

How Electoral Laws Worsen the Candidacy of Minorities in Rural India*

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Abstract

Governments around the world regulate political candidacy. This paper studies the impact of electoral laws in India that disqualify citizens with more than two children from contesting local government offices. Since political officeholders significantly influence the communities they govern, these laws were designed to shape social norms around family size. I leverage variation in the law's adoption across states within a difference-in-differences framework to examine how it affects political candidacy among Muslims, India's largest religious minority and one of its most marginalized groups. I find that fertility limits reduce Muslim candidacy. I argue that this is due to the dilemma potential candidates face between complying with the law or adhering to social norms regarding family size. Drawing on an original survey of 500 village politicians, I find evidence consistent with my theory. This paper underscores that states' efforts to shape social norms through electoral laws may come at the cost of marginalized groups' political representation.

Keywords: political entry, electoral laws, candidacy, local politics, population control policies, India

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1 Introduction

In many countries, minority groups remain marginalized at various stages of the political process. According to a large body of literature, “neutral” institutional rules, such as the disenfranchisement of those with criminal records and the requirement of difficult-to-obtain identification documents, are major contributors to the low turnout of these groups (Berman 2015; Keyssar 2009; Wehner and de Kadt 2023; White 2019). For example, such voting laws in the US are argued to be one of the primary reasons for the low participation of Black and Indigenous voters.

In this study, I investigate whether institutional rules also influence the participation of minorities as candidates for political office. Similar to voting laws, electoral rules that set eligibility criteria for political office—such as minimum age, residency, or education requirements—do not explicitly restrict the political entry of any group. However, they can potentially alter the social composition of the candidate pool by differentially affecting entry costs. Proponents argue that such laws enhance the quality of the candidate pool and create role models who can promote desirable choices in society (Shapiro et al. 2010). On the other hand, critics contend that attempts to regulate political entry often have far-reaching consequences, some of which may be unexpected (Pande 2015). However, empirical evidence on the impact of these institutional rules on the political entry of specific groups remains limited.

To address this gap, I examine the consequences of electoral rules in rural India’s local governments on the candidacy of Muslims, who are the largest religious minority and one of the most marginalized socioeconomic groups without institutional protection (Basant 2007).¹ In particular, I examine the impact of laws that impose fertility limits on those who want to contest village elections. These restrictions were implemented with the aim to control population growth by using elected representatives as

¹In some states, there are quotas for economically disadvantaged Muslims, but they have to compete with economically disadvantaged non-Muslims in those seats.

role models to drive the change (Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019; Buch 2005). The law disqualifies individuals who violate the requirement after its implementation but does not penalize aspirants with large existing families. In other words, it limits political office to citizens with fewer than two children before the law to two. If citizens had more than two children before the law, they are still eligible for office, but any subsequent birth will make them ineligible. These limits were among the first amendments to the local governance act that varied entry requirements in some states, leading to spatial and temporal variation in their adoption, making them suitable for a systematic study.

Why would laws limiting office to individuals with specific characteristics affect marginalized groups? Existing theories suggest that entry costs play a crucial role in the decision to run for elections (Gulzar 2021; Tullock 1965). I argue that when entry requirements challenge social norms, citizens who deviate from these norms to contest for office may face backlash from both their family and community. These costs are particularly pronounced for marginalized groups due to their lower likelihood of winning. Moreover, if electoral rules are implemented imperfectly—a common issue in developing countries—they may enable elites to exploit the system for their own benefit (Anderson et al. 2015; Neggers 2018).

Using data from a nationally representative survey, I find that fertility limits decrease the likelihood of any Muslim candidate and the share of Muslims on the ballot, suggesting a decline in Muslim candidacy. Additionally, there is descriptive evidence suggesting that these limits lead to a shift in the ratio of young candidates (those affected by the limits as they may not have achieved their desired family size before implementation) to older, unaffected candidates. This suggests that some politically aspirational young citizens, who are affected by the limits, ask an older (unaffected) community member to contest as a coping strategy. Such strategies could be problematic for democratic accountability, as the replacement candidate may act as a proxy for the ineligible individual if elected (Heinze et al. 2024).

To uncover the underlying mechanism, I rely on data collected from a primary phone survey of current village council members and runners-up in Maharashtra's village councils, one of the major states that adopted fertility limits. I find suggestive evidence that son preference is relatively higher among Muslim politicians. Since the determination of the sex of a fetus is banned to curtail sex-selective abortions, particularly the abortion of female fetuses (Arnold et al. 2002; Jayachandran 2017), son preference plays a pivotal role in determining family size. Given that family size preferences are shaped by community norms, deviating from these preferences can incur significant social costs. Additionally, I examine the role of imperfect enforcement in explaining the findings. I find that most politicians report that false accusations and incorrect reporting about the number of children to remain eligible are common in Maharashtra, even more than 20 years after the law's implementation. Furthermore, since Maharashtra is one of the states with better enforcement, these practices are likely even more prevalent in other states. In such an environment, I argue that false accusations, frequently used as tools of suppression by elites (Buch 2005), disproportionately impact Muslims. Unlike some other marginalized groups, Muslims do not benefit from quotas and must compete against dominant groups.

This paper makes the following contributions. First, it examines the consequences of laws that restrict individuals from holding political office based on specific characteristics for unprotected marginalized groups. Despite the wide variety of electoral laws, which can significantly impact the social composition of the candidate pool, existing studies have predominantly concentrated on the consequences of filing fees and signature requirements—types of electoral laws that were designed to reduce the number of political parties and have been argued to contribute to the demise of third parties in the US (Ansolabehere and Gerber 1996; Burden 2007; Drometer and Rincke 2009; Strattmann 2005; Tamas 2018; Tullock 1965; Winger 2002). Second, it highlights the factors that influence entry costs. Existing literature on the determinants of political entry fo-

cuses on political ambition, the likelihood of winning, and the benefits of running for office, like rents and prominence within the community (see [Gulzar \(2021\)](#) for a detailed literature review). This literature mentions that entry costs are crucial, but does not discuss individual, household, and community-level factors that constitute these costs. Lastly, this paper contributes to the large body of literature on decentralization in India. These government structures have been extensively studied in recent years, primarily due to the large-scale adoption of constitutionally mandated gender- and caste-based quotas for those running for local government offices ([Beaman et al. 2009](#); [Bhavnani 2009](#); [Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004](#); [Chauchard 2017](#)). However, while some laws aim to increase the representation of marginalized groups, several states have introduced laws that restrict office eligibility based on specific characteristics, such as minimum education requirements, toilet requirements, and fertility limits. Understanding the consequences of these laws is essential for assessing the benefits of representational gains from decentralization.

2 Conceptual Framework

How does restricting political office to candidates with specific characteristics affect the decision to run for office? The commonly held view is that barriers to entry through ballot access restrictions result in a decrease in political or electoral competition ([Afzal 2014](#)). This is because these restrictions increase the costs of entry for candidates, making it more difficult for them to run for office ([Tullock 1965](#)). These entry costs are an important part of my analysis, as they play a role in determining whether candidates impacted by the restrictions will choose to run for office ([Kapoor and Magesan 2018](#)).

Consider a hypothetical electoral law that challenges prevailing social norms. Several scholars have examined the complex relationship between laws and norms and their combined effect on individual behavior ([Bénabou and Tirole 2003,0](#); [Benabou and Tirole 2011](#); [Lane et al. 2023](#)). According to [Lane et al. \(2023\)](#), individuals are inherently pro-social and are influenced by the rewards and sanctions associated with conforming

to or deviating from societal norms. For instance, fertility limit restrictions may force individuals to choose between adhering to a family size preference and pursuing political office. If family size norms vary significantly across social groups, such restrictions might disproportionately affect certain groups more than others.

However, individuals might choose to deviate from these norms if the payoff for doing so is sufficiently high (Gulzar 2021). The potential benefits of running for office might include the rents from being an elected representative, the gains from public service, or the opportunity to represent one's community (Gulzar and Khan 2024). Yet, if the likelihood of winning an election is low, as is often the case for marginalized groups, the cost of deviating from family or community preferences may outweigh these potential benefits. Consequently, aspiring citizens from these groups may opt not to contest in elections.

HYPOTHESIS 1 Electoral laws that challenge social norms may reduce the candidacy of aspiring citizens from groups facing high costs for deviating from these norms and a low likelihood of winning.

Now, consider a scenario where the state is unable to fully enforce a law. In such cases, certain groups with greater influence over the bureaucracy might violate the law without facing consequences (Anderson et al. 2015; Neggers 2018). Furthermore, these influential groups could exploit limited state capacity to falsely accuse competitors. Consequently, even if a law-abiding citizen from a marginalized group decides to contest elections against their social preferences, they may be deterred by the potential costs of facing false accusations.

HYPOTHESIS 2 Imperfect implementation of electoral laws can reduce the candidacy of marginalized groups.

3 Fertility Preferences and Candidacy in Rural India

In many societies, fertility choices are influenced by social, demographic, and economic conditions (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969). Additionally, numerous studies on fertility behavior have documented a negative relationship between income and fertility (Doepke et al. 2023). The pattern looks very similar in India. Marginalized minority groups (Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Muslims) that are most economically marginalized tend to prefer larger families. Table 3.1 shows the preference for more than two children among socioeconomic groups, as reported by female respondents from three rounds of the nationally-representative National Family Health Survey conducted in 1992-93, 1998-99, and 2005-2006. Compared to 67% of Muslim women, only 48% of upper-caste women desired more than two children. There are several reasons for these preferences, and it is typically a combination of factors, such as high child mortality, low usage of contraceptives, son preference, and lack of access and resources for sex-selective abortion, among others (Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019; Buch 2005).²

Let us consider the trade-off that Muslims face between contesting elections and limiting family size. Muslims, as a religious minority and one of the marginalized groups in India, lack the constitutionally mandated institutional protections afforded to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In a typical constituency, if voters prefer to vote for candidates from their own group, Muslims may struggle to gain support without the backing of other social groups. Given the preference for larger families, candidates who choose to have the number of children they desire might become ineligible under the law, which disproportionately affects their community. On the other hand, if Muslim households limit family size to meet eligibility requirements, they may face high costs due to deviating from community or family preferences, potentially leading to backlash from their own. Additionally, Muslims are less likely to win elections as they compete

²Strong son preference is common across all social groups in rural India. However, historically disadvantaged groups are less likely to have the resources to illegally determine the sex and abort female fetuses (Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019; Buch 2005).

against politically dominant upper-caste Hindus in seats without quotas. Consequently, they might face more suspicions and accusations, as these tools of suppression are predominantly wielded by dominant groups (Buch 2005). Therefore, it is rational for more Muslims to contest less, despite their personal preferences.

Table 3.1: Fraction of women whose ideal number of children > 2

Category	Fraction
Muslim	0.67
SC/ST	0.56
OBC	0.44
Upper Caste	0.48
Hindu	0.49
Other religions	0.33

Source: This table reports computations done by Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019.

4 Fertility Limit Legislation

In recent years, India has made significant changes to the way local governance is handled through electoral processes. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 directed state governments to conduct regular elections at the local level and gave local councils the authority to oversee and manage expenses. As a result, village councils play a significant role, as they have the responsibility to provide public goods and decide who will benefit from the central and state government's development programs. These amendments not only strengthened local institutions, but also ensured underrepresented groups were represented by mandating quotas for them in elections. Specifically, one-third of the seats in local government bodies are reserved for women and a certain number of seats are reserved for scheduled castes, tribes, and other backward castes, based on their population. Several studies have been conducted to assess the political and economic impacts of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (Bhavnani 2009, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Dunning and Nilekani 2013).

The constitutional amendment was a significant step forward for local governance in India, but several states made new laws that varied the entry requirements.

One such law was the implementation of a two-child limit for candidates in local bodies. In 1992, the National Development Council was established after the results of the 1991 Census were released, with the goal of controlling population growth. Following the recommendations of the 1992 apex committee on family planning, several states imposed a two-child limit for candidates in local government bodies, based on the idea that local leaders could influence the fertility choices of their constituents by setting an example (Waldman 2022). Initially, eleven states implemented this legislation starting in 1992, but it is now only in effect in seven states, as four states repealed it between 2005-2006. According to Anukriti and Chakravarty (2019), pressure from societal groups forced the state government reverse the decision, as in some instances, elected representatives and aspiring citizens abandoned their wives or children or selectively aborted female fetuses due to fear of disqualification.

The law prohibits potential candidates who violate the limits from running for or continuing in political office after the policy goes into effect. All states provided a one-year grace period during which individuals could have additional children without affecting their eligibility. Incumbent politicians with two or more children who have another child after the policy takes effect will be disqualified from office, based on a complaint or petition to the district administration. According to administrative data from Buch (2005), several elected representatives were disqualified for violating the two-child limit in the states of Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. However, the study also documents cases of false accusations by political competitors and cases wherein no one complained against a violator. The authors' note that typically, these strategies are used by elites from the dominant castes in the village, and hence, imperfect enforcement increases the cost of running for office for political aspirants from marginalized groups.

5 Data and Empirics

The main aim of this paper is to examine the causal effect of fertility limits legislation on the candidacy in village council elections in India. To systematically investigate this, I exploit the spatial and temporal variation in the enactment of the law across states using the 2006/09 round of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS), a nationally representative sample of rural India.³ This round of the survey collected information from 8,569 households across 240 villages in 17 major states of India. In addition to a detailed household survey, a listing survey was conducted to gather demographic data and information on participation in local governance from the heads of all households in the surveyed villages.⁴ Complementarily, the village survey gathered administrative details, such as election year and reservation status for each seat on the council, from official village records.⁵ The REDS 2006/09 dataset is particularly suitable for my analysis for several reasons. Firstly, it collects detailed information on participation in local village councils from all major states of India. Secondly, the survey includes retrospective data on local governance participation, providing a rich dataset on political outcomes across multiple electoral cycles.

Figure 5.1 presents information on election years by state and variations in the timing of the implementation of these laws across states.⁶ The light gray shaded area in the figure represents the period during which fertility limits were in effect, while the diamonds mark the election years for the sample villages in each state. The data includes information for two elections per village; however, election timings varied across villages in some states, resulting in elections being spread over multiple years. The fig-

³The Rural Economic and Demographic Survey, originally conducted in 1971 as the Additional Rural Income Survey, employs a stratified random sampling strategy across 252 villages. Subsequent rounds were conducted in 1982, 1999, and the most recent in 2006/09, making it one of the oldest running panel surveys.

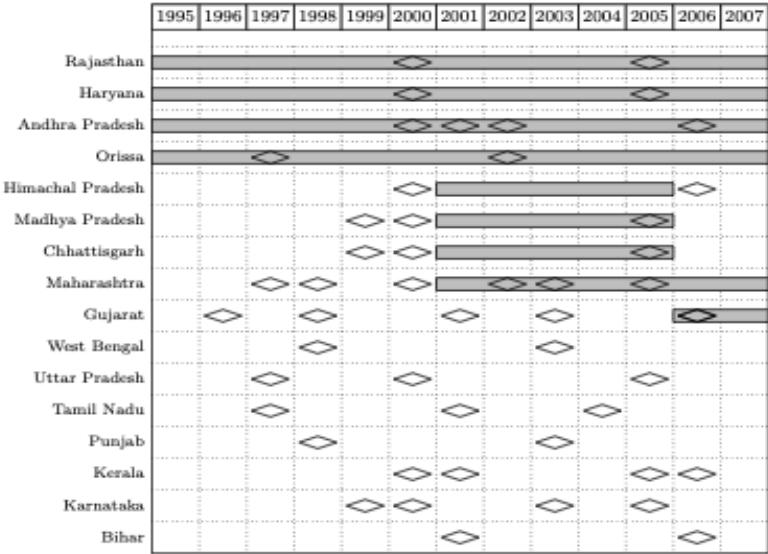
⁴The listing survey collected information from 115,429 household heads across 243 villages.

⁵Information from Jharkhand is not available, thus this state is excluded from my analysis.

⁶I primarily rely on [Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019](#) for key policy dates, but I verify and correct any discrepancies found in the timeline. For instance, administrative records indicate that the Maharashtra policy was implemented in 2001, not 2003, as mentioned in [Anukriti and Chakravarty 2019](#).

ure shows that some states had fertility limits throughout the study period, some had them for only one election cycle, and others never had fertility limits during the study period. In the survey data, the states that implemented the law are Rajasthan, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Bihar. Among these, Bihar implemented fertility limits only on candidates in municipal councils (urban councils), so Bihar is used as a control state. Four states revoked the policy, but Himachal Pradesh is the only state in my sample that had elections after the policy was revoked. Consequently, I exclude Himachal Pradesh from the analysis, as carryover effects—where potential outcomes in the present period may be influenced by previous exposure—would violate the stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA).⁷ Finally, the treatment group in our sample consists of the eight states that implemented restrictions on candidates in village councils.

Figure 5.1: Information on Election Years and Timing of Treatment by State



Notes: The light gray shaded period in the figure represents the years during which fertility limits were in place, and diamonds indicate the election years for the sample villages of the state.

Using the data from the census of household heads from villages, I identify house-

⁷The canonical difference-in-differences framework assumes that once a unit switches treatment status, it does not change (Callaway and Sant’Anna 2021).

holds with candidates who contested village council elections relying on responses to the following questions:

- Were you a candidate for the position of a council member in the current (previous) term?
- Was any member of your family a candidate for the position of council member in the current (previous) term?

The first question targets the head of the household, while the second is directed at other household members. If the answer to the second question is "yes," the response does not specify the number of candidates. Consequently, I define my measures in terms of candidate households rather than individual candidates. I use this information to create a village-level framework, with each observation representing a village election. I construct and employ three measures of Muslim candidacy: the number of Muslim candidate households, a binary measure indicating the presence of any Muslim candidate households, and the share of Muslim candidate households. Table 5.1 presents the mean and standard deviation of these candidacy measures across different treatment statuses: never treated, always treated, and sometimes treated.⁸ The descriptive statistics reveal that the mean number of Muslim candidate households is less than one across all treatment statuses. Additionally, there is a noticeable decline in candidacy across all measures in sometimes treated states, providing suggestive descriptive evidence of a decline in Muslim candidacy as a result of fertility limits.

I use a two-election period difference-in-difference design for the analysis, which leverages variation in treatment adoption across space and time. The main specification used for the analysis is:

$$Y_{vst} = \theta_t + \gamma_s + \beta \text{Fertility Limits}_{st} + X'_{vst} \delta + \epsilon_{vst} \quad (1)$$

⁸Table A.1 provides descriptive statistics on key variables used in the analysis, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values for all outcome and control variables in both the village and household frames.

Table 5.1: Summary statistics of main outcome variables by treatment status

	Never Treated	Always Treated	Sometimes Treated	
			Pre	Post
Muslim Candidate Households	.656 (2.41)	.444 (1.36)	.186 (.8)	.12 (.72)
Any Muslim Candidate Household	.202 (.4)	.179 (.39)	.071 (.26)	.04 (.2)
Share Muslim Candidate Households	.079 (.2)	.063 (.19)	.045 (.18)	.006 (.03)
N	218	117	70	50

Notes: Data from the listing questionnaire of Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 229 villages in 15 states of India.

where Y_{vst} represents the outcome of interest, such as the share of Muslim or SC/ST candidate households, in village v , state s , for the election year t . Fertility Limits $_{st}$ is equal to one for elections with fertility limits and zero otherwise. The specification includes controls for time-invariant state-specific factors (γ_s), factors specific to a particular election year (θ_t), village demography controls, and time-variant village-specific controls, such as the share of council member seats reserved under each category (SC/ST/OBC/Women) (X_{vst}). The coefficient β captures the average treatment effect. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. Since the number of clusters is less than 20, the preferred method for calculating standard errors at the state level is the wild bootstrap-t procedure, as described in [Cameron et al. \(2008\)](#).

A key identifying assumption is that the pre-treatment trends are parallel for the treatment and control states. This requires data on the outcome of interest for at least two previous election terms before the implementation year. However, such data is unavailable because village elections either did not occur or were irregular before the 1992 constitutional amendment. To address this challenge, I follow the approach used by [Cameron et al. \(2021\)](#), who faced a similar issue, and use data on related political outcomes from earlier periods. To do so, I compare pre-trends in state assembly election outcomes, as these policies were implemented by the state legislature, and use the fol-

lowing empirical specification:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 Treatment_s + \sum_{t=T-k}^{t=T-1} \beta_{2t} Fertility\ Limits_s \times Term_t + \beta_3 Year_t + \epsilon_{st} \quad (2)$$

where Y_{ist} represents the related outcome variables, such as measures of candidacy, political competition in state-level elections, for unit i , in state s , in year t . $Fertility\ Limits_s$ is an indicator for states that implemented the policy, and $Term_t$ is a vector of election year fixed effects. The coefficients β_{2t} capture differences between states with and without fertility limits for each term. I examine the pre-trends for two sub-samples separately: always treated versus never treated, and always treated versus sometimes treated.

Figure A.1 and A.2 present the plots for estimates and confidence intervals of the coefficient of interest, β_{2t} , for the comparisons between always treated versus never treated, and always treated versus sometimes treated, respectively. The data used in this analysis was obtained from Agarwal et al. (2021) and provides information not only on election statistics but also on the religion, gender, occupation, and education of candidates and elected representatives in state assembly elections.⁹ The results show that there is no significant difference in pre-trends for both sub-samples across all outcomes.

To uncover the mechanism, I collect primary data using phone surveys of politicians from 147 village councils across 9 districts in Maharashtra. Table 5.2 describes the sample for each group: Muslims, SC/ST (Non-Muslims), and Others (OBC and Gen). The survey oversampled politicians from marginalized minority groups such as Muslims, Scheduled Tribes, and Scheduled Castes, and hence was conducted in districts with a high share of their population. The main aim of the survey was to understand the opinions about fertility limits, trade-offs created by fertility limits, strategies adopted by politicians affected by the limits, challenges in enforcement, and investigate whether

⁹Thanks to Saloni Bhogale and Giles Verniers for kindly providing access to the data.

quotas can reduce the cost of fertility limits. Table A.2 provides summary statistics of the characteristics of politicians surveyed.

Table 5.2: Sample details for phone survey in Maharashtra

Sample	Observations
Total Sample	520
I. Muslim Politicians	188
1. Elected leaders	78.19 %
2. Runner-ups	21.81%
II. SC/ST Politicians	152
1. Elected leaders	70.39 %
2. Runner-ups	29.61 %
III. Other Politicians	180
1. Elected leaders	62.78 %
2. Runner-ups	37.22 %

6 Results

In this section, I first discuss the consequences of fertility limits on candidacy using the REDS data. I began by examining the impact of fertility limits on the candidacy of Muslims. Table 6.1 presents the effects on the number of Muslim households with candidates, a binary outcome indicating whether any Muslim household contested the election, and the share of Muslim households on the ballot in columns (1) through (3), respectively.¹⁰ In column (1), I find that fertility limits lead to a roughly 23% decrease in the number of Muslim candidate households, but this coefficient is not statistically significant. This imprecise estimate may be due to the fact that in most village elections, either zero or just a single Muslim candidate household contests, which is expected given that the average share of the Muslim population in a village is around 6%.

¹⁰I report 95% confidence intervals instead of standard errors as I can calculate them for both clustering methods. The distribution of wild-cluster-bootstrapped standard errors is not invertible.

In some Muslim-majority villages, however, all candidate households are Muslim. In other words, the distribution of Muslim candidates has excess zeroes and a long tail, which may mean the sample is not sufficiently powered to detect an effect on the intensive margin. In column (2), I find that fertility limits reduce the likelihood of a Muslim candidate household contesting by 0.07 compared to elections without fertility limits. This estimate is statistically significant at the 5% level and robust to different clustering methods for standard errors. The results in column (3) indicate that fertility limits significantly decrease the share of Muslim candidate households. The coefficients are significant at the 1% level for both clustering methods.

Table 6.1: Effect of Fertility Limits on Muslim Candidacy

Outcome	# Mus. (1)	Any Mus. (2)	Share Mus. (3)
Fertility Limits	-0.153 (-0.464,0.158) [-0.463,0.158]	-0.0766 (-0.141,-0.0124)** [-0.150,-0.00279]**	-0.0719 (-0.118,-0.0259)*** [-0.117,-0.0265]***
Control mean	.66	.2	.08
N	455	455	409

Notes: Data from the village questionnaire of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India is used. Treat is equal to one for treated elections in the states that imposed fertility limit laws, and zero otherwise. For control states, Treat is always zero. All specifications include election year and state fixed effects. Additionally, all specifications control for the share of council member seats reserved under each category (SC/ST/OBC/Women) and total number of seats in the village council. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. 95% CI in parentheses clustered by state, in brackets wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

In addition, I examine the effects using several different specifications, as shown in Table A.3. The results remain consistent after including controls for the Muslim population in panel A, time-invariant district-level characteristics (such as historical factors influencing fertility preferences and bureaucratic culture affecting the enforcement of fertility limits) in panel B, and the reservation status of the village chief seat in panel C. One concern with staggered treatment designs is that trends in outcomes correlated with the year of implementation of fertility limits might bias the results. Since the sample includes two election periods, states with fertility limits in both periods might vio-

late the identification assumption if the effects are time-varying (e.g., more significant in the second election after implementation). To address this concern, I show that the results are robust to excluding states with fertility limits in both election periods, as presented in panel D. Overall, the results provide robust evidence of a decline in Muslim candidacy.

Next, I investigate the impact of fertility limits on the candidacy of marginalized groups with institutional protection, such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Castes (OBC), in panels A through C.¹¹ Table A.4 presents the results for the number of candidate households of each group in column (1) and the share of candidate households in column (2).¹² Several factors may contribute to the imprecise estimates. Firstly, the cost of deviating from preferences may be lower due to ethnic quotas and the lack of competition from politically dominant upper-caste Hindus. Additionally, certain politically aspirational castes within these groups may be more likely to contest because they have a higher chance of winning if fertility limits discourage less politically aspirational castes from running for office. Existing studies have documented high political and economic inequalities between castes within these broad categories (Ahuja 2019; Jaffrelot 2023; Joshi et al. 2018). Finally, I also examine the effects of fertility limits on upper-caste Hindus (a politically dominant group with no institutional protection) in Table A.5 and the total number of candidate households in Table A.6. The results show that fertility limits are statistically insignificant across measures and specifications, potentially due to the same reasons affecting politically aspirational marginalized groups.

Recall that restrictions on the number of children a candidate can have only ap-

¹¹SC households are those coded as Scheduled Castes and identify as Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist for this analysis, as SCs belonging to other religions do not benefit from affirmative action policies. Since there are very few non-Muslim and non-Hindu households identifying as OBC and ST in the sample, OBC and ST households refer to OBC and ST Hindus.

¹²The binary measure for groups with institutional protection is not used, as most villages in the sample have at least one seat reserved for SC, ST, and OBC. Therefore, the presence of any candidate from these groups is mechanically ensured by quotas.

ply to those who have not yet reached their desired family size at the time the laws are implemented. Consequently, individuals who have already reached their desired family size before the implementation of fertility limits can still run for election, even if they have more than two children. Therefore, I examine whether fertility limits alter the age composition of the candidate pool.

To document the effect on age composition, the sample relies on the age of household heads contesting elections, as the data does not provide the age of all household members running for election.¹³ Using information on age and election year, I calculate the proportion of contesting Muslim household heads in five age groups (less than 30, 30-40, 40-50, 50-60, and above 60) at the time of election.¹⁴ In states that adopted fertility limits early, I examine candidacy in two elections following the implementation. For early adopters, the second election may occur anytime between six to ten years after implementation. For states with only one election since implementation, this gap will be less than five years. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that those in their 50s or 60s at the time of the election would have reached their desired family size by the time fertility limits were adopted in these states.¹⁵

Table 6.2 shows the changes in candidacy across various age groups of contesting Muslim household heads. The descriptive analysis reveals a pattern where the proportion of younger candidates (below 40 years of age) decreases as a result of fertility limits, while the proportion of candidates older than 40 increases—those who should not be affected by the law. This provides additional evidence suggesting that fertility limits impact Muslim candidacy. A similar pattern is observed for STs, OBCs, and general caste-contesting household heads, except SCs (see Table A.7). This suggests that fertil-

¹³The data significantly limits the statistical power to detect an effect on age composition, as around 33 to 50% of seats in each election are reserved for women, and it is very rare for women to be household heads. Therefore, this analysis highlights broad descriptive patterns for speculative discussion.

¹⁴According to the household survey, the median age of the male parent at the time of the birth of their last child is 30.

¹⁵I do not explicitly use the age at the time of implementation for this analysis, as it cannot be computed for states without fertility limits.

ity limits also affect those who have yet to reach their desired family size in other major groups, but not to the extent of decreasing their overall candidacy. This effect may be moderated by the replacement of younger affected candidates with older, unaffected candidates from the same community.

Table 6.2: Fertility Limits and Change in Age Composition of Muslim Candidates

	No limits	Two child limits	Difference
Proportion \leq 30 years	.19 (.4)	.09 (.28)	-0.11 (0.07)
Proportion between 30 and 40 years	.4 (.49)	.31 (.47)	-0.09 (0.10)
Proportion between 40 and 50 years	.21 (.41)	.29 (.46)	0.07 (0.08)
Proportion between 50 and 60 years	.16 (.37)	.17 (.38)	0.01 (0.07)
Proportion \geq 60 years	.09 (.29)	.2 (.41)	0.11 (0.06)
N	99	35	

Notes: Data from the village questionnaire of Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India.

In summary, the results show that fertility limits have a significant impact on the candidacy of Muslims. However, there is no significant impact on the candidacy of other major groups.

7 Discussion

In this section, I consider several potential reasons for the decline in Muslim candidacy. I begin by examining the costs associated with individual, family, and community preferences, which I term internal costs. I then explore the costs arising from imperfect enforcement, such as false accusations and incorrect reporting in candidate affidavits, which I term external costs. Finally, I consider the strategies used to cope with fertility limits and explore how hypothetical quotas might influence these trade-offs. This discussion draws on primary data from a village politician survey conducted in Maharashtra, the largest state that adopted fertility limits. This survey includes 520 politicians,

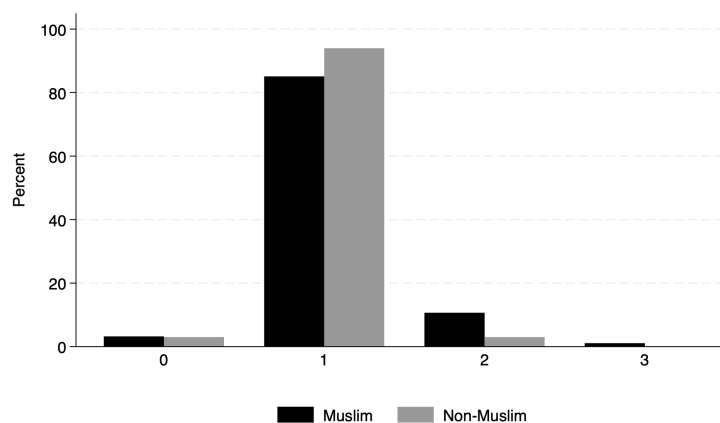
comprising current village council members and runners-up from 147 village councils across 9 districts in Maharashtra.

7.1 Internal costs

Recall that Muslims have a strong preference for large family sizes (refer to Table 3.1). These preferences suggest that a typical Muslim citizen who did not reach their desired family size before the implementation of fertility limits might choose not to contest elections if the desire for a larger family outweighs the desire to run for political office. However, it is possible that families running for political office have different preferences compared to the general population. Do these fertility preferences extend to politically aspirational Muslims?

To explore this further, the survey posed the following question to politicians: “Suppose your son or daughter plans to have children. How many sons and daughters would you want for them?”¹⁶ Figure 7.1 illustrates the differences in son preference between Muslims and Non-Muslims. The responses indicate that a relatively higher proportion of Muslim politicians desire more than two sons for their children.

Figure 7.1: Son preference
Source: Authors’ own survey in Maharashtra



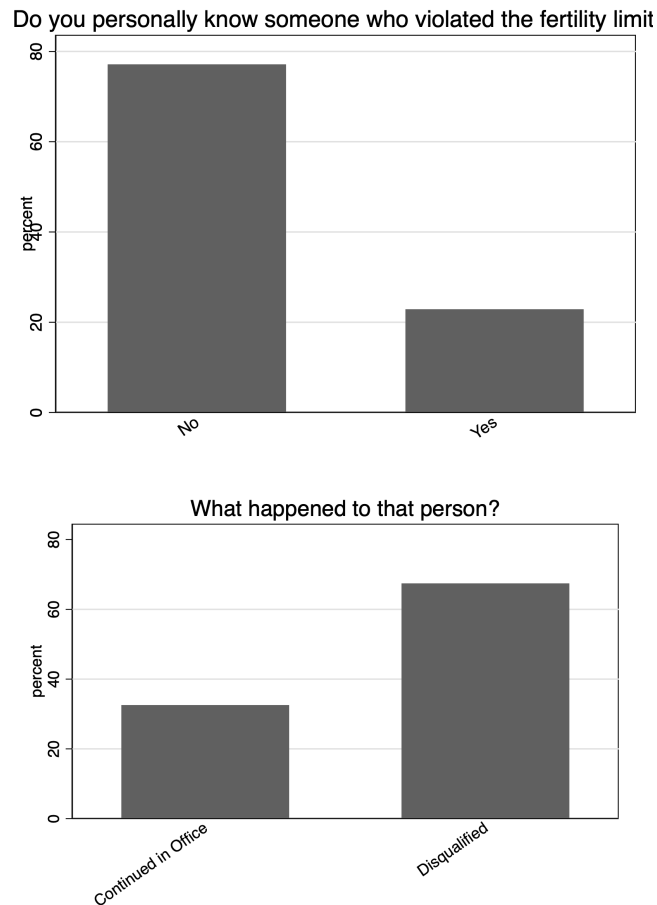
¹⁶I adopted the methodology used by Jayachandran (2017) to avoid bias from retrospective fertility preferences, which could be problematic given that politicians may have already reached their desired family size.

In summary, the findings from the village politician surveys suggest that the cost of deviating from established preferences could be higher for Muslims, as family preferences and community norms, particularly regarding issues like family size and marriage, play significant roles (Desai and Andrist 2010; Munshi and Myaux 2006). This dynamic underscores the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping political behavior.

7.2 External costs

Many studies on ballot access laws in Western democracies assume that these rules are perfectly implemented, often focusing on direct costs such as filing fees, which may disproportionately affect poorly funded candidates or parties. However, in developing countries, evidence frequently points to imperfect implementation of rules, leading to the exploitation of marginalized individuals by elites (Anderson et al. 2015; Neggers 2018). To investigate the implementation of fertility limits, politicians were surveyed and asked if they personally knew anyone in office who violated these limits, as depicted in Figure 7.2. Follow-up questions inquired whether these individuals were subsequently disqualified. The responses reveal that many office holders were either ineligible at the time of nomination or violated the limits while in office, and that some ineligible elected representatives continue to hold office despite these violations. These findings indicate that enforcement of fertility limit restrictions has been a significant challenge in Maharashtra, one of the most developed states with a relatively high bureaucratic capacity compared to other states in India.

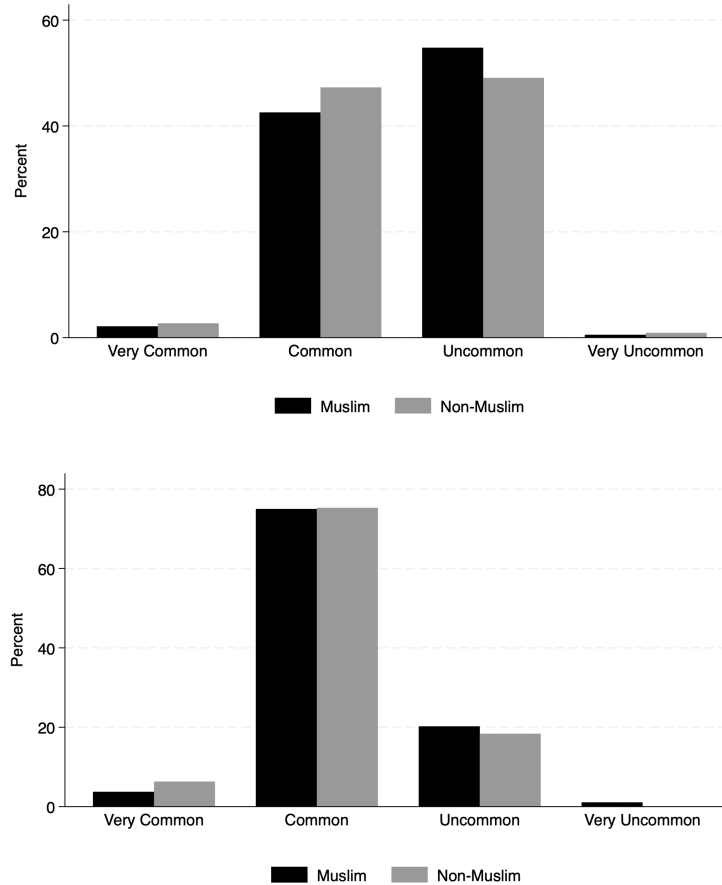
Figure 7.2: Imperfect Enforcement
Source: Authors' own survey in Maharashtra



To explore the consequences of imperfect enforcement, I examine the prevalence of lying about the number of children and making false accusations, as illustrated in Figure 7.3. The responses indicate that such practices are very common. A related study on fertility limit restrictions by Buch (2005) conducts a detailed case study and relies on qualitative evidence to argue that it is easier for elites to lie or level accusations against others. The authors suggest that false accusations serve as tools of suppression, used by politically dominant groups to intimidate political aspirants from marginalized communities. The prevalence of such practices can disproportionately reduce Muslim candidacy, who predominantly compete with these dominant groups, unlike other marginalized groups. Therefore, imperfect enforcement, especially the fear of false ac-

cusations, may discourage some individuals from running for office or, at times, result in coercion by elites.

Figure 7.3: Prevalence of illicit practices
Source: Authors' own survey in Maharashtra



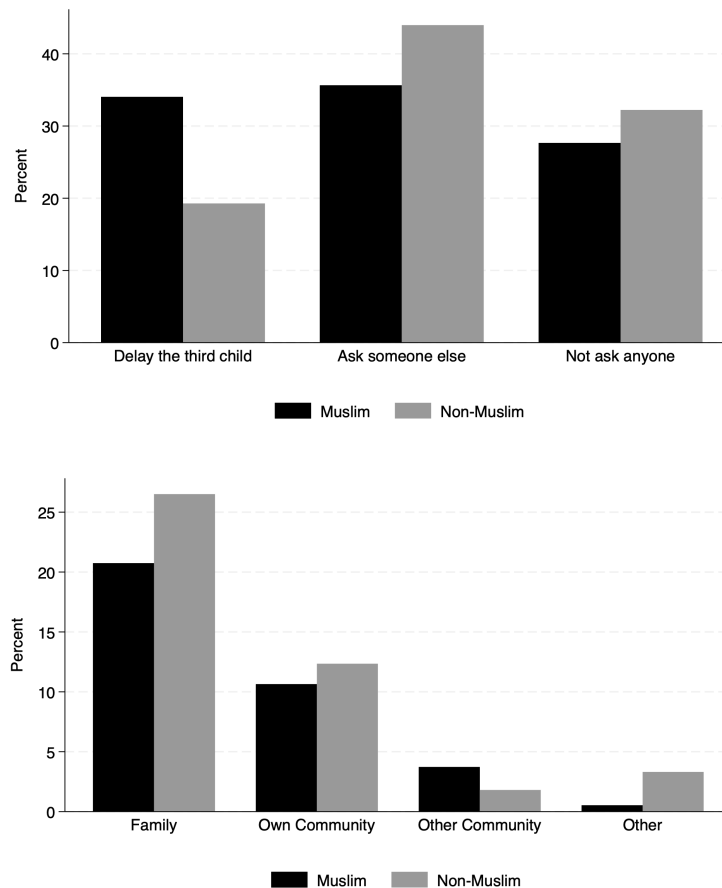
7.3 Coping with fertility restrictions

In this section, I discuss what aspiring candidates who desire to run for political office under fertility restrictions but also wish to have more than two children might do. If a critical mass of their community has reached their desired family size and remains eligible, an affected candidate may ask someone else to run in their place. In the village politician survey, I asked respondents what aspiring citizens from their community would do if they preferred to have more than two children. Approximately 40% indicated they would ask someone else to contest, and of those, more than 80% said they

would choose someone either from their own family or from the same community as the aspirant (see Figure 7.4).

The shifting ratio of young Muslims to older Muslims on the ballot, coupled with a decline in candidacy, suggests that young aspiring citizens affected by the restrictions may not always be replaced by older, unaffected community members. In other words, the decline in candidacy could be due to younger potential candidates dropping out without being replaced, while older unaffected candidates continue to run. Supporting this theory, the findings provide suggestive evidence that Muslims are relatively less likely to ask someone else to run if they choose not to themselves. Moreover, when they do select a substitute, they are more likely to choose someone from other communities, as shown in Figure 7.4. Often, these family members or relatives serve as mere proxies (Heinze et al. 2024).

Figure 7.4: Fertility Limits and Replacement
 Source: Authors' own survey in Maharashtra

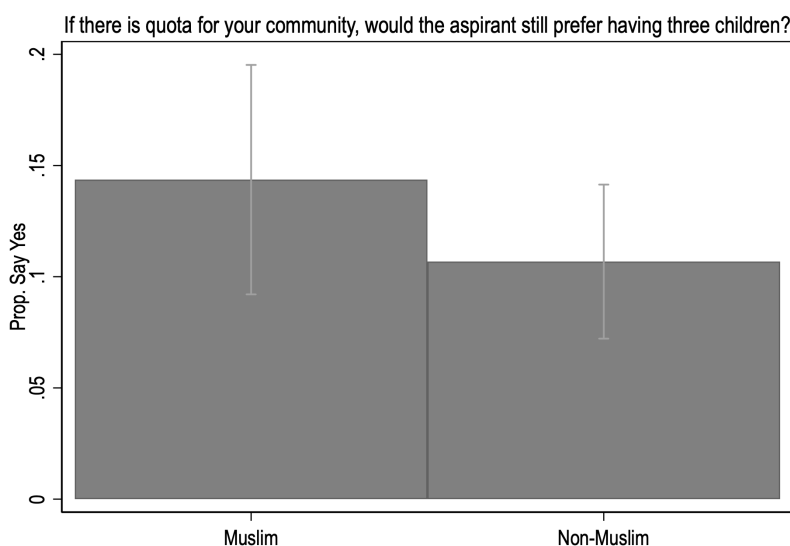


7.4 Electoral quotas for Muslims

Now, let us consider the potential impact of introducing electoral quotas for Muslims. Would the costs discussed earlier be mitigated if a specified number of council seats, proportional to the population, were permanently reserved for Muslims, similar to the existing quotas for SCs and STs? Theoretically, electoral quotas could influence the desire to remain eligible as they limit competition to candidates from a specific community. Figure 7.5 indicates that in response to hypothetical scenarios about seats being reserved for their own community, most politicians—particularly those from marginalized groups—report that aspiring citizens from their community may limit themselves to two children to remain eligible. This observation aligns with the argument by Anukriti

and Chakravarty (2019) that the desire to remain eligible for political office may lead to a relatively larger decline in fertility rates among SC/STs compared to other Hindus in states with fertility restrictions. Therefore, combining regulatory attempts to control political entry with electoral quotas might assist policymakers in achieving societal goals, such as reducing the candidacy of groups whose preferences do not align with creating the role models policymakers envisioned.

Figure 7.5: Hypothetical electoral quotas
Source: Authors' own survey in Maharashtra



8 Conclusion

This paper explores how electoral laws regulating political entry affect the representation of marginalized minority groups on the ballot. I find that fertility limit restrictions for village politicians reduce Muslim candidacy, one of the marginalized social groups and the largest religious minority group in India. I argue that these results are driven by the dilemma faced by citizens aspiring for political office, between complying with the law and adhering to social norms about family size. I provide evidence supporting my theory using an original survey of 500 politicians in Maharashtra. Additionally, I propose a new mechanism that highlights the conditions under which imperfect en-

forcement may influence political entry.

This study complements the existing literature emphasizes the role of entry costs in politics by providing insight into the components of these costs and how institutional factors and elite strategies might amplify them. Accordingly, this research highlights the trade-offs that aspiring citizens must navigate to remain eligible following the introduction of electoral laws. Furthermore, this study deepens our understanding of the barriers to political entry by focusing on several under-explored factors. It underscores the significant influence of family and community preferences on individuals' decisions to run for political office. Additionally, it discusses the challenges and implications of implementing electoral rules in regions with low bureaucratic capacity.

The findings also have multiple implications for Indian politics. The study probes the trade-offs faced by aspiring Muslim citizens within decentralized governmental structures and examines how seemingly beneficial laws might adversely affect them. It explores the role of electoral quotas for unprotected marginalized groups as a strategic policy tool aimed at fostering social change without compromising democratic integrity. This observation aligns with the argument by [Anukriti and Chakravarty \(2019\)](#) that the desire to remain eligible for political office may lead to a relatively larger decline in fertility rates among Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) compared to other Hindus in states with fertility restrictions. Therefore, combining regulatory attempts to control political entry with electoral quotas might assist policymakers in achieving societal goals, such as reducing the candidacy of groups whose preferences do not align with creating the role models policymakers envisioned. Moreover, the research refers to several studies suggesting that representation in local governments could enhance opportunities for higher office representation, positing that a decline in Muslim candidacy at the local level might impede their chances of obtaining party tickets for more significant political roles.

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A Appendix

Table A.1: Descriptive statistics on key variables

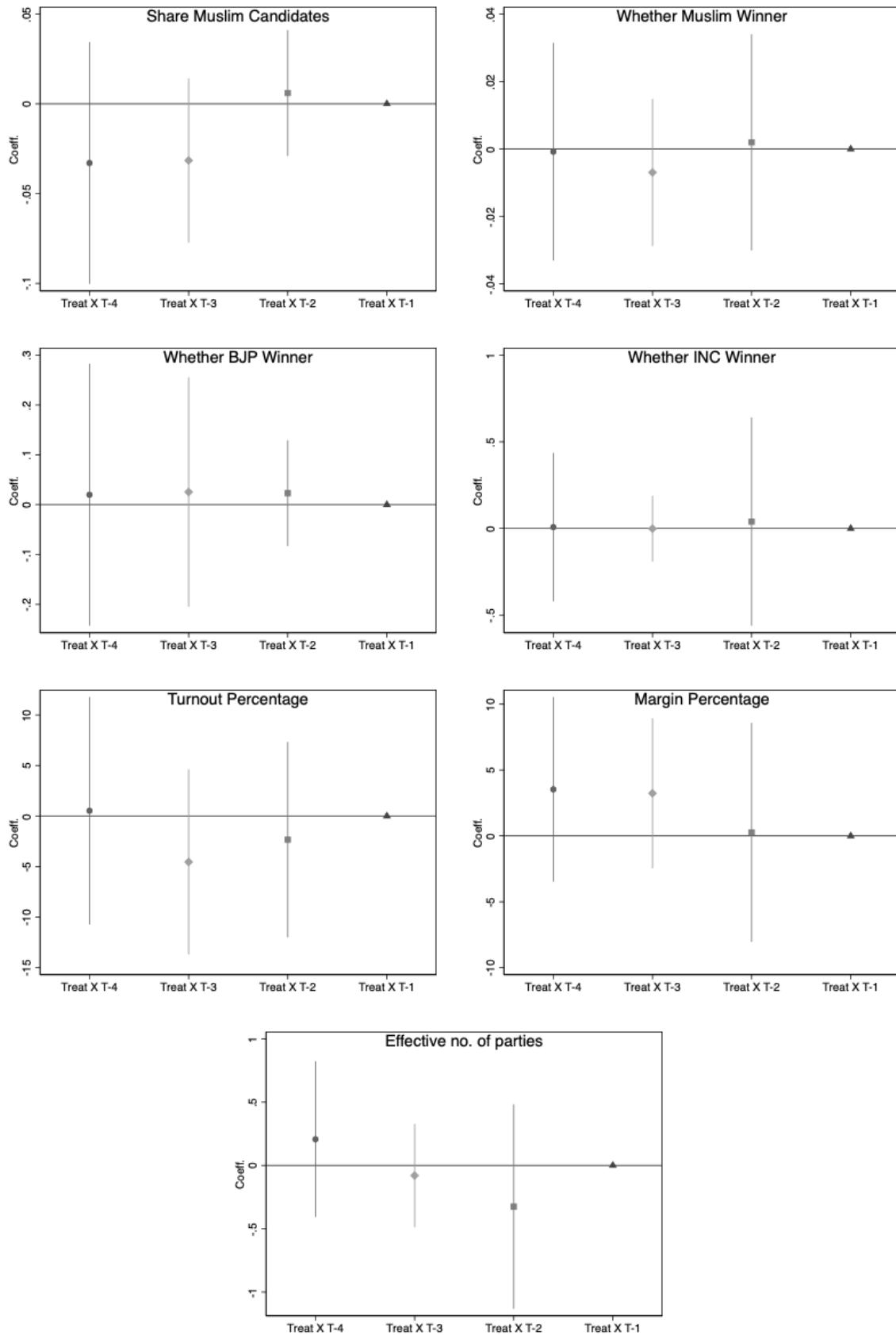
	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Panel A - Village level Frame				
Total Candidate Households	7.582	8.36	0	91
Muslim Candidate Households	.47	1.86	0	21
SC Candidate Households	1.648	2.9	0	27
ST Candidate Households	.655	3.03	0	56
Any Muslim Candidate Household	.158	.37	0	1
Any Upper Caste Hindu Candidate Household	.402	.49	0	1
Share Muslim Candidate Households	.061	.18	0	1
Share SC Candidate Households	.213	.25	0	1
Share SC Candidate Households	.1	.25	0	1
Share Upper Caste Hindu Candidate Households	.193	.29	0	1
Share OBC Reserved Seats in Council	.205	.2	0	1
Share SC Reserved Seats in Council	.131	.11	0	.67
Share ST Reserved Seats in Council	.069	.14	0	.88
Share Women Reserved Seats in Council	.24	.15	0	1
OBC Reservation for Village Head	.226	.42	0	1
SC Reservation for Village Head	.119	.32	0	1
ST Reservation for Village Head	.086	.28	0	1
Women's Reservation for Village Head	.286	.45	0	1
Total Households	465.771	524.65	54	6299
Muslim Households	40.114	115.41	0	864
SC Households	91.013	96.7	0	438
ST Households	27.204	60.04	0	450
OBC Households	186.721	223.31	0	2125
Upper Caste Hindu Households	96.851	222.02	0	2702
Total Seats	6472.525	10703.36	288	125980

Notes: Data from the listing and village questionnaire of Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 229 villages in 15 states of India.

Table A.2: Summary statistics of Maharashtra politician survey respondent, segmented by social group

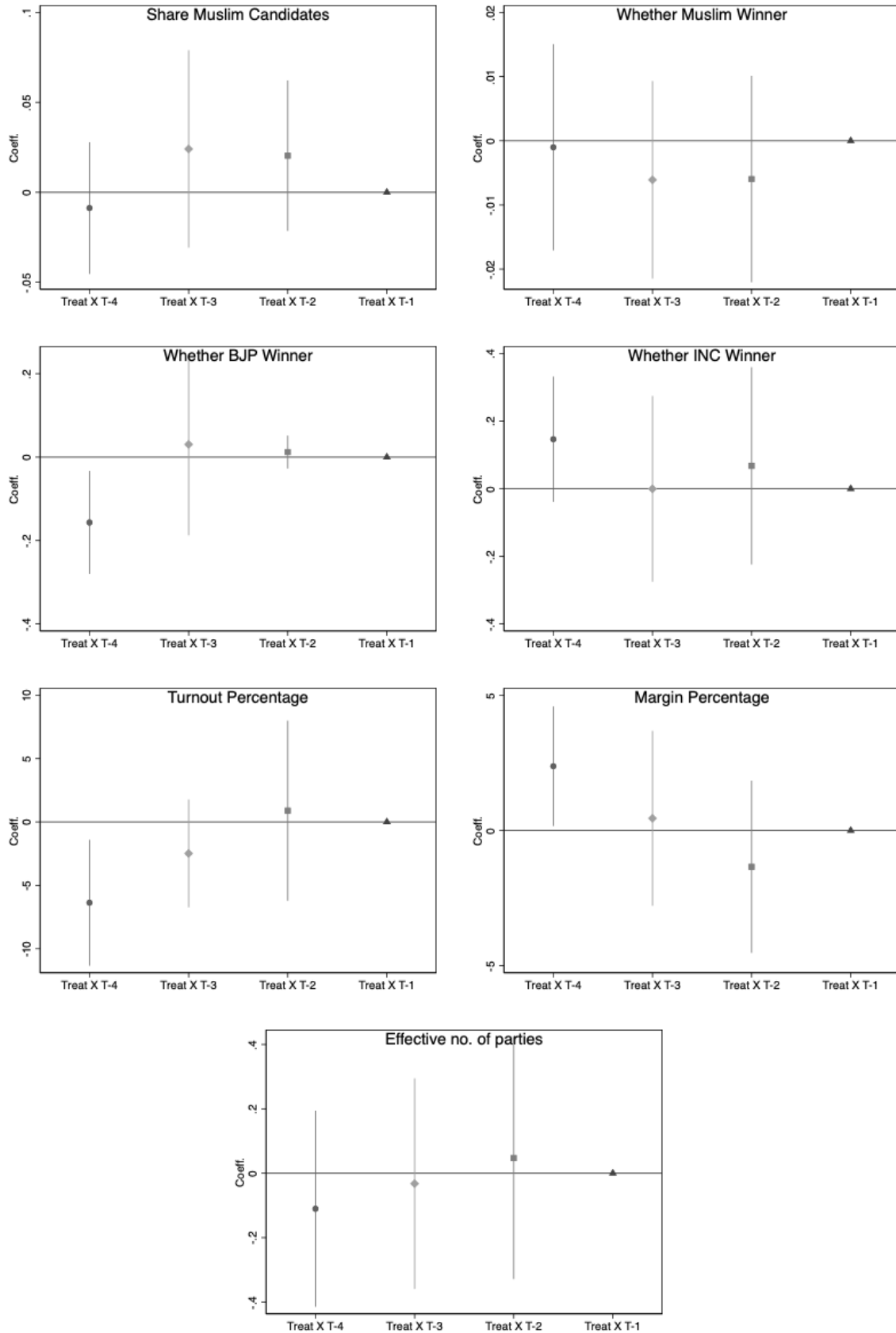
	Muslims	SC/ST (Non-Muslim)	Others
Statistic	Mean (SD)/Percent	Mean (SD)/Percent	Mean (SD)/Percent
Age	44.27 (13.36)	40.31 (12.40)	41.98 (11.07)
Gender			
Male	54.26 %	44.74 %	49.44 %
Female	45.74 %	55.26 %	50.56 %
Education level			
Up to 5th pass	20.12%	7.80 %	9.53 %
6-9th pass	24.85 %	16.31 %	19.05 %
10-11th pass	21.89 %	19.15 %	16.67 %
12th pass	17.16 %	26.95%	28.57 %
Graduation and above	15.98%	29.79%	26.19 %
N	188	152	180

Figure A.1: Pre-trends in Always treated states and Never treated states



Note: The figure plots coefficients, β_{2t} , from equation 2 for three outcomes. The vertical lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals on the coefficients.

Figure A.2: Pre-trends in Always treated states and Sometimes treated states



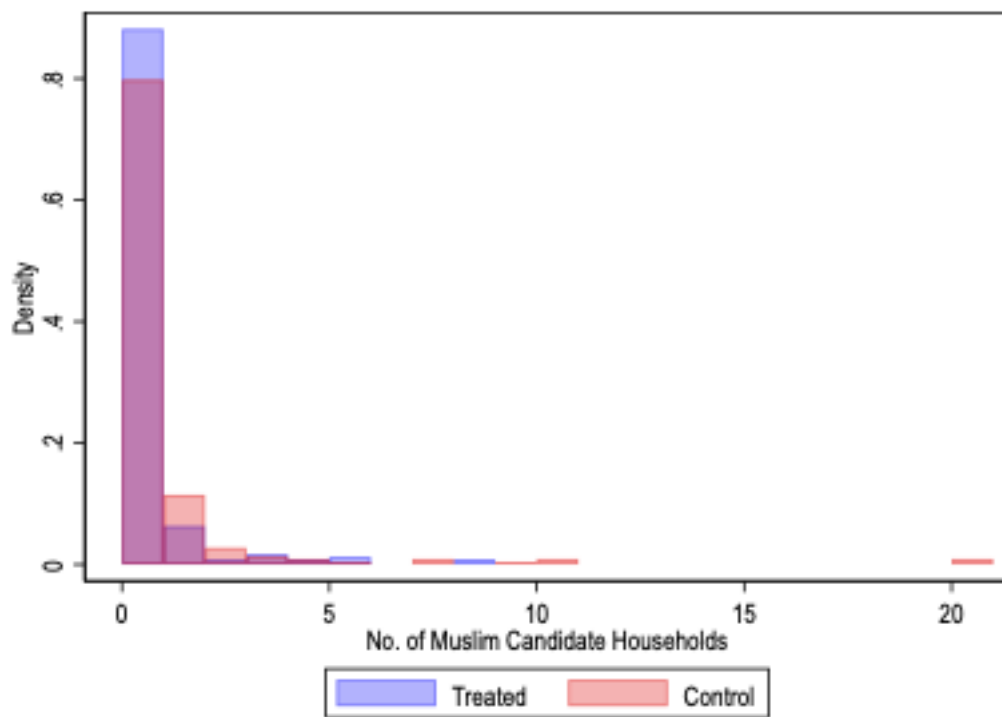
Note: The figure plots coefficients, β_{2t} , from equation 2 for three outcomes. The vertical lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals on the coefficients.

Table A.3: Effect of Fertility Limits on Muslim Candidacy (Alternate Specifications)

Outcome	# Mus. (1)	Whether Mus. (2)	Share Mus. (3)
Panel A - Demography controls			
Fertility Limits	-0.0764 (-0.401,0.249) [-0.413,0.260]	-0.0674 (-0.126,-0.00886)** [-0.131,-0.00375]**	-0.0688 (-0.112,-0.0300)*** [-0.112,-0.0253]***
Control mean	.66	.2	.08
N	455	455	409
Panel B - District fixed effects			
Fertility Limits	-0.0433 (-0.378,0.291) [-0.357,0.270]	-0.0516 (-0.119,0.0160)* [-0.112,0.00847]*	-0.0575 (-0.118,0.00284)* [-0.117,0.00196]*
Control mean	.66	.2	.08
N	455	455	406
Panel C - Controls for reservation of village chief seat			
Fertility Limits	-0.150 (-0.487,0.186) [-0.483,0.182]	-0.0738 (-0.139,-0.00844)** [-0.145,-0.00268]**	-0.0700 (-0.117,-0.0226)*** [-0.122,-0.0184]***
Control mean	.66	.2	.08
N	455	455	409
Panel D - Exclude always treated states			
Fertility Limits	-0.343 (-0.755,0.0700) [-0.805,0.120]	-0.0965 (-0.178,-0.0149)* [-0.202,0.00868]*	-0.0900 (-0.175,-0.00490)** [-0.178,-0.00244]**
Control mean	.66	.2	.08
N	338	338	302

Notes: Data from the listing and village questionnaire of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India is used. Treat is equal to one for treated elections in the states that imposed fertility limit laws, and zero otherwise. For control states, Treat is always zero. All specifications include election year and state fixed effects. Additionally, all specifications control for the share of council member seats reserved under each category i.e., SC, ST, OBC, Women and total number of seats in the village council. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. 95% CI in parentheses clustered by state, in brackets wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Figure A.3: Distribution of Muslim candidate households



Note: The figure plots the distribution of the number of Muslim candidate households by treatment status.

Table A.4: Effect of Fertility Limits on Other Marginalized Groups

Outcome	# Cand. HH (1)	Share . (2)
Panel A: SC Candidacy (only Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs)		
Fertility Limits	0.0521 (-0.531,0.635) [-.44,.54]	0.00725 (-0.0630,0.0775) [-.065,.08]
Control mean	1.77	.26
N	455	409
Panel B: ST Candidacy (only Hindus)		
Fertility Limits	-0.0427 (-0.807,0.722) [-.51,.42]	-0.0131 (-0.0542,0.0279) [-.054,.028]
Control mean	.09	.04
N	455	409
Panel C: OBC Candidacy (only Hindus)		
Fertility Limits	0.492 (-0.648,1.632) [-.66,1.6]	0.0890 (-0.0674,0.245) [-.082,.26]
Control mean	2.94	.38
N	455	409

Notes: Data from the village questionnaire of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India is used. Treat is equal to one for treated elections in the states that imposed fertility limit laws, and zero otherwise. For control states, Treat is always zero. All specifications include election year and state fixed effects. Additionally, all specifications control for the share of council member seats reserved under each category (SC/ST/OBC/Women) and total number of seats in the village council. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. 95% CI in parentheses clustered by state, in brackets wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Table A.5: Effect of Fertility Limits on General caste Hindus

Outcome	# OC. (1)	Whether OC. (2)	Share OC. (3)
Fertility Limits	-0.321 (-1.696,1.054) [-1.851,1.208]	0.0794 (-0.0966,0.255) [-0.111,0.269]	-0.0125 (-0.0837,0.0588) [-0.0933,0.0684]
Control mean	.91	.34	.16
N	455	455	409

Notes: Data from the listing and village questionnaire of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India is used. Treat is equal to one for treated elections in the states that imposed fertility limit laws, and zero otherwise. For control states, Treat is always zero. All specifications include election year and state fixed effects. Additionally, all specifications control for the share of council member seats reserved under each category (SC/ST/OBC/Women) and total number of seats in the village council. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. 95% CI in parentheses clustered by state, in brackets wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Table A.6: Effect of Fertility Limits on Total candidacy

Outcome	(1)	(2)	# of Cand. HH (3)	(4)	(5)
Fertility Limits	0.0497 (-1.685,1.784) [-9.697,9.797]	0.0417 (-1.692,1.842) [-5.409,5.492]	0.0406 (-1.922,2.003) [-1.727,1.808]	0.130 (-1.458,1.718) [-1.654,1.914]	-0.220 (-2.426,1.986) [-2.307,1.867]
Control mean	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
N	455	455	455	455	338

Notes: Data from the listing and village questionnaire of the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India is used. Treat is equal to one for treated elections in the states that imposed fertility limit laws, and zero otherwise. For control states, Treat is always zero. All specifications include election year and state fixed effects. Additionally, all specifications control for the share of council member seats reserved under each category (SC/ST/OBC/Women) and total number of seats in the village council. Standard errors are clustered by state and wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. 95% CI in parentheses clustered by state, in brackets wild-cluster-bootstrapped by state. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Table A.7: Fertility Limits and Change in Age Composition of Other Candidates

Difference	Overall	SC	ST	OBC	Gen
Proportion \leq 30 years	-0.06 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.17 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.02)	-0.08 (0.04)
Proportion between 30 and 40 years	-0.07 (0.02)	-0.08 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.10 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.05)
Proportion between 40 and 50 years	0.01 (0.02)	0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.08)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)
Proportion between 50 and 60 years	0.07 (0.02)	0.12 (0.04)	0.09 (0.06)	0.06 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)
Proportion \geq 60 years	0.03 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.06 (0.02)	0.06 (0.04)
N	2004	456	151	858	346

Notes: Data from the listing questionnaire of Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) 2006 survey across 15 states in India.