fixed and stable, are frequently sporadic in appearance, fluctuating in intensity, ambivalent in composition, and therefore logically inconsistent in pattern and structure.”²⁶

Parties have a variety of tools with which to sway public opinion: agenda-setting, framing, priming, and transmitting cues. Here, I focus on framing, which can be broadly conceived as a cognitive framework or mental structure that shapes how individuals perceive and interpret information. While much of the research on framing finds its roots in the pioneering work of prospect theory conducted by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahnemann, the concept has a long history in political science and sociology.²⁷ Frames influence how people process and understand information, events, experiences, and social interactions, guiding their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. These frames can be influenced by personal experiences, cultural norms, societal values, and individual beliefs, shaping the way individuals make sense of the world around them.²⁸

Within the realm of political communication, framing can be broadly understood as providing a cognitive structure to organize and interpret political communication and events.²⁹ Although this approach to framing is most closely modeled on literature originating in sociology, prominently Goffman (1974) and Gamson and Modigliani (1994), as well as Lakoff (2005)’s work in cognitive linguistics, it is also compatible with emphasis frames in political psychology.³⁰ Parties can employ frames to communicate complicated political realities as “compact, easily digested summaries.”³¹ Public opinion research shows that even subtle changes in how ideas are presented to voters can lead to substantively important shifts in mass opinion.³² Crucially, not only does framing matter for partisan identification, and

²⁵Downs (1957)

²⁶Edelman (1971:3). See also Allport (1937); Converse (1964); Zaller (1992); Edelman (1964); Chong and Druckman (2007*b*); Druckman (2014); Druckman and Leeper (2012).

²⁷Edelman (1964); Goffman (1974)

²⁸Tversky and Kahneman (1981)

²⁹Goffman (1974); Gamson and Modigliani (1994); Benford and Snow (2000); Lakoff (2005)

³⁰Brugman and Burgers (2018); Scheufele and Iyengar (2012); Scheufele (2000; 1999); Nelson (2019); Nelson, Oxley and Clawson (1997)

³¹Nelson (2013)

³²See, for instance, Edelman (1964; 1977); Gamson and Modigliani (1994); Lakoff (2005; 2010); Kinder and Sanders (1990); Zaller (1992); Iyengar and Kinder (2010); Iyengar (1990; 1994); Chong and Druckman

acceptance of partisan agendas, but also for voting behavior, and participation in social movements, a subset of what I call active participation.³³ Consequently, framing is a key tool for political parties in terms of how they seek to sway public opinion.

Frames are most effective when they are consistently applied and transcend merely transmitting information to invoke deeply held beliefs and ideas through norms, symbols, myths, and metaphors.³⁴ Norms in particular can have strong effects on behavior due to both cognitive and affective reasons. Because norms provide standards of behavior that define what is appropriate or forbidden in different situations for different individuals, they can reduce the cognitive burden of decision-making. At the same time, humans have an innate need to conform and can often be deeply connected to ideas of solidarity, justice, and morality.³⁵ Therefore invoking norms in political communication, rhetoric, and practice can help to re-interpret new information in the light of familiar practices that also have affective appeal.

By relying on these norms, individuals can use them as cognitive shortcuts, reducing the cognitive burden of collecting and processing information to make informed decisions. To be sure, norms may not always provide the most optimal or efficient answer. In such cases, rational decision-makers may seek to incur the cost of gathering information—which can sometimes be extensive—to reach conclusions that may deviate from norms. But at the same time, they run the risk of incurring the costs of norm violation. In such cases, rational agents would typically seek to weigh the benefits and costs of acting independently of established norms. Thus, individuals often weigh the benefits and costs of deviating from norms, and adhering to the normative heuristic can significantly reduce cognitive load and social costs in decision-making. However, for people who do not have trouble with compliance and wish to minimize cognitive costs, adhering to the normative heuristic can significantly reduce the cognitive and social costs of decision-making.

Indeed, the availability heuristic, which originated from research by Tversky and Kahneman (1973), and later extended to the concept of familiarity, demonstrates that people tend to make decisions based on the frequency of observed phenomena and the accessibility of relevant data. When norms provide credible signals about what is acceptable, norm-based decision-making can guide individuals towards the warmth of the familiar while avoiding the uncertainties of the unknown.

Finally, invoking familiar norms also helps people rationalize and process new information. Research by social psychologists suggests that individuals can experience psychological discomfort when they are exposed to information or attitudes conflicting with their values and beliefs.³⁶ To minimize this cognitive dissonance, individuals upon encountering new information link it with their existing knowledge to find evidence of confirmation. Hence, if a religiously conservative party's mobilization rhetoric aligns with familiar norms and existing

(2007a).

³³Edelman (1971); Snow and Benford (1988); Gamson (1985)

³⁴Lakoff (2005); Edelman (1964; 1971)

³⁵Bicchieri (2017); White et al. (2009); Prentice and Paluck (2020); van Kleef, Gelfand and Jetten (2019); Cialdini and Goldstein (2004); Asch (1956).

³⁶Festinger (1962)

knowledge systems, it can help gatekeepers re-interpret women's mobilization in a familiar light, convincing them of its validity and appropriateness under certain contexts.

In addition to this need to cooperate and conform, norms and symbols can also induce moral and emotional responses, which can either substitute for or complement rational thought.³⁷ Existing research in social psychology shows that emotions can have a significant impact on what we find acceptable and worth emulating, as well as what fills us with revulsion and encourages norms of sanctioning.³⁸ Framing strategies can thus be instrumental in reducing the perceived threat to gatekeepers in both the private and public spheres by fostering positive affect surrounding women's participation. By creating a favorable emotional environment, framing can mitigate the perceived costs associated with women's involvement in the public sphere and increase the likelihood of their active participation.

Taking together the cognitive and affective aspects of norms, this suggests that religiously conservative parties can use norms to reduce the costs of women's active participation in two key ways. First, if they can frame this participation as activities that are consistent with women's roles or those that are already associated with women, they can reduce the costs of cognitive dissonance that gatekeepers may feel when allowing women space in the public sphere. At the same time, certain ways of framing can also induce a positive—or less negative— affective response to women's participation. Hence, not only can frames help people “organize experiences and guide action” (Goffman 1974) but also facilitate shared understanding, and common knowledge, and help inculcate—or reduce resistance towards— certain forms of behavior.

3.5 A theory of norm-compliant mobilization

How would a political party, especially one whose ideology does not create the space for women's emancipation from coercive patriarchal structures in the family and society, achieve their support and presence in the political sphere? In this section, I propose a theory of norm-compliant mobilization that explicates how religiously conservative parties in traditional settings can achieve this seemingly difficult task.

The theory centers on the proposition that if the key constraints to women's participation lie not so much in their own disinclination towards politics or personal characteristics but rather in the social and cultural norms governing their behavior, then a frame that helps

³⁷Edelman (1971)

³⁸For instance, even in situations where nobody would find out, feelings of guilt may prevent us from engaging in morally inappropriate actions such as stealing. This emotional aversion to transgressing norms is exemplified in Milgram's experiment where he asked strangers to give up their seats in the New York subway. On the one occasion that he mustered the courage to do so, he was overcome with emotions of shame and guilt (Prinz 2006). Moreover, norms that prohibit actions associated with negative emotions, such as disgust or revulsion, are more likely to persist over time. For example, in European societies, norms that emerged as responses to actions that elicited feelings of disgust, such as behaviors related to hygiene or bodily functions, have demonstrated greater longevity compared to norms that are solely based on promoting good manners or etiquette (Nichols 2002).

people interpret politics as a socially acceptable activity, or at least less negatively, can help ameliorate the perceived—and actual—costs of women’s participation.

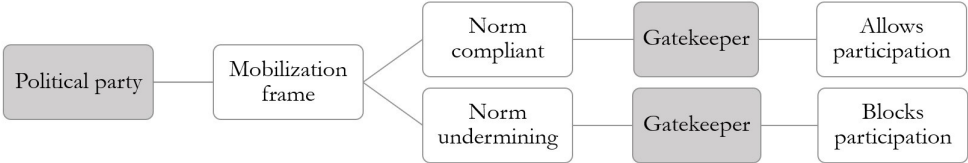
Politics as we have seen, is an inherently public and observable activity. Consequently, the benefits and costs to individuals from partaking in politics are also public. If women’s participation helps change policies, then the benefits are not restricted to the individual participant for available to the wider public. Moreover, participation also gives women public identities beyond their hitherto private identities as “A’s mother or B’s wife” as observed by India’s Election Commission. Similarly, as discussed previously, a significant component of the costs that women and their families face stems from the public and observable nature of their participation which can often be considered as undermining existing norms of women’s roles.

Accordingly, this theory proposes that women’s participation, rather than being a *unidirectional* function of personal characteristics or one of inequality within the private sphere, is a function of the *interaction* of the public and private spheres. There are two key players in this conceptual framework—a political party in the public sphere, and a gatekeeper in the private sphere. Political parties can influence women’s participation by virtue of how they frame their mobilization appeals. For the sake of simplicity, I classify mobilization frames into two categories—norm-compliant and norm-undermining. Norm-compliant frames align with traditional gender roles and the notion of separate spheres, thereby avoiding direct challenges to existing patriarchal norms dictating appropriate female behavior in the public sphere. Consequently, when political participation is framed in norm-compliant terms, gatekeepers are more inclined to permit women’s political engagement.

Conversely, gatekeepers are likely to oppose mobilization frames that infer norm-undermining roles upon women due to their potential to disrupt established power dynamics and challenge traditional gender roles within the private sphere. Norm-undermining frames introduce ideas and actions that defy conventional expectations regarding women’s behavior, potentially threatening the existing patriarchal social order. Gatekeepers, who often hold positions of authority and influence within the private sphere, may perceive such frames as subversive and detrimental to their own interests and control. By opposing norm-undermining frames, gatekeepers can maintain their position of authority and preserve the patriarchal structures that grant them power. Moreover, gatekeepers may also fear the public consequences of norm-undermining frames, including social backlash, loss of reputation, or a perceived erosion of societal values. As a result, they are inclined to resist and discourage women’s participation if they are articulated through norm-undermining frames.

This theory of norm-compliant mobilization draws on the framework of the separation of spheres that developed as a gender-based social, political, and economic equilibrium over the centuries, and is enforced by domestic gatekeepers within the private sphere to preserve their position within the home as well as avoid social sanction from disrupting this equilibrium. In this, it draws on the concept of the patriarchal political order articulated in Prillaman (2023) that considers the household as a unitary political decision-making unit where men dictate women’s political preferences and participation through threats of backlash and coercion. However, although it agrees with Prillaman (2023) in its diagnosis of what constrains women,

Figure 3.2: A theory of norm-compliant mobilization



it departs from the prognosis that meaningful participation cannot occur without challenging existing power dynamics. Instead, it argues that women can engage in seemingly norm-transgressive activities while being able to take the cover of norm-compliance to justify their actions. In essence, this theory suggests that women can navigate the political sphere while operating within the boundaries set by societal norms, thus allowing for their involvement without outrightly challenging the existing status quo.

In proposing that the sluices of domestic gatekeeping can open to allow women’s participation if it is framed and operationalized in ways that support women’s traditional domestic roles, the theory of norm-compliant mobilization also draws upon role congruity theory. Initially developed to explain prejudice against women in leadership roles by Eagly and Karau (2002), role congruity theory proposes that members of a group will be positively evaluated when its characteristics are recognized as aligning with the typical social roles of that group. Conversely, group members may face bias if they exhibit traits that deviate from the stereotypes associated with their group. Applications of role congruity theory to the case of women’s mobilization by religiously conservative parties suggest that women’s presence in the public sphere will be evaluated positively if it can be framed in role-congruent terms that do not threaten the separation of spheres.

The question then arises, why not call this a theory of role-congruent participation in the first place? Role congruity theory, as it stands is restricted to gender, whereas norm-compliant frames is a more general concept with applications beyond the realm of gender. For instance, in the realm of public health, ongoing work by Prerna Singh finds that vaccination uptake was higher when states could frame the intervention in ways that aligned with norms, morals, and practices prevailing in their societies. In a comparative historical analysis of smallpox vaccination in India and China, she finds that, unlike the Indian colonial state that tried to enforce compliance in a top-down way and met with significant resistance and vaccine hesitancy, China was far more successful in engendering compliance among citizens. Singh (N.d.) accounts for the Chinese state’s success in promoting compliance in its ability to frame the intervention around pre-existing norms and practices that were cognitively and affectively familiar to citizens. Thus, by emphasizing the significance of norm-compliant framing, I seek to acknowledge its applicability across diverse domains where behavior change is sought without challenging established norms.

The model of norm-compliant frames lays the groundwork for women’s entry into party

politics through two routes. First, it presents politics in a familiar light to women. This is crucial in contexts like India where women are often severely lacking in political knowledge and socialization. Second, when women's access to the political sphere depends on domestic gatekeepers' acquiescence, framing political engagement as conforming to public standards of women's public roles reduces perceived costs to women and their families. This restores gatekeepers' confidence that women's political entry will not change the balance of power within the home, or even be publicly perceived as a departure from socially constructed gendered behaviors.

Religiously conservative parties have a comparative advantage in mobilizing women through norm-compliant frames. Norm-compliant appeals are more *credible* for such parties for several reasons. First, such appeals are ideologically consistent with patriarchal views of how women should participate in the public sphere, often endorsed by religiously conservative parties. Second, such parties are often linked with base organizations and service wings that practice, propagate, and reinforce these norms and actions. Together, these factors make norm-compliant mobilization frames more credible for religiously conservative parties vis-à-vis others.

Religiously conservative parties possess a comparative advantage when it comes to mobilizing women through norm-compliant frames as opposed to other forms of mobilization. This advantage can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, norm-compliant appeals are inherently aligned with the ideological stance of these parties, which often endorse patriarchal perspectives on the appropriate role of women in the public domain. By emphasizing traditional gender norms and values, religiously conservative parties can effectively tap into the existing beliefs and expectations about women prevalent in their support base.

Secondly, religiously conservative parties can often be manifestations of larger movements that practice and propagate norm-compliant behaviors that make these frames credible in the first place. Like the BJP is the political arm of a larger Hindu nationalist movement led by the RSS, other grassroots organizations across the world have inspired the creation of parties to implement their political visions, if they did not create them themselves. In this vein, the Muslim Brotherhood has inspired the creation of parties in several countries including Jordan (Islamic Action Front), Tunisia (Ennahda), Kuwait (Islamic Constitutional Movement), Bahrain (Minbar), and Palestine (Hamas), in addition to its home country of Egypt. The PKS in Indonesia was also started by a group of students inspired by the Brotherhood. Similarly, Hezbollah in Lebanon started as a force to resist the Israeli invasion in 1984 and since then has morphed into a larger social and political movement. Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is part of a larger Christian Democratic movement across Europe, and Israel's Shas represents a broader religious and conservative movement within Israeli politics.

In all the cases mentioned, and as explored in greater detail in Chapter 6, the grassroots associations linked to the party have mobilized support for the party's vision, often in line with established social norms and practices. This close connection between the party and these supporting entities enhances the credibility of norm-compliant mobilization frames when they are presented by a religiously conservative party. Women and gatekeepers who

already hold sympathies towards the goals of these organizations are more likely to find such appeals persuasive, as they directly witness the practical implementation and reinforcement of these norms within their respective communities. Moreover, even individuals who do not align themselves with the religiously conservative party but are sympathetic to the invoked norm and are convinced of the party's sincerity, in part through the grassroots organization's efforts, may be willing to set aside their objections to women's participation if they perceive it as worthwhile.

In addition to being more credible, norm-compliant frames also hold greater value for religiously conservative parties. Families that support these parties often impose stricter limitations on women's mobility and adherence to traditional gender norms. As a result, women from such families may find it challenging to participate in activities that undermine these norms. Conversely, non-conservative women may be hesitant to participate in norm-compliant ways if it reinforces patriarchal norms and traditions, as they may strive for greater gender equality and empowerment. These dynamics create a separating equilibrium where conservative and non-conservative parties emphasize distinct strategies to mobilize women. Conservative parties, with their norm-compliant frames, have a comparative advantage in mobilizing women who adhere to traditional norms and are part of families that enforce such restrictions. On the other hand, non-conservative parties may prioritize alternative strategies that focus on challenging and transforming existing gender norms, appealing to women who seek greater gender equality and are more resistant to norm compliance.

3.6 Operationalizing norm-compliant and norm-undermining frames

Seva (service): A norm-compliant frame

Political parties seeking to mobilize women in conservative and traditional settings face an uphill battle. Not only do they need to accomplish the standard tasks of mobilization, persuasion, and political socialization, but also educate and socialize both women and men. On the one hand, women need to be socialized to enter the political arena, while men need to get used to women's presence in politics. Attempts at diversity and inclusion can be even more damaging for a religiously conservative party by causing ideological dilution and backlash from its existing core base. Critical to this effort is to lower the costs of women's engagement—for women, their families, as well as the party—by reframing politics as compatible with existing gender norms.

In India, the BJP effectively addresses these objectives by framing civic engagement in terms of *seva*, a powerful norm of selfless service. As discussed in Chapter 2, *seva* is an injunctive norm of service, in that it describes a normative standard of behavior. Within the private sphere, *sevais* gendered in its descriptive nature, depicting a hierarchical domestic relationship characterized by caregiving duties, primarily towards family elders, the infirm,

and children.³⁹

Although *seva* is not conceptually gendered *per se*, as South Asian traditions expect men to care for their elders, there exists a significant empirical gender-based disparity in terms of who provides and receives care, as well as the nature of tasks performed and the time dedicated to them. Women predominantly serve as caregivers, while men often assume the role of care recipients.⁴⁰ According to a time-use survey conducted by India's Central Statistical Organization in 2019, 14% of men reported undertaking unpaid caregiving services for household members compared to 27.6% of women.⁴¹ The disparity in the provision of unpaid domestic services is even more pronounced, with 26.1% of men and 81.2% of women engaging in such activities. Furthermore, women dedicate approximately 30 hours per week to caregiving tasks, which is ten times the amount reported by men.

Additionally, the nature of caregiving duties further reinforces socially constructed gender roles, highlighting the division of labor between male providers and female caregivers. Women bear the primary physical and emotional burden of caregiving, tending to the bodily and emotional needs of care recipients. In contrast, men's responsibilities tend to align with culturally perceived masculine duties, such as providing financial assistance, transportation, repairs, and other practical tasks.⁴² Women experience the daily realities of *seva*, as they are often engaged in continuous care-giving responsibilities. In contrast, men have the privilege of engaging in such service intermittently or as needed. This asymmetry further reinforces the gendered expectations and norms surrounding caregiving within South Asian contexts. Consequently, an aptitude for service (*seva bhava*) is often an informal measure of a woman's character, shaping societal expectations of women's roles and behaviors.

The BJP capitalizes on this cultural norm by presenting its vision of politics as *seva*. In the Indian context, women have historically faced persistent exclusion from politics, resulting in lower levels of political knowledge and interest compared to men. Additionally, the perception that politics is a domain tainted by corruption and moral vacuity further reinforces the perception that it is unsuitable for women, significantly raising entry barriers. Consequently, women are hesitant to engage in political activism and gatekeepers enforce these barriers due to the potential private and social costs.

This is effective for two reasons: familiarity and the circumvention of gatekeeping. First, in this environment, the framing of politics as *seva* becomes particularly effective in mobilizing women. Deeply ingrained as a gendered norm within the domestic sphere, *seva* offers a familiar lens through which women can perceive and engage with politics. By presenting politics as an extension of their existing domestic roles, the BJP, through *seva*, aligns political participation with the lived experiences and responsibilities of women. This approach has a clear parallel to Gandhi's efforts to involve women in the freedom struggle during the early 20th century, where he sought to domesticate politics by allowing women

³⁹Vatuk (1990); Lamb (2000); Cohen (2000); Kowalski (2016; 2022)

⁴⁰Balagopal (2017)

⁴¹Central Statistical Organization (2019)

⁴²Razavi (2007); Hirway (2015); Antonopoulos (2008); Irudaya Rajan and Balagopal (2017); Connidis (2005)

to contribute without necessarily stepping outside their homes. However, there is a subtle difference, in that the BJP instead extends the private sphere into the political realm. This strategy is consistent with the ideological beliefs of *Hindutva*, which emphasizes the family as a microcosm of society and views interpersonal interactions within households as guiding people's social roles. By framing political engagement as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities, the BJP thus reinforces the idea that the family is the smallest organizing unit of society, and in doing so, creates the space for women to serve the nation through the metaphor of an extended family.

The second factor underlying the effectiveness of *seva* as a mobilization frame is that it helps circumvent gatekeepers' objections to women's participation by downplaying the political nature of their participation. BJP activists' gendered use of *seva* allows them to project politics as a form of selfless service congruent with women's existing responsibilities within the household. Because it does not pose a direct challenge to traditional gender roles, *seva* helps preserve the patriarchal structure of power within the household, the party, and society at large.

Relatedly, the *seva* frame positions women as political outsiders above the usual power struggles and machinations of political life.⁴³ It highlights their status as individuals driven by higher moral values and a sense of duty, rather than being motivated by personal ambition or the pursuit of power. This framing allows gatekeepers, who may hold traditional views on gender roles and be resistant to women's participation in politics, to perceive women's involvement as non-threatening and in line with their expected societal roles.

In addition to facilitating access from families aligned with the BJP and possibly adhering to a more conservative view of women's roles, the *seva* frame can also ease access for women in families not aligned with the BJP. Emphasizing gendered notions of moral obligations and selflessness without explicitly highlighting its political nature, gatekeepers from various political backgrounds are more likely to support women's engagement with parties that promote the *seva* brand. Thus through *seva*, the BJP can use an approach that resonates with Riker (1986)'s concept of heresthetics, whereby it restructures its political environment to its advantage without relying solely on direct persuasion of male gatekeepers.

To be sure, *seva* is not the only norm-compliant frame that political parties can utilize to mobilize women. Throughout the world, when political spaces have been inaccessible to women, parties, and women themselves have employed alternative framings based on gender-specific roles such as motherhood, defense of family values, and religious affiliations. Indeed, I analyze some of these cases in Chapter 6. However, this book focuses exclusively on *seva* for empirical reasons, as it is the preferred frame of the BJP, and holds significant moral and affective resonance within India due to its long-standing legacy. Furthermore, *seva* encompasses various other frames. Its religious origins and role in Hindu re-organization and revivalism establish its strong religious connections. Simultaneously, its reference to women's traditional domestic roles reinforces its association with motherhood and family.

⁴³The sense of political exclusion can also emerge as a powerful unifying force to enable women's collective action and mobilization per Baldez (2002).

While acknowledging that religion and motherhood may have distinct mechanisms through which they can engage women, *seva* incorporates many of these aspects and can perhaps be regarded as encompassing the broadest range of norms and roles.

Protest: A norm-undermining frame

Apart from service, political parties engage women in a diverse array of frames and activities. One of the most common ways of doing so is through protests and related frames of contentious politics that entail women exercising a voice in the public sphere. These, I argue are constitutive of norm-undermining frames for two reasons: because of what they are an expression of, and because of what they entail for women and patriarchy.

Firstly, protests embody expressions of voice that stem from dissatisfaction with the existing status quo and recognition of various forms of deprivation, broadly conceived. These protests require women to exercise their voice in the public sphere and participate in collective actions that challenge prevailing gender norms. They articulate a clear demand for change, reflecting a departure from the customary expectation of women's adherence to societal norms. Moreover, protests manifest as expressions of rights and claims against the state, shifting the focus from mere duties or obligations towards actively asserting women's entitlement to agency and autonomy.

Secondly, protests entail public expressions of voice that are supported by collective action and institutional backing, often facilitated by political parties and unions. The public nature of protests highlights women's active participation in norm-undermining activities, thereby challenging the boundaries traditionally imposed upon them. Through their active engagement in protests, women can serve as influential role models, inspiring others to question and challenge gender norms. Additionally, the institutional support provided by political parties and other organizations, as also the bonding social capital between participants, further heightens the threat posed to patriarchal norms, amplifying the transformative potential of these mobilization efforts.

In summary, protests as a norm-undermining frame for mobilizing women offer distinct advantages within political party engagement strategies. Their nature as expressions of voice, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and assertions of rights challenge established gender norms. Furthermore, the public nature of protests, along with collective action and institutional backing, not only showcases women's participation in norm-undermining activities but also enhances the potential for inspiring broader social change. By embracing protests as a means of mobilization, political parties can effectively engage women in contentious politics, ultimately fostering gender empowerment and social transformation.

3.7 Conclusion

This theory of norm-compliant mobilization has important implications for our understanding of women's partisan engagement and its implications. It demonstrates that women's

participation is at its core a privately negotiated public activity, and therefore needs to be theorized as a function of the interaction of the public and private spheres. By taking this interaction into account, this theory predicts that women's entry into the public sphere does not only occur with normative change, or collective action based on shared identities, experiences, and grievances, but also as a process of negotiation with families and prevailing structures of power.

Applying this theory to the case of India and the religiously conservative BJP suggests that the Hindu right wing's deep-rooted association with the concept and practice of service, as well as its gendered identification, makes it an ideal frame to mobilize women, while at the same time, circumventing contradictions to its ideology and the patriarchal political order.

In the next chapter, I present the first empirical analysis of this argument. Using a multi-method approach, I examine the BJP's contemporary use of *seva*-based frames with a focus on how its macro-level framing and communication have uniquely gendered implications for the micro-level mobilization strategies adopted by the BJP's women activists. I present these results in a comparative lens by contrasting how the BJP's mobilization methods differ from those used by secular parties such as the Indian National Congress.

Chapter 4

How does the BJP Mobilize Women?

In this chapter, I discuss the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) contemporary operationalization of *seva*, particularly how its workers practice and articulate their political activities. Although my main focus is on the BJP, I also analyze the Indian National Congress' (INC)—the BJP's main national rival—perspectives on *seva* to provide a foil for my discussion about the BJP.

Chapter 2 traced the transition of *seva* from the private to the public sphere with the growing impetus of the Indian nationalist movement. From a personal and individualistic practice of religious devotion and charitable giving, *seva* became a means to recover national pride and build an associational civic culture in the hands of Indian nationalists, Hindu revivalists, as well as in Gandhi's appeals when mobilizing citizens, particularly women, for India's freedom struggle. This transition was accompanied by a corresponding centralization of the practice of *seva*. From a decentralized practice of charitable giving, revivalists and nationalists molded *seva* into a practice of organized service towards humankind.¹

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the evolving relationship between the RSS and the BJP, and how this informs the BJP's incorporation of the norm-compliant frame of *seva* into its rhetoric and practice. In doing so, I describe how the BJP's political communication ratifies *seva* as a standard of conduct intrinsic to the Hindu nationalist agenda. My analysis of *seva* within the BJP centers on these standards of conduct, how they are disseminated, manifested, and operationalized, and their behavioral implications for women and their families. Consequently, rather than examining *seva* as a material transaction of goods or service as the literature on constituency service, clientelism, or vote buying is wont to do, I focus on the gendered aspects of these standards of conduct within the BJP.

Next, with an eye on partisan differences in mobilization, I elucidate how the INC has a sharper focus on norm-undermining mobilization frames grounded in a rights-based approach towards citizenship as opposed to the BJP's norm-compliant *seva*-based approach. Finally, I discuss how this elite focus on *seva* shapes ground-level participatory outcomes. I discuss two broad categories of outcomes: the nature of events organized by the party machine and

¹Beckerlegge (2000*b*; 2006*b*); Watt (2005)

preferred recruitment criteria for party activists.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is dedicated to exploring elite-level framing and messaging of politics as service within the BJP. Second, I explore how these macro-level framing attempts correlate with differences between the BJP's and the INC's engagement with women activists and outreach with voters on the ground. Finally, I explore how the BJP uses *seva* as a recruitment strategy.

The evidence for this discussion draws from extensive qualitative and ethnographic work with the political elite and lower-level party activists in New Delhi and Rajasthan, and a discrete choice experiment implemented as part of a larger survey of 128 female party activists in Rajasthan. I supplement this with an extensive dataset of social media posts by the BJP, the INC, their women's wings and their key leaders that showcase differences across the two parties in terms of rhetoric and the volume of communications featuring *seva*.

A limit to the analyses presented in this chapter is that the differences in partisan rhetoric and the concomitant divergence in ground-level outcomes across the two parties should not be interpreted as part of a causal relationship but rather, as associations. Greater coherence between the BJP's communication and practice, as the results of my analysis indicate, may be a function of three mechanisms. First, it could be due to elite influence, in which case communication shapes practice. A second possibility is that it may be driven by party elites' intimate knowledge of what motivates the rank and file, in which case the practice of *seva* shapes communication, to the extent that political communication is intended to provide signals of party elites' focus areas to its rank and file. Furthermore, the current elite in the BJP comprise long-term RSS and BJP activists shaped by the organization's crystallizing focus on *seva* during the 1970s and 1980s. These competing but also complementary mechanisms show how ingrained the *seva* frame is to the BJP, simultaneously ideological, affective, and strategic. In Chapter 5, however, I present experimental evidence that the framing of activism and political participation in terms of *seva* has a causal influence on political behavior.

4.1 *Seva*: From the RSS to the BJP

What has been the relationship of the ostensible cultural and social service organization, the RSS, with the BJP through its history? The BJP's overwhelming electoral successes over the last decade have provided the legislative strength to the party to implement many of the RSS's long-standing ideological commitments. At the same time, the RSS's network of organizations have lent valuable strategic support during electoral campaigns and voter mobilization efforts. Given these overlaps in ideology and strategy, it can be tempting to consider that the two organizations have been as close since the BJP's inception. However a closer look at the vicissitudes of history shows that the RSS has not always provided unconditional support to the BJP, and neither has the BJP always been a vehicle for the RSS's interests. Yet, what is the framework through which we should analyze this evolving relationship, and where does *seva* feature in this scheme of things?

I argue that analyzing this relationship through the lens of ideology and organization reveals why the BJP focuses on *seva*. At the ideological level, the RSS has played a significant role in shaping the macro-politics of the BJP by influencing its broader social, cultural, and economic goals. At the organizational level, the RSS has provided broad signals and organizational links on how to structure the organization in order to achieve these goals. In both these heads, *seva* has played an important part as a mobilization frame, an organizational principle, a tool for Hindu consolidation, and for women, a socially permissible way to enter the public sphere.

As the ideological mentor of the BJP, one may expect the RSS to have an upper hand in deciding the party's goals. Yet, strategic considerations and electoral needs have often made the BJP take an independent line. This led to fundamental tensions between the ideologically puritanical stance of the RSS and the political pragmatism that the BJP was forced to exercise, especially its formative years. Fearing that *Hindutva* would be too inadequate a force to win over the electorate with a new party, in its first election that was held in 1984, the BJP experimented with an ideological platform based on Gandhian secularism. Held in the shadow of Indira Gandhi's assassination and heightened religious polarization between Hindus and Sikhs, the RSS threw its weight behind the INC, which it perceived as favoring the cause of Hindus at the time.² According to the BJP ideologue K.N. Govindacharya "Before the 1984 elections, there was coordination between RSS and BJP. But for [the] 1984 [elections] this stopped."³ This led to a sense of alienation among the party's cadre, many of whom broke ranks with the BJP. Mohini Garg, a founding member and former state President of the BJP's women's wing, recounted, "Indira Gandhi was a different leader, very strong. And we were all very affected by the way she was killed. In that election, all of us voted for the Congress."⁴

The 1984 election was the BJP's nadir: it secured just two seats in India's 542-member Parliament. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the party president and architect of this doomed experiment himself lost, and in 1986, was replaced by the more extreme Lal Krishna Advani. Since then, the Advani-led *Ram Janmabhumi* movement brought the BJP closer to the RSS's preferred ideological stance.

This period of ideological coalescence was also when the RSS's decided to put its ideology into practice through a concerted organizational push on social service, or *seva*, projects. Figure B.1 provides a clear depiction of the strategic shift made by the RSS towards prioritizing service provision, as evidenced by the increased activity in school construction. This shift aligns with the broader expansion of social service provision by other RSS affiliates, such as Seva Bharti and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which exhibit similar temporal trends.⁵

Alongside this increasing ideological alignment over time, the organizational structure of the BJP—then the Jana Sangh—mirrors that of the RSS, as discussed in Chapter 2. Rather than co-opting regional elites, the *Sangathanist* model prioritized building the party through

²Sitapati (2020); Choudhary (N.d.)

³Sitapati (2020)

⁴Interview with author in January 2019, New Delhi

⁵See Thachil (2014:Chapter 4) for further details on this expansion.

a solid network of activists who would embed the the party at the local level through *seva*, and simultaneously propagate Hindu nationalist ideology.⁶ Consequently, the BJP's—then the Jana Sangh—political activism was inseparable from social work. The long-term aim of establishing an organicist and harmonized society could not be completed without social work. And the Jana Sangh would come to power once the organization would merge with society.⁷

How did the Jana Sangh and the BJP go about this? The BJP follows a dual administrative structure, where elected representatives form the face of the party while “organizational secretaries” (*Sangathan Mantris*) form its steel frame. These organizational secretaries are full-time RSS propagandists who are assigned to look after party-building in different parts of the country. This division of labor allows the RSS a powerful window of influence into the BJP. For instance, Modi's first stint as chief minister was not through the channel of contesting elections. Rather he was an RSS propagandist on loan to the BJP with the position of National Secretary (Organization). When the incumbent Chief Minister Khushabhau Patel was dismissed in 2001, the central leadership of the BJP decided to replace him with Modi.

Even in more ordinary circumstances, organizational secretaries can wield significant influence for the RSS by shaping the BJP's expansion and implementation of the RSS's agenda. This unique organizational structure allows the RSS and the BJP to maintain ideological cohesion despite the centrifugal tendencies of electoral strategy. Organizational secretaries are also important roots of party discipline, especially when making decisions about internal party positions or during electoral nominations. The organicist thought of the RSS encourages harmony (*samrasta*), and consensus, hence *Sangathan Mantris* played essential roles in ironing out differences between competing factions. Here, their status as disinterested in political power for themselves, and their devotion to the cause of Hindu nationalism, endows them with a moral authority that others lack, and as Jaffrelot (1988) argues, their appeals for unity in the name of the movement's ideological objectives are often credible and effective.⁸

Through most of its history, the RSS was content to exert its influence through its Organizing Secretaries, abjuring a more active role in electoral politics. But this principle of overt political disengagement changed in 2013. The period from 2004 to 2014, the two terms in which the INC-led United Progressive (UPA) government had been in power, was not good for the RSS. As Figure 2.1, shows, there was an absolute decline in the number of local branches, coupled with charges of Hindu terrorism. Feared that a third consecutive victory for the UPA could perniciously undermine its long-term *Hindutva* agenda, the RSS started viewing the 2014 national election as pivotal to its fortunes.⁹ Fortunately for the organization, an opportunity came in the form of a slew of corruption charges against the

⁶Jaffrelot (1988:151-152)

⁷Jaffrelot (1988:151-155)

⁸Although there are recent exceptions to this rule: Modi was himself loaned to the BJP from the RSS in such a capacity, and media reports suggest that B.L. Santhosh, the existing General Secretary (Organization), harbors electoral ambitions (Singh 2022b).

⁹Andersen and Damle (2018)

UPA and the INC, that led to the party's public perception hitting rock bottom. After the BJP's loss in 2009, Advani had wanted a second shot at heading the party's campaign, but the RSS rank and file was overwhelmingly in favor of Modi. Facing this groundswell of support for Modi and fearing what could perhaps be a third loss at best or an internal revolt at worst, the RSS firmly threw its weight behind Modi. Advani was forced to make way. Nearly all accounts show that the 2014 election was remarkable for the RSS's contribution to the BJP's campaign.¹⁰ The BJP reaped rich rewards from the RSS's expanded role. Since the INC's historic victory in 1984, this was the first time a single party had won a majority of seats in the Indian Parliament.

Notwithstanding the RSS' rising political activism, it was unlikely that the BJP could continue to count on such a high degree of support in subsequent elections.¹¹ Cognizant of this, Modi together with the then Party President and current Home Minister, Amit Shah, took steps to expand the BJP's own base of activists through extensive and innovative membership drives. All activists, including women, were given targets to mobilize new voters to join the party and persuade existing voters. To make it easier for new members to enroll, the BJP took a novel initiative: all one had to do was to give a missed call to a designated phone number. These membership drives and workers' efforts to enroll people within the organization have led to the BJP calling itself the world's largest political party.

This expanded outreach and influx of new members could create problems of ideological dilution and competing interests as suggested in Chapter 1. The BJP is seeking to ameliorate this through two key measures: ideological homogenization by conducting training programs for new and existing members, and casting itself as a social movement working for the betterment of society. Since 2015, the party has invested substantial resources in training and outreach to acquaint the burgeoning cadre with the party's ideology.¹² At the same time, training institutions such as Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini have contributed to propagating a culture of *seva* through training sessions for politicians and civil servants.¹³

At the same time, rather than continuing to rely solely on the RSS to sustain moral and affective links with citizens through *seva*, the BJP is attempting to brand itself as a social movement, or at least a social service organization interfacing between the state and society.¹⁴ In doing so, the party has combined the more recent delivery of private goods and services (and contingent credit-claiming for such delivery), with the ongoing framing of Modi as a leader dedicated to *seva* and the party itself as an instrument for implementing this social service. For instance, in a letter lauding party workers' Covid-relief efforts in January

¹⁰See for instance Jha (2017); Sardesai (2015); Andersen and Damle (2018); Palshikar, Kumar and Lodha (2017); Singh and Goel (2019).

¹¹Andersen and Damle (2018:5)

¹²See www.bjptraining.com for an overview of the training program and manuals created under the *Deen Dayal Prashikshan Maha-abhiyan* (Deen Dayal Training Mega-Mission). Also see Ganguly and Dwivedi (2019) for an unabashedly admiring, albeit informative review, of Amit Shah's role in creating training and outreach programs.

¹³Interview with Shridhar Damle in Chicago, April 2023.

¹⁴Srivastava (2014); ET Bureau (2015); Ray (2017); Singh (2022a); Andersen (2022), Andersen and Damle (2018:5)

2021, the party president, J.P. Nadda, noted that the BJP had demonstrated how the party machine could be used as a tool of social service.¹⁵

The Hindu nationalist movement has historically followed a policy of gradual incorporation when it comes to women's participation. In its early years, the RSS did not permit women to join or participate in its local branches. In 1936, when Lakshmibai Kelkar approached the RSS with the proposal of allowing women to receive physical training to contribute to nationalist goals, rather than accepting women into the RSS, Hedgewar suggested that she start a separate organization exclusively for women. This led to the establishment of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Despite these extensive years of operation, the Samiti has always remained a marginal player within the right-wing movement with the reins firmly in the hands of the RSS.¹⁶ As a yardstick, the RSS operates 60,929 branches, has a membership of nearly 5 million, and is held together by a network of 3,000 propagandists compared to the Samiti's 4,900 branches, membership of 55,000 women and 50 women propagandists.¹⁷ Broadly the Hindu nationalist movement followed the principle of segregating men and women, leading to women having only a marginal say in the Sangh's affairs.

But even this segregated space was denied to women within the core political outfits representing Hindu nationalism. Prior to the establishment of the BJP, the responsibility of mobilizing Hindu interests rested with the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh. The Mahasabha provided very limited opportunities to women, even denying support to active women mobilizers to form a women's wing.¹⁸ Throughout its history, only one woman became a Member of the Indian Parliament through the party. As the Mahasabha slowly faded into irrelevance, it was replaced by the Jana Sangh. The Jana Sangh, however, did not play a significant role in the evolution—or devolution—of women's participation in right-wing politics and acted more as a “bridge” between the Mahasabha and the BJP, the party that eventually replaced it at the vanguard of the movement.¹⁹

While the Jana Sangh may not have played a significant role in mobilizing women within the right-wing movement, the broader social and political landscape of the 1970s and 1980s provided an environment conducive to women to start entering the public sphere. During this period, women started entering the public sphere to advocate for education and equal rights within an autonomous women's movement.²⁰ Although perceived as being inspired by global, particularly Western, movements, Indian feminists adapted their demands to local concerns to protest violence against women, dowry practices, *Sati* (widow burning), sex-selective abortion, rising prices of food and fuel, and movements against alcohol.

¹⁵Hindustan Times (2021)

¹⁶Interpretive scholars have pointed out that unlike the RSS whose members style themselves as volunteers, as evidenced by *swayamsevak* in the name of the organization, the *Samiti* styles itself as subservient to the nation as can be seen through its use of the term *sevika*. For more details, see Bacchetta (2004)

¹⁷RSS Annual Report 2022, Frayer and Khan (2019); Ambekar (2020)

¹⁸See Williams (2013; 2023)

¹⁹Williams (2023)

²⁰It is often argued that the women's movement was spurred by the publication of a Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1974 that highlighted discriminatory sociocultural practices, political and economic processes.

This spurred political parties to recognize the importance of women to their electoral designs, leading them to conclude that to get the votes of women, they had to appeal to their group interests. One reflection of this is the gradual increase in the space devoted to what parties believed were women's issues in their election manifestos. Even though parties did not know whether Dalit women would be better served through economic or social upliftment, they targeted women as a group.

In this milieu, as the Jana Sangh gave way to the BJP, the right-wing movement realized that they could ignore women's concerns at their own peril, particularly in the aftermath of the party's disastrous electoral debut in 1984. Extending the status quo would play into the hands of the Communists and the Congress who, given their ideological affinity, were better positioned to reap the fruits of the burgeoning women's movement. With these concerns in mind, and to provide a space for women in the party, the BJP established a women's wing of its own, the Mahila Morcha, or the Women's Front. Describing the motivation to form the women's wing, Mohini Garg, who had served as its former Delhi President and National Secretary, said that the party wanted to mobilize like-minded nationalistic women who were not just concerned about rights, but also responsibilities.

Garg described how she, along with Mridula Sinha—who later served as the President of the Women's Wing—went about the task of party-building under the guidance of Vijaya Raje Scindia, the BJP's main financier for much of the 1980s and early 1990s. Although the women's wing was conceptualized with the founding of the the BJP in 1980, it faced the challenge that few women were interested in party politics. Women's political involvement primarily centered around families already engaged in politics. Since it was hard to get ordinary women out of their homes on ordinary days, the Morcha resorted to religious festivals to mobilize women. Taking inspiration from Tilak's strategy of expanding the boundaries of the private sphere through the public celebration of festivals nearly a century ago, the Morcha started using the Hindu calendar of festivals to mobilize women out of their homes.

State units of the BJP were established and instructed to coordinate events with the national unit by celebrating festivals such as Holi, Raksha Bandhan, and Diwali. Alongside these occasional engagements, the state units were asked to regularize their mobilization activities through social service initiatives, such as teaching children, occasional community kitchens, and distributing clothing. Women in slums were specifically targeted with the distribution of blankets and warm clothes during winter, as well as the drives to collect school uniforms and books for children.

Initial attempts at coordination with state heads were through letters, providing instructions and activity schedules. However, replies from state units were scarce. In response, it was suggested to them that they should make physical visits to strengthen connections and expand the organizational structure. Thus, as the central office bearers of the women's wing embarked on state visits, state-level office bearers followed suit to districts and blocks, or *mandals*. This approach not only increased women's mobility and political engagement at different levels but also facilitated the establishment of a hierarchical organizational structure, starting from the national to the state and local levels. According to Garg, the women's wing had solidified its organizational framework by 1986.

Yet, the Morcha still lagged behind other parties when it came to organizational membership. For one, the larger party was still a marginal player in national politics. Second the constituency that the women's wing sought to mobilize believed in relatively more traditional roles for women than the Communists and the Congress. But the Morcha received a wind its sails with the Shah Bano case where a number of Hindu women became more sympathetic of the BJP's push for a uniform civil code, which was the party's main focus as far as women were concerned.²¹ Later, a number of women joined the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), another RSS-affiliated organization to unite the Hindu ecclesiastic order, to campaign for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya, the purported birthplace of the god Rama, in place of where a mosque currently stood. After the demolition of the mosque in 1991, a large number of women in the VHP and the Samiti went back to their homes, but a few extended their newfound freedoms by joining the BJP's women's wing, swelling its ranks, particularly in northern India.²² Since then, the women's wing engaged itself in organizational and propagandist work, mingling with social service efforts.

While there has been a large literature on the emergence and success of social movements, several social movements may take years to reach fruition. Scholars have explored various factors that contribute to their effectiveness, including the ability to mobilize grievances, access to resources, and the cultivation of collective identities.²³ Additionally, attention has been given to the framing of movement goals and the political opportunities that can be harnessed.²⁴ However, there is still a need to understand why some movements are able to sustain themselves over time while others fade away.

One perspective offered by the "new social movement" theory suggests that movements aiming to transform society and everyday life, rather than solely focusing on challenging the state, may have a greater chance of enduring and adapting to changing circumstances.²⁵ These movements prioritize broader societal changes and engage with diverse issues, allowing them to navigate potential opportunities, address grievances, and tap into emerging resources. This approach emphasizes the importance of long-term sustainability and adaptability in the face of evolving political and social contexts. For instance, successful bottom-up Islamist mobilization by the Virtue Party in Turkey focused on forging an indigenous identity through the transformation of everyday religious and cultural practices.²⁶

In this setting, Deo (2015) argues that an indicator for the success of social movements is the degree of grassroots activity that the movement can nurture in the period between different mobilizations. For groups that have been historically marginalized from the political process, and indeed the public sphere as in the case of women, not only does regular

²¹Williams (2023:44)

²²See Sarkar (1999*b*) for the variation in Samiti activity and influence.

²³See for instance Gurr (1970); Zald and McCarthy (1979); Anderson (2006).

²⁴See Melucci et al. (1989); Benford and Snow (1988; 2000) for framing, and McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001); Tilly (1995); Tarrow (1998; 1996); McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) for political processes and opportunity structures.

²⁵See Melucci (1996); Cohen (1985); Melucci et al. (1989); Bourq and Touraine (1981); Tuğal (2009)

²⁶Tuğal (2009)

grassroots organizing and activity legitimize their presence to the larger community, but also to other members of their group.²⁷ Indeed, the “everyday acts of politics [can be] the most consequential in shaping social reality in the long run.”²⁸

In the case of women in the BJP, the everyday acts of social service have a value beyond what can be measured through its impact on the lives of its beneficiaries. Admittedly, the voluntary acts of *seva*, unless when coordinated with specialized organizations like Seva Bharti, can often be extremely localized, and dependent on the organizational abilities, inclinations, and resources of activists. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine their transformative potential when political activists distribute fireworks to children in slums on the occasion of Diwali, or invite them to celebrate local cultural festivals. However, for women engaging in these acts of service, *seva* creates an institutionalized way to negotiate the boundaries of the public and private spheres, legitimizing their activity to gatekeepers in their families and the traditional elite in a way that complies with existing gender norms.

Moreover the ideology and the practice of *seva* provides a foundation to foster alignment and coherence among the often disparate activities of Sangh Parivar organizations such as the BJP’s women’s wing, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Matri Shakti, and Durga Vahini, amongst others. In a series of coordination meeting held for women’s organizations within the *Sangh Parivar* in different cities in 2019, the theme of which was “Woman: From the Individual to the Community” (*Mahila: Svayam se Samaj Tak*), representatives from different organizations addressed women members who had gathered in the audience, about the importance of service (*seva*) and organization (*sangathan*) as a means to build the Hindu nation. While in New Delhi, much of the audience consisted of middle-aged women, attendees in Kota were younger, with many in their late teens. The Delhi event had a stronger focus on *seva* compared to Kota which focused on educating young women about the purported perils of dating or marrying Muslim boys.²⁹ In both cases, women were encouraged to leave the confines of the private sphere to embrace a wider cause, and to embrace ideals enshrined in *seva* as a means for doing so. Shared platforms such as this enabled the propagation of specific elements of right-wing ideology, while also mobilizing women and providing associational spaces during non-electoral periods. These were not the only ways in which the BJP and the right-wing mobilized women through the lens of *seva*; I discuss more instances later in this chapter. I bring up the coordination committee meetings at this point to show how like the scholarship on the new social movements, the Hindu nationalist movement endeavors to elevate the concept of *seva* to a means of constructing an ethical Hindu identity and integrating it into women’s everyday public lives.

²⁷Scott (2008a;b)

²⁸Deo (2015:8)

²⁹The Hindu Right perceives the phenomenon of Muslim men marrying Hindu women as part of a larger narrative of a globally funded conspiracy. According to this perspective, the objective of these interfaith marriages is to increase the Muslim population in India through the conversion of Hindu women and their subsequent offspring.

4.2 Data and qualitative fieldwork

To understand the differences in how the BJP and the INC viewed women's participation, I conducted qualitative and ethnographic research with voters and political elites over a span of three years between November 2018 to January 2022. However, the bulk of this research was undertaken between November 2018 and February 2020 owing to the global pandemic that struck India in March 2020, because of which I had to effectively cease all field-based research till September 2021. Before the pandemic struck, I shadowed politicians during their election campaigns, attended party events, interacted with voters and party workers, and observed mobilization tools and rhetoric being employed in rural and urban areas.

My research window intersected with state- and national-level elections as well as some local-level elections, so I was able to closely examine electoral rhetoric and mobilization, and how this contrasted with parties' mobilization efforts in non-electoral times. During these elections, I shadowed two candidates from the BJP and one from the INC during their daily campaigns for a period of one week. I interviewed voters, party workers, journalists, and media personnel during these campaign events to develop my contacts for more in-depth qualitative data collection that I undertook after the din of elections had died down and politicians and people alike had more time on their hands.

In all, I interacted with 132 party activists through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and informal conversations during the course of participant observation during party events. Although the exact number is hard to ascertain since there were a large number of activists during some events, I had direct conversations with 82 unique activists. These respondents hailed from the BJP and the INC, as well as the thick organization of the *Sangh Parivar*, viz., the RSS, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, Matri Shakti, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. The table above delineates the functions of these organizations within the Sangh Parivar, as well as their gender composition. The BJP, the ABVP, and the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh are mixed-gender organizations; the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, and Matri Shakti are exclusively for women, while the remaining are for men.

I used a combination of top-down and ground-level strategies to access party activists in the BJP, the INC, and the Sangh Parivar. I spent initial months in Delhi making introductions and obtaining buy-in for my project at the national-level party offices as well as the RSS and the Rashtra Sevika Samiti—the women's wing of the RSS. I followed this up with fieldwork in my study sites where I met the state-level elites referred to me by the party activists in the national headquarters of the two parties. I continued using this respondent-driven selection method to get in touch with ground-level activists. However, there were limits to this approach. Activists were more likely to refer me to their loyalists, or to those who they were certain would talk about the party and themselves in good light. Occasionally, if the referent lived nearby, the current respondent could even summon them for an interview in their presence. Ostensibly, respondents were doing this for my convenience but it did not allow referents the opportunity to decline participation and constrained their responses. To ameliorate this, I used a second complementary approach where I tracked party events

Table 4.1: Main Sangh Parivar organizations

Name of Organization	Function within the Sangh
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)*	Parent Organization, grassroots mobilization
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)*	Political party arm
Rashtra Sevika Samiti*	Women's wing of RSS
Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)*	Cultural affairs and international activities
Matri Shakti*	Women's wing of VHP
Bajrang Dal*	Youth wing of VHP (for men aged 15-35)
Durga Vahini*	Women's wing of Bajrang Dal
Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)*	Students' union
Bharatiya Kisan Sangh*	Farmers' union
Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh	Workers' union
Seva Bharti*	Social service
Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA)	Social service (Tribals/ <i>Adivasis</i>)
Muslim Rashtriya Manch*	Muslim mobilization

Note: Adapted from Thachil (2014). * indicates that a primary respondent for my qualitative or quantitative fieldwork hailed from that organization

through party offices, key informants, social media as well as posters around the city. During such events, I was able to make the acquaintance of several activists at once, and then follow up with interviews or focus group discussions as they deemed convenient. In addition to interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, I attended election rallies to record election rhetoric, shadowed two candidates—one from each party—during their election campaigns for a period of one week, and interviewed voters, elected representatives, journalists, and other media personnel during these events.

4.3 Framing

In contemporary India, political communication is almost exclusively shaped by political parties. Interest groups are few and weakly organized, and print and electronic media are increasingly viewed as biased towards, or worse, controlled by political parties. The BJP government in particular has faced domestic and international criticism for control over media and attacks on press freedom, and there is a growing dissatisfaction among dissenting citizens with the state of media coverage.³⁰ While political parties are regulatorily prohibited from running radio channels, several television channels are owned by political families or operated by political parties. For instance, during the 2019 national election, the BJP launched a television channel, NaMo TV, to broadcast Modi's speeches and other promo-

³⁰Gowen (2018); Reporters without Borders (2019); Freedom House (2021); Suresh (2020)

tional content. Even in the absence of direct control, the structure of media ownership has led to substantial political funding of news channels and newspapers through donations or advertisement revenue.

In tandem with control over media, internet penetration and the growth of social media and mobile messaging services have enabled political parties to directly reach out to voters at an unprecedented scale. India has the second-highest number of smartphone users in the world, and the largest average daily mobile data consumption at 14 GB per person.³¹ Nearly a third of adults are on Facebook or WhatsApp, and about 14% use Twitter.³² Parties aggressively use social media as a tool for spreading information and specially designed campaign material, especially in the run-up to elections. One-sixth of adults reported being part of a WhatsApp group created by a member of a political party before the 2019 national election.³³ Among political parties, the BJP outstrips others in terms of its resources, organizational plan, and manpower.³⁴ For instance, a key aspect of the party's 2019 election strategy was to appoint a "cellphone *pramukh* (chief)" in each of India's nearly 100,000 polling station during the 2019 national election.³⁵

Seva is central to the BJP's communication strategy that seeks to frame politics as social service. Within this frame, Modi and by extension, the BJP's activists, are part of a larger mission to work selflessly for people's welfare. On the face of it, this is a gender-neutral strategy. However, Modi's projection of feminine-identified traits of selflessness, humility, and dedication echoes Gandhi's fusion of asceticism, religious and moral power, and self-sacrifice.³⁶ Together, this helps cast the BJP's politics in a moral and spiritual lens, paving the way for women's active participation by pandering to the social construction of women's identities. Second, in the case of women, *seva* helps bridge the private sphere to the political, without challenging patriarchal norms of women's traditional roles. Women party workers describe the motivation for their partisan association as *seva*. In addition, the public spaces that BJP women inhabit, and the events they organize and take part in are intimately linked to religion and community service. Finally, *seva* serves as a tool for political selection and helps women gain a public identity of social workers working for the good of their community, transcending a narrower partisan—and for that, a possibly tainted—identity.

Modi has unremittingly focused on communicating himself and the BJP as an embodiment of service unto the nation. As mentioned in Chapter 1, he has variously pronounced himself as a *Pradhan Sevak*, swept streets, sorted garbage, and washed the feet of sanita-

³¹See <https://www.statista.com/topics/2157/internet-usage-in-india/#dossierKeyfigures>.

³²CSDS (2019)

³³?

³⁴Mahapatra and Plagemann (2019); Singh (2019a); Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw (2019)

³⁵See Uttam (2018). While a comprehensive analysis of the BJP's political communication strategy is beyond the scope of this book, scholars, journalists, and political analysts like Mehta (2022); Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot (2019); Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020); Jaffrelot (2021); Anderson and Jaffrelot (2018); Singh (2019b); Chaturvedi (2016); Sircar (2020) have examined the BJP's multi-pronged communication strategy.

³⁶Basu (2021a;b)

tion workers in symbolic displays of service.³⁷ These strategic portrayals of service and submission—these tasks have traditionally been performed by women and marginalized group members—enable Modi to project feminine-identified traits such as selflessness, humility, and devotion in combination with his better-known image of a strong masculine leader.

Similarly, the influence of *seva*-based political frames can also be seen in the BJP’s centralized public outreach programs. For instance, the week of Modi’s birth anniversary, as shown in the publicity material in Figure 4.1 is celebrated as an annual *Seva Saptah*, or service week each year. During this time, party workers undertook various acts of performative service like feeding cows and cleaning cowsheds (*gauseva*), sweeping temple premises, cleaning ponds in slum areas, and holding medical, blood donation, and information camps.³⁸ In 2021, on the twentieth anniversary of Modi holding public office, the period between September 17 through October 7 was celebrated as Service and Dedication Mission (*Seva aur Samarpan Abhiyan*).

Other programs run by the BJP are framed similarly, for instance, the government’s drive against the use of single-use plastic in 2019 was called “Cleanliness is *Seva*” (*Swachhata hi Seva*). While it is unclear whether television programs were prompted to publicize this campaign at the behest of the government or a political party, the run-up to the 2019 national election was paved with several Hindi soap operas transmitting *Swachhata hi Seva* messages within their plots.³⁹ Ostensibly, these broadcasts were conducted in a bid to educate citizens about the importance of cleanliness, but the programming burnished the credentials of Modi as a leader dedicated to the cause of social service at a critical moment for the party. Later, in 2020 and 2021, the BJP’s Covid-relief campaign was administered as “Our organization is *Seva*” (*Seva hi Sangathan*) when party workers were called upon to distribute masks, sanitizers and food to the ailing.

More recently, the BJP government’s eighth anniversary in public office in June 2022 was celebrated as “*Seva*, good governance and welfare of the poor” (*Seva, Sushasan aur Garib Kalyan*). This event was publicized on social media with the hashtag “8YearsofSeva”. Moreover, as part of the festivities, Modi’s official “Namo” mobile app launched a game where one could earn “*seva* scores” from playing. Daily winners were felicitated as part of a galaxy of “*seva* stars.”⁴⁰

4.4 Engagement

This elite-level messaging helped women, politicians, and activists, to tie their identities to *seva*. This helped them take on the roles of social workers, above the rough and tumble of electoral politics. This was more pervasive and effective for women due to its compatibility

³⁷Mukhopadhyay (2022); Mint (2019); Achom (2019); Kazmin (2014)

³⁸See pictures in the Appendix to Chapter 4.

³⁹Sarkar (2019)

⁴⁰See pictures in the Appendix to Chapter 4.

Figure 4.1: *Seva Saptah* and *Seva hi sangathan* publicity material

with socially acceptable models of femininity.⁴¹ Activists were able to maintain a respectable public identity to downplay the unsavory aspects of politics. For instance, Sunita, a party activist in the BJP’s women’s wing, told me, “Modi *ji* is doing so much for women, and the longer I stay with the BJP, my interest in social work is only increasing. If he can do so much while having so many responsibilities, I can surely do the little I can [...] Politics, you can say is my career, but social work is what drives me. Every day, women often come to me for help in accessing welfare programs.”⁴² In the same way, Bedi (2009) reports a woman activist within the Shiv Sena, a Maharashtra-based religiously conservative party as

⁴¹(Ciotti 2012; Bedi 2016; Lama-Rewal and Ghosh 2005; Jakimow and Pragati 2021; Jakimow 2019a)

⁴²Interview on January 21, 2019.

describing her work as “80% *samajkaran* [social work] and 20% *rajkaran* [political work].” Thus, while male party workers were upfront about their political ambitions, women often said career progression was important insofar as it equipped them with the resources to do *seva* more effectively.

Moreover, *seva* provided a socially recognized and permissible way to enter public spaces. As Rita, a former BJP councilor said,

“I had always wanted to do something outside the house and politics had always interested me. [...] But I got married right after college and my in-laws were opposed to me joining any form of politics. But they did say, “If you want to do *samaj seva* [social service] that’s fine with us.”... Then in 1995, we heard that seats would be reserved for women in the municipal elections. And because my *seva* had given me an identity, both Congress and BJP approached me. I knew my family wasn’t very interested in me contesting [elections], and I too did not want to at first. But our *Vaidya ji* [traditional medical practitioner], who also happens to be a family friend, told my husband, “We always complain there are no good people in politics. Well, now you have an opportunity to change this. If your wife doesn’t fight an election, the wife of some crooked politician will win, and we will keep complaining.” My husband thought about this for a while and then discussed this with me. I was not very keen in the beginning but gradually became more agreeable to the idea. My in-laws respect *Vaidya ji*, they also saw I had never been at the forefront of wanting to fight the election myself, so they thought this might, after all, be the right thing to do.”

Like Rita, for whom *seva* provided a means to navigate the journey from the personal to the political, the members of the BJP’s women’s wing strategically used *seva* to lower the entry barriers for other women to associate with the party. This happened in at least four ways: (1) strategic quid pro quo, (2) concealing the event’s true purpose, (3) negotiating with women’s families, and (4) treating the party as an extension of the household.

Gayatri, a senior BJP activist and councilor, lamented the difficulty in mobilizing women. “They constantly say they don’t have time, they have too much work in the house, or their family won’t allow them. They also think these party event are pointless.” One of the ways in which she resolved this problem was to create a moral obligation in the minds of those she had helped in the past. “If I personally go and request women, they are generally amenable,” she said with pride in her mobilizational ability. “They know I had helped them out in the past. It’s not like I won’t stop helping them, but we are all part of the same *samaj* (community) here, so they also know it is good to get along with everyone.” Then pointing to Rakhi, a woman accompanying her to the interview, Gayatri said that she had saved her from an abusive husband and fixed a place for her to stay at a nearby temple. This had created a bond between them, and Rakhi now accompanied Gayatri wherever she went for party work.

In other cases, party activists confided they had to disguise the true purpose of an event to incentivize participation. According to Lekha, “Women may not attend if I tell them it is

a BJP event. So, I just tell them we are doing some *samajik karya* (social work) to benefit the community. Sometimes we get guest speakers who people want to listen to, once we got a famous *katha vachak* (religious storyteller), the women liked that and we also got our work done.” Occasionally, women asked activists to intercede with their families to back them up when requesting permission to contribute to society. This was, however, infrequently employed than the previous methods as it demanded considerable familiarity for the activist to ‘interfere’ in what they thought was a family matter, and for it to be considered credible.

Finally, *seva* helps project gender norms within the household onto the public sphere, reinforcing the *Hindutva* idea of the nation being an extension of the household.⁴³ BJP Mahila Morcha activists, often referred to the party as a *parivar* (family) stating that the party treated them as mothers and sisters. Further, they felt safe within the BJP as it was a “*sanskari*” (moral) party that respected Indian (Hindu) traditions. Sunita recounted a party-sponsored trip she had made to Uttar Pradesh, “I went for party work to Varanasi for three days last year. I stayed at the homes of other sisters [party activists], and it seems like I have a large family in every state. I have also invited them to stay with me when they come here.”⁴⁴

It could however be argued that all political parties, and not just the BJP, employ the language and tools afforded by *seva* to mobilize women in such traditional contexts. To check the extent to which this may hold, I compare the BJP with the INC, its main rival in Rajasthan. My observation of several discussions within the women’s wing of the INC, the All India Mahila Congress (AIMC), made it clear the AIMC elite—at a minimum—did not view women as tied to their traditional roles.⁴⁵ In fact, the AIMC’s key recommendations for the INC’s 2019 general election manifesto included splitting the existing Ministry for Women and Child Development into separate ministries for gender justice and child development. This, they believed, was necessary to recognize the different needs of women and children, and to stop simply viewing women as caregivers. The draft manifesto also contained suggestions to increase the number of outside options for women through employment, encouraging the private sector to hire women, reduce the gender gap in wages, reserve government jobs for women, and increase access to justice and legal aid.

Furthermore, members of the Mahila Congress—particularly those with leadership responsibilities at the national and state levels—took a more pragmatic, and sometimes cynical view of *seva*. Although they did organize and participate in *seva*-related activities, the party, and its members relied on a wider set of participation tools. Many of these, viz. public protests and signature campaigns were of a nature that was antagonistic to existing patriarchal structures or the state. Several activists recounted participating in protests on issues of women’s security, demonetization, poor implementation of new tax systems, unemployment, and inflation. This assertive and expressive form of citizenship espoused by the INC is complemented by a relatively higher emphasis on individual rights and providing

⁴³Menon (2002)

⁴⁴Interview in March 2019.

⁴⁵Interviews, discussions, and shadowing conducted by the author during February-April, 2019.

entitlements to enable citizens to make claims against the state.⁴⁶ This is also reflected in the AIMC's flagship programs: *Hamara Haq* (Our Rights) which aims at providing legal support to women, and *Priyadarshini* which intends to build women's leadership skills. As a result, they relied less exclusively on *seva*-based methods at an institutional level. A highly ranked member of the Rajasthan branch of the AIMC put *seva* in its place:

“I have already told you I am very straightforward... I think if women tell you they entered politics to do *samaj seva*, this is bullshit! You will see that many women [in my party] talk of *seva* and social work. All of this is made-up, I did not join politics because I was motivated by social service. All women constantly angle for party tickets, be it for councilor, block, district, or MLA.”⁴⁷

Upon pressing further, she did go on to express what was a much more common sentiment within the BJP, that if women were genuinely interested in *seva*, politics offered them an opportunity to broaden the scope of their activities. However, as the rest of the conversation indicates, she did not consider most active women in the INC to be in politics for the sake of social work. For them, *seva* was a means to a political end.

Quantifying differences in partisan engagement

Existing analyses of partisan positions are often based on election manifestos or speeches of key party leaders.⁴⁸ There are of course several advantages to this approach: parties take clear and unambiguous positions in manifestos that can be compared over time and across different states. However, few people I met during fieldwork had read party manifestos, and parties' reliance on them as a tool for mobilization or persuasion has declined. In fact, the BJP has released manifestos on the cusp of election day, and other parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have even eschewed the practice of publishing them. Furthermore, manifestos can be written in formal and technical language, hindering their comprehension by voters.⁴⁹

Similarly, leaders' speeches can give important clues about their partisan positions. In the Indian case of personality-driven parties that mold themselves to follow the leader, elite communication helps elucidate parties' positions and strategies—not only to voters but also to lower-level party functionaries. Yet, there are several degrees of separation between party elites and voters. Elites also may not be able to speak to voters on matters that are of direct and immediate relevance to them, and at a time they want.

⁴⁶The United Progressive Alliance coalition government headed by the INC during 2004–2014 legislated several welfare measures congruent with this paradigm: the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Right to Information, and the Right to Education.

⁴⁷Interview with author in September 2019.

⁴⁸See, for instance, Franzmann and Kaiser (2006); Gross and Jankowski (2020); König, Marbach and Osnabrügge (2013); Pelizzo (2003)

⁴⁹For a discussion of the technical language of Austrian manifestos, see Dolezal et al. (2012). Unfortunately, there is no comparable study in the Indian context.

Using social media posts to test differences in political communication across the BJP and the INC

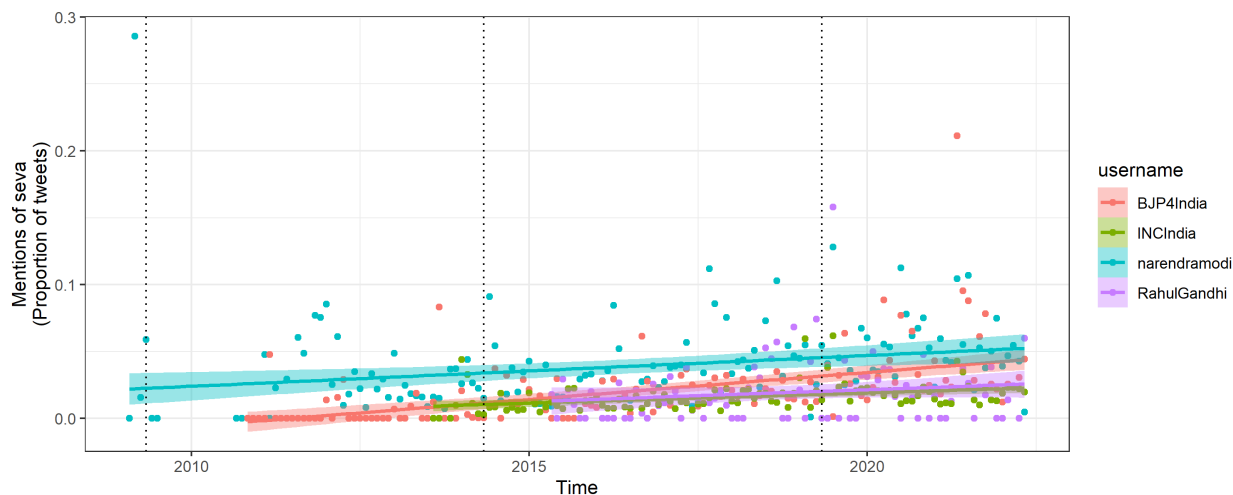
In light of this, I use social media posts to analyze party rhetoric. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook provide parties with a low-cost and accessible way to reach out to voters. With the proliferation of mobile internet users, social media has become a critical platform for parties to transmit policy and ideological opinions to inform, engage, mobilize and persuade voters.⁵⁰ Since 2015, political parties are increasingly using Twitter to disseminate political propaganda and inform voters about their ideological and policy platforms. There are several advantages to this: tweets and Facebook posts are high-frequency data, and as such, can be used to opine, clarify and inform people about local activities and developments. Quotidian events, often the subject of day-to-day outreach like the medical services camp for the elderly mentioned in the beginning of this book, blood donation and tree plantation drives, or protesting against rising prices are too banal to be mentioned in manifestos and speeches. Yet, publicizing these events on social media affords substantial visibility for the party and its functionaries, not only among voters but also signals efficacy to party elites. Twitter, in particular, is extensively used for communicating and signaling between voters, party workers, and elites. This makes Twitter a valuable source of information on quotidian politics.

In addition to content, these social media affords parties and activists the leeway to communicate their ideas and agendas in an informal setting. The language used by people to describe politics in their day-to-day lives can often diverge from that used by parties in formal communication channels. Highlighting these differences in a comparative ethnography of Indian elections, Banerjee (2014) says, “[Citizens] modified official English words to describe local events and used local idioms to explain philosophical notions of citizenship and participation. Entirely new words were coined to describe unprecedented events, everyday sayings were given new inflections of meaning, euphemisms were used to hide political tensions.” This informality and the use of metaphor and euphemism can be retained on social media. Thus, not only can social media analysis be an important tool to examine the nature of activities organized by party organizations, but the words and language used in these posts can lend important insights on how parties frame their politics to a wider audience.

To estimate the extent to which the BJP uses *seva* in its rhetoric, I conduct a computational text analysis of social media messages posted on Twitter. I begin by analyzing the larger narrative environment created by the party’s elite that has the greatest reach, and from which both citizens and party activists take their cues. Next, I consider tweets issued by the women’s wings of the two parties and their Presidents.

Figure 4.2 is based on the universe of nearly 400,000 tweets sent by the official Twitter handles of party leaders, Modi and Rahul Gandhi, and their respective parties, the BJP and

⁵⁰(Martínez-Rolán and Piñero-Otero 2016; Chopra 2019; Wasike 2017; Enli and Moe 2017; Engesser et al. 2017; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013; Coppock, Guess and Ternovski 2016)

Figure 4.2: Occurrence of *seva* in party and party leaders' tweets

Note: This figure shows the proportion of tweets issued by the official Twitter handles of Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, and their respective parties, the BJP and the INC, containing the word *seva* (and its variants). Dots represent monthly averages. Trendlines are calculated from OLS regressions and shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals. Vertical dotted lines indicate months in which national elections were held.

the INC.⁵¹ In keeping with his image of using technology for outreach, Modi was the first to adopt social media in 2009. The BJP created its Twitter handle next year, while the INC and Rahul Gandhi joined in 2013 and 2015 respectively. Figure 4.2 plots the monthly average proportion of tweets that contain the word “*seva*” or “service”, as well as their Hindi and English variants.⁵² As is clearly discernible, the concept is far more intrinsic to the Hindu right-wing: Modi even prior to incumbency has been communicating his ideas using the language of *seva*. Moreover, this has only increased over the last decade. Taking its cues from Modi, the BJP’s usage of *seva* has increased to a point where it is almost level with Modi at about 10 percent of all tweets. On the other hand, the INC and Rahul Gandhi’s usage of *seva* is far more limited and is less than half of Modi and the BJP’s proportional usage. Furthermore, the BJP’s volume of tweets is greater than the INC’s, showing that the INC lags behind in the absolute number of *seva*-related tweets too.⁵³

These results indicate that party elite within the BJP are assiduously engaged in steeping

⁵¹The scraping was conducted in June 2022 and contains every tweet issued by their handles. Neither Modi nor Rahul Gandhi are *de jure* Presidents of their parties, but in a *de facto* sense, the parties run per their directions.

⁵²I remove words like “*sevayein*” or “services” because they can refer to public services, rather than the action of serving.

⁵³As of June 25, 2022, the BJP had issued 232,400 tweets, the INC had issued 116,800 tweets, Narendra Modi had tweeted 33,600 times, and Rahul Gandhi 6,283 times.

Table 4.2: List of Twitter handles scraped

Person / Organization	Party	Level	Description	n
BJP Mahila Morcha	BJP	Central	Women’s wing	10,640
Vijaya Rahatkar	BJP	Central	President (2014-2019)	5,635
Vanathi Srinivasan	BJP	Central	President (2019 onwards)	7,977
Rajasthan Mahila Morcha	BJP	Rajasthan	Women’s wing	4,898
Madhu Sharma	BJP	Rajasthan	President (2015-2020)	13,994
Alka Mundra	BJP	Rajasthan	President (2020 onwards)	3,727
All India Mahila Congress	INC	Central	Women’s wing	22,947
Sushmita Dev	INC	Central	President (2017-2021)	4,396
Netta D’Souza	INC	Central	Acting President (2021 onwards)	3,575
Rajasthan Pradesh Mahila Congress	INC	Rajasthan	Women’s wing	13,358
Rehana Rayaz Chisti	INC	Rajasthan	President (2017-2021)	2,787

Note: This table shows the list of Twitter handles and the number of tweets scraped for the analysis in Figure 4.3. “Central” level refers to national or federal level.

the party’s brand as within the idea of service. Yet, is this reflected in the rhetoric applied towards women? To understand this, I analyze tweets issued by the women’s wings of the two parties, along with their Presidents. The voice of the women’s wing is especially critical in the case of Rajasthan—and at an overall level, India—since the task of personal outreach towards women voters is largely relegated to women activists. Gender-based segregation in public spaces now turns to the advantage of women party workers as they become indispensable for ensuring that the party’s message reaches female voters who—in ordinary circumstances—would not have been approached by men. Consequently, to analyze women’s voices within the parties, I scraped nearly 94,000 tweets issued by the national and Rajasthan chapters of the BJP’s and the INC’s women’s wings, and their respective Presidents, as detailed in Table 4.2.

I find strong evidence to bolster my qualitative findings on partisan differences in the use of political frames. Figure 4.3 presents the differences between the social media contents of the two parties’ women’s wings. 4.7% of tweets issued by the Rajasthan chapter of the BJP MM contain “*seva*” or service, as compared to just 1.9% for the AIMC.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the AIMC’s Twitter feed features ideas of political antagonism much more prominently at 3.9% as compared to 1.7% for the BJP.⁵⁵ Examining the difference between the use of “*seva*” and “protests” between the two parties amplifies this divergence between language and ideas being communicated. While the INC’s women’s wing is 2 percentage points more likely to tweet about “protests” than “*seva*” while the BJP Mahila Morcha leans in the opposite

⁵⁴I remove words like “*sevayein*” or “services” because they can refer to public services, rather than the action of serving.

⁵⁵It may be argued that the INC focus on protests may in part be because they are not in power in the Centre. However, in Rajasthan, the INC is in power, and still tweets more about contentious participation.

Figure 4.3: Occurrence of *seva* and protests in BJP and INC's women's wing's tweets

Note: This figure shows the proportion of tweets issued by the women's wings of the INC and the BJP and their Presidents as detailed in Table 4.2 containing the word *seva* (and its variants), protests or *dharna* (and its variants), and the difference between the two. National refers to the federal level, and not a pooling of tweets from across states. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by handle.

direction by 2.5 percentage points. Importantly, these differences persist at the national level and are statistically significant. This suggests that my findings are not restricted to Rajasthan and likely hold for most of the country where the BJP has a substantial organizational footprint.

Yet, do these differences in communication and framing translate to actual events and modes of participation? To answer these questions, I now turn to a survey conducted with women activists.

Corroborating these differences on the ground: A survey of party activists

The design and analysis choices in the party activists's survey is detailed in the pre-analysis plan available in the EGAP Registry at <https://osf.io/tb3kz/>. Respondents in the party activists' survey were local-level women politicians and party workers who regularly attended, or were tasked with mobilizing women for party events during and in-between elections. Unfortunately, political parties did not maintain a comprehensive list of party workers. Consequently, I had to use a variety of methods to create a list of potential respondents. I started

with a “seed” frame: a list of activists that I had compiled during my qualitative research, and extended this with the help of key informants, officials in party offices as well as previous respondents with whom I was able to maintain contact through the pandemic. In two instances, once each for the INC and the BJP, I was given confidential access to contact numbers of members of the women’s wings who were part of the district- and state-level WhatsApp groups. I supplemented these references by scraping publicly available nomination papers—that contain phone numbers and addresses—of candidates contesting local elections between 2019 and 2021 from the Rajasthan State Election Commission’s website. Finally, I combined snowball sampling with this seed frame to administer the survey and embedded experiments. The survey was conducted in two study districts, Jaipur and Kota. I had to halt implementation in Jodhpur because of rising Covid-19 Omicron variant cases and resulting safety considerations for respondents and enumerators. However, based on my previous qualitative fieldwork, I do not have reason to believe that the inclusion of Jodhpur would change my current findings.⁵⁶

The survey was undertaken by me with a team of one male and one female enumerator who received intensive training for over a week. This proved necessary because enumerators had limited experience with surveying elites, which several female activists undoubtedly were. They expected background knowledge about their party, could become impatient if respondents displayed unfamiliarity with the nuances of party structure and organization, and could get fatigued with standard survey procedures. Moreover, the limited respondent pool inhibited the replacement of non-respondents. For these reasons, I trained enumerators myself intensively over a period of eight days. The training module included guided tours of party offices, introductions with office chiefs, attending party events to build familiarity with potential respondents, and informal interactions with party workers and key informants. This helped enumerators overcome their inhibitions in front of high-ranking office bearers, built domain knowledge, and equipped them to handle unexpected field situations. When scaling up, I conducted several interviews myself in the presence of enumerators to help understand how to frame and explain questions and handle respondents’ concerns. Subsequently, I conducted fewer interviews myself but accompanied enumerators, and conducted random checks and monitoring to ensure data collection proceeded smoothly.

The respondents in this survey range from activists without official party positions to current and former booth-level workers, block- or *mandal*-level functionaries, district- and state-level office bearers, and current and former *Sarpanches* and councilors. 37.5% of respondents were associated with the women’s wing. It was easier to access the BJP’s women’s wing, both because of the larger number of women constituents, but also for reasons of willingness to be interviewed.⁵⁷ Consequently, while 43.2% of the BJP sample is associated with the Mahila Morcha, only 29.6% of the INC sample was from the Mahila Congress.

Table 4.3 shows summary statistics of respondents. 74 respondents, amounting to 57.8%

⁵⁶Funds permitting, I will undertake a survey in Jodhpur at a later date.

⁵⁷Members of the INC’s women’s wing were more likely to assign greater weight to my political antecedents, and often asked if I had clearance from the party elite.

of the sample, were affiliated with the BJP and the remaining 54 were with the INC. The average activist was 46 years of age with a long association with their party—nearly 15 years, although variation is large. Some respondents were veteran activists and had been with the party for 50 years, while others were younger and had just made their foray into political activism. This corresponds to an average start age of 30 years, broadly aligning with other ethnographic accounts indicating that women in India are more likely to be able to access public spaces once they no longer have to devote the majority of time to child-rearing.⁵⁸ A little more than half of them had contested elections. In terms of religious composition, 85.2% of the sample consisted of Hindus. Finally, women from the “general” caste category formed 59.4% of the sample followed by the “other backward class”. Subaltern women constituted 12% of the sample. The BJP sub-sample had a larger proportion of Hindus and a lower representation of subaltern castes and tribes.

Table 4.3: Party activists’ survey - Summary statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
BJP	128	0.578	0.496	0	0	1	1
Caste: ST	128	0.016	0.125	0	0	0	1
Caste: SC	128	0.109	0.313	0	0	0	1
Caste: OBC	128	0.273	0.447	0	0	1	1
Caste: General	128	0.594	0.493	0	0	1	1
Hindu	128	0.852	0.357	0	1	1	1
Age	128	46.359	12.237	21	38	55	78
Education (years)	128	13.891	4.055	0	12	17	17
Years with party	128	14.832	11.211	1	6	20	50
Assets: N rooms	128	4.521	2.306	0	4	5	20
Assets: Car	128	0.719	0.451	0	0	1	1
N petitioners	128	17.346	38.880	0	0	15	300
Contested election	128	0.531	0.501	0	0	1	1

Note: This table shows descriptive statistics from a survey of party activists conducted in Jaipur and Kota districts of Rajasthan.

Findings from the party activists’ survey reinforce—and extend—the results of my qualitative research and computational text analysis. First, the survey bolsters my previous finding of partisan differences in mobilization methods by showing that a larger proportion of the BJP’s public events are based on the idea of social service as conceived by activists. Second, they broaden my findings by showing that this focus on *seva* also lends itself to a political selection strategy. Women activists in the BJP believe that a larger proportion

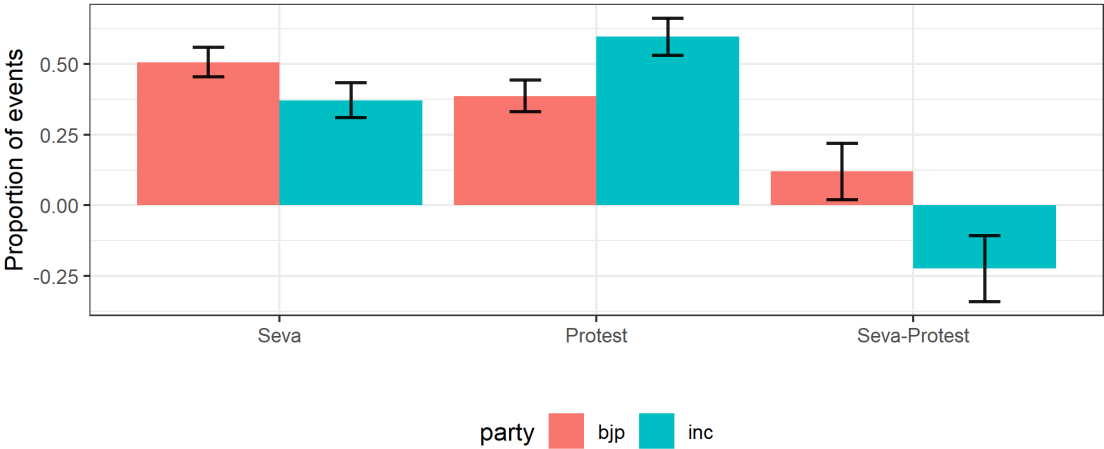
⁵⁸Bedi (2016); Jakimow and Pragati (2021)

of their compatriots have entered politics through non-contentious routes of social service as compared to the INC. Consequently, *seva* has not only channeled women into specific forms of political activism but also helped to incentivize otherwise apolitical or conservative women to engage with the party through the frames afforded by social work.

Forms of party activism

To measure how activists engaged with each other and the wider public, respondents were asked to recollect the events that their party—or activists in their individual or official capacity—had organized in the three months leading up to the survey. Enumerators recorded the number of these events and then asked respondents how many of these could be categorized as social work or *seva*, and how many could be categorized as contentious protests. Based on this, in Figure 4.4 I find that the BJP’s and INC’s activists recollected having organized or taken part in an average of 19 and 17.3 events over the last three months. The BJP’s activists self-classified 50.7% of party events as social work, 13.5% more than the INC. On the other hand, but as expected from qualitative evidence and social media analysis, female activists described more of their events in contentious terms than the BJP. Within-party differences also match the results of the social media analysis, with the BJP showcasing more “*seva*” events than protests and the INC doing the opposite.

Figure 4.4: Party events



Note: Based on a survey of 128 party activists, this figure shows the proportion of public events in the last three months classified by respondents as pertaining to social service (*seva*) or protests and demonstrations. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Negative values in the difference between *seva* and protests indicate more events were classified as protests.

What forms of *seva* did party workers undertake? The BJP is a cadre-based party that needs to arrange and coordinate regular events to keep its members engaged and sustain a

minimum level of outreach in non-electoral times. Consequently, active workers spent most of their time keeping the organizational cogs of the party running smoothly, which they did through a range of religious, cultural, and social programs and service-related activities. Electoral and other partisan duties, when they did transpire, came about in short and frenetic bursts, and were extremely effective in firing up public imagination and engaging voters. However, these frames of suspension were impossible to sustain for more than a few weeks. Consequently, parties and their women's wing, especially the BJP, planned several events to keep their members busy in-between elections. The District President (*Zila Adhyaksh*) of the BJP Mahila Morcha in Jodhpur related her growing organizational responsibilities, "Usually, we meet more frequently than once a month. . . maybe twice a month or so? We try to do that but it's not always possible. I am free of my household duties now but not all women are in this position. We have actually become more active these days after [losing] the state election."

For the BJP, many of these events centered on the Hindu calendar and were based on ideas of religious and social service. These included religious services, cleaning temple premises, organizing community soup kitchens (*bhandaras*) during festivals, distributing fireworks to slum children before the *Diwali* festival, and organizing blood donation and medical camps, and building awareness about welfare programs.⁵⁹ *Seva* provided opportunities to showcase their caregiving nature. Party activists also undertook *seva* activities on a personal basis in much of the same ways—soup kitchens, resolving disputes, helping people navigate bureaucratic processes, or just chastising negligent government officials.⁶⁰ They also collected donations for medical procedures for the poor, distributed clothes and blankets at homeless shelters or railway stations, and collected donations for the *Ram Mandir* movement.⁶¹ Maintaining constant contact with citizens—"sukh dukh mein saath nibhana", or sticking with them through thick and thin—was part and parcel of *seva*. An inclination towards *seva* (*seva bhaav*) was therefore a condition to be inculcated within aspiring politicians. This is what made *seva* so suitable for women in politics: it projected women's private caregiving roles and normative standards of feminine behavior into the public sphere.

Religion and sacred spaces formed yet another dimension of the BJP's political *seva*. When conducting public outreach or social service programs, the women's wing almost invariably chose to do so within the grounds or in the vicinity of a place of worship. For instance, when conducting *Seva Saptah* in 2019, the BJP Mahila Morcha organized a medical camp in a *Ganesh* temple, and tree plantation and sanitation initiatives in a *Bangali*

⁵⁹For instance, in 2021, the BJP MM celebrated the harvest festival of *Makar Sankranti* by serving *khichdi* (a dish made from rice and lentils) to farmers. Possibly related to this, the reason for targeting protesting farmers at this time was to assuage them about the BJP's intentions regarding agricultural procurement laws that had been passed without consultation or deliberation.

⁶⁰Some examples of activists navigating the state include fast-tracking bureaucratic services like obtaining identification cards, birth, marriage, or death certificates, processing pensions for senior citizens, widows, or persons with special needs, pressurizing police to file crime reports (FIRs).

⁶¹The BJP and the RSS have embarked upon a large voluntary donation drive to collect money to construct a temple at Ayodhya, the purported birthplace of the god *Ram*.

Baba temple. These places of worship were not only sites of *seva*, but also congregation and celebration. Party members organized religious storytelling sessions like *Ram*, *Bhagwat* and *Devnarayan Katha*, conducted *bhajan mandalis* (choirs), and culminated religious processions like *Kalash Yatras* in temples. The BJP's inherent association with religion also meant that temples could double up as sites of political celebrations. For instance, in February 2019, the Jaipur branch of the BJP Mahila Morcha fêted an Indian air strike on a terrorist camp in Pakistan with earthen lamps and fireworks at the *Moti Dungri Ganesh* temple.

The multiple ends to which the BJP deployed religious sites constantly reinforced the party's identity as well as created safe spaces for women's engagement. Religious sites, along with *Anganwadi* (child care) centers and parks are some of the few spaces where women can associate freely.⁶² It was in these sacred and socially sanctified spaces that activists forged acquaintances and deepened relationships with other women, advising them on domestic disputes as well as quotidian aspects of *seva* described earlier.

In other instances, BJP members used their embeddedness in social spaces to proselytize a covert political agenda. As one example, during the Hindu festival of *Vijay Dashami* in November 2019, several members of the BJP Mahila Morcha residing in a common neighborhood in Jaipur collaborated with the local RSS branch to organize a religious procession, specifically a *Kalash Yatra*. This was followed by a lecture (*bauddhik sabha*) invoking Hindus' exploitation by Islamic invaders. After the lecture and while serving refreshments, BJP MM members split up and started informal breakout groups, where they discussed their growing concern with the inter-religious marriage between Hindu women and Muslim men, which they believed could have dangerous demographic consequences for local Hindus".⁶³ To counter this "threat", they floated a plan to create a neighborhood women's organization, *Veerangana Vahini* (Valiant Women's Army) to track and remedy such cases.⁶⁴ Thus, the event provided a platform for women to participate in social and religious activities. At the same time, it helped propagate *Hindutva*, informed women about "local problems", estimate the number of women who could potentially support the BJP and RSS' ideological agenda, and floated ways for future community engagement. Importantly, party activists did not bring up their partisan affiliation during the event. When I asked them about this afterward, party workers said there was no need for that because the event was not formally organized by the party and theirs was a cultural, not partisan, agenda. Similarly, in another neighborhood of Jaipur, nearly 15 kilometers away, an activist recounted how the *Hindu Vichar Manch*, or Hindu Discussion Forum, a *Sangh Parivar* organization used its networks among educational institutions, courts and lawyers, and the police to keep tabs on suspected cases of inter-religious marriages.

For the BJP workers, this covert political agenda too was subsumed within their con-

⁶²Most of my focus group discussions were conducted in temples and *Anganwadi* centers.

⁶³The phenomenon of Muslim men marrying Hindu women is referred to as *love jihad* by the Hindu right because of a belief this is an organized attempt to convert Hindu women and the resulting offspring to Islam. The right-wing considers this to be a strategy to reduce the proportion of Hindus in India and leverages this to create an environment where Hindus feel under threat.

⁶⁴Two years later, when I returned for fieldwork, there were 37 active members in the Vahini.

ception and imagination of *seva*. For them, *seva* was a tool to preserve social structure and relationships in a way aligning with their worldview. In the same way that quotidian acts of social work and performative service were part of *seva*, this mission of propagating and protecting the Hindu social structure from threats, real or perceived, was also *seva* for them. Describing her motivation for joining the Mahila Morcha, Meena said, “I was inspired by *Hindutva*. We are Hindus and it is our duty to serve our religion and protect it.”⁶⁵ These roles allowed women to think of themselves as “cultural propagators of the Hindu nation,” an extension of their familial roles of upholding spiritual and moral domains while men took the responsibility of the material domain.

4.5 Political recruitment

The final aspect of *seva*’s mobilization potential that I consider is its role in political selection. In other words, does *seva* work as a tool to inspire the partisan engagement of women who may not be interested in politics *per se*, but find within it, an outlet for their existing individual social work? Rachna, an elderly BJP partisan and social worker in Kota, suggested this was true in her case. She objected to being called a party activist or even a party member but conceded that her social work had brought her close to several women in the Mahila Morcha who often persuaded her to take part in party-related activities and events. She looked down upon politics now but later confided that had she been younger, she may have considered joining the party because its *seva* framing resonated with her.⁶⁶

To test the effect of social service versus social justice motivations in selecting into political parties, I leverage discrete choice analysis through a conjoint experiment embedded in the party workers’ survey. When administering the experiment, enumerators presented respondents with hypothetical profiles of two politically active women on the verge of joining a party. They were then asked to both 1) pick which of the two profiles was a better match for their party, and 2) rate the degree of the match for each profile. The latter comprised a ten-point scale, where “1” indicated a very poor match and “10” indicated a perfect match.

Only two sets of profile-pairs or tasks consisting of six attributes each were provided for each candidate to reduce the cognitive load for respondents. Attributes included age, marital status, caste, whether their family supports their decision to join a party, political ambition as well as the nature of their previous activism. These attributes were selected based on qualitative interviews as important predictors for women’s entry into politics. An example of the conjoint task is included in the questionnaire in the Appendix.

The main attribute of interest in this chapter is the nature of women’s previous activism, i.e., whether they have participated in *seva* events or protests. Supplementary attributes I discuss are those of age and marital status. I discuss the remaining attributes, ambition, family support, and caste in Chapter 7 on women’s agency.

⁶⁵Interview in October 2021.

⁶⁶Meeting at a party event in November 2020.

The objective of the discrete choice experiment is to estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE)—the marginal effect of an attribute averaged over the joint distribution of the other attributes. Consistent with Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014), who show ordinary least squares (OLS) produce consistent estimators of attribute AMCEs, I pre-specified the following estimation method:

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{activism}_{ijk} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{ijk} \quad (4.1)$$

Here, the outcome variable, y , is either a rating or a choice provided by the i^{th} respondent on the j^{th} task where $j \in \{1, 2\}$, to the k^{th} profile where $k \in \{1, 2\}$. Activism is an indicator variable indicating whether the woman in the profile took part in *seva* or protests, and γ_i denotes individual fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. As per my pre-analysis plan, I also present heterogeneous treatment effects by the party of the respondent.

In addition, I present results from an alternative specification that contains all attributes as per below, where caste, age, marital status, family support, activity, and ambition are indicator variables. In this chapter, I focus on

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{caste}_{ijk} + \beta_2 \text{age}_{ijk} + \beta_3 \text{maritalstatus}_{ijk} + \beta_4 \text{familysupport}_{ijk} \\ + \beta_5 \text{activism}_{ijk} + \beta_6 \text{ambition}_{ijk} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{ijk} \quad (4.2)$$

Table 4.4 and Figure 4.5 depict the results from estimating Equations 4.1 and 4.2 respectively. I find that the BJP's women party activists perceive women with a background in *seva* as a better match for their party, compared to the reference category of women with a background of activism involving contentious participation including demands for social justice and individual rights. INC activists, on the other hand, have no clear preference based on this attribute, suggesting a more balanced intake, at least with regard to activism choices. Pooling all respondents, party activists chose women with a background in *seva* as similar to women corps within the party. However, as the individual party-wise results suggest, this is driven almost entirely by BJP respondents for whom the AMCE on the *seva*-based activism attribute is a very high 0.35 as opposed to 0.013 for the INC. The difference between the two parties is also statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Columns 5 through 8 in Table 4.4 present the results for the rating measure on the degree of the match. The results concur with the choice outcome. Women in the BJP assign a higher similarity rating to profiles that highlight a background in *seva* vis-à-vis protests, by 1.37 units on a 10-point scale.

These results also hold for the alternative specification mentioned in Equation 4.2 where all attributes are accounted for. Figure 4.5 presents the estimated AMCEs for both outcomes, viz., the profile that better matches their party (top panel) and the degree to which the profile matches their party (bottom panel). In both cases, an underlying background in social service makes the potential candidate attractive in the eyes of the BJP's cadre.

Table 4.4: Conjoint analysis: activism AMCE (Party activists' survey)

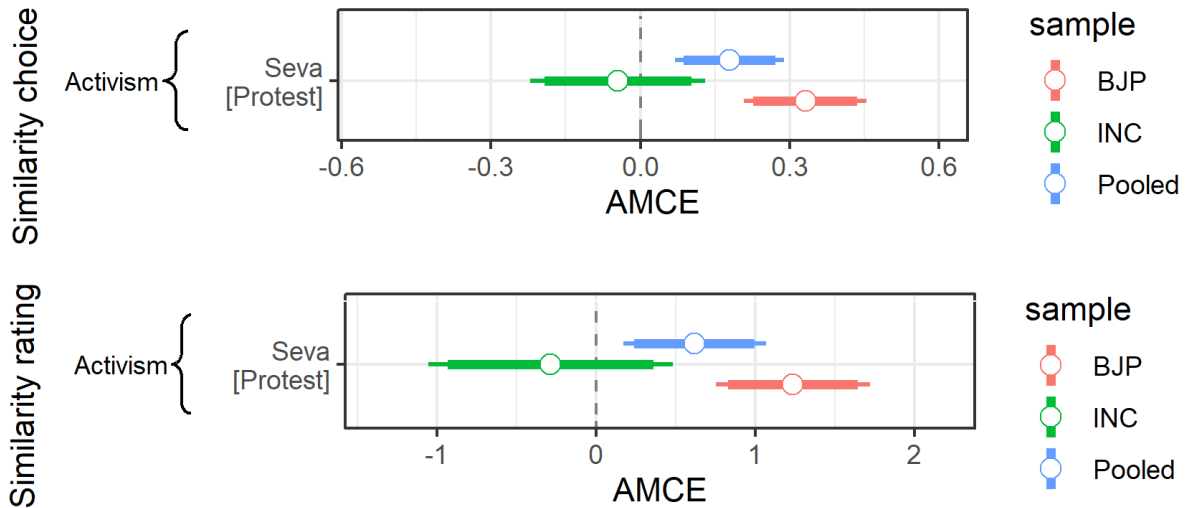
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
	Choice			Rating				
	Pooled	BJP	INC	Pooled	Pooled	BJP	INC	Pooled
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
Seva	0.211*** (0.056)	0.349*** (0.065)	0.013 (0.094)	0.009 (0.065)	0.737*** (0.237)	1.367*** (0.274)	-0.172 (0.392)	-0.311 (0.333)
BJP				-0.119*** (0.041)				-0.764** (0.345)
Seva × BJP				0.248*** (0.081)				0.959** (0.433)
Constant				0.495*** (0.034)				6.095*** (0.260)
FE	Ind	Ind	Ind	×	Ind	Ind	Ind	×
Covariates	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
N respondents	128	74	54	128	128	74	54	128
Observations	512	296	216	512	512	296	216	512
R ²	0.032	0.090	0.0001	0.038	0.317	0.396	0.231	0.016

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Based on a survey of 128 party activists, this table shows the AMCE of the nature of activism (*seva*-based participation vis-à-vis the reference category of contentious protest-based participation) on which profile was chosen as the better match for the respondent's party (Columns 1-4), and the degree of the match as provided through a 1-10 rating where 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest (Columns 5-8). Columns 2 and 6 are for respondents from the BJP and Columns 3 and 7 are for respondents in the INC. The remaining columns pool respondents from all parties. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

Of course, these results do not belie that the BJP does not organize protests and demonstrations, or that the INC does not encourage social service. What this shows is a difference in the relative importance accorded to different forms of participation within the party organization, and thereby, within participants' conceptions of political activism. Several respondents within the INC were associated with social work, and ran charitable foundations, trusts, or were associated with NGOs. Yet, most often, these were personal or familial undertakings focused on boosting the organizer or their family's profile with little additional support from the party machine or a "thick organization" that the Sangh Parivar affords to the BJP. The BJP's women's wing organized a number of protests while I was on the field—against an INC minister's misogynistic remarks about women teachers, crimes against women, examination mismanagement.⁶⁷ But, often their contentious engagement continued to be framed in norm-compliant terms. In 2023, as the five years of the INC government were drawing to a close, the women's wing decided to protest the purported increase in violence

⁶⁷See <https://bit.ly/35fhjZJ>, <https://bit.ly/3utHEVv> and <https://bit.ly/3DcdWzf>.

Figure 4.5: Effect of activism type on political selection (Party activists' conjoint experiment)



Note: Thick lines indicate 90% confidence intervals and thin lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Effects are relative to the reference level in each attribute specified in square brackets.

against women. But they did so by involving women's traditional roles in the home, using kitchen utensils and steel plates as props.⁶⁸

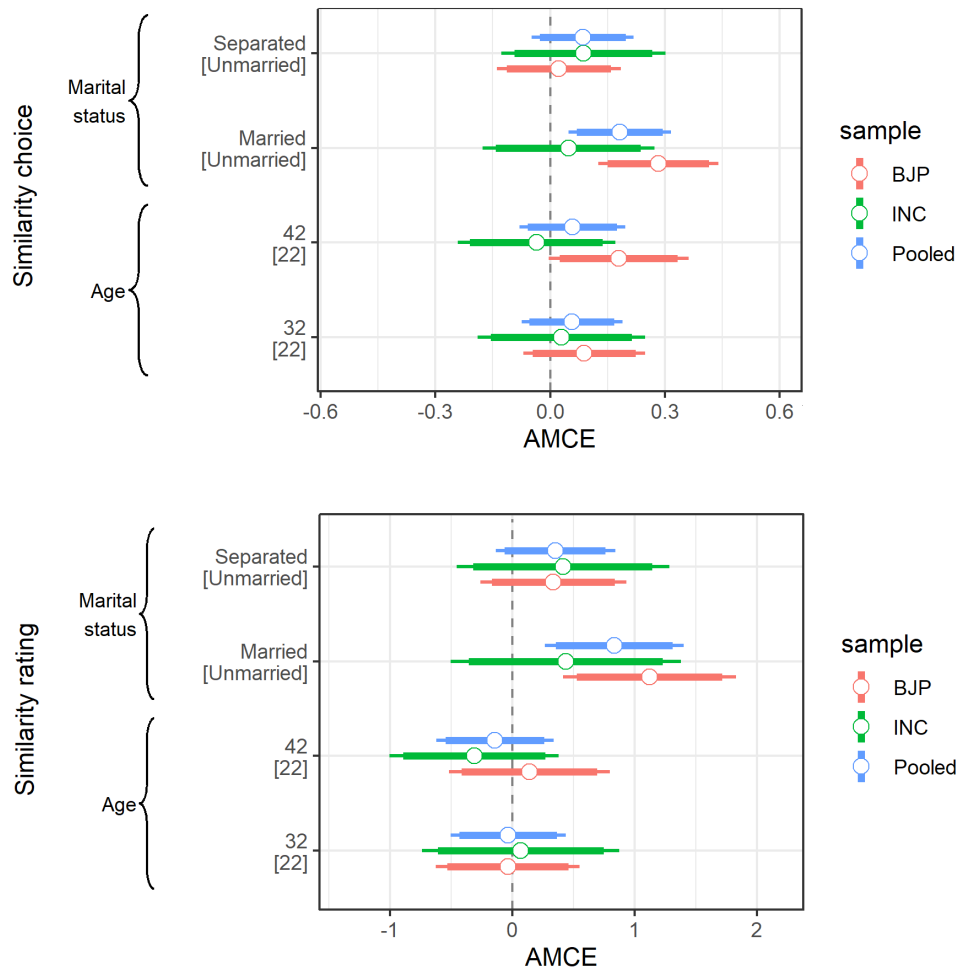
Analysis of additional attributes of marital status and age suggests the BJP cadre comprises a larger proportion of women leveraging traditional norms of life courses in finding an opening into politics. In several cultural contexts dictated by patriarchal norms, including India, women rise in domestic and social hierarchies to enjoy greater freedom, autonomy, and power in the period after active motherhood.⁶⁹ Prior to this—especially in the time just after marriage, or when caring for young children—women faced stronger restrictions on their mobility. When describing their political journeys, several activists in the BJP recounted that they had transitioned to seeking more possibilities for themselves once their children no longer required active adult supervision.

These stages of life broadly correspond to the attributes of marital status and age. Correspondingly, in Figure 4.6, I find that activists in both parties deemed unmarried women to be the least like the party members, although the AMCE of “separated” is not statistically significantly different from the reference category of “unmarried”. The BJP's activists had a strong preference for married women as did the INC, albeit less noticeably so. In addition, there is weak evidence to suggest that the BJP's activists deem older women as

⁶⁸See Figure B.6.

⁶⁹Brown et al. (1982); Jakimow and Pragati (2021)

Figure 4.6: Effect of marital status and age on political selection (Party activists' conjoint experiment)



Note: Thick lines indicate 90% confidence intervals and thin lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Effects are relative to the reference level in each attribute specified in square brackets.

better matches for their party (42 compared to the reference category of 22).⁷⁰ During survey implementation, when given a choice between a 22-year-old and a 42-year-old woman, a BJP activist mulled over this choice, thinking out loud, that young women could attract unwanted attention from men, “spoiling” the party’s environment. In this context, marriage signaled that women would not welcome any unsolicited advances. Consequently, in both parties, but particularly in the BJP, life after active motherhood provided women with op-

⁷⁰This holds for the choice outcome, but not the rating outcome.

portunities to explore new avenues and roles for themselves. It is in this middle age that women could use social and cultural constructs of power to make the transition to the public sphere seeking new possibilities for themselves through *seva*, a combination of voluntarism, spiritual pursuits, and social work.⁷¹

This suggests that *seva* plays a fundamental role in women's selection into the BJP. Otherwise apolitical women like Rachna who viewed the concept of *seva* through a Hindu lens find a community within the BJP and can mobilize others who share similar worldviews. While they were not party activists *per se*, ideological overlap around the idea of service, and the BJP's framing of itself as a social service organization presented women with the opportunity to enter partisan spaces.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter documented how the BJP, particularly since Modi's elevation to the national stage, has framed its politics as rooted in ideas of social service. This discourse on *seva* has both ideological and organizational coherence for the Hindu right-wing. In terms of ideology, as detailed in Chapter 2, *seva* was conceived as a means to forge bonds of citizenship across—and within—social classes with an eye to strengthening national solidarity. This inclusive idea in the hands of the religious right-wing turned into a tool for Hindu consolidation. As a result, the RSS' organizational structure mirrors that of religious organizations geared toward a combination of proselytization and social service activities. The BJP inherited this organizational structure, which it has increasingly deployed towards acts of performative—if not substantial—social service.

How does *seva* play out on the ground? This chapter shows that the BJP's political communication is characterized by an overarching emphasis on *seva*. In particular, the BJP's women's wing is more than twice as likely to express ideas related to service in its tweets as compared to its counterpart within the INC. This difference in political rhetoric finds expression in ground-level outcomes. According to female party activists, more than half of their organizational and individual occupancy of the public sphere could be described in terms of *seva*, a conformative and non-contentious mode of active participation. In contrast, the INC is more likely to engage women in contentious politics through protests and demonstrations.

Within the BJP, *seva* provides women with a channel of entering public spaces in four ways. Unlike men, who often do not require to negotiate their entry into public and political spaces, women's ability to do so falls under scrutiny by their families and is judged in terms of prevailing gendered norms of behavior. In this, *seva* purges politics of its negative connotations by emphasizing service, a core normative expectation of citizens from representatives and party activists. Moreover, *seva* provides activists with public identities as social workers, which they can employ to frame politics as an extension of the private sphere, as also strategically downplay their partisan roles. Activists use quotidian acts of service to forge moral and material links with citizens. Moreover, *samaj seva* affords them a broad frame

⁷¹Pandya (2016)

that can be leveraged to solicit and induce women's active participation. Finally, *seva* also serves as a tool of political selection where women activists consider *seva* to be intrinsically important to themselves, and others who seek to join the party.

I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion on whether the BJP's utilization of *seva* is strategically targeted at women. From a macro-level perspective, Chapter 2 and this chapter have provided historical and contemporary evidence for the RSS and the BJP's strategic use of *seva* as a means to organize and consolidate the Hindu community. And this framework extends to both men and women, suggesting that the BJP's use of *seva* may not necessarily be a distinct and deliberate strategic move for women.

Decision-making within the BJP involves multiple actors at different levels, including the national leadership, state units, the women's wing, and individual women activists. Lacking deep organizational connections with the Hindu right-wing, I was unable to get the opportunity to directly interview the top decision-makers in the contemporary BJP.⁷² While I cannot conclusively confirm or deny the existence of a specific *seva*-based strategy for women devised by the top brass, I can only speculate that my interlocutors in the women's wing would have known about this if it existed. And by design mobilization strategies cannot be secret, so the fact that they did not highlight *seva* as a strategy exclusively for women, suggests that rather than a strategy exclusively for women, the party's *seva* antecedents were so strong that it made it a natural mobilization frame irrespective of the sex of the target.

But my qualitative work does indicate that the women's wing as also individual women were aware of how *seva* worked to shift gatekeepers' opinions about their participation, who found it credible because of the BJP's ownership of the *seva* frame. This indicates that the RSS and the BJP, through the overarching frame of *seva*, provide a platform for women within the movement to strategically expand their traditional domestic roles into the public sphere, should they choose to do so. Thus, The BJP's assiduous framing of politics as *seva* may be led by the party elite, especially Modi, but it draws from a ground-level understanding of people's normative understanding of politics.

Yet, how effective is *seva* in enabling women's active participation, and what are the mechanisms through which it operates? This is the subject of the next chapter.

⁷²This is a relatively rarefied set of people comprising Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, and BJP President J.P. Nadda.

Chapter 5

How Effective is *Seva*?

The previous chapter of this book discussed the BJP and the RSS shifting focus on *seva* and its growing importance as a framing tool and mobilizational device for the party. In this chapter, I build on this by examining the effect of *seva*-based mobilization appeals on women's participation. In doing so, I shed light on two crucial mechanisms underlying women's entry into public spaces: men's gatekeeping within the family and social norms of women's participation. Although these are empirically related—men's gatekeeping is often a function of internalizing social norms—I treat them as separate concepts to shed light on the micro-foundations of the effectiveness of *seva* in enabling women's partisan engagement.

This chapter is based on primary surveys and experiments conducted with randomly selected households in the districts of Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Kota in Rajasthan. Primary data collection was carried out by Morsel Research and Development. Teams of two enumerators—one man and one woman—visited 1,457 households across these three districts between September 2021 and January 2022, between the Covid-19 waves of Delta and Omicron. Following rigorous health and safety precautions, each enumerator interviewed a respondent of the same sex as them in each household, leading to a total of 2,914 respondents. Respondents were surveyed simultaneously and privately, leading to confidence that the responses on which this chapter is based were not affected by the undue influence of other individuals within the household.

This chapter is structured as follows. I begin with a brief discussion of the data this chapter is based on. Next, I present a descriptive picture of women's political participation in these districts, with a focus on the gender gap in women's mobility, political knowledge, and active participation. Next, I use original observational data to examine the role of partisanship in explaining these differences, and the circumstances under which men are willing to acquiesce to women's entry into public and political spaces. Then, I turn to a discrete choice experiment and political communication experiment to estimate the causal effect of norm-compliant frames in mobilizing women into politics. Next, I discuss the mechanisms through which the effect takes place and consider the role of competing explanations. I conclude with a discussion of why the BJP has a comparative advantage over the INC in deploying *seva* as a norm-compliant frame.

5.1 Data and methods

The design and analysis choices in the party activists’s survey is detailed in the pre-analysis plan available in the EGAP Registry at <https://osf.io/tb3kz/>. Sampling for the household survey was done in three stages. In Stage 1, I selected the primary sampling units (PSUs)—Gram Panchayats in rural areas and municipal wards in urban regions. Since the concentration of women-focused party activities was higher in and around urban areas, and to minimize enumerators’ travel distance and time during the Covid-19 pandemic, I listed municipalities and blocks (or *Panchayat Samiti*) headquarters within an approximately 80 kilometer radius of the three main cities in their eponymous districts.¹ Then blocking on gender-based reservation status of municipal ward councilors and Gram Panchayat Sarpanches, and their party affiliations (BJP or INC), I sampled an equal number of municipal wards and Gram Panchayats in each district.² Figure C.1 in Appendix C shows the PSUs within Rajasthan’s administrative structure, while Figure C.2 shows the locations where the survey took place in each district.

The second stage was to identify households. Each PSU was assigned a randomly generated “start number” corresponding to a voter on the PSU’s electoral roll. Enumerators were instructed to locate the residence of this voter and ascertain if a man and a woman of voting age were present in the household at that time. If yes, they proceeded to select respondents and conduct the survey. However, if these conditions were not met, or if consent could not be obtained, enumerators visited the next house to the right. This process was repeated until a survey was completed. After a successful survey, enumerators skipped five houses to the right and repeated this process.

The final stage was to identify respondents. Husbands and wives were ideal respondent pairs for this study as most women of voting age are also married. In such cases, it is with their husbands that women primarily converse about politics, and whose cooperation they seek to participate. Thus, husbands are often the most critical gatekeepers. However, men were often at work, so finding husband-wife pairs proved to be difficult. It was not possible to survey wives during the day and husbands in the evening. Although it was unlikely that women would be able to influence their husbands’ responses, during pilot surveys it proved that husbands could refuse their consent even if their wives had successfully completed their survey in the morning. Moreover, there was a limited amount of time in which to complete a day’s work due to Covid-19 related curfews in the evening. Hence, I modified respondent selection to make it more flexible, but through a design that sought to preserve the critical gate-keeping relationship between respondents to the extent possible. This was done as follows. Within a household, enumerators noted the age of the eldest male member present

¹I had to make an exception to this rule in Jodhpur district as there were an insufficient number of municipalities within the specified radius.

²Municipal ward councilors’ party affiliation is publicly available as they contest elections are contested on a partisan basis. I conducted a short telephonic survey to obtain Sarpanches’ party affiliation after scraping their contact information from Rajasthan’s State Election Commission’s website. I dropped PSUs from the sampling frame if their representatives were not reachable or did not reveal party affiliation.

at that time. Next, they listed the names of all women younger than him who were present in the house in descending order of age. The final selection of the female respondent—also designated the primary respondent—was made through a household-specific Kish table.³ The female respondent was then asked, among the men who were present in the house at that time and elder to her, with whom she had the most political conversations. This person was the male, or secondary, respondent.⁴ Both interviews were conducted simultaneously and privately so that respondents could not hear or influence each other’s answers. Typically, the male respondent was interviewed in their living room or porch while the female respondent was interviewed in a separate room inside the house.

Using this method, I was able to survey 1,457 households across 95 wards (in 12 municipal councils or *Nagar Palikas*) and 94 village councils or *gram panchayats*. The surveys adhered to strict quality standards: I was present on the field throughout the duration of each survey and each day accompanied different teams of enumerators to the field. Enumerators were given daily feedback on how they had been asking questions, how to help the respondent understand survey questions, as well as body language and demeanor. Then, with the help of a research assistant, I listened to random audio audits recorded on SurveyCTO and calculated the amount of time spent on each question through text audits. Households in which enumerators failed to adhere to survey quality protocols were removed and fresh households were surveyed in their place.

Descriptive statistics about the sampled households are presented in Table 5.1. Men were, on average, 40.8 years of age and older than women by about 6.6 years. Approximately 87.4% of male respondents were in a position to act as the female respondent’s gatekeeper.⁵ Figure C.3 in the Appendix contains a detailed break-up of relationships between respondents within a household. Men were also more educated than women (8.6 years vs 5.7). More than 90% of the respondents were Hindu, and nearly half were from other backward classes.

5.2 Gender and political participation in Rajasthan

Like several states in northern, western, and central India, women face several restrictions on their agency and autonomy in Rajasthan. A large number of households subscribe to the custom of veiling (*purdah/ghunghat*) whereby women are required to cover their face when venturing into public spaces or in the presence of men and household elders. The perceived prevalence of this custom was widespread—women believed that 8.8 and 8.5 out of 10 families would require women to subscribe to this practice in front of elders and when outside the house. These norms were not misperceived: 84.5% and 77.5% men supported women’s veiling in front of elders and in public spaces respectively. Correspondingly, more

³Please refer to the sample cover page in the appendix to this chapter.

⁴The age rule was relaxed by a few years in case the original secondary respondent was not in a position to be interviewed or did not provide consent.

⁵52.4% were husbands, 21.6% were grandfathers (-in-law), fathers(-in-law) or uncles, and 12.2% were brothers(-in-law).

Table 5.1: Descriptive statistics (Household survey)

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Caste: General	2,914	0.140	0.347	0	0	0	1
Caste: ST	2,914	0.120	0.326	0	0	0	1
Caste: SC	2,914	0.236	0.425	0	0	0	1
Caste: OBC	2,914	0.496	0.500	0	0	1	1
Caste: SBC	2,914	0.008	0.087	0	0	0	1
Hindu	2,914	0.906	0.291	0	1	1	1
Age	2,914	37.508	14.058	18	25	48	95
Education (years)	2,914	7.173	5.450	0	0	12	18
N rooms	2,914	3.061	1.907	0	2	4	24
Religion important	2,914	3.748	0.557	1	4	4	4
Vote National	2,914	0.816	0.388	0	1	1	1
Vote State	2,914	0.774	0.418	0	1	1	1
Vote Local	2,914	0.827	0.378	0	1	1	1
Participate: Campaigned for party	2,914	0.278	0.448	0	0	1	1
Participate: Political event	2,914	0.330	0.470	0	0	1	1
Participate: Encouraged others to vote	2,914	0.442	0.497	0	0	1	1
BJP ID	2,914	0.543	0.498	0	0	1	1
INC ID	2,914	0.365	0.482	0	0	1	1
Political knowledge: NREGS	2,914	0.366	0.482	0	0	1	1
Political knowledge: <i>Ujjwala</i> LPG subsidy	2,914	0.691	0.462	0	0	1	1
Political knowledge: Reservation status of PSU	2,914	0.792	0.406	0	1	1	1

Note: This table shows descriptive statistics from a survey of 2,914 individuals across 1,457 households (1 man and 1 woman per household). Caste, Hindu, political participation and political knowledge variables are binary variables. The importance of religion is measured along 1-4 Likert scale with higher values indicating greater importance. Partisanship is calculated using pre-specified methods. Political knowledge variables are based on whether the respondent could correctly identify the political party in power at the national level when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), and the Ujjwala cooking gas subsidy were implemented, and if they correctly knew if their ward or Panchayat had been reserved for a woman candidate in the most recent local election.

than 9 of 10 in my survey practiced this custom in either of these situations.⁶ In the past, chief ministers such as Ashok Gehlot of the INC and Vasundhara Raje of the BJP have called for ending this practice; however conservative groups have justified the custom, arguing that the veil was a marker of women's modesty and respect accorded to elders.

Norms are similarly restrictive when women sought to exit the private sphere. 78% men considered that women should seek the family's permission when going to the local market to make purchases. While the figure was lower for women seeking to visit their friends or neighbors, 54.6% male respondents still considered it a good practice to ask for permission. Visiting the parental home, or traveling using public transport were heavily regulated; in each case 9 of 10 men thought women should seek familial permission. Newly married women faced particularly stiff restrictions which was particularly jarring compared to their previously free(er) lives in their parents' homes. During an interview with a Rajput household in Jodhpur district, two sisters, who had recently married into the same household in the neighboring district of Nagaur, and were home for the *Navratri* festival, recounted the changes to their lives.⁷ The elder of the two sisters said,

We feel suffocated, we can't even leave the house to buy Parle-G.⁸ My husband keeps saying, "If you need something, just tell me, and I will get it for you." Finally, after a few months, I told him about how I felt. But what can he do? Like me, he is also 19, and my father-in-law (*sasur ji*) decides everything. And if he is not at home, my brother-in-law (*jeth*) will [...] These days, the only things that sustain me these days are my mobile phone and the electricity connection. But because the house is behind a hill, the mobile signal can be weak and occasionally we have power cuts too.⁹

These restrictions on mobility went hand in hand with gaps in political knowledge and participation. Levels of political knowledge, as measured through knowledge of partisan policies were higher among men than women. 49.5% male respondents could correctly identify that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was the brainchild of the INC, compared to just 16.% women, a difference of 41.1 percentage points. Gaps in knowledge were relatively lower—but still substantively high at 22.9 percentage points—for the BJP's well-publicized and more recent gas cylinder subsidy program; 80.6% men and 57.7% women attributed it correctly. Finally, 87.4% men and 71% women could correctly recall whether their constituency had been reserved for women in the last local election.¹⁰

In classical theories, democracy's defining characteristic is competition for leadership among elites.¹¹ Consequently, citizens' participation is restricted to helping choose the win-

⁶73.6% used a full veil and 16.8% used a partial veil, or *pallu*, the border of a *sari*.

⁷Rajputs are a group of patrilineal clans historically associated with warriorhood.

⁸Parle-G is a popular brand of biscuits, often partaken with tea.

⁹Interview by author in Jodhpur, November 2019.

¹⁰This referred to the *Sarpanch* election for rural respondents and Councilor elections for urban respondents.

¹¹Schumpeter (1942)

Table 5.2: Descriptive statistics by sex (Household survey)

	Men					Women					Difference			
	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	M-F
Age	1457	40.831	15.163	18	95	34.185	11.974	18	75	6.646***				6.646***
Education (years)	1457	8.597	4.827	0	18	5.749	5.663	0	17	2.848***				2.848***
Religion important	1457	3.848	0.506	1	4	3.647	0.588	1	4	0.201***				0.201***
Vote National	1457	0.877	0.328	0	1	0.755	0.430	0	1	0.122***				0.122***
Vote State	1457	0.868	0.339	0	1	0.680	0.467	0	1	0.188***				0.188***
Vote Local	1457	0.893	0.309	0	1	0.762	0.426	0	1	0.131***				0.131***
Participate: Campaigned for party	1457	0.386	0.487	0	1	0.170	0.376	0	1	0.216***				0.216***
Participate: Political event	1457	0.472	0.499	0	1	0.189	0.391	0	1	0.283***				0.283***
Participate: Tell others to vote	1457	0.557	0.497	0	1	0.327	0.469	0	1	0.23***				0.23***
BJP ID	1457	0.551	0.498	0	1	0.535	0.499	0	1	0.016				0.016
INC ID	1457	0.345	0.476	0	1	0.386	0.487	0	1	-0.041				-0.041
Political knowledge: NREGS	1457	0.572	0.495	0	1	0.161	0.367	0	1	0.411***				0.411***
Political knowledge: Ujjwala	1457	0.806	0.396	0	1	0.577	0.494	0	1	0.229***				0.229***
Political knowledge: Reservation status	1457	0.874	0.332	0	1	0.710	0.454	0	1	0.164***				0.164***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. This table shows descriptive statistics from a survey of 2,914 individuals across 1,457 households (1 man and 1 woman per household). Caste, Hindu, political participation and political knowledge variables are binary variables. The importance of religion is measured along a 1-4 Likert scale with higher values indicating greater importance. Partisanship is calculated using pre-specified methods. Political knowledge variables are based on whether the respondent correctly identify the political party in power at the national level when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), and the *Ujjwala* cooking gas subsidy were implemented, and if they correctly knew if their primary sampling unit (ward or Panchayat) had been reserved for a woman candidate in the most recent local election.

ners of this competition through voting, making turnout the most basic form of political participation.¹² Although official estimates show the gender gap in turnout as closed, it continues to be expressed in survey measures.¹³ Close to 90% male respondents claimed they had voted in the most recent national, state and local elections, but women lagged behind substantially by 12, 19, and 13 percentage points respectively.¹⁴

Men and women voted in broadly similar patterns. 55.6% of men and 53.5% were identified as BJP supporters, while the corresponding figures for the INC were 34.5% and 38.6% respectively. Within a household, women's partisanship broadly matched their families. Overall, 82.6% of women followed their families in this respect, and compared to men, were more reliant on others in deciding who to vote for. On a 1-4 Likert scale women rated the average independence of their vote as 3.48 compared to 3.88 for men. 86.1% of men had the same preferences as their family; however, unlike women, this higher degree of overlap could be because men were also imposing their preferences upon the household. The BJP was the primary beneficiary if there were partisan differences within the family as indicated in Figure 5.1.

Gender gaps widen in the realm of active participation. Only 17% of female respondents in the sample had campaigned for a political party and just 18.9% had attended a political event. In these aspects of participation, men led women by nearly 22 and 28 percentage points respectively. Women lagged behind men in non-partisan forms of active participation too. For instance, when asked whether they had encouraged others to vote, 55.7% of men replied in the affirmative as compared to 32.7% women. Relative to the first two measures of active participation, inspiring others to vote is a low-cost activity since respondents could have asked friends or even other household members to do so since the question did not specify that the person should be outside the family. But to the extent that it was interpreted as encouraging those outside the house, women were impaired by a severely smaller social network: on average men had 9.1 friends with whom they had regular conversations, but women had only 2.7 friends to turn to. Women also had lower access to independent private information. Compared to 86.2% male respondents only 34.2% women had primary or exclusive access to a cellphone.

5.3 Partisanship and women's participation

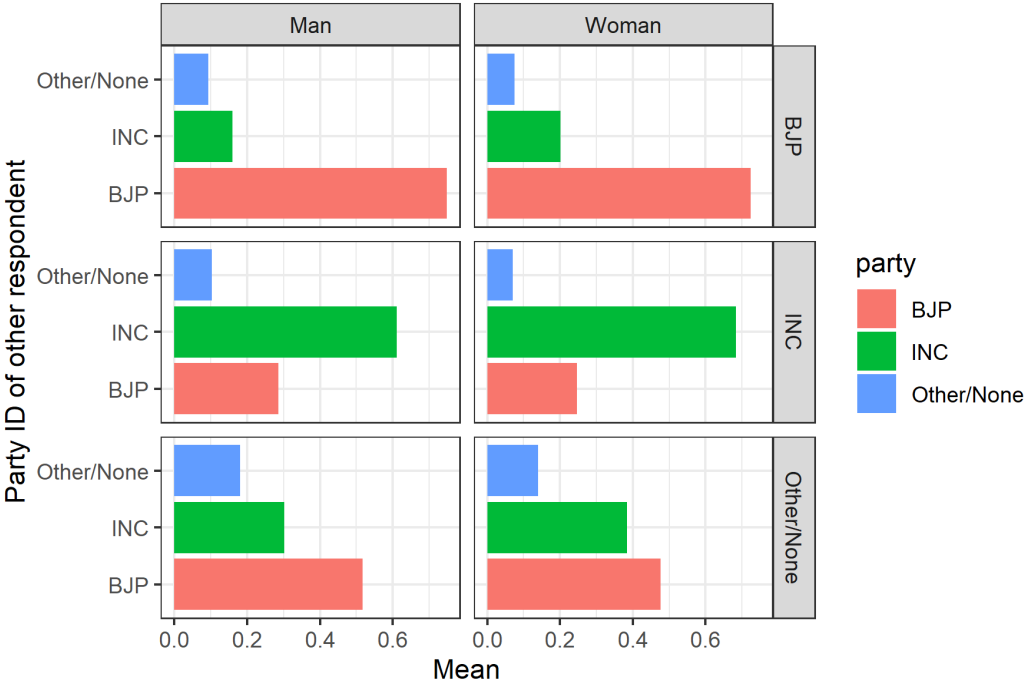
As these data suggest, women face severe barriers when entering public spaces. Public and political spheres overlap substantially, and the gendered separation of these spheres distanced women's access, to knowledge, engagement, and access to politics. During interviews with female voters, hesitation and embarrassment crept in when they thought themselves unable to converse on these topics to their satisfaction, ultimately declaring I should speak to men

¹²Berelson (1954); Dahl and . Dahl (1956); Sartori (1965)

¹³See also Chowdhury and Malhotra (2018)

¹⁴The figures reported by women are closer to the official estimates, so it is possible that the gender gap is a function of differential over-reporting.

Figure 5.1: Household differences in partisan identification



Note: The figure shows gender differences in partisan identification within a household. The first column indicates, for men, the distribution of partisan identification of women respondents. The second column shows the corresponding means for women.

if I wanted to know more about politics. Referring to the purview of social norms, they often said, “Women in our community don’t go to these events.¹⁵ It’s only the men who go. There might be one or two women, but they go with their husbands.”

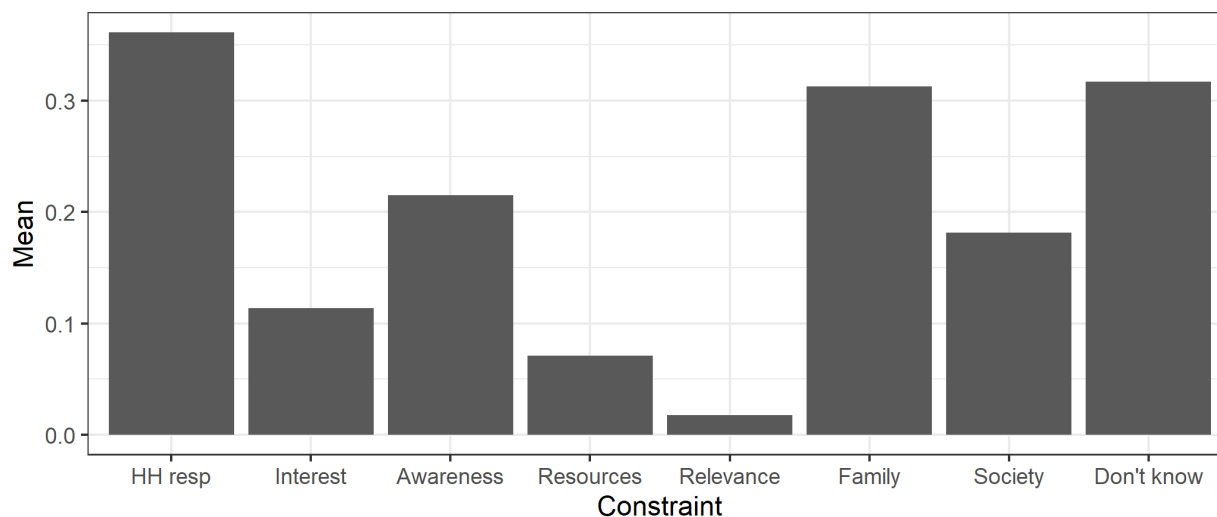
When asked about the reason for women’s lower participation in an open-ended survey question, 36.1% of female respondents cited the burden of domestic chores and related responsibilities. Close second at 31.3% was family gatekeeping, followed by lack of awareness (21.5%), societal constraints (18.1%), and lack of interest in politics (11.3%). Nearly a third of respondents were unable to give any reason. The relatively low selection of societal constraints may be because these are often internalized and enforced by the family.

On the other hand, religious, social, and cultural events are very much part of the female public sphere. In fact, I had to pause fieldwork at certain times of the day during *sawan*, the most auspicious month of the Hindu calendar.¹⁶ Women, especially in rural regions, were unable to devote time for interviews because they had to go to a temple or their neighbor’s house for religious programs like prayers and recitals (*paath*), hymns (*bhajan*), or

¹⁵The word used in place of community is *samaj* which can also refer to caste or sub-caste (*jati*).

¹⁶*Sawan* usually falls in July and August of the Gregorian calendar.

Figure 5.2: Reasons for women’s low political participation



Note: The figure shows the responses to an open-ended question that asked female respondents in the household survey, “Why do you think there are so few women playing an active part in politics?” that were slotted into pre-specified categories by enumerators. Enumerators could pick more than one category for the response, so the proportions may not add up to 1. Categories included constraints imposed by household responsibilities; lack of interest, awareness/education, resources, relevance of politics; or constraints imposed by their family or social norms.

storytelling sessions (*katha*). Leaving the home for these purposes was socially acceptable, even encouraged. For instance, upon a second visit to a household, I was asked by the husband of my original respondent to come back at a different time because his wife was getting ready to go to a neighbor’s house for these festivities.¹⁷ In addition, fewer men required women to ask them if they wanted to leave the house for a *seva* event (78.2%) as compared to antagonistic events like protests (91.7%), or even programs organized by political parties (90.6%).

Is there any association between women’s mobility and the political party they support? In Table 5.3, I examine the effect of men’s partisanship on whether they think women should seek permission to enter public spaces for various purposes. In Column 4, I find that BJP partisans are almost 5 percentage points less likely ($p < 0.05$) to require women to seek permission for *seva*-based activities. Given a baseline of 79.8%, this amounts to a 6.14% decline. In no other case of entering public spaces—among those measured in the survey—did partisanship matter for men’s opinions about women’s permission-seeking behavior.

Next, I test whether perceived reasons for the gender gap in active participation vary by partisanship. To do this, I regress women’s perceptions of the origins of the gender gap on whether they identified as BJP partisans. Table 5.4 presents the results of these OLS

¹⁷Interview in August 2019 in Jaipur district.

Table 5.3: Permission needed for women’s mobility

	Permission required to go to:						
	Market	Friends	Par.Home	Seva	Protest	Campaign	Pub.Transport
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
BJP ID	0.001 (0.024)	-0.021 (0.031)	0.004 (0.020)	-0.049** (0.023)	0.018 (0.017)	0.003 (0.021)	-0.016 (0.014)
FE	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	0.775	0.54	0.884	0.798	0.908	0.902	0.942
Observations	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Based on the male sub-sample of the household survey, this table shows the differential mobility requirements for men identifying themselves as partisans of the BJP. Partisanship is calculated as per the pre-analysis plan. The dependent variables are whether men require women in their family to seek permission when going to the market, meeting friends, parental homes, for *seva*-, protest-, or campaign- related activities, or using public transport. The OLS regressions use randomization block fixed effects and covariates (age, education, caste, religion, religiosity index, political knowledge index, political participation index). Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level, which is District (3) \times Region (2) \times PSU female-reservation status (2) \times PSU-representative Party ID (2). This analysis was not pre-registered but the overall regression adjustment follows the pre-registered guidelines.

regressions with block-fixed effects. In Column 6, I find that BJP partisans are 6 percentage points more likely than others ($p < 0.05$) to trace women’s low participation to domestic constraints. Compared to a baseline of 31.3%, this constitutes a substantively important 19.2% increase. This aligns with our theoretical expectation that families ascribing to *Hindutva* and traditional gender norms may impose stronger restrictions on women’s mobility. Crucially, the BJP’s supporters were 3.3 percentage points less likely ($p < 0.1$, a 27.7% decline relative to the 11.4% baseline) to attribute the gender gap in active participation to a lack of interest in politics.

Together, the observational evidence presented in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 indicate that women face substantial blocking when seeking to engage in the public sphere. Female BJP partisans were more likely to mention domestic barriers as a cause of women’s lower political engagement. Yet these barriers were not impregnable. Men, especially those aligned with the BJP were more likely to allow women to engage in the public sphere if it was for norm-compliant activities.

5.4 The effect of *seva* on women’s participation

The compelling findings from these observational data highlight how women in BJP-identifying families may experience greater ease in pursuing a public role when their motivation is framed

Table 5.4: Why are there so few women in politics?

	Reason for gender gap in political participation							
	HH resp	Interest	Awareness	Resources	Relevance	Family	Society	Don't know
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
BJP ID	0.027 (0.031)	-0.033* (0.019)	0.015 (0.018)	0.015 (0.013)	0.005 (0.007)	0.060** (0.025)	0.007 (0.018)	-0.026 (0.019)
FE	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block	R. Block
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	0.361	0.114	0.215	0.071	0.018	0.313	0.181	0.317
Observations	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457	1,457

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. This table shows the differential perceptions behind the gender gap in women's political participation based on respondents' partisanship. This question was only asked to women respondents in the household survey. The dependent variables are whether women mentioned constraints imposed by household responsibilities; lack of interest, awareness/education, resources, relevance of politics; or constraints imposed by their family or social norms. These OLS regressions use block fixed effects and covariates (age, education, caste, religion, religiosity index, political knowledge index, political participation index). Partisanship and indexes are calculated as per the pre-registered protocol. Standard errors are clustered at the block level, which is District (3) \times Region (2) \times PSU female-reservation status (2) \times PSU-representative Party ID (2). This analysis was not pre-registered but the overall regression adjustment follows the pre-registered guidelines.

in terms of *seva*. While the results consider various covariates such as age, education, political knowledge, history of political participation, religiosity, caste, religion, and even unobserved heterogeneity, it is important to acknowledge that there may still be confounding factors at play. One crucial factor is the influence of political parties, which is not accounted for in this analysis. As evidenced by the qualitative data presented in Chapter [insert chapter number], both men and women exercise a higher degree of caution when it comes to engaging in partisan activities. Hence, to investigate the impact of explicitly partisan mobilization appeals, and to rule out other possible confounders, I now turn to experimental methods.

An ideal experiment to estimate the effect of norm-compliant frames is to partner with political parties to invite women to party events, where the mobilization appeal would be randomly chosen from a list of pre-defined norm-compliant, neutral, and norm-undermining frames. However, the onset of Covid and ensuing health and safety considerations inhibited holding public gatherings. Consequently, use a set of survey-based experiments. The first of these is a discrete choice experiment where I use stated participation preferences as an outcome measure. The second is a political communication experiment that uses respondents' choices to transmit preferences to a representative. Together, these experiments shed light on the causal effect of *seva*-based participation frames, as well as mechanisms driving the effects.

Experimental design

Discrete choice experiment

A discrete choice experiment presents respondents with a pair of two choices of the entity of interest and asks them to choose between them. Adapting this basic setup to my study, to set up the experiment, I ask respondents to imagine an upcoming election where two fictitious candidates seeking party nominations were organizing events to mobilize women. I then present respondents with two candidate-event profiles and randomly vary six attributes: (1) candidate sex, (2) political party, (3) caste, (4) event frame, (5) number of women interested in attending, and finally, (6) the number of men encouraging women to attend. I then ask respondents to pick their preferred candidate-event, and to rate each on a scale of 1 through 10. Women were asked to choose the event they would like to attend. Men, on the other hand, were asked to choose which event they would like the primary respondent to attend. Women were asked an additional outcome question—in addition to their individual pick and ratings of candidate-events—they were asked which event they think their family would pick for them.

Each respondent was asked to complete two choice tasks. Applications of conjoint analysis typically ask respondents to complete a larger number of tasks; indeed Bansak et al. (2018) finds that respondents may be able to complete up to 30 tasks without an appreciable decline in response quality. However, during pilot surveys, I noticed that large gender gaps in education, mobility, and political knowledge meant that women respondents and enumerators were expending considerable time and effort on the experiment to the detriment of the remaining survey. Moreover, men were prone to get restive if the women’s survey took much longer than theirs. Thus, to reduce enumerator and respondent fatigue, and bring the time commitment across the two surveys at par, I reduced the number of choice tasks to two. In addition, I used pictorial aids to address gender gaps in literacy and comprehension. The question was asked as below:

Parties and politicians organize different kinds of events from time to time. These days many women are also taking part, so I will now ask you some questions about the kinds of events you think that **[you/women in your family]** would like to attend.

Now please imagine this situation: There is an election coming up two candidates are trying to get an election ticket. These candidates are planning to organize an event near your neighborhood to mobilize women. When they organize this, they will invite women, including **[you/name of female respondent]** to attend. I will now tell you a little bit about these candidates and the event they plan to organize.

This is the **[first/second]** candidate:

1. **[He/she]** is a **[man/woman]**

2. [**He/she**] is a member of [*jati*], which is a part of the [**caste**] community.¹⁸
3. [**He/she**] wants to get a ticket from [**BJP/INC**]
4. [**He/she**] is interested in running for office in the next election from your constituency and is planning to organize a [**public meeting/seva program/peaceful protest**] to work towards the development of this area.
5. In your neighborhood, [**few/many**] women have expressed an interest in attending this.
6. In your neighborhood, [**few/many**] men are willing to let women in their families attend this.

Outcome Questions:

1. Unfortunately, both events will be held at the same time, so people can only attend one of them. If [**you/name of female respondent**] had to attend one of these events (and she sought your opinion about this), which one would you like (her) to attend?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how much did you like:
 - (a) the first (women's) event,
 - (b) the second (women's) event,
 where 1 means that you did not like the event at all, 5 means you liked the event to some extent, and 10 means that you liked the event a lot.
3. [*For women respondents only*] Now if you think about your family, which event would they like you to attend?
4. [*After the last task only*] What made you choose this event?

Consistent with the computational text analysis, I continue to operationalize norm-compliant and norm-undermining frames and activities as *seva* and protests in the discrete choice experiment. However, in addition to these, I include a neutral category of participation—a public meeting or *jan sabha*—as a reference category upon which to test the (expected) positive effect of *seva* and the (expected) negative effect of protests.

The use of fictitious, rather than real, candidate-events allows me to more effectively manipulate the dimensions of theoretical interest. Second, like the real world where entities may vary on several dimensions, a discrete choice allows me to manipulate several attributes at the same time. This adds an element of realism to the choice. Finally, it also allows me to circumvent social desirability bias since it provides respondents with several possible justifications for each choice.

Despite these advantages, there are certain drawbacks to discrete choice experiments. First, Auerbach and Thachil (2018) and Auerbach and Thachil (2020) draw attention to construct validity problems, many of which stem from designs prioritizing theoretical interest

¹⁸Please refer to the pre-analysis plan at <https://osf.io/tb3kz/> for the list of sub-castes (*jatis*) and their corresponding caste groups.

over contextual resonance. To overcome this, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork to simplify my theory into easily comprehensible contextually relevant attributes. Second, an overlooked problem in forced-choice experiments of this nature—where realism requires respondents to hypothesize making an observable choice—is that the very act of choosing can be imagined as a declaration of support. In most cases, this would be interpreted as a virtue of the method. However, in contexts where electoral outcomes are uncertain, and where citizens may need to turn to multiple patrons to get things done, the costs of making a “public” choice can be high.¹⁹ These ethnographic insights prompted me to decrease the psychological burden of making a choice by providing a plausible justification of why respondents needed to choose—because the events were at the same time.

Unlike some applications of discrete choice analysis that focus exclusively on the extensive margin, the intensive margin of the intensity of the preference is also of key theoretical interest in this study. For instance, women could subconsciously take familial and social considerations into account when deciding which event to attend. Alternatively, respondents could be concerned about the privacy of their responses if other family members were present in the room at the time. In such cases, it was possible that women could suppress their true choice by choosing a more acceptable candidate-event. However, the rating question ensured a greater level of confidentiality as women could answer it by silently placing a finger on a ladder provided for this purpose. Thus the intensive margin of preferences is of both theoretical and practical significance.

The goal of the discrete choice analysis is to estimate the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE), which is the marginal effect of an attribute averaged over the joint distribution of other attributes. Here the key attribute of interest is the nature of the event, estimating which allows me to obtain the AMCE of norm-compliant frames (*seva*) compared to neutral (public meetings) and norm-undermining (protests) frames. Moreover, manipulating women’s interest and men’s acquiescence allows me to test the effect of social norms surrounding the acceptability of women’s participation. Per Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014), I estimate this through an OLS regression with individual fixed effects as per below:

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{ijk} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{ijk} \quad (5.1)$$

Here, the outcome variable, y_{ijk} , is either a rating or a choice provided by the i^{th} respondent on the j^{th} task where $j \in \{1, 2\}$, to the k^{th} profile where $k \in \{1, 2\}$. The independent variable of interest is an indicator variable denoted x_{ijk} which in the main analysis refers to the event, women’s interest, and men’s permissibility. γ_i denotes individual fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

¹⁹People could go to unusual lengths to avoid this: a woman revealed, how not to alienate or offend anyone, she had once voted for all the candidates on the ballot. Similarly, Govindrajan (2018)’s ethnography finds that elections created a cycle of mistrust between citizens—who promised their vote to multiple candidates—and losing candidates.

In addition, I present results from an alternative pre-specified OLS regression containing all attributes as indicator variables as per below.

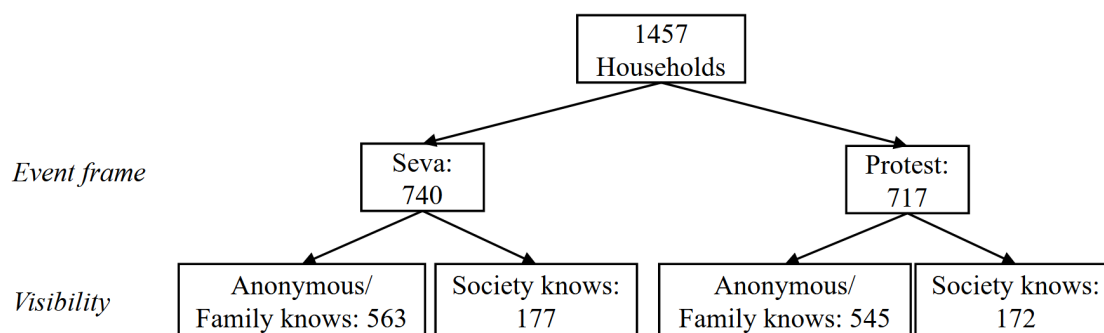
$$y_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{sex}_{ijk} + \beta_2 \text{caste}_{ijk} + \beta_3 \text{party}_{ijk} + \beta_4 \text{event}_{ijk} \\ + \beta_5 \text{women's interest}_{ijk} + \beta_6 \text{men's permissibility}_{ijk} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{ijk} \quad (5.2)$$

Both of these should give similar results based on randomization of attributes and equal probabilities of assignment.

Political communication experiment

A potential limitation when using a discrete choice experiment to test participation is by design, respondents are forced to make a choice. Hence, the design discussed in the previous section especially with regard to the choice outcome—albeit informative for relative preferences—does not lend itself to insights on actual attendance or absolute levels of participation.

Figure 5.3: Political communication experiment CONSORT diagram



To overcome this hurdle, I designed a political communication experiment represented in Figure 5.3. Respondents were told about outreach events planned by newly elected local representatives to build awareness—and develop solutions—to local service delivery problems. The event frame was randomized as norm-compliant or norm-undermining. Unlike the discrete choice experiment, there was no neutral frame.

The next step in the experiment is to test a key mechanism at the heart of taking part in potentially transgressive activities—the visibility of participation. The visibility of participation can be a powerful mediator in deciding whether people are willing to bear the costs of political action. Visibility can suppress participation if perceived as incompatible with prevailing norms.²⁰ In particular, Paler, Marshall and Atallah (2018) finds that respondents are less likely to sign a petition when asked to provide their names relative to an anonymous

²⁰See Paler, Marshall and Atallah (2018); Panagopoulos (2010); Klar and Krupnikov (2016); Hayes, Scheufele and Huye (2006); Kuran (1997); La Raja (2014); Mutz (2002); Rosenfeld, Imai and Shapiro (2016).

condition. Similarly La Raja (2014) finds that people, especially when surrounded by those with different political views, may opt out of contributing to political campaigns when asked to divulge their names. On the other hand, visibility may boost civic engagement when perceived as socially desirable. In such cases, people are more likely to vote,²¹ as well as partake in more costly activities like voicing political opinions, signing petitions, and joining rallies and protests.²²

The experiment was originally designed as an exploratory design geared towards disentangling household and societal constraints to women's participation. It sought to do so by soliciting women (and men) to transmit their opinions about the event by randomizing the visibility of this participation as (1) completely anonymous (50%), (2) known to their family but not their society or representative (25%), and finally, (3) completely visible to their family, society, and representative (25%). Thus, there were six treatment groups: two event frames \times three visibility conditions. However, in practice, the first treatment condition, that of complete anonymity proved to be hard to implement. Although enumerators were able to interview men and women separately, it was not always possible to isolate the designated female respondent from other women in the household. This was due to several factors, including the small sizes of homes, and women respondents' need to simultaneously attend to domestic chores. For these reasons, complete isolation was relatively harder to implement than sex-based segregation. Moreover, women respondents and gatekeepers were more guarded and wary if enumerators insisted on complete isolation. Thus, because women's participation decisions could not be easily anonymized from the family, I pool the complete anonymity and partial visibility conditions and compare them to the group assigned to the complete visibility condition.

The experiment was implemented as follows:

As you know, elections were held over the last 1-2 years to choose your [Sarpanch / Councilor]. But because of COVID, many new leaders have not been able to meet with voters. Many leaders we have spoken with so far have expressed an interest in being able to interact with voters to know what their problems are and how to solve them. But only after things become completely normal, and we defeat Covid. They are then thinking about organizing an event to mobilize people in their areas.

The purpose of this event will be to engage with voters and start working for the development of this [village/ward]. We will do this through a [protest and demonstration/*samaj seva* event]. The event will start with an address by your leader. After that, [there will be a march where we will shout slogans/we will do *seva* and a *padayatra*] and get other people in the area to join. This will help others know about how the party is working to make people's lives better and show people how they can contribute to making their community better.

[Enumerator: Now please place the 1-10 ladder in front of the respondent.]

²¹Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008); Gerber et al. (2016); Dellavigna et al. (2017); Funk (2010)

²²McClendon (2014); Eubank and Kronick (2019); Bursztyn et al. (2020; 2021)

1. Do you like or dislike this idea? Can you tell me on a scale of 1-10, where 1 means you dislike it completely, 5 means you are neutral, and 10 means that you like it completely?
2. If I were to ask 10 men in your *mohalla* about this, how many of them do you think would attend this?
3. If I were to ask 10 women in your *mohalla* about this, how many of them do you think would attend this?

Thank you for sharing your opinions. To help your representative make a decision about holding this event or not, we would like to tell them what people in their constituency think.

Are you willing to send this opinion to your representative? If you choose to do so, [we will not disclose your decision or your name to anyone inside or outside the household, including the other respondent and your representative/ we will not disclose your name to anyone outside the household, including your representative. But the rest of your family will get to know/ we will publish your name in a newspaper a few days after we complete this survey, and also share your name with your representative. So, people in your family, members of your community, and your representative will come to know that you sent your opinion.

There will be no direct or indirect benefit to you from sharing your opinion except for helping your leader decide what the people want. But if you don't want to share this opinion with your representative, that is also totally fine. So you have two options: (1) send your opinion to your *Sarpanch/Parshad*, (2) not send your opinion. What would you like to do?²³

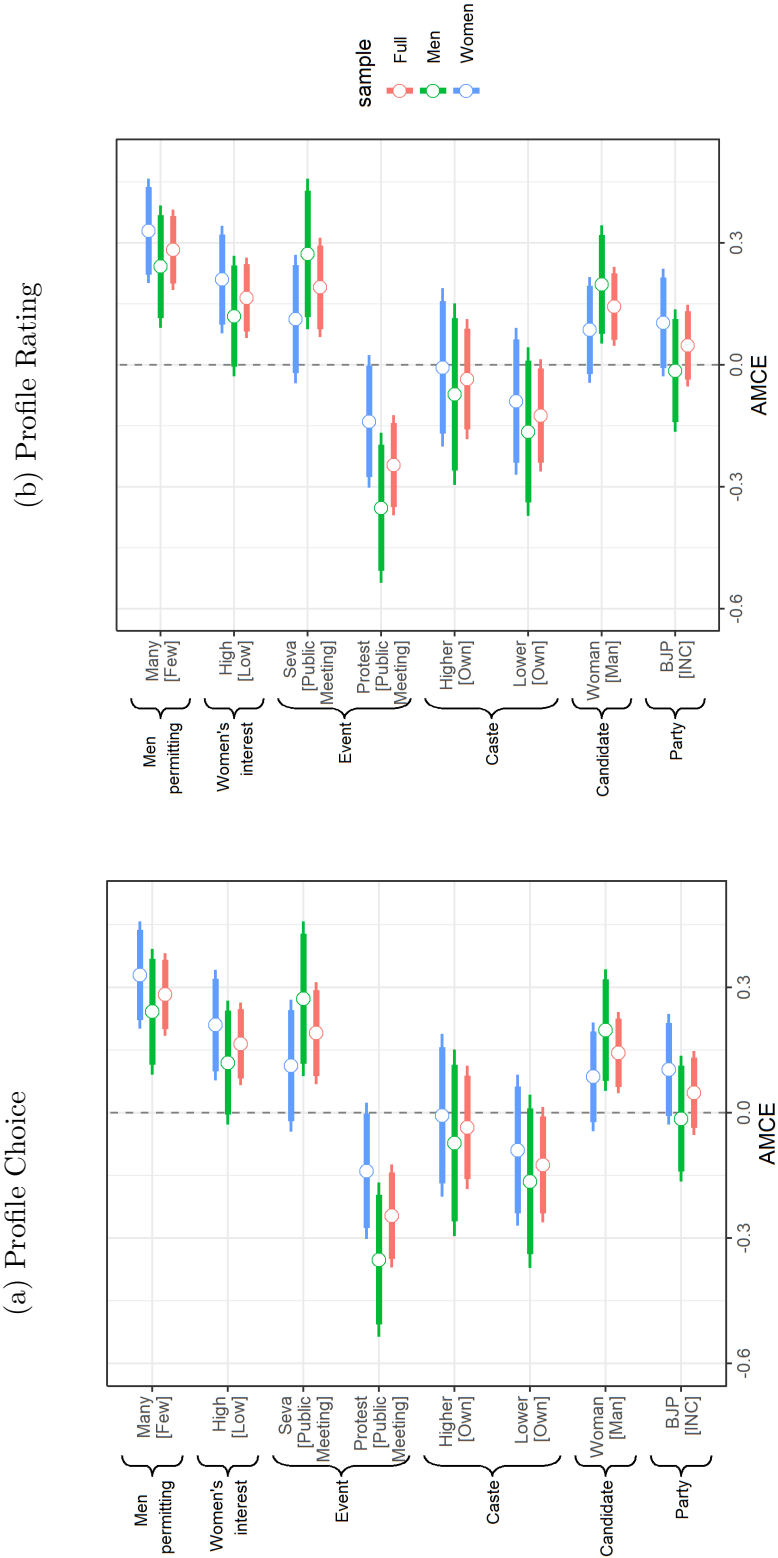
Main finding

The main attributes of interest per the pre-analysis plan are the event frame (attribute 4), and social norms surrounding women's participation as approximated by the number of women interested in taking part, and the number of men who are willing to unblock access. The remaining attributes were designated for exploratory analysis. In summary, I find as per my theoretical expectation, that women prefer *seva*-based political events over the regular course of politics that comprises public meetings. These differences in choice are particularly stark when comparing these events to antagonistic forms of participation like protests. Crucially, men hold far stronger preferences about the kinds of events women should take part in compared to women themselves, and both women's and men's preferences can be swayed by what other women, but more importantly, what other women think.

Figure 5.4 and Table 5.5 show the results of the pre-specified analysis for the main attribute of interest, the event frame. Figure 5.4 is based on estimating Equation 5.2 that

²³Respondents in the non-anonymous conditions were debriefed at the end of the survey about the hypothetical nature of the event, and whether they would like to see their name published in a local newspaper.

Figure 5.4: Results of conjoint analysis on choice of candidate-event profile



Note: The figure shows the Average Marginal Component Effect for all attribute-levels, relative to the one in brackets based on estimating Equation 5.2. Thin lines indicate 95% confidence intervals and thick lines indicate 90% confidence intervals.

Table 5.5: AMCE of framing political events in terms of *seva* and protests (Conjoint analysis)

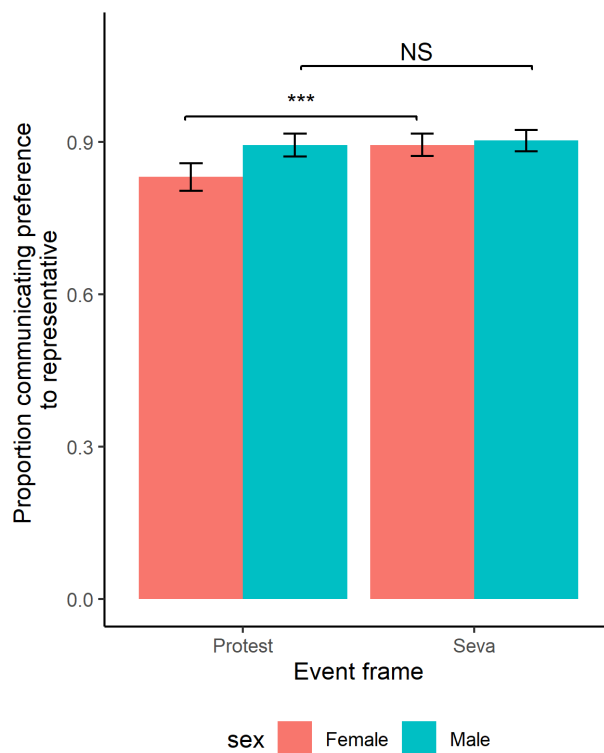
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Choice			Rating			Family choice
	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Women	Men	Women
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Protest	-0.062*** (0.015)	-0.038* (0.022)	-0.086*** (0.022)	-0.249*** (0.063)	-0.149* (0.084)	-0.352*** (0.095)	-0.057*** (0.022)
Seva	0.077*** (0.015)	0.064*** (0.022)	0.091*** (0.021)	0.187*** (0.063)	0.105 (0.081)	0.268*** (0.095)	0.052** (0.022)
FE	Ind.	Ind.	Ind.	Ind.	Ind.	Ind.	Ind.
Covariates	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
N respondents	2914	1457	1457	2914	1457	1457	1455
Observations	11,656	5,828	5,828	11,656	5,828	5,828	5,818
R ²	0.010	0.005	0.016	0.392	0.409	0.378	0.006

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. This table estimates the Average Marginal Component Effect of framing a hypothetical political event in terms of *seva* and protests vis-à-vis the reference category of a public meeting. Columns 1-3 and 7 focus on the extensive margin of choice of program. Columns 4-6 focus on the intensity of the preference based on a 1-10 rating where 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest. The estimates are obtained from a pre-specified OLS regression as recommended by Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto (2015). The specifications include individual-level fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the level of the respondent.

estimates the AMCEs of all attribute-levels together. I find that compared to the reference category of neutral participation—a public meeting organized by the electoral candidate—women display a lower inclination (by 3.8 percentage points) to choose the contentious event frame of protests. At the same time, they are 6.4 percentage points more inclined to choose the contentious frame of protests, vis-à-vis public meetings. This leads to a difference of 10.2 percentage points between *seva* and protests. The signs of the AMCE on the rating outcome measure are consistent with the choice measure, but the difference between *seva* and the reference category is not statistically significant at the 5% level.

The findings from the political communication experiment confirm the patterns seen in the conjoint experiment. Pooling all visibility conditions, we find evidence of a gender gap in political communication under the norm-undermining frame of protests but not in the norm-compliant frame of *seva*. First, we find that men and women are highly—and equally—likely to assent to send their opinions to their representative when assigned to the *seva*-framed event. Indeed, communication for both sexes is nearly 90%. But within the protest-framed group, women are 10 percentage points less likely than men to reach out to their representative. Men’s communication decision, on the other hand, remains at about

Figure 5.5: Effect of norm-compliant frames on preference communication (political communication experiment)



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents choosing to communicate their preferences under norm-compliant (*seva*) and norm-undermining (protest) frames. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Horizontal lines and stars indicate p -values of differences between the corresponding columns based on covariate-unadjusted OLS regressions ($NS : p > 0.1$; $* : p < 0.1$; $** : p < 0.05$; $*** : p < 0.01$).

90% and is invariant to the event frame. This 10 percentage point gender gap across the two frames is substantively large at about 11% and significant at the 1% level.

Why are the differences in communication for women more muted when compared to the discrete choice experiment? There could be a few reasons for this. For one, the two designs are not comparable since the discrete choice experiment can often present a clear counterfactual frame to respondents, amplifying the difference between the event frames. Indeed, over 31% of women and 42% of men based their decision on the event frame, which was the most important attribute for both sexes. A second reason for this difference is the nature of participation the two designs entail. The discrete choice event requires the respondent to visualize physically entering a public space that broadcasts their partisan positions. On the other hand, the political communication experiment provides a plausible cover to respondents who can frame their civic engagement as based on a concern for local

service delivery rather than partisanship *per se*. Moreover, the communication of preferences is a far less exceptional form of political engagement compared to attending party events, especially considering the role-incongruent character of the latter.

Next, I turn to examining the implications of framing for men's acquiescence to women's participation. A key prediction of my theory is that norm-compliant frames, by not challenging traditional gender norms, can help mitigate gatekeepers' resistance. Moreover, if women's participation decisions are largely predicated on men's preferences, men should exhibit similar, if not stronger preferences about women's participation. To provide evidence for the impact of men's permissibility on women's participation decisions, I return to the discrete choice experiment.

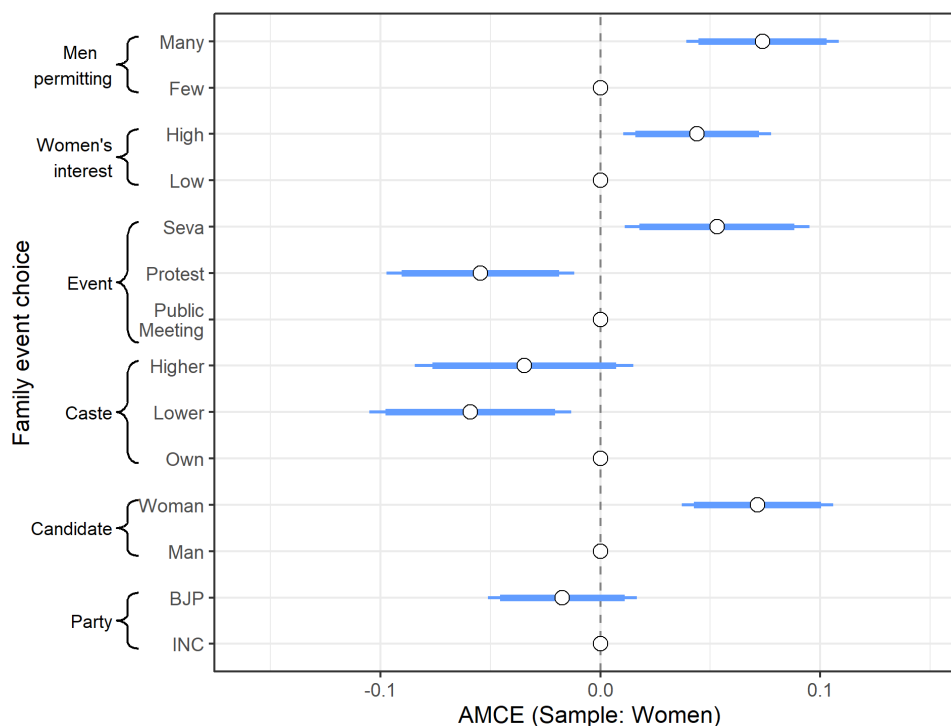
Unlike women, for whom the outcome question queried the candidate-event *they* were more interested in, men were asked which candidate-event they favored *for the primary (woman) respondent*. Focusing on the event frame, as shown in Figure 5.4 and Table 5.5, we find that men's choices align with women's in terms of direction, but they are decidedly stronger. Relative to the reference category of the public meeting, men are 8.6 percentage points less likely to choose protests, and 9.1 percentage points more likely to choose *seva*. Men's dislike for norm-undermining frames (compared to the reference group) is almost 5 percentage points more severe than women's ($p < 0.1$).

This trend is visible in women's anticipation of men's preferences, suggesting they may need to strike a patriarchal bargain when entering the political arena. When asked which event would their *family* prefer they attend, their preference for norm-undermining behaviors drops by 2 percentage points compared to their personal preferences as can be seen in Column 7 of Table 5.5 and Figure 5.6. In addition to the extensive margin, this difference between men's and women's preferences also holds for the intensive margin of ratings, where men's rating of protests drops by 0.352 points compared to 0.149 points for women. Based on an interaction model, this difference is significant at the 10% level.

A second way to estimate the effect of gatekeeping is to examine if women change their answers if asked to choose from the perspective of their family. After eliciting the woman respondent's individual preferences, enumerators asked them to tell us which candidate-event profile would their family find more suitable for their participation. Figure 5.6 depicts the AMCE. We find that the results are largely congruent to women's personal preferences, save for the stronger preferences in favor *seva* and against protests. However, the divergence from their personal choice is not so strong to be statistically meaningful at conventional levels of significance.

What were the most important factors underlying decision-making for men and women? After the last comparison task of the discrete choice experiment, enumerators asked respondents which of the attributes had been the most influential in their decision-making process. We asked this question only after the final task because it was possible that if we asked this earlier, respondents might have biased subsequent choices to be consistent with this decision-making process. Thus, by asking it after the last question we were able to avoid cognitive biases related to recency, anchoring, confirmation, or even a desire to appear consistent before the enumerator.

Figure 5.6: Results of conjoint analysis on choice of candidate-event from the gatekeeper’s perspective (Discrete choice experiment)

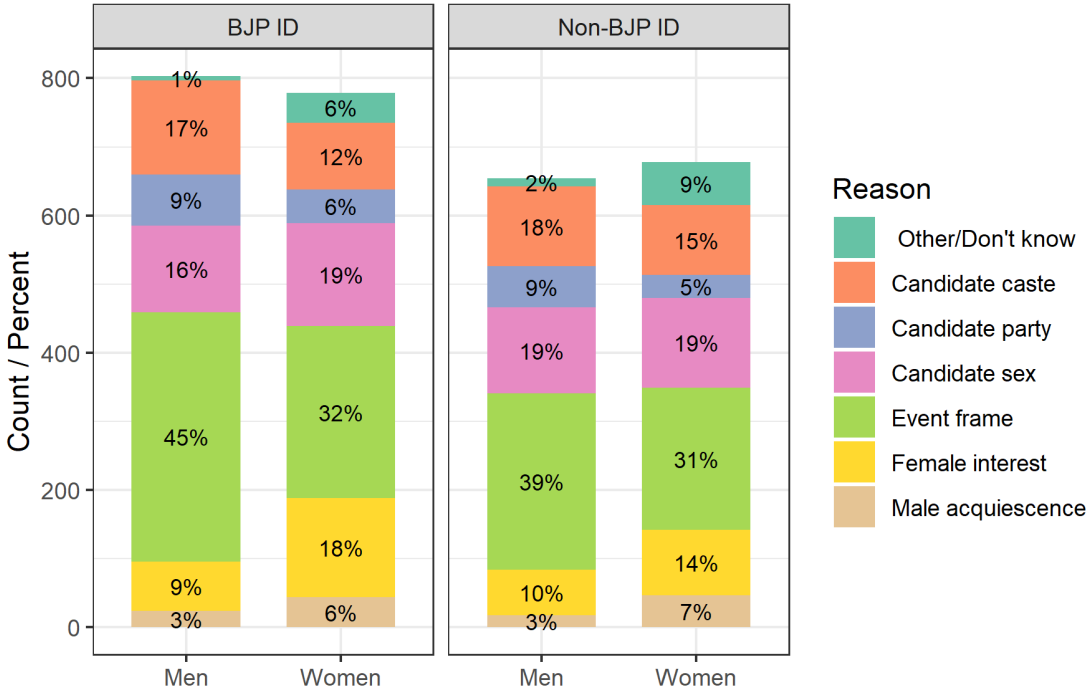


Note: Based on the women’s sub-sample, this figure shows the Average Marginal Component Effect for all attribute-levels, relative to the reference category depicted as a white dot centered on 0. Results are based on estimating Equation 5.2. Thin lines indicate 95% confidence intervals and thick lines indicate 90% confidence intervals.

In Figure 5.7, we see that both men and women, regardless of their partisan identification, accorded the greatest importance to how the event was framed. There are however some differences across gender and partisan identification. Pooling over the partisan divide, we see about 42.6% men basing their decision on the event frame compared to 31.5% women, an 11.1 percentage point difference. Moreover, 45% men identifying with the BJP said they based their decision on framing compared to 39% of other respondents which includes partisans of the INC and other parties, as well as other non-partisan respondents. This 6 percentage point higher reliance on event framing is statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.01$.

These supplementary findings, although not individually decisive, reinforce and support the conclusions drawn from the main analysis. They confirm that respondents demonstrated a preference for norm-compliant frames when considering women’s engagement and that the attribute of the event frame strongly influenced their decision-making. Furthermore, the results indicate that men, particularly those affiliated with the BJP, exhibited a higher inclination to prioritize event frames over other attributes. This alignment between the

Figure 5.7: Reason for choosing candidate-event profile (discrete choice experiment)



Note: This figure shows the main reason why respondents chose a particular profile in the last task of the discrete choice experiment.

additional findings and the main analysis affirms the robustness of our conclusions and provides further evidence for the significance of norm-compliant frames and the role of gender and party affiliation in decision-making processes.

Qualitative evidence also points to the role of *seva* frames in allowing socially recognized and permissible ways to enter public spaces. Describing her journey into politics, a BJP activist in Jaipur, said that she did not consider herself a politician, but a social worker or *samaj sevika*.

For me, politics is a way of doing social service. I was the first woman in my (local) community to join a party. And my father-in-law was very displeased when my husband told him about this. So I had to tell him that it was just a way for me to do social work to uplift our community. And I was lucky my husband came round after a while, and we were able to get my father-in-law's permission. And that was important because he is the head of the family.²⁴

²⁴Focus group discussion in Jaipur, November 2021.

5.5 Mechanisms

What explains the effectiveness of *seva* in enabling women's participation, and what leads to the BJP's success in mobilizing women? In this section, I discuss exploratory results from two pre-registered mechanisms: the role of visibility in mitigating norm-undermining behaviors, and beliefs about the acceptability of participation. Next, I present evidence on how the BJP operationalizes the *seva* frame to mobilize women out of the home.

Does visibility reduce role-incongruent behavior?

How does the visibility of political engagement affect the propensity of potential participants to enter the public sphere or exercise voice? This is an empirical question and often depends on factors such as the norms surrounding participation, its nature, and perceptions of the benefits and costs of being seen as active citizens. As Paler, Marshall and Atallah (2018) argues, when an issue is uncontroversial and taking a public position is socially desirable, the visibility of participation can promote prosocial behavior and increase participation. This is often observed in cases of high voter turnout during elections. However, when an issue is controversial and taking a public position can lead to criticism or sanctions from those who disagree, the social costs associated with visibility can deter individuals from publicly expressing their private beliefs. This can result in preference falsification, where individuals hide or misrepresent their true preferences due to perceived social pressures.²⁵ The fear of social sanctioning reduces the willingness to take public political action, leading to a decline in participation.

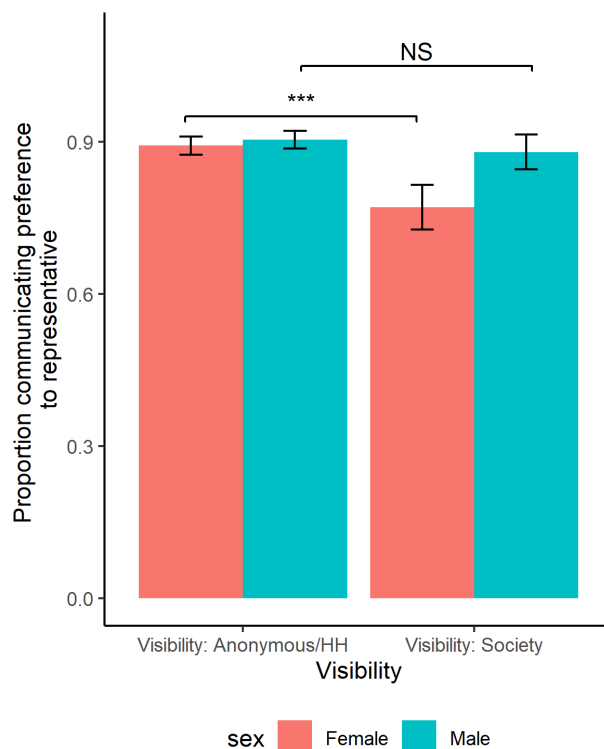
In the case of my study sites, using the political communication experiment, I find in Figure 5.8 that from a baseline communication rate of 89.8% under anonymity or partial visibility (to the immediate family), the marginal effect of complete visibility to society and the representative is to reduce the opinion transmission by 7.3 percentage points.

This effect of visibility, as shown in Figure 5.8 is driven largely by women. Men and women are roughly equally likely to transmit opinions under conditions of social anonymity. However, starting from 89.3%, the likelihood of women communicating to their representative declines by 12.8 percentage points when their participation is rendered visible to society and their representative. This constitutes a substantial effect of 14.3%. Men's participation on the other hand remains invariant to whether their community and representative become aware of their engagement.

But does this vary by framing and norm-compliance? Since *seva* is an injunctive norm and is descriptively gendered, we would expect women to be more sensitive to framing than men. Then, within each gender, we expect gender-incompatible behavior to decline to a greater extent as it becomes visible to the community. Consequently, we would expect participation to fall to a greater extent within the protest frame compared to the *seva* frame. The implications for norm-compliant frames are not as clear. On the one hand,

²⁵Kuran (1997)

Figure 5.8: Effect of social visibility on participation



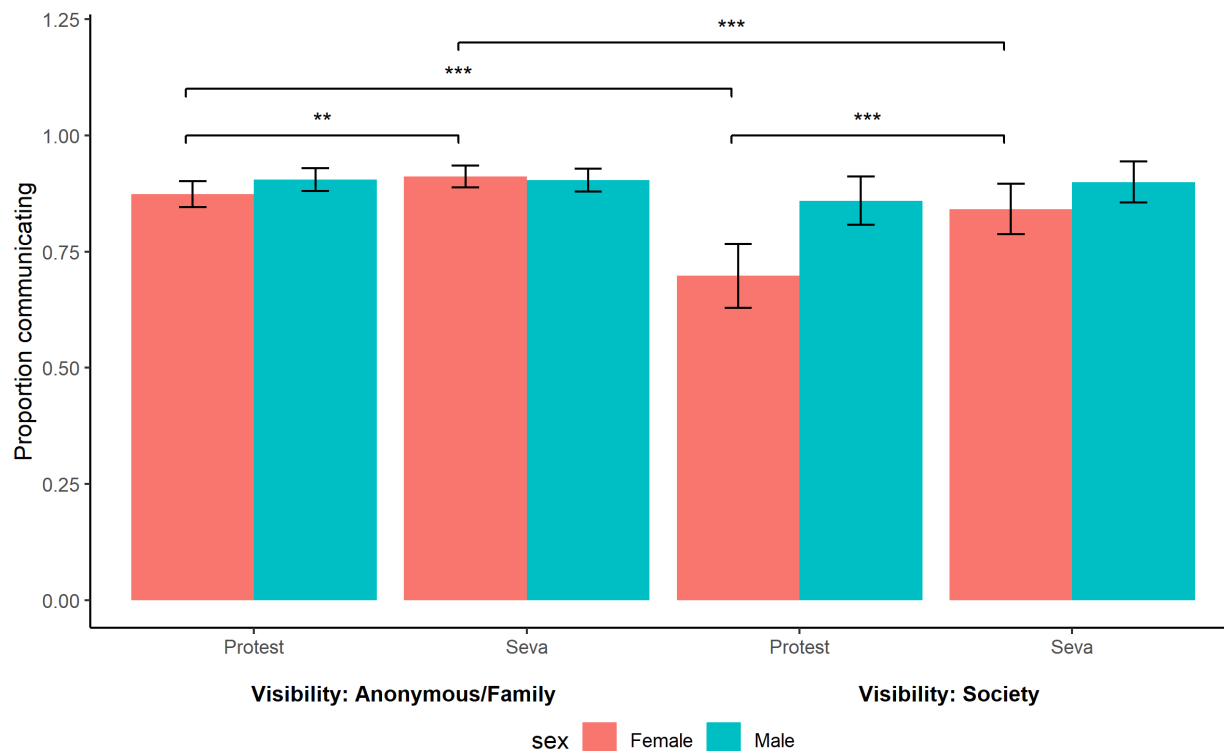
Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents choosing to communicate their preferences when their participation is visible to society compared to when it is not. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Horizontal lines and stars indicate p -values of differences between the corresponding columns based on covariate-unadjusted OLS regressions (NS : $p > 0.1$; * : $p < 0.1$; ** : $p < 0.05$; *** : $p < 0.01$).

gender-compatible actions and social esteem motives may increase participation, but on the other hand, visibility of partisan engagement may depress it. Hence the composite effect of visibility for women's preference transmission is ambiguous.

To answer these questions, in a pre-registered secondary analysis, I disaggregate the overall visibility effect based on the event frame assigned to respondents. Adjusting for the effects of pre-specified covariates, we find in Figure 5.9 that women assigned to the norm-compliant *seva* frame reduce their participation by 7.1 percentage points (proportional effect of 7.8%). But the fall in participation is much steeper in the norm-undermining condition with an 18.5 percentage point decline, amounting to a 21.2% proportional effect.²⁶ These findings support our theoretical expectations that citizens' inclination to engage in norm-incompatible behavior would diminish when the social costs associated with such behavior are

²⁶Unadjusted estimates are similar at 6.9 and 17.6 percentage points under norm-compliant and norm-undermining groups respectively.

Figure 5.9: Effect of social visibility and event frames on participation



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents choosing to communicate their preferences under norm-compliant (*seva*) and norm-undermining (protest) frames, when this communication is invisible to society (Columns 1-4) and when it is visible to society (Columns 5-8). Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Horizontal lines and stars indicate p -values of differences between the corresponding columns based on covariate-adjusted OLS regressions ($NS : p > 0.1$; $* : p < 0.1$; $** : p < 0.05$; $*** : p < 0.01$).

made more salient by increasing its visibility within the community. The steeper decline in participation and communication in the norm-undermining condition underscores the impact of heightened social costs on individuals' willingness to engage in behavior that deviates from established norms.

To disaggregate the overall null effect of visibility on men's participation, I examine whether this varies by the use of norm-compliant frames. In Figure 5.9, I find no evidence of heterogeneity. Although, the loss of social anonymity reduces participation for men too, the quantum of the decline in both *seva* and protest groups are not large enough to be statistically or substantively significant at conventional levels.

Together, these results have important implications for our understanding of the implications of visibility on political participation. Public visibility can often be a pre-condition for

active political participation and citizenship. Consequently, the ability to enter public spaces can determine how one's interests are represented, either individually or in groups. Existing studies find varying effects of visibility on public engagement: on the one hand, for citizens motivated by social esteem, visibility can encourage greater civic engagement (Dellavigna et al. 2017; McClendon 2014), but when perceived as costly, can discourage citizens from taking part or making their participation known (La Raja 2014; Paler, Marshall and Atallah 2018). But visibility may be moderated by norms of acceptable behavior that vary by group. Although Anoll (2018) does not examine visibility per se, she finds that the effect of participatory norms can in the US vary by race and neighborhood composition. Aligning with this view, this analysis shows the group-based nature of norm development and enforcement by highlighting how making participation known can have differing consequences for women and men.

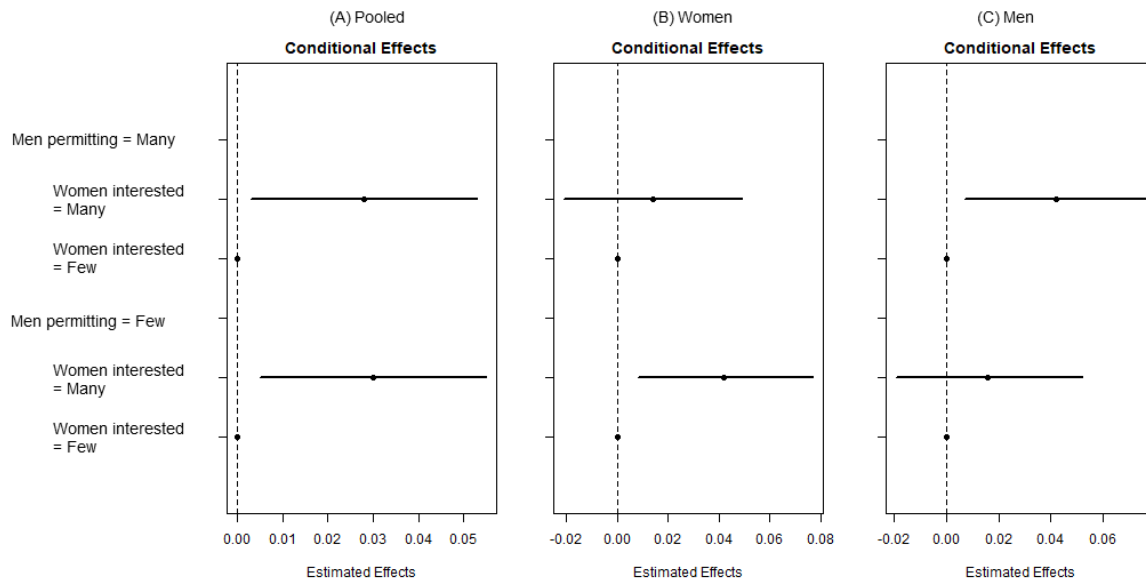
Do beliefs about the social acceptability of participation matter?

Next, I investigate how beliefs about the social acceptability of participation influence women's inclination and ability to engage in partisan politics. In doing so, I focus on how (a) perceptions about the number of women interested in engaging in party events, and (b) perceptions about the degree of acquiescence from gatekeepers—influence respondents' participation decisions. The analysis that follows combines findings from the discrete choice and political communication experiments.

First, I discuss evidence from the discrete choice experiment's attributes of "women's interest" and "men's permissibility" that operationalize expectations of how many women in the respondent's neighborhood are interested in taking part and the acceptability of participation by men. More specifically, the attribute of "men's permissibility" manipulates perceptions of men's gatekeeping, while the attribute of "women's interest" tests whether perceptions of group size and potential strength in numbers matter for respondents' choice and rating. Crucially, if political participation is construed as costly for women, an increase in the number of perceived participants can reduce the per capita costs, incentivizing women to participate in stronger numbers. Similarly, greater men's acquiescence will also encourage participation. Consequently, we would expect women respondents to choose the profile with higher endorsements by other women and men. Male respondents would also be more supportive of participation when more people in the community endorse this. However, given their status as gatekeepers, we should expect both men and women to assign greater weight to men's preferences rather than women's.

The results of this analysis are included in the two attributes at the top in Figure 5.4. Across male and female respondents, I find nearly identical magnitudes of the AMCE of manipulating gatekeeping perceptions through "men's permissibility". Both men and women are about 8 percentage points more likely to choose the event where "many" (as opposed to the reference category of "few") men will permit women from their families to take part. Similarly, manipulating perceptions of women's interest in Panel A affects event choice by approximately 3.6 percentage points for men and 3.8 percentage points for women. Crucially,

Figure 5.10: AMIE of women’s interest, conditional on men’s permissibility



Note: This figure shows how the effect of women’s interest varies within a given level of men’s permissibility. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

the magnitude of the AMCE for this attribute is less than half that of men’s permissibility ($p < 0.05$). This provides clear evidence in support of our theory that women’s participation is moderated by men within the household, as well as perceptions of what male members of the community deem appropriate.

However, in contrast to the significant influence of the event frame, Figure 5.7 reveals that respondents are unlikely to openly acknowledge that their decision-making is influenced by concerns about men’s acquiescence. Only a small percentage, approximately 3% of men and 6.5% of women, stated that this factor played a significant role in their decision-making process. The question arises: what could explain this discrepancy? One plausible explanation is the presence of social desirability bias, which can lead respondents to either understate or overstate their reliance on certain attributes when interacting with enumerators. In this particular context, women may not want to express that their decision-making is heavily influenced by men’s attitudes as it might diminish their sense of esteem and agency. At the same time, men may also want to downplay their control over women’s mobility and political choices before others. Hence, to manage their public image and moderate potential judgment from external observers, respondents may have consciously or unconsciously downplayed their reliance on this attribute.

How does men’s gatekeeping interact with women’s interest? Are men more permissive of women’s participation if they think more women are interested in the event, regardless of the opinions of other men? To check this, I estimate the Average Marginal Interaction Effect (AMIE) proposed by Egami and Imai (2019). This enables us to examine how the effect

of the women's interest, conditional on men's gatekeeping. The AMIE does not depend on the choice of baseline conditions, easing its interpretation and comparisons across multiple interaction effects.

Figure 5.10 shows that in Panel A, the pooled sample, respondents preferred the candidate-event with a higher level of women's interest regardless of men's gatekeeping levels. Disaggregating this into its components for female and male respondents in Panels B and C respectively shows that women place a higher weight on other women's preferences in conditions of lower men's permissibility, while men assign greater weight to women's preferences only when men's permissibility is already high. These results show that high levels of women's interest *per se* are unlikely to effectively substitute for low levels of men's acquiescence.

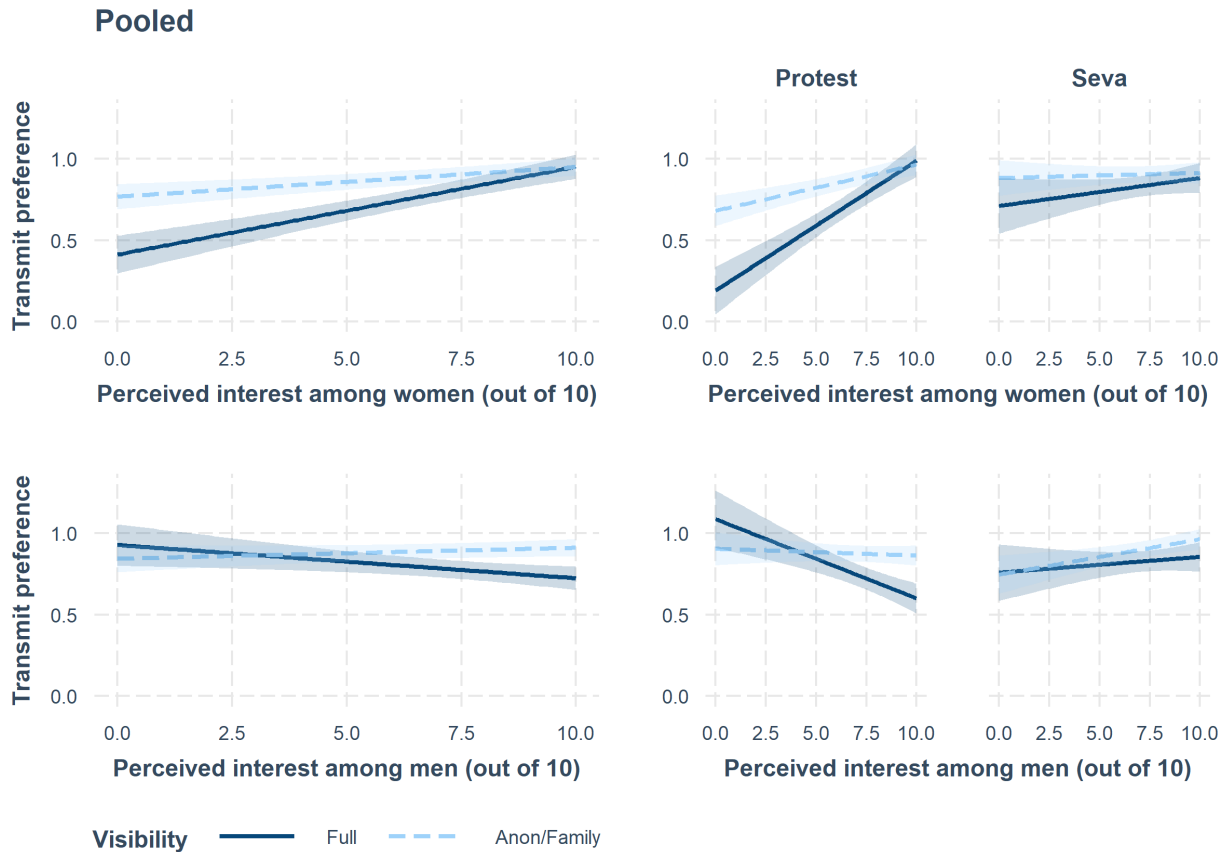
Taken together, these findings underscore the fundamental importance of visibility and social perceptions in explaining women's entry into the public sphere. Whether it is women's physical presence in public or even the transmission of opinions to representatives, these factors assume a central role in determining their presence and voice. Visibility penalizes transgressive behaviors while not rewarding compliant behaviors. As we see in Figure 5.9, social observability reduces engagement in both *seva* and protests but primarily penalizes the latter. Similarly, women's participation is more sensitive to men's interests than what other women in the community might be interested in. Since men are more likely to favor norm-compliant frames, it follows that women are prone to participate in *seva*-framed activities.

What does this mean for norm-undermining behaviors? Are there any conditions under which we can expect women to engage in activities that challenge the status quo? To be sure, the cloak of anonymity does shield a female respondent from backlash and reduce the costs of gender-incompatible participation, but the vast majority of political life—except perhaps for the secret ballot—is conducted within the public sphere. Indeed, entering the public sphere is vital for political socialization, contributing to public opinion, asserting influence over politics and policy, redressing grievances, making claims, and holding the state to account. Moreover, normative change and acceptance of women in the political sphere as also role-model effects can only be initiated when their engagement can be observed. Consequently, anonymity is neither a desirable nor sustainable solution. Then under what circumstances can women take part in potentially costly behaviors?

One possible pathway to reduce the cost an individual face is to engage in group-based activity, where the costs of visibility can be shared among all participants. To test this, I interact perceived participation with transmission visibility in Figure 5.11. Consistent with our expectation, in Row 1, we observe communication to increase despite non-anonymity as women's perceptions about other women's interest increases. This increase is driven almost entirely by the protest event frame, showing women find greater solidarity in the presence of other women who can share the costs of role-incongruent behavior. Strikingly, as the perception of women's interest reaches its maximum possible value (10 out of 10), participation under conditions of social visibility becomes equivalent to participation under social anonymity.

Norm-compliant behaviors on the other hand are far less sensitive to perceived interest among other citizens. Indeed, the relatively higher intercept and flatter slope in Column 3

Figure 5.11: Moderating effect of perceived interest and participation visibility on preference communication (political communication experiment)



Note: Using the women's sub-sample, this figure shows the predicted values of preference communication under different conditions of visibility, moderated by perceived interest among other women and men. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals.

shows that the relation between participation under the *seva* and perceived interest is consistently high across all possible values of perceived support. In other words, since participation is already high, the role of perceived support ceases to matter. Hence in low information settings, and especially where women have overall lower levels of political knowledge, *seva*-based frames can reduce communication and coordination costs by obviating a party's need to invest in solving these problems in the first place.

This positive relationship reverses as women's perceptions of men's interest increases, as can be seen in Row 2 of Figure 5.11. This too is driven by the norm-undermining treatment, suggesting that women perceive protests as a masculine form of engagement. Women's participation under *seva*-based frames continues to be less sensitive to perceived male interest. Overall, we find that community support matters for role-incongruent behaviors and espe-

cially so when it is provided by other women. Finally in Appendix Figure C.4, we see that men's participation is uniformly high and largely invariant to frames or perceived interests, both among men and women.

Does partisanship matter?

What is the impact of partisanship on women's participation in the public sphere? Tables 5.3 and 5.4 reveal that men affiliated with the BJP were more inclined to relax permission requirements for women to engage in norm-compliant activities such as social service. However, it is important to note that the question did not specify women's involvement in partisan or political activities. Considering the societal stigma associated with overtly political events, it is possible that men's and women's opinions about such events may change when they are explicitly made aware of their highly political nature.

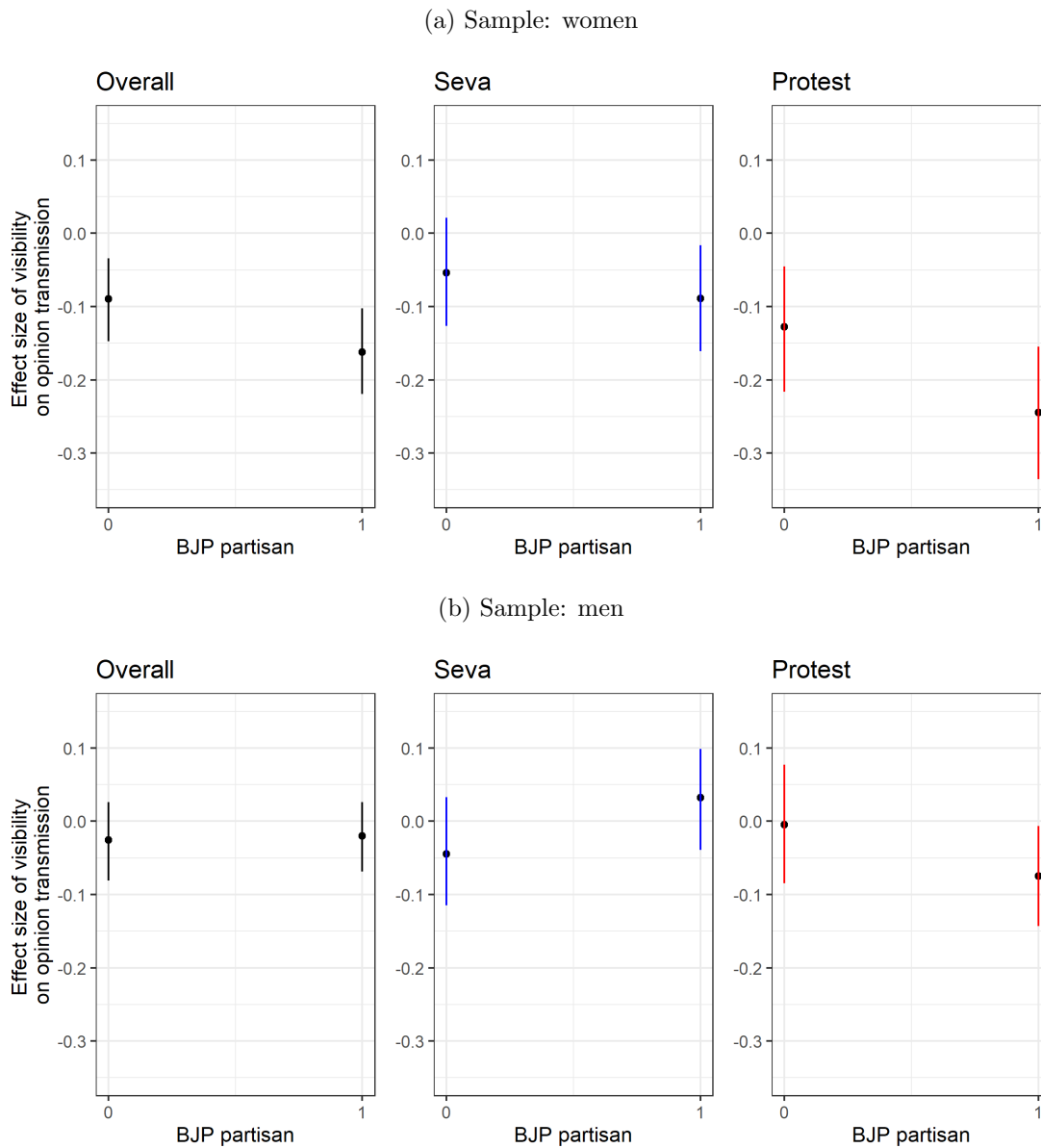
Using a range of methods and combining both the discrete choice and political communication experiment, I find that partisanship does matter for women's engagement, but in a nuanced way. Its independent impact as measured through the AMCE is weak, perhaps even non-existent. But when undertaking a deeper analysis through the lens of visibility and norm-compliance, I find women's participation to be influenced by partisan considerations.

Starting with the discrete choice experiment, Figure 5.4 suggests that neither women nor men are more likely to prefer a specific political party when making the participation decision. I find that the AMCE for the BJP (compared to the INC) for both the choice outcome is statistically indistinguishable from 0. Suggestive evidence from the rating outcome does indicate that women have a stronger preference for the BJP; yet with a p -value of 0.129, this too is not significant at conventional levels. Similarly, only 5% to 9% of respondents in Figure 5.7 said that the party was an overriding factor in their decision-making process.

Next, we find that topline results in the political communication experiment support this finding. There is no differential effect of partisanship on willingness to communicate with representatives as can be seen in Table C.1. But when we manipulate visibility—which we cannot do in the discrete choice experiment as attending an event by construction is always public—we find that partisanship influences the effect of visibility on political participation and communication and that this varies by the event frame. Figure 5.12 shows how the effect of visibility on opinion transmission changes based on partisanship. Pooling across all event frames, I find that women (Figure 5.12, Row 1)—regardless of partisanship—reduce participation when it is visible. However, the fall is steeper for women aligned with the BJP than with other parties ($p < 0.05$). Disaggregating this, we find in Columns 2 and 3 of Row 1, that the decline for both groups of women, is primarily driven by the norm-undermining frame. Indeed, the effect of visibility drops by almost two times as much for women aligned with the BJP compared to those who are not (0.25 vs 0.13, $p < 0.05$) in the protest condition. There is no appreciable partisan difference in the *seva* condition.

On the other hand, when pooling over all event frames for men (Row 2, Column 1), we find remarkably little differential impact of partisanship in moderating the relationship between visibility and participation. However, this hides considerable heterogeneity that

Figure 5.12: Moderating effect of partisanship on the effect of visibility on willingness to communicate with a representative (political communication experiment)



Note: The figure shows how being a BJP partisan influences the effect of visibility on the propensity to send opinions to their representative. Regressions adjust for pre-specified covariates, use randomization block fixed effects, and cluster SEs at the individual level, i.e., the level of treatment assignment. Lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Table 5.6: Does partisanship shape political communication?

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Communicated opinion					
	Pooled	Women		Men	Pooled	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female						-0.030 (0.021)
BJP ID	0.019 (0.017)	0.023 (0.017)	0.021 (0.017)	0.017 (0.021)	0.019 (0.024)	0.032 (0.022)
Female × BJP ID						-0.024 (0.026)
Constant	0.871*** (0.015)					
R.Block FE	×	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	×	×	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914
R ²	0.001	0.017	0.027	0.044	0.042	0.031

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ This table shows the association between partisan identity, gender and transmission of preferences in the political communication experiment. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects and are adjusted for covariates. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

emerges once we consider the event frame. As the remaining cells in Figure 5.12 indicate, BJP-aligned men are more likely to transmit preferences when exposed to the *seva* frame than those not aligned to the party ($p < 0.05$). But this effect reverses with norm-undermining frames. Being assigned to the protest frame has no impact on the relationship between visibility and preference transmission for men not aligned with the BJP, but it moderates the relationship between visibility and transmission for BJP-identifying men by 7.5 percentage points ($p < 0.05$).

Does caste matter?

The final mechanism of participation I consider is the candidate's caste. The influence of caste in Indian politics can be aptly summarized by the adage, "In India, people vote their caste, not cast their vote." With caste-based reservations of political seats, a large number of ethnic parties have proliferated with demands for representation from previously marginalized groups. However, as we have seen in Chapter 2, entering the political sphere

through the frame of *seva* has historically been interpreted as an upper caste prerogative and a way to reach out to non-dominant castes to include them with an encompassing Hindu identity. Consequently, it is possible that these results may be driven primarily by the beliefs of upper-caste groups. To analyze the effect of caste on political decision-making I first examine the discrete choice experiment. Here I look at the AMCE of the caste attribute, and its AMIE with the event frame. Next, I examine heterogeneous effects by caste in the political communication experiment.

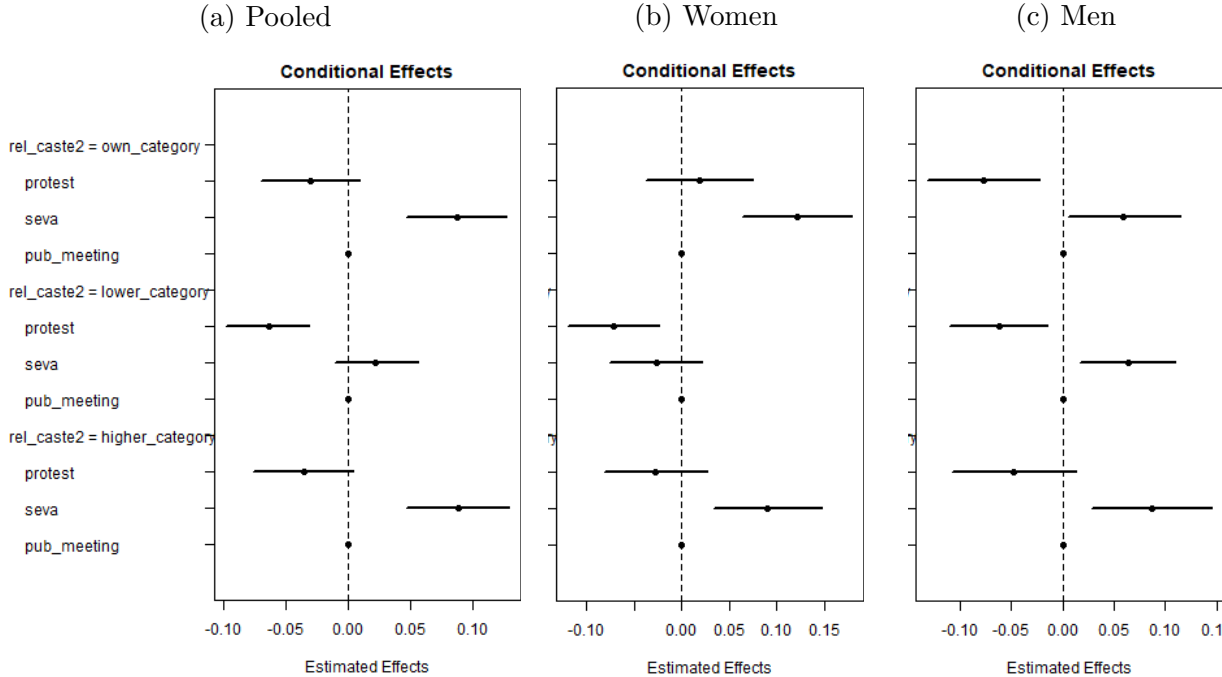
To test the effect of caste on profile choice, I recoded the variable into three caste groups relative to the respondent (own caste, higher caste, and lower caste. Although I lose the granular information about sub-caste (*jati*)-based comparisons, the hierarchical variable created in this way grants theoretically important insights, As Table 5.4 indicates, caste continues to be pivotal in decision-making. Overall, respondents preferred co-ethnic candidates, but this tendency was more pronounced among men than women. Women penalized lower caste candidates (compared to their own caste) by 3.8 percentage points ($p < 0.1$), but men did so by 7 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). In the same way, and unlike women who did not display caste-based preferences, men were 8.1 percentage points less likely ($p < 0.01$) to choose a candidate from a relatively higher caste group than themselves. Effect sizes in the rating outcome have the same direction; however, the intensive margin of preferences is indistinguishable from 0 at the 5% significance level for both men and women.

Interaction effects in participation preferences within relative caste groups show that the overall sample in each category broadly preferred *seva* and discounted contentious politics relative to public meetings (see Figure 5.13). Yet, there is some heterogeneity between men and women. Unlike men, women did not penalize protests if they were organized by a co-ethnic candidate but did penalize *seva*-based events (relative to the generally positive evaluation they have received in other analyses) when conducted by a lower caste candidate.

Thus, while respondents exhibited a certain preference for co-ethnic participation, were upper castes more likely to exhibit a preference for *seva* any more than other groups? To test this, I plot predicted values of political communication by gender and caste under different framings in Figure 5.14. In the first panel, pertaining to men, I find no caste-based differences in communication across norm-compliant and norm-undermining frames. However, men from the scheduled tribes (ST) group exhibit a stronger proclivity to communicate than upper castes (in the general category group) and scheduled castes (SC) groups.

Next, when examining opinion transmission for women in the second panel of Figure 5.14, again I find little heterogeneity in trends across castes. We saw previously that women were more likely to communicate under the *seva* framing. This result is replicated here in each caste group. It is only in the Other Backward Class (OBC) group that the difference across framing is not statistically significant, but here too we see that the predicted probabilities exhibit consistent trends with the overall sample and other caste categories. Thus, we see that the norm and ethic of *seva* seem to be similarly effective for women across all caste groups.

Figure 5.13: AMIE of event frame, conditional on candidate caste



Note: This figure shows how the effect of the event frame varies within a given level of the candidate’s caste. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

5.6 Competing explanations

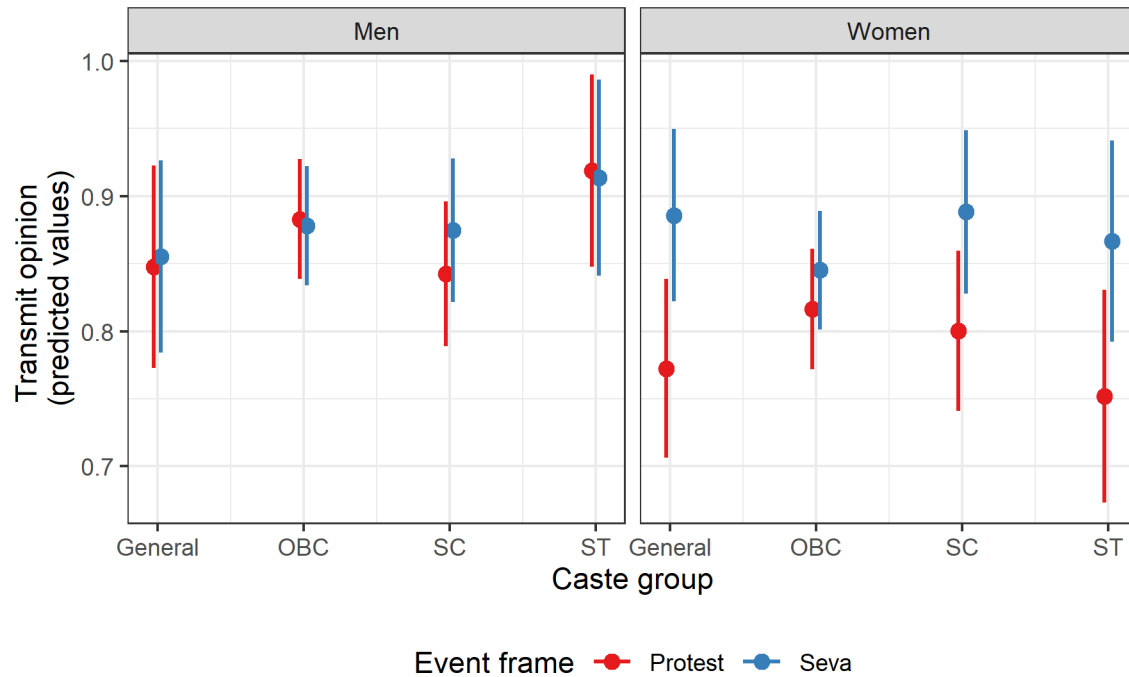
I now turn to examining the remaining determinants of active participation, with a focus on how they interact with the event frame or the mechanisms. These attributes include candidates’ features such as the political party they belong to, their sex, and their caste. These were classified as exploratory outcomes per the pre-analysis plan.

Women representatives

Emerging evidence in India suggests that women representatives are uniquely able to recruit more women within the party organization.²⁷ A critical feature underlying this is that public—and especially political—spaces are often segregated by sex, such that this is often internalized among people’s conceptions of politics and leadership. During the administration of the discrete choice experiment, several respondents—both men and women—upon being asked which candidate-event they preferred (for women) immediately chose the profile with a woman candidate. Indeed, when making this choice, some men remarked, “Women will obviously go to the event with the woman candidate.”

²⁷Goyal (2021)

Figure 5.14: Predicted values of opinion transmission by caste (Political communication experiment)



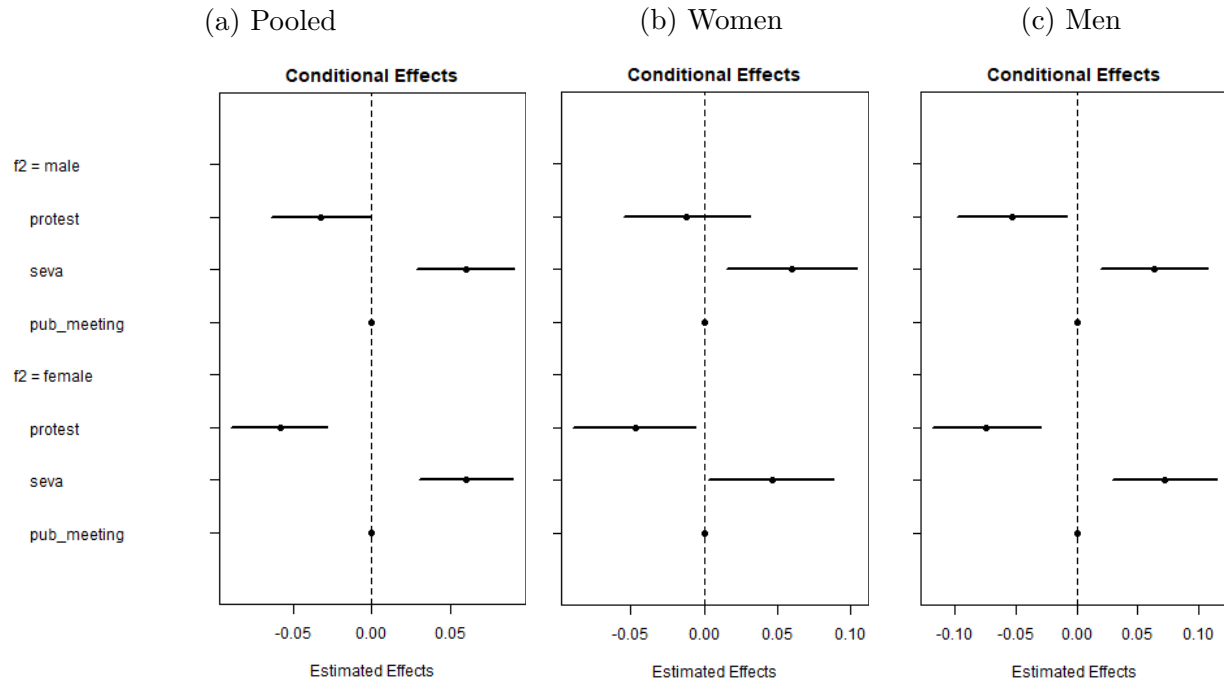
Note: This figure shows the probability of transmitting opinions under different event frames based on respondents' caste and gender. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Results from Table 5.4 support this. In the choice outcome, the presence of a woman candidate led to women and men choosing that profile by an additional 7.6 and 6 percentage points respectively. Conditional effects of candidate sex for the event frame in Figure 5.15 are on expected lines for the male sample and pooled data, where within each level of the candidate's sex, *seva* is preferred, and protests are considered undesirable compared to the public meeting baseline. However, female respondents indicate weaker disapproval for a protest when it is conducted by a male candidate compared to when it is organized by a woman (although the difference is not statistically significant), suggesting that women may be concerned about leadership skills and safety considerations when antagonistic politics is led by women.

A second way to test the effect of the representative's gender is through the political communication experiment. Since 50% of the seats in local government bodies are randomly assigned to be reserved for women, the political communication experiment yields the causal effect of having a female representative on preference transmission. Moreover, if we find that women are more

There are two notable distinctions between the discrete choice experiment and the political communication experiment. The first dissimilarity arises from the nature of the event

Figure 5.15: AMIE of event frame, conditional on candidate sex



Note: This figure shows how the effect of the event frame varies within a given level of the candidate's sex. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

under investigation. Unlike the discrete choice experiment, which assesses respondents' preferences to physically attend a particular electoral event, the political communication experiment is centered on preference transmission on quotidian service delivery. Second, there exists a disparity in the treatment intensity between the two approaches. In the discrete choice experiment, the treatment is explicit and draws attention to specific attributes or characteristics of the candidate's gender. In contrast, the political communication experiment employs a more subtle approach, as it does not explicitly underscore the sex of the participants during the course of the experiment. Instead, the study concentrates on respondents' willingness to exercise voice without explicitly emphasizing sex as a salient factor. Given these differences, we might expect the weaker treatment intensity to attenuate the effect of gender at an overall level.

Table 5.7 presents the results derived from the analysis. The first column, representing the overall sample, indicates that there is no significant difference in the likelihood of citizens sending their preferences to their representative based on the representative's gender. However, when examining the results by gender, it becomes evident that male respondents exhibit a somewhat stronger tendency to refrain from communicating with their local representative when she is a woman. This difference, is, however, not significant as we can see in the results in Column 4.

Table 5.7: Does representative's gender shape preference transmission?

		<i>Dependent variable:</i>									
		Communicated preference									
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Reserved		-0.020 (0.017)	-0.008 (0.024)	-0.032* (0.018)	-0.030* (0.018)	-0.037* (0.021)	-0.0003 (0.023)	-0.004 (0.023)	-0.0001 (0.030)	-0.006 (0.024)	-0.008 (0.026)
Female					-0.050*** (0.016)						-0.030 (0.019)
BJP Rep								-0.004 (0.020)	-0.027 (0.030)	0.017 (0.017)	0.017 (0.019)
Reserved × Female					0.020 (0.027)						0.007 (0.034)
BJP Rep × Female											-0.041 (0.029)
Reserved × BJP rep × Female											0.024 (0.053)
Reserved × BJP Rep								-0.032 (0.031)	-0.016 (0.045)	-0.051 (0.033)	-0.045 (0.035)
R.Block FE		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sex		All	F	M	All	All	All	All	F	M	All
Party ID		All	All	All	All	BJP	Non-BJP	All	All	All	All
Observations		2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914	1,446	1,468	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914
R ²		0.012	0.016	0.023	0.016	0.027	0.018	0.013	0.019	0.025	0.017

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. This table tests the effect of gender and partisanship on preference transmission in the political communication experiment. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

Second, I find that BJP-aligned respondents (male and female), as shown in Column 4 are less inclined to transmit their opinions, but again this difference is not statistically significant. Finally, in Columns I test the interaction of the effect of gender and BJP partisanship for men and women and find no differential relationship based on the sex of the respondent.

Thus, taken together, this suggests that the gender of the representative matters for women's participation, but when it is made salient to respondents and/or when the event is framed as appropriate for women. This highlights both an opportunity and limitation for women representatives. Women's gender identities are particularly salient in the run-up to elections when they are more visible than most other times during their tenure. Like their male counterparts, women politicians represent their entire constituency but are often perceived as particularly concerned with women's concerns. Moreover, norms of gender mixing also lead to the view that female politicians' events were more appropriate for women. Consequently, women leaders may be able to draw larger crowds of women, but this also restricts them in the popular imagination as being leaders for women.

In the political communication experiment, the results indicate that when the identity of the politician was less emphasized, gender did not influence citizens' inclination to transmit their opinions. Several reasons could account for this finding. Firstly, the experimental design might not have made the gender of the representative more salient to the participants. Therefore, the lack of explicit gender cues may have diminished the impact of gender on citizens' willingness to communicate their preferences. Secondly, if women politicians are perceived as mere figureheads for their male family members, both male and female citizens might perceive their communication as effectively directed towards men. This perception could attenuate women's participation even in the presence of descriptive representation, as their voices may not be seen as directly reaching women politicians. Furthermore, it is important to consider the potential influence of experimental artifacts. In some cases, the representatives had been elected only a few months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed significant limitations on their ability to interact with constituents and establish their presence. The survey itself was conducted during a challenging period between two waves of the pandemic when people were unable to meet with their representatives due to various restrictions. These circumstances could pose challenges for new leaders in effectively engaging with citizens and making themselves known.

The remaining possibility is that the BJP is more likely to nominate women candidates and if women have a stronger ability to mobilize women citizens, then the increase in women's active participation may stem from this channel. To investigate this, I gathered data from national and state-level elections in Rajasthan since 1980 and plotted the proportion of women being nominated by each party in Figure C.5. I find that women's nomination rates have generally been lower in national elections than state elections in both parties, with the INC nominating somewhat more women in states between 1990 and 2000. The BJP increased women's nominations in the state elections between 2001 and 2010 but dropped thereafter. The INC on the other hand has been to maintain a steady increase, and in recent years has also given more nominations to women in national elections than the BJP, going as high as 25% in 2014.

In my final analysis, I explore nomination and representation patterns in local elections. However, data for this is somewhat limited since elections are not held on partisan lines in village Panchayats, and even if it did, there is no aggregate time series dataset published by the State Election Commission. As a result, I rely on the latest cross-section from municipal wards, representing the most detailed level of the urban political process. This data covered elections conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2021.

A second confounder in this analysis is that a third of municipal wards are reserved for female representatives. As a consequence parties have to meet a minimum floor, reducing their discretion in the rates of women they nominate in elections. However, most parties only nominate women in reserved constituencies, keeping men for gender-open wards. I find that both the BJP and the INC followed this pattern with a similar nomination rate of women around 38%, 5 percentage points higher than the mandated minimum.

Finally, when analyzing the win rates in wards reserved for women, where the BJP and the INC directly competed, I found that the results were also quite similar. Out of the 1,943 contested wards, the INC emerged victorious in 43% of cases, while the BJP secured victory in 42% of cases. Based on these findings, we can conclude that while women's presence in the public sphere can be overall a power force attracting other women into politics, it is unlikely to be able to explain partisan differences in mobilization efforts.

Welfare programs

One important channel through which political parties can influence vote choice and participation is by channeling—and claiming credit for—welfare programs. Recent research in the context of urban India (Mumbai) shows that winning a state-constructed low-income housing lottery induces an increase in winners' political knowledge, engagement, as well as policy preferences.²⁸ Other research focuses more squarely on electoral returns rather than participation. In this context, a range of studies based in India, Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay examine whether strategic welfare provision can lead to beneficiaries rewarding incumbents.²⁹ While results are mixed, the intuition behind the rationale is clear—when the government provides goods and services with private benefits, it induces beneficiaries to link their well-being to the incumbent and support it, either as a reward or in expectation of continued advantages from these provisions.

In this light, since 2016, the Modi-led NDA government implemented several welfare programs, collectively referred to as “new welfarism” or “populist welfarism.”³⁰ This umbrella term encompasses a range of public welfare programs publicized as a personalized delivery of private benefits directly from Modi. These include cash benefits for constructing homes, toilets, pension programs, health, and life insurance benefits, subsidies for cooking gas cylin-

²⁸Kumar (2022)

²⁹Chowdhury (2014); Bobonis et al. (2022); De La O (2013); Manacorda, Miguel and Vigorito (2011); Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez and Magaloni (2016)

³⁰The term “new welfarism” appears in Anand, Dimble and Subramanian (2020) but the underlying logic is articulated most clearly in Aiyar (2019)

ders, and loans with low rates of interest and collateral, amongst others. Although it is unclear about the extent to which the BJP has been successful in mobilizing women through this channel, studies by Deshpande, Tillin and Kailash (2019) and Mehta (2022), combined with journalistic analyses including Jha (2017) attest to the perception that these welfare programs helped Modi gain moral legitimacy and voters' trust in the 2019 national election.

A number of such welfare programs were explicitly targeted at women. One of these programs, the Clean India Initiative (Swacch Bharat Mission) focused on constructing toilets and was widely publicized as reducing risks to women who, in the absence of proper sanitation facilities within their homes, had to go outdoors to attend to basic bodily needs. A second program introduced in 2016, called *Ujjwala*, provided free cooking gas connections to women from economically disadvantaged households. The aim was to promote clean cooking fuel and reduce health hazards associated with traditional cooking methods. The BJP promoted these programs as significant steps to uphold women's honor and dignity, as they addressed the challenges women from impoverished backgrounds faced in accessing necessities like toilets and cooking gas. Other programs focused on fixing the sex ratio and educating girls (*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*), creating bank accounts for women (*Jan Dhan Yojana*), giving loans to women entrepreneurs (*Mudra Loan*), and constructing houses under the name of women or joint ownership (*PM Awaas Yojana*). To be sure, many of these programs pre-dated Modi but were re-branded with the prefix PM for Prime Minister (or *Pradhan Mantri*) to create a personal connection between Modi and voters.

During his first electoral campaign as the incumbent Prime Minister, Modi, and the BJP strategically utilized welfare programs to engage women in campaign activities. The BJP's women's wing devised a plan to mobilize women through Beneficiary Conventions, known as *Labharthi Sammelans*. These conventions served as platforms for women beneficiaries of welfare programs to share their personal stories and experiences, highlighting the tangible positive effects of the government's initiatives on their lives. Moreover, the government accorded these beneficiaries a prominent role in election rallies and public meetings, aiming to demonstrate to non-beneficiaries that the government's efforts to enhance women's lives were not mere rhetoric but rather backed by concrete actions with real-life outcomes. By showcasing the tangible benefits of these welfare programs, the government aimed to persuade potential voters of the value they could gain by re-electing the BJP to power.

The primary objectives of these initiatives were twofold. First, by highlighting the positive outcomes of the welfare programs, the government aimed to inspire and encourage other women to apply for these initiatives. This was meant to increase awareness and participation among women who could benefit from the various programs and schemes. Second, the government sought to convey the message that its initiatives were effectively addressing the needs and concerns of women. By showcasing women beneficiaries in campaign activities, the government aimed to foster a sense of trust and confidence among the public, reinforcing the notion that these programs were making a genuine difference in the lives of women, and that those who had not yet received these benefits would have the opportunity to do so in the future.

However, such a mobilization strategy comes with a major scope condition: incumbency.

Only incumbent governments can claim credit and expect electoral returns. This places a natural limitation on the ability of government-sponsored welfare programs to elicit women's participation since parties cannot do this while they are challengers. In addition, credit-claiming can be harder in states like Rajasthan where the BJP was not in power at the state level. State governments have their own welfare programs that can dilute the federal government's ability to seek sole credit. And crucially, as we have seen in Figure 1.1, upticks in women's mobilization for the BJP have occurred *before* the BJP was an incumbent and in a position to influence mobilization through welfare programs. This highlights the fact that factors other than the delivery of welfare programs, such as framing, political campaigns, messaging, or other non-incumbency-related influences, do contribute to parties' ability to mobilize, and women's ability to participate.

Nonetheless, I examine the role of welfare programs in determining partisanship and political participation. The men's survey had an additional module about their household's receipt of welfare programs.³¹ The programs selected in the welfare program module were the *Ujjwala* gas cylinder subsidy program; the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS); housing and toilet construction under the *PM-Awaas Yojana* (PM-Housing Plan) and the *Swacch Bharat* (Clean India) Mission; old-age, disability, or widow pensions; and subsidized foodgrain rations from the public distribution system. These programs were chosen based on my qualitative fieldwork based on how closely political parties were promoting and seeking to identify with them, as well as their reach and discussion among voters. The BJP was extensively trying to use *Ujjwala* and toilet construction—and housing construction to a lesser extent—to claim credit amongst women.

Nearly half of the sampled households had received benefits from the pension program, and 71.1% were enrolled within the PDS system to obtain subsidized grains, suggesting that the reach of welfare programs was fairly deep within Rajasthani districts. NREGS was also a valuable buffer; in rural areas over 64% of men reported that at least one member of their homes had found paid employment under the scheme. 38.6% and 34.3% respondents reported having received a cooking gas connection and funds to construct a toilet within their home. Compared to these, the housing scheme had the most limited reach with only 8.4% reporting receipt of grants. The overall awareness of welfare programs among the sampled households was high, with 88% of respondents indicating knowledge about these initiatives. The average household had received 2.33 (of 6) welfare programs.

First, I examine the relationship between welfare receipt and partisanship. Both the BJP and INC, at the federal and state levels in India, have assiduously attempted to attract voters through welfare programs. This emphasis on welfare becomes particularly prominent during election periods, indicating that parties can view them as short-term tactics to influ-

³¹The decision to include only men in this particular module was based on the fact that the information being addressed was commonly known within the household. Additionally, this additional module helped equalize the length of the men's and women's surveys. Typically, the women's survey took longer to complete, and some men, who finished their survey relatively quickly, became restless and occasionally suspicious of the disparity in the length and content of questions compared to the women's survey. By having a separate module for men, it ensured a more balanced and equitable survey process for both sexes.

ence voters. However, it is important to note that welfare receipt can also result from—or contribute to—long-term patron-client relationships. In either scenario, one would anticipate that beneficiaries of welfare programs would perceive them as partisan incentives or rewards.

To test this, Figure C.8 uses ordinary least squares regressions to estimate the relationship between partisanship and welfare receipt. I find, perhaps against conventional wisdom, that none of the listed welfare programs seem to be associated with partisanship for either of the two parties. Indeed the only individual programs that are (weakly) associated with partisan identification—significant at 10% and not 5% levels of significance—are housing (among men) and toilet construction for women, both of whom are more likely to display a preference for the INC. This suggests that the state-level incumbent was able to claim credit for these programs at the time the survey was undertaken. Although the BJP's flagship program of *Ujjwala* may not have been associated with partisan alignment, men who received *any* welfare program or knew beneficiaries were more likely to be aligned with the BJP.

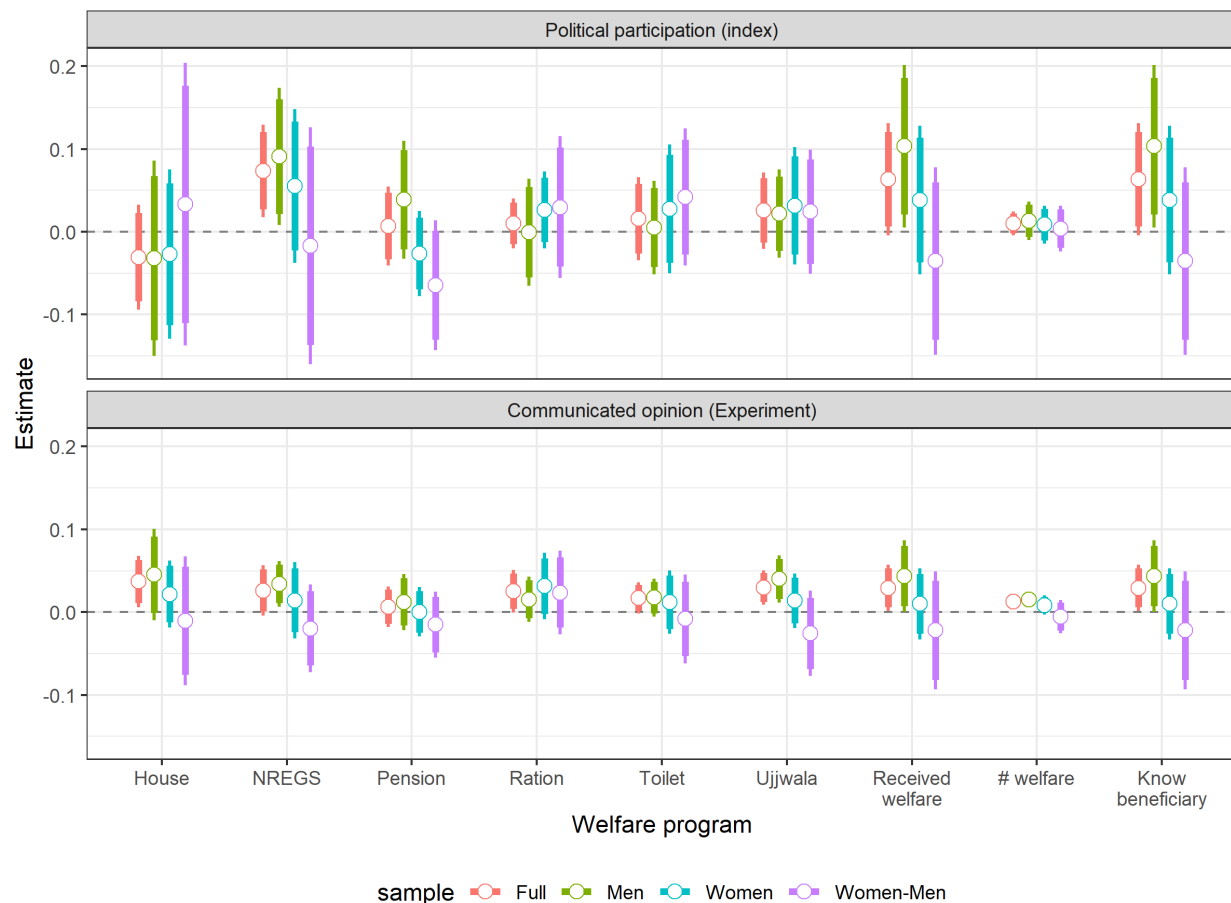
But does this influence political participation? Using OLS regressions on observational data derived from the household survey, I find in the top panel of Figure 5.16 that there is little evidence of a linear relationship between women's political participation and welfare receipt. However, we observe a stronger correlation for men, specifically in the case of the NREGS program, which requires beneficiaries to actively engage outside the home to receive benefits.

Further analysis of opinion transmission in the political communication experiment yields similar results. Women beneficiaries of individual welfare programs do not exhibit a higher likelihood of expressing their preferences to their representatives compared to non-beneficiaries. Conversely, male beneficiaries of the NREGS program and the cooking gas subsidy demonstrate a continued willingness to submit their preferences, suggesting a potentially unexpected gender difference in the influence of these programs on political behavior.

Moreover, investigating both the extensive margin (presence or absence of benefit receipt) and the intensive margin (number of benefits received) further support the notion that men who report receiving at least one benefit are more likely to engage in politics and communicate their preferences. The intensive margin, represented by the number of benefits received, also shows a positive correlation with greater preference transmission, but primarily among men rather than women.

Finally, is there an association between the nature of the benefit and the kind of participation favored by respondents? Using data from the discrete choice experiment, I investigate whether being a beneficiary of a program like the NREGS, which offers an employment guarantee underwritten by a legal right, is associated with a culture of contentious participation and claim-making among beneficiaries. It is worth noting that while other welfare programs exist based on specific eligibility criteria, they are not explicitly grounded in a legal rights-based approach allowing citizens to make a claim against the state. Thus, by examining choices made by different types of beneficiaries in the discrete choice experiment, I aim to understand how the specific benefit received influences their preferred mode of participation. This investigation can provide valuable insights into the presence or absence of a culture

Figure 5.16: Effect of welfare benefits on political participation



Note: This figure shows the relationship between welfare receipt and political participation. The dependent variable in Panel A is an index of political participation calculated in the pre-specified procedure. The dependent variable in the second panel is opinion transmission in the political communication experiment. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Both panels contain covariate-adjusted estimates (per the pre-specified procedure) that account for unobserved heterogeneity at the randomization block level. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

of contentious participation and claim-making among beneficiaries of rights-based welfare programs, in contrast to those receiving benefits from other non-rights-based programs.

To do this, I created three binary variables to indicate whether respondents selected a profile with an event framed in terms of non-contentious *seva*, a contentious protest, or the comparatively neutral frame of a public meeting. To explore the potential association between the nature of the welfare benefit and the chosen event frame, I conducted covariate-adjusted OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects. Pooling across men and women respondents in Column 1 of Table 5.8, I do not find any correlation between the

Table 5.8: Does beneficiary status shape participation? (Discrete choice experiment)

	Choice of profile								
	<i>Seva</i> profile			Protest profile			Meeting profile		
	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Women	Men
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<i>Ujjwala</i>	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.018 (0.013)	-0.008 (0.013)	0.014 (0.009)	0.023* (0.014)	0.005 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.008 (0.013)	0.002 (0.013)
House	0.008 (0.015)	0.023 (0.021)	-0.006 (0.022)	-0.005 (0.015)	0.004 (0.021)	-0.015 (0.020)	-0.002 (0.015)	-0.026 (0.020)	0.021 (0.021)
Pension	0.007 (0.009)	0.016 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.019** (0.009)	-0.010 (0.013)	-0.029** (0.013)	0.012 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.013)	0.031** (0.013)
Ration	0.017 (0.012)	0.007 (0.016)	0.030* (0.016)	0.002 (0.011)	0.011 (0.016)	-0.007 (0.015)	-0.020* (0.012)	-0.017 (0.017)	-0.024 (0.016)
Toilet	0.002 (0.010)	-0.010 (0.013)	0.011 (0.014)	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.014)	-0.009 (0.013)	0.011 (0.009)	0.025* (0.013)	-0.001 (0.014)
NREGS	-0.006 (0.010)	0.013 (0.015)	-0.025* (0.015)	0.006 (0.010)	-0.022 (0.015)	0.036*** (0.014)	0.001 (0.010)	0.010 (0.014)	-0.011 (0.014)
FE	Block	Block	Block	Block	Block	Block	Block	Block	Block
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	5,836	2,916	2,920	5,836	2,916	2,920	5,836	2,916	2,920
R ²	0.003	0.006	0.007	0.006	0.009	0.014	0.005	0.008	0.007

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. This table examines whether receipt of welfare programs shapes choice of profile (based on event frame) in the discrete choice experiment. Pension can refer to any of old age, widow, or disability pensions provided by the central or state government. NREGS refers to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme implemented by the INC-led UPA government in 2005, and *Ujjwala* refers to a cooking gas cylinder subsidy introduced by the BJP-led NDA government in 2016. Covariate adjustment is per the pre-specified procedure. Standard errors are clustered at the level of the household.

choice of *seva* and the type of welfare program. However, among households receiving income support through the NREGS, I observed that men were more inclined to support women attending contentious event frames and were less likely to choose *seva*. For women themselves, there was a slight positive correlation between the *Ujjwala* program and selecting contentious frames, but no evidence of agreement among men.

Furthermore, in households receiving pension benefits from the state, men showed a lower likelihood of choosing contentious event frames. This could be rationalized by the fact that pensions are regular monthly payments that may be subject to political or administrative discretion, potentially leading households reliant on pensions for a significant portion of their income to avoid voicing their concerns through contentious frames. Moreover, factors such as old age or disabilities could limit their mobility and preference for more active methods like *seva* or protests.

Party organization

Another alternative explanation frequently cited to support the argument for the BJP's success with women is its organizational prowess. There are several metrics that gauge the organizational strength of a political party, such as party budgets, leadership professionalization, institutionalization of positions, connections with non-party associations, and the level of support for electoral candidates amongst others, measuring these factors can often be challenging.³² Among these, I consider two possible features: the institutionalization of leadership positions for women within a party, and the number of local activists.

Emerging scholarship and my qualitative research suggest that the presence of other women within the organization is a necessary if not sufficient, factor enabling women to participate in political spaces. For example, Goyal and Sells (2021) emphasizes that women's reservations lead female candidates to recruit more women within the party. But while women's quotas may be able to explain the influx of women into political parties, they cannot explain variation within political parties, as long as all parties choose to nominate women candidates.

Instead, we must look at organizational features unique to the BJP if indeed party organization is a tenable explanation for the BJP's success in mobilizing women. In other words, if party organization plays a significant role in explaining the BJP's ability to recruit women, we must identify the features that set the BJP apart from other political parties.

One possible feature is the BJP's adoption of an internal quota whereby a third of positions in governing bodies are *de jure* reserved for women. This policy was implemented through a change in the party's constitution in 2006, making the BJP the first party to adopt such a measure. The head of the women's wing emphasized this during a public event on women's political empowerment, stating, "BJP is the only party in the country that is providing 33% reservation to women in the party."³³ Following her lead, during my interviews, a number of high-level activists attributed the party's mobilizational ability to this internal quota.

If internal party quotas are to influence grassroots mobilization, the question arises, how might this occur? One potential route is that the increased availability of party positions through the quota enables more women to occupy influential roles. As a result, these women leaders can establish their own teams and constituencies of women activists. This dynamic fosters a network of women at the grassroots level, enhancing their ability to mobilize and engage other women in the party's activities and campaigns. Another possible mechanism is linked to greater substantive representation within the party. If internal quotas lead to women occupying more leadership and decision-making positions within the party, their voices and perspectives may gain increased recognition in both internal and external policy decisions. This, in turn, could encourage more women to engage in grassroots activism for the party.

³²See Gibson et al. (1983) for an exploration of measures of organizational strength for political parties in the US.

³³ANI (2021)

But for internal quotas to explain partisan differences in mobilization outcomes, they must be unique to the BJP and implemented in the spirit of empowering women within the party. To what extent are these conditions met?

Upon more detailed examination, we find that neither condition holds. The INC, in 2010, had amended its party constitution to adopt an internal quota whereby a third of the positions in all committees were reserved for women.³⁴ As a consequence, both the BJP and the INC are evenly matched when comparing *de jure* regulations. Thus, we must turn to *de facto* practices within each party to understand whether inclusion could have an effect and the mechanisms through which it could influence grassroots mobilization.

In this dimension, Ravi and Sandhu (2014) finds that both the BJP and the INC fall considerably short in terms of the concrete efforts they take to diversify their organizations. As of 2014, only 5 of the 42 (11.9%) members of the Congress Working Committee, the party's executive body, comprised of women. Nine years later, in 2023, the INC maintained a similar trend with 11% women members. The BJP, on the other hand, started out on a better footing at meeting these standards than the INC with 26 of 77 members (33.7%) of its National Executive being women. Nine years later, the BJP has expanded its national executive nearly five times but has regressed considerably in terms of gender inclusion. Only 40 of its 360 members, amounting to 11.1%, are women.

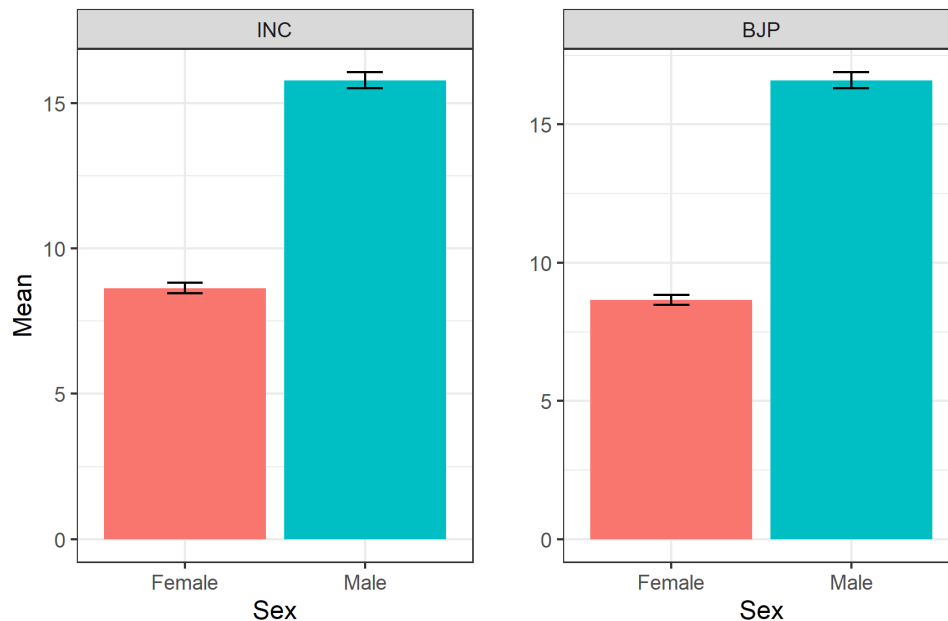
In addition, Williams (2023:123) finds several shortcomings in the BJP's implementation of its quota. Rather than redistributing existing positions, which were predominantly held by men, the BJP increased the size of its committees. The party thus accommodated women alongside men and not in their place, thus diluting its impact on existing power dynamics within the party. Furthermore, the party did not extend the reservation ruling to higher-level bodies like the Parliamentary Board, mitigating the ability of the quota to represent women's voices and interests within the party, or in external policy decisions. Clearly then, women's inclusion within elite-level decision-making bodies has been inconsistent and is unlikely to be able to explain the BJP's ability to mobilize women at the local level. Moreover, a number of positions in lower-level committees were vacant or filled by relatives of male activists. Expressing her frustration at the lack of ground-level change wrought by the internal quota, a BJP activist exclaimed, "The next time they [party elites] tell you we reserve 33% seats for women, just ask them to count and show!"³⁵

If internal quotas are unlikely to explain partisan differences in mobilization, what might be a more compelling explanation? Here, I consider a second measure of party organization, local-level activism. Indeed, local-level female activism can be effective in drawing other women to party events. As the results of the discrete choice experiment indicate, women are more likely to pick the event where a larger number of women expressed a preference for attending. Moreover, men are also more amenable to taking such signals seriously. During qualitative interviews, households also confirmed that, were they to acquiesce to women's participation in the absence of a male family member, they would do so only if women were

³⁴Indian National Congress (2010:8)

³⁵Interview by author in March 2019, Jaipur

Figure 5.17: Organizational strength based on perceived number of party activists



Note: This figure shows the organizational strength of the BJP and the INC based on the perceived number of men and women activists respondents associated with the BJP and the INC in their ward or Panchayat. Bars Indicate 95% confidence intervals.

going with other women known to the family, or with trusted activists with whom they felt women would be safe and secure.

To measure local-level activism, respondents in the household survey were asked to recall the number of active workers in the BJP and the INC in their ward or Panchayat. When respondents could not answer this question, which was true for women more often than men, I imputed values based on the pre-specified procedure. This process involved calculating randomization-block means of the number of party activists, stratified by the sex of the respondent, and imputing these means for those unable to answer.

Figure 5.17 shows there was virtually no difference in perceived organizational strength between the two parties. On average, respondents believed there were 8.6 women activists in their PSUs. The number of male activists was nearly double, at 15.8 for the INC and 16.6 for the BJP, a difference of 0.8 ($p < 0.05$). Despite this slight advantage to the INC, it seems unlikely this is pivotal to its ability to mobilize women into the public sphere given the sex-segregated nature of mobilization and political engagement. On the other hand, the presence of local-level activists, as can be seen in Chapter 5 as well as other emerging research, is posited to be a stronger predictor of a party's ability to engage other women.³⁶

³⁶Goyal and Sells (2021)

One reason why the average number of party activists in the BJP matches so closely with the INC could be due to the sample selection procedure. Recall that PSU selection was based on blocking by the party in power or the partisan alignment of the representative. Thus we have a roughly equal proportion of wards and Panchayats under INC and BJP control. If the seemingly innocuous assumption—that the chance of winning an election is positively correlated with organizational strength—bears out, then the organizational strength of the two parties would likely be balanced in the PSUs that were part of the survey.

Table 5.9: Does party organisation shape preference transmission? (HH survey)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Communicated preference						
	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Pooled	Women	Women
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
N activists	0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0002* (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)			
N Female activists					0.0004 (0.0004)		
Female				-0.030 (0.027)	-0.038 (0.023)		
N BJP Female activists						0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.001)
N INC Female activists						-0.001 (0.002)	
BJP ID							0.040 (0.032)
N activists × Female				-0.0002 (0.0004)			
N Female activists × Female					-0.0003 (0.001)		
N BJP Female activists × BJP ID							-0.002 (0.002)
R.Block FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457
R ²	0.026	0.043	0.042	0.029	0.030	0.043	0.044

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. This table examines the association between organizational strength and opinion transmission in the political communication experiment. Covariate adjustment is per the pre-specified procedure. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

With this in mind, I also undertook a quantitative analysis of the link between party organization and propensity to engage in political action in Table 5.9. Using the political communication experiment, I find that the number of activists has a virtually negligible impact on respondents' propensity to transmit opinions to their representatives. Only in

Column 3, do we see that men's communication rate increases with the number of activists, but the size of the effect is too small to be substantively important. In Columns 4 through 7, I examine the effect of the number of female activists but do not discern any differential impact based on the number of activists with the BJP or INC, or even interacted with the respondent's partisan alignment.

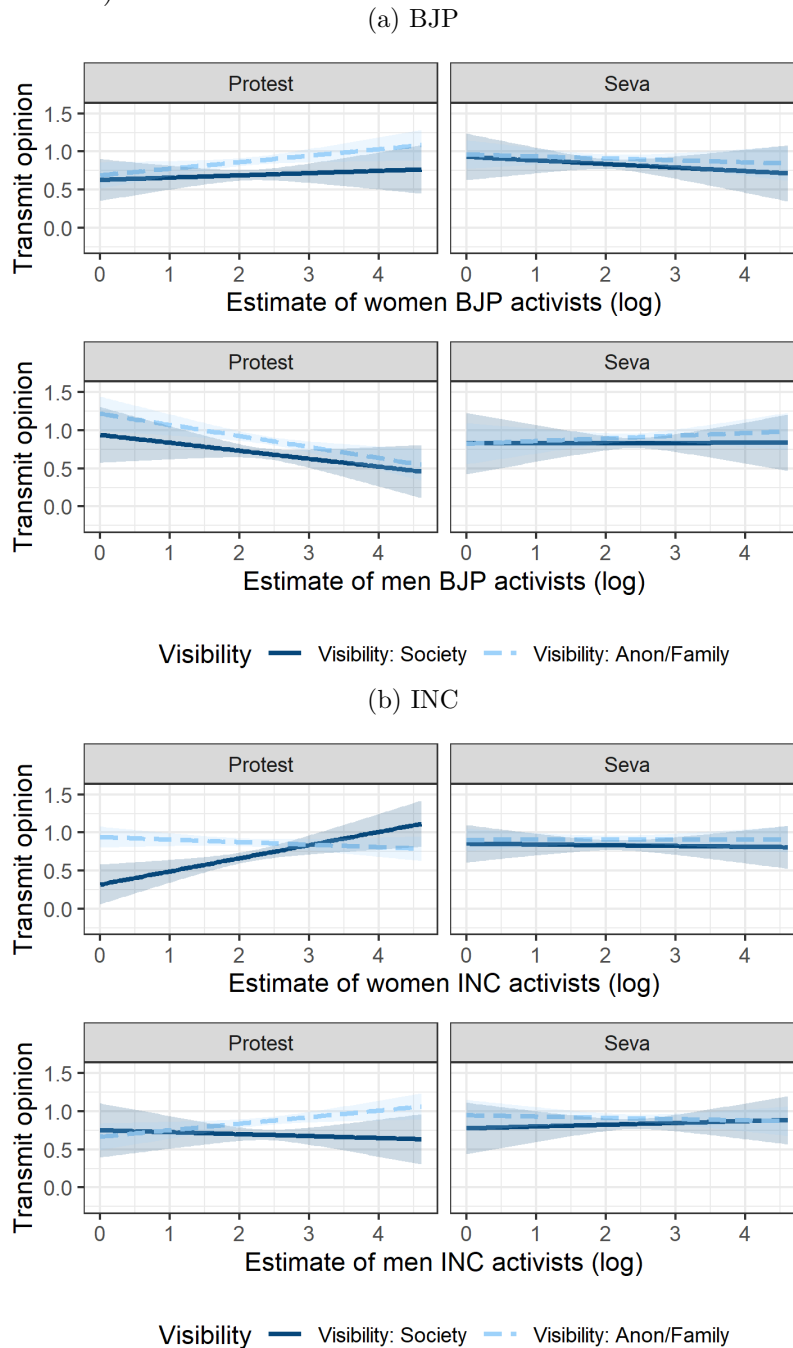
While these findings indicate that organizational strength, as measured by the number of activists, may not be directly associated with citizens' inclination to express their opinions, it would be premature to conclude definitively that the number of activists does not influence participation. We previously observed that women were more likely to engage with their representatives when they anticipated other women to be interested, even if this participation was observable by their representative and the wider community. Although the number of party activists did not show a distinct impact on communication, one possible avenue through which it could exert influence is by shaping expectations of societal interest. Consequently, it could moderate the effect of framing and visibility on participation.

To examine this further, in Figure 5.18 I regressed women's transmission of opinions on framing and visibility while interacting them with the logged number of men and women party activists.³⁷ A visual inspection of the interaction effect shows that an increase in the number of women activists in the BJP helps arrest the decline in norm-undermining participation under conditions of visibility. The effect is even stronger as the number of INC activists increases. On the other hand, the increase in the number of BJP male activists shows little differential effects for visibility. Men within the INC have similar (lack of) effects.

Taken together, these results suggest that while framing has a strong direct effect on political participation, the effect of organization may be more subtle. Importantly, the transmission of opinions seems impervious to an increase in the number of activists, male or female, under the norm-compliant mobilization frame of *seva*. This reinforces our previous finding that mobilization under norm-undermining frames is more sensitive to perceived interest among women in the respondent's community than under norm-compliant frames, which continues to be high throughout. These results also suggest that the overall effect of party organization on mobilization is by influencing people's expectations of the number of people who will participate, and not through the quality of participation in terms of its effects on representing women's substantive interests. Importantly, organization may matter when parties seek to mobilize women in norm-undermining ways for which it is important for potential participants and gatekeepers to understand how this engagement will be perceived by their community. By mobilizing women through norm-compliant frames, parties can circumvent this problem.

³⁷I use the logged number of activists to reduce the number of outliers. A regression with the absolute number of activists, represented in Figure C.9 shows similar results.

Figure 5.18: Moderating effect of party organization on opinion transmission (Political communication experiment)



Note: The figure shows how party organization (measured in terms of log of the number of party workers) moderated the effect of visibility and framing on communication with representatives. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Religion

In exploring alternative explanations, I finally examine the role of religion and religious rhetoric in mobilizing women to participate in the public sphere. It is crucial to acknowledge the significant moral and affective influence of religion in drawing previously politically inactive individuals into the realm of politics. A prime example of the BJP's mobilization through religion was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement between 1989 and 1992 which attracted a considerable number of otherwise inactive citizens into the public sphere. Indeed, this was the first Hindu nationalist mass movement to consciously recruit women, albeit in supporting roles to men. A more recent instance took place in Kerala between 2018 and 2019, where the RSS and the BJP rallied their members, including women, and other sympathetic citizens against a court ruling that granted women access to a traditionally restricted temple.

Religiosity and religious practice do indeed play a significant role in shaping political knowledge and participation. Chhibber and Shastri (2014) persuasively argues that religious practice in India is closely tied to greater political participation due to its communal nature, local focus, temporary suspension of social hierarchies, alignment with the political elite, and perceived representation. Engaging in religious rituals and activities fosters a sense of commonality among practitioners, encouraging active involvement in political processes. The frequent and community-oriented nature of religious practice makes it accessible and encourages participation at the local level. In religious spaces, social hierarchies are temporarily set aside, promoting a sense of equality and facilitating political engagement. The political elite's participation in religious practices reinforces the connection between religion and politics. Moreover, he argues that religious individuals are more likely to view political parties and politicians as representative, further motivating their political participation.

In consonance with this, I find in Table 5.10 that higher levels of religiosity among both men and women are positively associated with increased political participation. The religiosity index, which considers various aspects of religious practice, shows that for every unit increase in religiosity, there is a corresponding 0.16 standard deviation increase in the political participation index. The religiosity index encompasses factors such as standardized measures of individuals' stated religiosity, frequency of prayer within their home, viewership of religious programs on television, visits to temples, involvement in religious services, participation in communal religious ceremonies, religious processions, and festivals. Similarly, the political participation index combines measures of voting, involvement in election campaigns, attendance at rallies and public meetings, donation collection, as well as participation in other party events outside of electoral periods. These results indicate that individuals with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to actively engage in political activities, highlighting the impact of religious beliefs and practices on political behavior.

Crucially, the significance of public religious expression outweighs private beliefs in terms of its impact on political engagement. This can be observed by examining the religiosity index, which encompasses both private beliefs and public practices. By analyzing the individual components of the index in Columns 4 through 6, we find that the public performance of religion exhibits a stronger association with political engagement. This finding lends sup-

Table 5.10: Association between religiosity and political participation

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Political Participation Index					
	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Women	Men
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Rel. Index	0.160*** (0.022)	0.185*** (0.035)	0.138*** (0.029)			
Rel. Pub. Index				0.125*** (0.012)	0.139*** (0.022)	0.111*** (0.016)
Rel. Pvt. Index				0.027 (0.018)	0.036 (0.023)	0.020 (0.026)
R. Block FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914	1,457	1,457
R ²	0.215	0.253	0.192	0.220	0.258	0.196

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. This table examines the association between public, private, and overall measures of religiosity (measured through indexes) and political participation (measured as an index of turnout and active participation). Covariate adjustment is per the pre-specified procedure. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

port to Chhibber and Shastri (2014)'s arguments regarding the importance of public religious participation in shaping individuals' political behavior.

Yet at the same time, there are also limits to the mobilization potential of religion. One significant constraint is the local and diverse nature of Hindu religious practices. While this diversity does allow for inclusivity of a range of beliefs and practices, it simultaneously poses challenges when attempting to scale up to the national level to provide the foundation for effective political mobilization. Unlike other religions, there is no pan-Indian religious practice within Hinduism that can serve as a unifying force capable of galvanizing a nationwide political movement. The BJP's most significant movement, LK Advani's Ram Rath Yatra, which is often credited with reviving the BJP's fortunes still only covered eight (of 25) states and 77 (of 543) constituencies.

Second, the seemingly inclusive nature of religious gatherings cannot completely paper over social and caste-based inequalities that can undercut mobilization efforts. Within caste categories, upper castes tend to exhibit the greatest amount of religiosity as is demonstrated by a mean index value of 0.07. Other backward classes (OBCs) are a close second. Other groups including the scheduled castes and tribes are far less religious than the general category. As we can see in Table C.2, controlling for age, education, and other demographic characteristics, members of scheduled castes and tribes as well as those with special backward class status, and especially women, trail behind the upper castes in terms of religious beliefs as also the public display of religiosity. Data from the Religion in India Survey conducted by

the Pew Research Center confirms this: on average Hindus are quite likely to visit temples each day, but members of scheduled castes and tribes are much less likely to visit places of worship relative to upper castes and other backward caste groups.

Third, the absence of a universal religious order within Hinduism makes it challenging to establish a hierarchical structure for political mobilization based solely on religion. Finally, there are alternative avenues for representation in Indian society, such as caste, civil society, state institutions, and political parties, which may compete with religious mobilization efforts. In fact, 15.9% of men surveyed were members of caste organizations. Membership was similar across all caste categories, but somewhat greater for scheduled castes at 19.1%. These trends highlight the constraints of mobilizing solely on religious grounds in India.

Next, I examine the heterogeneous treatment effects of framing by religiosity in the discrete choice and political communication experiments. In the political communication experiment, as shown in Table C.3, I find that the index of religiosity, especially pertaining to public religious practice, is associated with greater communication with representatives. However, religiosity does not moderate the relationship between the event frame and participation. Similarly, we see in Table C.4 where I interact the religiosity index with the event frame, that the AMCE of the event frame by itself persists when interacting with religiosity. Indeed, religiosity has a stronger moderating effect on the protest frame—in the positive direction—than for the *seva* frame when examining the extensive margin of profile choice. In the intensive margin of ratings, we see that more religious men are more likely to give higher ratings to candidate profiles.

Finally, I consider the possibility that religiosity may have a differential effect on the relationship between framing and participation through the channel of partisanship. If BJP-aligned people are more religious than others (which they are), then it is possible that *seva*'s effects on participation are driven by religiosity than the frame itself. To shed light on this possibility, I regressed opinion transmission on the interaction of the religiosity index with framing and partisan identification. Results in Figure C.10 show that the effect of framing remains relatively strong and stable across all levels of religiosity across both BJP-aligned and non-BJP-aligned respondents. Indeed if anything, it gets a little stronger for non-BJP-aligned women.

Taken together, these results indicate that religiosity and more pertinently, public religious practice, can be a powerful determinant of political participation in India for reasons both proposed by Chhibber and Shastri (2014), and shown by the evidence in this study. However, the effect of framing on participation continues to persist independently of the channel of religiosity and religious practice. Indeed, exploratory evidence for men in Figure C.10 suggests that greater intrinsic religiosity and public practice can even be associated with intensifying willingness to engage in contentious political activities, at least for men. Hence, religious activity can at best be a complement for *seva*-based frames, but not a substitute.

5.7 Conclusion

The central goal of this chapter has been to establish the causal effect of *seva* in enabling women's political participation. Based on the discussion in this, and preceding chapters, women face significant barriers to entering public, and particularly political, spaces. Key barriers include men's gatekeeping, a product of patriarchal norms that confine women to their traditional roles within the private sphere. Yet the very patriarchal norms that restrict women's mobility can provide a narrow channel of participation—social service—that circumvents men's gatekeeping. Indeed, men can even be supportive of women's political participation if women are willing to strike a patriarchal bargain by articulating it in such terms.

Using a conjoint experiment that varied the nature of active political participation and perceptions of men's gatekeeping, I showed that men were more likely to acquiesce to women's participation in social service as compared to other forms of politics. Importantly, both men and women were more likely—at both the intensive and extensive margin—to base their decisions (on women's participation) on other men's—rather than women's—preferences.

A second political communication experiment confirmed the topline finding that framing matters for women's participation, but not as much for men. I also find that the key mechanism through which norm-compliant frames are effective is their relative non-elasticity with regard to the visibility of participation. In an environment where women's—and not men's—public political engagement can be construed as transgressive, frames that highlight women's lack of compliance with social norms are less likely to be successful in enabling women to step out of the home in such activities. However, there is one condition under which women may be able to engage in norm-undermining behaviors, i.e., when they believe that other women may also be interested in taking part. This helps to split the fixed costs of participation across a larger pool recalibrating social expectations.

What enables the BJP to mobilize women? The discussion on partisanship suggests that rather than the BJP enjoying an absolute advantage with *seva*, it is more of a comparative advantage with regard to other norm-undermining frames. Respondents aligned with the BJP and the INC exhibited a similar inclination to take part in norm-compliant activities; however, those with the BJP exhibited a stronger decline for protest frames.

Does this mean that the BJP enjoys a “Hindu advantage” in mobilizing women through *seva*? Or can other parties also adopt a similar strategy? The available evidence suggests that while other parties have the potential to mobilize women through the concept of “*seva*” or service, they may face limitations compared to the BJP. One significant factor is the difficulty of smoothly transitioning mobilization strategies. The BJP and its precursor, the Jana Sangh, have invested significant time and effort in establishing a party brand centered around “*seva*” and religious nationalism. There was a brief period during the BJP's inception, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee served as its President, that the party experimented with diluting its Hindutva ideology in favor of Gandhian socialism. However, this shift displeased the RSS, which even contemplated reaching out to the INC instead. During this time, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was grappling with Sikh separatism, leading the RSS to perceive

the INC as more aligned with their ideology than Vajpayee's BJP. Interviews with veteran members of the BJP's women's wing and the research of Choudhary (undated) indicate that some RSS and BJP members even voted for the INC in the 1984 elections, following Indira Gandhi's assassination, believing that the INC represented Hindu interests. However, after the BJP's significant defeat in the 1984 national elections, Vajpayee was removed as Party President, and the leadership was handed over to L.K. Advani, who held stronger Hindu nationalist views. Since then, the party has adopted a much more hardline strategy that has only intensified since 2014 and the ascent of Modi. Thus, the BJP has had a deep and committed relationship with religion. This relationship with religion has also spilled over to *seva*. As delineated in Chapter 2, *seva* has been a tool for Hindu consolidation since pre-independent India, and was carried into contemporary India by the RSS. The RSS has consistently applied the rhetoric of social service to describe its activities and *seva* is a key component of its construction of a compassionate self-image.

On the other hand, the contemporary INC's links to secularism, religion and *seva* are fraught and contested. During the freedom struggle, the INC explicitly tried to represent the interests of both Hindus and Muslims despite the presence of a number of Hindu hardliners like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Madan Mohan Malviya, and Purushottam Das Tandon amongst others. Despite this avowed secularism, the Muslim League suspected the party would not be able to do enough to ensure that Muslim voices would be heard and their voices and concerns represented in the new country. In the initial years after independence, Nehru took a strong stance against mixing religion and politics, taking such measures as passing the Hindu Code Bill leading to reforms in Hindu personal law. Since then, the INC's association with secularism has steadily weakened, first with Hindu-Sikh riots in 1984 upon the assassination of Indira Gandhi, where many of the guilty hailed from the Hindu majority and were not prosecuted thereafter. It is also at this time that the RSS debated about switching allegiances from the BJP to the INC.

But all of this changed with Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's son, and successor as Prime Minister. In a landmark judgment, Shah Bano a Muslim woman, won a court case to obtain maintenance from her divorced husband. However, her husband contested the claim based on provisions of Muslim personal law. Facing opposition from protesting Muslim clergy as well as the Hindu right wing advocating for a uniform civil code, Rajiv Gandhi overturned the court's verdict. This decision deeply eroded the INC's credit with Hindus and fueled the Hindu right wing's subsequent attacks on and erosion of Nehruvian secularism. To this day, the right wing has accused the INC of pseudo-secularism, where different rules apply to Hindus and Muslims.

The INC has been unable to find a suitable response to this line of attack. This can, in part, be attributed to the BJP's weaponization of identity, especially as it pertains to the INC's leadership. Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi's wife, was painted as unfit to lead India due to her Catholic and Italian heritage. Although this met with limited initial success—the INC-led coalition won the 2004 and 2009 national elections—these narratives have accumulated greater momentum over the years, especially with misinformation spread on social media groups, as my qualitative research suggests. Rahul Gandhi who is Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi's

scion, currently the most prominent leader of the party, has attempted to ingratiate himself with Hindus. These have included temple visits, announcing his caste status as well as other means of highlighting the party's and his personal connection with Hinduism.³⁸ However, despite Rahul Gandhi's attempts to align himself and the INC with Hindu identity, the INC's fortunes have continued to decline, as seen in the 2019 elections.

INC's falling stock in the religion market has gone hand in hand with its estrangement from the values of selflessness and sacrifice intimately linked with *seva*. Since 2012, the INC-led government was accused of a slew of corruption charges and was the target of an anti-corruption campaign. The campaign was led by the group India Against Corruption who put up Anna Hazare, a Gandhian and former freedom fighter, as the face of the movement, even as much of the ground-level logistical support was allegedly provided by the RSS.³⁹ The campaign was extremely effective at portraying the INC as corrupt and self-serving, and Rahul Gandhi as a beneficiary of the party's nepotistic politics. Although these corruption allegations were never substantiated, and in one instance were based on inaccurate audit reports, the party's ineffective response resulted in a significant loss of moral standing among Indian citizens.⁴⁰ Consequently, during the BJP's 2014 election campaign and subsequent tenure, themes of morality, sacrifice, and selflessness became highly valued by the public. Even policies such as demonetization and the implementation of a new tax regime, which contributed to the economic slowdown, were perceived as stemming from good intentions, even if lacking in expertise, experience, and foresight.

The concept of *seva* in politics often involves the notion of the powerful, particularly the state or its representatives, serving the needs of the citizens or the less privileged. Consequently, citizens tend to rely on the state when seeking specific services. As a result, one would expect citizens to associate *seva* with the incumbent political party. However, the association of *seva* with the BJP has been so deeply entrenched that even in Rajasthan, one of the few states that the INC was the incumbent when the study was conducted, more citizens associate *seva* with the BJP rather than the INC. In a survey, when asked which party they would associate with the ideas of "seva" and service, 44% chose the BJP, 27% chose the INC, and 18% believed both parties could be equally associated with these concepts. Additionally, 38% of respondents associated the INC with protests and contentious participation, while 27% associated it with the BJP, the opposition party at the state level. Rajasthan, as an incumbent party stronghold, presents a challenging case to find an instance where the incumbent party is more strongly associated with activism rather than service. This underscores the deep entrenchment of political brands in people's minds.

A second impediment to other parties in cloaking themselves with *seva* is the lack of organizational backing that the BJP receives from the RSS. The RSS's extensive network of affiliated organizations engaged in some form of "social work" provides a strong bedrock to provide credibility to the BJP's use of *seva* frames. Similarly, parties other than the

³⁸See for instance Deka (2022).

³⁹Express News Service (2020)

⁴⁰Banerjee (2021). The Comptroller and Auditor General later apologized for these errors.

BJP may face opposition and criticism when using *seva*-based rhetoric, particularly if it is perceived as an attempt to mirror the BJP's success. Critics may question the authenticity of their commitment to *seva* and accuse them of using it as a political tool rather than a genuine ideology. Indeed, the BJP has often portrayed the INC as electorally opportunistic during its attempts to show its relation with religion. Overcoming these perceptions and establishing themselves as credible proponents of *seva*, while also differentiating themselves from the BJP can be a significant challenge for parties like the INC whose association with *seva* has been historically weaker.

A third reason is the overall coherence of messaging. The BJP has strategically positioned itself as a party that organically combines nationalism, cultural pride, and social service. Thus, other secular parties that seek to mobilize citizens, particularly women, through the frame of *seva* will need to craft a cohesive framework to build a compelling narrative that aligns with their core principles and values, while also avoiding the overt sacralization of *seva*.

Finally, it is worth contemplating whether religious parties enjoy a distinct political or mobilizational advantage. As suggested by Brooke (2019), and posited by Pepinsky, Liddle and Mujani (2012) in the case of Islamic parties in Egypt and Indonesia, it is possible that parties like the BJP benefit from a unique religious advantage. This means that the BJP's association with religion and selflessness may lead voters to reward it more or penalize it less for the same policies compared to secular or non-religious parties. Moreover, conservative individuals may be more inclined to view the BJP's *seva*-based initiatives more favorably than other parties that have yet to effectively utilize religion in a manner similar to religiously conservative parties. Consequently, the interplay of religion and nationalism may amplify the BJP's *seva* framework beyond what non-religious parties can achieve, resulting in a distinctive political effect for the BJP. However, further research is required to confirm or refute this proposition.

Chapter 6

The Argument in Comparative Perspective

The relationship between religion and politics, and how this is moderated by gender and sex has been the subject of many studies, not only in India but across the world. In this chapter, I investigate the applicability of my theory of norm-compliant mobilization in contexts outside India. But to begin with a word of caution, a thorough evaluation of the generalizability of the arguments put forth in this book to contexts beyond India would require significant additional research, possibly even dedicated full-length publications. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this book. The objectives of this chapter are more modest, aimed at demonstrating how particular insights from this book can enhance our comprehension of political parties and women's ability to negotiate access to the public sphere in other regions.

Early studies investigating women's voting behavior in a comparative context with men primarily focused on whether women possessed distinct political preferences from their male counterparts. This subject generated substantial deliberation, especially in countries that had initially restricted voting rights to men, particularly during the initial stages of first-wave democratization. The emergence of women's suffrage movements prompted concerns among politicians regarding the potential impact of women's collective participation in the electoral process. Teele (2018:6) highlights the apprehensions harbored by politicians regarding the ramifications of women's voting power on the established societal order. Consequently, despite the arduous efforts of suffragists, women often encountered greater prospects of attaining suffrage during times of political turmoil or when expanding the franchise aligned with electoral strategies.

However, if incumbent politicians regarded women's diverging preferences as a rationale for constraining the extension of the franchise, their concerns may have been unfounded. After the granting of suffrage and throughout much of the 20th century, women demonstrated a greater propensity to vote for conservative political parties. This inclination was substantiated by several studies conducted in the post-World War II era, indicating that women not only exhibited conservative voting patterns but also displayed lower levels of po-

litical knowledge compared to their male counterparts.¹ Notably, an examination of voting behavior among men and women in Norway, France, Germany, and Yugoslavia conducted by Duverger (1955) revealed that women tended to exhibit a more favorable disposition toward right-wing parties, particularly those of a religious nature. This trend, commonly referred to as the traditional gender gap, denoted the heightened likelihood of women casting their votes in support of conservative political factions.²

The prevailing explanations for this phenomenon centered on the examination of structural dissimilarities between men and women, specifically in terms of religiosity, life expectancy, and labor force participation. Women's higher levels of religiosity contributed to their increased participation in religious activities, exposing them to conservative ideologies propagated within those contexts. Furthermore, the lower engagement of women in the labor force diminished their likelihood of supporting labor and worker's parties. Another contributing factor was the observation that older individuals tended to hold stronger conservative attitudes, and given women's longer life expectancy, their voting patterns tended to align more closely with conservative ideologies. Consequently, these three factors played a significant role in establishing a gender-based ideological gap.

Despite the existence of such voting disparities, there was limited evidence to support the notion that women could be effectively mobilized as a distinct voting bloc. Political parties' attempts to harness women's collective voting power were often hindered by more salient cleavages such as race, ethnicity, region, and class. Consequently, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) in the context of Europe, regarded gender as a secondary cleavage with limited potential for independent mobilization.

Considerable transformations have taken place in women's voting patterns since these early days. A notable shift occurred in the United States during the 1980 Presidential election, which subsequently manifested in other Western democracies. It was observed that women, in contrast to their previous conservative tendencies, displayed a greater inclination to vote for left-wing parties compared to men. This shift in political preferences gave rise to what Inglehart and Norris (2000) labels the modern gender gap, distinguishing it from the traditional gender gap observed earlier. This modern gender gap has endured over time, persisting even when controlling for factors such as age, social class, race, and religion.³

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to comprehend the conceptual differences between the traditional and modern gender gaps. Although both are labeled under the term "gender gap," they in fact denote two distinct phenomena. The traditional gender gap pertains to two divergences between men and women: first, men's greater inclination to partake in political activities, and second, women's inclination towards conservative political parties. In contrast, the modern gender gap solely focuses on the reversal of women's partisan behavior. Therefore, for clarity, I will refer to these distinct gender gaps as the participation gap and the partisan gap respectively.

¹Duverger (1955); Duncan (2017)

²Norris (2005)

³Manza and Brooks (1998); Whitaker (2008); Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014)

The reversal in the partisan gender gap is attributed to several factors that have emerged over time. The shift in gender-based voting patterns can be attributed to various factors that have emerged and evolved over time. Scholars such as Inglehart and Norris (2000; 2003) have identified several key factors contributing to the increase in women's support for left-wing parties. Firstly, advancements in economic development and the increased participation of women in education and the labor force have played a significant role. Women's entry into the workforce, particularly in low-wage jobs, has heightened their reliance on government-backed welfare programs and social safety nets, leading to increased support for left-wing parties advocating for such policies. Secondly, the partisan positioning of political parties on gender-related issues, especially notable in the United States, has influenced women's party preferences. Parties that align themselves with progressive gender policies and advocate for women's rights have gained greater support from female voters. Thirdly, the declining rate of marriage and the rising rates of divorce have had implications for women's economic status. Studies by Edlund and Pande (2002) indicate that the decrease in marriage rates has contributed to a wealth gap, benefiting men and potentially leading to reduced support for left-wing parties among male voters. Conversely, rising divorce rates have had the opposite effect, increasing support for left-wing parties among women. Lastly, the dissemination and increased receptivity towards liberal and feminist ideologies have played a role in shaping women's political preferences. The spread of these ideologies has influenced women's perceptions of political issues and fostered a greater alignment with left-wing parties. Collectively, these factors, including economic development, educational attainment, partisan positioning, changes in marital dynamics, and the influence of liberal and feminist ideologies, have contributed to the observed shift in women's political preferences and voting behavior.

In contemporary times, the rise and prominence of radical right-wing political parties have contributed to the widening modern gender gap in political preferences.⁴ These parties advocate anti-globalization, protectionist, and anti-migrant ideologies, attracting a disproportionate level of support from men. Particularly, men employed in low-skilled manual and blue-collar occupations in the United States and Europe have been significantly affected by the consequences of globalization, leading to concerns about job displacement by migrant workers with lower wage expectations. The far-right has capitalized on these concerns and successfully appealed to this segment of the male population. Often they espouse misogynistic rhetoric ideologies and rhetoric making women hesitant about pledging their support for these parties.

⁴Betz (1994); Givens (2004); Norris (2005); Bruijn and Veenbrink (2012); Immerzeel, Coffé and Van der Lippe (2015)

6.1 Religious parties and the gender gap in political engagement

However, the existing body of research on the gender gap in right-wing support in the developing world remains limited, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of the relationship between conservatism and men's and women's electoral behaviors. In addition to the geographic focus of existing research on Western democracies, existing research on the gender gap focuses on left and right-wing parties as overarching categories, hiding the fact that these categories are not homogeneous. To be sure, research does not explicitly claim that right-wing parties and parties are monolithic entities. But focusing on the left-right cleavage can often obscure the variation within the right-wing, not only in terms of ideology, but also policy agendas, visions, and collective conceptions of a "just" society.⁵ Indeed the variation within the conservative movement has stumped scholars' attempts to reach a consensus on a minimal definition of the electoral right. As expressed by Ricci (2009), the right wing can be likened to a Rorschach inkblot, lacking clear boundaries and presenting a blurred, elusive center. Consequently, different observers can often attribute conflicting characteristics, aspirations, and expectations to this amorphous entity.⁶

Emerging research has started to investigate the internal dynamics of the gender gap within specific sub-categories of the right wing. For instance, Mayer (2015) conducted an analysis focusing on the far right in France and observed a significant reduction in the gender gap in support of the Le Pens between 1988 and 2012. In 1988, women were 6 percentage points less likely to vote for Le Pen compared to men. However, by 2012, this difference had decreased to 1.5 percentage points. This finding suggests a narrowing gender gap in support for the far right over time. However, there are a number of confounders with the political transition within the party as Jean Marie Le Pen made way for his daughter Marine Le Pen, indicating that women's presence at the helm of the right wing may ameliorate other women's concerns about the purported misogyny of such parties.

What is the role of religion within the right wing? Much existing research looks at the effect of voters' religiosity in support of the right wing, but relatively little examines the gender gap within the religious right. However, a notable exception to this gap in research is the study conducted by Duncan (2017), which investigates the gender gap within Christian Democratic parties in Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Along with advocating conservative and democratic principles, these parties have been strongly attached to traditionalist understandings of the family and gender roles. Dierickx (1996) They prioritize traditional family values, advocate for the support of religious institutions and demonstrate a commitment to social welfare programs. Typically, these parties promote conservative stances on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration. With changing norms about gender roles in these countries, it would appear that Christian democratic parties would be particularly susceptible to an erosion in support among women. Yet,

⁵Gidron and Ziblatt (2019)

⁶Ricci (2009:159)

Table 6.1: Right-wing party classification checks

		Party classification (Wikipedia)	
		Right	Non-right
Party classification (OpenAI)	Right	200	5
	Non-right	1	254

Duncan (2017) finds no evidence of a gender gap among supporters of this set of religious parties. Although Church attendance and self-placement on a left-right scale did reduce these parties' advantage among women, nowhere did the Christian Democrats have a gender disadvantage.

As these studies highlight, the partisan gender gap is far from being a general phenomenon across all categories of right-wing parties. Among these, religiously conservative parties are particularly interesting since they can employ religion to undergird mobilization appeals to women. To this end, I build on the previous studies to examine the existence of the gender gap for the religious right wing. To do this, I utilize individual-level data collected by the World Values Survey (WVS), a long-standing research initiative founded by Ronald Inglehart in 1981. The WVS has been implemented in over 100 countries and is recognized as a leading source of standardized information concerning human values and beliefs.

The WVS, since 1989, has collected respondents' preferences about the party they favor or would like to vote for. Specifically, the survey asks respondents about their first and second choice of the party they would vote for. Through this process, the survey captures information on citizens' preferences about 1,632 unique parties. However, as shown in Figure D.1 many of these parties are minor players, consequently, I restrict my analysis to parties accounting for at least 5% of people's first preference. This leaves me with 460 political parties across 73 countries. I then classify these parties' ideological positions as left-wing, centrist, or right-wing using an artificial intelligence algorithm developed by OpenAI⁷.

The OpenAI algorithm has been trained to undertake tasks like language modeling, text completion, and answering questions using over 45 terabytes of text data including books, websites, news articles, as well as others. But because this is a recent innovation, there is little information on how robust this classification is. Hence, to test measurement validity, I compare this with Wikipedia's classification has been shown to yield valid and reliable left-right scores comparable to scores obtained via conventional expert coding methods.⁸ Table 6.1 presents the results of this analysis: the OpenAI method matches with the Wikipedia classification in 454 of 460 cases, with an accuracy score of 98.7%.

In the next step of this analysis, I leveraged the accuracy of OpenAI's classification system to distinguish between political parties with religious ideologies and those without. Using the

⁷OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT (May 1 version) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com/chat>

⁸Herrmann and Döring (2023)

same list of 460 parties, the algorithm identified 46, or 10%, as having a religious foundation. These parties were found to be centered on promoting the interests of religious adherents, establishing organic ties with religious organizations, or deriving from religious movements. Additionally, many of these parties emphasized the role of religion in shaping cultural and societal values. Parties, such as the US Republican party, that attract a significant proportion of religious voters but were not based on an exclusively religious ideology were not classified as religious by this algorithm.⁹

In accordance with established research on the partisan gender gap, our analysis reveals that women have, on average, exhibited a lower propensity to support right-wing parties since the inception of data collection by the World Values Survey. Initial estimates presented in Table D.3 of Appendix D do not indicate any differences between men's and women's right-wing party preferences. However, our regression analysis, which controls for Country \times Year fixed effects and relevant covariates including age, education, income, marital status, and religiosity, demonstrates the emergence of the partisan gender gap. Notably, this is a hard test for the partisan gender gap because existing research focuses on showing its presence in advanced democracies, and not across *all* countries as I attempt to do here.

What happens when we restrict our analysis to religious right-wing parties? Using the same regression specifications, we find that the partisan gender gap disappears, suggesting that these parties, on average, enjoy more support from women than other parties among the right wing. As the first panel of Figure 6.1 shows, from a 1.8 percentage point difference for right-wing parties, the partisan gender gap for religious right-wing parties is statistically no different from 0.

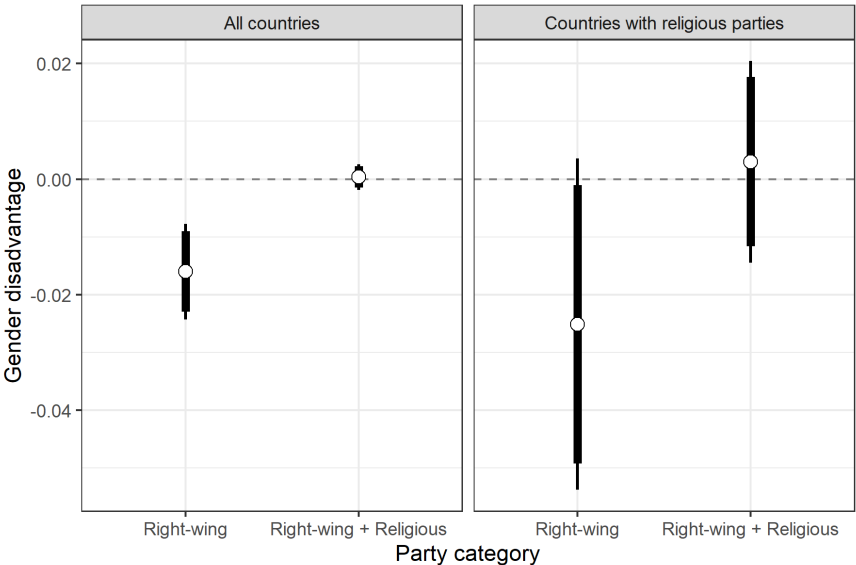
However, it should be noted that not all countries have religious right-wing parties that receive a significant level of support in the World Values Survey (WVS). Therefore, it could be argued that it is relevant to examine the gender gap in a restricted sample that includes only individuals residing in countries with a religious right-wing party. Upon running identical regression specifications on this restricted sample, I find these results to be broadly consistent with the full sample. Specifically, right-wing parties continued to experience a gender disadvantage, as demonstrated in the second panel of Figure 6.1, with statistical significance at a 90% confidence level, rather than 95%. However, this disadvantage disappeared when focusing on religious right-wing parties.

6.2 Case studies of religiously conservative parties

Now that we have established that religiously conservative parties can mitigate the partisan gender disadvantage, I now turn to examine how these parties mobilize women and what are the public avenues in which they seek women's engagement. Do these parties also use norm-compliant mobilization appeals to motivate women into the political sphere, and to

⁹Going forward, I plan to conduct additional robustness checks to confirm measurement validity for this classification.

Figure 6.1: Gender gap for right-wing and religious parties



Note: Using the 1984-2020 panel of the World Values Survey, this figure shows the covariate-adjusted gender gap in support for right-wing and religious right-wing parties. Negative values indicate lower support among women. Regressions include Country \times Year fixed effects and are weighted by the population of the country. Covariates include age, income, education level, religiosity, and marital status. Standard errors are clustered at the Country \times Year level.

enhance men’s acceptance of women’s participation? If so, what are the features of this norm-compliant mobilization, and does this have parallels to the BJP’s and the RSS’s leverage of gendered social service norms?

Throughout this book, I employ the local term of *seva* to describe how the Hindu right wing operationalizes norm-compliant behavior. I do this to emphasize the broader meanings and implications of the term. Previous studies have examined the concept of *seva* in terms of constituency service and the provision of public services. However, my use of *seva* highlights its moral implications, normative meanings, and affective repercussions, which have received less attention in the literature. Nonetheless, using a local term has its challenges. One potential drawback is that it may narrow the reader’s understanding of the concept to a specific cultural or geographical context. Consequently, my goal in this chapter is to break down the concept of *seva* into its constituent parts and explore whether these components serve as the foundation of political mobilization in other settings.

As discussed in Chapter 3, *seva* is a particular operationalization of norm-compliant mobilization frames. On the one hand, it has a deep resonance with the BJP because of its origins in religion and Hindu revivalism. The party’s motto of “Nation first, party second, self last” also maps on to the ideas of selflessness and self-abnegation projected by *seva*. But crucially, *seva* is also a role-congruent activity for women whose private lives are structured

around familial caregiving duties, which are explicitly referred to in the very terms of *seva* and service. Indeed, as described in Chapter 4, women referred to their domestic duties as positive manifestations of love and service. Sometimes they referred to them in relatively neutral terms of “work,” but rarely through the negative lens of a “chore.” Hence, the power of *seva* in mobilizing women lies in its ability to act as a bridge to the political sphere in a way that reinforces rather than undermines women’s traditional roles within the private sphere.

The first step in understanding how generalizable norm-compliant mobilization is is to investigate the role of religion, and Hinduism in particular, in forging an association between right-wing parties and women. While service finds a basis in Hinduism, it is hardly the only religion that valorizes ideas of service, charity, selflessness, and sacrifice. Transcending the self to be more altruistic and other-regarding through charity and service are central tenets of most global religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Indeed, as illustrated in Chapter 2, Hinduism’s emphasis on charity grew under the influence of Buddhist practices. Likewise, obligatory alms-giving or *zakat* is one of the five mandatory acts prescribed for Muslims.¹⁰ As a result, if religion is deemed a necessary factor in mobilizing and rationalizing women’s public presence, multiple religions can serve the same function as Hinduism does through the concept and practice of service.

But at a more foundational level, I argue that religion is not a strictly necessary condition for women’s norm-compliant mobilization. To be sure, religion is one of the most prominent sources of norms governing people’s behavior, but women are also subject to a second set of behavioral norms: those emerging from patriarchy. When religion and patriarchy converge, as in the case of political Islam or Hinduism, then the weight of norms is particularly onerous as deviations will cause a backlash, both from religious adherents as well as proponents of patriarchal institutions. However, patriarchy alone can provide a powerful behavioral template to guide behavior by emphasizing women’s roles as caring mothers, dutiful wives, as well as respectful daughters-in-law within the home.

I do not wish to discount the role of religion in shaping the contours of norm-compliant mobilization in India. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 4, a large number of women activists within the BJP and the larger right-wing ecosystem saw their participation as service unto their religion, community, and conception of country, a Hindu *rashtra* or nation. However, in a context where women’s transition from the private to the public sphere depends on their ability to negotiate patriarchal attitudes and institutions within their homes and their communities, the role of religion is important insofar as it allows party activists and potential participants a plausible motivation or justification to facilitate this transition. Furthermore, I would suggest that among politicians and party activists who seek to project themselves as social workers, men rely more upon religion than women. Traits of selflessness and sacrifice are inherent to social workers or *samaj sevaks* and *sevikas*. And unlike women, whose domestic roles as mothers and wives are a direct manifestation of these traits in a patriarchal

¹⁰The other four acts are professing faith (*shahadah*), prayer (*salah*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawm*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

setting, men do not have similar private traits or identities to which they can take recourse. Consequently, men rely more on religion and a modest lifestyle to cultivate a public image of social service.

If we approach the concept of *seva* from the perspective of norm-compliance, we can observe that numerous conservative political parties and leaders have utilized similar rhetoric and mobilization strategies to involve women in the public sphere. This chapter delves into several cases in greater detail. In some of these case studies, women's transition into the public sphere began as a bottom-up movement, while in others it occurred as part of an elite-driven strategy to incorporate more women in politics. The reason I include both is that it can often be an onerous task to distinguish between top-down and bottom-up movements, and party elites can often shape organizational incentives to structure grassroots organizational structure and behaviors. These cases encompass a range of conservative parties, many of which possess explicit religious ideologies. Nonetheless, I also include some cases of conservative parties that are not explicitly religious but draw support from a more religious set of voters and have used norm-compliant mobilization tools to draw women into politics. Finally, although political parties often play a crucial role in women's mass mobilization, women's political and social movements have often been established by women themselves or with the help of organizations independent of parties or religious groups. Some prominent examples of these include women's suffrage movements in advanced democracies and prohibition in the US. Often, women's involvement in such movements, whether advocating for political rights or pressuring for favorable policies, has been legitimized through norm-compliant reasoning. Consequently, it is not solely political parties but also women who have strategically utilized their traditional identities to amplify their voices in ways that align with prevailing social arrangements.

Turkey

In Turkey, a number of religiously conservative parties have mobilized women into the public sphere based on an Islamist worldview highlighting the importance of traditional gender roles and the values of family, modesty, and religious observance. One of the most prominent of these parties, the *Refah* (or Welfare) Party was founded in 1983 in the aftermath of a military coup, but had its roots in the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi or MSP) that was founded nearly a decade ago. With an ideological stance critical to the principles of Kemalism, particularly its seemingly rigid idea of secularism, the Refah aimed to propagate Islamic values and principles as the fundamental basis of society.

Islamic political parties are often associated with advocating for positions that limit women's engagement in public life. The Refah however had a more nuanced position. Although its overarching framework placed women squarely in terms of their positions within the family, it also endorsed policies to educate women and facilitated their participation in the workforce. The party's reversal of the headscarf ban as part of its efforts to encourage the expression of religious devotion in the public sphere led to an increased enrollment of

girls from economically disadvantaged and religious households.¹¹

A key objective of the Refah Party was to protect women from exploitation and prevent their objectification in commercial and advertising domains. However, these endeavors continued to be grounded in party's Islamist agenda. In the realm of education, the party exhibited a distinct preference for religious instruction aligned with its particular interpretation of Islam. Additionally, the Refah encouraged women to pursue careers in fields that adhered to Islamic guidelines, such as education, healthcare, and social services, and its efforts towards protecting women from exploitation was driven by a concern for preserving traditional values and societal order.¹²

Like their religiously conservative counterparts in India, Lebanon, and Indonesia, Refah saw women in terms of their traditional roles, and implemented a number of social welfare initiatives aimed at promoting the well-being of women within their families. These initiatives encompassed financial aid, healthcare services, and support specifically tailored for mothers and children, with the intention of alleviating some of the burdens associated with women's traditional roles. Thus, although there was an improvement in women's status, it was not by considering specific needs and concerns of women themselves but in support of their roles within the family.

But one of the most distinct legacies of the Refah party was its ability to mobilize women into the public sphere. The Refah inherited a core base of traditional conservative Sunni Muslims comprising of rural populations, religiously oriented business owners and professionals, lower-middle-class urban dwellers, and segments of the educated middle class. This core constituency could be leveraged to give the party 7.18% of the national vote in 1987, but it fell short of the 10% threshold to win a seat in the Grand National Assembly. Although there was a substantial improvement in 1987, the party realized that a business as usual approach would not serve it well in future. Keeping this in mind, the party decided to focus on mobilizing women. The key effort in this direction was taken by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was then at the helm of the Refah's Istanbul organisation. Erdogan and his supporters did face initial resistance from more conservative factions but finally prevailed, gradually incorporating women into its newly formed women's wing, the Ladies' Commission. Erdogan himself trained the first set of women members. Most new members were already connected to the party in some form, with many being friends and relatives of existing party members. Although its base was strongest in Istanbul, by the end of 1996, Ladies' Commissions had been established in all 79 provinces, highlighting their extensive geographical reach. By now, the Commission had spread far beyond its initial focus on elites or their friends and acquaintances, with a membership of nearly one million women within six years of its formation.¹³ This focus on women paid rich dividends: the Refah's vote share increased to 16.87% in 1991 and 21.38% in 1995 when it won 62 (of 450) and 158 (of 550) seats respectively. It emerged as the single largest party in 1995 and formed a coalition government.

¹¹Meyersson (2014)

¹²Arat (2007)

¹³Arat (2007)

These women activists were crucial critical to mobilizing support for the party and were often recognized as instrumental for its success.¹⁴ The main objectives of the Ladies' Commission was to institutionalize the party's women-centred outreach by organizing meetings, preparing propositions, increasing membership, and arranging events tailored for women. In Arat (2007) emphasizes the pivotal role of women in the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), shedding light on their pivotal contributions in mobilizing support for the party. Women played a significant role in convincing their husbands to become party members, thereby expanding the party's base. The women's organizations within the party were acknowledged as dynamic agents, actively participating in rallies, meetings, and a wide range of activities. Their involvement and dedication were crucial in fostering the party's organizational strength and outreach efforts, that surpassed the organizational bases of other secular formations.

But how did the Ladies Commission create these phenomenal partisan links with ordinary women? How were they able to draw them into the public sphere in a country where women were largely relegated to the home? And does this have any parallels with the BJP's use of social service? To shed light on this, I draw on ethnographic research on the Refah Party's mobilization toolkit conducted by Arat (2007) and White (2011). I begin with an account of the Refah's general approach towards mobilization, which as White (2011)'s research shows, was intricately layered upon two local cultural norms. The first norm, known as "*imece*," encompasses reciprocal relationships and cooperative interactions among kin and neighbors. The second norm, referred to as "*himaye*," pertains to the provision of patronage and safeguarding the interests of the socially disadvantaged and marginalized.

In Ümraniye, a district within Istanbul where White (2011) conducted her research, the Refah effectively leveraged the principles of *imece* and *himaye* to mobilize people and build strong community networks. *Imece*, a rural tradition of mutual support, was adapted to urban life, where migrant families in poor neighborhoods constructed extensive webs of obligation. People assisted each other in various ways, from sharing food and labor to engaging in informal sector activities, without expecting immediate returns. This communal obligation fostered a sense of collective responsibility, with everyone contributing to the well-being of the community as a whole. *Himaye*, on the other hand, represented a hierarchical form of protection and loyalty within families, regions of origin, and political parties. At the political grassroots level, within the realm of activism, *himaye* took on a more expansive significance. It embodied a moral duty to safeguard and support the less fortunate and vulnerable. This interpretation of *himaye* as the defense of the powerless, intertwined with the *imece* framework of ethical mutual responsibility served as the driving force behind the Refah's party activists.

These norms of *imece* and *himaye* had particular import for women's mobilization. The concept of *imece* was not only evident in formal organizational structures but also in the everyday cooperative practices among women. Women had already embraced the idea of *imece* in their personal lives. Instead of pursuing their individual goals, women often used their earnings to support their families, investing in education, and elevating their house-

¹⁴Arat (2007); White (2011); Eligür (2010)

hold's standing within the community. This prioritization of the collective well-being of their families and the wider community, in essence, exemplified selflessness and sacrifice, aligning with the values of *imece*. Women activists engaged in various quotidian activities within and across households, such as sharing and preparing food, assisting with significant events like weddings, community festivities, and funerals. They also collaborated in tasks such as spinning, knitting, embroidering, quilting, and caring for the sick and elderly.¹⁵ This collective mindset and active participation resonated with the objectives of the Refah movement, enabling its mobilization efforts and fostering solidarity among women striving for the improvement of their families and neighborhoods. Consequently, it became natural for the Refah to extend the concept of *imece* into the political realm by basing its mobilization appeals on this shared norm. As argued by White (2011), the Refah party and the Ladies Commission utilized women's roles in *imece*-based civic networks to involve them in canvassing, organizing and participating in demonstrations, and attending rallies.

Women activists used a process of "apolitical politicization" to create a conduit for women's entry into the public sphere and partisan activism.¹⁶ Central to this was the formation of "hücre" or cells consisting of interconnected neighbors with an established history of *imece*-based networks or webs of mutual support and trust.¹⁷

Household visits played a crucial role in strengthening these networks. The Refah's women activists favored home visits for two main reasons. Firstly, it allowed them to bypass the restrictions imposed by the Turkish political and judicial system, which limited explicit discussions on certain topics in public spaces. Consequently, the privacy of household conversations provided a safe environment for party activists to articulate the party's message. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the intimacy of the home setting created a natural atmosphere that facilitated activists' efforts in forming close connections with constituents and effectively conveying the party's ideological position. Tea sessions, in particular, provided opportunities for reading religious texts, addressing inquiries about daily life, and organizing small discussion groups on subjects such as women's rights in Islam, feminism, and current political and socioeconomic issues affecting women and their families.¹⁸

Throughout these strategic interactions, women activists consciously avoided employing religious propaganda or divisive political rhetoric that could alienate the women they engaged with. As described in Eligür (2010), the Ladies Commission pursued a patient and long-term strategy focused on *dakwah*, or proselytization, rather than seeking immediate material political rewards. The women subtly challenged Kemalism, secularism, and Western influences by advocating for a conscious Muslim existence.

Recognizing the influential role of women in child-rearing, the women activists provided guidance on raising children according to Islamic principles and emphasized the significance of an Islamic family structure. Traditional social gatherings, such as reception days and religious celebrations, served as platforms for discussing proper interpretations of Islam.

¹⁵White (2011)

¹⁶Arat (2007)

¹⁷White (2011)

¹⁸Eligür (2010)

These gatherings facilitated the cultivation of trust, emotional bonds, and a redefinition of faith and lifestyle in alignment with Islamist ideology. The fusion of *imece*-based norms of deferred reciprocity with religious ideas enabled activists to establish a sense of commonality and shared values with the general population.

The Refah's organizational strategy played a key role in explaining women's ability to enter the public sphere and in explaining their success in two ways: organizational strategy and behavioural approach. In their efforts to extend Refah's reach to targeted neighborhoods and districts, the Ladies Commission drew on their pre-existing *imece*-based social networks to strategically engage with the wives of influential male elites. Subsequently, the activists familiarized themselves with the community's social structures, identified persons of influence, and requested introductions to other community members through communal gatherings, such as tea parties. This approach was replicated in subsequent social events, further solidifying their network.

The Party placed particular emphasis on guiding women in their behavior within private settings, aiming to promote persuasive and influential conduct. Women activists embraced and internalized the party's mobilization philosophy, which centered around the principle "One who wants to get honey, does not destroy the beehive."¹⁹ This philosophy served as a guiding principle that informed their training programs and influenced their outreach strategies. The Ladies Commission structured its approach based on a set of core principles aimed at cultivating positive and constructive relationships. During household visits, women activists were mindful of being soft-spoken, persuasive, respectful, and tolerant in their interactions. The training programs emphasized the cultivation of love and unity instead of fostering divisions, the dissemination of good news rather than negative narratives, and the importance of forgiveness. Furthermore, women activists were encouraged to alleviate the challenges faced by women in their daily lives, thus demonstrating empathy and support. Importantly, their focus was not solely on seeking votes for the party, but rather on fostering a sense of shared experiences and building mutual trust and support. By adhering to these principles and conducting their political activities within the context of socially embedded interactions, members of the Ladies Commission effectively mobilized women's support for the party.

The second norm that the Refah party employed was that of *himaye*. *Himaye*, which embodies loyalty, protection, and support within families and communities, influenced women's lives and shaped their involvement in political activities.²⁰ At a broader level, all Refah activists drew on *himaye* as a guiding principle, emphasizing the need to protect and support the weaker members of society. It represented a relationship based on affection and care rather than mere duty-bound obligations.

But for women in particular, *himaye* meant being under the protection and loyalty of their husbands and families. Thus, this principle also presented challenges to women's full engagement in political activities. The protective role expected of women within family

¹⁹Eligür (2010:191)

²⁰White (2011)

life often limited their choices and freedom of movement outside the home. Husbands and families could impose restrictions, such as requiring wives to seek permission or supervision for leaving the house, ceasing work, or even ending their education.

Despite these challenges, women activists could also transform *himaye* to provide a framework within which they could navigate their political engagement. They sought ways to extend *himaye*'s protection into the political sphere, symbolically manifesting it through practices like veiling. Hence, by behaving in norm-compliant ways rather than actively challenging patriarchal structures, women activists were able to participate in public life while navigating the confines of traditional gender roles.

In summary, the Refah Party effectively harnessed the principles of *imece* and *himaye* to mobilize women and expand its political influence. By leveraging mutual obligation and horizontal networks through *imece*, they established horizontal grassroots connections and organized communities. Additionally, by embracing *himaye*, the party took into account vertical power hierarchies and relationships of protection and support, empowering women to participate in political activities while respecting cultural expectations. This combined approach enabled the Refah Party to build trust, foster a sense of belonging, and successfully enabling women to enter the public sphere and contribute to the party's ideological and political objectives.

The origins of *imece* and *himaye* do not lie in religion *per se*, but these norms share similarities with key teachings of religion, such as the importance of being other-regarding and altruistic in one's day-to-day life and interactions with others. This aligns with the emphasis that Islam places on charity or *zakat*, which involves giving to those in need. When a religiously conservative party like Refah embraces a rhetoric of altruism built upon networks of mutual cooperation, these norms can often be perceived as religious due to their alignment with Islamic values. However, it is worth noting that the moral credit from practicing *imece* and *himaye* may actually be greater than simply following religious doctrines of *zakat*. While *zakat* is obligatory, practicing *imece* is voluntary. This means that practicing these norms in one's day-to-day life may lead to greater social recognition and personal moral upliftment, as individuals willingly offer their time, resources, and support without expecting anything in return. In this sense, the practice of *imece* can provide a sense of fulfillment and a heightened sense of moral duty beyond what is required by religious obligations like *zakat*. Thus, the use of shared norms by Refah allowed for interpretations in a religious sense and provided practitioners with a sense of spiritual significance.

But this overt emphasis on religion also proved to be the Refah's downfall. The party's pro-Islamist policies and its challenge to the secular principles of the Kemalist establishment created conflicts with the Turkish army and other secular elements in the country. This ideological clash on the intersection between religion and the state led to social unrest and heightened political tensions. The Turkish Constitutional Court, perceiving the party's position and policies as a threat to the secular nature of the Turkish state and the ideals of Kemalism, ultimately banned the Refah Party in 1998. Furthermore, the party's alleged association with religiously motivated violence, such as the Susurluk scandal, further

undermined its credibility and contributed to its dissolution.²¹

The news of the Refah being banned led to considerable consternation within religious and right-wing circles but the overall reaction was mixed. While some core supporters were deeply disappointed and felt that their democratic rights had been violated, others were more optimistic and resolute. Some were even blasé with the opinion that the ban was of little consequence. Indeed, a Refah activist opined, “If they close the party, then a few politicians lose their jobs; that’s all. It has no effect on us. We’re a social movement, not a party.”²²

The activist’s words proved prescient, although it took some time for his prophecy to be complete. The ban did lead to a change of guard, with several members of the Refah forming the Virtue Party in 1998 with members of the National Salvation Party or the MSP. Necmettin Erbakan, the erstwhile leader of the Refah took a backseat, and Recai Kutan took the reins of the new religiously conservative force in Turkish politics. In the 1999 general elections, the Virtue Party performed strongly—considering it was a new party—with 111 out of 550 seats making it the third largest party. However, the Virtue Party continued to face stiff opposition from secularist forces, and with a ban in 2001, met a similar fate as its predecessor.

It was at this point that the predicted change of guard appeared, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the architect of the Refah’s Ladies Commission and former Mayor of Istanbul, sidelining Erbakan and Kutan to form the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. The AKP has since become a dominant political force in Turkey, taking forward the legacy of the MSP, Refah, and Virtue Parties, by maintaining a blend of conservative and Islamic principles while also emphasizing democratic governance and economic development. In the 2002 general elections, the AKP secured 34% of the popular vote and 363 out of 550 seats in the parliament. This allowed the party to form a single-party government, marking a significant shift in Turkish politics. In subsequent elections, the AKP maintained its dominance, and in 2014, Erdoğan was elected as the twelfth President of the country. These electoral victories demonstrated the party’s ability to appeal to a broad cross-section of Turkish society, including conservative Muslims, rural populations, and middle-class urbanites. Crucially, they also highlighted Erdoğan’s growing stature and personalistic appeal. This shift in leadership marked a significant turning point in Turkish politics, leading to a more authoritarian and socially conservative turn.

The AKP’s success can be attributed in part to its adoption of the organizational structure and mobilization strategy inherited from its predecessor. Refah recognized the influential role of women within the household, and similarly, the AKP targets women as a means of reaching the entire family. Erdoğan specifically highlights the instrumental role of women in the AKP’s electoral triumph, referring to it as “conquering the castle from within.”²³ The party places a priority on gaining the support of women, believing that once convinced, they

²¹The Susurluk scandal of 1996 exposed a network of corruption and criminal activities involving Refah politicians, organized crime, and extremist groups.

²²White (2011:5)

²³Çavdar (2022)

can also persuade their husbands and raise their children according to the party's desired religious and cultural values.

Drawing from Refah's approach, the AKP has established its own women's wing called AKP-KK, which serves as a mobilization tool to attract women to the party. Building upon the groundwork laid by Refah's Ladies Commission in the 1990s, the AKP-KK has achieved remarkable success in increasing women's membership. It boasts nearly 4.7 million members, leading Erdogan to dub it the largest women's organization in the world.²⁴ This strategic focus on women has yielded significant electoral advantage; the AKP now boasts a higher percentage of female supporters compared to any other political party in Turkey. In 2018, for instance, the AKP received support from 53% of female respondents, while the leading opposition party, CHP, garnered support from only 18% women respondents.²⁵

The AKP-KK follows the Refah's template of encourage women's participation in political activities through *imece* and *himaye*.²⁶ Women engage in *imece* by providing support to those in need, such as helping widows, disabled individuals, the sick, or the poor, often without expecting any form of compensation, engendering a sense of mutual indebtedness and obligation among group members. The AKP reinterprets *imece* as a tool for political motivation, calling upon the sense of unity, belonging, and solidarity within the group to encourage political engagement.²⁷ The party utilizes a range of activities organized by the AKP-KK, including female-only visits, Islamic education, and recreational and charitable endeavors. These activities not only provide women with opportunities to socialize and address daily challenges but also serve as platforms for political mobilization. During female-only visits, AKP-KK representatives and volunteers listen to women's needs, provide assistance, and foster trust and friendship. Such initiatives have resulted in the AKP-KK building informal networks that can be turned into powerful political machines capable of mobilizing millions of women when needed.

Similarly, *himaye* fosters a personal, paternalistic relation between activists and citizens, as well as the activists and the party as discussed previously. By actively addressing women's issues and fulfilling their needs such as access to healthcare, employment, education, and social support, the AKP aims to create a sense of gratitude and loyalty among women, fostering a reciprocal relationship. Women who benefit from the party's support are more likely to demonstrate allegiance, trust, and deference to the AKP. This loyalty is expected to extend beyond personal interactions, aligning women with the AKP's vision, agenda, and political strategies. Furthermore, the AKP's use of *himaye* extends to the organizational structure of the AKP-KK. The AKP-KK acts as an intermediary between the main party organization and women, positioning itself as a protector and advocate for women's interests. By addressing their concerns, providing a platform for their voices, and organizing activities

²⁴Çavdar (2022)

²⁵Independent surveys conducted by KONDA further demonstrate that women either constitute nearly half or the majority of AKP supporters (Çavdar 2022).

²⁶White (2018)

²⁷Çavdar (2022); Joppien (N.d.)

that cater to their needs, the AKP-KK reinforces the perception of the AKP as a guardian and source of support.

The Refah Party and the AKP's utilization of cultural norms to engage women in socially acceptable ways bears a striking resemblance to the BJP's use of *seva*. First, the relational nature of *imece* and *seva* allows women to build networks of mutual trust and cooperation. While there is a common absence of mandated or immediate reciprocity, which is more pronounced in the case of *seva*, it reinforces the notion that party activists do not perceive their social relationships solely from an electoral instrumentalist perspective.

Second, in the same way that *seva* allows women in the BJP to enter politics in socially permissible ways, the norm of *himaye* allowed creative reinterpretation by Islamist women in Turkey to allow them a conduit to engage in public life while respecting prevailing patriarchal norms within their families. Third, both *seva* and *himaye* allow women a modicum of agency by placing them in relative positions of power vis-à-vis other women and other underprivileged citizens without confronting domestic power structures.

Fourth, and final, both sets of norms allow the party and the leader—Modi and Erdogan—to assume the role of benevolent paternal authorities, whose organizations act as extended families, providing protection and provisions for women activists and ordinary citizens alike.

In summary, the Refah Party, AKP, and BJP employ cultural norms with religious overtones to engage women in politically relevant ways. These norms facilitate the formation of networks, offer a socially acceptable path for women's participation, grant a certain level of agency, and present the party and its leaders as overarching protectors and providers.

Lebanon

Formed in 1982 as a response to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah (literally, Party of God) is often referred to as both a political party and an extremist group. Since 1990, it has emerged as a significant political force to represent the interests of Lebanon's Shia Muslim community. In addition to its political endeavors, Hezbollah, similar to the BJP and the RSS in India, has involved itself, along with several subordinate groups, in the provision of social welfare programs.

The Hezbollah's pursuit of social services is not exclusively motivated by politics, although Melani Cammett specifies how the organization is more likely to favor its core Shia Muslim base.²⁸ Indeed, like volunteers or service providers engaged with the RSS, Hezbollah officials deny the contingency in service provision. Instead, they ground their motivation in Islamic scriptures that call for *zakat* and charitable giving on the part of all Muslims. Cammett (2014) details the diverse range of services provided by the Hezbollah, including healthcare, education, aid distribution, agricultural support, infrastructure development, microfinance, youth and sports clubs, media outlets, and religious institutions. Additionally, the group has established specialized institutions to support the families of fallen fighters and those injured in conflicts or landmine accidents. Furthermore, the Hezbollah is involved

²⁸Cammett (2014)

in waste management, and water provision, and operates hospitals, clinics, dental offices, mobile clinics, and vaccination and health education programs.

Although the Hezbollah has a reputation for being male-dominated and its leadership is predominantly male, it has been able to enlist women's support as well as create permissible spaces for them through these social service efforts. In the social sphere, women are involved in providing social services to their communities through Hezbollah's network of institutions, including schools, hospitals, and charities. They also participate in religious and cultural activities organized by the group. Indeed, women involved in the Hezbollah look upon their participation as a form of community service, and in so doing, transform their political action into an expression of publicly performed piety.

In a deep and rich ethnography of women's activism for the Hezbollah in the al-Dahiyya neighborhood, a suburb of Beirut, Lara Deeb describes how the political movement has helped transform an age-old Islamic discourse on charity and alms-giving into a new norm of volunteerism for women. With the proliferation of community service organizations or *jam'iyyas*, many of which are backed by the Hezbollah, women's voluntary engagement in community service has become a public expression of personal piety.²⁹ Indeed, women in al-Dahiyya are expected to participate in some activities of at least one community organization, in addition to fulfilling their other religious obligations in order to be seen as "good" middle-class Muslim women. While some women volunteered sporadically, or exclusively during Ramadan, others took community service more seriously, and almost as a vocation. However, as in the case of women in the BJP, who prioritized their families over their political careers, at least publicly, women's volunteering in community service organizations was undertaken in addition to household work. All the women prioritized household responsibilities, sometimes asserting strongly that women who could not keep their households "in order" should not be involved in community service. As a consequence, and much like the BJP activists who woke up at the crack of dawn during election campaigns to complete their household duties, women in Lebanese service organizations started their days extraordinarily early or stayed up late to compensate for the time they would spend outside the home. They were proud, not of their volunteering *per se*, but in being able to contribute to society *in conjunction with* and *not in place of* their household responsibilities. As Deeb (2011) argues, women's ability to balance the home and the world was a source of pride and a marker of their strength and commitment to their families and the community.

In a country that is consistently ranked as one of the most unequal in the world when it comes to women's political participation—Lebanon is ranked 110 among 146 countries—Hezbollah's ability to suffuse the political into religion, what had hitherto been the domain of the personal allowed pious women a way to contribute to their religion and nation, and in the process, gain an element of bounded agency.³⁰ Patriarchal norms, coupled with essentialist ideas of femininity, resulted in the widespread perception that women's empathetic and emotional abilities inherently qualified them for community service. Most of the tasks

²⁹Deeb (2011)

³⁰World Economic Forum (2022)

involved in providing aid were domestically oriented, and household visits that women made to other women as part of their service obligations—like partisan outreach to women in India—were impossible for male volunteers. Additionally, community service also provided women with a veritable “weapon of the weak.”³¹ Denied the opportunity to serve in the military or a “door to heaven” like male martyrs, volunteering represented an appropriate way for women to resist Israeli occupation without weapons.³²

Service organizations were considered appropriate spaces for women’s engagement without threatening the prevailing moral and social order. Like *seva*’s function in constructing an ethical Hindu relational self-described in Chapter 2, Lebanese women’s participation in service organizations also helped forge relational bonds with other community members. Deeb (2011) describes how women created bonds of fraternal and sororal kinship by referring to men and women as brothers and sisters respectively. This practice created a secure and non-threatening environment for their participation, reassuring external members of the community that there was no inappropriate behavior occurring within these organizations. Furthermore, this modern relational self was seen as superior to the traditional self that was overly embedded within family and kin, to the detriment of the larger community.

For women engaged in community service, active participation was not only a right but also a responsibility. They saw it as a necessary part of fulfilling their religious duty and contributing to their community. However, it was not without its challenges, as they were often excluded due to gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Indeed, pious women often described their struggle to engage in public life in a way that was consistent with their religious beliefs as women’s *jihad*.³³ To overcome these obstacles, they used a multi-pronged approach involving educating men about the importance of women’s work and their own role within the family, and political activism. At the same time, they promoted the model of an ideal pious modern woman, someone who was “educated, outspoken, strong, and visible while also being pious and committed to her faith, family, and community.”³⁴ Thus, to expand some of their roles and freedoms, women were happy to reinforce their commitment to existing structures of power. Moreover, they rejected the notion that their empowerment required individualization and liberation, but instead emphasized the importance of collective action and social responsibility. They also worked to change the negative image of women in their society and demonstrate how women can work democratically and rationally. Hence, community service provided a new avenue for women to engage with their religious beliefs and piety, while also offering them an opportunity to participate in the public and political spheres.

³¹Scott (2008b)

³²Deeb (2011)

³³Deeb (2011:204-219)

³⁴Deeb (2011:217)

Indonesia

I now turn to discussing the case of Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party or the PKS. The comparison between Indonesia and the PKS with India and the BJP is a pertinent one owing to several factors. Both India and Indonesia are diverse societies, characterized by a wide range of ethnicities and religious affiliations, and have committed themselves to secularism through constitutional means. In addition, the two countries exhibit comparable patterns of religious composition, with a predominant religion—approximately 80% of Indians being Hindus and 87% of Indonesians adhering to Islam—a significant minority religion—Muslims constituting 15% of India's population and Christians making up 10% of Indonesia's populace—and the remaining individuals subscribing to alternative religious beliefs or atheism. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of a single religion, Indonesia and India inherited pluralistic nationalisms from their respective leaders and movements that struggled for independence during the late 1940s, and neither nation's constitution favors the dominant religion.

Despite the presence of several Islamic parties, the National Mandate Party (PAN), the United Development Party (PPP), and the Crescent Star Party (PBB) to name a few, the PKS bears a striking resemblance with the BJP. The PKS was founded in 1998, shortly after the fall of President Suharto's New Order regime, which had tightly controlled political activities in Indonesia. The party was formed by a group of activists from the Islamic student movement who had been involved in opposition activities during the Suharto era. First, both the BJP and the PKS have a religious nationalist agenda. The ideology of the PKS is based on Islamic principles, and the party sees Islam as a comprehensive way of life that provides guidance for all aspects of human existence, including politics. Although the PKS, like other Islamic parties advocated for the implementation of Sharia law in the country, it has since dropped this demand and accepted the *Pancasila* doctrine that claims Indonesia to be a religious, but not a strictly Islamic state.³⁵

Second, both the BJP and the PKS have a strong appeal among the middle class in their respective countries. The BJP's economic policies and pro-business stance have historically appealed to India's growing middle class, while the PKS's emphasis on social justice and clean government resonates with their Indonesian counterparts. Third, there is also a parallel between the two parties in terms of their advocacy of morality in politics. The BJP has often used the slogan, "face, conduct, character" (*Chehra, chaal, charitra*) to emphasize the importance of personal integrity and character in public life. The BJP has used this slogan in various campaigns and political speeches to highlight the party's commitment to ethical and moral values in politics. Similarly, the PKS has pushed for political reform, clean governance, and transparency in political decision-making and policy, as well as other moral concerns like battling corruption. The party's slogan since 2004 has been "Clean, caring, and professional", and it remains one of the only Indonesian political parties that can lay claim to a relatively clean image.³⁶

³⁵Slater and Tudor (2016; 2019)

³⁶Rinaldo (2010)

Third, both parties promote conservative social values, with a focus on traditional gender roles and family values. Like the BJP, the PKS advocates for the modest portrayal of women in popular culture and views women primarily through their familial roles as mothers and wives. A significant issue for the PKS is its stance against pornography. In 2008, the Indonesian government passed an anti-pornography law that was not strict enough for some Islamic groups, including the PKS, who advocated for even more stringent regulations, including against public actions that “exploit sex, obscenity and/or erotica.”³⁷ Considering pornography to be a significant threat to the moral fiber of Indonesian society, particularly through its effects on children and future generations, the party has campaigned for its eradication to avert a breakdown of social values.³⁸ In the same vein, the BJP banned several pornographic websites, citing concerns about the impact of pornography on children and society, with some leaders blaming increasing cases of violence against women on pornography viewership. In addition, BJP leaders have also called for the regulation of online content.³⁹ In previous years, the party’s manifesto proposed strict censorship laws to regulate explicit scenes and dialogues in films and committed to inducting 50% women into the censor board to ensure that films did not defile the modesty of women and did not have harmful effects on children.⁴⁰

But fourth, and perhaps most crucially, there are strong structural and organizational similarities between the BJP and the PKS. Just as the BJP serves as the political arm of a Hindu nationalist movement, the PKS drew inspiration from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Both parties share the belief that their respective religions, Hinduism and Islam, provide comprehensive frameworks that encompass all aspects of life, including politics, economics, and social organization. In addition, both the BJP and the PKS adopt a cadre-based organizational structure, which contributes to their superior organization compared to many of their political counterparts.⁴¹ The PKS operates within a hierarchical structure, consisting of six levels, with approximately 2 million members. Advancement within this structure requires specific training processes and qualifications to progress beyond certain levels. Notably, in 2005, 6% of PKS members belonged to the four highest membership levels and possessed voting rights for internal party positions. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), affiliated with the BJP, follows a similar model, employing rigorous Officer Training Camps (*Sangh Shiksha Varg*), or OTCs for members aspiring to become full-time officers and propagandists.

³⁷For an in-depth exploration of the development of the anti-pornography legislation, refer to Allen (2009)’s analysis. The legislation covered several public behaviors, which were collectively referred to as “pornoaction” or *pornokasi*. Such acts included kissing on the lips and performing erotic dances in public. The law also prohibited the exposure of specific sensual body parts, including genitals, thighs, buttocks, navel, and any part of a woman’s breasts. The interpretation of these provisions was extensive and widely understood as constraining women’s clothing choices in public.

³⁸Rinaldo (2013*a*)

³⁹Chatterjee (2018); Express News Service (2022)

⁴⁰BJP (1984; 1991; 1996; 1998)

⁴¹See Jaffrelot (1988); Mehta (2022) for information on the BJP’s organizational structure. For the PKS, refer to Mujani and Liddle (2009); Hellmann (2011); Park (2021).

Unlike dominant secular parties like the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle or PDI-P that—like the Indian National Congress—operates as an aggregative party, the PKS expands through *dakwah* or proselytization. In fact, the origins of the PKS lie in campus study groups where college students and others were invited to learn about the Quran and practice textual interpretations of Islam.⁴² These study groups, which are part of the *tarbiyah* (education) movement, share similar goals to the RSS, focusing on the cultivation of an ethical, religious, or cultural self. Indeed the PKS often functions as a cultural or civil society organization by issuing *fatwas* and guidelines for proper behavior and beliefs for its cadres as part of its larger aim to nurture morally and spiritually upright individuals who can make a positive contribution to their communities and society.⁴³

Similar to its intellectual progenitor, the Muslim Brotherhood—but to a lower degree than the contemporary BJP-RSS in India—the PKS upholds the gendered separation of public and private spheres. Decision-making within the PKS predominantly involves men and women are primarily perceived in terms of their traditional, or basic as the party calls it, roles as wives and mothers.⁴⁴ Although women are not prohibited from taking part in politics—indeed, Indonesia’s 30% reservation policy for women would render such a position untenable for any political party—but their active engagement within the party is contingent on receiving their husbands’ permission, fulfilling their domestic responsibilities, as well as adhering to religious and cultural mores. Through their *Tarbiyah*-based recruitment as well as education and training within the party, women in the PKS imbibe religious sanction for distinct and complementary gender roles, as well as the moral and cultural significance of protecting women’s modesty by wearing headscarves or *hijabs* and prioritizing women’s duties within the home at the expense of other dimensions of their lives. PKS women typically reject feminism as inconsistent with Islam, partly due to its emphasis on equality.⁴⁵

But notwithstanding this emphasis on women’s modesty and complementary gender roles, the PKS has actively recruited women and nominated them to the legislature. Although gender-disaggregated membership estimates are not available, the party boasts of one of the most active women’s organizations, the *Bidang Perempuan dan Ketahanan Keluarga* (BPKK) or the Women and Family Resilience Sector. Moreover, between 2004 and 2014, the PKS consistently ranked among Indonesia’s top three parties in terms of nominating women in legislative elections.⁴⁶ Indeed as Figure 6.2 shows, by nominating 40.3% and 37.1% women candidates, the PKS was ostensibly the most gender-inclusive party on this metric in 2004 and 2009. In subsequent elections, it closely followed the PPP, interestingly another Islamic party, to take second place.

⁴²Rinaldo (2013b)

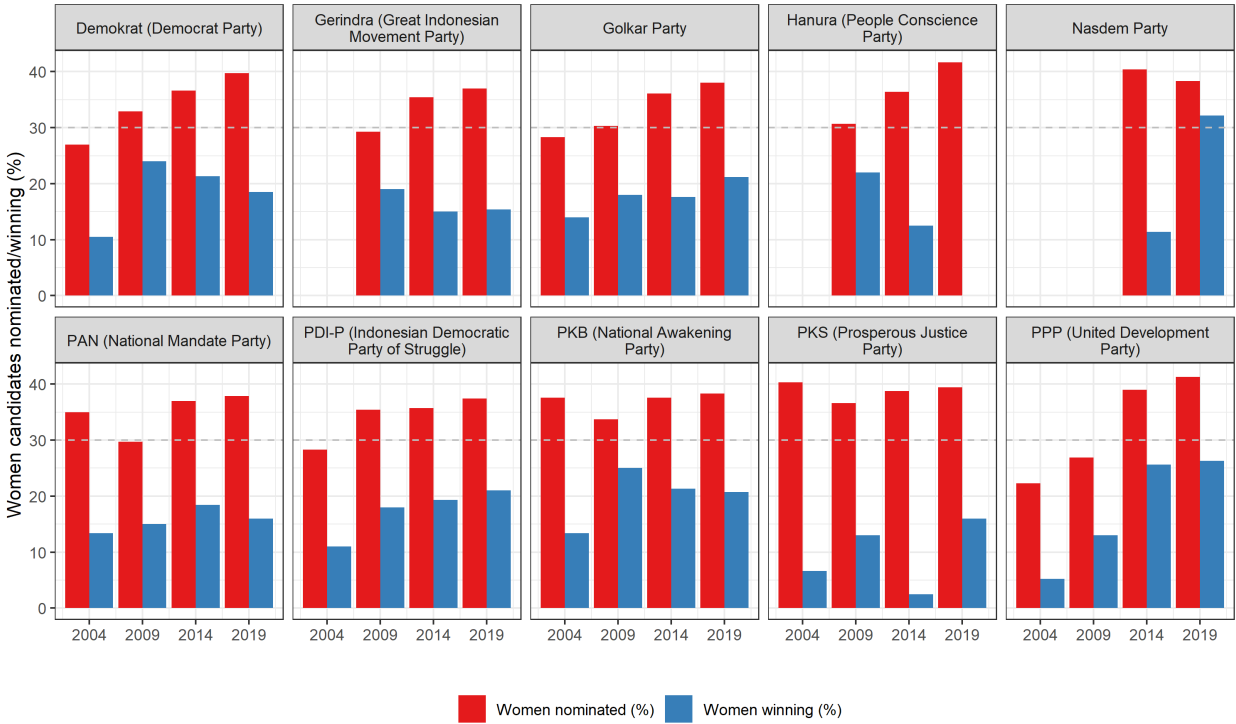
⁴³Rinaldo (2013b)

⁴⁴<https://pks.id/bpkk/>

⁴⁵Rinaldo (2013b)

⁴⁶Prihatini (2018) The extent to which the party nominated women can be judged from the fact that it has consistently exceeded the 30% women’s nomination quota institutionalized in 2003. Sahfan Badri Sampurno, A former national election manager for the PKS claimed that gender quotas were not inimical to Islam, and its cadre-based structure meant that it did not face challenges with finding women candidates.⁴⁷

Figure 6.2: Party-wise women’s nominations to the Indonesian legislature



Note: This figure shows the percentage of women who were nominated by ten major Indonesian parties in the legislative elections held between 2004 and 2019. Data is from Perdana and Hillman (2020). The horizontal dashed line is used to indicate the 30% women’s quota.

However, the PKS’s purported effort toward gender inclusion conceals some unsettling tendencies. The quota clearly forced parties to nominate women in their candidate lists, and crucially, led to a significant increase in women’s representation. In the 2019 legislative election, women held approximately 21% and 25% of seats in the lower and upper houses of the Indonesian parliament respectively. However, if we examine the proportion of candidates who actually won elections, we find that women from the PKS are among the least likely to win. Does this reflect an implicit gender bias among its supporters? In other words, are the PKS’ conservative supporters less likely to vote for women candidates? But if that were true, why would the party nominate them over and above the minimum mandated requirement? And why would women candidates in other Islamic parties like the PPP be relatively more successful?

To seek the answer to this perplexing question of PKS women’s inability to win elections despite high rates of nomination we must look beyond voters. Rather, the key factor appears to be the position of the candidate on the party’s candidate list. Studies suggest that candidates in higher positions are more likely to win elections, yet little is known about the

factors that determine how candidates are nominated, beyond generic criteria such as party loyalty and history of activism.⁴⁸ Claiming the first position in the candidate list was an acknowledgment of quality, but also a candidate's ability and willingness to pay to obtain this privilege. Over the years, the PKS has consistently favored assigning this position to men, so much so that in 2014, only 1.3% of first places went to women. In 2019, women's nomination figures recovered to 7.2% in 2019 but were still less than half of all other major parties. Although this does not directly lend itself to the concern that the party fields women in constituencies where it is uncompetitive, it nonetheless leads to concerns about the party's perspectives on the quality of its women candidates. A PKS executive attributed the party placing more male cadres in higher positions due to their greater ability to garner electoral support.⁴⁹ However this does not answer why the party nominates more women than necessary.

The position of women within the PKS party can be discerned through their activism and the process of candidate selection, which reinforces patriarchal structures of control rather than encouraging norm-undermining behaviors. One prominent way in which the party reinforces norm-compliance is by placing the responsibility of women's nomination in the hands of their families. For instance, PKS women who were nominated for the first or second position on the candidate list had to meet four conditions, including being married, obtaining written permission from their husbands, having children aged five years or above, and being financially secure.⁵⁰ Moreover, the party's leadership is dominated by men, and women need to legitimize themselves as party cadre.⁵¹ Nominations are determined by the male-dominated leadership, and in 2019, several female nominees were wives and other relatives of male PKS politicians. Women had little say: the party did not seek their personal opinion about their candidacy or constituency. Decisions were taken by husbands together with the party leadership, leaving nominees feeling obligated to accept out of a sense of duty to the party.⁵²

What are the kinds of public activities that women in the PKS engaged in? In an ethnographic account of women in Indonesian religious groups, sociologist Rachel Rinaldo found that religion acted as an enabling factor for pious women, including PKS members, to enter public and political spaces. Notably, PKS women were actively engaged in public issues with moral dimensions, such as the bill against pornography. An initial draft of the Bill was met with strong resistance from civil society groups that considered it a covert attempt to enforce Islamic laws and codes of conduct in violation of the *Pancasila* doctrine. In 2009, a number of these organizations protested publicly against the Bill, both for features inimical to pluralism as also supplementary restrictions on women's dress and comportment. In response to this protest, nearly 10,000 women affiliated with Islamic groups and political parties, including the PKS, organized a counter-march to support the Bill in its current

⁴⁸Prihatini (2020:14)

⁴⁹Prihatini (2020:14)

⁵⁰Rofhani and Fuad (2021)

⁵¹Rofhani and Fuad (2021); Rinaldo (2013a)

⁵²Rofhani and Fuad (2021); Kabullah and Fajri (2021)

form, and even denounced their opponents as 'evil, wretched women who did not have good morals.'⁵³ PKS women articulated their support of the Bill through their concern for the moral well-being of Indonesian families and society, particularly children who would constitute future generations.⁵⁴ In this way, women's candidacy and political action were overwhelmingly in compliance with both religious and patriarchal norms, and in line with their traditional roles as mothers and reproducers of culture.

This concern for children and the family can also be seen in the public platforms and policies articulated by the PKS's women's wing. Like the BJP, the PKS sees the nation as an extension of the family, and in 2015, the party proposed a bill to criminalize extramarital sex, same-sex relations, and cohabitation. Called the Family Resilience Bill, it also contained provisions promoting traditional gender roles and limiting access to contraception and reproductive health services. Although the Bill could not be tabled in Parliament since the Nasdem Party cast the decisive vote against it in 2020, the PKS has continued to mobilize women in thematically related events.⁵⁵ The women's wing, the BPKK, has been particularly active in furthering the party's religiously moralistic vision for women and families through events ranging from jamborees, training programs for women, and celebrations of families that could serve as exemplars for others in terms of their moral fortitude and economic striving. One of the key programs conceptualized by the PKS to meet these goals is the Indonesian Family Home (*Rumah Keluarga Indonesia*, or RKI) which seeks to strengthen the institution of the family in the wake of purportedly Western influences, including rising rates of divorce.⁵⁶ Like the BJP's *Hindutva* ideology, the regional head of the BKPP explained how the family was central to the PKS's vision of national integration:

“Per the slogan of the PKS Indonesian Family Home (RKI), the family is the core and the beginning of the presence of happiness. More than that, the family is the starting point for the development of a nation. If the family is handled optimally, then society and the country will prosper...”⁵⁷

The RKI program employed a multifaceted approach in order to safeguard the structural integrity of Indonesian families and enhance their resilience against economic adversity that several families faced during Covid. This approach encompassed training sessions focusing on pre-marital relationships, parenting, small-scale entrepreneurship, and household finance management. Recognizing their pivotal role in upholding the family unit within their cultural framework the majority of these sessions targeted women. However, a few sessions

⁵³Allen (2009)

⁵⁴Rinaldo (2013a)

⁵⁵Although the Family Resilience Bill was not tabled in Parliament in December 2022, the Indonesian Parliament passed a new criminal code (*Undang Undang Kitab Hukum Pidana*, or KUHP) that gives the state new tools to punish a wide range of ideological, moral, and political offenses, which contains watered-down provisions of the original Family Resilience Bill.

⁵⁶Since the inception of the PKS in 1998, the divorce rate, albeit still amongst the lowest in the world has nearly tripled.

⁵⁷<https://tinyurl.com/bdf5b4av>

policy matters and political happenings. I crawled this archive to scrape and download all publicity materials that mentioned the women's wing, the BPKK. Between January 2014 and May 2023, the PKS released 671 unique publicity materials containing information about the exploits of the BKPP, and its citizen engagement efforts. Employing the tools of text analysis, I identified major themes in their communication and explored the motivations of PKS women in engaging in politics, as well as their efforts to encourage other women to do so. By examining word frequency, contextual usage, and political speeches delivered at these events, it is possible to gain insights into the values and gender-related issues that the PKS deems significant.

As depicted in Figure 6.3, the concept of family, represented by the stem word “famili,” emerged as the central theme in the public activities and communication of the PKS women's wing. The PKS showcased the importance of “resili”ent families, and how exemplary families could have a positive impact on the “nation.” At the same time, the PKS encouraged “women” to become more “activ” participants in various aspects of society, encouraging their participation in politics, social development, and economic endeavors. Yet the reasons for which women are to do so were through their roles as “mothers”. Thus, the PKS's publicity materials acknowledged the vital role of mothers in raising, “caring” for, and protecting “children”, and highlighted their sacrifices and contributions.

During speeches delivered by guest speakers at these events, religious beliefs were highlighted as shaping women's roles within the organization. For instance, Umi Kalsum, a keynote speaker at a symposium in Java, outlined women's priorities in a hierarchical order. The first objective for women, as well as men, was to worship God. This was followed by being a good wife and mother who could serve as a positive example for her children, providing them with the best education possible. Lastly, the role of women encompassed political and religious aspects, whereby they were expected to support the advancement of the worldwide Islamic community.

In conclusion, the PKS perceives politics as comprising two dimensions: goals and processes.⁵⁸ While women are permitted to participate in pursuing political goals, the PKS believes that the political process itself was dirty and dangerous, rendering it incompatible with women. Moreover, Sihidi, Khanifah and Romadhan (2019:3) writes that the members of the party believe that women could be more prone to making rash decisions for biological reasons and that political procedures could detract from their primary obligations as mothers and wives within the private sphere. Indeed, female leadership was not a primary concern: women were prohibited from holding the top positions of President and Chairperson of the Syuro Council. This is further emphasized through the views of a party official:

Women engaging in society through the political party structure should not be excessively preoccupied with electoral outcomes, as their primary objective is to ensure that their *dakwah* reaches people's homes. Election results and victories

⁵⁸Sihidi, Khanifah and Romadhan (2019)

are regarded merely as a means to convey the truth, whereas the fundamental aspiration is for *da'wah*.⁵⁹

Weimar Germany

In contrast to several postcolonial countries where women gained suffrage concurrently with men, the path to political activism for women in established democracies has frequently been challenging. Scholarly investigations often center on the suffrage movement as the pivotal factor in women's political engagement, but it is essential to recognize that women had been politically active through various means that extended beyond the sole objective of securing their right to vote. These earlier forms of women's participation and organizing significantly shaped the subsequent organization of women within political parties when these parties eventually welcomed female members. The enduring impact of these primordial forms of participation highlights the significance of understanding the broader historical context and the diverse strategies employed by women in their pursuit of political influence.

One prominent theme that emerges from a study of early democratizers is that women's initial forays into the public sphere were characterized by adherence to established norms and conventions. Unlike the contemporary cases of India, Lebanon, Turkey, and Indonesia, where these norms were explicitly rooted in religion, the prevailing expectations regarding women's roles and behaviors in these nations may not have been explicitly religious in origin. Nevertheless, given the highly patriarchal nature of society at that time, the separation of spheres, and the alignment of conservatism with religion, women's public roles and actions were aligned with these societal expectations.

In this context, the early democratic practices observed in Weimar Germany provide valuable insights on an evolving political and electoral consciousness among citizens. Around 1900, growing segments of the German population actively engaged in political activities by organizing themselves and taking part in elections. This engagement in political affairs was a significant development, reflecting an evolving consciousness and involvement in democratic processes.⁶⁰ Women actively participated in these organizing efforts even without having the right to vote. During this period, women's associations experienced significant growth, not limited to the women's suffrage movement alone. Right-wing women's organizations emerged strongly within charitable, Protestant, nationalist, and housewives' associations. The combined membership of these organizations dwarfed more liberal women's organizations like the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (BDF) (with nearly 470,000 members in 1913), as well as the social-democratic women's associations (with approximately 140,000 members in 1913).

Research by Süchting-Hänger (2002) illustrates the significant role that seemingly apolitical charitable organizations played in the political engagement of conservative women, before the suffrage movement as also the establishment of the Weimar Republic. One prominent organization was the Patriotic Women's Association. Originally founded in 1866 during a

⁵⁹Sihidi, Khanifah and Romadhan (2019)

⁶⁰Streubel (2003); Ullmann (1995)

war initiative led by the Prussian Queen, Augusta, this association aimed to mobilize women for voluntary relief work during times of both war and peace. Its activities included training in nursing and communal welfare for the underprivileged. Other associations emerged to assist the underprivileged, the sick, and orphans, particularly in border regions.

Several right-wing organizations established their own women's organizations at this time to maintain communication and outreach between parties and conservative women. One example is the Association of Conservative Women (*Vereinigung konservativer Frauen*) founded by the German Conservative Party, which was the largest and most influential right-wing group during 1912-1913. Like the Patriotic Women's Association, much of its activities focused on coordinating patriotic and charitable endeavors.

In addition, a number of Protestant and nationalist women's associations played important roles in shaping the political landscape by mobilizing women. In many of these associations women's roles were narrowly defined to revolve around organizing social events and fund-raising through festivals, bazaars, and lotteries. Additionally, women were expected to uphold the ideals of "German households" and facilitate the transmission of "German culture and customs" within their homes. Moreover, women were encouraged to promote the objectives of their respective clubs in their local communities.⁶¹

Unlike the left-wing parties like the SPD that were already campaigning for the greater inclusion of women into the political process, conservative women's groups called for a more limited engagement. These groups were often explicitly prohibited from advocating for political demands put forth by the mainstream women's movement, such as universal female suffrage and other measures aimed at achieving civic equality. Instead, their focus remained on upholding conservative values and engaging in activities aligned with traditional gender roles.⁶² The establishment of women's committees by right-wing parties served as a significant model for conservative parties after women gained the right to vote and were allowed to join political organizations. These early organizational activities provided a blueprint for how conservative parties could engage and mobilize women within their ranks.

During the era of the German Empire (1871-1918), and going into the first world war, women did not possess the right to vote.⁶³ Voting rights for men too were contingent upon factors such as property ownership, social standing, or other qualifications. Political parties were also split on this debate. Socialist and liberal parties like the SPD and the DDP supported expanding the franchise to women, but they were opposed by their religious and conservative counterparts like the DNVP, DVP, and the Catholic Centre Party.⁶⁴ The right-wing parties, in particular, were generally opposed to women's political participation,

⁶¹Streubel (2003)

⁶²Scheck (1997)

⁶³Prior to the Weimar Constitution, some German states had already granted women the right to vote in local and regional elections, but not at the national level.

⁶⁴SPD: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party of Germany), DDP: *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* (German Democratic Party), DNVP: *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (German National People's Party), DVP: *Deutsche Volkspartei* (German People's Party), Centre Party: *Deutsche Zentrumspartei* (German Centre Party)

although they occasionally resorted to opportunism when they feared losing women's support to the socialists. Although a law banning women's political engagement was repealed in 1908, but the prospects of women gaining the right to vote remained bleak during that period. Consequently, right-wing parties felt secure in their limited efforts to engage with women. In fact, the "League Against the Emancipation of Women" established in 1912 a group of right-wing men vehemently opposed the legitimacy of any political involvement by women, irrespective of their objectives or goals.

But World War 1 changed everything. Women were called upon to not only resume their traditional wartime duties in nursing and organizing supplies, but they also temporarily filled positions previously held by men, playing a crucial role in maintaining domestic morale and public order. This increased importance of women during the war bolstered their call for greater political involvement. Although women's organizations and suffrage movements had emerged as important pressure groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries alongside progressive political parties, they were still unable to widen the attraction of their appeals and build consensus among the entrenched male elite.⁶⁵ In this context, women's efforts during the War and the constitution of the Weimar Republic finally gave women the right to vote.

This was a welcome development for parties at the forefront of the campaign for female suffrage like the SPD and the KPD as they believed they stood to benefit the most. Similarly, many influential bourgeois women leaders belonged to the centrist liberal party, the DDP. In contrast, the right-wing parties found themselves in a challenging position. Not only had they made little effort to engage with women, but they had also actively discouraged women's political participation. This posed a significant dilemma for the right wing, as they had to adapt to the new reality of female enfranchisement by addressing their lack of prior engagement with women. Moreover, the war had taken a significant toll on men; thus going into the first national election in 1920, it was widely accepted that the SPD would likely emerge victorious, with women constituting the bulk of their votes.

Women's voting behavior in the Reichstag elections came as a surprise to many, as it deviated from expectations. Despite the Social Democratic Party (SPD) being at the forefront of women's inclusion and advocacy, women did not predominantly vote for the SPD. Instead, women demonstrated a clear preference for religious and right-wing parties. Although nationwide data on votes by sex were not available, separate counts of votes by sex in certain states provided a statistically meaningful sample, according to Scheck (2004). In these districts, it was observed that the DVP received approximately 52 to 55 percent of its votes from women. The DNVP had an even higher percentage of female voters, ranging from 56 to 60 percent, second only to the predominantly Catholic Center Party which had the highest proportion of women voters. This unexpected preference for religious and right-wing parties among women was not overlooked by the right wing itself. A newsletter noted that

⁶⁵These groups, such as the General German Women's Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein*) and the German Women's Suffrage Association (*Deutscher Frauenwahlverein*), advocated for women's rights, including the right to vote.

the soaring preference of women towards the right wing meant that women from left-wing families had diverged from the political preferences of the men in their households. Thus, perhaps with a touch of *schadenfreude*, it noted that the wives of the SPD and Communist Party members had “committed political adultery and cuckolded them most wonderfully.”⁶⁶

This gendered voting pattern observed in the first national election was not an isolated occurrence but a consistent and widespread trend over the duration of the Republic. While data availability poses limitations, the Centre party maintained a significant advantage among women. In Bavaria, a predominantly Catholic state, the Centre party enjoyed a gender advantage ranging from 7.2 to 14.2 percentage points. In states with more diverse populations or a higher proportion of Protestant denominations, the Centre party was less successful. Nevertheless, Panel A of Figure 6.4 illustrates that the party consistently received more votes from women than men.

Table 6.2: Weimar Germany 1920 Reichstag elections: Vote share by Gender

Party	Women (%)	Men (%)	Gender Gap
Centre	28.8	20	8.8
German Democratic Party (DDP)	6.2	7	-0.8
German National People’s Party (DNVP)	5.6	4.4	1.2
German People’s Party (DVP)	13.2	13	0.2
Communist Party of Germany (KPD)	1.4	2.4	-1
Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	19.2	25.4	-6.2

Source: Duverger (1955:54-62).

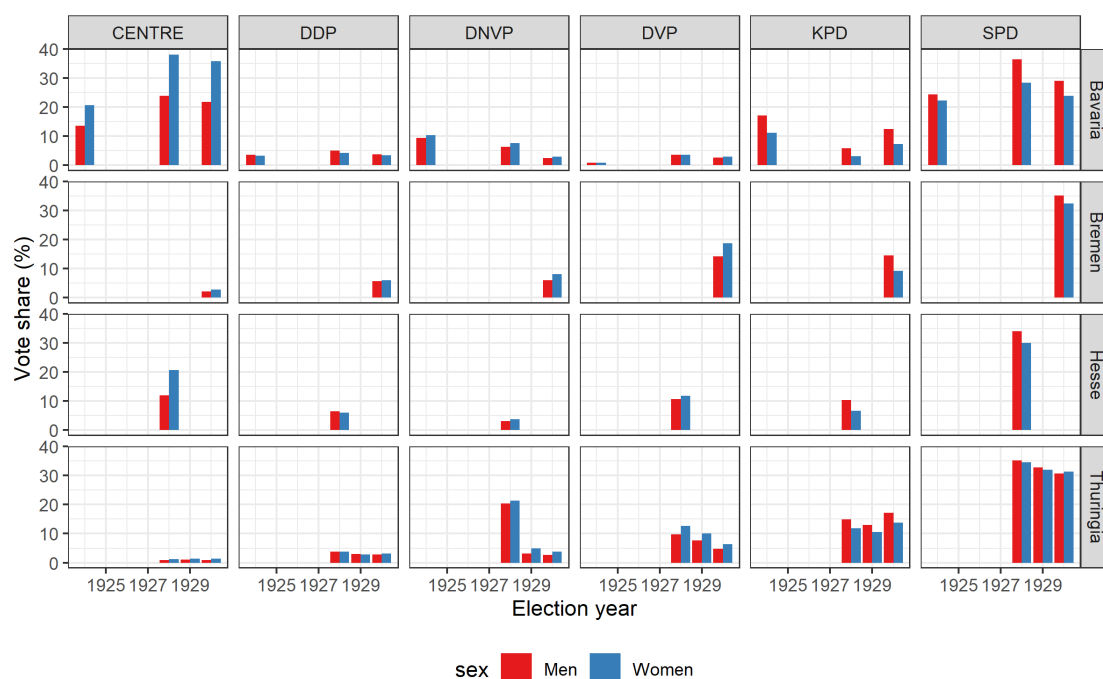
The DVP (German People’s Party) and DNVP (German National People’s Party) similarly experienced greater success among women across all states with available data. On the other hand, despite the DDP (German Democratic Party) campaigning as the party of women and boasting prominent female leaders, such as [names of prominent female leaders and their accomplishments], it failed to attract women voters disproportionately compared to men. Furthermore, the gender advantage of the DNVP and DVP was not limited to specific states. Across the four provinces of Bavaria, Bremen, Hesse, and Thuringia, where data is available, right-wing parties enjoyed a similar advantage among women. The only exception was the 1920 Reichstag election in Bavaria, where men were slightly more likely than women to support the party.

These voting patterns were not exclusive to Reichstag elections but also extended to state-level or “Länder” elections, as depicted in the second panel of Figure 6.4.

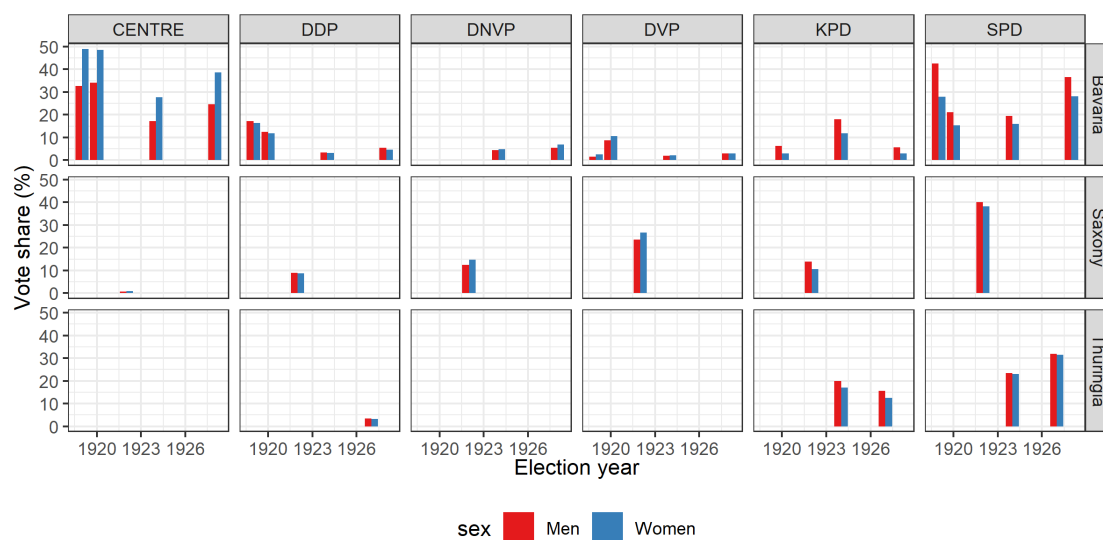
Why did more women vote for these parties despite them being the parties that had shunned women’s voting rights? The success of religious and right-wing parties can be attributed to two possible reasons: norm-compliant framing and organizational outreach.

⁶⁶Scheck (2004:27)

Figure 6.4: Party-wise vote shares in Weimar Germany
 (a) Federal legislature (*Reichstag*)



(b) State legislature (*Landtag*)



Note: This figure shows the vote shares (in percent) received by five major political parties in the Weimar Republic. The selected parties are the religious Christian Centre Party or *Zentrum*, the right-wing *Deutsche Nationale Volkspartei* (DNVP) and *Deutsche Volkspartei* (DVP), and the left-wing *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) and *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD). Rows refer to states (*lander*). Data is sourced from Duverger (1955:54-62).

However, these are not mutually exclusive since the effectiveness of partisan appeals can be moderated by the organizational strength of the party itself. Similarly, a strong party machine, capable of mobilization and persuasion on a mass scale, is often a function of successful political framing and programming, particularly when prevailing social and associational norms are not supportive of women's engagement within political parties.

As the momentum for women's suffrage grew and women eventually achieved the right to vote, religious and conservative parties sought to reconcile their ideologies with the changing political landscape. Sneeringer and Scheck's analysis of mobilization strategies reveals how the DNVP, the DVP, and the Centre strategically appealed to women voters by tapping into traditional values, religious beliefs, and gender roles.

The Centre party reframed its previous opposition by asserting that it was not rooted in contempt for women but rather in a desire to protect their virtue and shield them from the perceived roughness of politics. However, with women's proven willingness to serve the nation through their war efforts, the Centre party recognized that as workers, women deserved a say in how their taxes were utilized. This shift in perspective allowed the party to align voting rights with women's rightful representation in matters concerning their labor and taxation.

The DNVP and DVP, in particular, acknowledged their previous opposition to women's suffrage and made a notable shift in their stance. They proclaimed that women's significant contributions during the war had earned them the right to participate as equal citizens. By highlighting women's dedication and service, these parties aimed to create a narrative that positioned women's political participation as a natural extension of their invaluable contributions during the war. They sought to frame voting as a way for women to reclaim their service and dedication to the nation, transforming it from a universal right to a sacred duty meant for the deserving.

In addition, these religiously conservative parties approached women's political participation through an essentialist lens, rooted in their traditional identities as mothers.⁶⁷ Recognizing that women's involvement in politics could potentially disrupt the private-public barrier and extend into other areas of society, they employed a second reframing strategy by expanding the concept of the family to encompass the nation itself, drawing parallels to the contemporary BJP's approach in India. These parties argued that women's engagement in public affairs was not a departure from their roles as mothers and nurturers. Instead, it was a means to reinforce and protect their traditional identities, as well as the family unit. By connecting women's voting rights to their roles within the family, these parties framed women's sacred duty as safeguarding their families and communities. Furthermore, the conservative parties asserted that women's participation in the public domain would bring about benefits on a larger scale. They interpreted the nation's collective spirit as damaged during the war, and they believed that women's involvement in both the public and private spheres would contribute to the healing and rejuvenation of the extended family and the nation as a whole. This perspective positioned women as key agents in the process of rebuilding and

⁶⁷Sneeringer (2003); Scheck (1997; 2001; 2004); Boak (2015); Harvey (1998); Streubel (2003)

restoring the social fabric of the nation.

During this period, conservative parties across the world were faced with the growing influence of communism, viewing it as a significant threat to both the family and the nation. Parties in Germany were no exception: they attributed the increasing divorce rates and declining birth rates in the country to what they perceived as the rise of atheistic tendencies associated with communism, as well as the economic hardships caused by the Great Depression. The DNVP, in particular, invoked the image of social chaos in the Soviet Union to emphasize the potential consequences of embracing communist ideologies. They voiced concerns that the demographic differences, coupled with the influence of communism, could lead to a situation where Germany would be overrun by its neighboring countries. Consequently, the growing influence of communism was seen not only as a threat to the moral fabric of society but also to the future military strength of the nation. To counter these perceived threats, members of the DNVP's women's wing, exemplified by figures like Annagrete Lehmann, argued that only a "different moral, ethical, and Christian attitude" could provide the necessary protection and stability for the family and the nation.⁶⁸

This stoking of demographic concerns has significant parallels with the BJP in India. The Hindu right wing in India has frequently employed discourse surrounding the reproductive practices of Muslims, specifically referencing their ability to enter into polygamous marriages and allegedly attain higher birth rates than Hindus. This rhetoric is presented as a reason for apprehension, emphasizing the urgency for Hindus to acknowledge this perceived "threat" and rally together to counteract it, often by asserting that Hindus are endangered within their own nation. This narrative constructs demographic anxiety, wherein the focus on differential birth rates aims to mobilize Hindus by framing the situation as a potential dilution of their cultural and political dominance. By portraying Muslims as the source of this demographic change, Hindu nationalist groups seek to cultivate a sense of insecurity and vulnerability among Hindus, encouraging them to unite in defense of their identity and interests.

The notion of the family proved to be a versatile framework for political mobilization. As previously discussed, one perspective portrays the nation as an extension of the family. Another aspect, which also shares parallels with the BJP, involves equating the party organization itself with a family. Despite the accounts of exploitation that emerged from my fieldwork, women associated with the BJP expressed a sense of safety within the party, perceiving it as an extended family. In a rare mixed-party focus group discussion involving two women activists, one affiliated with the BJP and the other with the INC, an interesting observation emerged. The INC activist, who shared a longstanding friendship with her BJP counterpart, openly acknowledged that women were probably treated more respectfully within the BJP. Notably, the BJP activist did not dispute this statement.⁶⁹ Returning to

⁶⁸Scheck (2004)

⁶⁹Focus group discussion, in Madhya Pradesh, March 2019. This mixed-party focus group discussion should not be taken as a basis for making broad generalizations about the BJP and the INC. The discussion was a unique instance in which women felt comfortable openly discussing such matters. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider that similar accounts of exploitation and feelings of inadequate recognition for political efforts were reported across both parties. Therefore, it is possible that the observed perception of differential

the case of Weimar Germany, right-wing parties aimed to foster a sense of camaraderie and belonging among their members, presenting the party as a big family. The DNVP, for example, published newsletters that included family news, such as weddings and obituaries of party members.⁷⁰ They sought to create a supportive community that resonated with traditional values and appealed to women's desire for belonging and connection.

The Centre Party followed a similar strategy of norm-compliant mobilization frames by emphasizing ideals of Christianity, family, and morality to attract women to the party, as also to reduce men's opposition to women's political involvement. They emphasized the distinct "fundamental difference" between men and women, urging women to embrace maternal self-sacrifice as a means to address the wounds of war and counteract the moral decline resulting from the blockade and revolution.⁷¹ Activists operated under the belief that Catholic women primarily identified themselves through their domestic roles and sought to educate them about state policies through their roles as home managers controlling household spending. Additionally, as mothers, women were viewed as essential in shaping the values and loyalty of their children towards the Center Party, thereby safeguarding Catholic culture from the influence of Marxism, particularly within the working classes. The Center Party criticized the SPD for purportedly prioritizing women's votes over their moral virtue while claiming to foster gender equality.

The SPD's mobilization frames during 1918-20, on the other hand, centered on its pivotal role in championing female suffrage. The party positioned itself as the defender of women's rights and interests, focusing on political equality, legal and economic protection of motherhood, better working conditions for women, social welfare, youth education, and access to higher education. These issues were presented not just as women's concerns but as part of a broader struggle for human dignity. The SPD dedicated significant attention to women through numerous flyers specifically targeting them, highlighting its role in securing suffrage and equal rights in the constitution that women actively participated in shaping.

Early on, the SPD portrayed women as a moderating force who understood the practical needs of feeding hungry children, challenging stereotypes of female irrationality. While appealing to women's desire for bread and peace, the party also encouraged their political involvement and voting for the SPD, which promised class reconciliation and order. The SPD repeatedly emphasized the vote as a gift, expecting women to express their gratitude by voting for the party.

However, when initial election results revealed that women tended to prefer conservative and religious parties, the SPD responded by trying to assure female voters that its plans for women were not radical. It countered narratives of socialist excess by arguing that its commitment to social welfare demonstrated respect for women, placing blame on capitalism for exploiting women's economic dependence, particularly when marriage was not a viable

treatment within the BJP may be specific to that particular region or possibly influenced by the stature of the women activists involved, both of whom were accomplished professionals, with one holding a high position within her party.

⁷⁰Scheck (2004)

⁷¹Sneeringer (2003)

option for many. In later years, the party sought to appeal to women's identification with social welfare and motherhood, using powerful imagery such as a poster featuring a child urging their mother to vote Social-Democratic.⁷²

Thus, a theme common to the mobilization appeals targeted at women and their families by religiously conservative parties was the association of women's interests with the collective interests. The right to engage in political activity was consistently justified in partisan rhetoric through the lens of women's service to the community, whether it be the nation, race, religion, or even the political party itself. The committees responsible for the political education of women wholeheartedly embraced the principle that "The right to vote means a duty to vote." These appeals underscored the indispensability of women's service and self-sacrifice in confronting the perceived moral decline of society.

However, the emphasis on service and obligations not only aligned with the ideological perspective of the right-wing and religious parties but also served as a strategic approach. These parties had not anticipated that women's suffrage demands would be met so soon, and they had not made prior arrangements to actively engage with women. This lack of preparation was due, in part, to the socially conservative nature of their core supporters who held traditional views on women's roles and were hesitant about their participation in political life. As a result, there was a backlash against women within the parties themselves, and antifeminist leagues emerged to oppose gender inclusion. In this context, appealing to service and duties and framing women's political participation in norm-compliant terms played a crucial role. It helped conservative families accept the expanded role of women, albeit with some reluctance. By highlighting the importance of women's service and their fulfillment of perceived duties, these appeals aimed to assuage the concerns of socially conservative supporters who were resistant to women's involvement in politics. By framing women's political participation as a continuation of their existing roles and responsibilities within the family and society, conservative parties aimed to mitigate the potential disruption to traditional gender norms.

Indeed, the use of norm-compliant frames was an initial step towards addressing the larger challenge of transforming social attitudes towards women's involvement in politics. While the Weimar Constitution compelled political parties to target their appeals to women, it did little to alter deeply ingrained societal beliefs about women's political roles, or lack thereof. The extent of women's participation and their agency within the political landscape hinged on how they were channeled within political parties. In turn, the fortunes of political parties also relied on how closely their ideology mapped onto their chosen mobilization strategy.

When it came to integrating women into political parties, two options emerged: either incorporating them within the main organization, treating them no differently than male members, or establishing specialized women's wings. For right-wing parties during that time, the choice was clear. They were not ready to fully integrate women, but for electoral reasons, they had to include them. Additionally, these parties embraced the idea of complementary gender roles, seeing women as a distinct interest group. Thus, creating women's wings was

⁷²Sneeringer (2003)

a natural decision.

The DNVP emerged as a pioneer among right-wing and religious parties in recognizing the imperative of incorporating women into their party organization to enhance their competitiveness in the 1920 Reichstag elections. The party promptly established a women's wing, the *Reichsfrauenamt* (RFA). The DVP followed suit a few years later. These women's wings had three primary responsibilities: organizing propaganda among women, providing political education, and advising the party leadership on women and children-related issues. In addition, they were also responsible to entrench the organization by establishing women's committees at provincial and local levels and coordinating propaganda and education activities with the rest of the party organization at the central level. The RFA took its propaganda and education role seriously, maintaining a database of sympathetic women's organizations and distributing materials to provincial and local women's committees.

The DVP, and in particular, the DNVP, were tremendously successful in establishing robust organizations for engaging women within a few years. In contrast, other political parties were organizationally thinner. For instance, the Center Party, despite its strong support among women, did not establish its Women's Advisory Committee until June 1922. Instead, it heavily relied on the Catholic Women's League of Germany (*Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund* or KDF), an evangelical women's group with strong ideological and strategic ties, to fulfill crucial women's roles within the party across all levels. Consequently, it is ironic that the party with the greatest advantage in terms of gender support had one of the weakest internal women's organizations, relying extensively on collaborations with religious associations for much of their electoral success. But even in other parties where women had the luxury of a dedicated women's wing to express their interests, this also limited the overall influence of women within the parties.

What are the kinds of activities through which the right-wing and religious parties sought to engage women? And did this align with prevailing gender norms or undermine them? At the grassroots level, DNVP women displayed fervent activism, effectively expanding their traditional roles as mothers and housewives into the party sphere. Notably, they placed a significant emphasis on community service, particularly directed towards party members and citizens in need. While their activities primarily focused on the urban poor due to the stronger presence of party networks in cities, they also extended assistance to individuals residing near the borders. In particular, they organized activities to bridge the gap between rural and urban communities, providing farm holidays for economically disadvantaged children and adults. Party women demonstrated their dedication to alleviating the hardships established soup kitchens and distributing gifts. They also participated in fundraising efforts and made personal contributions, often in the form of food and coal during periods of economic turmoil like hyperinflation.

The activities of the DVP were aligned with the DNVP in its emphasis on social and charitable work. They offered assistance to those in economic difficulties, providing free lunches to renters, listing job openings for the unemployed, and sending city children on countryside vacations. Maternalist concerns informed instructive excursions, including visits to a milk distribution center, and organizing patriotic plays with messages emphasizing the

value of work for the nation. They collected and sometimes stitched clothes for children from poor families and organized Christmas parties. Although the DNVP's RFA was the more active of the women's wings, the Berlin branch of the DVP's RFA could give their DVP counterparts a run for their money. They engaged in fundraising through auctions of self-produced art and Christmas decorations. They also instituted one of the most prominent initiatives for the party, the Mother's Aid Wandering Basket (*Mütterhilfe Wanderkorb*). Through this program, the DVP lent baskets with essential items for raising small children to mothers free of charge. Women organized lotteries and exhibitions to support this initiative, which gained widespread recognition.

Social and charitable work was not all that women did for the party organization. Indeed, in an environment where the majority of the electorate found the political world bewilderingly new, some of the most essential strategic work for political parties was to spread political propaganda and educate women. Women activists had a comparative advantage in this sphere, not just because men were singularly unsuited for this. Men also harbored anti-feminist tendencies and often found it demeaning to engage in such work. Consequently, these tasks were largely left to women activists.

In addition, women took upon several responsibilities such as collecting dues, conducting door-to-door propaganda, and performing low-level administrative tasks at a grassroots level. These were particularly thankless tasks since party members were notoriously indisciplined in paying membership dues. In particularly challenging times like the hyperinflation period, these dues were paid in foodstuffs, requiring women to physically labor in rural areas. They also faced risks while distributing party leaflets in regions dominated by violence-prone leftists or later by Nazis.

These activities were crucial for the party's strategic objectives and electoral success. Women's involvement in political propaganda allowed for the dissemination of the party's message and the mobilization of support among women. By engaging in administrative tasks and grassroots organizing, women played a vital role in building and strengthening the party organization. But while these duties were strategically important for the party, the primary mobilizing rhetoric used focused on social work due to societal expectations and family dynamics.

6.3 Conservatism without religion?

Thus far, I have focused on the mobilization of women into the public sphere by religiously conservative parties, examining their gendered mobilization rhetoric, partisan persuasion strategies, and the public activities undertaken by women associated with these parties. It has encompassed both historical and contemporary cases across different countries and religious contexts, encompassing Islam and Christianity. However, conservative parties, despite not being explicitly grounded in religious principles, can often leverage an association with religion and the gendered separation of spheres to mobilize women into political activity. In this section, I provide a broad overview of how conservatism as an ideology is frequently

intertwined with religion. The influence of religion is evident in the foundational principles of conservative thought, which are often shaped and informed by religious values, principles, and beliefs. As a consequence, even when conservative parties are not explicitly founded on religious principles, these connections with religion can lead to conservative parties using the principles and tenets of religion and tradition to structure their ideology and outreach.

In examining the broad tenets of conservative thought, I draw upon Huntington (1957)'s analysis of conservative and Burkean theory. Conservatism, according to Burke and a range of conservative philosophers following in this tradition, including Russell Kirk and Roger Scruton, recognized that "man is a religious animal, and religion serves as the foundation of civil society."⁷³ Religion, according to conservatives, provides a moral framework, a sense of purpose, and a shared set of values that can be crucial for maintaining social cohesion and order. Often, if not always, religion can also provide the basis to justify an existing social order. This belief in a divine sanction reinforces the connection between conservatism and religion, as conservatives argue that religious teachings lend legitimacy and stability to societal structures.

Relatedly, conservatism also recognizes that social organization is complex and inherently unequal. Society in this worldview is composed of a variety of classes, orders, and groups. Differentiation, hierarchy, dominance, and subordination are seen as inevitable characteristics of the relationship between these groups, and therefore of society at large. It aligns with religious teachings that may endorse hierarchical or class-based arrangements, with the understanding that different individuals and groups have distinct roles and contributions to society.

Concerning the relationship of the individual with society, conservatism asserts that the community is superior to the individual, and the rights of individuals derive from their duties. This communitarian perspective aligns with religious doctrines emphasizing communal obligations, the importance of family and community, and the interconnectedness of individuals within a larger social fabric.

Moreover, conservatives view society as the natural product of slow historical growth. Existing institutions are seen as embodying the accumulated wisdom of previous generations, representing the culmination of societal evolution. Conservatives, following the tradition of Burkean prescription, argue that the passage of time confers a certain rightness and legitimacy to established practices and institutions. This aligns with religious teachings that emphasize the importance of preserving established customs and traditions, and slowing down if not negating change. This skepticism against rapid societal change stems from the belief that individuals, in their fallibility, may be unable to anticipate unintended consequences, leading their interventions to cause greater societal upheaval threatening the prevailing economic, social, and political order. This resonates with religious traditions emphasizing prudence, caution, and the acceptance of human fallibility.

Thus, conservatism and conservative parties often have a basis in religion, even if they are not explicitly religiously conservative parties. The influence of religion on conservative

⁷³Huntington (1957:456). See also Kirk (1953); Scruton (1984; 2018)

thought can be observed through the emphasis on tradition, the moral and ethical foundations derived from religious teachings, the recognition of natural law and order, the skepticism of rapid change, and the communitarian perspective that prioritizes the community over the individual. While not all conservatives are religious, and religious beliefs are not exclusive to conservatism, the connection between conservatism and religion remains significant in many societies with a strong religious heritage.

Conservatism, as a political and ideological orientation, then tends to emphasize traditional values, social order, and preserving existing norms and institutions including those pertaining to religion and gender. Often, this extends to upholding a hierarchical family structure and a heteronormative gender system with distinct roles and expectations for men and women. Moreover, even if conservative parties do not ground their ideologies explicitly in religion, as in the case of the contemporary US Republican Party, the policies they promote emerge from an understanding of gender roles grounded in religion and tradition.

In this context, I turn to a brief examination of how conservative parties in the US and UK mobilized women into the public sphere. Unlike the previous case studies that based their mobilization tools explicitly on religious and traditional norms, the Republican Party in the US and the Conservative Party in the UK used a combination of organizational innovation and conservative rhetoric that appealed to women's traditional roles and supported the separation of spheres.

The United States

Accounts of active participation in the US during the nineteenth century show how men and women were thought to belong to separate spheres⁷⁴. Politics was perceived as rough and violent, unsuitable for women's delicate ideals of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.⁷⁵ These ideals of "true womanhood" aligned with the concept of Republican motherhood, which emphasized women's role in raising virtuous citizens who in turn would pass on these values to the next generation.

As men made a world for themselves in the rational, materialistic, and competitive space of politics, women were encouraged to safeguard the home. When they did venture into the public sphere, it was for voluntary action and community work. They participated in church groups and charitable ventures like ladies' aid societies for which they raised money through socials and community entertainment programs. This "voluntarist style" was befitting of prevailing conceptions of women's moral and spiritual superiority making it a distinct political culture.⁷⁶

Denied the right to vote till 1920, women's initial forays into politics were non-partisan. But this started changing with the women's involvement in the temperance and suffrage movements. Through marches, vigils, and prayer meetings in saloons, the temperance movement leveraged women's moral superiority and targeted their outrage against a pernicious

⁷⁴Welter (1966); Baker (1991; 1984); Cott (1987; 1977); McGerr (1990)

⁷⁵Welter (1966); Baker (1991)

⁷⁶Baker (1984); McGerr (1990)

social evil. When persuasion or picketing proved inadequate, as it inevitably did—licensees found ways to circumvent laws and policies flipped—women started campaigning for candidates supporting their agenda.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, temperance agitation intersected with the women's suffrage movement. Like the temperance movement, demands for suffrage too were predicated upon—and not antithetic to—the argument for separate spheres. Rather than obviating the private-public and moral-material divide between women and men, suffragists framed their demand for a larger political role for women based on their moral purity, and the perspectives and experiences motherhood had uniquely bestowed upon women. In fact, Frances Willard, head of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) advocated for women's right to vote as "citizen-mothers" who, through their moral superiority could cleanse the home and society of its degeneracy.⁷⁷ This stance proved effective in marshaling support from both men and women and nullified anti-suffragists fears that suffrage would shatter the distinct gender-based roles they were familiar with and considered natural order. Thus, women were able to both accept and subvert these restrictions to negotiate a place in public life. At this point, "the female vote was often thought to be anti-saloon, verging on prohibitionist, and therefore closely linked to [...] the Republican Party."⁷⁸

Despite the beginnings of a connection with the Republican party, women still wanted no part in party politics, which they associated with political machines, violence, corruption, and unsavory public spaces.⁷⁹ To sustain their awakened political consciousness, Republican women formed partisan women's clubs. These clubs provided a happy medium ground where women could continue their political engagement through traditional women's organizations, skirting the stigma associated with party politics. Through Republican clubs, women recruited their neighbors, furthered their political understanding, socialized themselves into politics, and formulated their own agendas. By the 1930s, there were thousands of such clubs across the country. However, the decentralized nature of the clubs meant that women could sometimes pursue an agenda to the detriment of their party. Cognizant of this, the Republican party started unifying them under a single organization, the National Federation of Republican Women's Clubs. Marion Martin, the head of the Federation argued that the voluntarist style signaled that politics was an avocation for women, as opposed to the serious businessmen projected it as for themselves. Moreover, voluntarism combined with moral conviction could lead to women taking up fringe positions leading to their further alienation within the party.

Martin's experiment in centralization aimed to portray women as professional and disciplined partisan workers perfectly capable of making necessary compromises and negotiations, and adhering to the party line when needed. However, the party failed to fulfill its end of the bargain by denying women significant advancement opportunities. This led to women who may have initially supported this strategy becoming frustrated and disillusioned. Not

⁷⁷Faludi (2017)

⁷⁸Teele (2018:108)

⁷⁹Rymph (2006)

only were they unable to gain influence within the party, but their supposedly unique voices as women were also being suppressed in favor of maintaining party discipline.

The voluntarist and moralist style of women's politics returned with a vengeance with the end of World War II and a change in guard at the helm of the women's federation. The Republican party strategically returned to infiltrating non-partisan women's groups and attracting civic-minded women, rather than professional political workers to the party. To do so, the party discarded nuanced political messaging in favor of a single moral and emotive message that could be used for most issues for which the party took a stand on. As some Republicans believed, reasoned arguments were not enough to mobilize women; one had to resort to "moral and emotional talk" to do so.⁸⁰

As the communist threat intensified and the Democrats began to leverage labor unions for political organizing, the Republican party channeled women into grassroots activism. Spurred on by the perceived threat to liberty and traditional family values that communism supposedly posed, Republican women took it upon themselves to actively neutralize this through actively forming study groups, circulating newsletters, publishing books, lecturing, letter writing, and even opening conservative bookstores.⁸¹ To strengthen their cause, religious symbols, services, and practices were integrated into the women's federation and became an integral part of the discourse surrounding women's politics. The strength of their organizing was such that in the 1950s, American women were thought to be far more extreme in their opposition to communism than men. As such, it was not surprising that McCarthy's "Red Scare" speech was delivered at a Republican Women's Club.

This tendency to view political participation through a normative lens as a moral crusade of good against evil was not exclusive to women. Indeed James Morone shows how notions of virtue and sin were embedded in American politics, influencing movements such as abolition, prohibition, women's suffrage, and civil rights.⁸² However, because the gendered separation of public and private spheres, women were *perceived* as more morally and spiritually virtuous. They either internalized this perception or strategically utilized it to their advantage, presenting their participation as driven by moral concerns in order to gain greater legitimacy.

The Republican Party recognized the power of religious and moral frameworks in politics and capitalized on them to create opportunities for women's involvement in the political realm. By aligning their political activities with moral values, women found avenues for participation within the party. This strategy allowed them to establish a sense of legitimacy for their engagement in political causes, particularly those related to morality and social reform.

⁸⁰Remarks by Harold Mitchell, Transcripts of RNC Policy Committee meeting, 18 January 1950, frame 717, RPP I-a. in Rymph (2006:115)

⁸¹Nickerson (2009; 2012)

⁸²Morone (2004)

Great Britain

Like the Republican Party in the US, the British Conservative Party mixed social events and canvassing to draw women into political spaces. In 1883, the British Parliament passed the Corrupt Practices Act outlawing the use of paid canvassers. Reeling from this ruling while still recovering from their landslide loss to the Liberals in 1880, the Conservatives adapted their electoral strategy to establish a voluntary canvassing organization, the Primrose League. The League was set up in England, Wales, and Scotland between 1883 and 1884, and was instrumental in reviving Conservative fortunes in the early twentieth century. Characterized by Martin Pugh as a “party within a party”, the League employed a curious mix of modernity and invented tradition in its administrative structure and operations. Headed by a Grand Council, the League’s members, designated as Knights and Dames, supported the League’s work through a fee or tribute. But despite this pseudo-medievalism, the League constituted a modernizing force by inducting women into the party machine. Indeed, the League’s induction of women as full members pre-dated the constitution of the Liberal Party’s women’s wing by over three years.⁸³

The League was not open to women just in name. A study of eleven League locations, or habitations as they were called, found that women constituted nearly 48.7% of League members.⁸⁴ Over time, Dames went on to hold several leadership positions, yet, most of their duties were in the realm of non-electoral social work and back-end clerical work. Women took the lead in what was innovative political programming for the time. They organized teas, concerts, dances, balls, outings, summer fêtes, choirs, choral societies, and even weddings and commemorations. As it had done with Republican women in the US, this turn to socially constructed women’s roles helped break down barriers between the personal and the political, cementing associational political cultures across classes, and urban and rural habitations.

These ostensibly non-political gatherings drew women to the League in droves. At its peak, more than half a million members of the League were women.⁸⁵ With time and involvement, many women expressed a desire to contribute in other ways, including canvassing for their preferred candidates. This step had to be negotiated with caution and propriety as some quarters of the all-male leadership were hesitant about a more public role for women. Others, particularly those who had benefited from women’s contribution to their electoral campaigns, were more enthusiastic about expanding the scope of women’s activities. In the end, the latter group was victorious. Women’s canvassing was conducted on foot, in a touring propaganda van, as well as ‘safety’ bicycles that allowed women to cycle in long skirts, retaining feminine propriety. In 1898, League members were treated to a description of an election featuring “the recalcitrant voter being tracked to his lair by hands of enthusiastic and athletic Primrose Dames mounted on bicycles”.⁸⁶ Over time, women became some of the most valued canvassers for the Conservative Party, forcing frustrated Liberal politicians

⁸³Cowman (2010)

⁸⁴Pugh (1992)

⁸⁵Sheets (1986)

⁸⁶Robb (1942)

like Herbert Gladstone to denounce:

These wives and daughters of the Philistines stop at nothing. All the unscrupulous women of England are members of the Primrose League. In the country districts they threaten; in the towns they cajole; in both town and country their armouries are overflowing with thousands of yards of flannel and countless sacks of coal.⁸⁷

Yet, despite these contributions, women were content to play second fiddle to men. The League maintained separate organizational structures for men and women, with real power held by men. Women members were often reminded not to imitate men but to excel in their own separate spheres, and many women members did not seek to be on equal footing with men. The idea that women had influence in politics was far more important. As one of its members said, “We don’t wish to govern the country... [but] assist in placing men in government.”⁸⁸ This stance led the League to not approve of women’s suffrage, even though a number of members were in favor of it.

The League’s importance gradually diminished after World War I and expansion in suffrage, including that of women. The Conservative Party decided to embrace a modern mass membership movement to be able to compete with the Labour Party, gradually reducing the influence of the League, which continued more as a relic rather than a potent political force until it was formally dissolved in 2004.⁸⁹

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the applicability of the theory of norm-compliant mobilization in regions outside India. To do so, I employed a combination of survey-based analysis and contemporary and historical case studies.

Prevailing studies on women’s political behavior, primarily borne out of studies based in advanced democracies shows that right-wing parties face a gender disadvantage. Using data on political preferences from the World Values Survey, I find that the gender disadvantage holds across most countries on average, even when adjusting for covariates. However, in the case of right-wing parties that have a founding basis in religion, this disadvantage disappears to a considerable extent, suggesting the importance of norm-compliant mobilization frames. This leads us to consider that religiously conservative parties may be more successful than conservative parties in terms of their ability to develop ties with women (*vis-à-vis* men) and create conditions enabling women’s active participation.

Do religiously conservative parties in other countries leverage norms similar to the BJP’s use of *seva* in India? Using in-depth case studies, I find that close parallels may be found in Turkey and Lebanon. The AKP in Turkey uses norms of *imece* and *himaye* to extend

⁸⁷Sheets (1986)

⁸⁸Cowman (2010)

⁸⁹Pugh (1988); Cooke (2011)

women's private roles into politics, while maintaining men's patronage for their political engagement as in the case of the BJP. This ensures that women and their families can avoid private and social costs of their political engagement. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah mobilizes women through ostensibly apolitical community service, mirroring the BJP's use of *seva*. In other cases, religiously conservative parties like the PKS in Indonesia and the DNVP, and the DVP in Weimar Germany have used religious rhetoric and organizing to frame women's participation in norm-compliant terms and as an extension of their domestic roles.

Finally, I examine whether the basic tenets of norm-compliant mobilization can be extended to conservative parties. Although this does stretch the scope conditions of the theory a little thin, I show that at certain historical junctures when the idea of separate spheres was normatively upheld by large sections of the population in Western democracies like the US and the UK, conservative parties were able to mobilize women into the public sphere by emphasizing their links to religion and morality. Indeed, women's arguments for expanded roles in public life, including temperance and suffrage were grounded in norm-compliant frames based on their privileged position within the private and spiritual sphere. However, although women were able to gain a certain degree of freedom by articulating their participation using the language of norm-compliant frames, there were limits to the agency they could enjoy. I examine this in the next chapter with an analysis of how *seva* expands—and limits—the freedoms available to women, as well as the normative and empirical implications of norm-compliant mobilization for democratic deepening.

Chapter 7

The Implications of *Seva*

Having established the applicability of the theory of norm-compliant mobilization in a range of contexts outside India, in this last chapter, we shift our focus towards examining the positive and normative implications of participation that arise from such mobilization frames. The examination centers on two primary implications: the impact on women, and the implications for democracy as a whole.

A central puzzle in the study of women's participation in conservative parties and movements lies in understanding why women engage with a movement that seemingly contradicts their own emancipatory interests. The first step to resolve this is to understand whether women in these movements have emancipatory interests in the first place, and if so what are they? In other words, do they operate under Marxist frames of false consciousness or are they rational agents striving to exercise a semblance of control over their lives? If so, to what extent does active participation under the overarching framework of norm-compliant mobilization allow women to exercise greater agency in their personal and public lives? These are the questions I address in the first half of this chapter.

My research finds women in the BJP as rational agents with both affective and emancipatory goals, some of which can be attained within the bounds of patriarchal institutions enveloping them. The channel of *seva* allows them the means to make progress along these goals while not disturbing larger structural constraints akin to the idea of "controlled emancipation" proposed in Hansen (1994). Hence, norm-compliant frames allow women to gain a greater degree of autonomy within the bounds of patriarchy and can be thought of as a strategy of constrained optimization or a patriarchal bargain that "manipulates the system to one's best advantage, but one that leaves the system itself intact."¹

The second half of the chapter zooms out to consider an important but understudied puzzle on the relationship between political participation and democratization. Much existing empirical research on political participation assumes that greater participation and inclusion are normatively beneficial for democracies. Yet, this association does not seem to hold in the Indian case, where rising participation and inclusion, particularly for women, but by no

¹Kandiyoti (1988; 2005); Wade (2011)

means restricted to them, have not gone hand-in-hand with better outcomes for democracy. What explains this apparent paradox?

To address this, I generalize my theory of norm-compliant mobilization frames beyond women, and situate it within the larger concept of allegiant citizenship, drawing on the works of Almond and Verba (1963) and Dalton and Welzel (2014). In contrast to assertive models of citizenship that emphasize individual rights, equality, and holding the state accountable through voice, allegiant models prioritize deference to authority, adherence to social norms, and a willingness to prioritize duties over rights and entitlements. I operationalize these concepts using measures from the World Values Survey and demonstrate that allegiant citizenship exhibits an inverse-U-shaped relationship with democratic health, indicating that stronger allegiance beyond a certain threshold is associated with declining democratic conditions. Conversely, assertive citizenship displays a monotonically increasing association with democratic health.

Based on this, I argue that the answer to this puzzle in the case of India can be found by examining the qualitative aspects of participation rather than solely focusing on quantity. Considering the intensive margin of *how* people participate, and the role of political parties in shaping this, rather than just the extensive margin of *how many*, provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of democratic backsliding. This perspective serves as a counterbalance to existing explanations that primarily focus on elite-led subversion of democracy, neglecting the role of citizens as a bulwark against creeping authoritarian tendencies. Thus, by delving into the citizen side of democratic breakdown, I shed light on the microfoundations of democratic backsliding in the world's largest country.

7.1 What *seva* accomplishes for women

In this section, I examine the implications of norm-compliant mobilization on women's personal and political agency. Often, women's participation in conservative movements has been interpreted through the lens of false consciousness, a concept frequently employed by social philosophers to describe the ignorant attitudes held by individuals who, despite being rational and knowledgeable, are influenced by structural oppression. This notion is particularly applicable when examining women's overt mobilization in support of patriarchal and religious structures that serve as justifications for women's subjugation.

A prominent example of this phenomenon was when a group of 104 prominent British women published the "Appeal against Female Suffrage" in 1889, which played a pivotal role in delaying women's suffrage until after the conclusion of World War I. These women opposed granting women the right to vote, citing their "physical constitution" and inherent dissimilarity from men as reasons rendering them unfit for political involvement. Instead, they argued that women's indirect influence on politics was sufficient to represent their interests. Due to the social stature of these women and the fact that women themselves were opposing suffrage, the Appeal significantly impeded progress towards women's suffrage until

the end of the war.²

However, it is essential to approach the interpretation of women's involvement in religious and conservative movements with caution to avoid reducing them to mere pawns in the patriarchal political order. While acknowledging the existence of oppressive power structures, this perspective risks negating women's agency in negotiating these structures in attempts to advance their interests, as my research indicates. Furthermore, such a perspective also fails to acknowledge that some of their actions may be detrimental to the interests of other communities and women, and as noted by scholars like Sarkar and Butalia (1995), and as a consequence absolves them from their role in furthering intolerant and anti-inclusionary sentiments.

In this section, I examine the motivations of women activists within the right-wing movement, and whether their *seva*-based political involvement can lead them to exercise greater agency in their personal and political lives. I begin with defining how we should think about women's agency in these restrictive frameworks, followed by analyzing how political *seva* leads women to gain a semblance over their own lives. Much of this discussion is based on qualitative interviews and participant observation with women and their families within the BJP and their families. Finally, using qualitative and experimental data, I discuss some limits to the emancipatory role of *seva* especially with reference to women's ability to express career and political ambition, especially when such ambitions set them up in conflict with other men within the party.

Defining agency

The concept of agency with most applications in the empirical scholarship of gender is that of "agency freedom" proposed by Amartya Sen.³ Agency freedom recognizes an individual as a responsible agent who can identify goals for oneself and pursue them in a way they deem fit. This leads us to the three components of agency freedom: the ability to identify goals for oneself; the ability to pursue these goals; and finally, the ability to choose a means to pursue these goals from a set of all available options. The acquisition of agency then lies in the pursuit of one's goals, not in their achievement *per se*, which Sen embeds in a separate concept, that of agency achievement.

Given this, the route to agency seems straightforward. Women can attain greater agency if they have the freedom to identify and pursue goals in a manner of their choosing. Constraints to agency are any barriers that women face in this process, in that they can emerge from an inability to be able to choose goals they value for themselves, or being unable to pursue them. Equally crucial is the manner in which women pursue their goals. For instance, let's consider a scenario where a woman desires to enhance her mobility by purchasing a car and intends to earn money for it through suitable employment. In this case, if a family member surprises her with a car as a thoughtful gift on her birthday, while undoubtedly

²Wilson (2021)

³Sen (1985; 1999)

appreciated, it would still encroach upon her agency and restrict her freedom, even if she had no other reason to value her employment apart from its capacity to enable her to buy the car.

But all barriers to agency are perhaps not as benevolent. In patriarchal contexts all over the world, some of the key barriers to women's agency emerge from social norms and institutions that limit women's ability to choose goals and act upon them. Recognizing this, Sen argues, "There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom."⁴

Extending this chain of thought to its logical end leads to an unsettling thought that women's agency must necessarily be constrained in patriarchal societies.⁵ As a result, one perspective within liberal and feminist scholarship argues that the pursuit of agency necessitates resistance. According to this viewpoint, agency is embodied in "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)."⁶ At the core of this argument is the existence of an innate self that craves autonomy. Consequently, agency is conceptualized as the expression of this autonomous self, which can only be realized in acts of resistance. As a corollary, the absence of resistance to norms deemed as oppressive is the acceptance of authority and a lack of agency.

But what about women whose consciousness, and even this "autonomous self" has been shaped by non-liberal traditions? Mahmood (2004) argues that interpreting agency as resistance "sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions." Women in such contexts may accept prevailing social arrangements, and yet exert control over their lives. This is best explicated in the struggle of a student striving to learn how to play the piano.

Consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship. . . her agency is predicated on her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as docility. Although we have come to associate docility with abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement. Such a way of thinking about agency draws our attention to the practical ways in which individuals work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a particular discourse.⁷

⁴Sen (1999)

⁵This is not to say that others' agency is not compromised in patriarchy, but the focus of this book is on women in patriarchal societies.

⁶Mahmood (2004)

⁷Mahmood (2004)

Thus, agency is not necessarily resistance, but a capacity for action created and enabled by specific relations of subordination. A person's social and cultural contexts shape the goals they pick for themselves. Agency is then reflected in the work and they impose upon themselves in order to attain a state of being.⁸

How do Mahmood's and Sen's conceptions of agency relate to each other? Indeed, there are broad overlaps. Both are relational conceptions in that agency can only be defined in relation to a goal. But unlike Sen, who also highlights the ability to choose goals, Mahmood stresses on process, practice, and method. She emphasizes that agency is conditional upon the specific goal in question. Mahmood recognizes that within non-liberal contexts, individuals may have limited or constrained choices due to socio-cultural factors that are beyond their individual control. Agency should therefore be understood within the context of these constraints and the specific objectives individuals aim to achieve within those parameters. Thus, this approach acknowledges that people in non-liberal contexts should not be judged or penalized for not choosing goals that go against their traditions and cultural norms.

Seva and women's agency

Does *seva* result in greater agency or empowerment for those performing it? If so, what are the forms that this agency takes? These are the questions I now turn to. The evidence for this discussion is based on qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with party activists in the BJP.

There are, however, some caveats to consider when interpreting these findings. Because political parties do not maintain formal membership requirements, there is rarely any delineation between an activist from a member or even the rest of the electorate in any metric apart from whether they are identified by other members of the community as active party workers. In addition to this fluidity of who constitutes an activist, parties did not maintain lists of activists or share a comprehensive list of office-bearers. Hence, to identify respondents, I used references from key informants as well as other activists. This had both benefits and drawbacks. A key advantage was the quality of information: party activists were far more likely to respond positively to an interview request when I contacted them through a trusted reference, were more forthright in their responses, as also more generous with their time and were open to multiple visits. But relying on references also introduced survivor bias into the sample, since my respondents primarily comprised of long-term party activists whose status with the party was well known to informants and other members of the community. Women who were new entrants to the world of partisan activism were hard to identify and interview. In several instances, women who had been able to sustain their engagement for long durations, sometimes over 40 years, had stronger ideological motivations and were better at striking bargains about their political participation with their families. In other cases, families were relatively more supportive of women's participation, and women were from political families, especially those who entered politics at the behest of men, were viewed as

⁸Mahmood (2004)

consolidating and extending a shared political legacy. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of all women involved in partisan activities, especially those who recently began their foray into partisan politics.

In addition, some activists were extremely conscious of their reputations and the party's image, and as such were hesitant to refer me to women with whom they had personal or professional rivalries or those who had reason to be unhappy with the party. However, this was an easier barrier to surmount through sustained fieldwork and attending party events, where I could identify—and introduce myself to—other active participants. Nevertheless, this approach had unintended consequences, such as alienating some previous interviewees. For instance, there was an incident where an activist in Jaipur observed me traveling in a car with another activist with whom she had a strained relationship. Subsequently, she refused any further requests for follow-up interviews. Fortunately, incidents of this nature were relatively rare, and they did not significantly hinder the overall research process. Given these factors, my analysis of *seva*'s ability to allow women a semblance of control over their lives is based on its long-term effects on a non-random sample of respondents.

One of the key challenges in assessing women's agency based on either one of the frameworks proposed earlier is knowing current activists' goals at the time of starting their engagement. As my interviews made clear, often women did not start with what in their opinion was a particularly well-defined objective. Often, they viewed the origins of their participation through a non-partisan lens as an act of reciprocity for previous favors from other party activists or just a way to spend time outside their homes. Notwithstanding that women's ability to acquire leisure time and exercise it in meaningful ways can be interpreted as a political and agentic act, activists were disinclined to see it as a form of resistance.⁹

An additional challenge was that women desired states of being were fluid, evolving with age, experience and political knowledge, resources, familial backing, and the (in)ability to acquire previously desired goals. Although there was considerable diversity in what women sought from their party work, I synthesize my findings into four main categories: associational lives and leisure, mobility, the ability to practice and implement their preferred ideological positions (whether through running for office or party work), and forging a public identity that, while not necessarily independent of their family, was created through their own effort and was something they could call their own. The *seva* frame was present in all these motivations, sometimes explicitly and other times as an underlying influence guiding their preferred expressions of agency.

Associational lives and leisure

For the women I interviewed, and especially those without political antecedents, *seva*, first and foremost gave them a means of associating with other women sharing similar values and worldviews. These spaces were all the more valuable because for many it was one where they could speak their minds and participate freely without being encumbered by

⁹For an overview of approaches of how leisure, not just women's, can be seen as political, see Shaw (2001).

family. Although politics continued to be dominated by men, it did provide some enclaves for women's participation. Bacchetta (2004) describes how members of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the women's counterpart to the RSS, saw the Samiti as a space where they could "escape constraints which otherwise may have been imposed upon them as women, within their context." Similarly, the women's wing of the BJP gave members a platform to engage with other women in an environment largely sequestered from men. Here, they talked about their daily lives, discussed current political developments, built networks with other members in different neighborhoods, and planned events to continue their engagement and outreach. These spaces were all the more valuable for women who did not have many avenues to interact freely with people outside their immediate neighborhood.

Women in the BJP's women's wing, the Mahila Morcha, frequently engaged in various social activities to foster camaraderie and celebrate significant occasions. They organized parties for themselves and commemorated birthdays and wedding anniversaries of fellow members. Tea gatherings, religious rituals, and prayer ceremonies, such as *pujas*, were common events when members visited each others' homes. Additionally, they occasionally arranged picnics at tourist destinations or places of religious importance, and even hosted kitty parties at members' residences or local restaurants.¹⁰ Furthermore, the women in the BJP's Mahila Morcha would plan trips to watch films that aligned with their ideological perspectives, such as "The Kerala Story" and "The Kashmir Files"—commonly perceived as propaganda films for those from a non-aligned perspective—and shared their experiences on social media platforms. They also banded together to welcome and interact with high-ranking politicians who visited their locality, or to go to rallies and campaign events. In this way, the BJP's *sangathan*, or organization, promised friendship and delivered entertainment and occasional excitement. It served as a social outlet where like-minded women could come together, fostering a sense of belonging and providing a refreshing break from the monotony of their everyday lives.

Several women started their political engagement after reaching middle age as a form of passing time while doing "good work" after completing their child-rearing responsibilities. As a BJP activist who started her political journey in her early forties said, "I became free from my household responsibilities after my children finished school. At that time, there were many other women like me, many of them were also parents, and of the same age as me. We used to meet each other anyway because of our children, so after we did not need to spend as much time at home, we thought why not use this to do something for society."¹¹ Thus, *seva* offered a platform for associating with other women sharing similar values and worldviews in a socially permissible way.

¹⁰Kitty parties are social events held as part of a women's microfinance and social club. Clubs meet monthly and members contribute a sum of money. The next host is chosen through a lottery, and she receives the pooled contributions for that month.

¹¹Interview by author, Kota, 2019.

Mobility

As activists accumulated greater experience and took on additional administrative responsibilities, demands upon their time increased and they had to spend longer hours at the party office or doing organizational and community-based work within their jurisdictions. This gradually led to more public autonomy and freedom of movement. Lekha, a former *Karyalaya Prabhari* (office in-charge) of the BJP's women's wing was from the Rajput community, a group known for imposing seclusion norms upon women.¹² Recounting her gradual progress in the party, she said,

It was before the 2014 election that I started getting interested in politics. . . I rarely went outside my colony alone at that time, so my husband took me to the party office in his car at first. Then I started going to neighborhood events on my own. People started recognizing me and sometimes asked me about how to resolve some small problems. Sometimes we organized information camps. . . My husband is an advocate and as my party activities continued, I needed to go to the party office more often. He couldn't always take me whenever I needed to go. So, then I started going to the party office and other places on a Scooty [scooter]. My niece accompanied me for some time. But now I have a car too and I don't need anyone to go with me, and no one comments about this anymore.¹³

Many women activists shared similar experiences to Lekha. Initially confined to their homes, their involvement in community work provided them with opportunities to participate in party events, engage in election campaigns, and even secure official party positions. In some cases, families supported their activism by providing them with a vehicle. Mobility was crucial for these activists, as it eliminated the need to rely on their husbands or endure public transportation, which could pose safety concerns. Moreover, having a vehicle allowed them to bring other women along, gradually building a network of loyal female supporters. As a consequence, the lack of independent mobility could be a serious hindrance to ambitious women.

Sahyadri, a BJP councilor and former Block President (*Mandal Adhyaksh*) of its women's wing, lived with her husband, children, and in-laws on the outskirts of Kota. Her husband operated a small business and was doing well enough to be able to afford two cars, one of which was assigned for the exclusive use of Sahyadri. Telling me about the demands of her time, and how a car had proved invaluable for her, Sahyadri importantly said,

(As active workers) we have no conception of rest. Whenever people call us we need to go for whatever reason they want. Sometimes the party can call us when there is a big leader in Kota. Or when people need any sort of help, they just call me. Initially, my husband used to go with me, but as I became more active,

¹²In fact Harlan (1992) says, "Rajput women refer to *parda* [veiling, or seclusion] as the most characteristic aspect of a Rajput woman's identity."

¹³Interview on September 17, 2019 in Jaipur district.

he sent his driver with me instead. Now it's not just my driver. When I get a call, I try to figure out if I can solve the problem on my own or if I would need to apply pressure on an official or the police. Using pressure tactics is easier if I am in a group. So in those cases, I call women who are close to me and we go together in my car. We talk to the complainant and then go to the police station of a government office as needed.

But while a vehicle could fast-track career progression for those privileged to afford one, it also weighed down those who could not. Often, sincere workers had to forgo promotions because they could not afford these vehicles. Lekha confided that Seema, one of her deputies, was very dedicated to her and the party. But unlike Lekha who had a scooter and access to her husband's car, Seema did not have a private conveyance for herself. So, despite Seema's commitment, Lekha hesitated to promote her because she was not sure how Seema would be able to manage transport for herself as well as mobilize other women when required to travel outside her neighborhood.

In contrast to Lekha and Sahyadri, who enjoyed relatively more freedom of movement within the city due to their husbands' support (Sahyadri even had a dedicated driver), not all women activists experienced the same level of increases in mobility. When not in the company of other women, many activists were accompanied by male family members, likely due to the preconceived notions and reputation associated with politicians. Interestingly, even in supposedly more liberal spaces like Delhi, some families imposed strict restrictions on women.

During one of my many visits to the BJP's central headquarters in Delhi, I made the acquaintance of Lata, the wife of a high-level leader in the party. Although Lata herself did not occupy an official position within the party at that time, she had been drafted into coordinating the women's wing's campaign during the 2019 national election. After a brief interview, she introduced me to one of her trusted deputies, Madhu. Madhu was the President of the women's wing in one of the districts in Delhi. She had a graduate degree in History from the University of Delhi and had completed a diploma course in women's empowerment. While a student, she used public transport every day and traveled to campus unaccompanied. But since joining politics about two years ago, her elder brother accompanied her everywhere.

At first glance, it seemed that Madhu's mobility—and through this, her agency—was limited by her brother's constant presence. He was also present for some parts of my interview with her, and although Madhu did not seek his intervention, he occasionally contradicted her. When he stepped out for some tea, I asked her about the topic of her mobility, to which she replied,

I frequently need to visit poor and unsafe locations in Delhi for my work. Sometimes I need to go outside Delhi too... See, I am in my thirties. I don't need to tell you that it's already unusual for a woman like me to be unmarried. Even though people don't always ask if I am married or not, they can tell that I don't

wear *sindoor* (vermillion). You know how unsafe Delhi is for women... If there are other women with me, it doesn't matter that much... but often it is just easier for my family if a man travels with me. And anyway, he is also with the BJP, so he already knows many people I need to work with.¹⁴

At first glance, it seemed that Madhu's mobility—and through this, her agency—was limited by her brother. But while it was indeed a constraint, Madhu treated it as a patriarchal bargain. Male compatriots in the party always treated her with respect in the presence of her brother, as also bureaucrats and frontline workers when she approached them on behalf of citizens. She also explained how this allowed her to navigate her political engagements with confidence, even in challenging situations and at unconventional hours. Consequently, the implications of being chaperoned by her brother depend on what her primary goals were. Of course, if Madhu's goal was autonomy and independent mobility, her brother's presence did impede her agency. But if her primary goal was to continue working in her field of choice, perhaps the loss in mobility was a reasonable bargain in her eyes.

Returning to the site of Rajasthan, the phenomenon of men chaperoning women to party events and in their quotidian political engagements was not exclusive to the BJP. During one of my initial research trips to Kota, my informants suggested that I interview Sharan, a member of the Indian National Congress who had recently been elected as the Chairman of a Block Panchayat. As I waited to meet her in a large room at her Kota home with a research assistant, a man entered the room holding a tray with an orange-flavored soft drink. Politely, serving us, he withdrew only to return a few minutes later with Sharan, who took a seat on a sofa to my left. Instead of leaving the room again, the man sat next to Sharan, where he remained for the rest of the interview. He remained largely quiet during the conversation, and it was only when Sharan explicitly referred to him as her husband, Alok, that I realized their relationship. I had the opportunity to meet Sharan a few more times during my research trip, including at her block-level office. Alok was always by her side and occasionally shared her administrative responsibilities. On the final day of my visit, I accompanied Sharan, Alok, and several members of her team, most of whom were male *Sarpanches*, on a trip to a shrine in the hills. Throughout the trip, Alok remained close to Sharan, and it was evident that everyone was accustomed to their dynamic. Indeed it would be out of place were it not so.

Ideological propagation

In addition to enjoying increased mobility and a more active social life, women activists in the BJP found a unique platform within the party to express and promote their ideologies, which in turn contributed to their sense of collective agency. The organizational and electoral

¹⁴Interview with author in January 2019 in Delhi. Upon speaking with her brother, I learned he was actually in the RSS but was active in the BJP as well. He had even applied for a nomination to contest in the municipal elections, although his request was ultimately rejected.

work of the BJP provided them with opportunities to affirm and spread their worldviews, allowing them to have a perceived voice and influence in shaping the party's direction.

Catherine Blee's ethnographic research on organized racist movements like the Ku Klux Klan in the US suggests that women could often join these groups from a desire to expand their access and influence, not only for themselves but also their ideological positions and beliefs, which were not necessarily racist at the time of joining. Many of these women came from racially tolerant backgrounds, initially seeing the Klan as an agency of redress for wronged women, professing a desire to "straighten out" men deviating from their normative standards of behavior. Indeed a number of women in the Klan had a history of civic engagement in voluntary groups and the temperance movement, particularly the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Anti-Saloon League. Similarly, even some male far-right activists were not recruited based on their racist outlooks, but rather on their aspiration to stand out and exert authority. Racism, in such cases, was learned through the process of socialization.¹⁵

However, during my research, I observed that the BJP did not function as an exclusive radicalizing machine, indoctrinating its activists with exclusionary attitudes. Instead, there were two distinct categories of activists. The first group comprised those who joined the party out of strategic concerns. Recognizing the BJP's prominence in their local political landscape, these activists believed that aligning themselves with the party would serve their personal interests. When some of them resorted to polarizing rhetoric, it was often a calculated move to signal an ideological commitment to the party hierarchy or to build a loyal voter base for elections. This category also included politicians and activists from other parties who considered the BJP a more promising venue for their aspirations.

The second category of activists in the BJP's women's wing consisted of individuals who had pre-existing personal or familial connections with the *Hindutva* movement, or who held sympathetic views aligned with its ideology. Many women in the BJP's women's wing had family members, such as fathers or brothers, who were associated with the RSS. In certain instances, mothers of current women activists had left their daughters at creches operated by local branches of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti when they had to attend to other responsibilities. It was during these formative years that these women developed their ideological affinities towards the right-wing movement, as they were exposed to the teachings and values propagated by the organization. This early exposure played a role in shaping their perspectives and laying the foundation for their future involvement with the BJP.

This does not mean that the BJP did not contribute to the radicalization of its members. In their initial years, the views of many women within the party were indeed malleable, and the consistent exposure to exclusionary narratives solidified their incipient predispositions against the Muslim community at large as well as other political parties like the INC they identified as serving Muslim interests. However, my argument is that most women already possessed certain inclinations and predispositions towards such ideologies even before joining the party.

¹⁵Blee (2008)

For instance, Meenu, a woman in her 50s, resided in an affluent neighborhood with her retired husband. While she identified herself primarily as a housewife, she also recognized her true calling as a social worker. Her foray into politics stemmed from her dedication to service, as she initially engaged in activities such as assisting women in acquiring voter identity cards and securing pending pensions. Meenu expressed a deep sense of fulfillment when she could help individuals attain their desired outcomes, which they had previously struggled to achieve.

Meenu's initial interest in politics might have been sparked by this overall sense of *seva*. But she had always nursed a soft spot for the right wing's ideology of *Hindutva*, firmly believing that it was essential for Hindus, like members of other religious communities, to have a nation where their values and beliefs could be upheld and protected. Her desire to make a meaningful impact led her to the VHP's women's wing. Later, the same conviction propelled her towards the BJP, where she found a platform to advocate for her beliefs and contribute to the realization of her vision.

Ever since she had lost her son to a road accident a few years ago, Meenu had felt rudderless and had been suffering from depression. At this juncture, her involvement with the women's wing gave her a reason to step out of the home and provided a semblance of meaning. At this juncture, one of the ways she was able to exert control over her life, while also furthering her own beliefs and the *Hindutva* project was by volunteering as a marriage and divorce counselor with the local *mahila thana*, a woman's only police station. "As Hindus, we believe that family is everything, so when When I heard that all couples seeking a divorce must attend counseling sessions at *mahila thanas*, I signed up. Because I am with the Mahila Morcha, the people at the *thana* knew me, I had to go there often for work when people wanted my help or as a witness." Although it was unclear if she had undergone special training for this job, she said, "My objective is to minimize the number of broken homes... Often it is the fault of both sides, so I make sure that I counsel both sides to see that it is not right to seek a divorce unless under the most extreme of cases. We might have problems sometimes, but family is the foundation of our society. Where will we be, if all of us start going our separate ways?" This affective attachment to the family and its conceptual place in the national hierarchy resonates deeply with one of the core tenets of *Hindutva*. Therefore, Meenu's part-time counseling work provided her with a unique opportunity to simultaneously achieve multiple goals. Through her counseling work, she was able to exert control over her life, fulfill her *seva* aspirations by helping individuals, preserving the institution of family, and in so doing propagate her *Hindutva* beliefs.

Meenu's perspective on Muslims revealed a complex mix of opinions. She disapproved of the separate personal laws that governed Muslims, considering it a point of contention since Hindus fell under a separate civil code. Embracing a common narrative within right-wing circles, she argued that the allowance for multiple marriages for Muslim men and the perceived ease of divorce could threaten the survival of Hindus in their own country. In this context, Meenu was actively engaged in educating people about the concept of "love *jihad*." Drawing from a personal experience from counseling an inter-religious couple, and one of the few times she had recommended a divorce, she said, "There was this case of a Muslim boy and

Hindu girl... The girl could not adjust to their lifestyle. I thought this was not sustainable, the differences were too much, so I recommended a divorce. The boy has already found another wife, but it has not been so easy for the girl because our society is so judgmental.” At the same time, she regarded Muslim men through a lens of fear and suspicion, she was more tolerant towards Muslim women, perhaps believing them to be subjects of oppression within their religion. She shared that she had rented out a room in her house to a Muslim woman and her daughter at a rate below market value. Overall, Meenu’s motivations for taking part in the BJP’s activities stemmed from the opportunity it gave her to propagate its worldview and try to further her conception of society and nation.

A number of other women activists in the BJP echoed similar sentiments; that the BJP and Modi in particular were implementing a long-needed corrective to what they called the “pseudo-secularism” of the INC, and its policy of appeasing religious minorities and treating them as consolidated voting blocs or “vote banks.” Citing the controversial abrogation of Article 370 which revoked the special autonomous status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, integrating it fully into India, and the court order to construct a temple at the purported birthplace of the Hindu god, Rama, a participant in a focus group discussion said, “I can speak for the others when I say that all of us feel proud that we are part of a government that does not need to stoop to other communities’ wishes when we decide we want to honor our own gods [...] And we are united under only one constitution.”¹⁶

Some activists also cited the pride they felt with what they considered to be India’s rising stature on the world stage, which they believed was a result of having a strong Prime Minister like Modi. Often they looked to me for confirmation because they knew I was based in the US, and I was careful not to bring up Modi’s poor record in economic growth and employment, democratic erosion, and inclusive governance. This deliberate omission was necessary to be able to continue the interview and maintain my relationship with respondents, so I could complete my research.

The right-wing movement offered validation of women’s personal beliefs, allowing them to find comfort in extending their roles as caregivers, nurturers, and spiritual guardians from the private sphere to the public domain. The right wing recognized and validated these aspects of their lives. This alignment with the movement’s ideology eliminated the need for women to step out of their comfort zones and provided women with a sense of reassurance. Within the party, they were able to propagate these ideas during various events, including party gatherings, electoral campaigns, and outreach activities. Consequently, they felt that even their small contributions were interconnected with the larger goal of building a nation that reflected their shared beliefs and values.

Public identity

The final dimension of agency that I explore discuss is how women in the BJP, particularly those activists from conservative families had been able to use the levers of political partici-

¹⁶Under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, Jammu and Kashmir had its separate constitution, which granted it a degree of autonomy in governing its internal affairs.

pation to create a public identity for themselves. By actively engaging in political activities and being seen and heard, they were able to craft public identities and be known for their actions, opinions, and contributions to their community.

Although there were certain restrictions to the transformative potential of their political engagement—that I explore in greater detail in the next section—several activists were able to see themselves as active participants who make a difference in their society. They took pride in their greater mobility, networks with the political elite, the being known for their activities and opinions outside the home. A natural result of this was greater name recognition and recall, which women also took pride in. Kirti, a former Block Panchayat leader who termed herself an “active woman,” as opposed to the majority of local representatives who were proxies for their husbands, gave me a list of activities she had been part of over the last week. Starting with welcoming a visiting politician from a neighboring state, donating blood at an MLA’s birthday, attending an RSS event of which her husband was a member, and giving testimony to the police in a case, in addition to other day-to-day party activities, it was clear she had a busy week. During the interview, she expressed her curiosity about whether I had met other women who were as actively involved in politics, even among those currently holding elected office.

My interview with Kirti also emphasized the importance of name recognition for these active women. During the interview scheduling process, when I asked for the address of the meeting location, Kirti provided only partial directions. However, she confidently assured me that anyone in the area would be able to guide me, as her reputation had preceded her. This approach was not limited to Kirti alone, as many other women activists followed a similar pattern. Interestingly, their claims of name recognition were often validated, as I was able to locate their destinations by asking a few strangers for directions to their homes or offices. Indeed Kirti told me that although she lived with her in-laws and the house was originally referred to as her father-in-law’s house, it was referred to as “Kirti’s house” now. This emphasis on name recognition and the ease with which their identities were recognized within their communities was emblematic of the impact and visibility that political engagement afforded these women. It enabled them to transcend their traditional domestic identities and become prominent figures with influence and recognition.

However, winning an election is not the sole path to establishing a public identity. The case of Radha, a part-time teacher, and first-time contestant in the 2021 municipal elections in Kota, exemplifies how individuals can build and sustain public identities even in the face of electoral defeat. Initially, Radha had never considered running for office. It was her husband, a member of the BJP’s youth wing, who encouraged her to participate in the elections. Despite her initial reluctance, Radha actively campaigned alongside her husband, delivering speeches and taking part in rallies.

Although Radha did not emerge victorious in the election, her involvement in the political process had a profound impact on her public image. As she continued in public life through *seva* based activities, people approached her for assistance, viewing her as their representative, despite her defeat. They expressed their continued faith in her abilities, stating that they considered her their “Councilor” even without the formal title. This sustained

political and community engagement catalyzed an important life choice: despite her parents' opposition, she left her job to pursue politics in a full-time way.

Another way to establish a public identity was by attaining an official position within the political party. Activists coveted an official title because it made their involvement seem official in the eyes of others, and a notch above the simple avocation or voluntarism that men sometimes thought about women in the party. Thus, when the position of the Party President changed hands in Rajasthan in 2019, there was much jostling within the party since it meant that existing working committees, including the women's wing, would be reconstituted. In Jaipur, the new District President faced so many competing claims that it took her more than six months to constitute a new working committee. For many women not habituated to recognition in their personal lives, official titles boosted their self-worth and gave them a tangible accomplishment they could use to embellish their reputation amongst voters as well as intercede more effectively on their behalf. Indeed, underlining the link between titles and her efficacy in doing *seva* for people, an activist in Jodhpur said, "Since I got a title, I no longer have to wait for hours to meet government officers and police or get turned away. Now I simply say I am a Mandal Adhyaksh, and they immediately make time to meet me."

While some activists sought official titles within the political party to enhance their social service work, it was not the sole motivation for everyone. Some women valued titles for the personal recognition and social prestige they would acquire within their community and the party organization. Lekha voiced her frustration with this growing phenomenon, remarking, "More than half the women [under my leadership] want an official position, but when it comes to actually carrying out the work, they are nowhere to be found!"

As activists and social workers, the BJP opened up numerous opportunities for women to engage with diverse communities and institutions. Activists received invitations to speak at events organized by caste and community organizations, where their newfound status and identity gave them a platform to address pertinent issues and advocate for their ideological worldviews. Some activists were also sought after as chief guests in educational institutions, sports tournaments, and cultural programs, as well as other social service and civil society organizations. Activists received certificates and souvenirs from these events that were often proudly displayed in their living rooms. Those activists who had not received such invitations, but were active in party events, also collected pictures, news articles, and posters as evidence of their involvement. A Block President in the women's wing in Jaipur proudly showed me a carefully preserved banner inviting people to attend a public meeting featuring Modi, and a photograph of herself in the corner with other women in her team. Collectively, these diverse engagements significantly expanded the self-imagery of women activists, instilling in them a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Party politics provided women with yet another route to social prominence. As activists and social workers, the BJP opened up numerous opportunities for women to engage with diverse communities and institutions. Activists received invitations to speak at events organized by caste organizations—often intensely patriarchal spaces—and community institutions, where their newfound status and identity gave them a platform to address pertinent

issues and advocate for their ideological worldviews. Some activists were also sought after as chief guests in educational institutions, sports tournaments, and cultural programs, as well as other social service and civil society organizations.

The significance of these engagements was not lost on activists. Women like Radha who had recently embarked on this path, as well as more seasoned activists like Lekha alike cherished the certificates and souvenirs received from these events, proudly displaying them in their homes and offices as symbols of their contributions. Even those women who had not had the chance to attend such events, but were active in party events collected records such as photographs, news articles, and posters as a way to document their involvement and demonstrate their dedication. For instance, a Block President proudly showed me a carefully preserved banner inviting people to attend a public meeting featuring Modi that also had a photograph of herself in the corner with other women in her team. Collectively, these diverse engagements significantly expanded the self-imagery of women activists, instilling in them a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Interestingly, the recognition received by activists also had some unexpected consequences. Lekha, for example, experienced a change in how shopkeepers treated her in her neighborhood. They offered her discounts and even extended informal credit offers without her asking. While she clarified that she did not take advantage of these privileges, she enjoyed the special treatment and recognition it brought her. On the other hand, Radha found her newfound status hindered her ability to bargain at the marketplace. The local fruit seller would often allude to her elevated position whenever she tried to negotiate prices, which became a source of mild, yet amusing, frustration for her family.

Summing up: agency from *seva*

The creation of a new public identity by women in the BJP was often centered around the concept of *seva*. Rather than identifying themselves as politicians or party workers, these women activists embraced the role of *samaj sevikas* or social workers. They derived a sense of self-fulfillment and purpose from their acts of social service, considering it a core aspect of their identity.

While some men also identified themselves as social workers, it held a more central position in the self-perception and agency of women activists. This emphasis on social service aligned with culturally accepted models of femininity, allowing women to navigate their roles within society more comfortably. As noted by Jakimow (2019a), adopting the identity of a social worker is a common “political style” for both men and women politicians in India. However, for women, it held particular significance due to its compatibility with societal expectations of femininity. By framing themselves as social workers, women activists not only aligned with socially acceptable norms but also positioned themselves as individuals dedicated to the betterment of their communities. This identity allowed them to establish a distinct and respected position within their party and the larger society. Their commitment to *seva* resonated with people and enhanced their credibility as political actors, leading to increased support and recognition.

Political scientists have often assumed that politicians are strategic, and thus the appropriation of a frame as altruistic and selfless as *seva* can only stem from strategic motivations. In fact, Goyal (2021) says that women activists in Delhi strategically downplay political ambition in favor of gender-compliant social work. Like with most things, there is some truth in that perspective. Indeed, the articulation of *samaj seva* as a motivation for political entry was so prevalent among women in the BJP that I initially questioned whether respondents were merely using these norm-compliant frames to present themselves in a socially desirable light. However, as I spent more time with the party activists and they became more comfortable opening up to me, I realized many of them were indeed motivated by these altruistic goals. For several ground-level activists politics was not just about the strategic calculus of winning elections, pursuing power, or seeking rents from occupying office. While winning elections and holding positions of power may become a priority for some women once they occupied public office, ground-level activists consistently articulated their motivation in terms of *seva*.

Seva resonated with women activists because it tapped into their affective motivations. For instance, Meenu said, “I feel good about myself when I can help people get their work done by taking them to the Councilor or MLA.” One could argue that Meenu could afford to be other-regarding because she was not occupying public office. But women in office like Kusum, a Councilor in Jodhpur, echoed a similar sentiment when she said that political power was important to her insofar as it enabled her to feel good about getting things done for people, but not for its own sake.¹⁷ Moreover, *seva* was not limited to those engaged in the political vocation. Women from various backgrounds, such as the elder of the two recently married sisters from the Rajput community introduced in Chapter 4, spoke about her aspirations, “I would like to finish school over the next couple of years, but ideally, I would want to be in a position where I can help other people, not just in my family or community. I don’t know to what extent that will be possible, but since you asked, that is what will make me feel good about myself.”¹⁸

Thus, the motivation of women activists to engage in *seva* went beyond strategic calculations of winning elections or seeking personal gains. It reflected their genuine desire to make a positive impact by contributing to the well-being of others. And it is through this that women activists found their own sense of fulfillment and self-worth, leading to a sense of affective agency grounded in *seva*.

The notion of *seva*-based affective agency is highlighted in Tanya Jakimow’s research.¹⁹ While Jakimow’s account aligns with Sabah Mahmood’s perspective on agency as a process of self-becoming, it also deviates from Mahmood’s emphasis on docility by highlighting the indispensable role of emotions in the process of self-fashioning. Emotions, according to Jakimow, not only shape individuals’ sense of self but also broaden the possibilities of who they can become. Within the realm of *seva*-based affective agency, activists’ emotional

¹⁷Interview with author, November 2019.

¹⁸Interview with author in Jodhpur, November 2019.

¹⁹Jakimow (2019a; 2023)

responses are deeply influenced by their intended self-perception as benevolent and compassionate individuals dedicated to social work. Furthermore, when emotions intersect with politics, individuals in positions of power (broadly interpreted as having the ability to influence outcomes for others) place significant importance on *seva* in constructing their sense of self. Ultimately, emotion and affect play a crucial role in *seva*-based agency by shaping women's self-identity, expanding the range of possibilities for selfhood, and reinforcing gendered identities associated with care, selflessness, and social work.

An alternative formulation of power and agency through public *seva* parallels Lamb (2000)'s explanation that providing domestic *seva* can, counter-intuitively, be a form of power.

“At the same time that *seva* overtly signifies the superiority of the elder being served, more covertly it reveals the elder's declining domestic power and bodily strength... the act of cleaning up an elder... marks a junior's hierarchically inferior position... but it points sharply as well to the elder's incontinence, loss of control over even basic bodily functions, and infantility.”

This formulation of agency through political *seva* was echoed by Suman Sharma, a former President of the BJP's women's wing in Rajasthan who said “If you [women] think politics is dirty, then the onus is on you to jump in and clean it but in a way that you don't get defiled. Don't wait for others [men] to do it for you.”²⁰ In saying this, she acknowledged the imperfection of men, placed women lower in the party's hierarchy, echoed women's domestic duties by asking them to shoulder the responsibility of cleaning up politics and yet maintaining their purity, and in so doing endowed them with a moral integrity that men supposedly lacked. Hence, in this second formulation of agency, women's traditional roles were a source of affective and moral power that gave them an upper hand but at the same time, did not seek to change the root cause of why politics was considered dirty in the first place.

Taken together, we find that norm-compliant participation can be constitutive of agency for women in conservative parties. Political work, especially if it was framed in terms of *seva* gave women a socially permissible way to enter public spaces and increased their mobility. Second, it expanded their networks: they met, and worked with, other like-minded women, and exchanged information and advice on household and external matters. Third, *seva* gave women a means to express and propagate their worldviews, making them feel that they were part of a larger movement to shape their community and nation. Fourth, it also gave women a public identity and a means of affective well-being. Finally, *seva* was also important for a sense of moral agency, where women could recognize their moral superiority over men.

All these factors contributed to women feeling they had the ability to shape their personal lives and outcomes for themselves and their community, and through this, how they thought they were perceived by their peers in the party and community. For many regular participants and experienced activists, *seva*-based participation was the first time they had been able to

²⁰Interview with author in Jaipur, February 2019.

see themselves as active agents who could exert control over their lives. These feelings of power and agency were amplified by women's newfound proximity to nodes of social and political power. Indeed, activists often brought up their connections to the political elite during interviews in a bid to boost my perceptions of their recognition, efficacy, and power to influence outcomes.

This brings us to the realization that women imparting *seva* in the public sphere do so from a position of power. Parties and candidates depend on activists' mobilization abilities and campaign efforts during elections, as also for shaping public perceptions about partisan policy platforms in non-electoral times. In addition, citizens approach them as supplicants for assistance in filling forms, obtaining government identification cards, making claims on the state, and even resolving domestic and community disputes, many of which were functions of traditional elites. This is in sharp contrast to *seva* in the private sphere, where women are often at the lower end of the power hierarchy within the family. This reversal of power dynamics between the private and public sphere, access to power structures, and ability to get things done for others allows women to acquire greater agency through political *seva*.

The limited emancipation of *seva*

Within the home

As the experiences and narratives of these BJP activists indicate, norm-compliant mobilization eased them out of many of the constraints they had been subjected to in the past. Despite their participation being shaped by patriarchal norms, women were able to make objective progress there was an objective increase in the range of freedoms women were able to experience. This increase in agency was also visible in the progress with their self-fashioning projects. However, it is important to acknowledge that the underlying conditions supporting this increased agency did not challenge the patriarchal foundations of women's subjugation. As a result, there are inherent limitations on the extent to which norm-compliant mobilization can be considered truly emancipatory.

The primary limitation of *seva*-based participation was its inability to challenge existing gender roles and societal expectations imposed on women. While *seva* provided women with the opportunity to construct public identities as selfless, sacrificing, and caring social workers, these identities remained aligned with patriarchal constructions of women's roles and conformed to the expected norms of public behavior. As a result, they did not confront the underlying causes of women's subjugation within the home and society, nor did they address the issue of women's under-representation within political parties, as highlighted by Suman Sharma's perspective on women's contributions in the BJP. If these public identities had encouraged behaviors that challenged established norms by diminishing men's status at home or expanding women's freedoms beyond societal expectations, the potential for transformative change through political engagement would not have been undermined.

Women in the BJP were comfortable with continuing their political engagement as long as it was considered acceptable by gatekeepers. As Williams notes, most activists consid-

ered “family support” as indispensable to initiate and sustain their political lives. In my interviews, almost all the married women expressed gratitude towards their spouse or family members for granting them permission to pursue their political interests. The support and cooperation from their families were of utmost importance, to the extent that these women were willing to discontinue their political work if their families withdrew their permission. When faced with a hypothetical choice between their political endeavors and fulfilling their family obligations, the women unequivocally prioritized their families, as they expressed sentiments like “We can live without politics, but not without families.” This observation aligns with previous research by Sarkar (1993), who found that members of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti remained tied to family interests and ideology while enjoying a limited yet significant public identity. In this context, the desired identity these women aimed to establish was one that set them apart from other women in their social and political circles, without posing a challenge to men’s position within their households.

Although women’s deference to their families and avowed adherence to patriarchal boundaries could limit personal autonomy, it can also be argued that it was a rational decision since families could be a source of valuable political capital activists seeking to be able to continue their political engagement or even rise in the party hierarchy. In this context, family support, rather than a trope as Williams (2023) suggests, could be an extremely valuable asset and signal of character and moral integrity. Thus, the potential political and personal gains from maintaining a harmonious relationship with their families and conforming to social mores outweighed the potential costs of loss in agency in the eyes of most activists.

Obtaining family support for women entering the political sphere was often a delicate and strategic process. When women joined at the urging of their families, their support was already secured. However, for others, gaining family support required careful negotiation and selection of allies and adversaries. Rather than confronting the entire household individually, which could be risky, potential activists were more likely to succeed if they could build initial bridges by taking sympathetic members into confidence. In joint families, husbands were often the first recipients of wives’ confidence. If they could be convinced, they could act as bulwarks against other family members if they expressed their incontinence with the looming change in status quo.

This process of negotiation necessitated women to take a cooperative rather than confrontational stance with their families. Potential activists did not want to “spoil the environment of their home” home by being too recalcitrant in their approach. When Sahyadri expressed her desire to transition from non-partisan social work to the local organization of the BJP, she initially faced opposition from her father-in-law, who believed that women from respectable families should refrain from engaging in party politics. However, Sahyadri was able to garner support from her husband, who then persuaded his mother to accept her decision. As a result, Sahyadri’s father-in-law had little choice but to suppress his dissent and acquiesce to the family’s consensus. Now that he was old and infirm—he had recently undergone an operation—and he saw Sahyadri taking care of him, she told me with some pride that he regretted his initial disapproval. According to her, this process of negotiation was arduous but necessary since balancing family and politics was a process of give and take,

especially for women. Favors from others, including their own family could not be assumed, they had to be earned through love and *seva*.

In addition to coalition-building, a second reason why negotiations were so important for potential political entrants was to share the burden of household chores. As shown in Chapter 5 the strongest impediment to regular political engagement in the eyes of women were household chores and obligations. In South Asian and Rajasthani cultures, the early years of marriage are often dedicated to learning household management from senior women, limiting women's engagement in external activities. However, as women gain experience and become more proficient in their domestic responsibilities, they can negotiate for more personal space and pursue their interests. Typically, this negotiation involves sharing their household responsibilities with their mother-in-law or sisters-in-law. Family structure matters here: larger families provided greater possibilities for sharing and shuffling responsibilities among women. Consequently, and perhaps counter-intuitively, I found more politically active women in joint families compared to nuclear families in rural Rajasthan.

Party work could often be arduous. Describing her schedule during elections, an activist told me how she spent nearly 12-14 hours outside the house for a sustained period of two to four weeks. She woke up at 4-5 am, packed lunch for their husbands and children, set food aside for remaining family members who would remain at home, put the house in order, served breakfast by 7-9 am and then left for party work. These punishing schedules and long periods of absence meant made it still more essential for women to avoid conflicts and take a cooperative stance with families.

A final reason why activists could not risk alienating their families was because political advancement required access to resources, that women often lacked. Not only were election campaigns becoming increasingly expensive—candidates reported spending between Rs 500,000 to 5,000,000 in *Sarpanch*-level elections, the lowest level in India's federal structure. Assembly and parliamentary election campaigns could run into several multiples of this. In addition, election nominations were hard to come by without greasing the palms of party elite with substantial sums of money. It was impossible for women to access such amounts without independent access to large capital or productive assets like a business, industry, factory, or agricultural land, ownership of most of these things were skewed towards men.

But it is not as if substantial reductions in the cost of fighting elections would make politics easier for women to *afford* doing politics. Active workers were often asked to travel to different parts of the city or even rural areas at short notice. This was relatively straightforward for women like Lekha and Sahyadri who had a personal vehicle, but the vast majority of women were not as fortunate. Public transport could be unreliable and unsafe, and for some women and gatekeepers, ill-befitting the stature of their family. Consequently activists had few options besides requesting husbands or families to cover these expenses. This could lead to them feeling guilty about their participation, and so they tried to limit their participation within their immediate neighborhood. Irregular engagement was acceptable if activists did not nurture additional ambitions, but because active participation was a metric for handing out titles and nominations (at least for those who could not rely on personal finances or connections), selective activity could be an impediment to one's prospects within the

party. Often, sincere workers had to forgo promotions because of financial constraints and unwillingness to constantly ask their husbands for travel and related money. Thus, lacking independent access to financial resources made it even more imperative for party workers to take a cooperative, and not conflicting, stance with their families.

Within the BJP

The mobilization of women is a hard task at the best of times, but especially so in a state like Rajasthan where women had been excluded from public spaces through stringent norms of seclusion. Gatekeeping norms were so strong that entering public spaces aside, gatekeepers did not allow us to interview women Sarpanches and Councilors over the phone, leading us to abandon a phone-based survey of party activists. In one case from Jodhpur, a father-in-law insisted on responding on the behalf of the intended respondent, and took umbrage when the enumerator asked him about her age. Despite these hurdles, women in the BJP worked assiduously to engage with women, educate them about the government's welfare programs, mobilize them to party events, all the while assuaging families of their safety and security while they were outside the house.

Not only did women perceive their roles in politics as more challenging than those of men, but they also regarded themselves as more loyal and dedicated foot soldiers. They actively participated in party activities, worked tirelessly on the ground, and believed in the party's ideology and vision. However, despite their dedication and hard work, active women were often overlooked when it came to securing electoral nominations. Activists nursing political advancement through contesting elections felt particularly aggrieved when denied a nomination from a female-reserved constituency. Several complained that parties misused them, "When they want to mobilize women for an event, we do it... they tell us to fill so many buses... But when it is election time, the ticket goes to a man [female proxy of male activist]".

Why was women's *seva* devalued by the party? One possible reason is not necessarily the work itself, but rather biases and stereotypes associated with women. However, this explanation seems less plausible, as parties are required to nominate women in local elections, and both the BJP and the INC tend to nominate women at similar rates. Instead, I argue that the nature of the work that women activists typically engage in may contribute to the devaluation of their contributions. Gender-based spheres of socialization often leads women activists to primarily focus on working with women whose vote might be influenced by families more than men. This type of work is often conducted on an individual basis, such as providing support, assistance, and interceding with government officials or higher-level activists and politicians. As a result, the labor involved in this work is more intensive and time-consuming compared to activities like leading marches or protests, which are more visible and tend to be associated with men's roles in political activism. Moreover, the visibility of women's work is often limited due to their restricted access to public forums and spaces. Women activists, unlike men, cannot spend time at the local tea shop or village or town square to talk up their achievements leading to fewer opportunities to amplify their

messages to the electorate and building a strong following for themselves. Thus the nature of women's work the nature of lack of visibility can hinder their recognition and influence within the party, contributing to the undervaluation of their contributions.

This is not a phenomenon restricted to India. Based on research in Argentina, Mariela Daby argues that the gendered division of political work creates discrimination against female brokers by favoring men in the building, expanding, and sustaining personal political networks. This division of labor emerges from women's disproportionate work with non-voting populations, such as women and children, limiting their opportunities to utilize clientelism to build a following. Furthermore, because female brokers cannot deny services to children, they have fewer means to punish voters who fail to reciprocate by participating in rallies and elections. This disparity in political work allocation and the limited capacity for punishment further hampers the ability of female brokers to establish and cultivate a dedicated following.

A second reason why women's work and *seva* may be undervalued in parties can be traced to societally gendered roles that assign men as breadwinners and providers, while relegating women to the role of homemakers. Because women activists often do not have access to independent income streams and are widely seen as financed by their families, their political involvement can be interpreted by parties, and particularly male activists, as an avocation than as a vocation. When parties or women frame their political motivations in terms of *seva*, it further reinforces the notion that women's engagement akin to a hobby than a career. Unlike *seva*, electoral politics is associated with the exercise of power, leadership, and representation, making it more likely to be viewed as a legitimate career path.

Furthermore, when women consciously downplay their ambitions by emphasizing that their interest in power is primarily driven by its potential to expand their scope of *seva*, it inadvertently reinforces the perception that women are inherently uninterested in pursuing power for its own sake. This approach that aligns with societal expectations and norms of femininity, perpetuates the idea that women's motivation in politics are *solely* rooted in altruistic and service-oriented goals, rather than seeking positions of authority and influence. After all, power is not a necessary condition for undertaking social work, and women can continue with their *seva*-oriented goals without being in a position of power. Thus, when men (through a proxy in a female-reserved seat) and women are pitted in a zero-sum game, this emboldens men like Prakash to request women activists to withdraw their nominations. This request is grounded in the belief that men are the primary breadwinners for their families, while women are viewed as hobbyists, undermining the seriousness and dedication of women activists in the political arena.

In this particular aspect, there was a shared consensus among activists from both the BJP and the INC that their respective parties were reluctant to nominate them in elections. Yet there were differences with regard to the extent to which BJP and INC activists *sought* to contest elections. Unlike the INC where most activists openly discussed their plans to run for office, BJP activists, on average, were more circumspect and less vocal on this topic. Some women like Angoori Bai, an Anganwadi (child care center) worker affiliated with the BJP, preferred to stay out of the electoral aspects of politics claiming, "*Chunav ladvane mein jo mazaa aata hai ladne mein kahaan aata hai.*" ("It is so much more fun to help

others fight elections, rather than contesting yourself.)” Others like Lekha hesitated to take the plunge from organizational work into electoral politics. Office seeking, according to her, need not—and should not—be an activist’s primary motivation.

“It’s not that I don’t want to contest [elections], but you really can’t do long-term politics if your sole motivation is getting a ticket. There are so many factors [behind this], it is so uncertain. So, you need to find other things that motivate you.”

Survey data corroborates this observation. For one, fewer BJP women in my sample had contested elections (42% vs 68.5%, $p < 0.01$). Although this is in part a feature of the respondent selection procedure, the BJP did have more non-elected activists who were easier to approach for interviews than the INC.²¹ In addition, a survey experiment pitting electoral ambition against party loyalty also points towards BJP activists professing greater loyalty, even if it was at the cost of career advancement.

In this survey experiment, we sought the respondent’s opinion on a hypothetical situation involving an active worker (randomized as a woman or man) from their party whose application for a party nomination had just been denied in favor of another person (also randomized as a woman or man) who had not done any party work but whose family had good connections with the party’s elite. Convinced that the original active worker could win the election, another party had offered to nominate them, but this would mean leaving the party. After presenting this, we asked the respondent for their opinion on this matter on a scale of -2 to 2, where lower values indicate that the activist should remain with the party and higher values indicate that the activist should prioritise their career and join the other party.²² Although this was conjectural, most party workers seeking an election ticket had experienced this; in fact, upon hearing the vignette, a BJP worker in Kota commented we were relating her own story to her.

The pre-specified analysis for this is as follows:

$$y_{id} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BJP_{id} + \beta_2 \text{female denied}_{id} + \beta_3 \text{female nominated}_{id} + \beta_4 \text{female denied} \times \text{female nominated}_{id} + \gamma_{id} + \delta_d + \epsilon_{id} \quad (7.1)$$

Here the outcome variable, y , is a rating of the extent to which the i^{th} respondent in the d^{th} district feels that the person denied an election ticket should stay with the party. “BJP” indicates whether the respondent is a BJP activist, “female denied” indicates whether the party worker denied the nomination was a woman, while “female nominated” indicates whether the person winning the nomination was a woman or not. γ refers to a matrix of covariates and δ refers to district fixed effects.

²¹INC activists were more prone to enquiring about my (and enumerators’) antecedents and connections with party elite. Although few activists overtly declined to participate when approached over the phone, many failed to set up a date and time, and stopped responding thereafter.

²²This is a modified outcome variable (\tilde{z}) created as a linear transformation of the original rating (z) provided on a 1-5 scale by the respondent, viz. $\tilde{z} = z - 3$. Please refer to the party workers’ questionnaire in the Appendix.

Table 7.1: Party switching vignette experiment (Party activists' survey)

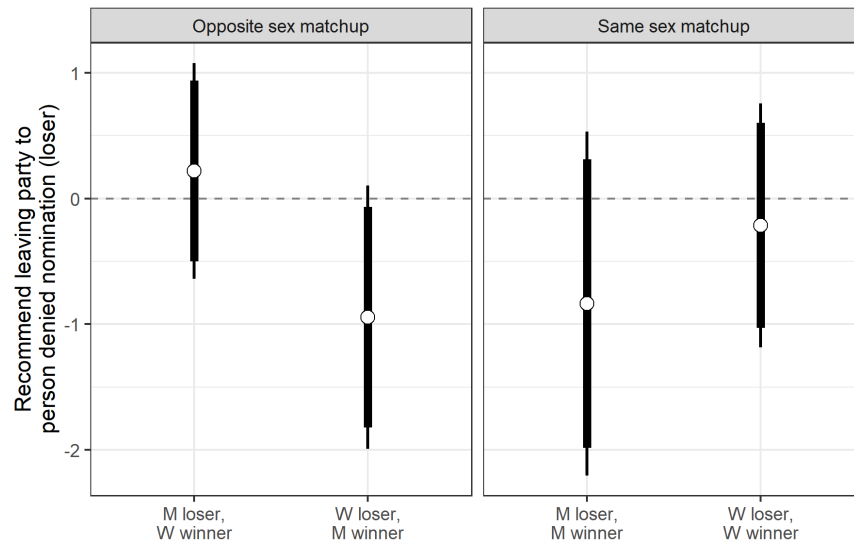
	Recommend party switching			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
BJP	-0.548** (0.232)	-0.576** (0.233)	-0.585** (0.233)	-0.573** (0.253)
F denied		0.090 (0.232)	-0.227 (0.340)	-0.114 (0.340)
F nominated		-0.300 (0.239)	-0.608* (0.340)	-0.551 (0.347)
F denied × F nominated			0.591 (0.465)	0.600 (0.472)
Constant	-1.074*** (0.176)			
FE	×	District	District	District
Covariates	×	×	×	Y
Observations	128	128	128	127
R ²	0.042	0.059	0.071	0.147

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. This table shows the results of a survey-based vignette experiment administered to party activists to test their willingness to recommend that a hypothetical election candidate switch to a different party upon being denied a nomination from their current party. The outcome variable is measured from -2 to 2, where positive numbers indicate a stronger recommendation to switch parties. The constant term shows the mean recommendation for respondents in the INC. Covariate adjustment was conducted per the pre-specified procedure.

Results in Table 7.1 that the extent of party loyalty is considerably high across both parties. The constant term of -1.074 indicates that on average INC activists would discourage the vignette's protagonist from leaving the party to further their career. Hence, while they would indeed like to further their careers (per my qualitative evidence), they had some second thoughts if it involved leaving the party. The BJP's activists were even more discouraging of party switching to further their careers, by 0.57, a substantive difference of more than 50%.

Finally, in an exploratory analysis I explore the conditions under which women in the BJP, relative to the INC are more (or less) likely to recommend staying with the party. Given that women in the BJP, on average are more likely to espouse complementary gender roles from an ideological perspective, even as they undermine them to some extent under the watchful gaze of domestic gatekeepers, I examine matchups based on the sex of the persons winning and losing the party nomination. Hence in same-sex matchups I consider female (male) winners vs female (male) losers, and in opposite-sex matchups, I consider female

Figure 7.1: When should deserving candidates switch parties when denied nominations? (only BJP activists)



Note: This figure illustrates the conditions under which BJP activists, relative to the INC, recommend that a person denied an electoral nomination should switch parties. These results are based on the results of a party switching vignette experiment conducted as part of the party activists' survey. The dependent variable is a transformation of the survey outcome where negative values indicate greater party loyalty and positive values correspond to recommendations of party switching. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with district-level fixed effects and adjusted for covariates.

(male) winners vs male (female) losers. Figure 7.1 visualises the results of this analysis. In same-sex matchups, I find that BJP respondents are about as likely as INC respondents to recommend that the nomination loser stay with the party. However, when it comes to opposite sex matchups, I find that women in the BJP are more likely to recommend loyalty to women who lose their nomination to a man compared to the INC ($p < 0.1$). However, there is no difference between the BJP and the INC in recommendations for men losing nominations to women.

There is an obvious caveat to this, that of the small sample size; this analysis is based on responses from 74 BJP and 54 INC activists. But notwithstanding this, we find suggestive evidence of differential political cultures across the two parties, where women in conservative settings are more likely to profess patience and loyalty even in the face of being denied a well-deserved reward for sustained activism. Crucially, this actually may be an underestimate as shown in this interaction with Preeti, a BJP activist in Jodhpur, about how she voluntarily exited a race to a possible electoral nomination.

In the previous election, this ward was not reserved for women, and Prakash [a male BJP activist] was elected as Councilor. Prakash is like my younger brother. I had even done door-to-door campaigns with him at that time. But this time, the ward was reserved for women and it was my turn to contest. But Prakash came to me pleading, “Please let my wife contest. My family and I have staked everything on politics, and all of this will be wasted if I can’t take another shot. Whatever *seva* you need, just tell me, it will be done.” His wife is completely uneducated and undeserving, but what could I do? I didn’t want to spoil my relationship with someone I consider almost a brother, so as much as I wanted to contest, I decided not to. I still regret it sometimes... but no, I still can’t leave BJP. Not everything is about an election ticket.”

That Prakash’s wife was perceived as “undeserving” was widely shared among other activists in the neighborhood. Although I could not interview Prakash’s wife—the mere suggestion of her engaging in political discussions independently, without her husband’s presence, was met with open derision among other activists—I was able to visit her office at a time when Prakash was busy in a field visit, and his wife was at home. Here, I saw a framed collage of her activities after being elected as Councilor. In each photograph, Prakash was either in the center or by her side; there was not one picture he did not feature in.

While it would be unwise to generalize based on an incident or two, they were remarkably common in the two parties, but especially in conversations with BJP activists, where even in reserved wards, women activists were requested to take a step back. This leads to the inference that the familial bonds that the BJP encourages within its organization, bolstered by the ideals of service and unwavering party loyalty, may contribute to women sacrificing their political ambitions for men, at least in the short to medium term. Consequently, *seva* also emerges as tool to provide women a certain motivation and meaning to their political involvement in the BJP, while simultaneously managing their aspirations, ultimately undermining women’s political agency within the party.

7.2 Implications for democracy

The importance of political participation depends on our conceptualization of democracy. In classical theories, democracy’s defining characteristic is competition for leadership.²³ Consequently, citizens’ participation is restricted to helping choose the winners of this competition through voting. In fact, broader definitions of participation are tantamount to citizens trying to control politicians which is anathema to this conception of democracy. Similarly, in other theories of democracy focusing on elections and elite competition, turnout continues to be the primary form of political participation.²⁴ Broader conceptualizations of democracy transcend these decision-making and competitive dimensions to “developing aspects of men’s

²³Schumpeter (1942)

²⁴Berelson (1954); Dahl (1956); Sartori (1965)

characters”²⁵ and promote “the general mental advancement of the community, including [...] advancement in intellect in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency”.²⁶ This stems from the normatively important idea that citizens should be able to actively govern themselves through their representatives in democracies. For instance, “people must be allowed to decide freely what traditions they wish or not wish to follow”,²⁷ and they should be able to have a say in the social and economic goals the state sets for itself.²⁸ This leads to the notion that democracies need to educate people to think of the public good more than just self-interest. This is where political participation steps in as the main tool to educate people. Thus, from a means of selecting who governs, here participation is central to democratic practice. It increases people’s functionings, capabilities and teaches people to become better private and public citizens. Further, participation and citizenship are self-reinforcing: the more a person participates, the better he or she becomes at being a democratic citizen.²⁹

Notwithstanding its importance, most democracies suffer from the long-standing problems of overall low levels of participation, as well as inequality in which groups participate. Many individuals and groups are unable or unwilling to care about participating in politics, so much so that Sartori (1965) suggested that the real problem was not low participation *per se* but the expectation that it should be higher. Further, inter-group inequality in participation leads to the systematic exclusion of particular groups from the decision-making process. This is because such groups may not be able to elect the representatives of their choice, and after elections, representatives with limited time and resources at their disposal are likely to answer to more vocal or electorally responsive groups.

Consequently, significant scholarship highlights the importance of citizen engagement to democratic deepening. In India, the last decade and a half has seen nothing less than an explosion of political participation, both in terms of turnout and active engagement. Yet, India is also passing through a phase of democratic backsliding and Freedom House and the V-Dem project have downgraded India to being an electoral autocracy, or only “partly free”. Existing explanations focus on the government’s control of democratic institutions, and its lack of commitment to constitutional ideals of pluralism and minority rights. Yet these explanations do not explain increasing engagement. How then does one explain this puzzle?

Measuring democracy: The V-Dem project

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project is one of the best organized efforts to collect data on democratic processes both in terms of historical coverage, and contemporary breadth and granularity. The 2020 version of the dataset contains 482 indicators and 87

²⁵Rousseau (1762)

²⁶Mill (1861)

²⁷Sen (1999)

²⁸Verba and Nie (1972)

²⁹Pateman (2014)

indices covering 202 polities between 1789 and 2019. The project identifies five definitions of democracy based on the key attribute or component that each seeks to measure.

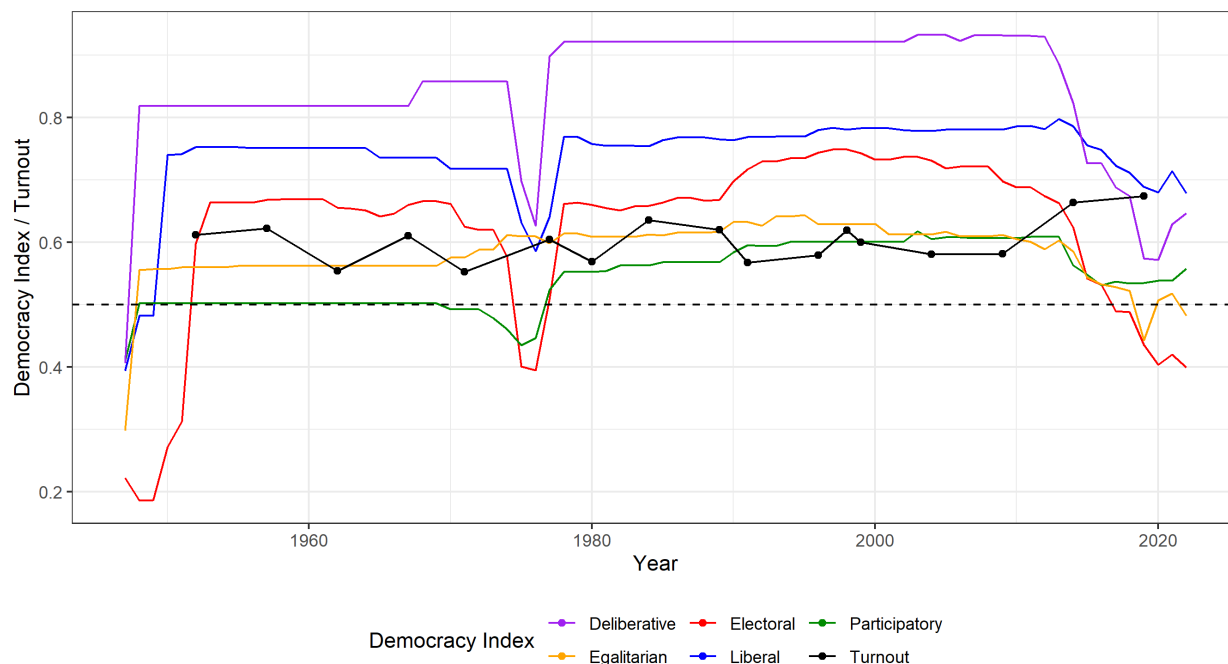
The first of these is electoral democracy based on Dahl (1956)'s idea of democracy as a polyarchy. This dimension focuses on the presence of free and fair elections, where citizens have the right to vote and political parties can compete for power. Moreover, it emphasizes the protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, association, and assembly, which allows citizens to express their opinions and engage in political activities without fear of repression. The second conception of a democracy is that of a liberal democracy that accords primacy to the protection of individual rights and civil liberties through the constitutional protections, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances to limit the exercise of executive power. The third definition focuses on political inclusion and active participation, beyond the stipulation of elections. Because representatives may not always be able to fulfill their functions as delegates, citizen's participation is essential for the ability of democracies to be substantively representative. Thus, the participatory democracy definition looks at the extent to which citizens have opportunities to engage in decision-making processes, such as through public consultations, civil society organizations, and direct forms of citizen participation. Fourth, the deliberative dimension focuses on the quality of public deliberation and the openness of political discourse. It examines the availability of information, the ability of citizens to engage in reasoned debates, and the existence of mechanisms for public deliberation and deliberative decision-making. Finally, egalitarian democracy considers the extent to which political power is distributed equitably across society. It assesses factors such as socio-economic equality, the prevalence of discrimination, and the inclusiveness of political representation, particularly with regard to marginalized groups.

The V-Dem project considers its first measure, electoral democracy or polyarchy, to be the most fundamental of its five definitions, and as such, combines this index with the remaining four definitions when deriving indexes of liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy. Figure 7.2 shows the progress of democratic deepening in India since independence in 1947. To evaluate the progress of separate dimensions of democracy, I plot the base index reflecting participatory, liberal, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy without the final interaction with polyarchy.

As Figure 7.2 shows, India has usually demonstrated a moderate, if not always consistent, commitment to democratic practice. In particular, until the last decade, India had consistently done well in measures of deliberative and liberal democracy. The deepening of electoral democracy was particularly pronounced in the aftermath of the Emergency imposed between 1975 and 1977 when this measure showed a recovery over and above the pre-Emergency era. The increasing voice of non-dominant groups since the 1980s is also reflected in the rising index for participatory and egalitarian democracy.

In the last decade, and more so since 2014, there has been a marked decline in democratic health as indicated by all measures. The 2023 V-Dem report refers to India as "one of the worst autocratizers in the last 10 years", ranking it as 97th in its Liberal Democracy Index, 108 on the Electoral Democracy Index and 123 on the Egalitarian Component Index. Some of the key reasons for this include increased control over media, repression of civil

Figure 7.2: Increasing participation amidst democratic backsliding



Note: This figure shows the health of democracy in India since independence in 1947 and electoral turnout. Measures of democracy are from the V-DEM project (von Römer et al. 2023; Maerz et al. 2022). Turnout data is from the Voter Turnout Database published by Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2023). The horizontal dashed line indicates the minimum threshold for being classified as a democracy per V-DEM. The vertical dashed line is at the year 2014.

society, a decrease in academic and cultural freedom, episodes of violence against religious minorities, the use of anti-Muslim rhetoric and legislative measures introducing different rules for citizenship for migrants based on their religion. Media groups with right-wing leanings, have for their part, questioned purported double standards, the indexing methodology, as well as the V-Dem being part of an international conspiracy to malign India's image in the world.³⁰

However, across all this temporal variation in democratic health, political participation as measured through electoral turnout has remained largely steady. In fact, it has increased to an all-time high in 2019, at a time where India faces a growing crisis of democratic erosion. Other measures of active engagement especially during elections, as shown in Figure 1.1 are also increasing rapidly. This increase is also broad-based by gender and caste. Not only is participation high among men, but never before in India's history have women turned out at the same, if not higher, rate as men. Similarly, members of non-dominant caste groups, are also as likely to vote and participate as their higher caste counterparts.

³⁰See Pallav (2022) as one example of such opinions.

Consequently, participation and inclusion—particularly turnout or partisan engagement in the public sphere—as a barometer for democratic health would lead to the conclusion that the prospects for democracy in India were perhaps never better. Yet, *all* measures of democracy, not just the V-Dem project, but also the Polity IV project, and Freedom House indicate the presence of strong tendencies of democratic backsliding in multiple dimensions of democracy in contemporary India.

How do we resolve this apparent paradox of democratic decline amidst rising participation and inclusion? The answer, I argue, lies in examining why—or the conditions under which—democratic backsliding occurs. Existing scholarship on democratic backsliding has primarily examined its supply-side with an analysis of how populist and authoritarian-leaning leaders manipulate the rules of the democratic game in their favor, all while ostensibly working within constitutional boundaries.³¹ Indeed, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight how the violation of norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance can lead to a self-sustained downward spiral for democratic impulses. Other tools in the hands of populists and prospective authoritarian leaders include marginalizing the opposition, undermining experts, packing courts in their favor, installing loyalists in key positions, neutralizing critical media and reaching out directly to the people, and polarizing the electorate by demonizing certain groups. In all these cases, populist elites hollow out democratic institutions, while coming to power through democratic means.

Yet, this top-down elite-driven focus, while illuminating *how* democratic erosion occurs, does not shed light on *why* such tendencies can co-exist with rising participation. Indeed, citizen participation along with a united opposition, and robust media and civil society, has been considered an important check against the implosion of democratic institutions. Citizen participation assumes considerable significance in this process since populists seek electoral legitimacy even as they propose and implement policies that undermine democracy. Hence, it could be argued that the ultimate power in arresting democratic decline rests with citizens who after all have the ability to oust populists and authoritarians from office. Consequently, I contend that understanding the “demand side” of democratic erosion allows us to start piecing together the second piece of the puzzle by delving into the factors that shape citizens’ perceptions, participation, and potential tolerance for democratic erosion.

Classifying participation and participatory norms

A first step to understanding the demand side of democratic backsliding and its relation with citizen engagement is to recognize the enormous heterogeneity of citizen participation, both in terms of what it means for personal and political efficacy. This book makes an attempt in this direction by recognizing that participation may occur under norm-compliant and norm-undermining frameworks. While norm-compliant frames steer participants in a manner that aligns with established power structures, norm-undermining frames direct participation in

³¹Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Huq and Ginsburg (2018); Varol (2015)

the opposite direction, and in so doing can serve as a more effective check against creeping authoritarian tendencies.

This builds on a substantial previous scholarship on the relationship between participatory norms and democracy led by Almond and Verba (1963)'s seminal thesis that posited stability of democratic systems was contingent upon a delicate equilibrium among citizen participation, obedience to laws, and the acceptance of disagreeable decisions. This balance, referred to as a civic culture, fostered a sense of citizen influence within the government, effectively resolving the inherent tension between popular control and effective governance. Thus, they found participation under norm-compliant frames to be beneficial for democratic health.

However, subsequent research found shifts in the cultural foundations of participation conflicting with Almond and Verba (1963)'s normative model.³² In an increasingly post-materialist world, citizens were developing more assertive, self-expressive values that emphasized individual liberties and agency. Building upon this, Dalton (2015) classified original conception of the civic culture as an allegiant orientation that places emphasis on confidence in existing institutions, interpersonal trust, belief in democracy, and adherence to prevailing norms. On the other hand, an assertive orientation focused on promoting and protecting individual rights and liberties and exercising voice as a means to check state tyranny.

Consistent with Dalton (2015)'s approach I use data from the World values Survey to measure these distinct dimensions of participatory norms. To construct a measure of allegiant participation I construct an index based on three sub-indexes: institutional confidence, philanthropic faith, and norm compliance. Institutional confidence is measured by assessing individuals' level of trust in the armed forces, government, political parties, police, and the legal system and courts. Philanthropic faith is captured by combining measures of interpersonal trust, faith in democracy, and interest in politics. Finally, norm compliance represents the extent to which individuals conform to societal norms. This operationalization closely aligns with Dalton (2015), except for my inclusion of confidence in the government of the day and political parties in the institutional confidence index.

Next, I operationalise my measure of assertive participation based on averaging three indexes that measure respondents' sensitivity to the protection of individual rights, equality of opportunity, and the expression of opinions through collective action. The individual rights index comprises attitudes toward divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. The equal opportunities sub-index measures attitudes regarding gender equality in access to education, employment, and political engagement. Finally, I measure citizen articulation of voice through indicators such as participation in protests, strikes, occupy movements, and boycotts.

Table 7.2 summarises the components of each index. I standardize each component or variable by mean-centering and dividing by the standard deviation. Next, to calculate the

³²Douglas (1948); Inglehart (2018; 2015); Inglehart and Baker (2000); Inglehart (1977); Huber and Inglehart (1995); Nevitte (2011; 1996); Dalton (2004); Dalton and Welzel (2014); Dalton (2015); Norris (1999; 2011); Abramson and Inglehart (2009)

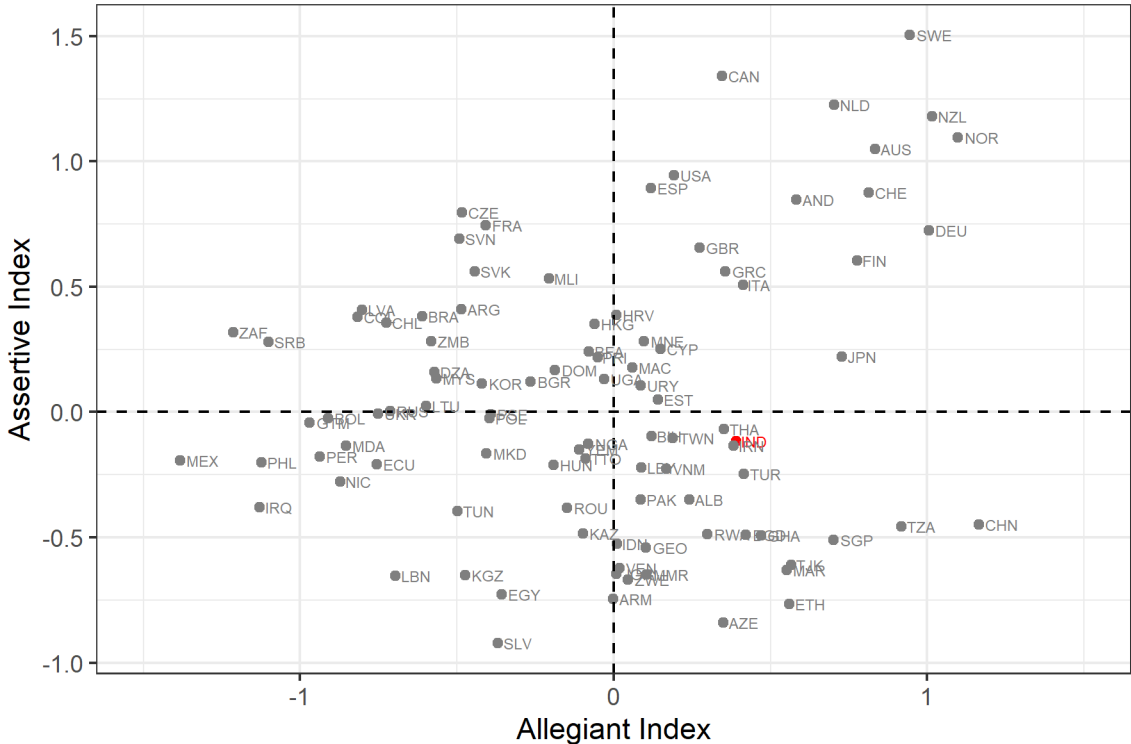
Table 7.2: Components of allegiant and assertive orientation indexes

Orientation index	Sub-index	Variable
Allegiant orientation	Institutional confidence (1/3): Confidence in	Armed forces
		Government
		Political Parties
		Police
	Philanthropic faith (1/3)	Courts
		Trust in others
Assertive orientation	Norm compliance (1/3): Attitudes towards	Belief in democracy
		Interest in politics
		Accepting bribes
	Individual liberties (1/3): Acceptance of	Evading taxes
		Cheating on state benefits
		Divorce
Equal opportunities (1/3): Attitudes towards gender equality in	Abortion	
	Homosexuality	
	Employment	
	University education	
Voice (1/3): Whether people have participated in	Political leadership	
	Protest	
	Strike/Occupy	
		Boycott

sub-index for each country-year, I simply take the arithmetic mean of the standardized components, Then, to derive the overall orientation index, I average across sub-indexes, assigning equal weights to each. Finally, I calculate country-year level averages, thereby constructing a pseudo-panel dataset spanning the seven waves of the WVS.

Figure 7.3 plots the values of the allegiant and assertive orientations for 99 countries using the latest available waves of the WVS. The plot includes dashed vertical and horizontal lines at 0 to represent the mean values of the indexes, which divide the countries into four distinct quadrants. The first quadrant indicates high allegiant-high assertive orientations with countries primarily in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and North America such as Sweden, Norway, Australia, Netherlands, Canada, Germany and the US. The second quadrant contains high allegiant but weakly allegiant countries including several from Asia and Africa like China, Tanzania, Singapore, Turkey, Pakistan, and Rwanda. India, in red, also belongs to this group. The third quadrant contains countries demonstrating low assertion and allegiance index scores. These include Slovenia, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Mexico, and

Figure 7.3: Allegiant and Assertive orientations index



Note: Using the latest available round of the World Values Survey, this figure plots allegiant and assertive orientations across 95 countries. The dashed lines correspond to the mean values of the standardized variables in the index. Variables included in the index are in Table 7.2.

Iraq amongst others. Finally the fourth quadrant has countries that are weakly allegiant but more assertive than average, for instance, France, the Czech Republic, Argentina, Brazil, Serbia, and South Africa.

Although the indexes are constructed such that there could be a high degree of correlation between them—there is no apriori reason why high confidence in democratic institutions cannot go hand-in-hand with equality of opportunity for instance—like Dalton (2015) I find only a weak positive linear relationship with $\rho = 0.14$. When adding the remaining waves, the relationship further weakens to $\rho = 0.03$. This lack of a relationship suggests that the allegiant and assertive indexes may be able to explain different facets of democratic practice.

Participation and democracy

To test the relationship between these distinct dimensions of participatory orientations and democratic outcomes, I combine the WVS pseudo-panel with measures of democracy cal-

culated by the V-Dem project. Keeping only those years when a survey was conducted, I analyse 251 cases or 95 countries spanning 31 years across 1989 till 2020.

Table 7.3: Relationship between participation and democratic health

	Democracy Index				
	Electoral	Liberal	Participatory	Deliberative	Egalitarian
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Assertive index	0.311*** (0.028)	0.267*** (0.026)	0.148*** (0.024)	0.200*** (0.026)	0.232*** (0.025)
Allegiant index	-0.028 (0.028)	-0.00003 (0.028)	-0.036* (0.020)	0.032 (0.026)	0.048* (0.026)
Constant	0.601*** (0.020)	0.693*** (0.019)	0.549*** (0.013)	0.722*** (0.017)	0.668*** (0.017)
Covariates	×	×	×	×	×
Observations	251	251	251	251	251
R ²	0.371	0.312	0.229	0.216	0.353

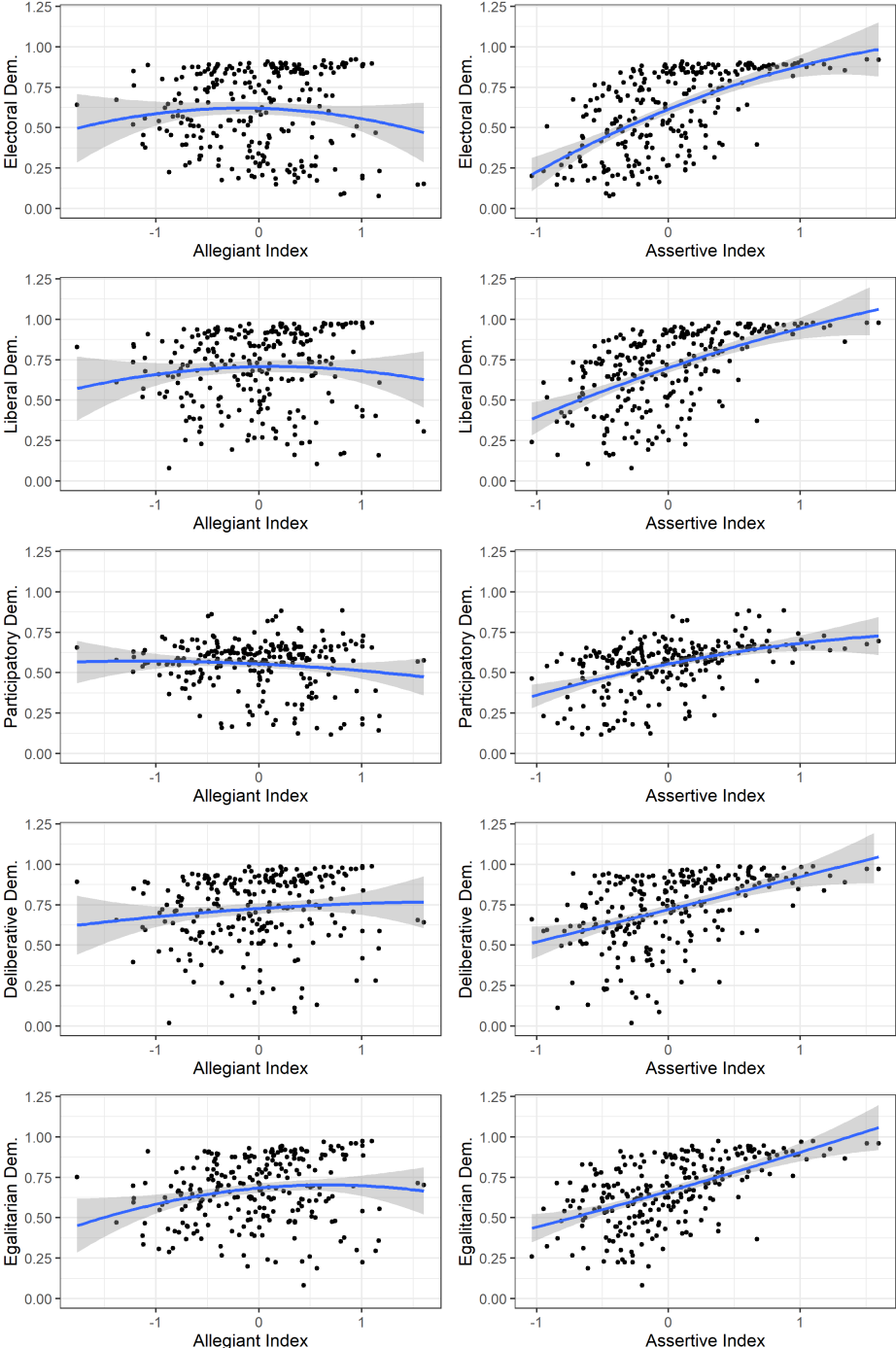
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. This table shows the association between different measures of democracy (from V-Dem) and indexes of allegiant and assertive orientations in political participation. SEs are clustered by country.

Table 7.3 presents the results of an OLS regression analysis that examines the relationship between participation and democratic health. The findings suggest that assertive participation has a positive and statistically significant relationship with democratic health across all five dimensions of democracy. The strength of the linear relationship is particularly strong for the electoral and liberal democracy measures, although an assertive orientation continues to be strongly predictive with improvements in other measures of democracy as well. In contrast, the coefficients for the allegiant index are statistically indistinguishable from 0 in three of five cases.

Figure 7.4 provides a visual representation of the relationship between participation and democratic health, specifically focusing on the assertive and allegiant inclinations. The graph clearly illustrates a strong and positive relationship between assertive inclinations and democratic health, as indicated by the upward trend of the line representing assertive participation.

In contrast, the relationship between allegiant inclinations and democratic deepening appears to be weaker, as reflected by the less pronounced trend of the line representing allegiant participation. Additionally, the presence of a quadratic smoothing curve suggests a non-linear relationship between democracy and allegiant participation. Specifically, it indicates an inverse-U pattern, implying that there may be an optimal level of allegiant

Figure 7.4: Relationship between type of participation and democratic success



Note: This figure shows the relationship between the different forms of participation cultures and democratic success. Trendlines are constructed based on OLS regressions with quadratic smoothing and no covariate adjustment. Data for participation culture is from the World Values Survey while measures of democracy are taken from the V-DEM project.

attitudes for democratic health, beyond which further increases in allegiant participation may not be beneficial. However, the relationships depicted in the figure do not imply causality. As a consequence, the results are also consistent with the explanation that countries with lower scores on democratic measures are more likely to foster allegiant attitudes among their citizens as a means to discourage threats to the existing political order.

These results provide a strong indication that the solution to the puzzle of democratic backsliding amidst rising participation can be found when we analyze *how* people engage with politics, not merely *how many* people engage. When people engage with politics *actively and assertively*, participation is correlated with better democratic outcomes, regardless of how it is measured. On the other hand, *active but allegiant* participation that upholds existing social order and can be channeled in the favor of the entrenched elite, is only beneficial to a certain point, after which the relationship reverses. This is not to decry the value of allegiant participation. Often, this can be the only route for repressed and marginalized populations to engage with the political sphere. However, the limited space for self-expression and dissent that allegiant participation provides reduces its value as a force for strengthening democracy by not exerting voice and accountability pressures upon the government and limiting expectations from the state.

In this context, allegiant citizenship is congruent to the idea of norm-compliant mobilization frames deployed by Modi and the BJP. During his tenure, Modi's speeches have highlighted the party's emphasis on discipline and adherence to public order, willingness to sacrifice and undertake hardships for the larger goal of nation-building, and on citizens' obligations towards the nation, rather than rights. When called upon to justify ill-informed and poorly designed policies like demonetization, the BJP's spokespersons called upon citizens to cultivate patience and selflessness for the greater good of the nation.³³

This marks a strong shift in political rhetoric and moral frameworks from the previous regime headed by the Indian National Congress that emphasized a rights-based framework to development, whereby rights to information, education, and employment were legislated. On the other hand, Modi has explicitly called upon citizens to accord greater primacy to duties and obligations rather than rights, saying "In the last 75 years, we only kept talking about rights, fighting for rights and wasting time. The talk of rights, to some extent, for some time, may be right in a particular circumstance, but forgetting one's duties completely has played a huge role in keeping India weak."³⁴ In accordance with this moral framework, Modi renamed one of the most important ceremonial boulevards in New Delhi from *Raj Path* (previously called Kingsway) to *Kartavya* (Obligations) *Path*. In addition, in a speech in July 2023, he called the next 25 years leading to 100 years of India's independence the Era of Obligation (*Kartavya Kaal*) where citizens would have to prioritize duties. "Duty," he said was "not an option, but a resolution."³⁵ To highlight this message further, in a televised conversation with students, Modi illustrated his conception of citizenship:

³³For instance, a common metaphor invoked to justify citizens' standing in long queues to exchange banned currency notes was to invoke the sacrifice of armed forces personnel Prakash (2016).

³⁴The Hindu Bureau (2022)

³⁵Scroll Staff (2023)

That rights and duties get spoken of together is itself a mistake. It implies that rights are one system and duties are another system. It is not like that. Everybody's rights are embedded in our duties. If I carry out my duty as a teacher, then doesn't it safeguard the rights of the students?... Then there will be no quarrel between rights and duties. Mahatma Gandhi used to say rights are not fundamental, it is duty that is fundamental, and if we fulfill our duties honestly, no one will have to ask anything for their rights because their rights are protected in them."³⁶

These ideas of citizenship do indeed speak to a moral framework encompassing obligations and sacrifice, most clearly articulated by Gandhi. Indeed, in several communications, Gandhi discussed how rights emerged from discharging one's duties. This extract from a speech at a prayer meeting, held in New Delhi on June 28, 1947 is just one example from several similar referrals,

The Constituent Assembly is discussing the rights of the citizen. That is to say they are deliberating on what the fundamental rights should be. As a matter of fact the proper question is not what the rights of a citizen are, but rather what constitutes the duties of a citizen. Fundamental rights can only be those rights the exercise of which is not only in the interest of the citizen but that of the whole world. Today everyone wants to know what his rights are, but if a man learns to discharge his duties right from childhood and studies the sacred books of his faith he automatically exercises his rights too."³⁷

That two of the most important and charismatic mass leaders in the history of India employ a similar moral framework highlights the importance of norms of avowed selflessness and sacrifice in the Indian political culture. Indeed, Rudolph and Rudolph (1970) argues that Gandhi's charisma was deeply rooted in aspects of Indian tradition that he interpreted for his time. In particular, Gandhi was able to realize and embody a number of normatively accepted—but onerous to follow—ideals including *seva*, asceticism, and abstinence in his daily life and his public actions. Part of Modi's and the RSS's appeal in the eyes of the electorate lie not as much in their history of polarization and sectarianism, but in their purported occupation of similar moral spaces. As a consequence, as a true populist, Modi not just embodies the people he claims to represent but also transcends them.³⁸ Moreover, he is also able to transcend his counterparts in other parties who cannot exercise a similar moral influence, in part due to the BJP's success in branding them as elites benefiting from nepotism and susceptible to baser instincts of corruption and lack of probity in public—and

³⁶*Pareeksha pe Charcha* (A conversation about examinations), New Delhi, January 20, 2020 (Baruah 2020).

³⁷Gandhi (1999)

³⁸See Basu (2021a) for a more detailed analysis of the cultivation of Modi's persona, and comparisons and contrasts with Gandhi.

therefore, in private—life. Why this moral framework of *seva* and sacrifice carries weight for Indian citizens is a matter for subsequent research.

7.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown the implications of *seva*-based frames on women's agency within political parties, and for democratic health at large. In both cases, the evidence is of an associational nature. But notwithstanding this, it lends important descriptive insights on the why women in conservative movements are attracted to notions of *seva*, and what it helps them achieve in the public sphere. Crucially, for women restricted in their ability to engage with politics for reasons related to domestic or social barriers, *seva*-based mobilization and participation allows them a route into politics. But perhaps even more importantly, it provides a conduit—albeit dequetered—for women to expand their associational lives, provides a warm glow and sense of moral fulfillment through the occasional “good works” they do, and a non-confrontational public identity. Importantly, *seva* also gives women a sense of personal efficacy and agency by raising their status among other members in their community who approach them as supplicants for navigating the state. Political *seva* thus affords a reversal of hierarchies unavailable to women restricted to the private sphere, and thus is a source of agency for women activists.

Yet, it is also important to recognize the limitations of *seva*. In particular, I find that women in the BJP stronger party loyalty and are more accepting of their subordinate positions in the party's hierarchy. In a survey experiment, I find that the BJP's women activists are less willing to contest elections or to challenge men for electoral nominations than their INC counterparts.

Finally, I consider the wider implications of *seva* for democratic processes at large. The process of democratization is commonly associated with the expansion of participation and inclusivity, which are generally regarded as positive factors for the consolidation and deepening of democratic systems. However, India is currently undergoing a phase of democratic erosion amidst rising participation.

What explains this? The solution to this, I argue, lies in assessing how people participate, rather than how many. In this context, the BJP's deployment of *seva* frames constitutes an attempt to shape an allegiant civic culture among citizens that encouraged citizen participation in party activities that comply with existing norms and moral frameworks such as voting, paying taxes, relinquishing subsidies, and placing trust in political elites. However, this comes at the expense of more assertive modes of citizenship that emphasize individual and human rights, as well as the importance of dissenting voices. Thus, by focusing on the non-gendered aspects of *seva*, I also shed light on the microfoundations of democratic backsliding in the world's largest country.

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Appendix A

Appendix to Chapter 1

Positionality and reflexivity during field research

Like other states in northern and central India, several communities in Rajasthan adhere to patriarchal norms, and observe customs of female seclusion. The most common aspect of seclusion is veiling in front of family elders or when outside the home, but the broader idea extends to segregation in public spaces. Over time, there has been some dilution in adherence: 26.4% of women prefer a partial veil. Yet nearly 63.8% still practice the full veil in public spaces. In these contexts, it is unusual for women to speak to unknown men without the express permission of their family members. Related, women's relative ignorance about political phenomena coupled with its unsuitability for feminine sensibilities could mean that men would want to dominate these conversations, effectively silencing women's voices. For these reasons, I was worried prior to fieldwork that my gender role may present an obstacle in gaining access and collecting data.

A second cause for concern was obtaining organizational access to the BJP and the RSS. These organizations, with their majoritarian vision and undermining of democratic institutions, have been severely criticized by international media, research and advocacy organizations, and crucially, academics in India and the West. In this context, it would not be misplaced for RSS and BJP personnel to be skeptical of my aims for fear I would depict them in unsympathetic terms.

There were ethical dilemmas as well: an ethnographic approach necessitates a degree of sympathy, or at least an enactment thereof, with subjects to induce trust and make sense of their motivations, worldviews, and sometimes, prejudices. Expressing contradictory opinions on my behalf, in such cases, could be very costly. It could impair my relationship with research subjects built over a considerable period of time, and their relationship with key informants who had connected us. Yet, agreeing could normalize, or worse, enable exclusion, and silence could mean tacit support. Finally, there could be backlash, or curtailment of access if I expressed critical opinions openly. While the chances of this happening were remote, there were examples of biographers of prominent politicians losing access, ethnog-

raphers, historians, and linguists being threatened, and critics being intimidated on social media.¹ “There is a reason why many scholars do only one project on the right wing”, an ethnographer recounted the right-wing’s reception to their scholarship in 2020.

As I started my fieldwork, I realized that my identity had both advantages and disadvantages. My initial forays into the field were unaided by key informants, local contacts, or even female research assistants. However, like Thomas (2017) I found that introducing myself as a student, helped open many doors, both at party offices and when trying to interview women in households. Fortunately, my fears of not obtaining access were partially unfounded. My status as a student researching women’s political participation helped explain why I needed to speak with party women, who gradually became more accepting of my presence. This was particularly true about the national headquarters in Delhi where there were fewer restrictions on women’s mobility. On the other hand, the weight of social mores set in when I was in my study districts, where it was rare to find women in party offices on a day-to-day basis. In fact, it was rare that one could find anyone in party offices outside the state headquarters in Jaipur! Consequently, most of my field-level interactions were at social and religious functions, protests, party events, or interviews. Women activists were more likely to meet with me if I had met them first at a party event. I usually let women decide where they wanted to meet with me; when they were willing to meet at a public place or a restaurant, they made it a point that there was someone—male or female—accompanying them or supervising the conversation, if not participating.

My identity as a student and my somewhat young, at least for my age, appearance helped downplay traditional markers of masculinity like aggression and conversational dominance. Like Ortiz (2005) and Thomas (2017), this was also a conscious choice as I found a muted masculinity assisted me on the field. For one, it made me non-threatening to men who could have viewed an unmarried man with suspicion.² Second, most women interlocutors were older than me or married with children, giving them a sense of “seniority” over an unmarried student who could have been as old as their younger brothers or, in some cases, sons.³ To some extent, not all of this was a performance; my speech is normally soft, and I tend to listen more than I speak when in group settings, regardless of its gender composition. This, however, made it harder for me to fit in neatly with other men in the field except for key informants. But this was perhaps not completely dissonant with the novelty of a man researching women’s political participation.

My status as an outsider, while certainly creating a social distance between interlocutors and myself, was not without some advantages. Strategically playing up my US connection in Delhi, and my Delhi connections in Rajasthan was often helpful in obtaining access, even if it did take some time to build familiarity. Interlocutors in Delhi were often curious about

¹Mukhopadhyay (2014) recounts how Modi stopped responding to interview requests. Linguists and historians receiving threats include Wendy Doniger and Audrey Truschke. I am withholding names of ethnographer(s) who recounted their experience since they were revealed in confidence.

²Galam (2015); Takeda (2013)

³Women tend to get married at an early age in Rajasthan, and it would not be unusual for a 42-year-old woman to have a son in his early to mid-twenties.

my life in the US, and though they sometimes wondered why an American university would encourage students to conduct research in other countries, they were mostly happy to answer my questions and let me attend party events. Similarly, those in Rajasthan were interested in Delhi. Here, to decrease the social distance, I often did not bring up my US connections in the beginning. As an outsider, I was forgiven the occasional faux pas and awkwardly-phrased question, and ignorance of local customs. After a while, my status as an outsider also gave some women the freedom to talk about things they might not have mentioned to a party insider or neighbor. Occasionally I was privy to conversations about politicians' private lives, their political insecurities, and even resentment towards the party and politics in general. On another occasion, party activists solicited my opinion as a neutral outsider. For instance, in 2021, a high-ranking member of the BJP's women's wing, asked me for my personal opinion on protests taking place against the farm laws. During these times, I had to be extremely careful not to appear either overly critical or insincerely ingratiating.

As an educated Hindu upper caste man, albeit with a caste-ambiguous last name, I shared several descriptive characteristics that made some, if not all, conservative women believe I was sympathetic to their aims without even breaching the subject of my political affinities.⁴ It was not often that people asked me about my partisanship or if I was also studying other parties. On the few occasions they did, I replied that my project was based on women across all parties in Rajasthan, and as a student, I was supposed to be politically neutral. Most people were satisfied with this response; only on one occasion did a male activist in the BJP office in Jaipur *really* grill me about who I had voted for. Unsatisfied with my answer that I had not been able to cast my vote in the last two national elections on account of being outside the country, I wriggled out of a difficult situation by saying I had voted for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) during assembly elections in Delhi. Although he was not completely happy about this, the fact that I had not voted for the INC assuaged him somewhat. At that time, the AAP's anti-corruption brand had a positive image even in the minds of BJP activists. "Unfortunately", he sighed, "Rajasthan is not ready for them yet."

Finally, I used a number of methods to reduce my social distance. After my initial unaided forays into the field, I hired female research assistants, and used references from key informants, often in conjunction with each other. Occasionally I even sought help from Anganwadi workers in identifying and referring me to potential respondents.⁵ In addition, I took a number of steps to make the distance less salient. I did not dress too formally or casually—shirts or collared t-shirts with jeans worked on most occasions; sat at the same level as respondent(s) as much as possible; accepted their hospitality—I rarely refused tea for instance; and always traveled using public transport.

I tried to be of help during events and gatherings in case they were short-staffed, both to occupy myself—I would usually reach at the appointed time, which was almost always

⁴I was commonly thought to be a *Jat*, a politically influential community in North India.

⁵Women in *Anganwadi* centers had relatively high degrees of mobility owing to their maternal and child health duties. They were also politically aware after attending trainings conducted by the Election Commission or the district/block administration on mobilizing women to vote.

too early—and to gain “currency when seeking observational rights”.⁶ Rather than standing aside like Adam Smith’s impartial spectator, I tried to be of assistance by fixing posters where women couldn’t reach, installing fans, arranging chairs, and taking pictures of party activists’ public work. Taking pictures was unexpectedly useful for activists because these could be posted to social media and shared within party WhatsApp groups.

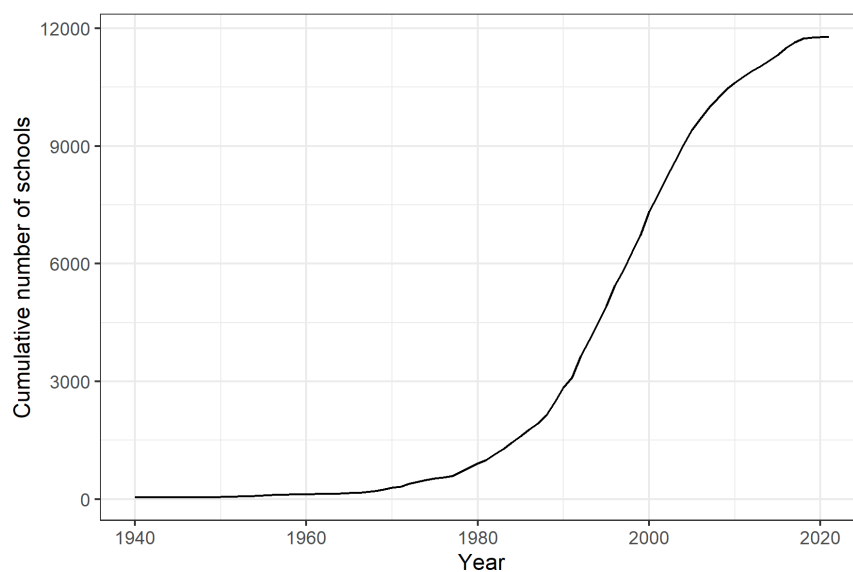
But like there was an element of performance from my end, there is no reason to suppose my respondents, especially party activists, were not performing for me. For instance, my initial reaction to their articulation of *seva* as a motivation for joining politics was one of quiet skepticism. After all, in a misogynistic milieu where politicians are widely perceived as liars, crooks, and thieves, and interested in seeking office or rents, few would want to admit they enjoyed politics and the pursuit of power it entailed. I was prone to dismiss *seva* as a socially desirable response or an attempt to impress an outsider by alluding to one’s altruistic motivations. Assuming that *seva* was but a veneer, I tried to penetrate through to a “true” motivation for a while. However, as fieldwork progressed, I met people several times and saw that they continued to invoke *seva* in their conversations. Like Brass (1997) and Deeb (2011), I then realized, that looking for the “truth” was perhaps to miss the point. What is the “true” motivation, how much of *seva* is “true” and how much is “instrumental” are not questions this book will answer. To be sure, *seva* is a performance for some. Some respondents said as much, usually when referring to other activists. But even if one were to accept as much, several questions remain, even if it is a facade, why do they choose *this* facade? How effective is *seva* in mobilizing women, compared to other methods? How does it help women connect their sense of self to available, comprehensible, and justifiable ways of taking part in politics? What do women gain from *seva*, and are there any limits for women, and for democracy as a whole? These are the questions this book tries to answer.

⁶Thomas (2017:7)

Appendix B

Appendix to Chapter 4

Figure B.1: Schools operated by RSS



Note: This figure shows the cumulative number of schools operated by the RSS over time through its affiliate Vidya Bharti. Data is from <https://www.vidyabharatialumni.org/>.

Figure B.2: Modi undertaking performative service



Figure B.3: Namo app game

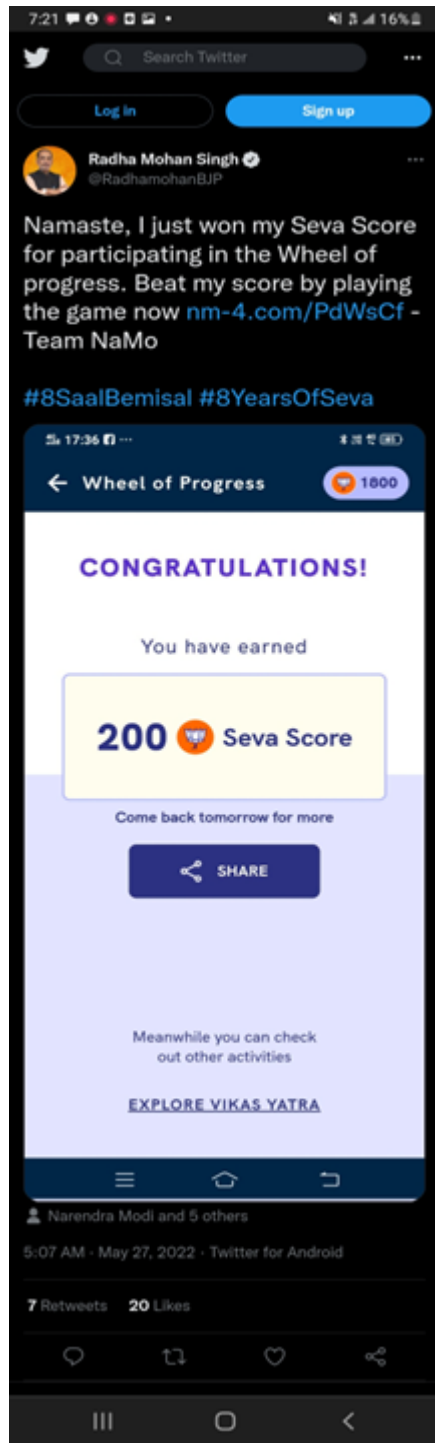


Figure B.4: Namo app game: *Seva* star winners

 **NarendraModi App** @NamoApp · Jun 9
Announcing the Top 'Seva' Scorers for 8th June.

Keep playing and earning 'Seva' score.

Top scorers have an opportunity to interact with PM @narendramodi along with other exciting rewards such as signed copy of 'Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery' book!

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8th June 2022 **Top 'Seva' Scorers**

साल
8^{वां} वर्ष
आज का दिन
याद रखें

SEVA STARS WINNERS

Do you want to be a Seva Star too?

Go to NaMo App's **Play and Learn** module and increase your Seva Score!

Name	Name
Amit Mahajan	NARENDRA MODI APP
Vikrant Tyagi	Hemant Jha
Nandini Shukla	VK Bhasithkumar
Amrendra Sharma	Rajat Sharma
Jahanvi Vyas	Harsh Chaturvedi
Rekha Mahajan	Shrenik Rokhade
Kamlesh Bafna	Ajay Kumar
Somvir Sheoran	Anu Solanki
Bidyut Chakraborty	Anuj Shukla
Latha Gobu	Vikas Kumar
	Lokesh Chahar

2 9

Figure B.5: Performative service undertaken by the BJP's women's wing

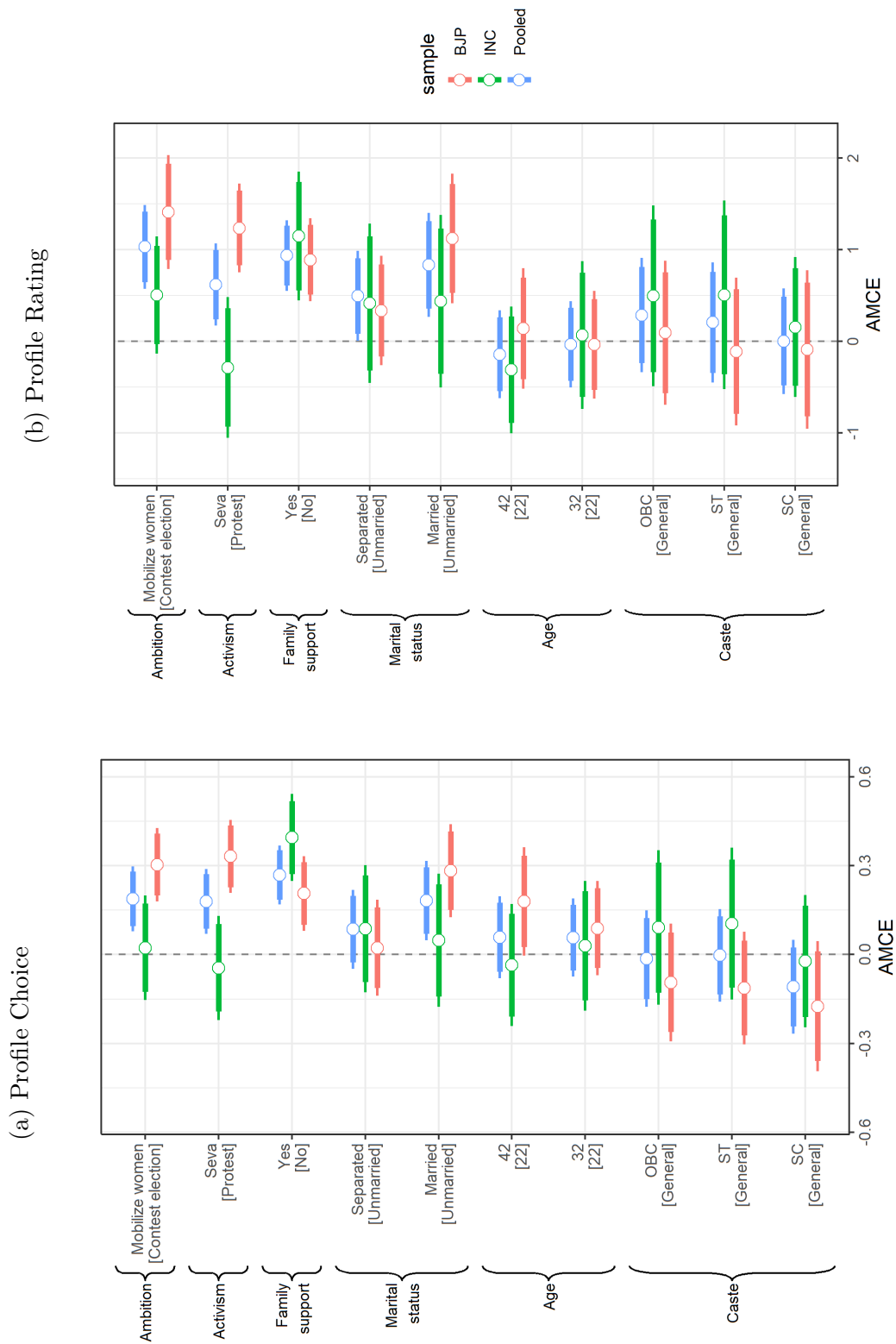


Figure B.6: *Thali* (steel plates) protest undertaken by the BJP's women's wing



Note: Picture courtesy Hindustan, July 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4j8tjvw4>

Figure B.7: Results of conjoint analysis on choice of potential party activist



Note: The figure shows the Average Marginal Component Effect for all attribute-levels, relative to the one in brackets based on estimating Equation 5.2. Thin and thick lines indicate 95% and 90% confidence intervals respectively.

Appendix C

Appendix to Chapter 5



**Political Participation in Rajasthan:
Voters' Household Survey**



HH Unique ID / Code	: 783/ 11-JD-P-1-B-63
Municipality	
Panchayat committee	
Gram Panchayat	
Village	
Ward number	
Age of eldest man present during visit	

Woman respondent Of Selection : In the table below, please write the names of all the women who match the following conditions: **(1)** their Age is at least 18 years, **(2)** They have been living here for at least 6 months, or will be living here for the next 6 month, and **(3)** they are willing and capable of being interviewed. Please write the names in descending order of age, i.e, from eldest to the youngest. If there are more than 6 women matching these conditions, stop at the 6th woman.

F. No.	Woman's Name	Age
F1		
F2		
F3		
F4		
F5		
F6		

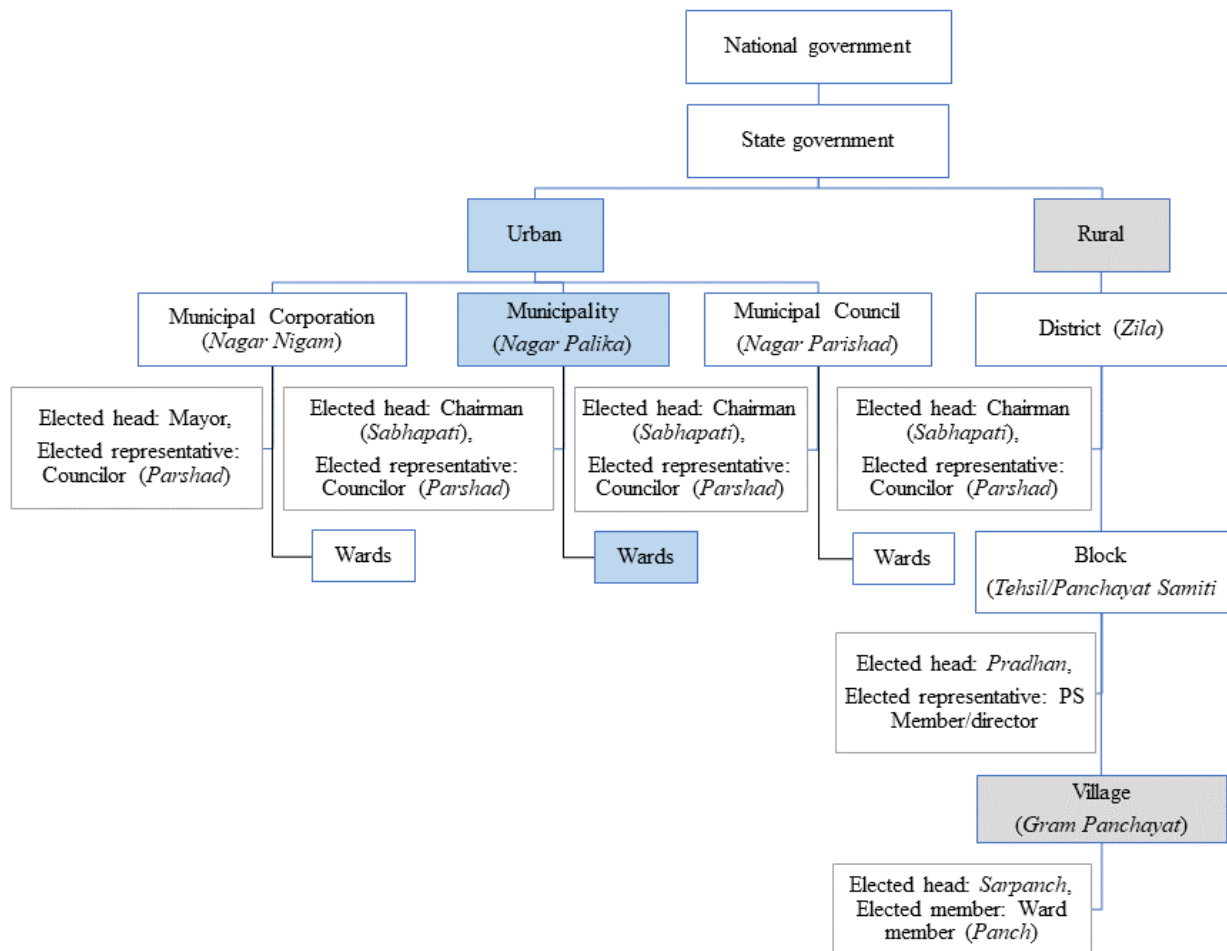
Now in the table below, choose the column corresponding to the highest F. No. you listed in the table above. Select the respondent with F. No. as listed in the "Sampled" row for your chosen column. If this respondent is unavailable or unwilling, select the respondent with F. No. as listed in the "Replacement" row for your chosen column. If neither respondent is available, skip the household.

		Number of women					
		1	2	3	4	5	6+
Respondent	Selected	F 1	F 2	F 2	F 2	F 4	F 2
	Replacement	X	F 1	F 3	F 3	F 2	F 1

Selection of male respondent: Ask the female respondent, that among the older men present in the house at that time, who does she rely upon the most for her political opinions. This will be the male respondent. Obtain consent from him. If he is unavailable or unwilling, try to obtain consent in the following order of relations: 1) Husband, 2) Father / Father-in-law, 3) Brother/brother-in-law, 4) other men. As far as possible , the male respondents should be older than the female or their age.

Enumerators: Please keep this sheet safely and hand it over to your supervisor after the survey.

Figure C.1: Administrative structure and study locations



Note: This figure shows Rajasthan’s administrative structure and regions where the study took place. The bottom-most shaded boxes are the primary sampling units.

Figure C.2: Map of PSUs

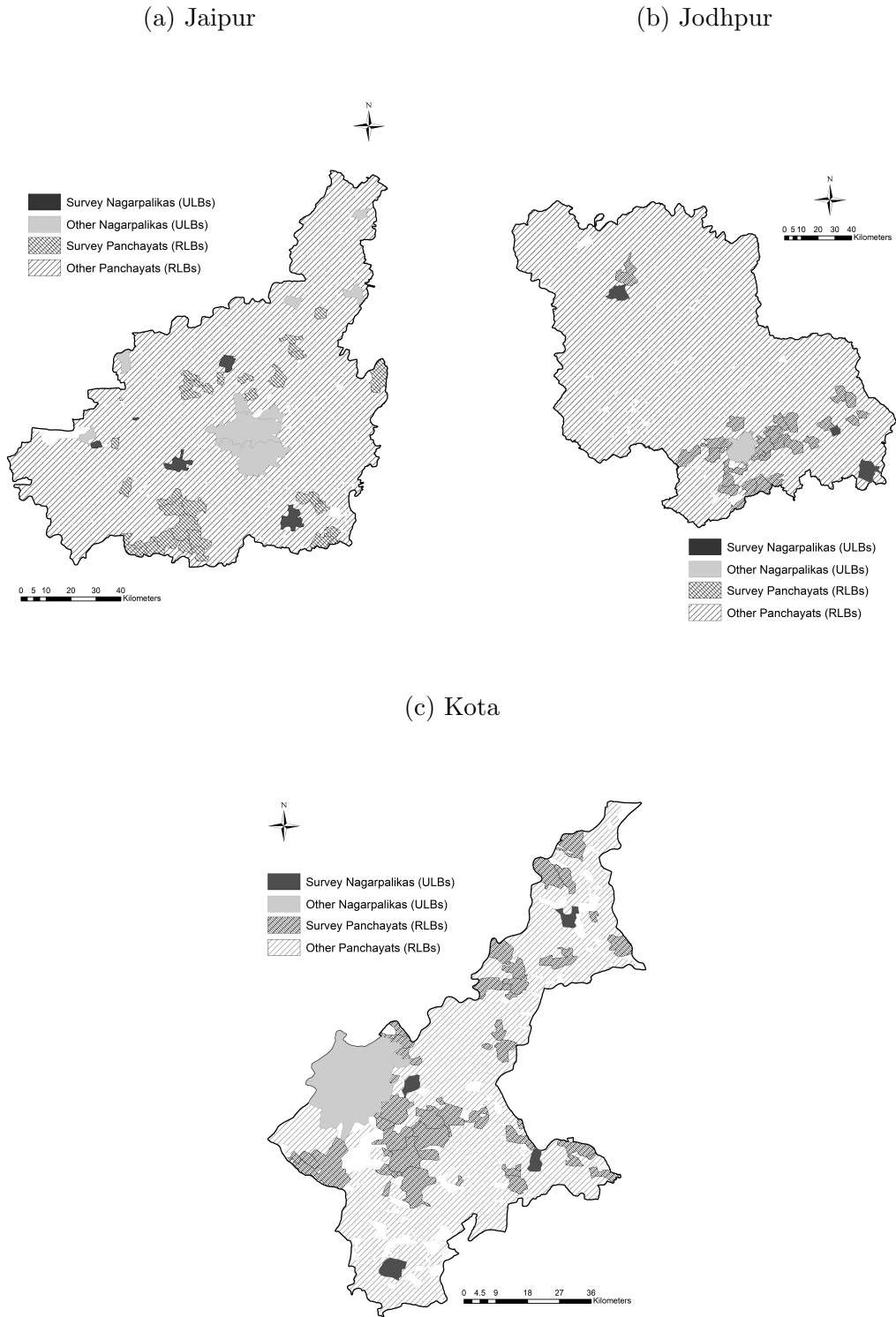
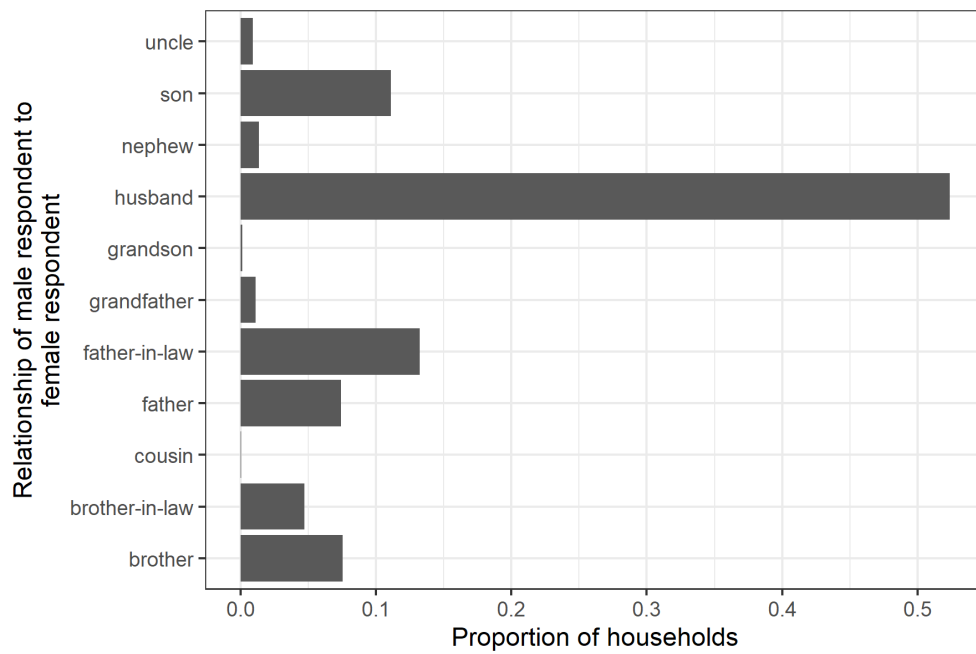
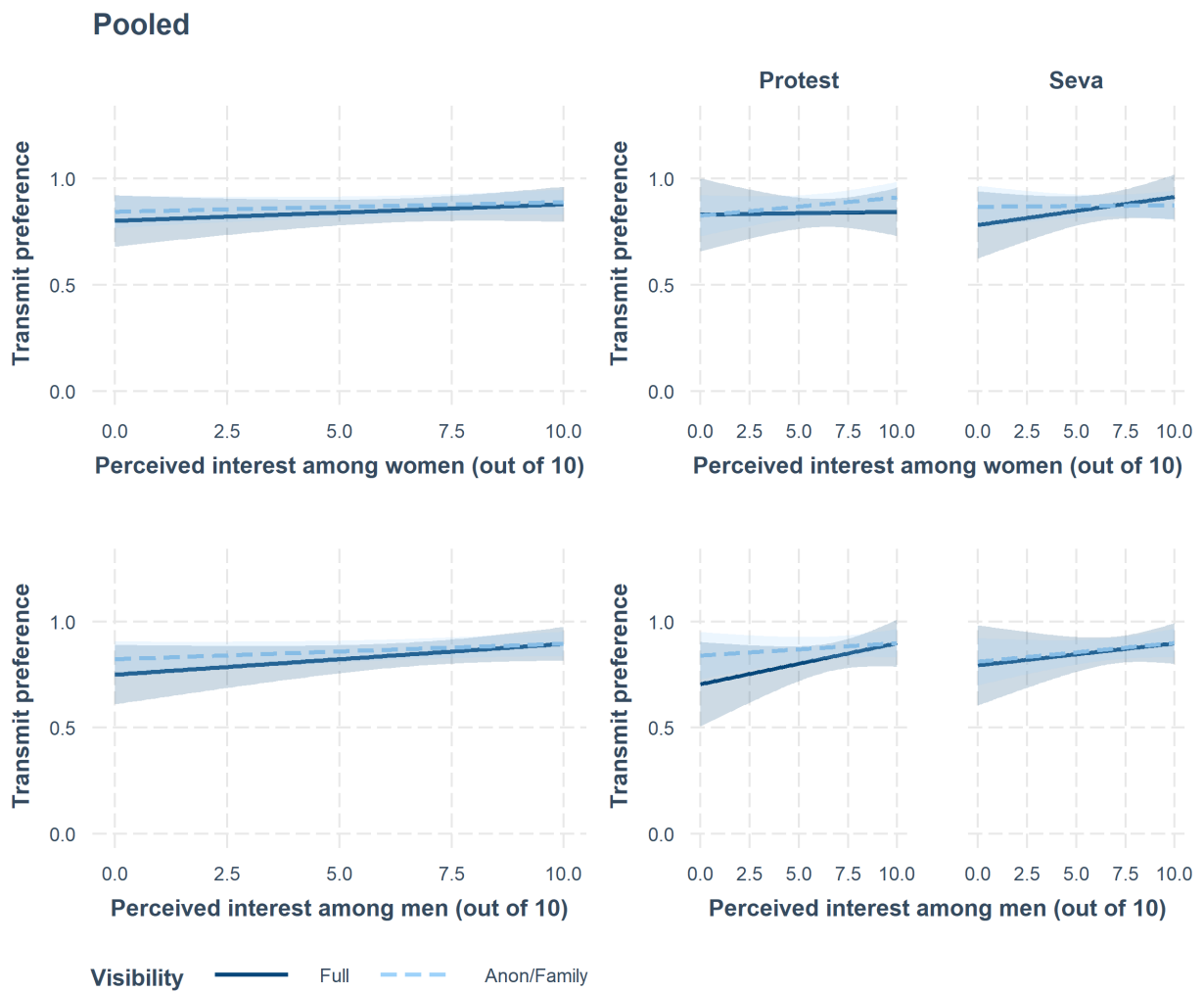


Figure C.3: Relationship of male respondent to female respondent



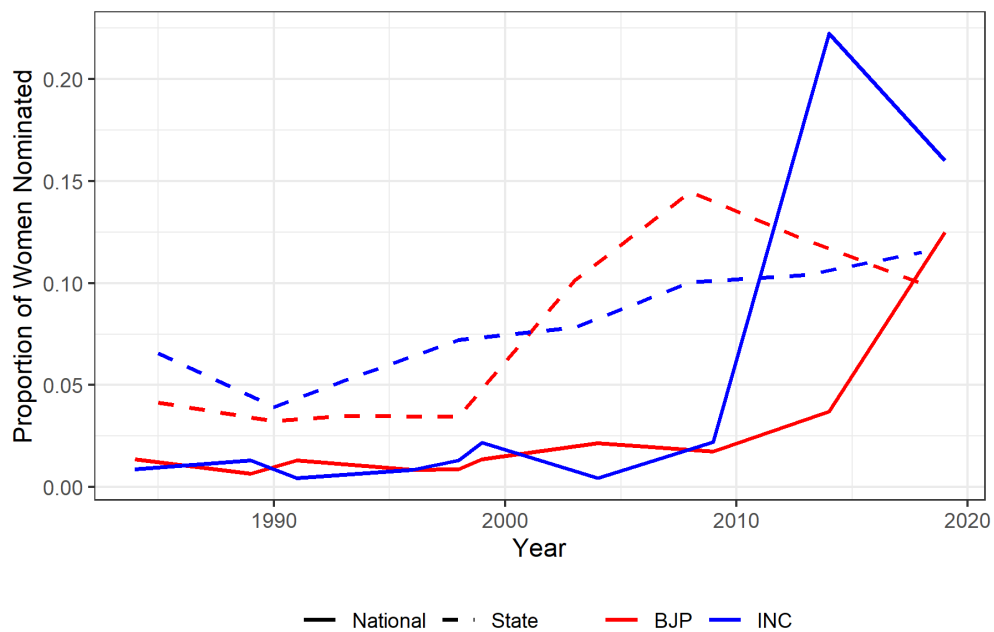
Note: This figure shows the relationship of the male respondent with the female respondent for the household survey. The y-axis measures the proportion of households.

Figure C.4: Moderating effect of perceived interest and participation visibility on preference communication (political communication experiment)



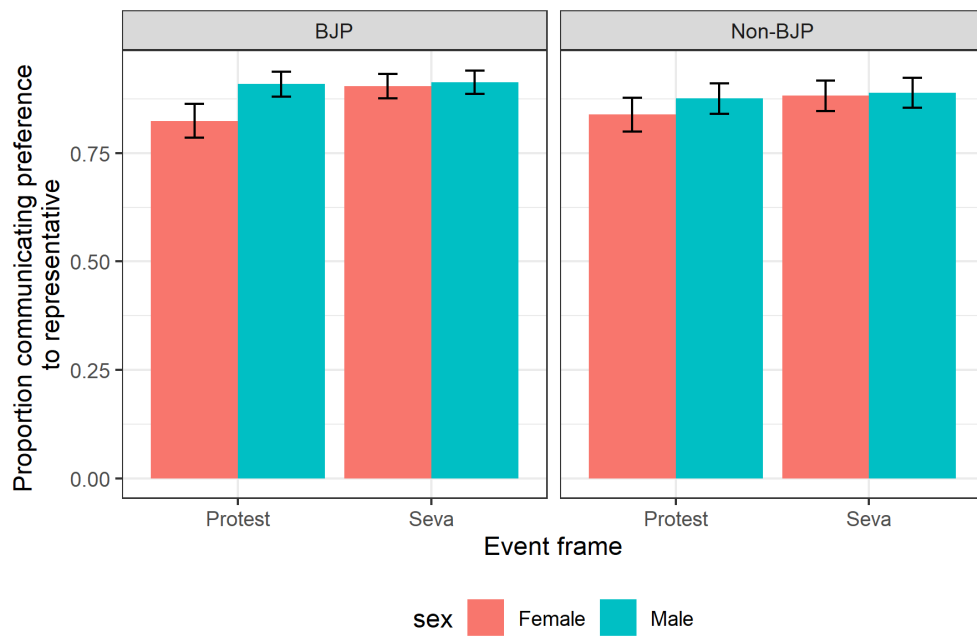
Note: Using the men’s sub-sample, this figure shows the predicted values of preference communication under different conditions of visibility, moderated by perceived interest among other women and men. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure C.5: Proportion of female candidates nominated by BJP and INC in state and national elections (1981-2019)



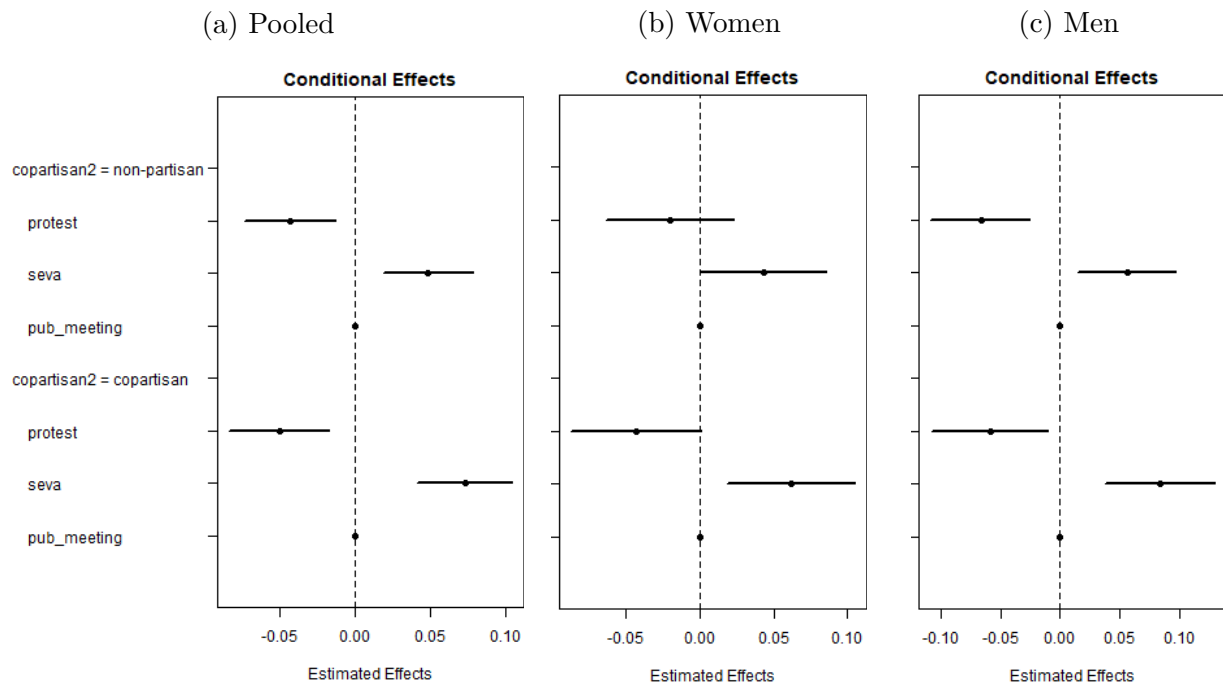
Note: This figure shows the proportion of women nominated by the BJP and the INC to contest national and state-level elections in Rajasthan. Data is sourced from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data (Agarwal et al. 2021).

Figure C.6: Partisanship and opinion transmission (Political communication experiment)



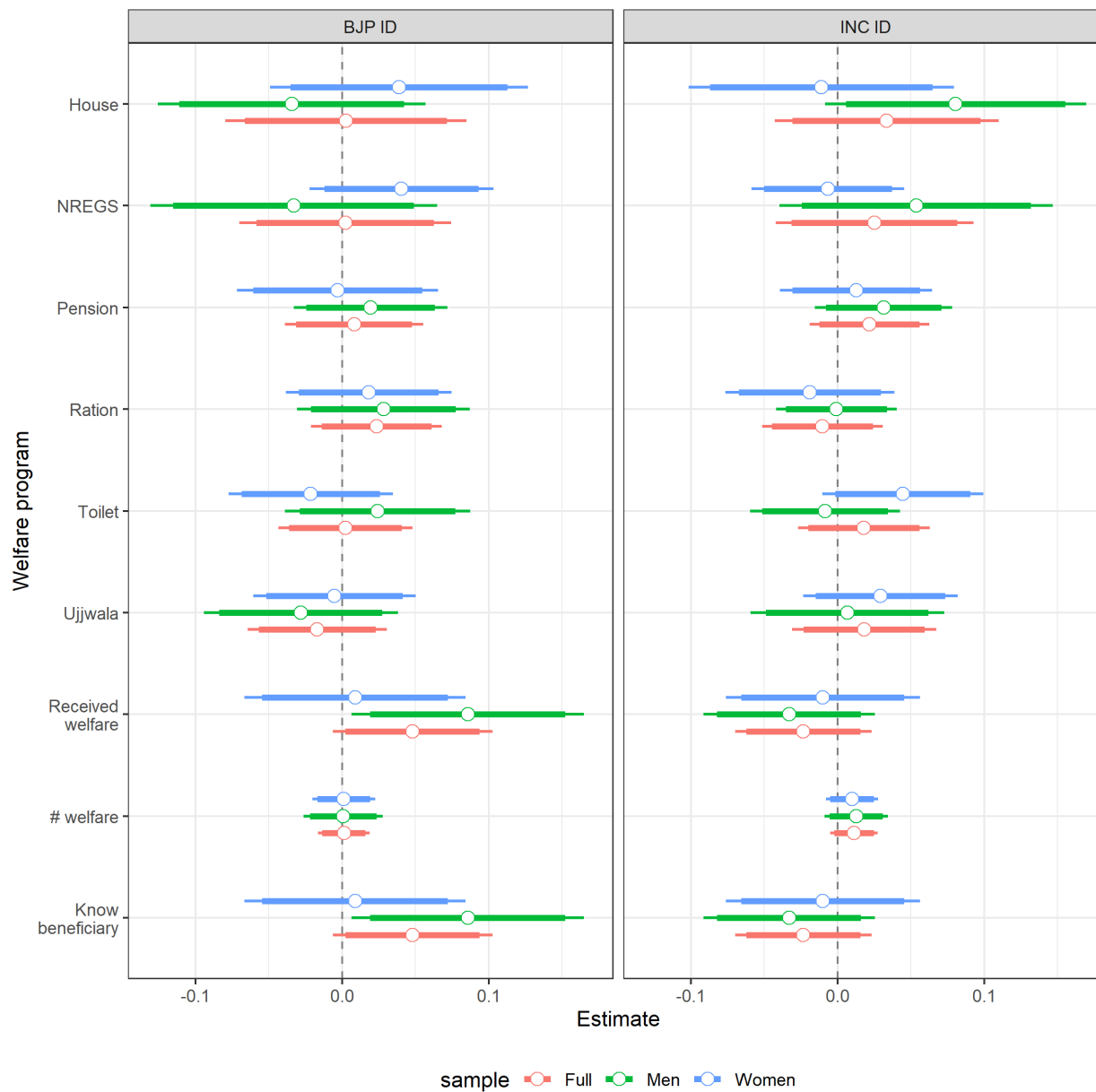
Note: Using data from the political communication experiment, this figure shows the proportion of respondents choosing to transmit their opinions to their representative under different norm-compliant and norm-undermining frames based on their partisan alignment.

Figure C.7: AMIE of event frame, conditional on co-partisanship



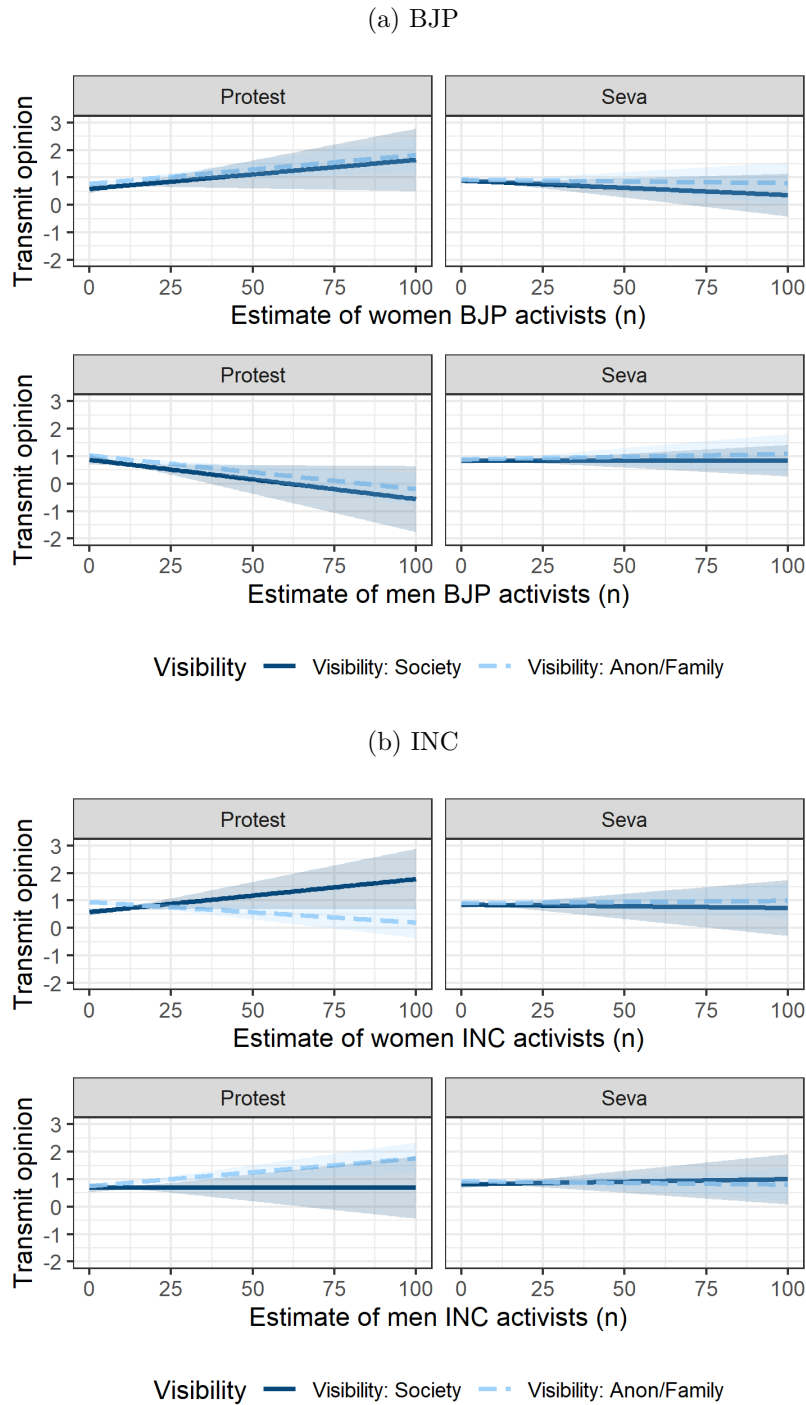
Note: This figure shows how the effect of the event frame varies within a given level of partisanship between the candidate and the respondent. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure C.8: Welfare and partisanship



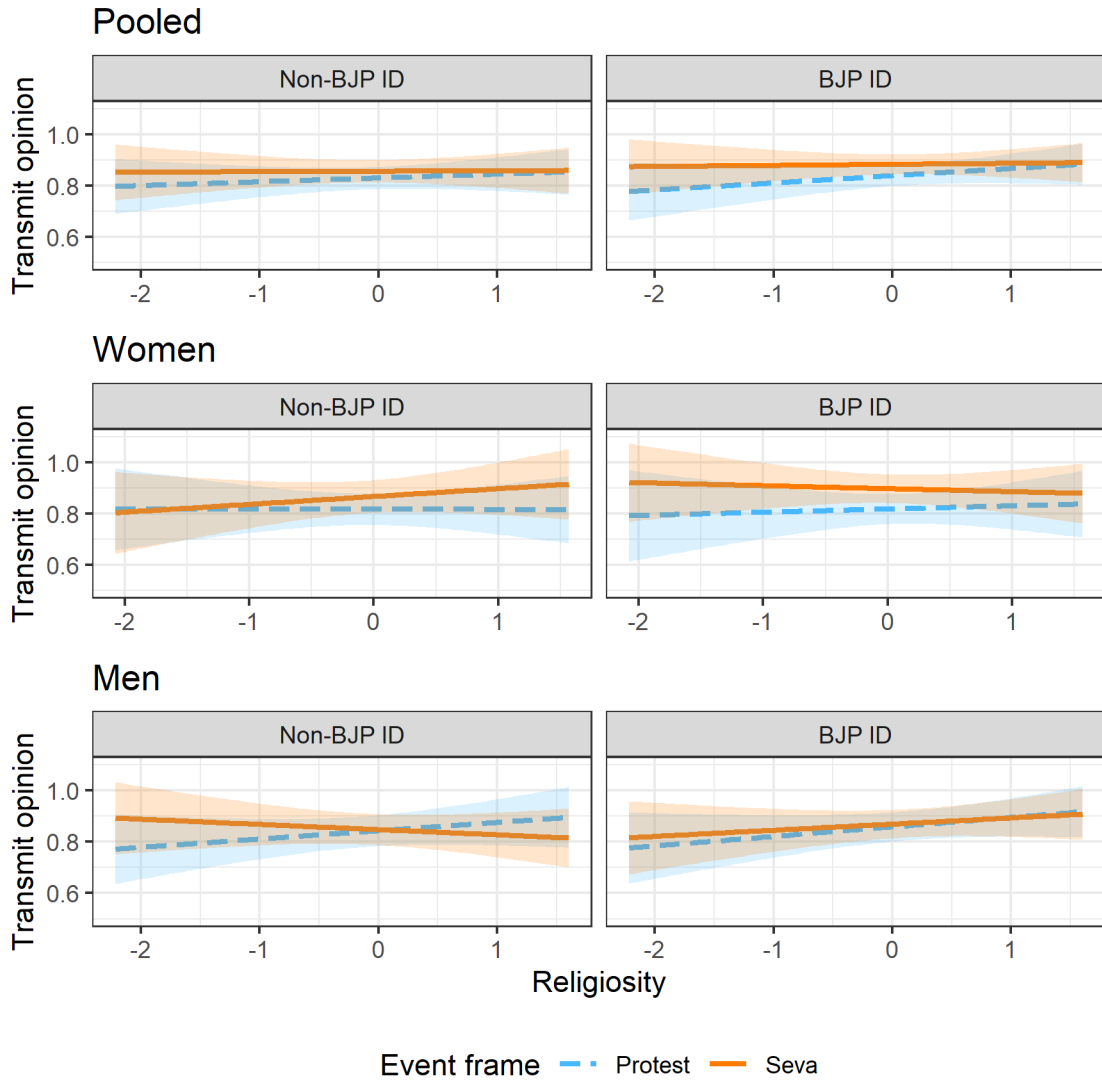
Note: Using the household survey, this figure shows the association between partisanship and receipt of welfare programs. “Received welfare” refers to whether a recipient received any of the welfare schemes listed above. “# welfare” refers to the number of welfare programs the respondent’s household received among the six listed above. “Know beneficiary” refers to whether the respondent knows someone who received the any of the welfare programs. This question was asked to only those people who denied receiving any welfare programs. In case a household received a welfare program, I classified their response to this question as yes. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects and adjust for covariates. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level. Thick lines indicate 90% confidence intervals and thin lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure C.9: Moderating effect of party organization on opinion transmission (Political communication experiment)



Note: The figure shows how party organization (measured in terms of the number of party workers) moderated the effect of visibility and framing on communication with representatives. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure C.10: Do religiosity and partisan alignment moderate the influence of framing?



Note: The figure shows how religiosity and partisan alignment moderates the effect of framing on communication with representatives. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Table C.1: Does partisanship shape political communication?

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Communicated opinion					
	Pooled		Women	Men	Pooled	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female						-0.030 (0.021)
BJP ID	0.019 (0.017)	0.023 (0.017)	0.021 (0.017)	0.017 (0.021)	0.019 (0.024)	0.032 (0.022)
Female × BJP ID						-0.024 (0.026)
Constant	0.871*** (0.015)					
R.Block FE	×	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	×	×	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914
R ²	0.001	0.017	0.027	0.044	0.042	0.031

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ This table shows the association between partisan identity, gender and transmission of preferences in the political communication experiment. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects and are adjusted for covariates. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

Table C.2: Caste and religiosity

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
	Religiosity Index				Public Religiosity Index			
	Pooled	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Pooled	Women	Men
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
OBC	0.005 (0.036)	0.0001 (0.037)	0.018 (0.042)	-0.003 (0.073)	0.015 (0.036)	0.010 (0.037)	0.019 (0.042)	0.022 (0.079)
SBC	-0.249** (0.101)	-0.274** (0.102)	0.306 (0.260)	-0.295** (0.138)	-0.055 (0.141)	-0.073 (0.142)	0.481 (0.457)	-0.059 (0.187)
SC	-0.151*** (0.050)	-0.163*** (0.052)	-0.167*** (0.052)	-0.139 (0.082)	-0.176*** (0.053)	-0.187*** (0.055)	-0.227*** (0.064)	-0.125 (0.087)
ST	-0.115*** (0.043)	-0.132** (0.048)	-0.188*** (0.062)	-0.064 (0.085)	-0.049 (0.059)	-0.061 (0.066)	-0.168** (0.075)	0.059 (0.103)
Constant	-0.226*** (0.066)				-0.208*** (0.063)			
R. Block FE	×	Y	Y	Y	×	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457
R ²	0.061	0.065	0.087	0.057	0.032	0.033	0.047	0.035

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ This table shows the association between the respondent's caste category and their religiosity. The religion index (Columns 1-3) combines measures of public and private religiosity. The public religiosity index (Columns 4-6) uses only measures of public religiosity. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects and are adjusted for covariates. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

Table C.3: Heterogeneous treatment effects of religiosity on the effect of framing on preference transmission (Political communication experiment)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>							
					Transmit opinion			
	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled	Pooled	Women	Men	Pooled
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Seva</i>	0.034**	0.062***	0.008	0.007	0.034**	0.060***	0.010	0.009
	(0.013)	(0.022)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Rel	0.022	-0.002	0.038*	0.043**				
	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.021)				
Female				-0.070***				-0.067***
				(0.024)				(0.023)
Rel Pub					0.036**	0.018	0.041**	0.048**
					(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Rel Pvt					-0.018	-0.027	-0.005	-0.007
					(0.016)	(0.028)	(0.025)	(0.024)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel	-0.014	0.017	-0.030	-0.036				
	(0.017)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.031)				
<i>Seva</i> × Female				0.055*				0.050*
				(0.027)				(0.026)
Rel × Female				-0.046				
				(0.030)				
<i>Seva</i> × Rel × Female				0.050				
				(0.049)				
Rel Pub × Female								-0.029
								(0.032)
Rel Pvt × Female								-0.021
								(0.037)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pub × Female								0.020
								(0.049)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pvt × Female								0.038
								(0.038)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pub					-0.010	0.007	-0.011	-0.017
					(0.017)	(0.031)	(0.029)	(0.028)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pvt					-0.004	0.013	-0.025	-0.023
					(0.019)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.029)
R. Block FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914	2,914	1,457	1,457	2,914
R ²	0.029	0.051	0.041	0.035	0.033	0.054	0.047	0.039

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ This table shows heterogeneous treatment effects of religiosity on the effect of framing on communicating with their representative in the political communication experiment. Measures of public religiosity include participation in religious acts of service, visiting places of worship, attending religious storytelling sessions, and taking part in religious processions. Measures of private religiosity include a self-assessment of the importance of religion in respondents' lives, and the frequency with which respondents pray at home or watch religious programs. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects and are adjusted for covariates. Standard errors are clustered at the randomization block level.

Table C.4: Heterogeneous treatment effects of religiosity on the effect of framing on participation preference (Discrete choice experiment)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>									
	Profile choice				Profile rating					
	Pooled (1)	Men (2)	Women (3)	Pooled (4)	Pooled (5)	Pooled (6)	Men (7)	Women (8)	Pooled (9)	Pooled (10)
Protest	-0.046*** (0.012)	-0.065*** (0.017)	-0.028* (0.016)	-0.064*** (0.016)	-0.064*** (0.016)	-0.225*** (0.060)	-0.336*** (0.089)	-0.144* (0.081)	-0.324*** (0.089)	-0.325*** (0.089)
<i>Seva</i>	0.058*** (0.012)	0.068*** (0.016)	0.048*** (0.016)	0.068*** (0.016)	0.068*** (0.016)	0.204*** (0.059)	0.305*** (0.088)	0.091 (0.078)	0.306*** (0.088)	0.304*** (0.088)
Rel	-0.025* (0.013)	-0.016 (0.018)	-0.037* (0.019)	-0.016 (0.018)		0.242*** (0.093)	0.451*** (0.133)	-0.014 (0.125)	0.459*** (0.134)	
Rel Pub					0.002 (0.014)					0.194** (0.096)
Rel Pvt					-0.020 (0.017)					0.273** (0.114)
Female				-0.005 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.013)				0.257*** (0.090)	0.256*** (0.090)
Protest × Rel	0.048** (0.022)	0.040 (0.030)	0.059* (0.032)	0.040 (0.030)		-0.031 (0.118)	-0.244 (0.168)	0.222 (0.161)	-0.250 (0.169)	
<i>Seva</i> × Rel	0.025 (0.022)	0.007 (0.030)	0.050 (0.033)	0.007 (0.030)		0.017 (0.117)	-0.194 (0.168)	0.279* (0.161)	-0.209 (0.168)	
Protest × Rel Pub					0.012 (0.024)					-0.219* (0.126)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pub					-0.014 (0.024)					-0.109 (0.123)
Protest × Rel Pvt					0.030 (0.028)					-0.030 (0.145)
<i>Seva</i> × Rel Pvt					0.024 (0.027)					-0.102 (0.147)
Protest × Female				0.036 (0.023)	0.037 (0.023)				0.198 (0.121)	0.197 (0.120)
<i>Seva</i> × Female				-0.020 (0.023)	-0.020 (0.023)				-0.200* (0.117)	-0.198* (0.117)
Female × Rel				-0.022 (0.026)					-0.481*** (0.183)	
Protest × Female × Rel				0.019 (0.044)					0.484** (0.233)	
<i>Seva</i> × Female × Rel				0.043 (0.044)					0.499** (0.232)	
Female × Rel Pub					0.003 (0.020)					-0.130 (0.133)
Female × Rel Pvt					-0.028 (0.023)					-0.377** (0.152)
Protest × Female × Rel Pub					-0.024 (0.034)					0.294* (0.174)
<i>Seva</i> × Female × Rel Pub					0.013 (0.034)					0.206 (0.171)
Protest × Female × Rel Pvt					0.048 (0.039)					0.202 (0.194)
<i>Seva</i> × Female × Rel Pvt					0.033 (0.038)					0.307 (0.198)
R Block FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Covariates	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Observations	11,656	5,828	5,828	11,656	11,656	11,656	5,828	5,828	11,656	11,656
R ²	0.008	0.012	0.005	0.008	0.009	0.023	0.034	0.029	0.027	0.027

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ This table shows heterogenous treatment effects of religiosity on the effect of framing on profile choice and preference in the discrete choice experiment. Measures of public religiosity include participation in religious acts of service, visiting places of worship, attending religious storytelling sessions, and taking part in religious processions. Measures of private religiosity include a self-assessment of the importance of religion in respondents' lives, and the frequency with which respondents pray at home or watch religious programs. Estimates are based on OLS regressions with randomization block fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

Appendix D

Appendix to Chapter 6

Figure D.1: Density plot of party support

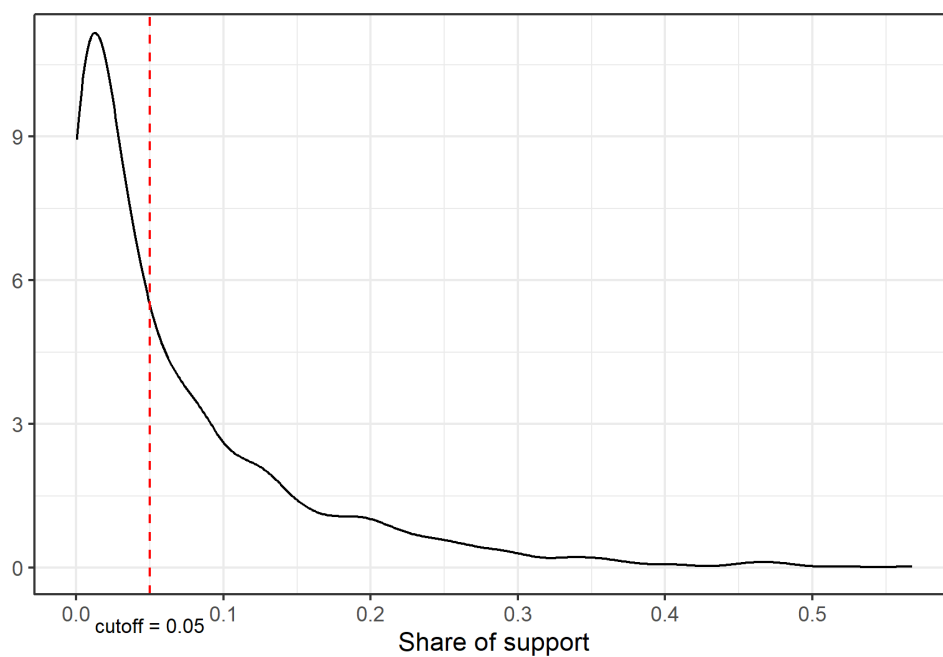


Table D.1: List of right-wing parties

Country	Party
Andorra	Democrats For Andorra; Liberal Party Of Andorra

Table D.1: List of right-wing parties (*continued*)

Country	Party
Argentina	Justicialist [Peronist] Party, Daniel Scioli, Florencio; Radical Civic Union, Ricardo Alfonsín; Republican Proposal, María Eugenia Vidal; Together For Change, Macri; Ucr Frepaso Alliance
Armenia	National Unity; Pan-Armenian National Movement; Prosperous Armenia; Republican Party Of Armenia
Australia	Liberal Party; Nationalist Party Of Australia
Azerbaijan	New Azerbaijan Party
Bangladesh	Bangladesh Jamaat-E-Islami; Bangladesh Nationalist Party; Jatiya Party (Manju)
Bulgaria	Citizens For European Development Of Bulgaria; Union Of Democratic Forces
Belarus	Belarusian Women's Party; Conservative Christian Party Of Belarusian People's Fro
Canada	Canadian Alliance; Conservative Party
Switzerland	Christian Democratic People'S Party; Swiss People'S Party; The Liberals
Chile	Christian Democratic Party; Independent Democratic Union; National Renewal
Colombia	Colombian Conservative Party; Democratic Center Party; Social Party Of National Unity
Cyprus	Democratic Rally; National Unity Party
Czech Rep.	Christian Democratic Party; Christian Democratic Union / People's Party; Civic Democratic Party; Freedom Union; Movement For Self-Governing Democracy / Society For Mor; Republican Party Of Farmers And Peasants // Agrarian Pa
Germany	Christian Social Union In Bavaria
Dominican Rep.	Social Christian Reformist Party
Algeria	Mouvement De La Société Pour La Paix / Hamas; National Rally For Democracy
Ecuador	Creo Movement; Warrior Wood Civic Movement
Egypt	Freedom And Justice Party; National Party Of Egypt
Spain	People's Party
Estonia	Estonian Reform Party; Pro Patria; Russian Party In Estonia; Union Of Pro Patria And Res Publica
Ethiopia	Amhara National Democratic Movement; Coalition For Unity And Democracy; Prosperity Party
Finland	National Coalition Party

Table D.1: List of right-wing parties (*continued*)

Country	Party
Great Britain	Conservative And Unionist Party
Georgia	Bloc 'Agordzineba' - All Georgian Union Of Revival; Citizens' Union Of Georgia; Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia; United National Movement
Ghana	New Patriotic Party
Greece	New Democracy
Guatemala	Come On Or Let's Go; Grand National Alliance; National Advancement Party; National Unity Of Hope
Hong Kong Sar	Democratic Alliance For The Betterment And Progress Of; Liberal Party
Croatia	Croatian Democratic Union; Croatian Social Liberal Party
Haiti	Alternative For Progress And Democracy
Hungary	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance
Indonesia	Golkar Party - Party Of Functional Groups; Great Indonesia Movement Party; National Awakening Party; National Mandate Party; Prosperous Justice Party; United Development Party
India	Indian People's Party
Iraq	Fatah Alliance; Iraqi Islamic Party
Israel	Likud-National Liberal Movement
Japan	Japan Innovation Party; Liberal Democratic Party; New Frontier Party; Your Party
Kazakhstan	Nur Otan
Kyrgyzstan	Dignity Party; Respublika; Respublika - Ata-Zhurt
South Korea	Democratic Party; Liberty Korea Party - Grand National Party
Lebanon	Amal Movement; The Future Movement; The Lebanese Forces
Libya	Justice And Construction Party
Lithuania	Center Union Of Lithuania; Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats
Latvia	For Fatherland And Freedom; Latvian First Party / Latvian Way Party; Latvian National Conservative- Green Party Electoral Uni
Macau Sar	Macau United Citizens' Association
Morocco	Istiqlal Party; Justice And Development Party; Popular Movement
Moldova	Christian Democratic People'S Party; Democratic Agrarian Party Of Moldavia; Party Of Communists Of The Republic Of Moldova

Table D.1: List of right-wing parties (*continued*)

Country	Party
Mexico	Institutional Revolutionary Party; National Action Party
North Macedonia	Democratic Party Of Albanians In Macedonia; Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democr; Movement Besa; Vnatrena Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija
Myanmar	National League For Democracy; Union Solidarity And Development Party
Montenegro	People’s Party; Serbian People’s Party; Socialist People’s Party Of Montenegro
Malaysia	Ideas Of Prosperity; National Front; Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
Nigeria	Action Congress Of Nigeria; All People’s Party; Alliance For Democracy; Congress For Progressive Change; National Republican Convention
Netherlands	Christian Democratic Appeal; Party For Freedom; People’S Party For Freedom And Democracy
Norway	Christian Democratic Party; Conservative Party; Liberal Party; Progress Party
New Zealand	New Zealand First Party; New Zealand National Party
Pakistan	Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz Sharif Faction
Peru	Alliance For The Great Change; Change 90; National Unity; Popular Action; Popular Force; Union For Peru
Philippines	Fight Of Democratic Filipinos; Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats; Nacionalista Party; Nationalist People’s Coalition; New Society Movement
Poland	Civic Platform; Law And Justice; Polish Christian Democratic Party; Polish People’s Party; Self-Defense Of The Republic Of Poland; Solidarnosc
Puerto Rico	New Progressive Party; Popular Democratic Party
Romania	Alliance Of Liberals And Democrats; Conventia Democratica Din Romania As A Whole; Democratic Alliance Of Hungarians In Romania; Democratic Liberal Party; Democratic Party; Greater Romania Party; National Liberal Party; National Peasant Party Christian Democrat; Social Democratic Party
Russia	Liberal Democratic Party Of Russia; Our Home – Russia; United Russia; Women Of Russia
Rwanda	Rwanda Patriotic Front
Singapore	People’S Action Party

Table D.1: List of right-wing parties (*continued*)

Country	Party
El Salvador	Nationalist Republican Alliance
Serbia	G17 Plus; Serbian Movement Dveri; Serbian Radical Party
Slovakia	Christian-Democratic Movement; Democratic Party; Movement For A Democratic Slovakia; Party Of The Democratic; Slovak National Party
Slovenia	Green Party; Slovenian Democratic Party; Slovenian National Party; Slovenian People's Party
Sweden	Fascist People's Party Of Swede; Moderate Party
Thailand	Democrat Party; For Thais Party; Thais Love Thais Party
Tajikistan	Democratic Party
Turkey	Justice And Development Party; Motherland Party; Nationalist Movement Party; Peoples' Democratic Party; True Path Party; Virtue Party; Welfare Party
Taiwan Roc	Chinese / New Party; Nationalist Party; Non-Partisan & Non-Partisan Solidarity Union
Uganda	Democratic Party; National Resistance Movement
Ukraine	Communist Party Of Ukraine; Democratic Party Of Ukraine; European Solidarity; Opposition Platform - For Life; Our Ukraine; Party Of Regions
Uruguay	Colorado Party; National Party
United States	Libertarian; Republican Party
Venezuela	Copei
South Africa	Conservative Party; Democratic Alliance; Democratic Party; National Party
Zambia	Patriotic Front; United Democratic Alliance
Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front

Table D.2: List of religious parties

Country	Party
Argentina	Justicialist [Peronist] Party, Daniel Scioli, Florencio
Armenia	Democratic Party Of Armenia
Bangladesh	Bangladesh Jamaat-E-Islami
Belarus	Conservative Christian Party Of Belarusian People's Fro
Switzerland	Christian Demmocrats; Christian Democratic People'S Party

Table D.2: List of religious parties (*continued*)

Country	Party
Chile	Christian Democratic Party
Colombia	National Christian Party
Czech Rep.	Christian Democratic Party; Christian Democratic Union / People's Party
Dominican Rep.	Social Christian Reformist Party
Algeria	Mouvement De La Société Pour La Paix / Hamas
Egypt	Freedom And Justice Party
Indonesia	National Awakening Party; Prosperous Justice Party; United Development Party
India	Indian People's Party
Iraq	Iraqi Islamic Party; Islamic Dawa Party; Islamic Supreme Council Of Iraq; Uprightness / Chest
Jordan	Islamic Action Front
Lebanon	Amal Movement; Free Patriotic Movement; Hezbollah; The Future Movement; The Lebanese Forces
Libya	Justice And Construction Party
Lithuania	Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats; Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party
Morocco	Justice And Development Party
Moldova	Christian Democratic People'S Party
Malaysia	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
Netherlands	Christian Democratic Appeal
Norway	Christian Democratic Party
Philippines	Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats
Poland	Polish Christian Democratic Party
Palestine	Hamas
Romania	National Peasant Party Christian Democrat
Slovakia	Christian-Democratic Movement; Slovene Christian Democrats
Turkey	Justice And Development Party; Virtue Party; Welfare Party
Venezuela	Copei
Yemen	Al-Islah

Table D.3: Gender gap in support for right-wing and religiously right-wing parties

	<i>Dependent variable: Favoring party</i>											
	Right			Religious right			Right			Religious right		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Female	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.011** (0.005)	-0.005** (0.003)	-0.00005 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.011)	-0.005 (0.010)	-0.013 (0.010)	-0.008 (0.006)	-0.0001 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)
Constant	0.416*** (0.016)			0.055*** (0.010)			0.410*** (0.028)			0.149*** (0.023)		
FE	×	Y	Y	×	Y	Y	×	Y	Y	×	Y	Y
Covariates	×	×	Y	×	×	Y	×	×	Y	×	×	Y
Sample	All	All	All	All	All	All	Restrict	Restrict	Restrict	Restrict	Restrict	Restrict
Observations	248,738	248,738	218,045	248,738	248,738	218,045	89,695	89,695	75,662	89,695	89,695	75,662

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Based on individual level data from the World Values Survey, this table shows the partisan gender gap for right-wing, and religious right-wing parties. Ideological positions were classified using OpenAI's artificial intelligence algorithm. Columns 1-6 are for the full sample (after restricting to parties obtaining at least 5% support across all years of the survey. Columns 7-12 is based on a restricted sample of only those countries with at least one religious party. Fixed effects are the Country × Year level. Covariates include age, education level, income scale, marital status, and religiosity. Standard errors are clustered at the Country × Year level.