



# Don't Touch My Road. Evidence from India on Affirmative Action And Everyday Discrimination <sup>☆</sup>



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## SUMMARY

This article investigates whether affirmative action, in the form of electoral quotas, affects group-based discrimination. The redistributive effect of quotas is subject to debate, and their ultimate target is discrimination. To identify the effect of electoral quotas, I take advantage of their rotation across space and over time in India. To proxy discrimination, I use a measure of caste-based exclusion from a public infrastructure (namely, streets). In 2006, 44.5% household members of the marginalized castes labeled Scheduled Castes (SC) still suffered from caste-based exclusions. I document that ongoing SC quotas reduce the likelihood of caste-based exclusion for members of the SCs by about one fifth. The results also imply that the effect is not persistent: it disappears with the end of the SC quota. From a policy-maker's perspective, these results are mixed since electoral quotas do affect everyday discrimination, even if the effect does not last. These results are consistent with a temporary change in the behavior of members of the dominant castes after a one-shot electoral quota. These results are inconsistent with either a change in the stereotypes held by members of the dominant castes, or a change in the aspirations of members of the lower castes.

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## 1. Introduction

Discrimination prevents equality of opportunity, and evidence abounds on the persistence of discrimination (Bertrand & Duflo, 2016). In this context, affirmative action is frequently used to fight discrimination, and ultimately target equal opportunities. Affirmative action is particularly appealing to governments because it allows them to immediately and visibly change outcomes of interest, for example, the racial composition of university students. How-

ever, affirmative action is also controversial: people outside its target can feel discriminated against.<sup>1</sup> On this ground, the US Supreme Court has banned explicit racial quotas in 1978 (subtler forms of affirmative action are still legal, and challenged, for example in the case of Fisher, 2016). Quotas, and in particular electoral quotas, nonetheless remain widespread. More than 100 countries have electoral quotas for women, and 38 countries have electoral quotas for other minority groups (respectively, Krook, 2009; Reynolds, 2005). Proponents of quotas advocate them as transitory tools. The objective is to repeal quotas, once they have allowed the society to reach a non-discriminatory equilibrium. This article stems from the idea that electoral quotas are more likely to have long lasting effects if they change the way that people interact with each other. Otherwise, the risk is to go back to a pre-quota (discriminatory) equilibrium once quotas are repealed. This question is even more important now that the redistributive effect of electoral quotas is subject to debate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To be precise, discrimination means that people with similar characteristics – apart from their group identity – in similar circumstances are treated differentially (Bertrand & Duflo, 2016). Affirmative action means that a person or institution in a position of power actively improves an outcome of interest for a minority, going beyond non-discrimination (Holzer & Neumark, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The seminal works by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) for women, and Besley, Pande, Rahman, and Rao (2004) for castes, document that leaders elected on quotas favor the members of their group in the allocation of public goods and benefits. However, more recent studies do not confirm this finding (Bardhan, Mookherjee, & Parra-Torrado, 2010; Jensenius, 2015).

I investigate whether affirmative action, in the form of electoral quotas, affects caste-based discrimination in India. Members of the marginalized Scheduled Castes (henceforth, SCs), and other marginalized groups, benefit from quotas in the form of seat reservations in local political assemblies (the *gram panchayats*). The SCs used to be called untouchables and often refer to themselves as *dalits* (the oppressed). They still face widespread discrimination. To measure discrimination, I exploit a question in a survey asking household heads whether they were excluded from some streets because of their caste (i) at the time of survey and (ii) 10 years before. In the Hindi Belt, the heartland of India, 44.5% household members of the SCs declared in 2006 that some streets were off-limits due to their caste. Yet the practices of untouchability and caste-based discrimination have been anti-constitutional since 1949. The startling figure of street exclusion confirms the persistence of caste-based discrimination and calls for more research on how to achieve equality of opportunities.

While discrimination is notoriously difficult to measure, declarations of exclusion from public goods such as streets provide a good starting point for several reasons. First, from a methodological perspective, a declaration of street exclusion is an original proxy of discrimination. Even if the variable of exclusion is unlikely to disclose the absolute level of caste-based discrimination, changes in the variable over time allow me to study changes in caste-based discrimination. This strategy is in line with Bertrand and Duflo's idea that imperfect measures of absolute discrimination can be used to evaluate anti-discriminatory interventions (Bertrand & Duflo, 2016). Second, from the perspective of positive economics, street exclusion proxies caste-based discrimination, the form of discrimination which is costly to society (Becker, 1957). Streets are a public good, and street exclusion means that discriminatory agents are willing to pay—be it money or time—to ensure that other agents are excluded. Last but not least, from an ethical perspective, street exclusion is a blatant negation of equality of opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Street exclusion makes it difficult or impossible, for members of some castes, to access some areas of their village. Mechanically, such exclusions limit access to the public goods or jobs that are in these areas.

My identification strategy relies on the way that quotas are allocated at each election, and on the assumption that caste quotas have heterogeneous effects on households from different castes. The states' local administrations allocate quotas within each state and the allocation rule is state-specific. It can be random or depend upon village-level characteristics. I identify the effect of electoral quotas on street exclusions through within-village and within-caste variations over time. Village year fixed-effects allow me to control for time-varying village-level characteristics (including any characteristic that administrations may use to allocate quotas). The panel dimension of the data also allows me to account for caste-specific trends and time-invariant unobservables at the household level.

I document a large and significant effect of electoral quotas on low-caste members' access to streets. SC quotas decrease street exclusions by about 10 percentage points for SC households. Unfortunately, the effect is not permanent: it vanishes once the quota comes to an end. To put things in perspective, since roughly every second SC household reports exclusion, SC quotas reduce the likelihood of street exclusion by about one fifth (for members of the SCs). These results are robust. In particular, they are independent of the share of SCs in the village (some administrations use caste

shares to allocate quotas), and are robust to the omission of the 1996 variable of exclusion (which comes from a recall question).

My research question is most closely related to the investigation by Chauchard (2014) of the impact of electoral quotas on the discriminatory beliefs and intentions of members of dominant groups. I complement Chauchard (2014) in two respects. First, his data design prevents him from assessing the effect of quotas over time. Indeed, he uses cross-sectional data that he collected in Rajasthan villages where either an SC quota was being implemented for the first time, or no SC quota had ever taken place. Second, his analysis relies on what members of dominant castes stated to be their feelings and action plans toward low castes. He convincingly makes sure—both in the design of his questionnaire and the interpretation of his results—that statements are not strategically biased. However, as underlined by LaPiere's seminal work, actions may differ from statements (LaPiere, 1934). I complement Chauchard's work with a study of discrimination from the perspective of members of the low castes, and with data covering three electoral terms (and any quota occurring during these terms).

More broadly, my results contribute to the literature on the link between electoral representation and people's actions—meaning the actions of constituents rather than leaders. Almost all the articles in this literature focus on women political representation, and few of them address directly the question of discrimination. However, this rich literature underlines different channels through which electoral representation may affect discrimination. These potential channels are: the actions of the minority leader (Besley et al., 2004), a change in either the mindset or actions of the minority members (respectively, Dunning, 2010; Iyer, Mani, Mishra, & Topalova, 2012), and a change in either the mindset or actions of the majority members (respectively, Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras, & Iyer, 2013; Chauchard, 2014). For simplicity, I refer to the group considered to be discriminated against as the minority group, even if this group may be numerically important, as is the case with women.

Building upon the existing literature and auxiliary empirical evidence, I suggest two channels that are consistent with the main results of the article: either the SC leader plays a pivotal part while in office (enforcing or negotiating a change of behavior of members of the dominant castes), or there is a change in the perception of the social norm by members of the dominant castes (SC quotas reduce the belief that publicly discriminating members of the SCs is normal). In both cases, members of the dominant castes change their behavior for the duration of the electoral term, which is consistent with a reduction of street exclusions during SC quotas. A one-shot quota is already enough to observe this effect. Empirical results are inconsistent with alternative channels, such as a change in the stereotypes held by members of the dominant castes, or a change in the aspirations of members of the lower castes.

## 2. Institutional context and literature

This article exploits a system of caste quotas for the head's seat in Indian local political councils. Caste quotas aim at fighting the legacy of caste discrimination in India. This section briefly introduces the context in which this fight is taking place, and existing findings on the impact of minorities' political representation.

### (a) Castes

Several caste features induce a strong inertia for caste-based discrimination, and may justify the implementation of affirmative action. First, castes are hereditary, exclusive and virtually unchangeable at the household level. Second, castes are ordered on a social status ladder, which matches a purity ladder, where

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even if all forms of discrimination were statistical and could be argued to be efficient screening devices in the presence of imperfect information (Arrow, 1973), “[d]iscrimination is no less damaging to its victims for being statistical. And it is no less important for social policy to counter” (Phelps, 1972, p. 661). See Roemer and Trannoy (2015) for a recent discussion of the different notions of equality.

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