

Ethnonationalist Gender Norms: How Parties Shape Voter Attitudes toward Female Candidates in India



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Abstract: *How do parties in multiethnic societies shape voter attitudes toward female candidates? We address this question, focusing on parties with ideologies that contain ethnonationalist gender norms—patriarchal norms applied to women from an ethnonationalist party’s core ethnic constituency. We argue that, while these norms appeal to an ethnonationalist party’s base, they also provide informational cues to the party’s “non-core” voters that undermine their support for the party’s “core” female candidates. Evidence from an original conjoint survey experiment in the Indian state of Bihar supports our argument; upper-caste female candidates suffer a support penalty when they are affiliated with the national ruling party, whose ideology prescribes ethnonationalist gender norms targeting its core Hindu upper-caste constituency. This penalty, we show, is driven by the party’s non-core voters. Our results, which we further bolster using real-world electoral data, illuminate when and how ethnonationalist gender norms disadvantage elite female candidates.*

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Despite some significant strides toward improving gender equality in other spheres, women all over the world remain severely underrepresented in political office. Women’s representation in national parliaments is a far cry from parity, and the gender balance in India’s national parliament is even more skewed, with female members occupying just over 14% of seats.¹ Worse, women are even less present in most of India’s state legislative assemblies. Women’s underrep-

resentation in public office thus represents a paramount obstacle to achieving the overall goal of gender equality both in India and beyond.

For women to gain adequate representation in public office, they must win the support of sometimes skeptical voters. Why might voters often fail to support female candidates? Previous research has made significant strides in addressing this question. The most obvious explanation is voter prejudice against female candidates.

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¹IPU Parline, “Global Data on National Parliaments,” <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=1&year=2021> (accessed April 19, 2021).

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This prejudice often originates in patriarchal cultural attitudes and societal norms about gender roles, which in turn can shape attitudes toward female leadership (e.g., Cassese and Holman 2018; Krook 2020). However, recent studies across a range of contexts have shown that voters, all else equal, often prefer female to male candidates (Clayton et al. 2020; Goyal 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2022).

A second common explanation for women's underrepresentation in politics points to gender stereotypes. These may result in voters penalizing female candidates based on specific traits, qualifications, campaign messages, or policy choices considered “unfeminine” (e.g., Schneider and Bos 2014; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). At the same time, gender stereotypes may not always harm female candidates (Brooks 2013; Dolan 2014). Moreover, there may be different gender stereotypes depending on candidates' party ideology (e.g., Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009) or the nature of the office they hold (Anzia and Bernhard 2022). A third and related set of explanations has to do with the characteristics of voters. For example, voters' gender and party ideology have been found to shape their preferences for female candidates (Saha and Weeks 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2020).

Our study builds on this previous literature but focuses more tightly on the role of parties. Whereas several previous studies have pointed to the important gatekeeping role that parties play in nominating—or failing to nominate—female candidates (e.g., Bhavnani 2009; Goyal 2020; Jensenius 2016; Spary 2020; Weeks et al. 2022), we argue that parties in ethnically divided societies can also contribute to voter perceptions of, and support for, female candidates once they are nominated. Specifically, we focus on the impact of parties with *ethnonationalist gender norms*, which we define as patriarchal norms associated with an ethnonationalist party's ideology that are targeted toward women belonging to the party's core ethnic constituency. We posit that ethnonationalist gender norms provide informational cues to voters about the degree to which female candidates from an ethnonationalist party's core ethnic constituency—whom we henceforth refer to as the party's core female candidates—will effectively represent their interests.

Ethnonationalist gender norms should, we argue, influence voters' perceptions of, and support for, an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates in two ways. First, since such norms typically dictate constraints around the mobility and assertiveness of the party's core female candidates, voters should expect the such candidates to be less able to advocate for their interests than the party's male candidates. Second, voters should

also expect the party's core female candidates to uphold ethnonationalist gender norms to a greater extent than the party's other female candidates. In turn, since these norms cater to the interests of the party's core ethnic constituency and often help to preserve the privileged position of this constituency, they should run counter to the beliefs and interests of the party's non-core voters—that is, voters from ethnic groups outside the party's core ethnic constituency.

Thus, our argument suggests that non-core voters should, all else equal, have less of a preference for the party's core female candidates compared to either (a) the party's male candidates of any ethnicity or (b) the party's female candidates from outside the party's core ethnic constituency. Meanwhile, building on the argument from previous studies that partisan loyalties often trump gender preferences (e.g., Dolan 2014; Goyal 2020; Hayes 2011), we posit that voters from the party's core ethnic constituency should vote for the party's candidates regardless of the candidates' ethnicity or gender.

Our argument contributes to the collective understanding of ethnic parties and ethnic voting, which has received much attention in India as well as in other developing democracies (e.g., Birnir 2007; Chandra 2004; Chauchard 2016; Suryanarayan 2019; Thachil 2014). Specifically, we build on research that shows how the ethnicity of a party's leadership or core support base serves as an informational cue for voters about which groups will receive preferential treatment in economic policies or distributive benefits (e.g., Birnir 2007; Chandra 2004). We contend that these party attributes can—in conjunction with ethnonationalist gender norms—shape voters' expectations regarding the extent to which female candidates belonging to certain ethnic groups can effectively represent their interests. Our findings add nuance to simple expectations of preferential treatment for candidates from parties' core ethnic constituencies by shedding light on the conditions that produce an electoral disadvantage for female candidates belonging to parties' core ethnic constituencies.

We examine the implications of the above argument in the Indian context, focusing on the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current national ruling party. The BJP has Hindu upper-castes² as its core ethnic constituency (e.g., Suryanarayan 2019; Thachil 2014) and espouses a Hindu nationalist ideology known as *Hindutva*, which is associated with restrictive gender roles, especially for upper-caste Hindu women. We focus

²We define Hindu upper-castes as individuals who are Hindu and who do not belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Caste (OBC) categories.

on the context of state-level elections in rural and small-town Bihar—a North Indian state that represents an ideal context given its gender disparities in state-level representation, the patterns of ethnic office holding across the state’s major parties, and the salience of caste in both its rural and urban areas.

Evidence from a large conjoint survey experiment of close to 2,000 voters across eight state legislative constituencies in Bihar supports our argument. Consistent with the ethnonationalist gender norms associated with the BJP’s upper-caste Hindu nationalist ideology, we find that the BJP’s non-core voters (i.e., voters who are not Hindu upper-caste) are less likely to support the BJP when it fields an upper-caste female candidate as opposed to when it fields candidates who are upper-caste men or lower-caste women or men. Meanwhile—consistent with our argument that this relative penalty faced by upper-caste female candidates is shaped by the BJP’s ethnonationalist gender norms—upper-caste female candidates not affiliated with the BJP do not suffer such a penalty. Descriptive evidence from our survey data shows that the households of BJP’s Hindu upper-caste voters display lower levels of women’s empowerment than the households of other Hindu respondents, indicating that the BJP’s support of ethnonationalist gender norms reflects the gender norms held by the BJP’s core ethnic constituency. The overall results run counter to the conventional wisdom that subaltern women face greater political discrimination relative to their elite counterparts in all spheres. Instead, they shed light on how intersectionality (e.g., Bejarano et al. 2021; Celis et al. 2014; Crenshaw 2017) can—under certain conditions—create a relative disadvantage for women from elite groups that may counter some of the privileges they enjoy in other respects.

To probe the external validity of our survey experiment results, we examine our argument’s implications using real-world electoral data from state assembly elections in Bihar. Consistent with our findings from the conjoint survey experiment, results from our analysis of electoral data indicate that upper-caste women affiliated with the BJP enjoy less of an electoral advantage than either upper-caste men or lower-caste women affiliated with the party. We also find, consistent with our argument, that BJP women running in seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) receive significantly higher vote shares than BJP women running in unreserved constituencies.

While our argument and findings pertain to the Indian context, they have important implications for other ethnically divided societies whose major parties espouse ethnonationalist gender norms. For example, just as the

BJP’s emphasis on the protection and purity of Hindu upper-caste women is seen as central to its preservation of the Hindu caste hierarchy, many ethnonationalist parties across the globe identify with ideologies in which the “control of women and the patriarchal family are... central to fundamentalist constructions of social orders” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 62). For example, Dancygier (2020) highlights the gender norms of radical-right parties in Europe such as the Austrian Freedom Party and the Alternative for Germany, which have emphasized preserving “native” women’s role as mothers as a means of guarding the nation’s ethnic purity against the rising tide of immigration. In the Middle East, political Islamists’ norms regarding women’s segregation in the public sphere have led to negative reactions toward women representatives operating in mixed-gender settings (e.g., Bush and Prather 2020). Our research highlights the conditions under which these ethnonationalist gender norms might have electoral consequences for female candidates, especially as ethnonationalist parties seek to expand their support bases beyond their core ethnic constituencies. Indeed, just as the BJP has worked to extend its following by appealing to Hindu lower castes, other ethnonationalist parties across the globe also aim to broaden their electoral appeal by seeking support from ethnic groups outside their core constituency as well as from women (e.g., Dancygier 2020; Weeks et al. 2022). Our findings suggest that these circumstances should give rise to a situation where female candidates affiliated with ethnonationalist parties who are from the parties’ core ethnic constituency suffer an electoral penalty among voters outside this ethnic group due to ethnonationalist gender norms. While substantiating these implications is beyond the scope of the current research, our findings suggest that doing so could contribute new insights into the barriers to the political representation of women in ethnically divided societies.

Our argument is different from—though not antithetical to—other explanations of how parties and party ideology shape the representation of women in politics both in India (e.g., Bhavnani 2009; Goyal 2020; Jensenius 2016; Spary 2014) and elsewhere (e.g., Caul 1999; Lovenduski and Norris 1993). While previous scholarship has argued that partisan ideology directly shapes voter preference for female candidates in general (e.g., Saha and Weeks 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2022), our research sheds light on how party ideology can shape voters’ perceptions about the desirability of female candidates who are affiliated with ethnonationalist parties and who belong to the core ethnic constituency of such parties. Moreover, although previous research has shown that party identification trumps voters’ gender

preferences (e.g., Dolan 2014; Goyal 2020; Hayes 2011), our previous work³ shows that voters may switch parties based on a candidate's gender and ethnicity. This article bridges this apparent divide by shedding light on how and why party labels may dampen ethnic and gender preferences for a party's core voters, while making a candidate's gender and ethnicity more salient for voters outside an ethnonationalist party's core ethnic constituency. Our findings thus have important implications for the design of policies to promote women's representation in ethnically divided societies.

Argument and Hypotheses

Our theory sheds light on how ethnonationalist parties operating in multiethnic societies provide informational cues to voters (e.g., Chandra 2004; Conroy-Krutz, Moehler, and Aguilar 2016) that result in an electoral penalty for a party's core female candidates. Ethnonationalist parties with elite groups as their core constituency often have an interest in embracing and upholding ethnonationalist gender norms as a way of preserving the existing ethnic hierarchy and thereby benefiting their core support base. These norms, however, often lead voters to draw inferences regarding the extent to which an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates will be able to effectively represent their interests. Specifically, we argue that such norms typically lead voters from outside the party's core ethnic constituency to view the party's core female candidates less favorably compared to both the party's male candidates and its other female candidates.

First, consider non-core voters' evaluations of an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates vis-à-vis its male candidates. Due to ethnonationalist gender norms, non-core voters should, we argue, expect an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates to be less able to advocate for their interests than the party's male candidates. This is because ethnonationalist gender norms should condition voters' perceptions of core female politicians' willingness and ability to assert themselves within the party to effectively cater to their demands. In particular, non-core voters may expect ethnonationalist parties—wishing to signal their commitment to their core ideology—to select core female candidates who are especially likely to adhere to ethnonationalist gender norms in their own behavior. In turn, ethnonationalist norms surrounding female seclusion

and women's segregation (e.g., Bush and Prather 2020; Chakravarti 1993) may inhibit core female candidates' ability to interact effectively with constituents or with state officials with whom they may need to connect to serve their constituents' needs. Moreover, ethnonationalist gender norms surrounding women's assertiveness (e.g., Luke and Munshi 2011) may undermine core women's ability, once elected, to wield power within a party's ranks (e.g., Clayton and Zetterberg 2021). Given these norms, assertive behavior on the part of the party's core female politicians may be expected to trigger a backlash among the party's leadership as well as among its core ethnic constituency (e.g., Brulé 2020; Yildirim, Kocapinar, and Ecevit 2021). Thus, non-core voters may perceive an ethnonationalist party's male candidates of any ethnicity as better able to champion especially their “non-ethnic” interests once elected—for example, interests relating to development programs that would benefit their geographic constituency⁴—than the party's core female candidates.

Second, consider non-core voters' evaluations of an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates vis-à-vis its other female candidates. Since female candidates are typically expected to prioritize women's concerns (e.g., Brulé 2020; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004), voters' expectations of female candidates' stance on gender-related issues are likely to be especially salient. Yet female candidates' stances may vary depending on their ethnicity and partisan affiliation. Thus, non-core voters should expect an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates to be more likely to uphold ethnonationalist gender norms than the party's other female candidates. In turn, such norms typically run counter to the beliefs and interests of non-core voters—especially women—who generally do not subscribe to these gender norms. Moreover, since ethnonationalist gender norms typically also help preserve the existing ethnic hierarchy, they should run counter to the interests of non-core voters regardless of their gender. Thus, non-core voters should, we argue, tend to view an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates less favorably as their representatives than the party's other female candidates.

Based on these logics, we argue that ethnonationalist gender norms should undermine support for an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates among the party's non-core voters. Meanwhile, consistent with earlier research pointing to the dampening effect that strong party identity may have on the impact of

³See Banerjee et al. (2021) and Hankla et al. (2023).

⁴For example, Thomas (2021) shows that ruling party-aligned representatives improve public works provision in their constituencies.

candidate gender on vote choice (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2021; Dolan 2014; Goyal 2020; Hayes 2011), we expect that partisan preferences should trump gender and ethnic preferences for an ethnonationalist party's core voters.

These patterns, we further argue, are reinforced by ethnic quotas for marginalized or subaltern ethnic groups. Since these ethnic quotas restrict competition along ethnic lines, subaltern women compete against subaltern men in seats reserved for subaltern groups, and—often—elite women compete against elite men in unreserved seats. In turn, if an elite party with ethnonationalist gender norms tends to nominate elite female candidates who uphold these norms, then voters should, in line with our argument, expect that such a party's elite female candidates should have less of an ability to advocate for their interests than the party's elite male candidates. However, voters should not expect the gender disparities in influence to be as large among an ethnonationalist party's subaltern candidates running in reserved seats or among elite candidates affiliated with other parties. Thus, for a party espousing ethnonationalist gender norms targeted toward elite women, subaltern quotas should overall increase support for the party's subaltern female candidates relative to the party's other candidates.

Case Study: Ethnonationalist Gender Norms and Parties in India

Ethnonationalist Gender Norms within the BJP

The above argument has implications for understanding the electoral prospects of upper-caste female candidates affiliated with the Hindu nationalist BJP, a party whose ideology espouses ethnonationalist gender norms targeted toward women from its core Hindu upper-caste ethnic constituency. Although the BJP has increasingly elevated lower-caste—particularly other backward caste (OBC)—leaders to prominent positions and has succeeded in attracting the support of OBC voters, it is a party that is heavily dominated by Hindu upper-caste interests (e.g., Jaffrelot 2021; Palshikar 2015; Suryanarayan 2019; Thachil 2014). Socially conservative upper-caste Hindus have been a consistent source of electoral support for the BJP (e.g., Chhibber and Verma 2014), and the representation of upper-castes has tended to be higher in the BJP than in most other parties (e.g., Verniers and Jaffrelot 2020).

The ethnonationalist gender norms espoused by the BJP have their roots in the party's core Hindu nationalist

ideology, *Hindutva*—espoused by key leaders of the party as well as its affiliate Hindu nationalist organizations comprising the *Sangh Parivar*. This ideology, founded in part on the ancient Hindu text *The Laws of Manu* (Doniger and Smith 1991), has centered on preserving the purity of the Hindu upper-castes; the protection of upper-caste Hindu women's virtue has been seen as integral to the preservation of the Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti 1993). Thus, although the BJP has often advocated for the improvement of women's socioeconomic well-being, the discourses employed by the BJP and its affiliate organizations have placed a particular emphasis on the preservation of female honor and purity and of women's traditional roles (e.g., Basu 1996; Hansen 1995; Sarkar 1999; Sethi 2002; Tyagi and Sen 2020).

BJP leaders have publicly prioritized Hindu upper-caste concerns, especially upholding the norms of the Brahmanical patriarchy. Prominent BJP leaders—including its female upper-caste leaders—have defended the traditional Hindu upper-caste practice of *sati*, where widows throw themselves onto the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands (Vaid and Sangari 1991). In recent times, BJP leaders have mobilized fear, and even proposed legislation, around the issue of the so-called love jihad—the claim of an alleged Muslim conspiracy involving Muslim men seducing, converting, and marrying Hindu women—and highlighted the importance of protecting Hindu women from marrying outside their “communities,” implying disapproval of not only interreligious but also intercaste marriage (Chacko 2020; Tyagi and Sen 2020). Meanwhile, the BJP has often exhibited a double standard when it comes to the protection of the virtue of lower-caste women. In a recent high-profile case of a rape of a lower-caste woman allegedly by a group of upper-caste men, the BJP attracted severe nationwide criticism from opposition parties when the party's leaders sought to downplay the incident and to defend the accused upper-caste perpetrators.⁵ Moreover, in a 2020 election rally in Uttar Pradesh, one journalist observed that the state's BJP chief minister “talked about his government's commitment to providing protection to ‘*bahu, beti aur kisan* (wife, daughter and farmer)’ but didn't mention the Hathras case where a Dalit girl was allegedly gang-raped and killed by four upper-caste men.”⁶ These tactics have formed part of what Chacko (2020, 213) refers to as the BJP's “protection agenda,” which has highlighted the state's role in upholding the virtue of

⁵“Hathras Highlights How Project Hindu Rashtra Has Intensified Caste Oppression,” *Indian Express Online*, October 14, 2020.

⁶Anuj Kumar, “For U.P. CM, Trademark Tough Talk in Bulandshahr,” *The Hindu Online*, October 23, 2020.

Hindu women and which has cast Muslim men as well as lower-caste women as the enemy who “threatens Hindu female virtue” (Banerjee 2005; Chacko 2020, 141).

BJP Women in the Political Sphere

Although the BJP and its affiliate organizations have opened a space for the political participation of Hindu upper-caste women, they have typically done so while adhering to ethnonationalist gender norms (Banerjee 2006). Indeed, the BJP’s nomination of upper-caste women who have, for example, publicly supported the Hindu upper-caste patriarchal practices of *sati* (e.g., Vaid and Sangari 1991) or who have defended the caste hierarchy and its emphasis on female virtue⁷ have likely helped the party preserve its reputation of upholding the Brahminical patriarchy (e.g., Kapur and Cossman 1993).

Meanwhile, the BJP’s elevation of women from lower-caste backgrounds to prominent leadership positions within the party has been a double-edged sword for many of the party’s Hindu nationalist leaders. On the one hand, the elevation of these lower-caste women leaders has allowed the party to signal its support both for women’s advancement and for lower castes (e.g., Basu 1996). Indeed, Jensenius (2016) shows the BJP has responded to pressure to nominate more women by nominating women to run in seats reserved for SCs. At the same time, lower-caste women leaders often seek to oppose both patriarchal gender roles and upper-caste interests, sometimes resulting in challenges to male party functionaries as well as party elites. An example is OBC woman Uma Bharati, a prominent BJP maverick who has frequently challenged Hindu upper-caste party leaders to champion lower-caste interests.⁸

Lower-Caste Voters and the BJP

In Bihar as in many other parts of India, SC and OBC voters have tended to vote for lower-caste politicians from ethnic parties whose leadership and support base are dominated by lower castes. This tendency may stem from the anticipation of coethnic favoritism and the honor associated with having a lower-caste politician in office (e.g., Chandra 2004; Witsoe 2013). Increasingly, however,

despite the elitist upper-caste image of the BJP, many lower-caste voters have flocked to the party (e.g., Jaffrelot 2019). Existing research offers several explanations for this trend, including the weakness of opposition parties, the BJP’s use of nonstate service provision (e.g., Thachil 2014), and the BJP’s nomination of candidates from certain *jatis* or subcastes within the broader OBC and SC categories (e.g., Jaffrelot 2019). Our argument suggests that another important factor conditioning whether a lower-caste voter will support the BJP is the gender and caste identity of the candidate fielded by the BJP.

Lower-Caste Parties and Female Candidates

Many Indian parties have an ethnic base composed largely of lower castes—castes whose members are typically less constrained by the patriarchal norms associated with an ethnonationalist party’s ideology. Indeed, although lower-caste women face discrimination in many spheres, several studies have shown that Hindu upper-caste women are more limited in their independence and employment prospects and less assertive within their households than their lower-caste counterparts (Eswaran, Ramaswami, and Wadhwa 2013; Liddle and Joshi 1989; Luke and Munshi 2011). While these more restrictive gender norms among upper-castes may be based on Hindu nationalist ideology (Chakravarti 1993), the relatively less restrictive gender norms for lower-caste women may often be reinforced by economic necessity—for example, the need for lower-caste women to work outside the home (e.g., Luke and Munshi 2011).

As a result of the aforementioned conditions, lower-caste voters rarely support ethnonationalist gender norms that both preserve the caste hierarchy and often clash with the gender norms that exist within their households. Consequently, although members of lower castes may at times adopt patriarchal practices as a means of achieving status and upward mobility (e.g., Gorringer 2018), lower-caste parties rarely embrace Hindu nationalist gender norms as part of their core ideology.⁹ Thus, although lower-caste parties may nominate upper-caste female candidates for a variety of reasons, including their wealth, education, and dynastic connections (e.g., Chandra 2016), they should not have an interest in selecting upper-caste women who adhere to or advocate ethnonationalist gender norms. Thus, voters’ perceptions about upper-caste female candidates’ willingness

⁷“‘Shudras Feel Bad on Being Called Shudras’: BJP MP Pragya Thakur Courts Controversy with Caste Remarks,” *India Today*, December 3, 2020.

⁸Harikishan Sharma, “Suspicious Action of Police Dented Your Image, Uma Bharati Tells Yogi Adityanath,” *The Indian Express*, October 3, 2020. See also Dhavan (2008).

⁹Indeed, lower-caste parties’ opposition to the women’s reservation bill proposed in the national parliament was based not on patriarchal norms but on the argument that the bill would be detrimental for lower-caste women (e.g., Dhavan 2008).

and ability to represent their interests should be conditioned by whether these candidates are affiliated with lower-caste parties or with parties with ethnonationalist gender norms targeted toward upper-caste women.

Ethnonationalist Gender Norms: Hypotheses

Given our argument and the context supplied above, our theory leads to five main hypotheses.¹⁰ First, given our argument that a party's ethnonationalist gender norms shape the preferences for an ethnonationalist party's core female candidates among the party's non-core voters, we expect:

H1a: The BJP's non-core voters—that is, voters who are not Hindu upper-caste—should be less likely to support the BJP if the party's candidate is an upper-caste woman than if the party's candidate is an upper-caste man or a lower-caste woman or man.

Meanwhile, since lower-caste parties do not espouse ethnonationalist gender norms targeting their core constituency and since their core constituency holds less patriarchal gender norms, we would not expect a similar pattern for candidates affiliated with lower-caste parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1b: Voters who are not Hindu upper-caste should be no less likely to support the RJD if the party's candidate is an upper-caste woman than if the party's candidate is an upper-caste man or lower-caste woman or man.

The patterns are expected to be different for upper-caste voters who form part of the BJP's core constituency and should support the party regardless of the gender or ethnicity of the party's candidate. Thus, we expect:

H1c: Hindu upper-caste voters should be more likely to support the BJP than the RJD regardless of the gender and caste of the candidate fielded by either party.

In terms of aggregate electoral support, if the BJP's core voters—that is, Hindu upper-caste citizens—vote

for the BJP regardless of the candidate's gender or caste, then the BJP's non-core voters should drive the overall electoral success of BJP candidates in a constituency. Thus, when it comes to aggregate electoral support, we expect:

H2: The BJP should receive less electoral support if their candidate is an upper-caste woman than if their candidate is an upper-caste man or a lower-caste woman.

Finally, our argument suggests that the BJP's non-core voters should—due to the BJP's ethnonationalist gender norms—be more apt to vote for BJP lower-caste female candidates in reserved seats than for the BJP's upper-caste female candidates. If Hindu upper-caste voters vote for BJP candidates regardless of the gender or caste of candidate, we expect:

H3: Female candidates affiliated with the BJP should gain more support in reserved seats than in unreserved seats.

We test Hypotheses 1a–1c using data from an original conjoint survey experiment described in further detail below. Meanwhile, Hypotheses 2 and 3 are examined using candidate-level data and constituency election returns from state assembly elections in Bihar.

Context

We test our argument in the North Indian state of Bihar, where women's representation at the state and national levels is dismally low. Only 3 out of Bihar's 40 seats in the lower house of the national parliament are occupied by women, and the representation of women in Bihar's state legislative assembly has been below 10% (Banerjee et al. 2021). Although turnout among women surpassed that of men in the most recent state assembly elections, the major parties in Bihar have fielded only a small proportion of female candidates at the state and national levels.

Since our goal is to compare parties with different ethnic support bases, our research focuses on two of Bihar's major parties—the BJP and the RJD. Current politics in Bihar revolves primarily around these two parties in addition to the Janata Dal-United, or JD(U). The BJP's support base in the state, as in other northern and western Indian states, remains firmly among the upper castes—a combination of Brahmin, Rajput, Bhumihar, and others—although it has expanded its reach to OBC and other lower-caste voters. The RJD, headed by the long-term former chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav's eldest son, Tejashwi Yadav, has its primary support base

¹⁰Appendix E in the supporting information (SI) presents the results of our preregistered hypotheses (SI Table 5A, p. 13) and discusses their connection with the hypotheses in this section.

built mostly around Lalu's Yadav subcaste (part of the OBC caste category) and its allies. The RJD forms part of the state's current major opposition alliance along with the Indian National Congress Party (INC)—the former national ruling party. The JD(U), led by Bihar's current chief minister (head of government) Nitish Kumar, which until recently was part of a coalition with the BJP called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has its support base among the Kurmis and other lower castes (Kumar 2018). The Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), another major party in the state, was part of the NDA until the run-up to the 2020 elections when it formally broke away from the alliance.

Methodology and Data

We conducted our conjoint survey experiment in December 2020, about a month after the conclusion of the 2020 Bihar state assembly elections, with a sample of just under 2,000 respondents randomly selected from eight assembly constituencies in four districts in Bihar. SI Appendix B (p. 8) describes our sampling strategy and protocol. The conjoint survey experiment is the most effective way of isolating various independent variables and estimating their potential causal relationships with vote choice and has been used extensively to answer similar questions (see Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Mutz 2011; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). The enumerators asked the respondents to choose their preference in each of four pairs of hypothetical MLA candidates. For the first two pairs, these candidates were randomized according to the following traits: gender (male or female), ethnicity (upper-caste, OBC, SC, or Muslim), and campaign appeal (promises of public goods or protection).¹¹ Gender and ethnicity were indicated by the name of the candidate rather than explicitly mentioned. The enumerators then presented illustrations to the respondent of each member of the candidate pair, allowing the respondent to look at the picture while hearing the information read aloud. The drawings identified the gender of the candidate, but every additional identifier other than clothing color was standardized. For the third and fourth pair of candidates, enumerators again randomly selected a pair of candidates from the 16 possibilities mentioned above. For the last two pairs, however, one of the candidates in the pair represented the BJP and the other represented the RJD.¹² After presenting the

candidate pairs, the enumerators asked the respondent a series of additional questions pertaining to demographic characteristics, partisan preferences, and household decision making. SI Appendix A (p. 3) contains the survey instrument. Given our hypotheses, we present some analyses separately for Hindu upper-caste respondents, whom we define as the BJP's core constituency, and for voters who are not Hindu upper-caste who are the BJP's non-core voters.

We analyze the data from our conjoint survey experiment using two related approaches. First, we use a simple linear regression, which—as shown in Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014)—produces consistent estimators of the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of each attribute and of related quantities such as the average component interaction effect (ACIE) and the conditional AMCE of each attribute. However, since the use of this estimation approach is sensitive to the choice of reference category, we also present marginal means (MMs) plots. In forced-choice conjoint designs such as ours, these plots indicate which attributes increase (decrease) profile favorability based on whether their marginal means are above (below) the 0.5 threshold (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020).

Following Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014), our unit of analysis is the candidate profile and our dependent variable is a binary variable *Preferred Candidate* coded on the basis of the question “If these two candidates were running against each other for MLA, and the election were held today, which would you vote for?”

Our linear regression analysis employs robust standard errors clustered by respondent to account for potential within-respondent clustering (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). We control for candidate profile attributes by including an indicator for whether the candidate's campaign appeal emphasizes protection and a separate indicator each for whether the candidate is Muslim, upper-caste, or OBC. We leave membership in a Scheduled Caste (SC) as the reference category. We also include constituency fixed effects and controls for respondents' gender, age, and education level. SI Appendix D (p. 10) describes the variables and their sources (SI Table 1A, p. 10) and presents summary statistics (SI Table 3A, p. 11).

To capture the extent of women's decision-making power in the household, which we use as descriptive evidence, we create a variable *FemaleDecisionIndex* based on the answers to each of the eight parts of Question 35 in our survey questionnaire (SI Appendix A, p. 3). We assign one point to each response where respondents report that a woman—that is, the respondent if she is

¹¹See SI Appendix A (p. 3) for further details.

¹²To ensure that the results were not driven by the ordering of candidates, the third pair was presented with the BJP candidate first and the fourth pair was presented with the RJD candidate first.

a woman or mother or elder female members in the household—is listed as a decision maker for the relevant household decisions.¹³

Since conjoint survey experiments may not capture real-world voting behavior, we also conducted an analysis of candidate-level electoral data from state assembly elections in Bihar held between 2005 and 2020 combined with data on the caste of each candidate obtained from the Trivedi Centre at Ashoka University.¹⁴ We operationalize a given candidate's support using a variable measuring the percentage of the constituency vote received by the candidate in the relevant election. We control for unobserved constituency-level heterogeneity and for temporal shocks, respectively, using constituency fixed effects and election fixed effects. We also control for whether the candidate is an independent and whether the candidate belongs to one of Bihar's major parties. The supporting information contains descriptions of these variables and their sources (SI Table 2A, p. 10) and their summary statistics (SI Table 4A, p. 11). Although these data are observational and do not allow for causal identification, they allow us to examine whether the patterns observed in real-world elections are consistent with the implications of our argument.

Finally, we draw on 64 qualitative semi-structured citizen interviews conducted in four districts of Bihar to further probe the results of our survey experiment and help contextualize our quantitative findings. SI Appendix C (p. 9) provides further details on these interviews.

Results

Descriptive Evidence

A key premise that underlies our argument is that the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology is associated with ethnonationalist gender norms that reflect the norms held by its core Hindu upper-caste constituency. If this premise holds and if there is a link between women's household autonomy and the political preferences of household members (e.g., Prillaman 2022), we would expect *on average* that the households of Hindu upper-caste voters who intend to vote for the BJP in the next election should exhibit lower levels of women's empowerment than the households of other voters. Figure 1 examines these premises by presenting descriptive evidence

from our survey data showing how reported household gender autonomy varies according to respondents' caste and partisan affiliation. Indeed, Figure 1A shows that BJP Hindu upper-caste respondents report significantly lower levels of household decision-making power for women on average than other Hindu respondents. Meanwhile, consistent with our discussion regarding gender norms among the lower-caste support base of the RJD, Figure 1B shows that lower-caste Hindu RJD supporters were not significantly different from other respondents in the sample in terms of decision-making power of women in their households.

Experimental Evidence

Before turning to our hypotheses, we briefly use our conjoint survey experiment to examine overall patterns of preferences among the BJP's non-core voters—that is, respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste. Figure 2 displays marginal means highlighting that, among these respondents, female candidates are favored over male candidates. Moreover, lower-caste candidates—either SC or OBC—are favored over upper-caste candidates while Muslims are the least-favored ethnic category (See Hainkula et. al. 2023). In terms of overall partisan preferences, candidates affiliated with the BJP are favored over those affiliated with the RJD or those with no partisan affiliation.

Figure 3, which examines the interaction between caste and partisan affiliation among the BJP's non-core voters, shows, however, that affiliation with the BJP increases a candidate's attractiveness among these respondents only for candidates who are upper-caste men or lower-caste women or men. Meanwhile, unlike the BJP's other non-Muslim candidates whose profiles are more favorable than average, the BJP's upper-caste female candidates' profiles are not significantly different from the average. Interestingly, however, RJD-affiliated upper-caste female candidates are not at a disadvantage relative to the RJD's other candidates.

Table 1, which restricts attention to party-affiliated candidate profiles, presents a linear regression analysis used to estimate the average marginal component effects of candidates' partisan affiliation, ethnicity, and gender and the interaction effects of these components (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). The results show a negative and statistically significant coefficient on the triple interaction term *BJP Candidate* × *Upper-Caste Candidate* × *Female Candidate* both in the sample of all respondents and in the sample of respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste. The latter result

¹³SI Table 1A (p. 10) provides details on how this variable was coded in the case of multiple decision makers.

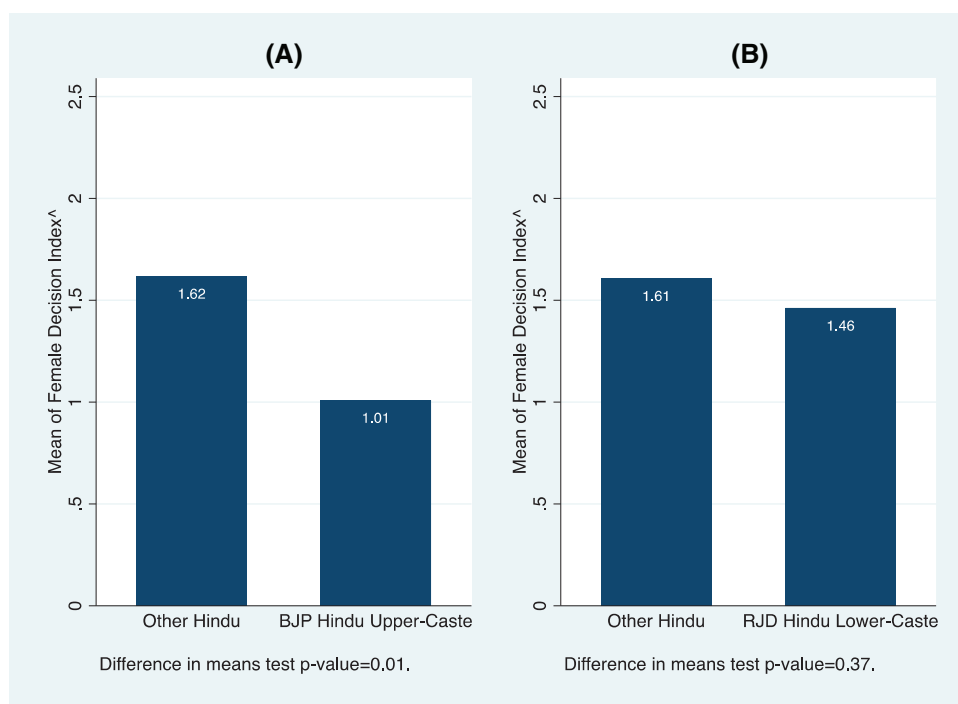
¹⁴The source is the provisional "TCPD-SPINPER Indian Legislators Dataset."

TABLE 1 Ethnonationalist Gender Norms: Party, Ethnicity, and Gender (Experimental Evidence)

	Respondent Characteristics		
	All	Not Hindu Upper-Caste	Hindu Upper-Caste
Female candidate	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.05)
Upper-caste candidate	−0.06* (0.03)	−0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.08)
Female candidate × Upper-caste candidate	0.05 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.10)
BJP candidate (vs. RJD)	0.15** (0.02)	0.10** (0.02)	0.63** (0.06)
Female candidate × BJP candidate	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.07)
Upper-caste candidate × BJP candidate	0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.12 (0.11)
Female cand. × Upper-caste cand. × BJP cand.	−0.10* (0.05)	−0.13* (0.05)	0.15 (0.16)
Protection appeal	−0.18** (0.01)	−0.18** (0.01)	−0.17** (0.04)
OBC candidate	−0.00 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.04)
Muslim candidate	−0.08** (0.02)	−0.07** (0.02)	−0.09* (0.04)
Female	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.01)
Age	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Education	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Constituency fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7,986	7,284	702
R-squared	0.06	0.05	0.40

Notes: Linear regression with robust standard errors clustered by respondent in parentheses. The unit of analysis is candidate profile. The sample is restricted to party-affiliated candidate profiles. The dependent variable is a binary indicator for whether the given candidate profile was chosen.

[†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

FIGURE 1 Women's Household Decision-Making Autonomy, by Respondent Subgroup

Notes: ^AFemaleDecisionIndex is an additive index based on the answers to eight subquestions of Question 35 in the survey; we assign one point to each subquestion where respondents indicate that a woman makes the relevant household decision. See SI Appendix Sections A and D for further details. The p-value for the difference-in-means test, based on a sample of 1,692 respondents, was calculated using a *t*-test with independent samples and variances assumed unequal.

lends support for Hypothesis 1a, showing that respondents who are outside the BJP's core Hindu upper-caste constituency are significantly less likely to support the BJP over the RJD if the BJP's candidate is an upper-caste woman than if the BJP's candidate is an upper-caste man ($p = .02$) or a lower-caste woman ($p = .02$) or a lower-caste man ($p = .09$).¹⁵ Thus, the findings support the argument that BJP upper-caste female candidates suffer a relative electoral penalty among the BJP's non-core voters, especially compared to the party's upper-caste male candidates and its lower-caste female candidates.

What beliefs or perceptions account for these patterns? Our qualitative interviews point to gender norms as a key reason for why BJP upper-caste female candidates may receive less support than their male counterparts.¹⁶ According to one respondent who was asked to speculate on this issue, "There still exists a perception that women won't be able to go just anywhere at any

time. Whereas, men can be approached at any time of the day in whatever situations, come what may."¹⁷ According to another respondent, "Men can vouch for running around to get work done which women can't."¹⁸ Another respondent echoed a similar idea and expanded on it: "For example if there is a fight and the chosen leader is female, she might not go to the police station late at night. There are several other restrictions when it comes to working with women."¹⁹

Turning to the next hypothesis, Table 1 shows that among respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste, upper-caste RJD female candidates do not receive less support compared to either the party's upper-caste male candidates or the party's lower-caste female candidates. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1b and our argument suggesting that voters should not expect ethnonationalist gender norms to constrain the effectiveness

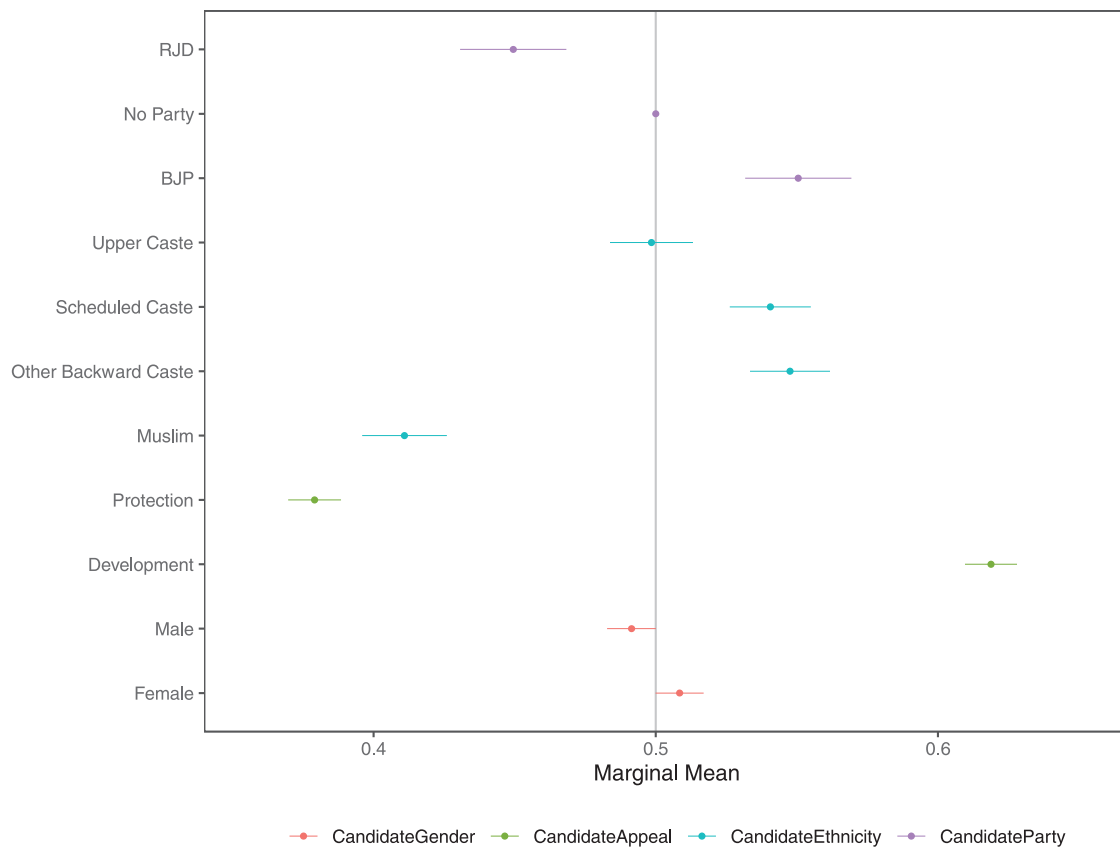
¹⁵See SI Appendix E2 (p. 14) for calculations of these marginal effects.

¹⁶See SI Appendix C (p. 9) for further details.

¹⁷Interview with citizen #6 in Supaul district, April 2022.

¹⁸Interview with citizen #19 in Jamui district, April 2022.

¹⁹Interview with citizen #10 in Gaya district, April 2022.

FIGURE 2 Marginal Means: Candidate Gender, Caste, Party, and Appeal

Notes: The figure, based on a sample of respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste, shows marginal means (MMs) as recommended by Leeper et al. (2020). *CandidateGender* captures the candidate's gender (male or female). *CandidateAppeal* captures whether the candidate's campaign message emphasized protection or development. *CandidateEthnicity* captures the candidate's ethnic background (upper-caste, OBC, SC, or Muslim). *CandidateParty* captures the candidate's partisan affiliation (RJD, BJP, or no party).

of upper-caste female candidates when they are affiliated with the RJD.

When it comes to the results for Hindu upper-caste respondents, Table 1 shows that BJP affiliation has no significant effect on reducing support for upper-caste female candidates. They show instead, consistent with Hypothesis 1c, that Hindu upper-caste respondents are significantly more likely to support BJP candidates over RJD candidates regardless of the candidates' gender or caste. Thus, for the BJP's core voters, partisanship—particularly partisan loyalty to the BJP—trumps both gender and caste when it comes to voting decisions.

SI Table 7A in Appendix E (p. 17) presents results of the main specification shown in Table 1, column 2 broken down by gender. We learn that the results in Table 1 for respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste are mainly driven by female voters in this category rather than their male counterparts. This finding lends

credence to the idea that the relatively lower support accorded to the BJP's upper-caste female candidates is driven by lower-caste voters' concerns about these candidates' commitment to ethnonationalist gender norms, which should be more salient for female voters.

Results Based on Electoral Data

Table 2 turns to examining Hypotheses 2 and 3 using candidate-level data from Bihar state assembly elections. Specifically, column 2 examines Hypothesis 2 using electoral data by creating a triple interaction term consisting of an indicator for (a) whether a candidate is a woman, (b) whether a candidate is affiliated with the BJP, and (c) whether a candidate belongs to an upper caste. Interestingly, analogous to the results of our conjoint survey experiment, the triple interaction term is negative and significant at conventional levels, showing support

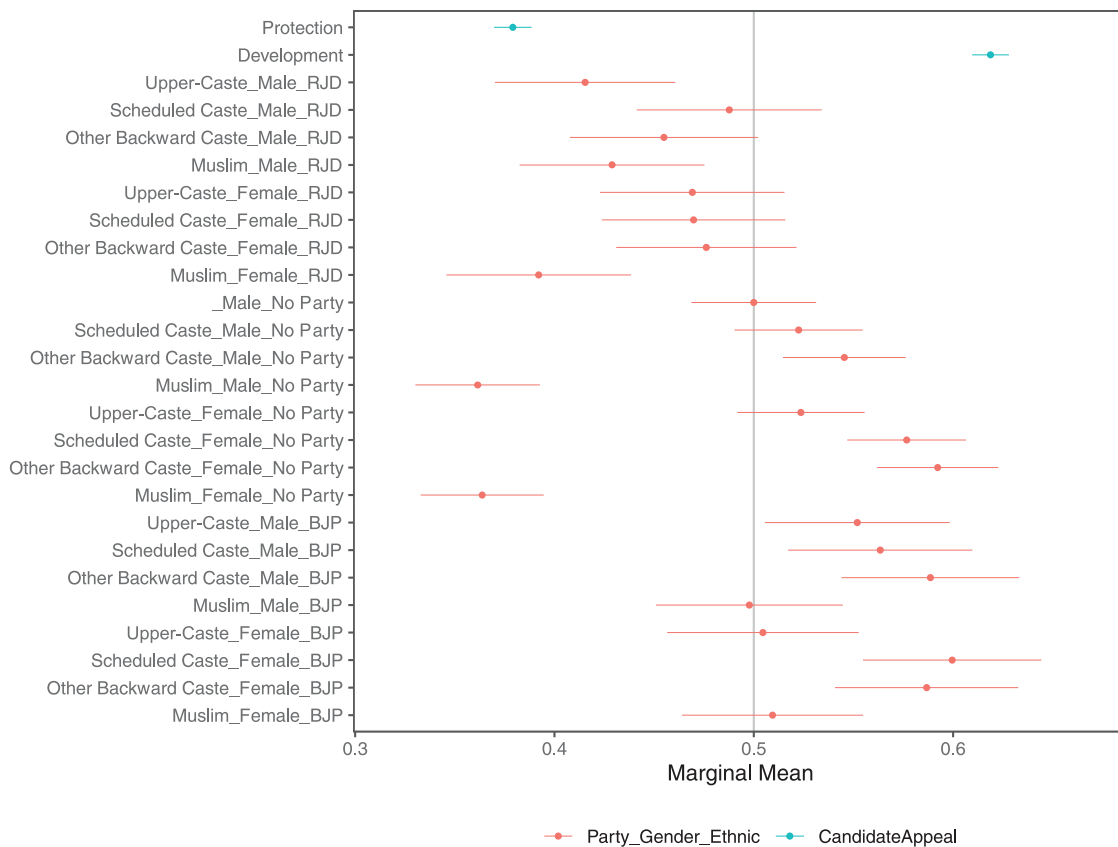
TABLE 2 Ethnonationalist Gender Norms: Effect of BJP Affiliation, Caste and Gender on Candidate's Vote Share

	(1)	(2)	(3)
BJP candidate	9.44** (0.69)	9.38** (0.92)	9.27** (0.76)
Female candidate	0.18 (0.30)	0.71 (0.58)	0.28 (0.34)
BJP candidate × Female candidate	1.39 (1.77)	3.09 (2.08)	0.59 (2.10)
Upper-caste candidate		0.40 (0.51)	
BJP candidate × Upper-caste candidate		−2.22 (1.54)	
Female candidate × Upper-caste candidate		4.25** (1.55)	
BJP cand. × Female cand. × Upper-caste cand.		−7.96* (3.81)	
BJP candidate × Reserved seat			1.11 (1.96)
Female candidate × Reserved seat			−0.69 (0.90)
BJP cand. × Female cand. × Reserved seat			5.54† (3.26)
Reserved seat			0.67** (0.24)
Independent candidate	−0.41** (0.12)	−0.84** (0.22)	−0.39** (0.12)
Major party candidate	23.62** (0.30)	23.91** (0.43)	23.61** (0.30)
Constituency fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Election year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	16,196	8,995	16,130
R-squared	0.63	0.63	0.63

Notes: Linear regression with robust standard errors clustered by constituency in parentheses.

The unit of analysis is candidate-election, and the dependent variable is the candidate's vote share in the constituency. Column 2 has fewer observations due to missing data on the caste identity of candidates.

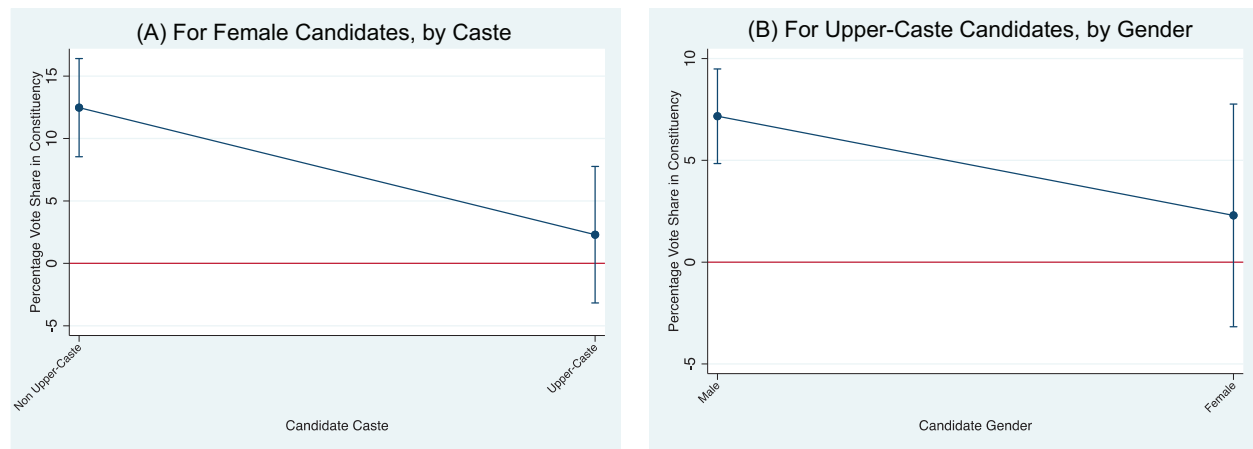
† $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

FIGURE 3 Marginal Means: Interactions among Candidate Gender, Party, and Caste

Notes: The figure, based on a sample of respondents who are not Hindu upper-caste, shows marginal means (MMs) as recommended by Leeper et al. (2020). *Party_Gender_Ethnic* is a variable interacting the gender of the candidate (male or female) with the party affiliation of the candidate (BJP, RJD, or none) and the ethnicity of the candidate (upper-caste, OBC, SC, or Muslim). *Candidate Appeal* captures whether the candidate's campaign message emphasized protection or development.

for Hypothesis 2. Specifically, the results indicate that upper-caste female candidates who are not affiliated with the BJP receive significantly higher vote shares on average than other candidates, which may reflect the privileges they often enjoy in the real world, such as wealth, education, and dynastic connections (e.g., Chandra 2016). However, as our argument suggests, affiliation with the BJP erodes this advantage. In particular, consistent with Hypothesis 2, Figure 4A and Figure 4B show that while BJP affiliation has a positive and significant effect on vote shares for non-upper-caste women and for upper-caste men, respectively, the effect of BJP affiliation for upper-caste women is not statistically significant at conventional levels. These results support the notion that the BJP receives less electoral support when it fields an upper-caste female candidate. Meanwhile, SI Appendix Table 8A (p. 18) shows that similar effects do not hold for Bihar's other major parties.

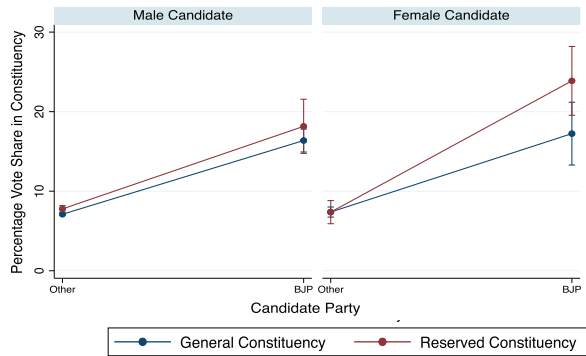
Next, column 3, which turns to examining Hypothesis 3, shows that a triple interaction term composed of indicators for whether (a) the candidate is affiliated with the BJP, (b) the candidate is female, and (c) the candidate's constituency is reserved for SCs is positive and statistically significant at the 10% level. Figure 5B, which displays marginal effects based on column 3 of Table 2, shows that the marginal effect of reservation for a BJP candidate who is female is positive and statistically significant at the 5% level. Thus, the results are consistent with Hypothesis 3 in showing that BJP female candidates in seats reserved for SCs gain significantly more support than BJP women running in unreserved seats. Figure 5A shows that there is no similar advantage for female candidates in reserved seats who are not affiliated with the BJP or for BJP male candidates running in reserved seats. Thus, consistent with our argument, the BJP's ethnonationalist gender norms appear to create a

FIGURE 4 Marginal Effects of BJP Affiliation on Constituency Vote Share

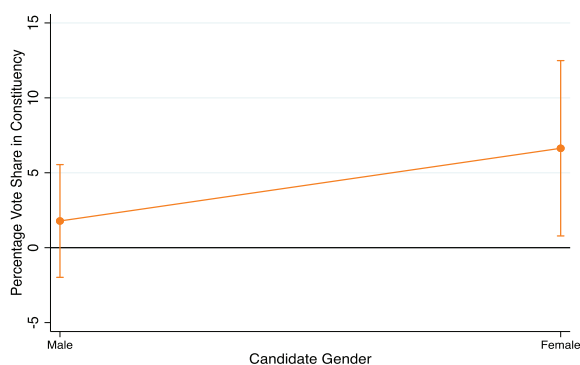
Notes: The figure shows marginal effects based on the results in Table 2, Column 2. The bars show 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE 5 Marginal Effect on Constituency Vote Share

(A) Marginal Effect of Gender, Party Affiliation and Constituency Reservation Status on Constituency Vote Share



(B) Marginal Effect of Constituency Reservation Status on Constituency Vote Share for a BJP Candidate, by Gender



Notes: The figures show marginal effects based on the results in Table 2, Column 3. The bars show 95% confidence intervals.

relative advantage for the party's female candidates in reserved seats compared to women running in general seats.

An important caveat is that the analyses of electoral results in Table 2 may reflect parties' decisions rather than voters' choices. Thus, an alternative interpretation may be that the BJP is more likely to field its upper-caste female candidates in constituencies where opposition parties have a higher chance of winning. Such a disadvantage would, however, be consistent with our main argument in that it points to yet another way in which ethnonationalist gender norms could shape the influence—or lack thereof—of the BJP's upper-caste female candidates.

Alternative Explanations

One possible alternative explanation for why BJP upper-caste female candidates receive less support from voters who are not upper-caste is that *non-upper-caste voters perceive upper-caste candidates from upper-caste parties as doubly unrepresentative* of their ethnic interests. However, as column 2 of Table 1 shows, we observe no penalty among non-Hindu upper-caste voters for upper-caste men affiliated with the BJP. Moreover, SI Appendix Table 9A (p. 19), which utilizes our survey data and restricts attention to candidate profiles with no party affiliation, shows no evidence that voters who are not Hindu upper-caste are prejudiced against upper-caste female candidates in general.

Another possibility is that upper-caste female candidates affiliated with the BJP may gain less support because these candidates may be seen as violating stereotypes associated with the BJP's core positions that may be construed as "masculine" (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009), thus leading to backlash from the party's core supporters. If this were the case, we should see the strongest penalty for upper-caste female candidates affiliated with the BJP among supporters and allies of the BJP. However, the results in SI Table 10A (p. 20) show, consistent with our argument, that the BJP penalty for upper-caste female candidates seems to be driven by the BJP's non-core voters.

Conclusion: Generalizability and Implications

Our study contributes to an understanding of the barriers to women's representation in ethnically divided societies. Specifically, it sheds light on how female candidates belonging to elite ethnic groups may suffer an electoral disadvantage when these candidates are affiliated with ethnonationalist parties. The reason, we argue, stems from these parties' support of ethnonationalist gender norms that shape both the type of elite female candidates they select and the expected behavior of such candidates. Our evidence, which involves triangulation across multiple data sources—a conjoint survey experiment, real-world electoral data, descriptive survey data on intra-household decision-making, and qualitative interviews—lends overall support to the argument. We have also shown that these results are not driven by simple gender prejudices or caste affinities.

More research is needed to determine whether our findings—which are based on the Indian state of Bihar and focus on the Hindu nationalist BJP—extend to other parties and regions in India. At the same time, our research has important implications for how the representation of women in ethnically divided societies might fare in the wake of the increasing dominance of ethnonationalist parties in many societies across the globe. Our findings suggest that as these parties move toward expanding their appeal to other ethnic groups, these parties' female candidates who belong to their core ethnic groups may suffer an electoral disadvantage among voters from other ethnic groups due to ethnonationalist gender norms. Moreover, our research sheds light on the possibility that ethnonationalist gender norms could create particular disadvantages for elite women from ethnonationalist parties in systems with quotas for subaltern

ethnic groups. Thus, elite parties' embrace of ethnonationalist gender norms may come at the cost of ensuring the representation of women from their core ethnic constituency within the party's ranks.

Our research suggests important lessons for improving women's representation in ethnically divided societies. Particularly, it suggests that gender disparities could be lessened if parties representing subaltern groups were to field not only subaltern female candidates but also women belonging to elite ethnic groups who are targets of a major party's restrictive ethnonationalist gender norms. For subaltern parties, however, such endeavors may detract from their goals of furthering the interests of marginalized groups. Examining these potential countervailing effects represents an important pathway for future research.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

- Appendix A:** Survey Experiment Instrument
- Appendix B:** Sampling Strategy
- Appendix C:** Qualitative Interviews
- Appendix D:** Variable Descriptions
- Appendix E:** Supplementary Results