Is Nepal on a Path Towards Gender Inclusive Political Leadership?

An Analysis of the 2022 Local Level Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Female Representation and Candidacy Remains At a Low Level in 2022:** Female candidacy and representation remains below or at 5% in mayor, ward chair and open ward positions in 2022. Female candidacy and representation for deputy mayor positions has dropped to roughly 75%.

- **Female Representation and Candidacy Fell Overall:** Relative to 2017, in 2022 women were 0.5 percentage points less likely to run for office and 1 percentage point less likely to be elected to office.

- **With Significant Differences Across Positions:** The decline in female representation is primarily due to the position of deputy mayor, where women's representation has dropped by almost 20 percentage points. Women's representation in open ward member seats, on the other hand, has increased by more than 1 percentage point.

- **Female Incumbents Were More Likely to Drop Out, and There Were Fewer First-time Female Entrants in Politics, Relative to Men:** Relative to male incumbents, female incumbents were 7 percentage points less likely than men to recontest for election; and 5 percentage points less likely to be re-elected to office in 2022. The rate of entry by first time entrants was 4 percentage points lower among women than men.

CONTEXT AND SAMPLE

In 2017, Nepal held its first local elections as a democratic republic. The Constitution mandated that, at the municipality level, parties are required to field a woman in either the mayor or deputy mayor position. At the ward level, two positions are reserved for women (female ward member and dalit female ward member). In the 2017 election, more than 30,000 politicians were elected and of these, women comprised almost 41%. Women's representation nearly perfectly reflected this legal quota system. Women were elected in less than 1% of open ward positions and less than 2% of elected mayors were women (while 94% of deputy mayors were women).

Did Nepal make further progress towards gender equality in the second round of elections in May 2022? Drawing on data from a survey we conducted in December 2021, female incumbents reported an ambition for higher positions: 63% of deputy mayors expressed an intention to run for mayor in the 2022 local elections.

To analyze temporal changes in Nepal's gender representation, we draw on a comprehensive administrative dataset of candidates and elected representatives in the 2017 and 2022 local elections, provided by the Election Commission of Nepal. Our dataset comprises 262,380 unique candidates and 70,460 representatives (35,242 in 2017 and 35,218 in 2022) across both election rounds, representing every municipality and ward in Nepal. Below, we describe the main findings (figure footnotes describing the regression model underlying the graphs are provided in the statistical appendix).

Findings

Figure 1 reports the level and change in women's and men's candidacy and election as mayors, deputy mayors, and in all open ward positions (including ward chairperson and open ward seats) across election rounds.

Figure 1: *Gender Composition of Candidates and Representatives Across 2017 and 2022 Local Level Election Rounds*

(a) Mayoral Position

(b) Deputy Mayor Position

(c) Open Ward Positions


Notes: See Appendix B.
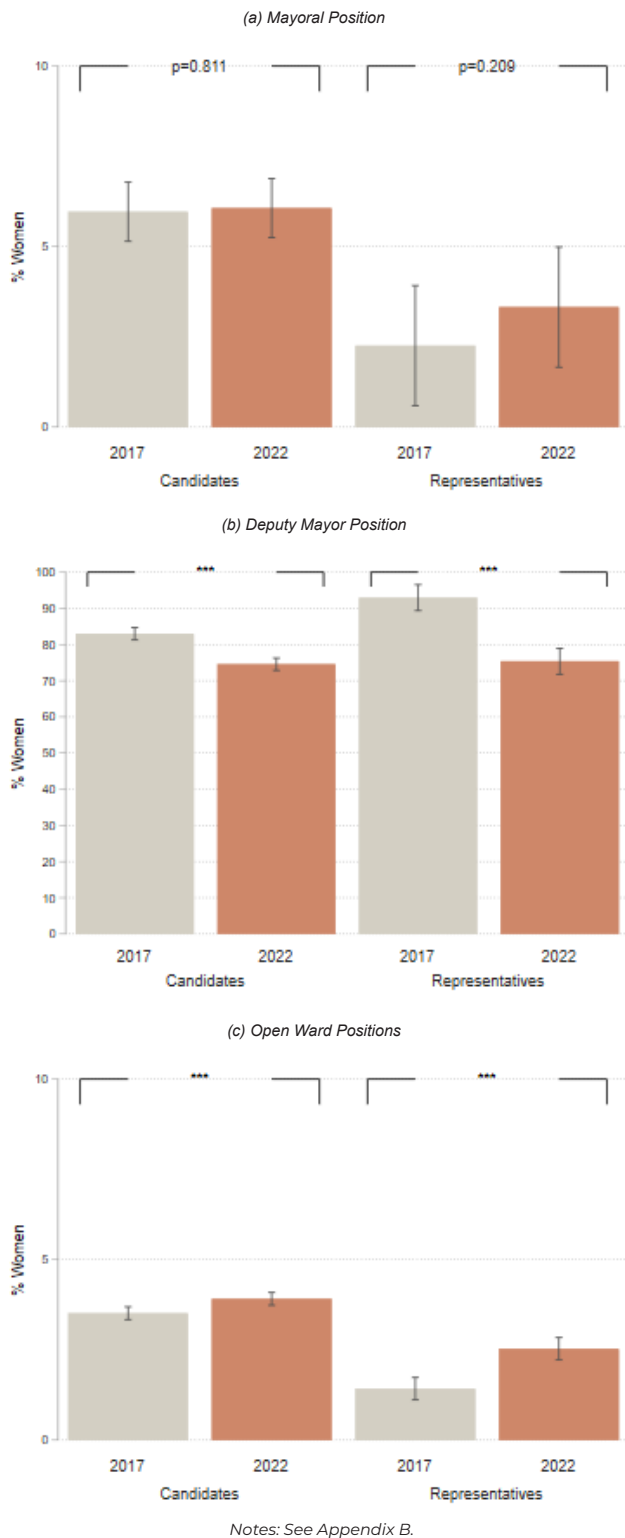
In general, fewer women ran for and were elected in 2022 than in 2017. While women are roughly 0.5 percentage point less likely to be fielded as candidates, the proportion of female representatives in municipal- and non-quota protected ward-positions fell by one percentage point on average in 2022 compared to 2017.

While the share of female deputy mayors fell by almost 20 percentage points, the share of female ward members in unreserved seats rose by more than 1 percentage point. The decline in female deputy mayor representation was not offset by a statistically significant increase in female mayor representation, implying that women did not leave the deputy mayor position to advance in their careers. Thus, while municipal positions became less inclusive of women in 2022, ward positions became more inclusive, indicating that women's representation is more attainable in ward-level (non-leadership) positions. In appendix A1, we further show that these results are robust to the inclusion of a variety of controls.

Why did women's representation in Nepal's 2022 elections decline? Figure 2 depicts the difference in recontestation, reelection, upward contestation, and dropout rates for representatives in 2017. The recontestation rate is the proportion of 2017 representatives who ran for the same position again in 2022. The reelection rate is the proportion of representatives elected in 2017 who were re-elected in 2022. The share of 2017 representatives who competed for a higher ranking position in 2022 is referred to as the upward-contestation rate.

The dropout rate is the proportion of 2017 representatives who did not run for any position in 2022. We also estimate the gender gap in the new entrant rate, or the proportion of 2022 candidates who did not compete for any position in 2017. A positive value indicates that women have a higher rate than men.

Figure 2: *Recontestation, Upward Mobility, Drop-Outs and New Entrants*

Notes: See Appendix B.
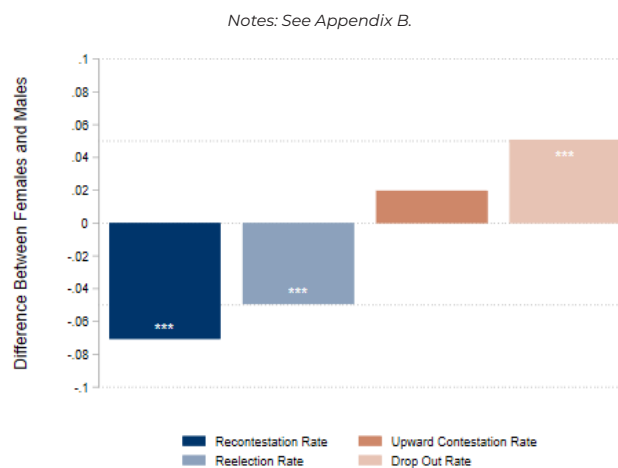
Multiple forces interact to explain women's lower representation in 2022: women were significantly less likely than men to recontest and be reelected to the positions they sought in 2017 and were more likely to drop out of politics entirely in 2022. Furthermore, women were significantly less likely

than men to enter politics in 2022. All of these factors work together to explain the decline in female representation shown in Figure 1. The magnitude of these gender disparities is significant: women were 7% less likely than men to recontest in 2022. Women were also 5% more likely than men to leave politics, with 82% of 2017 female candidates leaving politics after one term.

Women's political representation fell in 2022, despite: multiple attempts to increase women's representation through deliberate and targeted policy interventions, such as the requirement that 33% of candidate selection committees be women, the Congress party adopting guidance that at least one out of every three names discussed for every party ticket should be a woman, and a recently enacted term limit for mayors. In addition, surveys suggest growing trust of voters in female leaders and ambitions of female deputy mayors to progress in their careers (almost 50% of deputy mayors got more votes than the mayor in the respective municipality in the 2017 local level elections).

What are the barriers to women's political ambitions and representation? The significantly greater decline in women's representation compared to women's candidacy suggests that either women ran in places where they were more likely to lose, or voters were less likely to elect women in 2022. Did party coalitions play a role in the decline in female deputy mayor representation? Understanding the reasons for women's political dropout and failure to re-run will ensure the success of policies aimed at making Nepal's political institutions more gender inclusive.

by Rohini Pande, Henry J. Heinz II Professor of Economics and Director of the Economic Growth Center, Yale University

Michael Callen, Associate Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science

Soledad Artiz Prillaman, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stanford University

Stefano Fiorin, Assistant Professor, Ettore Bocconi Department of Economics, Bocconi University

Binod Paudel, Governance and Research Fellow, Inclusion Economics Nepal

Sarah Danner, Postgraduate Associate at the Economic Growth Center, Yale University

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APPENDIX
A Figures

Figure A1: *Gender Composition of Candidates and Representatives Across 2017 and 2022 Local Level Election Rounds*

(a) Mayoral Position

(b) Deputy Mayor Position

(c) Open Ward Positions
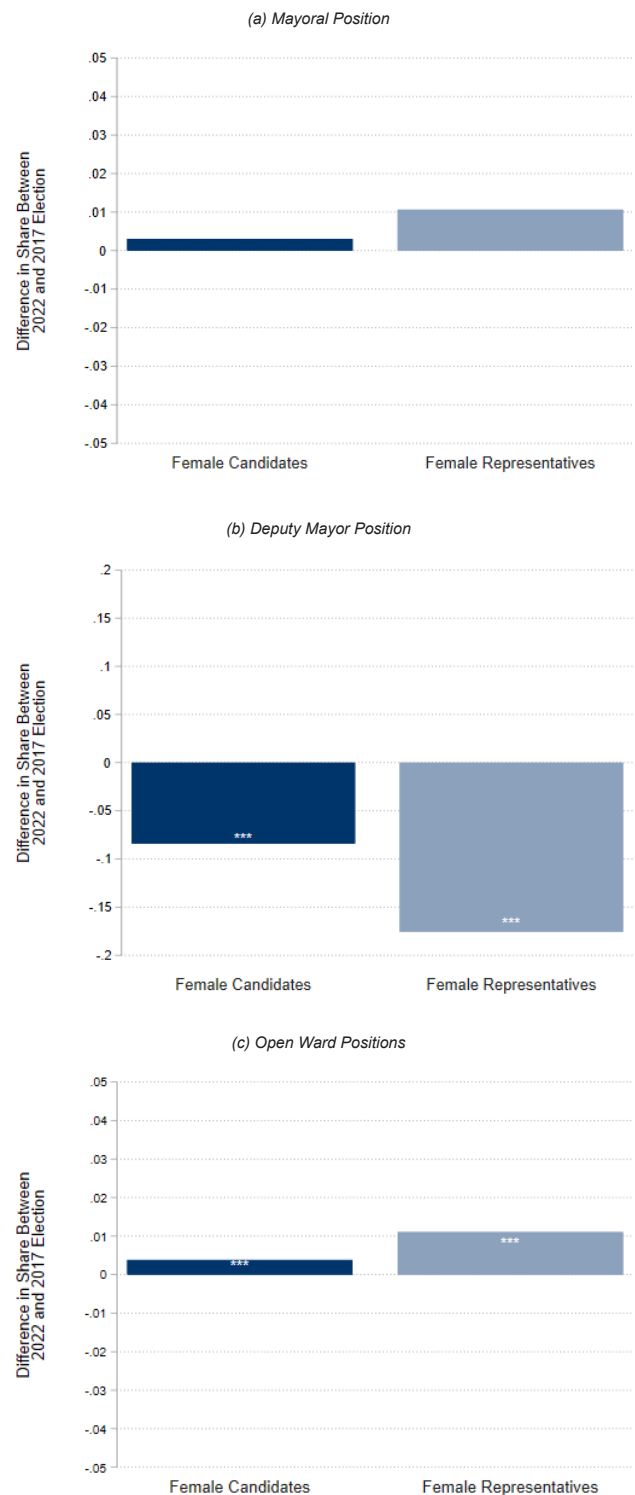
Notes: See Appendix B.

B Statistical Details

Figure 1 Notes: Our sample is the universe of all candidates/representatives in the 2017 (beige set of bars) and 2022 (orange set of bars) local level elections in Nepal. We look at municipal-level positions (mayor and deputy mayor) and non-quota protected ward-level positions (ward chair and open seats). Mayor refers to mayors in urban municipalities as well as chairmen in rural municipalities. Deputy Mayor refers to deputy mayors in urban municipalities as well as vice chairmen in rural municipalities. Open Ward Positions comprises non-quota protected open seats at the ward-level (ward chair and open ward seats). We plot the share of females and the confidence bars represent the standard errors from a simple mean comparison of gender and election round. The stars represent the level of significance. Levels of significance: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Figure 2 Notes: Our sample is the universe of all representatives in the 2017 local level election in Nepal. We look at municipal-level positions (mayor and deputy mayor) and non-quota protected ward-level positions (ward chair and open seats). Recontestation is a dummy that equals 1 if the 2017 representative is re-running for the same position in 2022 as in 2017, 0 otherwise. Reelection is a dummy that equals 1 if the 2017 representative is re-running for the same position in 2022 as in 2017 and being re-elected in 2022, 0 otherwise. Upward mobility is a dummy that equals 1 if the 2017 representative is re-running for a different position in 2022 as in 2017, 0 otherwise. Drop-out is a dummy that equals 1 if the 2017 representative does not contest in the 2022 election, 0 otherwise. The bars represent coefficients from regressing the respective indicator (recontestation, re-election, upward mobility or dropping-out) on an indicator for the gender, including controls for whether the municipality is urban or rural, district fixed effects and heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. The stars represent the level of significance. Levels of significance: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01. We repeat this exercise with the universe of all candidates in the 2022 local level election in Nepal to examine the gender composition among newcomers (not displayed in the figure but cited in the text). Newcomer is a dummy that equals 1 if the 2022 candidate does not contest in the 2017 election, 0 otherwise.

Figure A1 Notes: Our sample is the universe of all candidates/representatives in the 2017 and 2022 local level elections in Nepal. We look at municipal-level positions (mayor and deputy mayor) and non-quota protected ward-level positions (ward chair and open seats). Mayor refers to mayors in urban municipalities as well as chairmen in rural municipalities. Deputy Mayor refers to deputy mayors in urban municipalities as well as vice chairmen in rural municipalities. Open Ward Positions comprises non-quota protected ward-level positions (ward chair and open seats). The bars represent coefficients from regressing an indicator for the gender of the candidate/representative on the election round in the respective position (ie. plotting the difference in the share of female/male representatives/candidates in the 2022 election round compared to 2017), including controls for whether the municipality is urban or rural, district fixed effects and heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. The stars represent the level of significance. Levels of significance: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.