

# Representation of Women in Politics and The Role of Political Parties

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## Abstract

It is widely believed that gender equality in politics is a necessary condition for the effective functioning of democracy. Women's equal involvement in the political process and their representation in decision-making institutions strengthen democracy. However, in many democratic countries, gender equality in politics is far from achieved. India's case is no different, as the number of women in the current parliament stands at 14 percent. Several factors contribute to the gender disparity in politics and hinder women from entering politics in India. Political parties are one factor and play an important role as gatekeepers in politics. This study examines the factors affecting women's political representation in India and the political parties' role in women's access to political office. The scope of the study is from the general election of 1998 to the latest general election of 2019. It examines the performance of national parties in these general elections by considering the percentage of women candidates in an election and the percentage of elected women representatives. By analyzing the above-mentioned variables, the study examines the role of political parties in facilitating women's representation in India, how they address gender inequality in politics, and what political parties can do to improve women's political representation in India.

**Keywords:** Political Representation, Gender Equality, Gender Quota, Political Parties, Politics in India

## Introduction

Women constitute half the world's population, yet they are under-represented in the national politics of most democracies. Governments have taken action to tackle this issue by adopting various measures, such as the quota system. However, women continue to be underrepresented in the national decision-making process, and this contradicts the very basis of democracy, which is equality. Advocates of women's political representation argue that the lack of women's roles in policymaking can result in male-oriented laws, and an increased number of women in parliament can bring attention to women-centric legislatures. Historically, most of the theories of democracy or theorists of political thought ignored women's role in the political domain. Moreover, the world's biggest democracies, like the US and India, hardly gave equal political access to women in their countries. In the twenty-first century, changes started taking place in different parts of the world, with democracy being accepted as the universal form of government. However, the relationship between women's political representation and democracy has been problematic. There is no correlation between levels of women's representation and the quality of democracy (Lovendusky, 2020). The global indexes of democracy have been criticized for not including levels of women's representation in understanding the quality of the democratic process (Dahlerup, 2018).

While women, over time, excelled in education and labor participation in many countries, they remained underrepresented in politics, especially in the upper echelons of power. Even with a change taking place slowly, women still are nowhere equal to men in political representation or leadership. The share of women in Parliaments has steadily increased since the beginning of the new century. However, this trend is mainly confined to the local government bodies and does not reflect in the upper-level political bodies of many countries. Despite having a quota system, many countries still struggle with the lower representation of women in their decision-making bodies.

There are numerous factors contributing to the state of women in politics. It varies from the social system and culture to a country's political and legal structure. The political parties, as an essential part of democracy, play a vital role in women's representation. People choose their representatives through political parties and are therefore responsible for inclusive participation. However, political parties in democracies have been critically considered for practicing a gatekeeping system that is often not inclusive. Political parties also play the most critical role in the policy-making process. Furthermore, to formulate inclusive policies, the structure of political parties in democracies should also be inclusive. Therefore, to understand the presence of women in politics, it is essential to understand the presence of women in political parties.

India's case is no different from most democracies, as the number of women engaged in politics has been abysmally low. The number of women in the current parliament stands at just 14 percent. It is the highest achieved in the history of the Indian parliament, as the presence of women MPs in parliament has always been less than the current percentage. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments of the constitution brought a significant change in women's political representation in India as it provided 1/3<sup>rd</sup> reservation of seats for women in local government elections. Recently, the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023 and became law on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2023 with the approval of the President of India. The new bill, officially known as Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, aims to increase the presence of women in Parliament and state legislatures by assigning 33% of seats to women. However, the one hundred and twenty-eighth Constitution Amendment Bill can only be implemented after the next census and the following electoral delimitation process.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

The concept and phenomenon of political representation is central to the idea of democracy. It has led to various debates and inspired political struggles worldwide, especially in gender equality. Theorists have given different definitions to understand the concept of political representation. It is the concept in which a group of people living in a specific geographical area is represented by a person/party selected through electoral or non-electoral methods to ensure the interests of the people. Political representation, in other words, means representing the general public or the citizens of a country in the political sphere of that country. Hanna Pitkin (1967) has provided a simple definition of the concept by describing it as 'make present again' to present the citizens' voice in the policy-making process.

Hanna Pitkin (1967) significantly shaped the contemporary debate on representation. She defined the concept of political representation and classified it based on its characteristics. 'Pitkin found that the many different usages of the term representation shared at least one core meaning: "the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present."' In this sense, representation has an evidently paradoxical nature. Pitkin discussed different ways of looking at representation that had often appeared in political thought: formalistic representation, descriptive representation, and symbolic representation'

(Cotta & Russo, 2020). This study focuses on women's descriptive representation in India as the study only deals with the number of representatives elected to the parliament.

The first female representative to a legislature, Jeanette Rankin, was appointed in 1917 in the United States House of Representatives. Since then, many female representatives have been elected in countries worldwide. In the twenty-first century, the number has dramatically increased. However, a mere increased number of female representatives does not reflect the achievement of gender equality in a country's political system. Various factors affect women's representation, and there are various measurements to analyze gender equality and the level of male dominance in political representation.

Cristina Chiva (2018) defines male dominance in politics as "occurring when men, men's interests and/or masculine norms are privileged within the institutions of political representation. Male dominance in politics can, therefore take various forms, such as the numerical over-representation of men among political elites, the primacy of the substantive representation of men's interest in policy-making, male-coded norms shaping the formal and informal practices of political representation or the symbolic representation of women as citizens with gender-specific roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis their respective national or political communities".

According to Dahlerup & Leyenaar (2013), the degree of male dominance in descriptive representation (number of representatives) can be understood in four categories: 'male monopoly' (fewer than 10 percent women elected), 'small minority of women' (between 10 and 25 percent), 'large minority of women' (between 25 and 40 percent) and 'gender balance' (40–60 percent) (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). Cristina Chiva (2018) extended the study of Dahlerup and Leyenaar (2013) to include substantive and symbolic representation of women along with descriptive representation to understand male dominance in politics. The political parties play an essential role in women's representation in democracies and perpetuating male dominance in politics. The parties control the candidate selection in elections and act as gatekeepers to the legislative office (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Because they play such a crucial role, it is essential to study how political parties differ in selecting women as candidates. Potential legislators face a two-phased process for holding an elected office. First, they must be selected by political parties as candidates and then elected by the people to be a legislator. This process becomes more difficult for women due to the patriarchal structure of society and the general belief that politics and leadership are men's fields. The presence of women in parliament is needed for women-friendly legislation. Moreover, 'to understand female legislatures, we must first understand female candidates' (Kunovich & Paxton, 2005).

Caul (1999) studied political parties from twelve advanced industrial democracies and tried to understand which party characteristics encourage women's representation in parliaments. He identified four general party characteristics that affect the proportion of women parliamentarians, viz. organizational structure, ideology, proportion of women party activists, and gender-related representation rules.

The ideology of a political party has been identified to be a significant factor in the representation of women (Beckwith, 1992; Caul, 1999; Matland & Studlar, 1996). It is widely believed that the left parties give candidature to more women because of their egalitarian values. 'The traditional relationship shared between leftist parties and the women's movement on women's issues certainly extends to women's representation in parliament. Moreover, this relationship is even stronger in those parties with new Left or Post-materialist values' (Caul, 1999). However, Lovenduski and Norris (1993) argue that Left parties may no longer have a substantial number of women representatives as they used to have. However, the newly created Left parties may have even more female representatives than the old Left parties (Jensen, 1995).

Also, the Right-wing parties are less likely to give candidature to a significant number of women (Rule, 1987) primarily due to their adherence to traditional values.

Political parties that are newly formed are believed to have more representation of women and other less powerful groups (Dalton, 1991). 'The year a party enters the political system may be another measure of newness that affects the representation of women' (Caul, 1999). Apart from ideology and 'newness,' the rules of political parties are another reason that encourages or discourages women from entering politics. Political parties can increase the number of women by implementing gender quotas. This can be seen in the political parties of many democracies. However, none of India's national political parties have adopted such voluntary gender quota system.

Another factor that can help increase the number of women in political parties is the role of female party elites. The presence of women in powerful positions within political parties can encourage more women to join politics. Female leaders tend to favor the candidacy of other women in political parties (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2001). However, sometimes the female leaders may not act in the interest of other women and follow general party rules. However, Kunovich & Paxton (2005) argue that in general, 'higher average levels of women in elite party positions (across all parties) should positively influence the countrywide representation of women as candidates.'

This paper tries to understand the state of women in Indian politics and the political parties through the lens of the abovementioned concepts and theories and examine if they are applicable in the Indian context. The paper also examines the factors affecting women's political representation in India and the political parties' role in women's access to political office. The scope of the study is from the tenth general election of 1998 to the latest general election of 2019. It examines the performance of national parties in these general elections by considering the percentage of women candidates in an election and the percentage of elected women representatives. By analyzing the variables mentioned above, the study intends to answer the questions: 1) What is the role of political parties in facilitating women's representation in India? 2) Do political parties in India address gender inequality in politics? 3) What can political parties do to improve women's political representation in India?

### **Representation of Women in Indian Politics**

Women in India have been active in politics and social movements since the late nineteenth century. Many eminent women social reformers fought against the evil practices of their time. Women were also involved in the independence movement for the fight against colonialism (Khanna, 2009). However, this was mostly limited to one section of women, the upper caste elite women. Later, when an independent government of India was formed, the number of women who participated in the movements was not reflected among the newly elected representatives of the parliament. Some of the leaders foresaw this issue, and a gender quota for the parliament was discussed at the Constituent Assembly.

'The issue of reservations for women had come up in the Constituent Assembly but had been rejected by women representatives as it was felt to be unnecessary, since the working of democracy in the normal course would ensure the representation of all sections of Indian society' (Menon, 2000, p. 3835). The supporters of the bill argue that the political parties are fundamentally patriarchal and, therefore, they are reluctant to give candidature to women. Also, the critical mass theory (Dahlerup, 1988) suggests that 30% of women representatives are needed to influence policy outcomes effectively in a parliament.

However, the bill was rejected by many, including women activists, on the grounds that it would be against the concept of equality in democracy. Twenty-five years later, the Committee on the Status of Women in

India (CSWI) discussed the issue again. Though they considered the experiences of rural women and strongly suggested that women be part of local bodies, they upheld the decision of the Constituent Assembly on the issue of women's reservation.

As a positive turn in favor of the reservation bill, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution amendments of 1993 mandated a one-third reservation for women candidates in the local government bodies. Soon in 1996, for the first time, the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in the parliament as the 81<sup>st</sup> Amendment Bill, which proposed 33% of seats reserved for women in state legislative assemblies and Lok Sabha. However, it failed to get passed in the parliament due to a lack of consensus among political parties and was again introduced in 1998 when the NDA government came to power (Khanna, 2009). The bill again failed to get approval from the parliament, and it recurred in 1999, 2002, and 2003. The UPA government, in 2010, was successful in passing the bill in the Rajya Sabha, but it was not considered for discussion in the Lok Sabha. Many political parties refused to accept the bill on the grounds that the bill ignored the intersectionality of women's issues. They demanded reservations for backward and marginalized women within the women's reservation bill. As a result of the years of efforts, the Parliament of India finally passed the bill in September 2023. However, the Bill may not be implemented soon as there are legal processes that need to be completed. Even after the implementation of the bill, there are a few issues that may continue to arise. The countries that have implemented similar types of quotas for women have had an increase in the number of women parliamentarians; however, a mere increase in the number of women in politics did not mean the upliftment of women in society.

It is also important to observe that whether the newly elected parliamentarians through the quota would work together for the common interests of women. It can be challenging in a country like India, where there are more differences among social categories than similarities. This, however, does not diminish the importance of the women's quota in India, as this can be a stepping stone for further empowerment of women in politics.

Even after decades of experience in democratic functioning, India stands far behind in gender equality in society and politics. The current parliament comprises only 14% of women legislators, which is also the highest number in the history of the Indian parliament. There have indeed been changes throughout general elections, and more women representatives have been sent to the parliament with time. However, the change is taking place slowly, and women are still nowhere to be seen compared to the strength of male representatives in the parliament. There are several reasons for the fewer women participating in politics in India. The primary reason is the patriarchal structure of society, which is reflected in the Indian parliament and is equally reflected in the structure of political parties and their candidate selection. Similarly, "the lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics combined with a lack of support from the family and political parties in resources, severely affects women's chances to contest and win elections" (Rai, 2011, p.50).

As the gatekeepers of political office, the political parties play a significant role in women's access to the parliament. The voters in India, in general, give their vote keeping the political party in mind rather than the candidate. Moreover, in most cases, if a political party has strong supporters in a constituency, they can win the election irrespective of the gender of the candidate. Therefore, the political parties must work on the gender disparity in the composition of the parties. Only by improving the number of women candidates in an election the number of women legislators/representatives in parliament can be increased.



## The Role of Political Parties: Data Analysis

At present (October 2023), in India, there are six national parties, viz. Aam Aadmi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Indian National Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, and National People's Party (Election Commission of India). This study examines the gender distribution of electoral candidates of five of the above-mentioned national parties, viz. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), Indian National Congress (INC), and one previously recognized national party, the Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPI is also included in this study as it only recently lost the national party status. The scope of the study is from the general election of 1998 to the recent election of 2019. This period has been taken as the scope of the study as all five of the national political parties chosen for the study contested in the general election during this period.

Among the selected five national parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) are Leftist parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party is a Right-lenient party, and the Indian National Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party have women in the leadership positions. The influence of ideology and women leaders on the number of women candidates in the political parties will be analyzed with the data collected.

**Table 1. Gender Distribution of Candidates by National Parties**

	1998 Election		1999 Election		2004 Election		2009 Election		2014 Election		2019 Election	
Political Parties	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
BJP	90.5%	9.4%	92.6%	7.3%	91.7%	8.2%	89.8%	10.6%	91.1%	8.8%	87.3%	12.6%
BSP	96.4%	3.9%	95.1%	4.8%	95.4%	4.6%	94.4%	5.6%	94.6%	5.3%	93.7%	6.2%
CPI	89.6%	10.3%	92.5%	7.4%	94.1%	5.8%	92.8%	7.1%	91%	8.9%	91.8%	8.1%
CPI(M)	88.7%	11.2%	93%	6.9%	88.4%	11.5%	92.6%	7.3%	88.1%	11.8%	85.5%	14.4%
INC	92%	7.9%	88.7%	11.2%	89.2%	10.7%	90.2%	9.7%	87%	12.9%	87.1%	12.8%

Source: Election Commission of India

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of candidates by selected five national parties. It displays the data of six general elections from 1998 to 2019. Table 2 shows the performance of women candidates in these elections. The data suggests that the number of women candidates is increasing in general. However, the rate of growth is slower. If we take parties individually, the BJP's share of women candidates has increased; however, there have been fluctuations between the elections. BSP has the lowest percentage of

women candidates among all the selected national parties. The party does not seem to have substantial growth in the number of women candidates over the elections. However, unlike other parties, there are no significant fluctuations in the number, and BSP seems to have a constant percentage of women candidates even after twenty years.

The two Left national parties, CPI and CPI(M), has shown different trend throughout the elections. In 1998, both parties had a similar percentage of women candidates. However, by the 2019 election, with the highest percentage of women candidates among all national parties, CPI(M) stands at 14.4 %, and CPI only has 8.1% of women candidates. Though CPI(M) had fluctuations in between, the party has had positive growth since the last two elections. However, this positive growth was not visible in the case of CPI, and they had the lowest percentage of women candidates in the latest election. In the 1998 general election, INC had 7.9 % of women candidates, opposite to 12.8 % in the latest 2019 general elections. INC also

**Table 2. Performance of Women Candidates by National Parties in General Elections**

Political Party	1998 Election		1999 Election		2004 Election		2009 Election		2014 Election		2019 Election	
	Contested	Women	Contested	Women	Contested	Women	Contested	Women	Contested	Women	Contested	Women
BJP	32	15	25	15	30	10	44	13	38	30	55	41
BSP	10	1	11	1	20	1	28	4	27	0	24	1
CPI	6	2	4	1	2	0	4	0	6	0	4	0
CPI(M)	8	3	5	3	8	5	6	1	11	1	10	0
INC	38	10	51	14	45	12	43	23	60	4	54	6

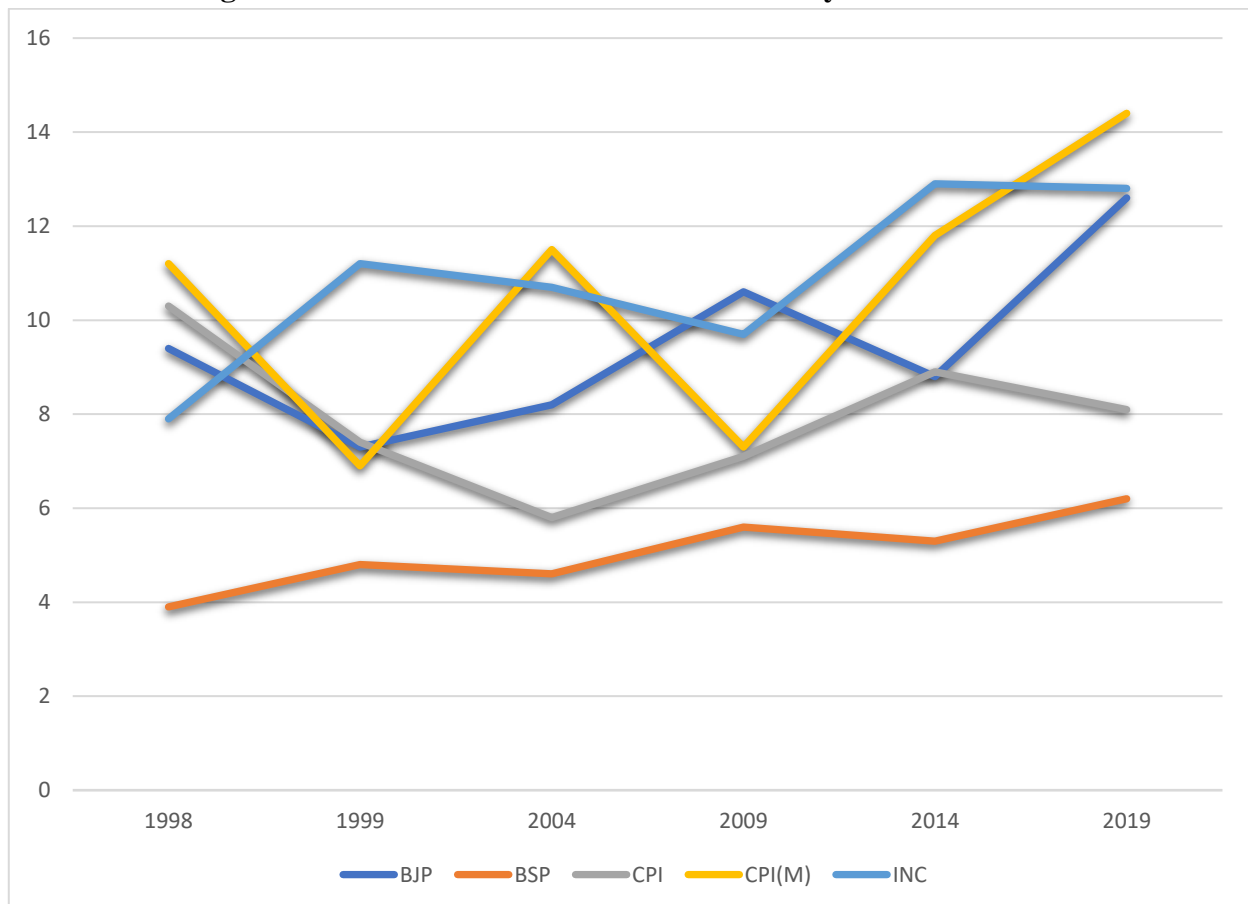
Source: Election Commission of India

had a positive growth in the number of women candidates. However, like other national parties, INC had fluctuations between elections.

Table 2 shows the performance of women candidates of the selected national parties from the 1998 general election to the 2019 general election. The data suggest that the general popularity of the political party reflects in the victory of women candidates as well. In the case of the BJP, their massive victory in the last two general elections has been reflected in the percentage of women candidates elected to parliament. It

is also visible in the case of other parties, like CPI, CPI(M), and INC. The poor performance of these parties in the previous two elections and their decreasing popularity among the masses have been echoed in the performance of their women candidates.

**Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Candidates by National Parties**



Source: Election Commission of India

As Figure 1 shows, all the selected national parties except CPI have a positive growth in the percentage of women candidates. However, among these parties with an increased number of women candidates, BSP has the lowest percentage of women candidates. And CPI(M) has the highest percentage of women candidates in the latest general election. Furthermore, in general, BJP, CPI(M) and INC have the highest percentage of women candidates. Their share of women candidates is increasing irrespective of the fluctuations in between. The data suggests that all selected national parties other than CPI have increased the number of women candidates over the general elections.

## Conclusion

Political parties in India play a significant role as gatekeepers in recruiting potential leaders of politics. Therefore, the parties' decisions and actions significantly impact women's access to political office. However, the parties most often fail to act on it. Understanding the trends of political parties in India using Chiva's (2018) concepts, the parties have 'male monopoly' or 'small minority of women' among candidates. If we look at the latest general election, only BJP, CPI(M), and INC have 'small minority of women,' which is even less than 15%. Both BSP and CPI have 'male monopoly' among their candidates.



These results show that the political parties in India must take necessary actions to ensure the adequate representation of women in political office.

The argument that ideology is a significant factor in the representation of women in politics (Beckwith, 1992; Caul, 1999; Matland & Studlar, 1996) does not fit into the Indian context. The two Left national parties, CPI and CPI(M), show different trends as CPI(M) has more women candidates, and CPI has fewer women candidates even compared to non-Left parties. Furthermore, BJP, a Right oriented party, has more women candidates than CPI. Another argument that women leaders of political parties tend to favor women as candidates (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2001) also does not seem applicable in the Indian context. The national party BSP, headed by a woman leader, has the lowest percentage of women candidates. There can be multiple factors behind the non-applicability of these theories in the Indian context. That should be a topic of another study.

This study suggests that the political parties must understand their role and responsibility as gatekeepers in women's political representation. Fundamental changes must be taken at the party level to improve the situation. The parties in India blamed each other for the failure of the Women's Reservation Bill before it was passed by the Parliament; however, the parties are reluctant to ensure women's representation within their party organization. Regardless of the implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill, the political parties can take volunteer actions to improve the number of women candidates. Political parties in India can adopt the voluntary quota system that many countries have adopted and implemented. However, the fundamental problem lies in the patriarchal structure of society. The quotas and laws that help improve the representation of women in politics must be accompanied by structural changes in society.

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