



Coalition and Women's Political Representation in Nepal

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Despite quotas meant to protect women's electoral representation in local governments in Nepal, women's representation is declining. We analyze data from Nepal's first two fully democratic elections to understand patterns of women's representation and reasons for its decline. We report three primary findings:

- Even in the presence of constitutional quotas, women's representation in municipal positions declined by around 20% between 2017 and 2022.
- Parties subverted these quotas and fielded more male candidates in 2022 through the use of political coalitions, largely between the Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist) parties, where each party nominated only one candidate who was almost always male.
- Coalitions were most likely in municipalities where parties had not won a seat in 2017, suggesting that they were a political strategy to shift partisan representation.

Our findings highlight the importance of institutional design for protections for marginalized groups, as political actors will attempt to bypass institutional rules if it does not serve their electoral interests. It additionally suggests that overturning gender hierarchies may require more than quotas.

Background

Women have yet to achieve parity of electoral representation in Nepal. In the mid-1990s, only 19% of local elected representatives were women. Nepal's new Constitution, introduced in 2015, sought to protect and ensure women's electoral representation in local office through mandated quotas. The 2015 Constitution created a federal structure that included seven provinces, 753 municipalities, and 6,742 wards with elected governments at all levels. At the municipality level, a Mayor and Deputy Mayor were to be elected, and each party was required to nominate at least one woman across the two positions. The expectation of this quota was that 50%

of all elected municipal positions (the highest level of local government) would be women.

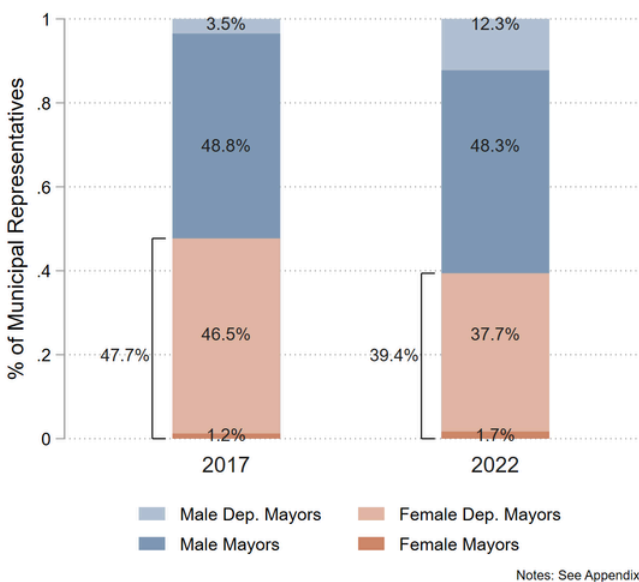
Nepal held its first truly democratic local elections in 2017 and then a second in 2022, each of which ushered in more than 28,000 new representatives to local governments. These local officials hold substantial policy authority under the federal structure outlined in the 2015 Constitution. Municipal governments are principally responsible for preparing annual programs and budgets, collecting local taxes, overseeing local subcommittees, adjudicating local disputes, and

delivering most local public services. Women’s representation in these local political institutions, thus, bears potential consequences for local service delivery.

Were women equally represented in municipal governments?

We leverage data provided by the Election Commission of Nepal on local election outcomes to measure women’s representation in municipal positions. Figure 1 reports the share of men and women elected to municipal government positions in the 2017 and 2022 elections. In 2017, women almost achieved parity of representation in municipal offices, claiming 47.7% of municipal positions, suggesting that the quota worked to ensure women’s electoral representation. Despite this high representation, Figure 1 demonstrates that women in 2017 almost exclusively occupied the position of Deputy Mayor, claiming 93.0% of Deputy Mayor seats, while men were elected to nearly all (97.6%) of Mayoral positions.

Figure 1: Gender Composition of Municipal Positions in Nepal’s First Two Fully Democratic Elections



Women’s representation in municipal positions, however, declined from 2017 to 2022 and in 2022 did not reflect the quota’s intent of 50% representation. Only 39.4% of municipal positions in 2022 were filled by women, marking an 8-percentage point or 20% decline in women’s representation. Further, women

remained relegated to the position of Deputy Mayor and did not achieve greater representation among Mayors. Instead, the decline in women’s elected representation coincides with more men winning the position of Deputy Mayor.

How was Nepal’s quota for women in local office bypassed?

From 2017 to 2022, Nepal saw a rise in the formation of political coalitions between parties ahead of the local elections. These coalitions were formal agreements between two or more parties to coordinate candidate nomination and jointly mobilize electoral support before the elections. Often, coalitions would result in parties only fielding one candidate for municipal positions to limit competition among coalition parties and to allow all parties in the coalition to field for at least one position.

Measuring the presence of a coalition is challenging as there is no official database and coalitions were formed at the local level, which resulted in variation across municipalities in the presence of coalitions. We measured the presence of coalition in a municipality by triangulating several data sources. First, using the Election Commission’s candidate list for the 2022 local elections, we identified instances where, within a municipality, two parties each field only one candidate (eg., one party fields only in the Mayor position and another party fields only in the Deputy Mayor position). Second, we validate this measurement using data from an original survey with female ward members from 2022 where we asked each ward member whether their party was in a coalition in their municipality. Comparing this with our candidate list measure, we identified 147 municipalities where survey responses did not match our coalition prediction. Third, to adjudicate these discrepancies, we called each municipalities’ information officers and recorded their statement on the presence of coalition in the 2022 elections. Our final measure of coalitions indicates that **53.6% of municipalities had at least one coalition in the 2022 local elections.**

Did coalitions undermine quotas? If parties interpreted the constitutional quota as requiring that they field a woman candidate if they are fielding two candidates, it is possible that coalitions, in which parties only field one candidate for the two municipal

positions, may have led to fewer women candidates. Our data shows that only 26.7% of coalitions abide by the quota, meaning that in only 26.7% of coalitions do we see a woman being fielded for one of the two municipal positions. In the other 73.3% of coalitions, both parties in the coalition fielded a man.

Figure 2: Effect of Coalitions on Female Representation

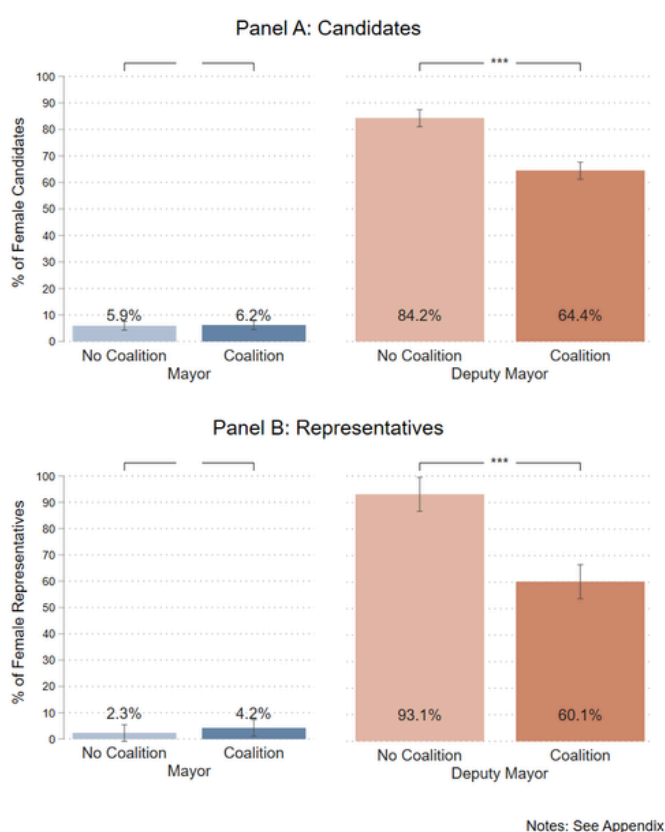


Figure 2 shows that women were significantly less likely to be elected in municipalities with a coalition than in municipalities without a coalition. The Figure reports the share of candidates (Panel A) and representatives (Panel B) that were women in municipal contests in the 2022 local elections. While very few women are elected as Mayor, there is no difference in women’s candidacy and representation based on the presence of coalitions for Mayoral office. However, women were significantly less likely to be fielded as candidates and elected as representatives in Deputy Mayor positions in municipalities that had a coalition. Only 64.4% of Deputy Mayor candidates and 60.1% of elected Deputy Mayors were women in municipalities with a coalition (compared to 84.2% and 93.1% respectively in municipalities without a coalition).

Figure 2 provides strong evidence that the decline in women’s electoral representation was concentrated in municipalities with a coalition: overall, the share of female representatives is 32.2% in municipalities without a coalition, compared to 47.7% in those without a coalition.

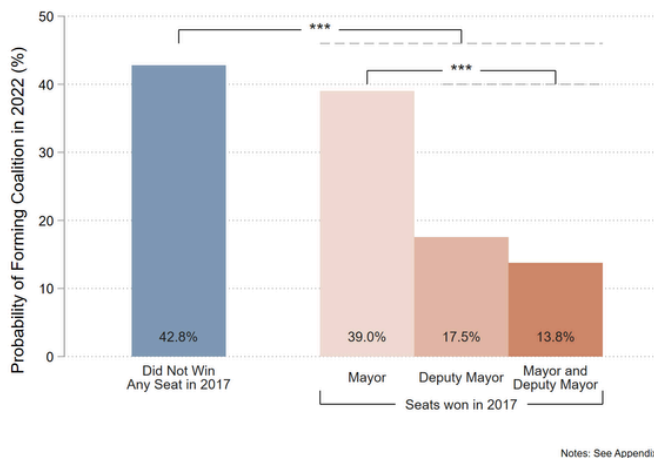
Why were coalitions formed?

Understanding where and by whom coalitions were formed can help to reveal the potential reasons behind women’s declining political representation. Using our coding of coalitions, which included information on which parties were involved in coalitions, we find that 54.6% of coalitions were between the Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist) parties and 3.8% were between the CPN (UML) and other smaller parties. This is striking as it shows that the vast majority of coalitions were between parties considered to be far left (CPN (Maoist)) and center right (Nepali Congress), suggesting that ideological similarity was unlikely to drive coalition formation.

Why then were coalitions formed? To answer this, we estimate a model of coalition formation. Figure 3 reports the estimated probability that a party would form a coalition in 2022 based on their electoral success in 2017. The figure shows that parties were most likely to enter coalitions if they had not won either municipal position in the 2017 local election; such parties are predicted to form a coalition with a probability of 42.8%. In fact, parties that did not win any municipal position in 2017 were 25 percentage points or more than twice as likely to enter a coalition than parties that won at least one seat in 2017.

Figure 3 also shows that parties that previously had won only the Mayor seat were significantly more likely to enter a coalition than parties that had previously won the Deputy Mayor seat. In combination, this suggests that coalitions were a strategy that was deployed in municipalities where parties lacked representation, particularly representation among Deputy Mayors.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Forming a Coalition by 2017 Electoral Success



Appendix

Figure 1 Notes

This figure reports the composition of municipal representatives (Mayors and Deputy Mayors) in 2017 and 2022. Data is from the Election Commission of Nepal.

Figure 2 Notes

Panel A of this figure shows the share of Mayor and Deputy Mayor candidates who are female in municipalities without coalition, and compares it to municipalities with coalition. Panel B reports the share of Mayor and Deputy Mayor representatives who were female in municipalities with and without coalition. The figure reports the raw means but the estimate of the difference derives from a regression that includes as controls the share of women candidates in 2017, the vote margin of each party for both positions in 2017, and district fixed effects. The vertical bars represent confidence intervals at the 95% level. Levels of significance (* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$). Data is from the Election Commission of Nepal.

Figure 3 Notes

This figure shows the probability of a party forming a coalition in a municipality based on its electoral performance in the municipality in 2017. The probabilities are predicted based on a regression with a control for whether there was a unitary government in the municipality in 2017, and district fixed effects. The larger bracket shows that the probability of forming coalitions when a party does not win any seats in 2017 is significantly greater compared to winning at least one seat. Likewise, the smaller bracket shows that the probability of forming coalitions when winning the Mayor seat in 2017 is significantly greater compared to winning only Deputy Mayor or both Mayor and Deputy Mayor. Levels of significance (* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$). Data is from the Election Commission of Nepal.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite constitutionally mandated protections for women's representation, we observe a substantial decline in women's electoral representation in Nepal. Our findings highlight a key mechanism for this decline: the use of political coalitions. Parties formed coalitions, likely as an attempt to increase their electoral success, but did not honor the gender quota. As a result, we see significantly lower representation among women in municipalities with coalitions.

Two key conclusions emerge from these findings. First, the design of institutional protections matters for their success. Parties were able to subvert quotas because these quotas mandated protections only in the case that a party fielded two candidates.

Small tweaks to the design of this protection, such as the mandate that a party field at least one woman if they field any candidates, could have major impacts on women's representation. Second, quotas may be insufficient to challenge long-running gender hierarchies. Our findings highlight the ways that gender hierarchies reassert themselves even in the face of institutions aimed at their erosion. This suggests that more may be needed to truly equalize political access and power.

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