

FROM SYMBOLIC INCLUSION TO SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL ROLES IN UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

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Abstract

India's record on women in politics tells two very different stories at once. On paper, the commitments are real — constitutional equality, liberty, grassroots reservations, a legal architecture built on inclusion. In practice, women remain a marginal presence in state and national legislatures. The promises and the reality have never quite met. This paper examines the dialectic of change and continuity in women's political roles and responsibilities in Uttar Pradesh (UP) — India's most populous and politically consequential state. This study draws on Election Commission data, UP legislative records stretching back to 1952, NFHS-V findings, and existing scholarship to trace how women's political participation has — and hasn't — evolved over seven decades: from token presence toward something closer to real agency, where that shift has happened at all.

The paper argues that symbolic inclusion — visible in the increasing number of women candidates and elected representatives — must be distinguished from substantive representation, which demands policy autonomy, leadership authority, and freedom from proxy politics. In UP, patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and the quiet gatekeeping that happens inside party offices continue to do the work that no law has yet undone. Political experiences in UP are analysed through the overlap of gender, caste, and class. The paper closes with concrete recommendations for what might actually change things.

Key-words: Gender and Politics; Panchayati Raj; Substantive Representation; Uttar Pradesh; Women's Political Representation; Women's Reservation Act.

1. Introduction

Uttar Pradesh is not a small footnote in Indian democracy. With over 240 million people and 80 Lok Sabha seats, what happens here shapes the country. The political fortunes of national parties are often decided in UP, making it the epicentre of electoral strategy, caste mobilisation, and governance debates. Yet, women — who constitute nearly half of the state's electorate — continue to occupy a marginal position in its political architecture.

The question of women's political representation in India is not new. The gap between what the Constitution promises and what actually happens to women in Indian politics has been there since independence. But the passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023 has given that old conversation new urgency. The Act promises 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies — a provision that, once implemented, would dramatically alter the composition of legislatures, including UP's Vidhan Sabha.

This paper asks the harder question: when women enter formal political institutions, do they actually gain the power to shape policy in women's interests — or are they largely there for appearances, present in number but marginal in influence? That distinction, between symbolic inclusion and substantive representation, is what this paper sets out to examine.

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How has women's electoral participation evolved in Uttar Pradesh from 1952 to 2024? (2) What structural barriers continue to limit women's political agency in the state? (3) What policy interventions can bridge the gap between symbolic inclusion and substantive representation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Symbolic vs. Substantive Representation

The theoretical foundation of this paper rests on Hanna Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the presence of women in political bodies as a demographic mirror of society; substantive representation refers to acting for

women — championing their interests, needs, and priorities in legislative deliberations. Pitkin argued that the two forms are analytically separable: a woman in office does not automatically act on behalf of women, and men may, in principle, advance women's interests.

Anne Phillips (1995) pushed the conversation further by asking whether it matters who is actually in the room. Her answer was affirmative — but with caveats. There are things one understands differently when lived. A male representative, however well-intentioned, is working from the outside in. That tension — between being there and acting for — sits at the centre of any honest evaluation of women in politics.

Later scholars complicated this further. Childs and Krook (2009) introduced the idea of critical actors — women who actively champion other women's interests even when vastly outnumbered. Celis and Childs (2012) argued that representation is not confined to legislatures but happens in civil society organisations, local governance bodies, and advocacy networks. In India especially, where informal power often erodes formal progress, that wider view is necessary.

2.2 Reservations, Local Governance, and the Limits of Formal Inclusion

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), reserving a third of Panchayati Raj seats for women, created a natural experiment in gender quotas. Buch's (2010) research in UP found real improvements where reservations took hold — more investment in welfare schemes, better attention to water and sanitation, and more responsive handling of domestic violence.

However, Pai (2013) cautioned against overestimating these gains, drawing attention to the Pradhan Pati syndrome — wherein husbands or male relatives exercise de facto administrative power on behalf of elected women leaders. Basu (1992) and Jayal (2006) have documented similar patterns across other Indian states, suggesting that institutional design alone cannot overcome entrenched patriarchal norms.

2.3 Women's Political Participation in Uttar Pradesh: Gender, Caste, and Class

Research on UP highlights the intersection of gender with caste and class. Jaffrelot and Kumar (2012) demonstrate that gatekeeping happens long before election day, and the women who do get through more often carry a famous surname. Chandra (2004) adds that in UP, caste shapes which women get a chance: Dalit and OBC women face a double burden of gender and caste disadvantage.

Thachil (2014) noted that the BJP's political mobilisation in UP has strategically incorporated women as voters and symbolic candidates without significantly expanding their decision-making authority within the party organisation or government.

2.4 The Post-2017 Context: Rhetoric, Symbolism, and Structural Exclusion

The post-2017 Yogi Adityanath era has produced a contradictory dynamic. The BJP government has intensified invocation of women's safety and dignity — drawing on slogans such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* — while positioning women as vulnerable beneficiaries of protective governance. Menon (2012) has argued that such discursive strategies can simultaneously elevate women's symbolic visibility while reinforcing paternalistic norms. Meanwhile, advancement of women within the BJP's organisational hierarchy has remained limited.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design, drawing primarily upon secondary sources. Data on women's electoral participation — including voter turnout, number of candidates, and election results — were sourced from the Election Commission of India (ECI) statistical reports covering the UP Vidhan Sabha elections from 1952 to 2022 and the Lok Sabha elections from 1952 to 2024.

Socio-economic indicators contextualising women's political position were drawn from Census 2011, Census 2021 provisional data, and NFHS-V (2019–21). The research also draws on a systematic review of peer-reviewed scholarship on gender and politics in UP and across India. Throughout, the analysis holds gender, caste, and class together rather than treating them separately.

4. Women's Political Participation in UP: Patterns of Change

4.1 Electoral Participation as Voters

One of the most significant shifts in UP politics has been the narrowing of the gender gap in voter turnout. In the 2017 UP Vidhan Sabha elections, female voter turnout stood at 61.37 per cent, compared to 62.48 per cent for men — a near parity that contrasted sharply with the 20-percentage-point gap recorded in the 1960s. By the 2022 Vidhan Sabha elections, women's turnout further increased to approximately 62.5 per cent. This transformation reflects improvements in women's literacy, increased political awareness, and deliberate mobilisation by political parties.

4.2 Women as Candidates and Elected Representatives

In the 2022 UP Vidhan Sabha elections, just 469 of the 4,442 candidates were women. Of those, 47 won seats in a 403-member assembly — a little over one in ten legislators. While this figure is higher than the 1952 figure of approximately 4 per cent, the pace of change has been gradual and uneven.

Table 1: Women's Representation in UP Vidhan Sabha (Selected Years)

Election Year	Total Seats	Women Elected	Percentage (%)
1952	430	18	4.2
1967	425	21	4.9
1985	425	28	6.6
2002	403	25	6.2
2012	403	36	8.9
2017	403	40	9.9
2022	403	47	11.7

Source: Election Commission of India (various years)

The data shows a pattern of incremental progress with persistent underrepresentation. Despite decades of electoral democracy, women have never held more than 12 per cent of seats in the UP Vidhan Sabha — far below the global average of 26 per cent (IPU, 2024).

4.3 Women in Local Governance: Panchayati Raj

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandated 33 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. As of 2021, women held approximately 34 per cent of gram panchayat pradhan positions in UP — a significant numerical achievement. However, the substantive impact of this representation remains contested. The 'Pradhan Pati' phenomenon — wherein husbands or male relatives exercise administrative control on behalf of elected women — remains a widespread practice, particularly in rural UP.

5. Structural Barriers: Continuity Amid Change

5.1 Patriarchal Norms and Social Constraints

Uttar Pradesh registers some of India's most adverse gender indicators. According to NFHS-V (2019–21), only 59.3 per cent of women in UP are literate, compared to 79.8 per cent of men. Female labour force participation stands at approximately 18 per cent — well below the national average. These socio-economic disparities directly constrain women's political participation by limiting their access to resources, networks, and public legitimacy.

5.2 Caste-Based Political Hierarchies

In UP's caste-saturated political environment, women's political opportunities are mediated by their caste identity. Upper-caste women from politically powerful families have historically had greater

access to party tickets and elected positions. Dalit and OBC women, despite constitutional protections, face compounded discrimination rooted in both caste and gender.

5.3 Party-Level Gatekeeping

In the 2022 elections, women made up barely 10 per cent of candidates fielded by the BJP, SP, BSP, and Congress combined. Selection processes still run on money, caste networks, and unspoken assumptions that favour men. By the time election day arrives, the outcome is already half-decided.

6. The Women's Reservation Act 2023: Promise and Limitations

The passage of the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 — reserving 33 per cent of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women — represents the most significant legislative development since the 73rd Amendment. For UP's 403-seat Vidhan Sabha, implementation would mean at least 134 seats reserved for women — a transformative change from the current 47 women MLAs.

However, the Act's impact is conditional on the completion of a fresh delimitation exercise and a fresh Census, both yet to be conducted as of 2025. This effectively delays implementation by several years, potentially until 2029 or 2034. Furthermore, the Act does not provide for sub-reservation for OBC women — a significant lacuna given the demographic composition of UP.

7. From Symbolic to Substantive: Policy Recommendations

First, the swift implementation of the Women's Reservation Act 2023 with a clear legislative timeline is essential. The government should prioritise completing the delimitation exercise to enable the Act's implementation at the earliest opportunity.

Second, anti-proxy legislation should be enacted at the state level to penalise the 'Pradhan Pati' phenomenon. Elected women representatives should be legally empowered to serve as sole signatories and to exercise administrative autonomy.

Third, a third of all winnable seats in elections should be reserved for women candidates, accompanied by reforms to internal party democracy to reduce elite gatekeeping. The Election Commission of India should make this a precondition for state funding of political parties.

Fourth, capacity-building programmes for elected women representatives — covering budget literacy, policy advocacy, and leadership development — should be institutionalised through the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) in UP.

Fifth, investments in girls' education, women's economic empowerment, and gender-sensitive infrastructure continue to be critical in widening the pool of women who are able and willing to engage in formal politics.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the trajectory of women's political participation in Uttar Pradesh through the analytical lens of symbolic inclusion versus substantive representation. The trend establishes incremental transformation in voter behaviour, candidate representation, and elected representatives, juxtaposed with structural continuity reflecting patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and party gatekeeping.

The increased number of women in politics in UP alone does not lead to political empowerment. Substantive representation demands that women exercise genuine political agency — shaping policy, leading institutions, and challenging structural inequalities — rather than serving as symbolic tokens in male-dominated political systems. The Women's Reservation Act 2023, while a landmark legislative achievement, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for this transformation.

Getting women truly into UP's political life won't happen through one fix. It needs laws that actually hold, parties that are genuinely accountable, real investment in women's economic lives, and a slower, harder shift in how politics thinks about gender. Together, they might finally bring India's most populous state closer to the equality its Constitution promised.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the research paper titled “From Symbolic Inclusion to Substantive Representation: Change and Continuity in Women’s Political Roles in Uttar Pradesh, India” is my original work and has not been published or submitted anywhere else. I take full responsibility for the content of this paper.

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