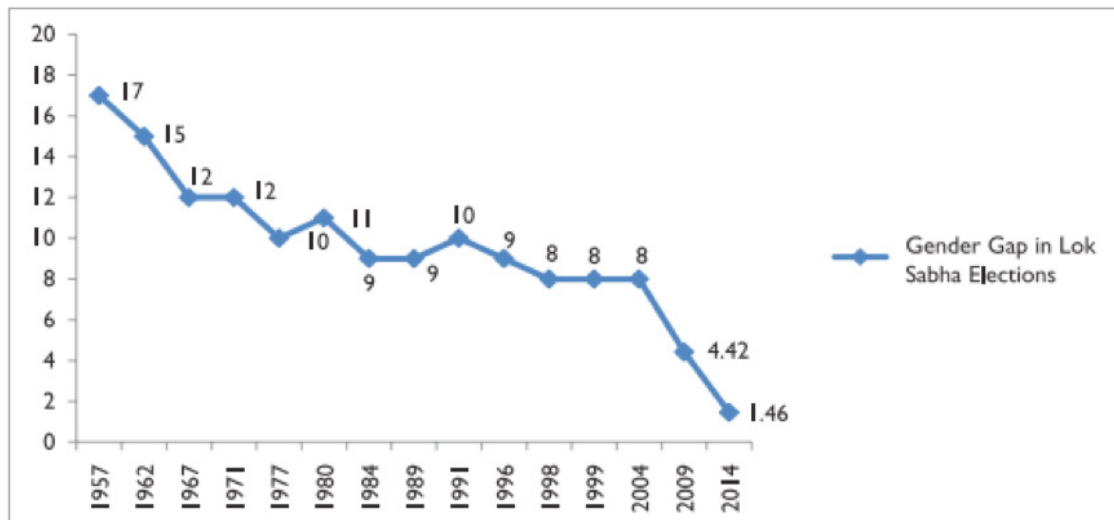


of “the defining features of the last 60 years of elections.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, this trend has had concrete political effects, as increased female voter turnout has changed policy implementation, campaign efforts, and ultimately, the notion that the political sphere is inherently masculine.



**Figure 1.** Gender Gap in Turnout: Lok Sabha Elections (1957–2014)

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data released by the Election Commission of India.

**Note:** Calculated as the difference between men's turnout (in percentage) and women's turnout (in percentage) for the Lok Sabha elections.

## VOTING VARIATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Although India has witnessed a major increase in female electoral participation overall, a closer look reveals that women's political participation varies regionally, depending on an area's social characteristics and culture. For example, voter turnout among women differs between northern India and southern India. While southern India exemplifies a matriarchal social structure, where women are given more freedom and mobility, northern India is known to have more “conservative views towards women,” including “discrimination against women in marriage, divorce [and] education.”<sup>11,12</sup> Despite such potential barriers, data has consistently shown increasing female voter turnout in northern India. Three of the five states with female voter turnout rates higher than men in the 2014 general election were in the North.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, two northern states described as highly conservative, female voter turnout increased from 558 and 572 women voters for every 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 804 and 866 for every 1,000 male voters in the 2000s.<sup>14</sup> The way in which the voter gender gap has decreased in the northern states particularly over time suggests that women are facing fewer social barriers and have gained autonomy as voters.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

## EDUCATION

Higher levels of education are often associated with higher turnout rates.<sup>18</sup> Although the 86th Amendment to the Indian Constitution grants men and women an equal right to education, a significant discrepancy exists between educated men and educated women.<sup>19</sup> Northern states and rural areas traditionally show lower female education and literacy rates.<sup>20</sup> While some states, such as Kerala (located in the South) report a female literacy rate of 91.98 percent, other states, such as Rajasthan and Bihar (both in the North) have female literacy rates as low as 52.66 and 53.33 percent.<sup>21</sup>

Although the gender gap in education persists, women's education has improved over time. In 1991, less than 40 percent of Indian women were literate. Twenty years later, the 2011 census reported a female literacy rate of 65.46 percent.<sup>22</sup> Although the 2011 census still showed a higher literacy rate for men, at 82.14 percent, this 20 percent increase in literacy among women within twenty years should not be overlooked.

Studies have pointed to increased literacy rates amongst women as a likely explanation for increased female voter turnout. As women become more educated and literate, they are increasingly able to access information, and thus, increase their political awareness.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it is believed that increased education, literacy rates, and, consequently access to information have increased political interest among women.<sup>24</sup>

This being said, a study using data from the 2001 and 2011 Census of India found that, "No clear relationship exists between changes in women's turnout and literacy," among states with large gender gaps in voter turnout.<sup>25</sup> The study points to Bihar as an example of a state in which female literacy rates have remained constant while female voter turnout has increased.<sup>26</sup> While increased literacy rates have likely only had positive effects on female empowerment and political participation, this study shows that attributing increased female voter turnout solely to education likely oversimplifies this observation.

## MEDIA AND INFORMATION ACCESS

In addition to education, media platforms, including televisions, newspapers, radios and more, have allowed women to readily access information and thus, have likely increased women's political awareness, interest and voter participation. A significant increase in India's media infrastructure began in the 1990s with the "liberalisation and opening up of the Indian economy."<sup>27</sup> The Census of India shows that access to media has continued to substantially increase over time. For example, TV ownership went up from a reported 32 per cent in 2001 to over 47 per cent in 2011.<sup>28</sup>

The influx of electronic media provided women with alternative and convenient platforms to access information, increase their political awareness "about their political and electoral rights."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, for women who have limited mobility and

are primarily confined to the home, media has expanded their ability to access information in the private sphere.<sup>30</sup> The way in which media has made information more accessible has helped lower the “cost” or “effort of becoming informed” and instead, has amplified the benefits of voting.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, increased access to media platforms amongst women means that women are not only able to access information overall but specifically, information directly from political parties. The Election Commission of India, as well as “various civil society organizations”, use media as “a platform for their voter awareness campaigns.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, political parties have resorted to media and technology to campaign and promote their platforms.<sup>33</sup>

Studies show a correlation between media exposure and voter turnout. A study, which used a Media Exposure Index to categorize women into low, medium and high media exposure groups, found that higher exposure to media increased awareness among women as well as their willingness to engage in politics.<sup>34</sup> Women with higher exposure to media participated in election campaigns at a 28% higher rate.<sup>35</sup> These statistics exemplify the relationship between knowledge and power. Furthermore, given that media exposure among women will likely increase and reach a wider audience, this data is promising as it shows that media will likely continue to empower more women over time.<sup>36</sup>

### **ACCOMMODATION AND MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN VOTERS**

Although changes in social variables have likely empowered women to vote, researchers hypothesize that the Election Commission of India’s efforts to mobilize voters may have also contributed to increased female voter turnout. In general, the ECI has managed to substantially increase voter registration across the country. That said, it is important to note that researchers have made an important distinction between increased voter registration and voter participation.

An analysis of 50 years of the Election Commission data for the Assembly elections between 1972 and 2012 found an improvement in women’s election participation over time. However, the study found that this improvement was due to an increase in active participation amongst women rather than increased registration and ability to vote. This analysis further substantiates the fact that a change in social factors and a breakdown in social barriers are encouraging women to turn out and exercise their right to vote.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the ECI’s efforts to increase security at polling stations have encouraged women to vote. Increased security around polling stations increases “confidence building measures” as women feel more secure and are better equipped to cast an independent and personal vote. The ECI began efforts to “[conduct] free, fair and violence-free elections” in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> This “empowered vulnerable groups” to vote by decreasing electoral fraud and “instances of rigging or intimidation.” Furthermore, EVMS has “led to a 6.4 percent increase in the likelihood that a less educated voter will cast her vote,” an improvement specifically important for women

as they have and continue to be disadvantaged educationally.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, EVMS has helped promote a more secure voter environment.<sup>40</sup> Thus, EVMS has contributed to creating a safe voting environment and has “empowered the vulnerable groups by increasing their participations in elections.”<sup>41</sup>

The ECI continues to make an effort to mobilize female voters and create a safe voting environment. For example, there is now at least one female polling officer at each polling station and “separate queues for men and women in order to improve the quality and perceived safety of the voting experience for women.”<sup>42,43</sup> Having a female polling officer makes women feel more comfortable at polls, as some women may feel uncomfortable having “a male polling staff member applying indelible ink on their fingers.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the ECI has expressed an interest in increasing the number of all-women polling stations in other parts of the country, such as in Goa (All Women Polling Stations 2016). These measures to increase safety, security and efficiency at polling booths are important as personal safety continues to be women’s primary concern when deciding to vote.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, these efforts have likely increased women’s ability to cast a vote that is exclusively their own. Data from the 2009 general election shows that women who were able to independently decide how to vote, as opposed to women who were “governed by family and peer groups,” were more likely to participate in elections.<sup>46</sup> Thus, these efforts have helped women overcome logistical, social and mental barriers which may have inhibited their ability to vote.

**Table 5. State-wise Analysis of Proportion of Voters Who Voted without Taking Anybody Else’s Opinion**

State	Increase in Women’s Turnout between 2009 and 2014 (in percentage points)	Gender Gap in Voting		Change in Proportion of Women Voting on their Own (in percentage)
		2009 (in percentage points)	2014 (in percentage points)	
Rajasthan	16.6	6.7	3.2	27
Uttar Pradesh	13.2	6.5	1.7	22
Assam	12.4	5.3	-4.8	11
Chhattisgarh	16	6	2.7	9
Madhya Pradesh	12.7	13.7	9.5	2
Jharkhand	15.8	6.2	0.7	1
Bihar	15.1	6.5	-2.6	-1
Odisha	10.4	1.5	-2.4	-8

**Source:** National Election Studies 2009 and 2014 conducted by CSDS.  
**Note:** Gender gap estimated as the difference in the men’s turnout (in percentage) and women’s turnout (in percentage).

## FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND INTEREST

Researchers have further observed a correlation between the upsurge in female voter turnout and an increased interest in politics among women. An increase in female political participation, ranging from campaigning to attending meetings, over time suggests that women are increasingly becoming more connected to the political sphere and thus turning out to vote in higher numbers. For example, in the Lok Sabha Elections of 1999 only 13 percent of women voters were considered

high political participants while 22 percent of women were so considered in 2009.<sup>47</sup> More specifically, between 2009 and 2014, there was an increase in the proportion of women's attendance at election meetings from 9 percent attendance in 2009 to 15 percent attendance during the 2014 Lok Sabha election.<sup>48</sup> While higher participation rates and higher voter turnout are correlated, it is difficult to decipher if increased political participation amongst women is a cause or effect of greater voter turnout. Nevertheless, this correlation is significant as it shows that there is an increase in political participation, beyond voting, among women and may further suggest that women are increasingly empowered to vote as they face fewer social barriers.

Additionally, it is possible that more women are coming out to vote because they feel more personally connected to the issues being discussed. Studies show that the more personal interest and connection an individual has to an election, the more likely they are to vote.<sup>49</sup> In other words, women are more likely to turn out to vote if female-related issues are raised. For example, the question of reserved seats in political office for women first emerged in the 1990s and acted as a "catalyst" for women to vote and increased grassroots political participation amongst women.<sup>50</sup> In 1993 the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution introduced 33 percent reservations for women at the local level.<sup>51</sup> This gave women a sense of "sharing power" in the 1990s, and thus likely increased female political participation. Reservations challenged the stereotype of politics as an exclusively male domain.<sup>52,53</sup>

Today, female reservations continue to be an issue. The Women's Reservation Bill, a bill which would extend 30 percent reservations for women to the national level, was introduced in 1997. Although many considered the Women's Reservation Bill to be a crucial next step in order to increase female political representation and presence, others objected to the bill, and the debate over the bill has continued to serve as a female-specific political issue for women to champion.<sup>54</sup> Especially as women continue to be disenfranchised and excluded from the political sphere, voting serves as a powerful tool for women to have their voices heard.<sup>55,56</sup> Thus, this bill has likely encouraged more women to vote and fight for a more inclusive political culture.

Researchers hypothesize that the most recent 2014 general election showed the way in which politics in India is becoming increasingly feminized through political issues and the way in which parties appeal to voters. For example, the BJP's platform was centered around economic issues, which were described as specifically "appealing issues to women in particular [as] 'in many households, it is the women – not the men – who are most acquainted with household expenditure and who interact with commodity markets.'"<sup>57</sup> Political campaigns have begun to target women as important decision-makers and critical constituents.

Furthermore, the recent platforms of the BJP and Congress showed an interest in women's issues and an increasing effort to mobilize women voters. Both Congress's Rahul Gandhi and the BJP's Narendra Modi added plans "to improve



women's safety" into their speeches during various appearances.<sup>58</sup> The Congress Party's manifesto describes how "[the party will] provide sanitary napkins to adolescent girls for free and will increase the number of women-only police stations."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the BJP tried to appeal to women as it "promised to reduce the gender gap in the judiciary and introduce self defence classes in school."<sup>60</sup> Although these efforts to appeal to women have likely mobilized women to vote, it is difficult to decipher the direction of this relationship. It could be that, as increased female voter turnout is seen, these efforts are a result of parties becoming more aware that they cannot afford to ignore women voters. However, it is also possible that women have been attracted to the polls by the parties' efforts to incorporate women's issues into their platform.

### IMPLICATIONS OF INCREASED FEMALE VOTER TURNOUT AND LOOKING AHEAD

Increased voter participation amongst women has demonstrated India's growth as a democracy as it is a promising indicator of increased "equality and freedom" across gender divisions.<sup>61</sup> Previously low levels of electoral participation amongst women have been indicative of the way in which women experience higher costs when it comes to voting.<sup>62</sup> For example, women often face restrictions related to family, income, education, and mobility, as well as mental boundaries that may limit their ability to vote. Furthermore, even when some women did vote, they were not always able to cast a vote that was truly theirs as they would often receive "counseling" from family members prior to casting their votes and would need permission before entering "the political domain."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, improvement in female turnout, specifically in northern states, holds promise as it suggests that women have gained more autonomy both socially and politically.

While studies have pointed to increased education, media exposure, issues related to women, ECI efforts, and the feminization of politics as possible contributors to enfranchising women, it is often difficult to conclude that there is a clear causal relationship between these variables and female voter turnout. It is likely that multiple variables have worked collectively to empower women as voters. For example, a safe and secure voting environment in conjunction with increased education, media exposure, and access to information have helped women cast a vote that is indicative of their personal opinion and beliefs. Overall, decreased social barriers have allowed women to use their votes as a tool of power and a way to make their voice heard. As Mukulika Banerjee, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, explains in her book, *Why India Votes*, "Women in India are told what to wear, what to cook, what to say, how to behave, where to go. But with voting, there is a very clear sense that this is one instance that they're able to register their own opinion."<sup>64</sup>

Increased female voter turnout has further helped promote the "feminisation of Indian politics," as a positive feedback loop exists between women voters and the prominence of women's issues. Women voters are more likely to encourage "wom-

en-centered policies, such as issues relating to safety, health and sexual assault.”<sup>65,66</sup> Furthermore, although increased female turnout is indicative of a more inclusive political environment, “this feminisation of politics” continues to face opposition from “male-dominated political establishment and party personnel, apparatuses and procedures.”<sup>67</sup> Women continue to be absent from top political positions and have a substantially lower presence than men in the Lok Sabha as well as other legislative bodies throughout the country.<sup>68</sup> Finally, as the Women’s Reservation Bill continues to be a divisive issue, it is imperative that women voters continue to feel equipped and empowered to independently exercise their vote in order to further diversify and open up the political sphere.

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