Title: Unpacking the effects of ethnic quotas on the political inclusion of disadvantaged ethnic groups in local governance councils

While the UN Sustainable Development Goals set targets to promote political inclusion and empowerment for ethnic minorities and to ensure that disadvantaged populations have improved access to basic services by 2030, little is known about real-world policies that can help to achieve these important targets. One prescription that has gained relevance in recent decades is the use of reserved seats—quota systems that mandate representation of minority ethnic groups in local governance institutions. India has undertaken such a reform, mandating increased representation of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (state-recognized disadvantaged minority groups) on the councils of Gram Panchayats, or local village councils responsible for the administration of key public goods. However, little is yet known about the effects of reforms like these on the political inclusion of disadvantaged ethnic minorities. I use data from a large-scale representative survey in India, focusing on two states in which reserved seats were randomly assigned to villages, in order to estimate the effects of the quota system on public goods targeting and political inclusion for minority households by comparing them to a counterfactual group of similar households in similar villages without the quota system. I first replicate and expand upon previous work showing that scheduled caste and scheduled tribe households see negligible public good benefits from living in a village where the position of the village council head is reserved for scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. Next, I show that members of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe households are less likely to attend village council meetings if their ethnic group has a reserved seat on the council. This is because village council meetings are a venue in which disadvantaged groups voice demands to council members, and enhanced representation might make this costly form of participation seem less crucial. Taken together, these findings suggest that quota systems may sometimes undermine the political inclusion of disadvantaged ethnic groups without delivering tangible benefits to those groups. More generally, the design of more equitable institutions requires a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between the behavior of disadvantaged minorities and the local governance contexts in which they operate.