

# Politicians Help Citizens Access Justice: Evidence from India\*

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## Abstract

Can local politicians help citizens access justice? To answer this question, I build on the literatures on legislature size and constituency service. Politicians facilitate access to justice as a form of ‘constituency service’ – which is stronger when politicians manage smaller constituencies and have additional representatives from non-dominant groups. To test this theory, I turn to village councils (*Gram Panchayats*) in India and examine whether adding additional elected members to councils facilitates their constituents’ access to the formal legal system. I leverage population-based discontinuities in council size and an original dataset on court cases filed by litigants from over 40,000 villages over 8 years to examine the causal effect of council size on access to justice. I find that citizens who live in village councils with additional members file a larger number of cases in courts, driven by an increase in registered crime. This is made possible because larger councils increase descriptive representation of members from non-dominant groups, allowing for a diverse group of constituents to approach council members for assistance, and further, overcome barriers to access justice. By highlighting the key role played by council members, I deepen our understanding of how citizens in developing countries access the formal legal system.

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# 1 Introduction

Access to justice is central to protecting people’s rights and contributes to social stability. When people have confidence that their disputes will be resolved, it prevents conflicts from escalating into violence and other forms of unrest. However, developing countries are characterized by low state capacity and weak legal institutions; courts are slow, understaffed, and located very far from rural areas. Importantly, people may not know when or how to approach official authorities. Under what conditions can elected politicians help rural litigants in weak states overcome these constraints?

There is a rich literature across legal studies, sociology and political science that has discussed the role of communities and village-level authorities in dispute resolution ([Galanter 1981](#); [Baldwin and Ricart-Huguet 2023](#); [Ellickson 1994](#)). When experiencing a dispute, resolutions can be achieved through mediation by a third party ([Sarat and Grossman 1975](#)). Across several countries in the Global South, parties approach the most proximate state representative who can assist them—often an elected politician. The politician can engage in informal dispute resolution, obviating the need to approach formal legal authorities.

However, when faced with serious crimes and violent cases, the ability of these authorities to informally adjudicate disputes breaks down substantially, since mediation and resolution through such informal means is largely unenforceable ([Sternlight 2007](#)). Lack of information, geographic barriers and economic constraints make it difficult for individuals to access courts and the police. Even on overcoming these barriers, corruption in the law enforcement system can prevent cases from being registered.

In this paper, I discuss an additional pathway through which politicians can facilitate access to justice that can enhance the rule of law: by helping aggrieved citizens approach the formal legal system. Rather than resolving disputes themselves, elected members can affect behaviors pertaining to both the reporting and recording<sup>1</sup> of legal violations by the state. Given that elected members are ambitious, want to maintain a good reputation and face competitive elections, they have strong incentives to offer help and assistance to their constituents—and

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<sup>1</sup>Reporting involves approaching the authorities; recording involves the registration of the dispute by the authorities.

thus facilitate access to justice as a form of constituency service. Helping constituents access courts and law enforcement agencies not only reinforces their power and influence but also offers an opportunity for credit-claiming at the time of elections. On the other hand, citizens approaching elected politicians for help with disputes are engaging in forms of claim-making—the everyday strategies through which citizens pursue rights fulfillment (Kruks-Wisner 2018).

Answering whether and when politicians engage in this type of work is challenging.<sup>2</sup> While qualitative and anthropological work has noted the role of village leaders in informal dispute resolution across diverse settings, like South Africa (Van Der Waal 2004), Indonesia (Just 2001) and India (Galanter 1981), they have not examined the role played by elected members in helping constituents approach and access the formal legal system. Further, it can be difficult to causally attribute the influence of elected politicians in this process since a number of factors could affect whether a dispute reaches the courts—like the litigant’s characteristics, presence of legal aid clinics, and distance to the legal institutions, among others.

I address these challenges in this paper by proposing a novel theory on whether and how elected council members can facilitate access to justice, by focusing on the size of the council. I argue that expanding the size of the councils adds additional members which leads to greater ‘mobilization of law’. Legal mobilization is simply how a judicial system acquires its cases (Black 1973), and politicians can help constituents approach legal authorities by directly providing information on how to file a case, along with economic and logistical support. Such assistance is crucial as it provides self-confidence to would-be litigants to approach the state, and further makes law enforcement agencies responsive to the concerns of the aggrieved party. Additional politicians in larger councils can increase such assistance because they can include a greater number of members from non-dominant groups. Thus, additional council members would choose to route criminal cases through the formal legal system.

Once individuals approach the council member, the council members can mediate and engage in dispute resolution directly by counselling parties by playing an informal, quasi-judicial

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<sup>2</sup>While one can simply survey citizens to ask this question, the share of citizens who actually experience disputes is quite small. Thus, finding respondents who can credibly attest to this behavior is difficult.

role, or help aggrieved parties approach the formal law enforcement system and register their complaints. I argue that the form of assistance provided by the council member depends on the *type* of dispute. While both the elected and legal institutions can help mediate and resolve civil disputes, criminal cases are difficult to dispense by elected institutions without systematic investigation and resources, which are best carried out by formal legal authorities.

Political bodies can be elected at the national or state level, and prior studies have looked at the effects of larger ‘legislature size’ on fiscal spending (Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981; De Santo and Le Maux 2023; Chen and Malhotra 2007; Hirota and Yunoue 2012; Egger and Koethenbuerger 2010; Baqir 2002)—outcomes associated with a budgetary function. Politicians could also be elected at the level of a local government—in cities, villages or counties—to form local councils. Studies have looked at the effect of council size on public spending (Hömann 2017; Lewis 2019; Pettersson-Lidbom 2012; De Benedetto 2018), public goods and services (Mignozzetti, Cepaluni, and Freire 2024; Lewis 2019; Plous Kresch et al. 2020) and quality of government and representation (Brooks, Phillips, and Sinitsyn 2011; Lyytikäinen and Tukiainen 2019; Bergh, Fink, and Öhrvall 2017; Britto and Fiorin 2016)—outcomes associated with local spending and development.

While prior evidence on the effects of larger councils offers mixed results when considering local outcomes, this paper is the first to systematically study the effects of a larger council on a particular form of constituency service — facilitating access to justice. To empirically isolate the role of politicians in facilitating access to justice, I focus on the number of politicians assigned to a village-level body or “council size.” Since a larger body (with a greater number of elected members) increases the ‘capacity of a body to perform its designated function, i.e., to represent’ (Gerring and Veenendaal 2020), increasing the size of the elected body adds additional resources to provide constituency service.

The main empirical challenges in evaluating the effect of a larger council on access to justice is that council size is endogenous, typically based on population. Larger councils may be reporting a greater number of cases, simply due to an increase in population or other omitted variables. Places with larger populations may be more urban, densely populated and closer to the state’s legal institutions which makes it difficult to estimate the causal effect of council

size on access to justice, since these related characteristics can also increase the number of case filings.

I address these challenges by leveraging a regression discontinuity design as applied to newly-collected fine-grained data on legal access. My empirical approach takes advantage of a unique rule in Maharashtra, a large state in western India, that assigns two additional council members at population-based cutoffs to a village council, forming a source of exogenous variation in council size. Maharashtra has a population of over 112 million people and is about the size of Mexico. Much like the rest of the country, local government in Maharashtra exists at the village, sub-district and district levels, and this paper focuses on village councils. While the official mandate of village councils involves the provision of public goods and services,<sup>3</sup> council members play a crucial role as street-level agents of the state by coordinating with the police, enforcing official policies and adjudicating disputes ([Goyal, Van Noort, and Ahrenshop 2022](#)). I collect and assemble an original dataset of millions of cases registered at each court in Maharashtra between 2015 and 2022, and augment these data by assembling datasets on election timing, election candidates, election winners and census information to analyze the main results. Finally, I conduct interviews to contextualize the role played by council members and turn to survey data to study downstream consequences.

I find that villages with larger councils almost double the number of cases registered with the formal justice system: from 0.7 cases filed each year to 1.5 cases filed each year. Consistent with the theory, which suggested that the effect is most pronounced for criminal cases that cannot be resolved locally, I find that the number of criminal cases filed from villages with larger councils increases by 50%, but do not find evidence that larger councils increase the registration of civil disputes.

I build on two sets of qualitative interviews with council members to provide further evidence. First, I collect 19 informational interviews conducted with council members in Maharashtra, focusing on the role they play in village-level dispute resolution and access to justice.<sup>4</sup> Second, I coded detailed field notes collected by research assistants from shadowing political elites

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<sup>3</sup>see Chapter 3, Bohlken ([2016](#)) for a description of local politics in India

<sup>4</sup>Interviews were conducted in summer 2025, over the phone, by the team at Across India.

(Bussell 2020b): specifically, the village council heads (Bussell 2020a). While the first set of interviews confirms that council members help facilitate access to justice for hypothetical serious crimes that take place in their village, the second set of notes provides actual evidence of these instances: out of 14 politicians shadowed over 3 days, 6 report visiting the police station for various reasons, the chief among which is to help constituents file complaints.

Next, I evaluate the drivers of the main effect by looking at the effects on representation using intermediate outcome tests (Blackwell, Ma, and Opacic 2024), and find that villages with larger-sized councils elect more council members who are women, members of marginalized groups, and females from marginalized groups, an outcome partly driven by affirmative action policies. Importantly, the treatment increases cases filed by women, however I do not find an increase in case filings that concern crimes against women, suggesting that gender norms may still dominate. This evidence confirms the main mechanism—that the increase in access to justice is driven by an increase in members from non-dominant groups.

I evaluate downstream consequences of my theory, to test whether a larger sized-council improves perceptions of political capacity. While similar data are not available to conduct tests for all villages analyzed, I leverage a difference-in-differences design as applied to survey data with over 5,000 respondents from 17 villages who rate the quality of elected councils during two periods. While all villages grew in population between the two periods, six villages crossed a population threshold that assigned them additional council members. I demonstrate that respondents who received the additional council members had better evaluations of their capacity based on a number of dimensions, including their ability to address disputes.

This paper makes three important contributions. First, I propose and test a novel theory on the role played by council members in facilitating access to justice and legal mobilization (Black 1973). While earlier work has focused on village-level dispute resolution through different local actors, my work shows that local elected representatives can perform an additional task—help with access to formal legal systems—in addition to engaging in informal dispute resolution. The findings underscore the importance of dispute resolution institutions that shapes behaviors in weak states (Blattman, Hartman, and Blair 2014; Brulé 2020). I also show that local authorities need not undermine the rule of law by highlighting how

non-adjudicative institutions (elected village councils) facilitate access to formal adjudicative institutions (courts) ([Sarat and Grossman 1975](#)).

Second, I contribute to the literature on political decentralization by looking at how a specific factor of institutional design (council size) affects local-level outcomes. Previous literature has looked at the effects of legislature size on budgets, development and public services ([Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981](#); [Chen and Malhotra 2007](#); [Höhmnn 2017](#); [Pettersson-Lidbom 2012](#); [Lewis 2019](#); [Mignozzetti, Cepaluni, and Freire 2024](#)), and I extend this literature by examining effects of council size on a form of constituency service, and particularly, how it can help citizens make claims on the state ([Gallagher, Kruks-Wisner, and Taylor 2024](#)).

A number of studies have looked at the role played by village councils as local intermediaries, shaping the allocation of benefits ([Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004](#); [Dunning and Nilekani 2013](#); [Besley et al. 2004](#); [Besley, Pande, and Rao 2012](#)), access to the state and its resources ([Bussell 2019](#); [Kruks-Wisner 2018](#)) and their contribution to democratic processes ([Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005](#); [Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2019](#)). I make an empirical contributions that allows scholars to test these phenomenon—by introducing and leveraging a unique regression discontinuity design to estimate causal effects. A similar empirical strategy can be leveraged across several Indian states, to study a range of political and economic outcomes. Finally, drawing on a newly assembled village-level dataset encompassing the full universe of cases filed in the lower courts of the Indian judiciary, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that examines the dynamic interplay between law and society at the grassroots level in India ([J. K. Krishnan et al. 2014](#); [Kokal 2019](#); [Galanter and Dhavan 1989](#); [Goyal, Van Noort, and Ahrenshop 2022](#)).

## 2 Theoretical Expectations

In this section, I review concepts of legal mobilization and access to justice and introduce a theoretical framework on how local politicians can facilitate the mobilization of law. My main argument is that local politicians assist their constituents who are involved in disputes to access to justice system, and increasing the size of the village council provides additional

people to carry out this work. In studying village councils, I focus on politicians serving in local governments in rural areas, at a level lower than states, regions or provinces, representing the “bottom tier” of decentralized governance ([Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006](#)).<sup>5</sup>

How can increasing the size of the local council affect cases filed from a village? The assistance of a council member is crucial for the aggrieved party since council members provide litigants with information on how to register complaints with the police and courts. The support and presence of a village council member can make law enforcement agencies responsive to the aggrieved party and ensure that complaints are registered and not ignored, since they are more likely to have established relationships with state authorities and deter negligence. This gives confidence to individuals to approach authorities with complaints. A larger council increases the number of politicians who are available to assist their constituents through this process, as they perform this function as a form of constituency service. This effect can be achieved if larger councils increase the representation of non-dominant groups, allowing for a more diverse set of constituents to approach council members for help.

## 2.1 Access to Justice & Legal Mobilization

Access to justice is fundamental to the protection of human rights and has been linked to social stability and economic development. Scholars typically use behavioral measures to conceptualize access to justice, and I focus here on the very first step of accessing justice through the process of legal mobilization.

Legal mobilization is simply “the process by which a legal system acquires its cases” ([Black 1973](#)). Sarat and Grossman ([1975](#)) provide a related definition: legal mobilization is the process through which adjudicative institutions (like courts) become involved in the definition,

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<sup>5</sup>Countries from a variety of contexts transitioned to consistent form of decentralized governance at the local level—during transition from a dictatorship to democracy (as in Brazil and Indonesia), countries that remained democracies during the transition (Bolivia and India) and countries used decentralization as a way to consolidate power (Uganda) ([Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006](#)). These distinctions help us understand the scope of the theoretical expectations: legal mobilization through local politicians is plausible in contexts wherein there is considerable autonomy and a real devolution of power to local authorities, which is most likely when the higher level politicians have been democratically elected. It is less likely to obtain in contexts where local actors are appointed, or where the goal of decentralization is power consolidation or legitimizing non-democratic political power.



interpretation and management of conflict. Scholars have long considered the demand-side and supply-side barriers that affect legal mobilization through courts, given the range of conflict management resources available in society ([Sarat and Grossman 1975](#)). From the demand side, most initial claims will not go to trial, and multiple intersecting social identities of litigants shape whether and how individuals seek access to justice ([Sandefur 2008](#)). Histories of disputes show a pyramid-shaped dispute processing and resolution, wherein the actions go through behavioral filters through each process— from making a claim, consulting a lawyer, filing a lawsuit, attempting a settlement and taking the lawsuit to trial ([Genn 1999](#)). Eventually only a fraction of all disputes end up as cases in the formal legal system. The situation is particularly difficult for rural litigants, who face many obstacles to getting their legal needs met.

On the supply side, the absence of lawyers ([Pruitt and Showman 2014](#)) and physical barriers like travel times and distance from courts ([J. K. Krishnan et al. 2014](#); [A. Hoffman and Strezhnev 2023](#)) can determine legal access. Legal institutions may facilitate or impede groups from realizing their justice goals due to the complexity of legal procedure, which increases the importance of gatekeepers like lawyers and clerks. For instance, the availability of legal services and representation forms an important determinant of outcomes for litigants ([Cassidy and Currie 2023](#)).

Thus, legal mobilization is shaped by both demand and supply-side dynamics. In the following section, I discuss how elected members of village councils can play a crucial role in shaping the demand for justice.

## **2.2 Politicians and Legal Mobilization**

The knowledge that a state has about possible violations primarily comes from citizen informants. For civil cases, this happens when the aggrieved party files a lawsuit; in criminal cases, this can happen when the victim approaches the police to register a complaint. When citizens are not aware that legal rights are violated, a state does not register any violations. At this stage, local politicians can help facilitate access to justice by providing information

and assistance about the steps individuals can take when rights may be violated.<sup>6</sup>

As discussed earlier, not all disputes end up being formally pursued—disputes begin as grievances, and people can respond by doing nothing about them, or making a claim (Miller and Sarat 1981). This forms a ‘dispute pyramid’—wherein not all grievances end up becoming disputes, and the role of local politicians can be highlighted in how parties progress through the various steps of formalizing the dispute.

Parties involved in civil disputes can approach elected council members for advice on the course of actions to pursue, and depending on the nature of dispute, request them to serve as adjudicators. The nature of the council member’s intervention can vary depending on the types of disputes. For example, if the dispute concerns inheritance, the council member can first try to mediate the dispute. If any of the parties are unsatisfied with the outcome, they may approach the formal legal system. If the dispute concerns matrimonial issues requiring a divorce, a legal separation can only be pursued through the formal system. In such cases, the role of the council member may be only limited to providing information like how to hire lawyers to approach the courts.

A council member’s role in criminal cases is more pronounced. A victim first decides whether to report the issue. If a victim decides to report, the police can decide whether to record the crime or not. The state can only pursue an investigation once both these steps are realized.

Politicians can affect the behaviors of the aggrieved party by shaping outcomes at the reporting and recording stages. First, victims can be encouraged to report the crime, both directly and indirectly. Politicians can directly influence reporting by providing information and advice on how to report. Further, they can indirectly influence reporting through a symbolic effect: simply seeing marginalized groups in positions of power can increase the self-confidence of victims and increase trust in institutions (Iyer and Mani 2012).

Further, politicians can affect behaviors at the recording stage. They can intervene and accompany complainants from their village to the police station, making the police more responsive to the crime and increasing the likelihood that a case gets registered. Local leaders

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<sup>6</sup>In India, female representation in local government increases reporting of crimes against women (Iyer and Mani 2012).

can be perceived to have greater power and influence than common citizens to highlight any refusal to file complaints by police officers, and thus can make the police more likely to register the crimes.

## 2.3 Dispute resolution as constituency service

Why might elected representatives intervene in disputes and help constituents register complaints? Politicians spend a large amount of time and resources responding to problems and needs of their constituency, to build strong relationships with the people they represent. Such activities come under the broad range of activities constituting constituency service, which can be defined in the context of service responsiveness: “the non-legislative services that a representative actually performs for individuals or groups in his district” (Eulau and Karps 1977; Fenno 2003).

The elected position affords the representative influence to solve particular problems within the constituency, often by serving as an intermediary between citizens and the state. By using their influence to intervene between bureaucrats and constituents, representatives can display their concern and responsiveness to the problems faced by their constituents. Such assistance is a form of representation, since political representation in this context is the action of politicians solving problems for their constituents (Pitkin 1967, 155).

Constituency service is even more crucial at the lower tiers of government, since elected representatives may not have the power to influence the *character* of policies but have the power to shape *how* they are enacted or implemented, through constituency service (Bussell 2019). A wide range of formal responsibilities are devolved to members of a village council—from decisions about discharging of government programs (Bussell 2020a) to intermediating on behalf of individuals by acting as street-level state agents (Goyal, Van Noort, and Ahrenshop 2022). Council members also aid law enforcement actors by raising awareness and compliance with social policy, like preventing child marriage and enforcing women’s inheritance (Brulé 2020; Goyal, Van Noort, and Ahrenshop 2022).

Recent work has found divergent effects of council size on public services (Lewis 2019), depending on whether individual members have homogeneous or heterogeneous preferences

regarding spending decisions. Since my outcome is based on constituency services which each politician can independently carry out, I expect that by increasing the number of council members will increase constituency service.<sup>7</sup> Helping constituents with their disputes is an avenue for constituency service—an activity wherein local politicians can claim credit and build a reputation. Such opportunities for credit-claiming can make politicians willing to help a very broad base of individuals, even beyond their own limited electoral constituencies. They can either engage in mediation and reconciliation by acting as third party adjudicators—typical of civil cases—or help aggrieved parties file official complaints with legal authorities—typical of criminal cases. This suggests the following hypothesis:

$H_1$ : Increasing council size increases access to the formal legal system.

## 2.4 Larger councils increase representation and perceptions of politicians

A larger council can improve responsiveness to constituent concerns, as each member may have a smaller constituency to manage, allowing for more personalized attention. Not all citizens are equally likely to request constituency services (Grossman and Slough 2022), and if additional council members in a large council belong to non-dominant groups, it can increase the body’s responsiveness to diverse demands due to both demand and supply dynamics.

Earlier work has shown that larger councils can be more diverse (Welch and Karnig 1979; Lyytikäinen and Tukiainen 2019; Allen and Stoll 2023), and more representative of the constituents (Schraufnagel and Bingle 2015). As constituency size decreases, each politician need fewer votes to win, that decreases the electoral cost of winning an election, since the campaign may require less fundraising, lowering the barriers for entry. This might increase the likelihood of such candidates to enter and win the electoral race, thereby increasing the number of representatives from diverse groups in the body.

A council member from a non-dominant group can increase the social network of connected

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<sup>7</sup>My main outcome—access to justice—is one outcome of such constituency service being carried out. Further, while politicians can pass the buck for work that can be attributed to the council at large, being able to uniquely intervene during a dispute and shape outcomes makes it less likely that a larger council would lower behaviors that can be easily attributed to individuals.

people<sup>8</sup>; thus, citizen also belonging to the non-dominant group would be more likely to approach such a “connected” legislator for assistance. Since constituents can approach any council member for help, who may be elected from the same or different wards, if a larger council is has more members from diverse groups, they may now have additional members who share their social background, whom they can approach.<sup>9</sup>

An observable implication of this theory would be that additional council members increase access to justice for constituents who belong to the non-dominant groups of society. Shared social backgrounds can not only help constituents develop trust but also help them feel that council members are more accessible, thereby reducing barriers to state institutions. On account of greater representation in larger bodies, such members would be more likely to request and be granted assistance, which increases the ability of the local council to meet the demands of their citizens. For instance, if a larger council has a greater number of females, I expect that this could lead to an increase in registration of cases filed by women and cases that concern women.

A final downstream effect of the greater constituency service in larger councils is that constituents hold better perceptions of overall performance by council members, and their ability to handle local disputes—factors that can further improve legal mobilization. This positive perception might further drive constituents to seek out help from their representatives to report and record their issues with the formal legal system. This suggests the following hypothesis:

$H_2$ : Increasing council size increases descriptive representation of non-dominant groups

$H_3$ : Increasing council size increases access to the formal legal system for members from non-dominant groups

$H_4$ : Increasing council size increases the public perceptions of council members held by constituents

Figure 1 summarizes the key aspect of my theory graphically.

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<sup>8</sup>Here, I mean citizens who are personally connected to local politicians.

<sup>9</sup>I posit that these practices are more likely for village-level councils, given the lower population of villages. For national legislatures, members span large constituencies where such direct connections would be rare.

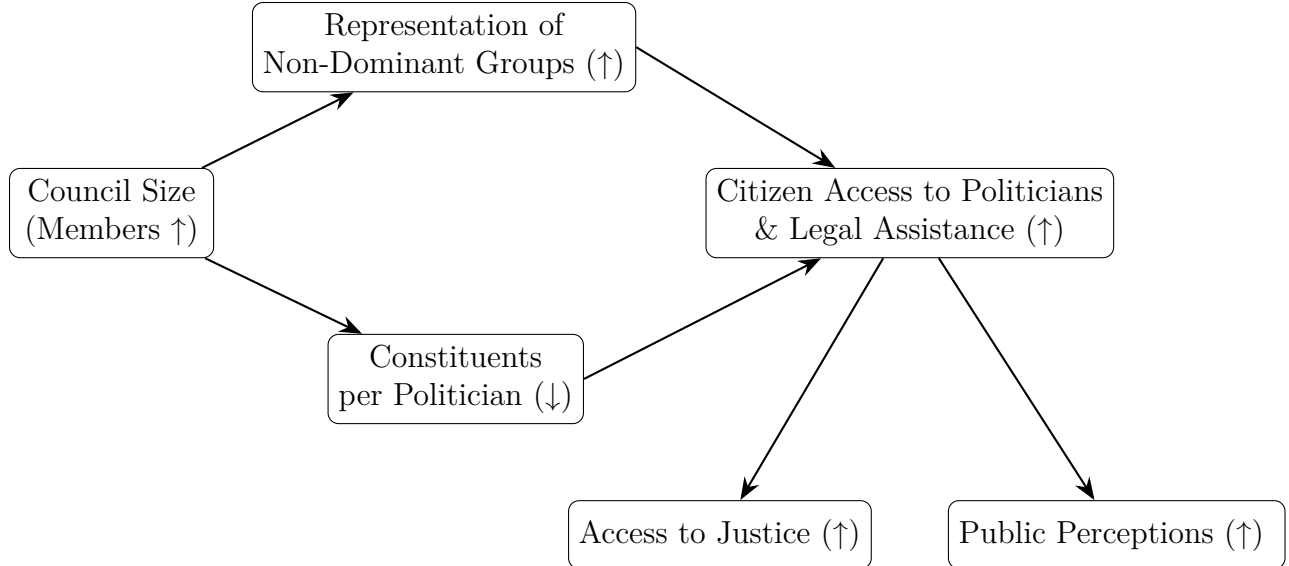


Figure 1: Summary of theoretical expectations

## 3 Background

### 3.1 Local Government in India

India’s post-independence constitution directed the establishment of local self-government—the earliest rural local government bodies have existed in independent India since 1959, and after 1993, were formalized across all states. In 1993, the Government of India passed the Indian Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, which mandated the creation of India’s rural representative bodies—the Panchayats. This formalized and decentralized power to the third tier of government. The reform sought to create a three-tier system of local governance comprising *gram panchayats* (village-level bodies), *taluka panchayats* (sub-district level bodies) and *zilla panchayats* (district-level bodies).<sup>10</sup> Each state was to set up such a three-tier system of local government, whose bodies were to be elected every five years. Additionally, the laws delegated several areas of administration, development and fiscal authority to the elected members.

<sup>10</sup>These have slightly different names across Indian states. For instance, in Maharashtra, the local bodies are set up in the form of a three-tiered system, wherein the *gram panchayat* is the lowest and most immediate elected-representatives body in a village. The next tier is at the block level (*panchayat samiti*), which forms a smaller area of a district—the councilors chosen from the entire district and chairpersons of the *panchayat samitis* make up the *zilla parishad*.

The law entrusted village councils (*gram panchayats*) with both administrative and developmental functions—states could devolve 29 functional areas to the village councils. These involved activities like managing and monitoring facilities for water provision, sanitation, education, public health and roads (Chaudhary and Iyer 2022). Additionally, health and education monitoring is also carried out by the council members—for instance, the maintenance of schools and monitoring of teachers comes under their purview (Chaudhary and Iyer 2022). Further, the new legislation also called for states to set up State Finance Commissions to provide recommendations on revenue-sharing and making grants to the village councils. However, very few states delegated the control of funds and most of these bodies continue to rely on the central or state governments for their revenues (Chaudhary and Iyer 2022).

Each village council was headed by the ‘pradhan’ who could be elected directly or indirectly. Village council members, including the council head, are the most influential local politicians, who are tasked with implementing public works, social justice projects and land allocation, among other responsibilities (Brulé 2020).

India has a long tradition of dispute resolution at the village level— Meschievitz and Galanter (1982) explain that the term *panchayat* means the ‘coming together of five persons,’ and the meeting of five or more members of a village or caste to judge disputes was a prevalent practice. These bodies could be organized along caste lines, based on village boundaries or involve the members of trade guilds or artisan groups to formally or informally hear complaints.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>While the idea of village panchayats serving as “judiciaries of the village” is not new, the Government of India has tried to approach the challenge of access to justice through two routes. In 2006, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj of the Government of India announced the formation of a committee to prepare a ‘Nyaya Panchayat Draft Bill’, which would involve elected bodies to serve as adjudicators. Press reports suggest that the Law Ministry had expressed objections to this, since in the same period (in 2007), the Ministry of Justice and Law conceptualized the *gram nyayalays*—which decentralizes judicial responsibility to local (village) level judicial bodies in the form of “mobile courts” that are headed by judicial officers who are trained judges (as opposed to elected officials). The ‘Gram Nyayalays Bill’ was eventually passed in 2008 in both houses of the Parliament. While few remain operational, these so-called village-level courts are simply reassigned courtrooms located within existing subordinate courts, thus their title is nominal (Bail 2015).

## 3.2 Law enforcement and judicial capacity

The judiciary in India is organized as a three-tier system. The Supreme Court is at the apex level of the Indian Judiciary, often described as the ‘most powerful judiciary in the world’. Further, there are 24 High Courts that encompass states or larger regions, and typically, each administrative district has a District and Sessions Court. Subordinate courts report to the District Court, which hears civil and criminal cases. Judges are recruited based on their performance in competitive judicial examinations, the norms for which vary across states.

Courts in India are incredibly overloaded—on a per capita basis, India has only 20 judges per million, while the United States has over 100 and Europe has over 200 judges per million ([Rao 2022](#)). Moreover, India’s courts are notoriously slow—congested courts delay the resolution of even minor disputes.

The Indian police system is one of the most under-resourced—India has the second lowest police-to-population ratio in the world ([Lee 2021](#)). Policing in India is organized at central and state level—at the central level, it includes the most elite members of the Indian Police Service (IPS), recruited through a centralized exam, and at the state level, it includes the State Police Services, recruited through a state-level exam. Several “non-gazetted” officers serve under them, comprising Inspectors<sup>12</sup> and Sub-Inspectors.<sup>13</sup> Finally, about 85% of Indian police officers are at the ‘Constable’ level, whose daily jobs consist of patrolling, escorting prisoners or running errands for senior officers ([Lee 2021](#)).

A single police station typically covers an urban neighborhood or a group of rural villages ([Lee 2021](#)). As of 2017, India reported 150 police officers per 100,000 people, less than half the world average ([Lee 2021](#)). The sanctioned strength is usually not met, since there are vacancies at all levels, arguably due to the low wages and poor working conditions ([Lee 2021](#)). Further, low availability for patrol vehicles makes patrolling and investigation especially difficult in rural areas (“[Data on Police Organizations](#)” 2021).

Given the weak capacity of the Indian state, a number of approaches have been taken to distribute the burden of law and order—particularly to local politicians. Unlike in Maharashtra

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<sup>12</sup>Inspectors command large urban police stations.

<sup>13</sup>Sub-Inspectors oversee relatively smaller police stations.



(the focus of this paper), in states like Bihar and Himachal Pradesh, village councils have judicial powers. In particular, in Bihar, village courts called *gram kachaharis* were set up in 2006, which are court-like institutions set up in every *panchayat* for resolving local disputes with the involvement of local people.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 Councils and Litigants

How and when do litigants approach courts in India? I turn to survey data for evidence. In 2017, a legal think tank in India conducted a nationwide survey to understand the various modes of dispute resolution used in India as a means to access justice.<sup>15</sup> Fewer than 6% of respondents reported having been involved in a dispute in the past five years.

During the initial stages of a dispute, people turn to trusted sources to understand more about their dispute—approaching friends, family and village elders—particularly, 74% said they would approach family or friends, 49% would approach village elders, and 23% said that they would approach members of the village council.<sup>16</sup> When asked whom they would not approach, 40% said the police, 32% said lawyers, and 13% mentioned legal service authorities. This highlights an important pattern: at the initial stage of a dispute, people tend to seek advice from those closest to them and generally distrust actors associated with the legal or law enforcement systems.

Among respondents who had experienced disputes and sought resolution, 70% said they would pursue resolution through the courts, while 30% opted for non-court methods. Notably, most respondents who preferred court-based resolution belonged to higher-income groups, whereas those opting for non-court methods were predominantly from lower-income groups. For certain types of disputes—especially those involving the government or police, as in criminal cases—courts remained the preferred method of resolution.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Kumar, Arun, “Panchayati Raj Day: How Bihar’s village courts bring down case load on judiciary”, Hindustan Times, 24 April 2023. The government trains the members of the village court (which includes sarpanch, deputy sarpanch, elected members and the secretary).

<sup>15</sup>The survey employed random sampling and collected responses from over 50,000 individuals. The information gathered includes demographic data, perceptions regarding disputes and information on disputes resolved through courts and through non-judicial means.

<sup>16</sup>The percentages are based on multiple-choice responses.

<sup>17</sup>For instance, 91% of disputes with the government, 74% of disputes with the police and 88% of insurance

This suggests that council members—the elected representatives of the *gram panchayats*—may influence the filing of formal complaints. They often act as initial advisors to would-be litigants, offering guidance on whether pursuing a case is worthwhile. Thus, qualitative descriptions of the context help support our theoretical expectations: by serving as initial advisors, local politicians can influence case reporting and, consequently, access to justice.

## 4 Empirical Strategy and Data

### 4.1 Empirical Strategy

A challenge to testing whether a greater number of representatives (larger councils) affects access to justice is that villages with larger councils may be systematically different from those that have a smaller council size, due to omitted unobservables. For example, they may be closer to courts, more educated, and differ in their social culture due to larger populations. These differences in council characteristics can, in turn, affect whether aggrieved parties approach the courts. Therefore, a simple comparison between smaller and larger councils could result in bias.

To study this systematically, I would need to look at a case where there is a different number of elected members assigned to “similar” areas. To do so, I leverage the population-based cut-off that determines the number of elected council members in the villages of Maharashtra using a regression discontinuity (RD) design.

Maharashtra is a large state in the Western part of India with a population of 112 million, and is divided into 36 administrative districts. Each district is divided into sub-districts (*Talukas*), which are further divided into village councils or *Gram Panchayats*.

The system to determine the number of local elected representatives to form a village council varies across Indian states. Regarding the composition of the councils, the 73rd Constitution Amendment (which mandated the creation of village councils) was ambiguous: the Act mentions that the “ratio between the population of the territorial area of a Panchayat at

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related cases were resolved by court, because of the relative absence of non-court avenues to resolve such disputes.

any level and the number of seats in such Panchayat to be filled by election shall... be the same throughout the State”.<sup>18</sup>, leaving the specifics up to individual states. Thus, there is heterogeneity in the size of a village council in each state: the number of council members in Kerala is between 13 and 23 members, while in Karnataka and Bihar, the number of members is determined by a population-based rule.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh, the rule is determined by population cut-offs (Narasimhan and Weaver 2023)—a Panchayat area having a population of 1000 gets 9 members, 1000-2000 gets 11 members, 2000-3000 gets 13 members and more than 3000 gets 15 members.

In this paper, I exploit a version of this rule in Maharashtra, which was one of the few states with effective councils and regular elections before the 73rd Amendment (Chaudhary and Iyer 2022). Moreover, it has one of the highest rankings regarding actual devolution of power to the councils (Unnikrishnan 2016). Elections involved electing the *pradhan* (head) and the members of the *Gram Panchayat*, and in recent years, they have been conducted both by direct election by the citizens, as well as through indirect elections (wherein the village head is elected indirectly among the elected members) (Heinze 2025).

In Maharashtra, the size of the local council is based on population cutoffs, which motivates a regression discontinuity (RD) design. The RD design exploits the continuity in the running variable—that is, the population of the council and the discontinuity at the cutoff between being assigned a smaller or larger council size. As per the Maharashtra Village Panchayat Act of 1959, the number of council members is determined by population cut-offs which I tabulate in Table 1. Here, we see that at a threshold of 1500, villages above the threshold have 9 elected members who form the village council, while those with a population below the threshold have 7 elected members that form the village council.

Councils with populations close to the threshold are expected to have the same characteristics. This is the first time this research design is being used in the Indian context; however, a related research design has been used in a different context by Mignozzetti, Cepaluni, and

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<sup>18</sup>Constitution of India, 73rd Amendment, <https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india/amendments/constitution-india-seventy-third-amendment-act-1992>

<sup>19</sup>For every 400 (Karnataka) and 500 (Bihar) persons, there is one elected member—see <http://bit.ly/karnataka-rule> and <http://bit.ly/bihar-rule> respectively.

Table 1: Village Council Population based cutoffs for number of members.

Village Council Population Thresholds	Number Of Council Members
<1500	7
1501-3000	9
3001-4500	11
4501-6000	13
6001-7500	15
>7501	17

*Source:* Maharashtra Village Panchayat Act, 1959. Population thresholds to be based strictly on previous census conducted.

Freire (2024), where the authors study the effects of legislature size on public service provision in Brazil.

Given the multiple cut-offs, I can either normalize and pool the results to form a single cutoff, or estimate effects at each cutoff using a multi-cutoff regression discontinuity design (Cattaneo et al. 2016). The multiple cut-offs can help overcome a common shortcoming of regression-discontinuity methods in estimating causal effects—with just a single cutoff, we do not know if the treatment effect persists for those units whose scores on the ‘running variable’ are farther away from the cut-off (Cattaneo et al. 2021).

While a design with multiple cutoffs can circumvent this issue, it is important to establish that the estimates are not contaminated by multiple treatments, which can be a common feature of regression discontinuity designs. Indeed, population thresholds can affect not only the size of councils, but also eligibility for public programs (Asher and Novosad 2020) as well as electoral systems in play (Arora 2022). I systematically searched for government programs that would contaminate any of the five cutoffs shown in Table 1. While no such programs appear to use the 1500, 4500, 6000 and 7500 cutoffs, a cutoff of 3000 is being used to determine eligibility for several schemes and I therefore remove it from further analyses. Further, other cutoffs at 4500, 6000 and 7500 not only change the size of the council, but also determine the number and size of wards within the council territory. I choose to fix the treatment as the addition of two council members, that happens at each cutoff.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Information on heterogeneity at each cutoff is provided in the Appendix Sections 2.1 and 2.2.

Thus, I leverage a sharp regression discontinuity design by pooling all the valid cutoffs, using population as the running variable. Population determines the number of seats in each council.<sup>21</sup>

I define causal effects in the potential outcomes setup as follows:  $Y_i(0)$  and  $Y_i(1)$  are the number of cases filed from council  $i$  where  $Y_i(0)$  is the measure of cases on the left of the threshold (the control condition) and  $Y_i(1)$  is the measure of cases to the right of the threshold (the treatment condition). The population of the council is denoted by  $X_i$ . The causal effect of an increase in council size by two members can be given as  $Y_i(1) - Y_i(0)$ . However, since both cannot be observed at the same time for individual councils, we can compute the average treatment effect exactly at the cutoff  $c$  as follows:

$$\tau = \mathbb{E}[Y_i(1) - Y_i(0)|X_i = c] = \mathbb{E}[Y_i(1)|X_i = c] - \mathbb{E}[Y_i(0)|X_i = c] \quad (1)$$

The key identifying assumption is that  $\mathbb{E}[Y_i(1)|X_i = c]$  and  $\mathbb{E}[Y_i(0)|X_i = c]$  are continuous in  $X_i$ , which ensures that all unobserved variables and confounders are also continuous in  $X_i$ . This allows us to use the observations to the left of the cutoff as counterfactuals for the observations to the right of the cutoff. The estimating equation is given as follows:

$$Y_i = \tau D_i + f(X_i) + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Where  $Y_i$  is the outcome for council  $i$ ,  $D_i$  is an indicator for the treatment (defined as the addition of two council members),  $\epsilon_i$  is the error term,  $f(x)$  is a polynomial function of the running variable—typically either linear, quadratic, cubic or quartic, and  $\tau$  gives us the average treatment effect at the cutoff.

The treatment effect  $\tau$  can be estimated using non-parametric techniques within a narrow bandwidth on each side of the cutoff. In my preferred specification, I use linear regression

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<sup>21</sup>For a test of compliance, see Appendix Section 2.5.

equations on either side of the cutoff, with a triangular kernel (wherein observations close to the cutoff have greater weights) and I use the mean-squared error (MSE) approach to choose bandwidths to obtain the local average treatment effect, or  $\tau$ .

## 4.2 Council Elections Data

I collected data on elections conducted in each council from the State Election Commission’s website. This contains important information on candidates, winners, winning margins and turnout. The earliest election recorded on the website is from 2017, and data were scraped up to the 2022 elections. I further assemble data on council characteristics (date of establishment, area, facilities etc.) from *MahaEgram*, a data repository of village councils managed by the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department of the Government of Maharashtra.

## 4.3 Village Councils

The number of members in each council depends on the population of the jurisdiction of the village council. Typically, a village council is constituted for a single revenue village; however, some councils span over two or three villages. I collect data on councils and villages from the Local Government Directory—a dataset that defines unique land region boundaries for rural local governments that map on to India’s census data. The government maintains this dataset as an “up-to-date list of respective administrative units”. I use this data to list over 28,000 village councils in Maharashtra, and merge it with other datasets like *MahaEgram*, that allows me to focus on subsets of councils that are created before 2015. A map of all councils in Maharashtra, and the number of members in each council is shown in Figure 3 in the Appendix Section 1.4. I further link this data to the Socioeconomic High-resolution Rural-Urban Geographic Platform for India (or **SHRUG**) using village census identifiers. This allows me to augment the data with data from the 2011 census with village demographics and characteristics like education and income levels, availability of transport, infrastructure, and other variables.

## 4.4 Justice Data

My main outcome is access to justice—whether people approach courts to enforce their legal rights. In practice, this would be data on the registration of civil and criminal complaints in the formal justice system.

To access the formal criminal justice system in India, one would first register the crime at a police station, and after preliminary investigation, the case would be sent to the court assigned to the police station ([Jassal 2024](#)).

Pursuing formal civil litigation in India involves drafting a complaint and submitting it to a court, along with the court fees and processing fees. The complaint would typically be drafted by a lawyer.

My outcome only considers the cases that get registered at the courts. Considering only the cases that filter through the various levels and reach the courts serves as a hard test of my theory that seeks to understand access to the formal justice system. A limitation of this outcome is that I am unable to capture if council members are facilitating greater access to other stages in the dispute resolution process.

For the data on court filings, I obtain the universe of case records from the Indian eCourts platform. This is a pan-India project under the Department of Justice of the Government of India that aims to transform the Indian judiciary by incorporating information and communication technologies. This project involved large-scale digitization of cases, which I use in my analysis. The public-facing platform includes the case metadata, which involves the acts and sections under which the case was filed. For criminal cases, details of the case come from the First Information Report<sup>22</sup> under which the case was filed. Next, it includes the details of the actors: litigants, lawyers and judges. Finally, it captures the relevant dates during the lifetime of the case: the date of filing, hearings, decisions and so on. In some cases, the text of the actual judgment is also reported.

This data concerns Maharashtra’s lower judiciary, consisting of District and Sessions Courts

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<sup>22</sup>Jassal ([2020](#)) explains that registration of the crime report—known as the ‘First-Information-Report’ is a citizen’s first step towards formal access to justice. These complaints are registered by an inspector called the ‘station house officer’ who serves at local police stations.

and covers both civil and criminal cases, scraped from the government website.<sup>23</sup> For all cases, I capture the location from where the complaint originated—for rural areas, this is a census village; for urban areas, it is a census ward. Earlier work using such data for all of India indicates that the data is reliable between 2010 and 2018 (Rao 2022; Ash et al. 2025). I expect the data to have been regularly updated, given that Maharashtra is a state with higher state capacity compared to other states in India.

I restrict my analysis to a subset of cases in which all parties associated with a case have their home addresses in the same village, and the case is filed in courts at the level of Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division or Judicial Magistrate First Class.<sup>24</sup> I collected 3.7 million cases that were filed in the lower courts, and restricting to cases whose parties originated from a single village, I am able to analyze 1.3 million cases which make up 34% of total cases filed within this period.

I collect cases for each village  $v$  that is nested within a council  $i$ , over eight years, with each year denoted by  $t$ . In the Appendix Section 1.1, I visually show the trends over time. The jurisdiction of each council can comprise of one or more villages (for a spatial distribution, refer to Appendix Section 1.2). Thus, my preferred specification is to modify Equation 2 to capture the different levels and temporal aspect of the data, by clustering the errors at the council-year level as follows:

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<sup>23</sup>District Courts, Maharashtra [https://court.mah.nic.in/courtweb/index\\_eng.php#](https://court.mah.nic.in/courtweb/index_eng.php#), Last Accessed in December 2023 after which the data (without the village-level identifiers) can be accessed from the national eCourts repository.

<sup>24</sup>I make these restrictions for two reasons: first, I expect my theory to apply to disputes where all parties are from the same village, given that council members would be less likely to expend time and effort on issues that they may not be able to claim credit for. Second, cases that arise from multiple villages cannot be assigned as outcomes given that (1) the treatment village cannot be determined for such cases and (2) using such outcomes would violate the SUTVA assumption. I focus on subordinate courts that have unique jurisdictions that cover particular villages. Cases that are filed in subordinate courts do not involve large sums of money or long sentences. I need to make this restriction since the exact jurisdictions heard by senior judges cannot be determined from the data. For additional details on limiting the analysis to subordinate courts, see Appendix Section 1.7. The village of the party is determined by the address of the plaintiff and defendant filed in the system—these can be individuals or organizations. For criminal cases, if there are three accused, the addresses of all three will be entered in the system. Although the state is a “party” to the case, an address for the state is not entered in this case.



$$Y_{vit} = \tau D_i + f(X_i) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

In order to test different theoretical expectations pertaining to civil and criminal cases, I classify cases into categories using a case coding rule elaborated in the Appendix Section 1.6.

#### 4.4.1 Survey Data

To explore possible mechanisms, I rely on data from the National Council of Applied Economics Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS).<sup>25</sup> The survey collects data from a nationally representative sample of over 8,659 households in 240 rural villages in 17 Indian states.

#### 4.4.2 Key Assumptions of Identification

As discussed above, the key identification assumption in a regression continuity design is that the outcomes for the treated and untreated units are continuous in  $X_i$  around the threshold  $X_i = c$  where  $X_i$  is the running variable and  $c$  denotes the cutoff. This gives us the ability to estimate the treatment effect.

While the identification assumption is fundamentally untestable, we can increase the credibility of the regression discontinuity design using the following approaches.

First, I conduct a density discontinuity test. This helps us assess whether individuals in councils can manipulate the running variable  $X_i$ —that is, the population in our case. Manipulation in this case would imply sorting: the concern is that a local council can select into either side of the discontinuity through corruption, perhaps because smaller councils can help local elites secure their power and positions by falsifying the population numbers. In such a scenario, the population distribution across villages will not be smooth.

We can assess whether there are distributional imbalances in the running variable on either side of the cutoff. I run the Cattaneo, Jansson, and Ma (2020), using local polynomials ranging

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<sup>25</sup>Data has been generously shared by Andrew Foster.

Table 2: Tests of Covariate Balance

Covariates	Units	Control	Treatment	<i>p-val</i>
All weather road	1/0	0.68	0.70	0.14
Public transport available	1/0	0.86	0.87	0.16
Internal road	1/0	0.37	0.36	0.67
Distance from HQ	km.	54.10	54.51	0.61
Graduates+	%	0.03	0.03	0.31
High income (INR 5000+)	%	24.23	24.20	0.95
High income (INR 10000+)	%	7.53	7.77	0.23

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . I take the means of observations within a bandwidth of 300 below and above the cutoff. The units column indicates the units of a measure: they can be either be for binary (roads, public transport availability) or continuous (distance, land, number of graduates, shares) variables. All variables are measured based on data from the 2011 census or the 2011 socio-economic caste census, as compiled in the ‘SHRUG’ dataset. ‘p-val’ indicates the p-value from two sided t-test. The treatment is regressed on the jurisdiction’s characteristics to conduct a joint hypothesis test, which imposes restrictions on multiple coefficients. I fail to reject the null hypothesis that the coefficients of the predictors are jointly 0, given a p-value of 0.37 associated with an F-statistic of 1.08.

from the first to fourth order. The null hypothesis implies that there is no manipulation. For each order, the p-values are as follows: local linear (0.78), quadratic (0.61), cubic (0.57) and quartic (0.95). This implies that we have no evidence of manipulation. The test is visually shown in the Appendix Figure A4.

Second, the identification implies that influences on other council characteristics are also continuous in  $X$  at  $X = c$ . If the measures of pre-treatment covariates are not balanced across the control and treatment group, they might confound the estimates of the treatment. I test this by analyzing the means for larger and smaller council sizes in Table 2 below for a range of outcomes within a constant bandwidth.

For the analysis in Table 2, I first assemble a list of pre-treatment covariates that could be possible confounds—any imbalances on these may imply that the estimated treatment effects are due to other confounding factors, and not simply due to the increase in council size. We see that the p-values for all are greater than 0.05 thus we fail to reject the hypothesis that they are statistically distinguishable.

In the Appendix Figure A5, I show graphically that variables like connectivity (roads, availability of transport), geographic characteristics (distance to district headquarters, courts

and police station) and socio-economic factors (education, income) are similar in treated and control villages (on either side of the cutoff).

## 5 Empirical Results

To test my theory, I present three sets of empirical results. First, I use a sharp regression discontinuity design and qualitative interviews with council members as evidence to show that increasing council size increases access to justice. Second, I leverage the same design and show that additional council members do not influence court processes. Finally, I evaluate the channel of constituency service for non-dominant groups. To demonstrate the mechanism, I evaluate whether larger councils improve descriptive representation of non-dominant groups. Consistent with the theory, I show that larger councils increases the representation of non-dominant groups, partly driven by affirmative action, and further that this increases case filings for litigants from such groups. I also test for the presence of electoral cycles and show evidence of this in Appendix Table A6, and rule out mechanisms related to changes in electoral context in Appendix Section 3.2.

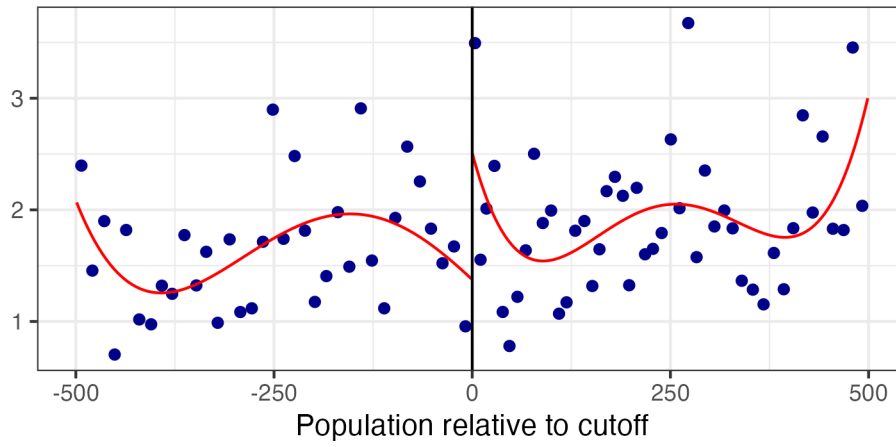
### 5.1 Politicians increase access to justice

In this section, I present the results of the main analysis, that leverages a pooled regression discontinuity. I start by describing the standard RD plots for my main outcomes: all cases, criminal cases and civil cases.

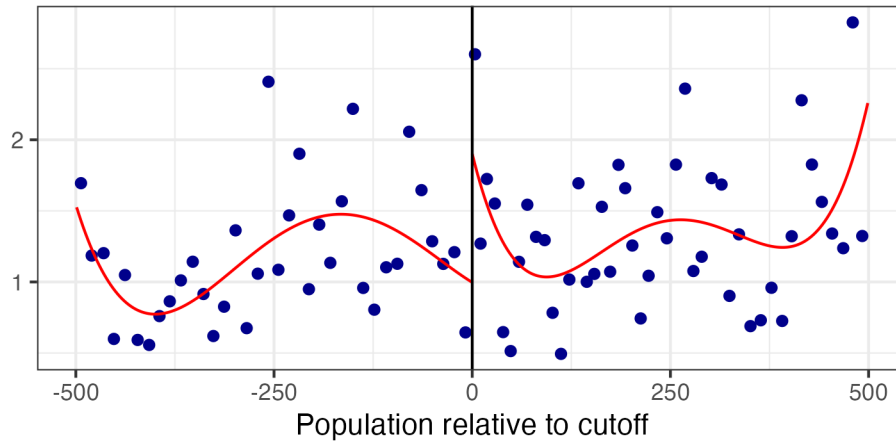
While the plots themselves are not a formal test, they provide descriptive evidence along with visualizations of the global trend. We can see from Figure 2 that for each of the outcomes, there is an increase in cases filed to the right of the threshold, relative to the left. Importantly, there is an upward break for each of the outcomes at the cutoff—suggestive of the fact that increasing council size can increase the number of cases filed with the formal legal system. The y-axis in the third plot (pertaining to civil cases) is compressed, indicating that we might expect smaller effects for these two outcomes.

I now turn to a formal test of this relationship. I report local linear regression discontinuity

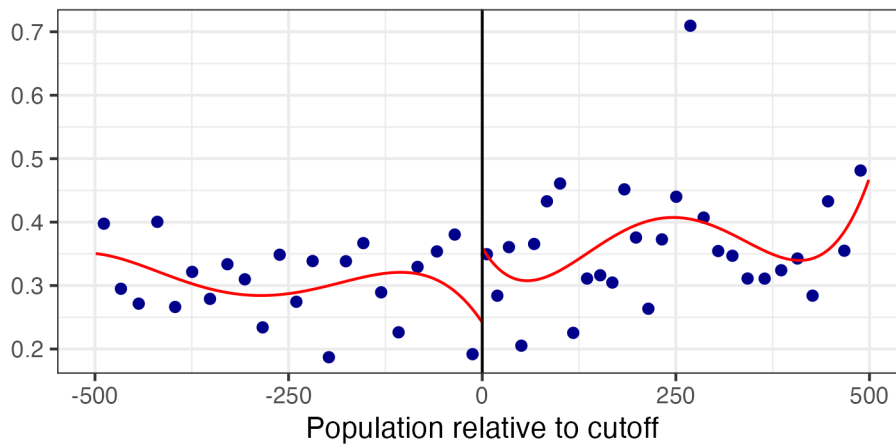
Figure 2: Regression discontinuity plots by case type  
All Cases



Criminal Cases



Civil Cases



*Notes:* Each blue dot in the figure represents a count of cases for each village-year combination, based on quantile-spaced binning ([Calonico et al. 2019](#)). Red lines denote local polynomial regressions of order four.

estimates using Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) optimal bandwidth and triangular kernels, with robust standard errors clustered at the council-year level in parentheses with a polynomial of degree one.

Table 3 displays the results without controls, and Table 4 shows the results with controls that include the year of cases filed from the local body.<sup>26</sup> Each regression result shows the total number of observations, the effective number of observations below and above the cutoff, the estimated local average treatment effect  $\tau$  and the robust bias-corrected  $p$  values.

From the results without controls (Table 3), we are able to confirm the positive effect of council size on access to the formal legal system as illustrated in the RD plots. Approximately 1.3 cases are filed in a court from a village with a smaller council size each year. The results imply that increasing the size of the council by two members leads to a 82% increase in the number of cases filed. The results are statistically and substantively similar when we add pre-treatment covariates to increase precision, as seen in Table 4.

Table 3: Main Results: No Controls

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	All Cases	Criminal Cases	Civil Cases
LATE	1.05*** (0.22)	0.96*** (0.20)	0.05 (0.03)
Obs. (L)	88568	88568	88568
Obs. (R)	48624	48624	48624
Effective Obs. (L)	12672	11672	19064
Effective Obs. (R)	11528	10848	17192
Bandwidth	134	125	199
Bandwidth (Bias)	332	294	360

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Robust standard errors in parenthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is cases measured from a village in a particular year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons.

While a larger council increases the number of civil cases by 18%, the results are not

<sup>26</sup>Mignozzetti, Cepaluni, and Freire (2024) show by simulation that adding controls (especially those responsible for the multiple thresholds) improves consistency and efficiency. I thus add indicators for each year control for seasonal effects, since adding controls improves consistency in a regression discontinuity setting (Calonico et al. 2019).

statistically significant. Having a larger council more than doubles the number of criminal cases, corresponding to a 112% increase in criminal complaints registered, with a similar magnitude and direction when we add pre-treatment covariates to increase precision. These results provide support the main hypothesis in this paper—that increasing council size can increase access to the formal legal system, and the increase is driven by criminal cases.

In the Appendix Section 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, I show that these results are robust to changes in bandwidth, district characteristics and functional form of the models used. The results are also robust to analyzing only the newly-formed councils as a natural experiment—see Appendix Section 4.5 and Table A11 for discussion and results, however these results are no longer statistically significant. Finally, I do not observe any statistically significant effects when analysing the outcomes using placebo cutoffs at half the cutoff values, as seen in Appendix Table A10.

Table 4: Main Results: With Controls

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	All Cases	Criminal Cases	Civil Cases
LATE	0.97*** (0.22)	0.85*** (0.20)	0.04 (0.03)
Obs. (L)	88568	88568	88568
Obs. (R)	48624	48624	48624
Effective Obs. (L)	12672	11952	25600
Effective Obs. (R)	11528	11056	21960
Bandwidth	135	128	261
Bandwidth (Bias)	326	295	404

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Robust standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is cases measured from a village in a particular year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. I include the indicators for the year in which the case was filed as controls.

## 5.2 Qualitative Evidence

In this section, I draw on additional evidence from qualitative research to show that council members facilitate access to justice for their constituents. I use two sources of interview

data of council members. First, I use data from anonymized field notes collected by research assistants from Bussell (2020a). Fourteen village council presidents were ‘shadowed’ (Bussell 2020b) for approximately two days, as they carried out their regular daily activities. Bussell (2020b) explains: ‘this method allows for detailed descriptions of president’s behaviors and interactions’, and shares detailed notes on her website. Second, I analyze qualitative data from phone interviews with 19 council members serving in various councils across Maharashtra.

Out of the fourteen presidents shadowed, 6 of them engaged in some activity pertaining to the police. These instances provide evidence of direct interactions with the police, where the council president assists with case filing. I reproduce the evidence from the field notes during the shadowing of council president D: “Council president D was approached for help in filing an FIR for a stolen television set. The president calls the head constable, requesting to file an FIR”. During the shadowing of council president G, the notes share this instance: “Council president G was approached by a woman with whom the school headmaster had misbehaved, and the president helped the woman by helping her write an application to the senior police officer”. Finally, during the shadowing of council president J, we see a similar incident: “Council president J called the police officer in charge to investigate a case of a woman from the village who had been harassed by a man”.

These instances highlight the fact that the council president has been approached for help with registering a complaint at the police station. I further conduct informational interviews with 19 council members, inquiring their perceptions on the role they play in dispute resolution. The short informational interviews focused on the role played by council members when their constituents experience disputes (see Appendix Section 5.2 for the questionnaire). I first inquired what role they play in dispute resolution, provided them with hypothetical scenarios of a civil dispute within a family involving land and inheritance, and a criminal issue wherein a murder had been committed. A limitation of this question was that in many villages, crimes like murders are rare, so few members had experience with such a grave crime. Nonetheless, the question elicited responses regarding how they would deal with grave crimes that would take place in the village. I reproduce a number of quotes and excerpts that provide suggestive evidence of the role played by council members in disputes.

I asked council members about the differences in handling civil and criminal disputes. Most respondents agreed that most small disputes get resolved within the village itself and there is no requirement to involve external authorities. When prompted to elaborate on these differences, one president said, “Typically, the *police patil*<sup>27</sup> and *sarpanch*<sup>28</sup> will try to solve the dispute at the village level itself. Only in the case of a big crime, the police will get involved”. Another council member remarked: “If it is a major crime, it will go to the police station and the courts. Criminal cases cannot be resolved within the village”. This confirms the dual role played by politicians in dispute resolution: one is in local dispute resolution, and the other is in helping litigants access the formal legal institutions.

Second, I asked council members about the interactions they have had with the police, and to describe the circumstances. One council member proudly shared that he knows the *beat hawaldhar*.<sup>29</sup> Another member shared: “If there is any issue in the village, or a case is registered from the village, the police will call the *gram panchayat* member, and we try to see if we can resolve the issue at the village level itself, since it will be a cheaper resolution”. A village president shared: “In case of any investigation in the village, the police get in touch with police patil, sarpanch and *gram panchayat* member”. These interviews highlight the forms of interactions and instances wherein the officers of the law enforcement system are closely knit with elected council members, and thus council members are equipped with the know-how on how they can help their constituents file complaints and approach courts.

### 5.3 Politicians and court processes

Can additional council members affect court processes? While the previous section shows that the addition of two council members to the local body can increase case filings, they cannot meaningfully influence processes once the cases reach the courts. This is primarily due to two reasons: first, that the legal branch is sufficiently separated and insulated from

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<sup>27</sup>The Maharashtra Gazette explains that the “police patil” is a village level official, subordinate to the Police Sub-Inspector of the area concerned. They are responsible for the maintenance of peace and order in the village, and is expected to assist the Police in investigating the crimes. Details reproduced from the Maharashtra Gazette at <http://bit.ly/409iuDb> accessed on July 10, 2025.

<sup>28</sup>The head of the elected council.

<sup>29</sup>The *beat hawaldhar* is the constables in-charge of the village, usually placed at the police headquarters.



the legislative branch, and second, that courts are extremely overburdened and slow due to a number of institutional reasons (Bhavnani, Bhogale, and Jadhav 2025) which hard to fix for individual cases, and to be influenced by village council members.

I test this using the case level data. I calculate the number of decisions issued for each village, and if decided, the average time (in days) that the case was decided in, using the filing and decision dates for each case. We confirm our expectations in Table 5: the additional council members are not able to meaningfully influence court processes. Even though litigants from villages file a greater number of cases, courts do not issue a larger number of decisions, or resolve the cases quickly. This has two implications—first, the influence of council members is limited to making a bridge to the legal institutions possible, and second, that the working quality of the courts does not diminish on account of being inundated by additional case filings.

Table 5: Politicians do not affect court processes

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Decisions	Time to Decision
LATE	0.12 (0.10)	−6.58 (26.61)
Obs. (L)	88568	8390
Obs. (R)	48624	5810
Effective Obs. (L)	30456	3349
Effective Obs. (R)	25576	3120
Bandwidth	309	329
Bandwidth (Bias)	524	497

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Robust standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is number of decisions and the mean time to decision for cases measured from a village in a particular year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. Note that the fewer number of observations for the time to decision outcome is due to the fact that it can only be measured if a decision is issued for a case filed from the council in a particular year.

## 5.4 Larger councils are more representative

One reason that could explain the increase in legal mobilization from villages with larger councils is that a larger council increases representation of non-dominant groups, by decreasing the costs of running for election. In order to provide evidence for this mechanism, I use the data on the profiles of local elected representatives—particularly data from the Maharashtra State Election Commission for elections held in 2021 that includes the gender and caste of all candidates.<sup>30</sup> I use the same sharp RD design to test whether the size of the legislature affects the number of representatives for diverse groups, and whether these increases may be driven by affirmative action or ‘quotas’.

From Table 7, I find that the additional councils increase the representation of non-dominant groups within the council—they have a greater number of women, members from marginalized groups and women who are from marginalized groups. This indicates that the additional seats are not secured by members of the dominant groups, but are filled by a more diverse pool of representatives. A larger council size increases the number of women in the council by 18% (similar to an increase in the number of seats with quotas for women, which increases by 14%), the number of members from marginalized groups by 11% and the number of women from marginalized groups by 12%. In Appendix Table A5 I show that excluding uncontested and vacant seats, the total members in a council (pooled) increase by 19%. This shows that the additional seats are almost entirely held by members from diverse groups.

What explains the increase in representation? While the theoretical underpinnings of a more representative council suggested that elections to larger councils might reduce the barriers to entry, I show in Appendix Table A9 that this is not the case: for each seat in a larger council, I do not find any change in the competitiveness of the election or the number of candidates contesting for elections at each seat. However, elections to a larger council increase the turnout by over 12%, indicating greater political mobilization in jurisdictions with a larger council size.

Next, I evaluate whether the increase in representation is driven by quotas at the council

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<sup>30</sup>This data was collected by Priyadarshi Amar during his dissertation fieldwork (Amar 2025) and I sincerely thank him for sharing the same.

Table 6: Greater Representation in larger councils

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Female	Marginalized Groups	Female and Marginalized Group
LATE	0.68*** (0.18)	0.44** (0.21)	0.26* (0.15)
Obs. (L)	4673	4673	4673
Obs. (R)	2518	2518	2518
Effective Obs. (L)	1261	1336	1365
Effective Obs. (R)	1096	1143	1155
Bandwidth	250	262	267
Bandwidth (Bias)	392	415	409

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Robust standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is number of council members from the group for a council. ‘Marginalized’ sums politicians belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons.

level. Quotas can affect representation beyond their target dimension ([Amar 2025](#); [Karekurve-Ramachandra and Lee 2020](#)), and we see that quotas are partly driving the greater descriptive representation: while larger councils increase the number of seats reserved for women, they do not increase the number of seats reserved for those from marginalized groups, overall or for women.

## 5.5 Implications of increased representation

In this section, I discuss the implications of the increased descriptive representation on access to justice. If indeed it is an increase in representation of diverse groups that is driving the effect of additional council members, we should observe increase in case filings from diverse groups.

One way to test this is by focusing on cases that concern women. I first classify cases based on litigant characteristics—whether the petitioners or respondents involve women, using litigant classifications from a subset of case-level data ([Ash et al. 2025](#)). Next, I produce a subset of cases based on case types—whether the case involves an issue concerning violence

Table 7: Quotas in larger councils

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Female	Marginalized Groups	Female and Marginalized Group
LATE	0.54*** (0.15)	0.33 (0.21)	0.17 (0.13)
Obs. (L)	4673	4673	4673
Obs. (R)	2518	2518	2518
Effective Obs. (L)	1246	1200	1253
Effective Obs. (R)	1087	1054	1091
Bandwidth	248	239	248
Bandwidth (Bias)	378	392	386

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Robust standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is number of council members from the group for a council. ‘Marginalized’ sums reserved seats for members belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons.

against women. Consistent with my theory, I show that there is a 28% increase in cases filed by female litigants, however we do not see any effect on cases that concern violence against women, as seen in Table 8. These results show the possible limits of increased representation: while they can affect overall filings by women, the increased diversity in councils does not alter social norms for case filings that concern the gravest of crimes against women.

## 6 Council Size, Quality and Ability

I now examine downstream consequences of a larger council size: whether politicians elected to a larger village council are perceived to be of better quality (based on their characteristics) and have greater ability to deal with and respond to disputes and other issues in a village. The idea is that politicians in villages might be perceived more positively if in fact they are more likely to help their constituents with disputes. To empirically test this, I use data from the National Council of Applied Economics Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS). This section analyzes the 2006-08 round of the nationally representative survey, which covers more than 8,000 households from villages across India. I focus my analysis on

Table 8: Increase in filings of cases concerning women

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Female Litigants	Violence Against Women
LATE	0.05* (0.03)	−0.0003 (0.01)
Obs. (L)	88568	88568
Obs. (R)	48624	48624
Effective Obs. (L)	27752	27576
Effective Obs. (R)	23784	23608
Bandwidth	283	281
Bandwidth (Bias)	465	436

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Robust standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is number of filings from female litigants and the cases filed that concern violence against women a village in a particular year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons.

more than 88,000 respondents from 233 villages in India, taking advantage of the fact that larger councils are allotted to villages between two elections, typically when they cross a population threshold.

The survey asks each respondent to rate the current and previous village council along various lines that can be considered measures of the perception of overall politician quality and ability. Each respondent is asked to rate council members' honesty, fairness, qualifications and knowledge. Further, respondents are asked to rate how well council members represent their problems to the government, and solve social and local problems. Responses are based on an ordinal scale (High = 1, Medium = 2, Low = 3, Not aware = 4). I exclude respondents who answered they were not aware to answer about the quality and ability of council members, and recode the outcomes based on an increasing score of evaluation for better interpretation. See Appendix Section 5.1 for the exact questions used in the survey.

I analyse the survey data with a difference-in-differences design, since ratings are collected for both the current and previous village council. Of the 233 villages, 64 villages are assigned a larger council in the current period, as compared to a previous period.

Thus, I can run a specification of the following:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Post}_t + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Treat}_v + \beta_3 \cdot (\text{Post}_{it} \times \text{Treat}_v) + X_i + \epsilon_v \quad (4)$$

Here,  $Y_{it}$  represents the outcome for respondent  $i$  from village  $v$  at time  $t$ ,  $\text{Treat}_v$  is an indicator that takes the value 1 if the respondent is in a treated village,  $\text{Post}_{it}$  takes the value 1 if the individual is evaluating the ratings for the current council, and 0 if the evaluation is for the previous council.  $X_i$  includes respondent level controls: sex, religion, years of schooling and caste. Standard errors are clustered at the village level.

I find in Table 9 and Table 10 that a larger council has greater rating on a host of measures of quality and ability—we see that the coefficients are positive for all outcomes, and statistically significant for three of them: respondents hold better perceptions of council member’s qualifications, wherein the treatment causes 3.6% increase in the outcome relative to baseline. Further, we see that respondents increase their evaluations of council member’s ability: the treatment causes 3% increase in their perceptions of a council member’s ability to solve local problems relative to the baseline. An important caveat of this design is that responses have been collected at a single period, and respondent’s ratings of previous council members could be biased when they receive the treatment: the recall bias may differ between the treatment and control groups. As such, these results provide suggestive evidence that members of a larger council size are perceived to have greater quality and ability by their constituents.

## 7 Conclusion

The United Nations defines access to justice as a fundamental principle of the rule of law—without which people cannot exercise their rights, challenge discrimination or hold decision-makers accountable. Access to justice is the principle that allows individuals to seek effective and substantive resolutions of their legal issues through a legal system that is fair and equitable. A strong legal system improves entrepreneurship (Chemin 2009), security of

Table 9: Effect of Larger Council on Quality of Council Members

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Honesty	Qualifications	Knowledge	Power
ATT	0.03 (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.07 (0.08)
Observations	88,980	83,416	82,887	3,758
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.005	0.03

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the village level. The treatment is council population crosses population threshold which assigns two additional seats. Each observation takes an ordinal outcome taking values between 1 and 3, with 3 being the highest rating. ‘Honesty’ is a rating of the council member’s honesty and fairness. ‘Qualifications’ is a rating of the council member’s technical qualifications. ‘Knowledge’ is a rating of the council member’s knowledge of national problems. ‘Power’ is a rating of the council member’s social status and power.

Table 10: Effect of Larger Council on Ability of Council Members

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Beneficiary Fairness	Represent problems	Solve social problems	Solve local problems
ATT	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)
Observations	86,278	84,789	86,102	88,673
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.004	0.01	0.01

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the village level. The treatment is council population crosses population threshold which assigns two additional seats. Each observation takes an ordinal outcome taking values between 1 and 3, with 3 being the highest rating. ‘Beneficiary Fairness’ is a rating of the council member’s ability to conduct beneficiary selection in a fair and effective way. ‘Represent Problems’ is a rating of the council member’s ability to represent village problems to government. ‘Solve social problems’ is a rating of the council member’s ability to solve social problems, such as disputes over land, marriage etc. ‘Solve local problems’ is a rating of the council member’s ability to solve local problems such as roads, education, water etc.

property rights ([Aberra and Chemin 2021](#)), and firm productivity ([Rao 2022](#)).

Studying access to justice poses challenges for researchers, since there are many determinants of why individuals approach legal authorities, and isolating the role of a particular determinant is difficult without a robust research design. Second, since instances of disputes are not experienced by everyone in the population, researchers find it difficult to measure access to justice through surveys. A major innovation of this study is to answer this question using a credible regression discontinuity design, interviews and micro-level data on court cases.

In this paper, I demonstrate that members of village councils can improve access to justice for rural citizens—particularly for criminal cases—almost doubling the number of criminal cases that end up being litigated in the formal legal system. This enables individuals to enforce their rights through the formal legal system, which can prevent power abuse and promote equality and human development.

Councils with greater size improve access to justice through greater descriptive representation, as these councils elect a greater number of members from non-dominant groups. This increase in representation can make them more effective as it allows the elected body to provide help and provide assistance to diverse members of the village community. Suggestive evidence also suggests that such bodies are also perceived to be of greater quality and ability.

In doing so, this paper makes important contributions to the literature on access to justice and legal mobilization ([Sandefur 2008](#); [Black 1973](#); [J. Krishnan et al. 2014](#); [Galanter 2010](#); [Genn 1999](#)). While prior literature discusses the role of village-level authorities in dispute resolution, my research reveals a new dimension: I find that elected members of local governments help constituents access formal legal institutions, which is essential to strengthening the rule of law, preventing conflict, and supporting economic development. Rather than substituting for a weak formal legal system, politicians play a complementary role, channeling cases towards the courts.

Second, this paper brings together the literature on constituency service and council and legislature size. Increasing the number of politicians may have mixed effects on public services ([Mignozzetti, Cepaluni, and Freire 2024](#)), finances ([Freire et al. 2023](#)) and overall development



([De Santo and Le Maux 2023](#)). This paper shows that larger councils can increase the overall capacity of the body by having a greater number of individual politicians engaged in constituency service. Studying this additional dimension—whether the number of politicians affects behaviors linked to constituency service—can form the basis of a promising research agenda, evaluating the effects of larger councils on responsiveness, trust and accountability.

Several governments in developing countries began a process of decentralizing development planning and management in the 1970s, to increase responsiveness and improve local development ([Bardhan 2002](#)). A key aspect of the decentralization process has been the formation smaller political units that elect a number of local representatives, creating local bodies for urban and rural areas. Such local bodies are not unique to India, and span countries across the world like Indonesia, Brazil, Uganda, China, South Africa, Pakistan and Bolivia ([Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006](#)). By demonstrating how members of these local bodies facilitate access to justice, I contribute to the larger comparative literature on local politics and decentralization.

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# Appendix

## Politicians Help Citizens Access Justice: Evidence from India

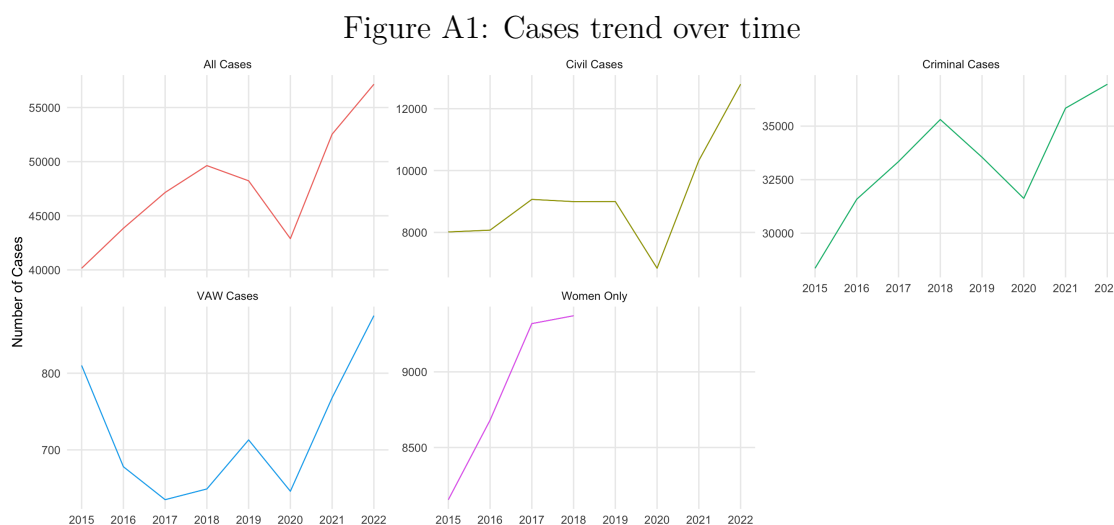
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# 1 Data Description

## 1.1 Trends over time

In this section, I show some descriptive figures. Figure A1 plots the trend of the main outcome (case filings) over the years for each case type: all, civil, criminal, cases with female litigants and violence against women cases.

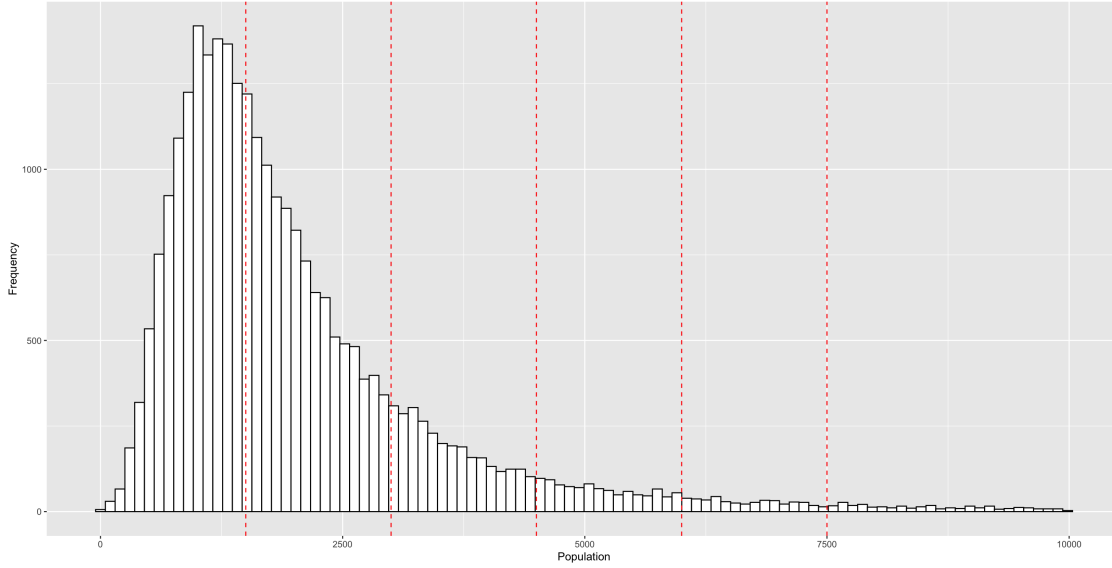


*Note:* The above plot shows the trend of the total number of cases in each year by category. Note that the cases with female litigants can only be measured upto 2018.

## 1.2 Distribution of Council Populations

Figure A2 shows a histogram of village council populations. Here we observe that the majority of the council data is around the 1500 cutoff, and the share of councils at each cutoff decreases at each subsequent cutoff.

Figure A2: Village Council Population Distribution



*Note:* Dotted red lines indicate population-based cutoffs that add two additional council members. Universe of data representing 26,536 village councils that could be mapped to their populations using administrative datasets.

### 1.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table [A1](#) shows the minimum and maximum populations for councils within each band, along with the count of villages within each band, and also displays the mean number of cases within each population band.

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics

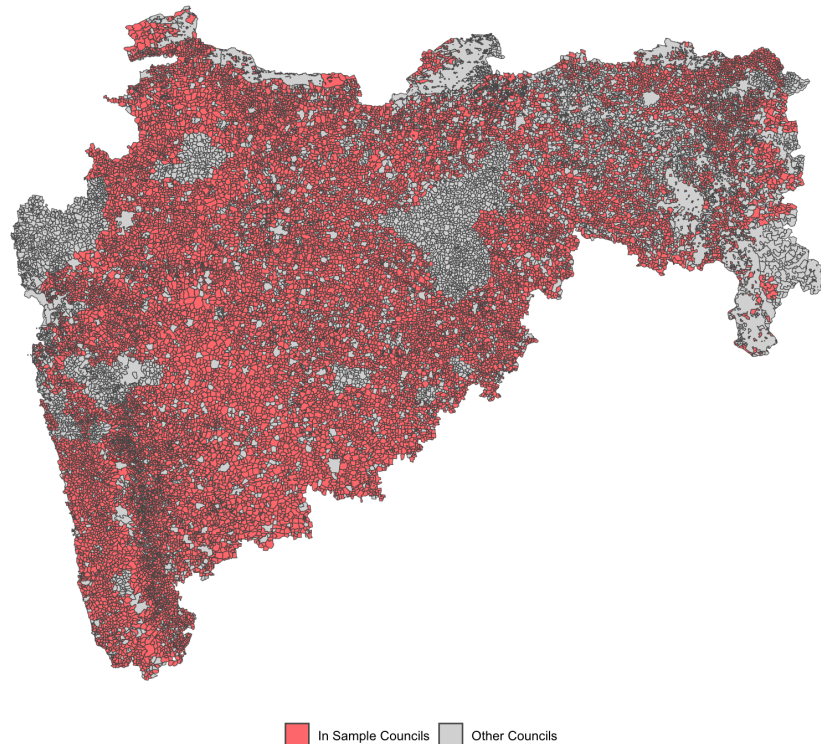
Population	Min Pop	Max Pop	Count	Members	All Cases	Civil Cases	Criminal Cases
<=1500	7	1500	12354	7	0.98	0.21	0.64
1501-3000	1501	3000	10162	9	1.99	0.44	1.32
3001-4500	3001	4499	2821	11	4.91	1.08	3.13
4501-6000	4501	6000	977	13	8.17	1.36	6.07
6001-7500	6002	7497	430	15	13.50	1.96	10.28
>=7501	7512	41559	569	17	23.25	3.03	18.56

*Note:* This table describes the councils in each block based on population: <1500, 1501-3000, 3001-4500, 4501-6000, 6001-7500 and >7501. Min Pop and Max Pop indicates the minimum and maximum population within the council's jurisdiction for each block. For example, for councils having a population of greater than 7500, the minimum population of such a council is 7512 while the maximum population is 41,559. Column 4 and 5 of the table indicates the number of such councils in the data and the council size assigned by the rule respectively. Finally, columns 6, 7, 8, 9 denote the on average the number of cases filed from councils within each block, according to case types.

## 1.4 Spatial Distribution

To provide an overview of the data dispersion, Figure A3 plots the village councils by their proximity to the population threshold. In this map, I plot every council in the state, indicating the councils for which both treatment and outcome data could be matched. The figure shows that the councils analyzed in the main analysis are well distributed across the state.

Figure A3: Maharashtra Local Government Bodies: Councils in Main Analysis



*Note:* Councils shaded in red are the councils in the main analysis. We see from this figure that these are well-distributed across the state.

## 1.5 Variable Sources

The primary data used in the paper comes from a number of Indian public agencies. Further information is given in Table [A2](#).

## 1.6 Outcomes

- Number of all cases 2015-2022: Number of all cases filed in lower courts in the district courts at the level of Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division or Judicial Magistrate First Class for each village.
- Number of criminal cases 2015-2022: Number of criminal cases (as decided by coding rule given below) filed in lower courts in the district courts at the level of Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division or Judicial Magistrate First Class for each

Table A2: Data Sources

Name	Source Description	Data Provided	url
eCourts	Maharashtra District Courts	Village-level case data	<a href="https://court.mah.nic.in/courtweb/index_eng.php">https://court.mah.nic.in/courtweb/index_eng.php</a>
LGD	Local Government Directory	Council-Village mapping	<a href="https://lgdirectory.gov.in/">https://lgdirectory.gov.in/</a>
shrug	Census of India 2011	population data	<a href="https://www.devdatalab.org/shrug">https://www.devdatalab.org/shrug</a>
Elections	Maharashtra State Election Commission	elections data	<a href="https://mahasec.maharashtra.gov.in/">https://mahasec.maharashtra.gov.in/</a> , Fieldwork by Priyadarshi Amar
REDS 2006	Rural Economic and Demographic Survey 2006	survey data	Data provided by Andrew Foster

village, as determined by case classification rule in Table A3

- Number of civil cases 2015-2022: Number of civil cases (as decided by coding rule given below) filed in lower courts in the district courts at the level of Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division or Judicial Magistrate First Class for each village, as determined by case classification rule in Table A3
- Number of violence against women cases 2015-2022: Number of violence against women cases (as determined by case classification rule in Jassal (2024)) filed in lower courts in the district courts at the level of Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division or Judicial Magistrate First Class for each village.

## 1.7 Limiting analysis to subordinate courts

The data spans the universe of cases in the District Courts of Maharashtra.

Table A3: Rules to classify cases as civil or criminal

Case Type	Manual Classification	Detailed Reason
R.C.S.	civil	regular civil suit
Civil M.A.	civil	
M.A.C.P.	civil	motor accident claims
Reg Dkst	civil	civil court judgement
Arbitration R.D	civil	arbitration only for civil
Marriage Petn.	civil	
L.A.R.	civil	land acquisition reference
R.C.A.	civil	regular civil appeal
Spl.C.S.	civil	special civil suit
PWDVA Appln.	civil	domestic violence
M.C.A.	civil	misc civil appeal
Spl .Dkst	civil	civil court judgement
MACP. Dkst.	civil	motor accident claims
M.J.Cases	civil	Misc judicial cases
MACP. M.A.	civil	motor accident petition
Succession	civil	succession post deceased
Darkhast	civil	
L.R.DKST.	civil	
Sum.Civ.Suit	civil	
Civil Suit	civil	
Civil Revn.	civil	
Civil Appeal PPE	civil	
S.C.C.	criminal	summary criminal case
R.C.C.	criminal	regular criminal case
Cri.M.A.	criminal	
Cri.Bail Appln.	criminal	bail application
Other Misc.Cri.Appln	criminal	
Sessions Case	criminal	sessions court
Cri.Rev.App.	criminal	criminal revision application
Cri.Appeal	criminal	criminal appeal
Cri.Case	criminal	
Spl Case MSEB	criminal	MSEB theft of electricity
Cri.Municipal Appeal	criminal	
Juvenile Cri.MA	criminal	



On the Civil side, the Maharashtra Civil Courts Act<sup>1</sup> lays down the rules to be followed. The State Government has the power to create districts, and the presiding judge in the district is called the “District Judge”. The state government can also appoint joint or additional district judges. Further, in each district, a number of “subordinate civil courts” can be created by the state government which are subordinate to the District court. Additionally, the judges practicing in these subordinate courts are called “Civil Judges”. The location of such courts and local limits of the ordinary jurisdiction are to be determined by notifications in the Official Gazette. The District Court also has appellate jurisdiction from decrees and orders of the subordinate courts.

On the Criminal side, the Code of Criminal Procedure, Maharashtra, lays down the rules to be followed<sup>2</sup>. The State Government establishes a Court of Session for every session division (this is basically a district) which is presided over by a judge. Further, the state government establishes courts of Judicial Magistrates (JMs First Class and Second Class) across places and a particular local area has jurisdiction to try any cases or class of cases. The senior-most judge in this court is the ‘Chief Judicial Magistrate’ (CJM). The CJM is subordinate to the Sessions judge, and other JMs are subordinate to the CJM.

The data only looks at subordinate courts that are located at the sub-district (*taluka*) level - these are at the lowest level and include courts of the Civil Judge Junior Division, Civil Judge Senior Division and Judicial Magistrate First Class and Judicial Magistrate Second Class. This helps us get around two important issues:

- (1) Maharashtra has established “District Courts” at the District Capital, and “Additional District Courts” at other locations in order to geographically spread out the higher court. The local limits of these courts are not always publicized on the website.
- (2) While aggregating civil and criminal cases, we can now be confident that they are of a similar nature
  - Civil Judge Junior Division: can hear cases that do not exceed a pecuniary value of 500,000 INR (~ \$6000)

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<sup>1</sup>Link to Maharashtra Civil Courts Act: <https://bit.ly/mh-civil-rules>

<sup>2</sup>Link to Code of Criminal Procedure, Maharashtra: <https://bit.ly/mh-crim>

- Civil Judge Senior Division: can hear cases that do not exceed a pecuniary value of 1,00,000 INR ( $\sim$  \$10,000)
- Judicial Magistrate First Class: can try cases that involve imprisonment of less than three years or fines not exceeding ten thousand rupees

## 2 Treatment Details

### 2.1 Multiple treatments at 3000 cutoff

I systematically searched for government programs that would contaminate any of the five cutoffs. While no such programs appear to use the 1500, 4500, 6000 and 7500 cutoffs, a cutoff of 3000 is being used to determine eligibility for a number of schemes:

- (1) A nationwide development program launched in 2014 called *Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana*<sup>3</sup>, wherein each member of parliament can choose a group of villages in their constituency to implement developmental programs.
- (2) The Government of Maharashtra using the 3000 threshold to determine additional staffing for the village panchayats<sup>4</sup>
- (3) The prize money for the “Tanta Mukti Scheme” (dispute-free villages) increases by 33% at the 3000 population cutoff<sup>5</sup>

I thus only focus on the uncontaminated cutoffs for the main analysis.

### 2.2 Treatment Dose

The main results in the paper pools treatment effects using the various cutoff. It is important to note that a number of factors change at each cutoff, most important being other policies in place and design and size of the wards. These differences are summarized in Table A4. There are other policies in place at 500 and 3000 cutoffs. The 4500 and 7500 cutoffs add a

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<sup>3</sup>Source: <https://bit.ly/sansad-agy>, Last Accessed: 10 July, 2025, Page archived locally.

<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://bit.ly/gp-staffing>, Last Accessed: 10 July, 2025, Page archived locally.

<sup>5</sup>Source: <https://bit.ly/tantamuktischeme>, Last Accessed: 10 July, 2025, Page archived locally.

Table A4: Heterogeneity in Ward Size and Design

Threshold	Details	Ward Design	Ward Size
500	roads construction policy	NA	NA
1500	7 to 9 (28%↑)	3,2,2 changes to 3,3,3	~500
3000	9 to 11 (22%↑) development policy additional staff	3,3,3 changes to 3,3,3,2	~1000 to ~750
4500	11 to 13 (18% ↑)	3,3,3,2 changes to 3,3,3,2,2	~1125 to ~900
6000	13 to 15 (15% ↑)	3,3,3,2,2 changes to 3,3,3,3,3	~1200
7500	15 to 17 (13% ↑)	3,3,3,3,3 changes to 3,3,3,3,3,2	~1500 to ~1250

*Notes:* Threshold indicates population-based cutoffs. Details provide the policy in place, along with the increase in council size in brackets. Ward design indicates the number of candidates and the total number of wards. For example, 3,2,2 indicates 3 wards with the first, second and third ward electing 3, 2 and 2 members respectively. Ward size shows how the number of persons changes in each ward at the threshold; at the 1500 and 6000 threshold there is no change in ward size since the number of wards remain the same.

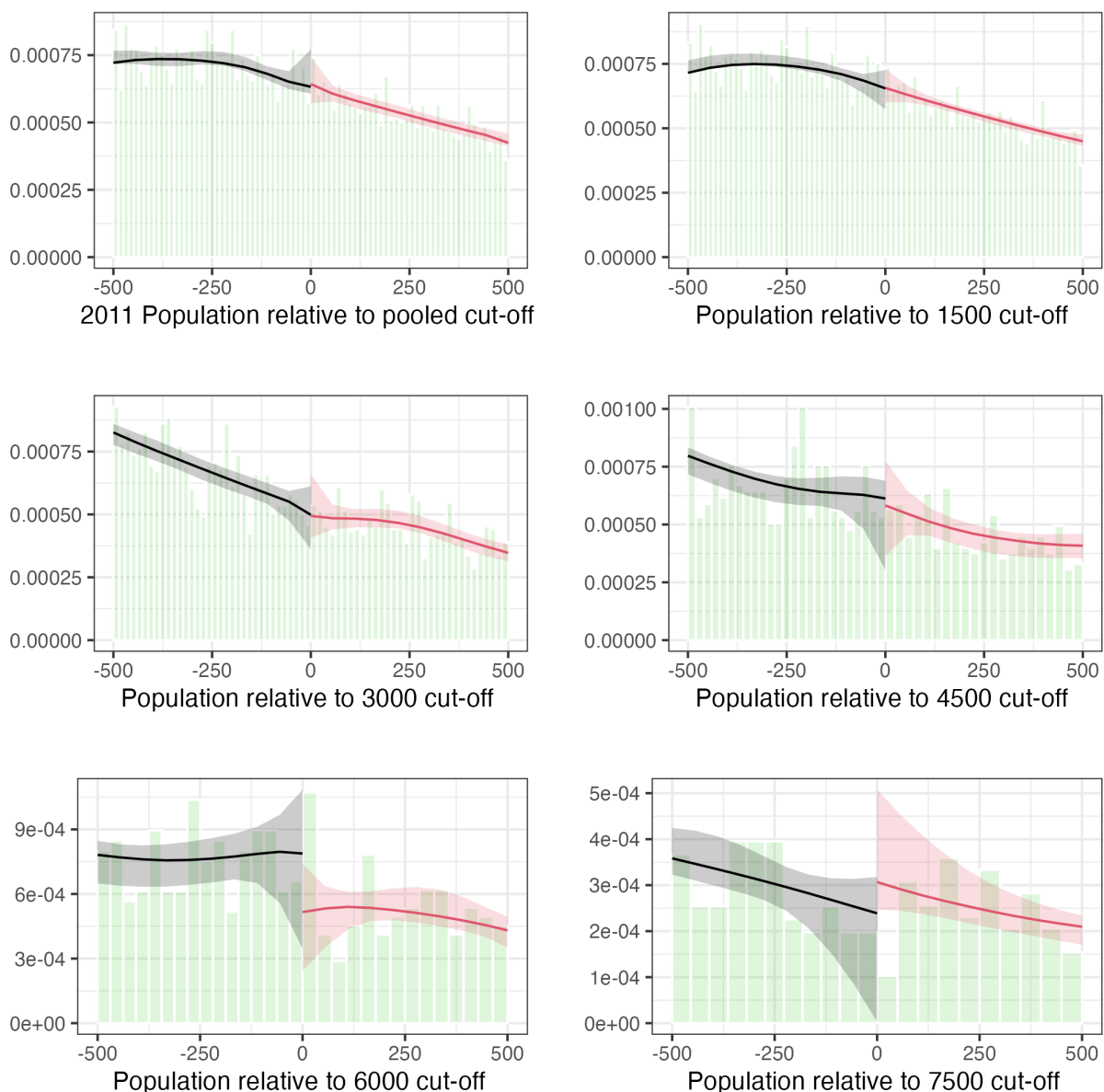
new ward for the additional council members. The 6000 cutoff has more than double the ward size as compared to the first cutoff, as seen in column 4 in Table A4.

## 2.3 Regression Discontinuity Assumptions: No Sorting

One of the key identification assumptions of the regression discontinuity design is that there is no manipulation of the forcing variable (in this case, council population) near the cutoff. This would be the case if influential persons in a village were able to falsify the population numbers to allocate either fewer or greater number of members than prescribed by the design. Given that the enumerators are typically government school teachers or local officials, it might be possible for local elites to influence the enumeration process. Another way this might happen is if people migrate to villages with either larger or smaller council sizes such that they are governed by their desired number of council members. While both these processes

seem unlikely, I plot the density of the running variable and conduct a formal test from Cattaneo, Jansson, and Ma (2020) at each of the population-based cutoffs individually. The local polynomial of degree 2 are constructed using a triangular kernel function, with ‘jackknife’ standard errors.

Figure A4: Density Plots and Continuity Test



*Notes:* Each plot in the figure shows the density of population based on the 2011 census around each cutoff. Figures and tests provide evidence for the absence of discontinuities at the thresholds.

## 2.4 Regression Discontinuity Assumptions: Continuity

The second key identification assumption of the regression discontinuity design is that pre-treatment covariates are balanced around the population threshold. The lack of balance might imply confounding – the estimates of the treatment may be biased.

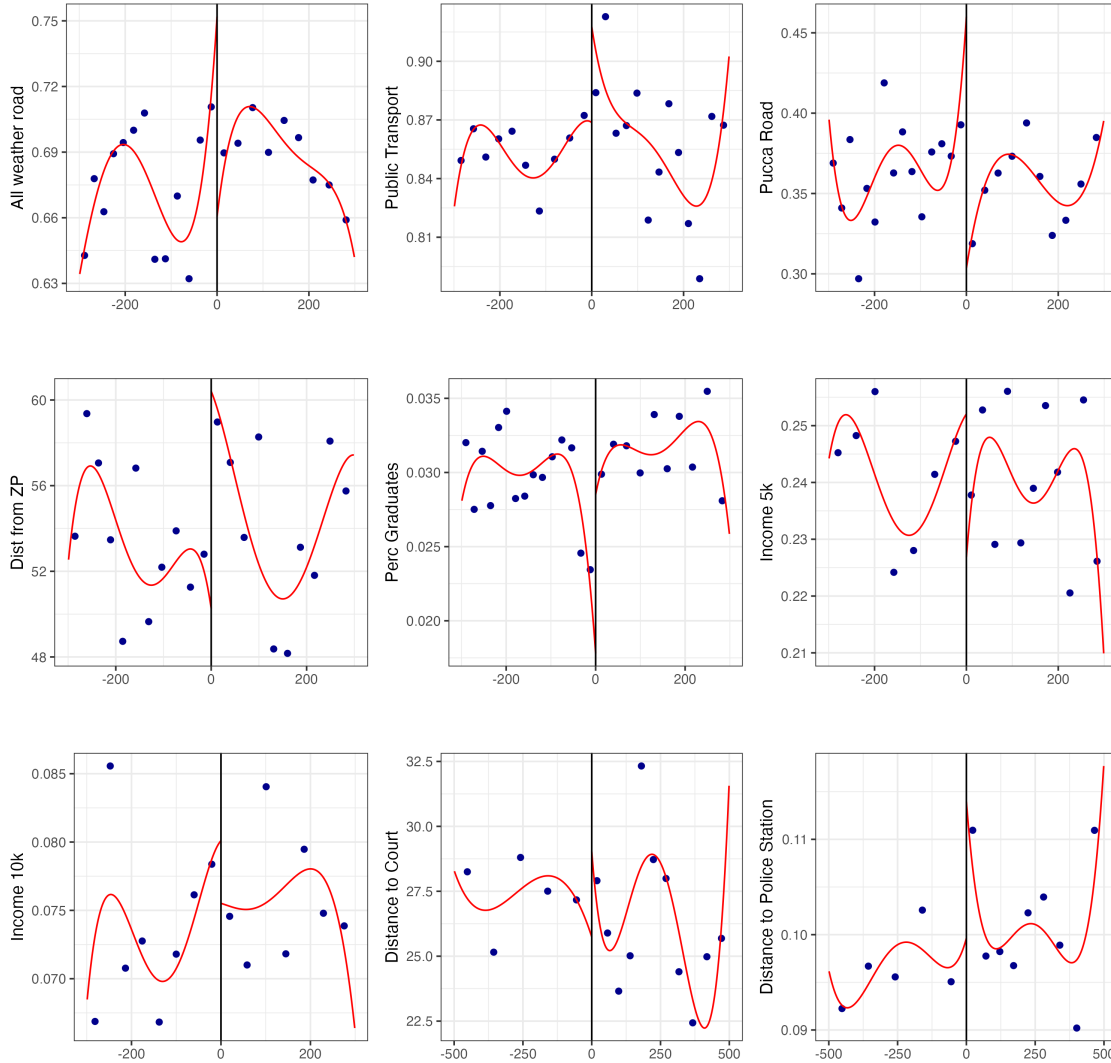
I test this assumption by collecting data from a number of data sources, particularly focusing on factors that are most likely to lead to confounding in this set-up: connectivity (availability of roads, transport and distance to headquarters), area (in square meters) governed by the council, number of graduates and high income earners. While the main paper discusses the differences between the treatment and control groups near the threshold, I visualize the data using plots here in [Figure A5](#)

Visually, it appears that a larger council is further away from the *Zilla Parishad* (ZP) that indicates the district capital, and has a greater number of graduates. On the other hand, smaller village councils have a smaller share of high-income earners. Finally, in larger councils, while there appears to be a greater probability of having access to public transport, there is also a lower probability of having an all weather or internal road. There does not appear to be any conclusive evidence on the presence of large discontinuities in pre-treatment covariates.

## 2.5 Test for Compliance

We show compliance with the rule at each of the cutoffs. First, I assemble data for all council elections held in Maharashtra, that includes both the candidates and winners. I produce the regression discontinuity estimates on the number of politicians at each cutoff in [Table A5](#). While we would expect that these estimates are precisely 2, they will not be perfect due to the absence of data for seats where no elections were conducted: that is, the council member was elected unopposed. This leads to missingness in the elections data. Further, while the election data is obtained directly from the State Election Commission, there were a lot of errors and inconsistencies in the data: duplicate names, incorrect/missing seats and so on. Efforts were made to reconcile it with the data on elected members from ‘MahaeGram’: an online repository of elected members for each council. However, the lack of cleaning,

Figure A5: Covariate Balance



*Notes:* Each blue dot in the figure represents an outcome (indicated on the y-axis) for each village council, based on quantile-spaced binning. Red lines denote local polynomial regressions of order four. Data for the first five outcomes comes from the 2011 census, while data for the last two outcomes (on incomes) comes from the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2012.

maintenance and updating of these data prevents a perfect comparison. As such, all results should be interpreted as intent-to-treat estimates.

Table A5: Compliance

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Pooled	1500	3000	4500	6000	7500
LATE	1.32*** (0.26)	1.23*** (0.24)	1.56*** (0.53)	1.79*** (0.56)	0.81 (1.66)	2.87** (1.22)
Obs. (L)	4868	4106	1683	497	190	75
Obs. (R)	2612	2088	643	205	92	227
Effective Obs. (L)	1337	733	212	126	40	75
Effective Obs. (R)	1152	693	200	100	32	73
Bandwidth	257	172	163	266	183	1078
Bandwidth (Bias)	402	259	279	421	282	1381

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council level. Each observation is number of elected council members measured from a village in the 2021 elections. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. 'Pooled' cutoff excludes 3000, as used in the main analysis. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.

### 3 Alternate Explanations

#### 3.1 Electoral Cycles

To explore whether the timing of elections matters, I break down the results by the number of years since the council election year - whether it is one, two, three or four years since the council election.

Table A6 shows evidence of an election cycle for all cases: the effects appear to be strongest as elections approach. Table A8 and A7 corroborate this pattern: the effects of council size and access to justice are strongest in the years leading to election. These findings provide evidence to demonstrate a possible electoral cycle for helping constituents gain access to justice.

#### 3.2 Electoral Context and Mobilization

Perhaps one reason why members of larger councils are more effective in facilitating access to justice could relate to the electoral context. An electoral explanation for this phenomenon can be that elections to larger councils are more competitive and increase turnout from

Table A6: Results by election year for all cases

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Election Year	1 year post	2 years post	3 years post	4 years post
LATE	−0.03 (0.88)	1.01 (0.64)	1.28* (0.66)	1.45** (0.68)	1.38* (0.83)
Obs. (L)	7583	5504	8849	10888	10888
Obs. (R)	4436	3171	5037	6282	6282
Effective Obs. (L)	3834	1429	1885	2561	2899
Effective Obs. (R)	3145	1263	1805	2322	2545
Bandwidth	455	235	202	214	240
Bandwidth (Bias)	678	450	418	430	448

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is cases measured from a village in a particular year based on the election cycle. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.

Table A7: Results by election year for criminal cases

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Election Year	1 year post	2 years post	3 years post	4 years post
LATE	−0.14 (0.79)	0.64 (0.51)	1.01* (0.59)	1.14* (0.61)	1.05 (0.75)
Obs. (L)	7583	5504	8849	10888	10888
Obs. (R)	4436	3171	5037	6282	6282
Effective Obs. (L)	3504	1371	1764	2517	2865
Effective Obs. (R)	2889	1214	1672	2269	2521
Bandwidth	412	223	191	210	236
Bandwidth (Bias)	621	447	404	421	437

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is cases measured from a village in a particular year based on the election cycle. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.



Table A8: Results by election year for civil cases

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Election Year	1 year post	2 years post	3 years post	4 years post
LATE	0.14 (0.14)	0.14 (0.13)	0.16* (0.09)	0.17** (0.08)	0.14* (0.09)
Obs. (L)	7583	5504	8849	10888	10888
Obs. (R)	4436	3171	5037	6282	6282
Effective Obs. (L)	3525	2060	2512	3874	3866
Effective Obs. (R)	2898	1758	2227	3313	3297
Bandwidth	413	340	264	320	319
Bandwidth (Bias)	593	515	422	514	510

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation is cases measured from a village in a particular year based on the election cycle. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.

diverse groups, and the incentive to be re-elected causes members to be more engaged in their constituencies and address disputes. Further, it may be that citizens in larger councils are more politically active given that there is now a larger group of candidates (simply on account of a larger number of seats up for grabs), and this political activity leads to greater contact with constituents, leading to a higher turnout during elections. Finally, members of larger councils can be perceived to be more legitimate by citizens, and hence citizens are more likely to approach them. I can test this by analyzing the effect of larger council sizes on the share of NOTA votes – NOTA is short for ‘None of the Above’ and such votes are cast when the voter does not support any of the candidates in council elections. Thus a greater number of NOTA votes could signal lower legitimacy and support.

I test this by analyzing the effect of larger council sizes on (1) the share of close elections (with a margin of victory less than 10%), (2) the number of contesting candidates, (3) percentage of constituents turning out to vote and (4) the share of votes that are indicated as “none of the above”.

Table A9 indicates that some of these mechanisms might be at play - elections to larger

council sizes are not more competitive, do not have greater number of candidates contesting per seat or changes the number of NOTA votes cast by voters. We observe a statistically significant 12.8% increase in turnout.

Table A9: Larger councils and electoral context

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Close Elections	Candidates	Turnout	NOTA
LATE	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	349.47** (142.25)	1.91 (7.47)
Obs. (L)	69117	69611	10841	10841
Obs. (R)	47304	47595	5845	5845
Effective Obs. (L)	30160	24643	3111	3946
Effective Obs. (R)	28270	23794	2622	3225
Bandwidth	391	318	258	327
Bandwidth (Bias)	594	518	403	493

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. The treatment is councils with two additional members. Each observation measured from a council during an election. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.

## 4 Sensitivity Analysis

### 4.1 Sensitivity to Bandwidth Choice

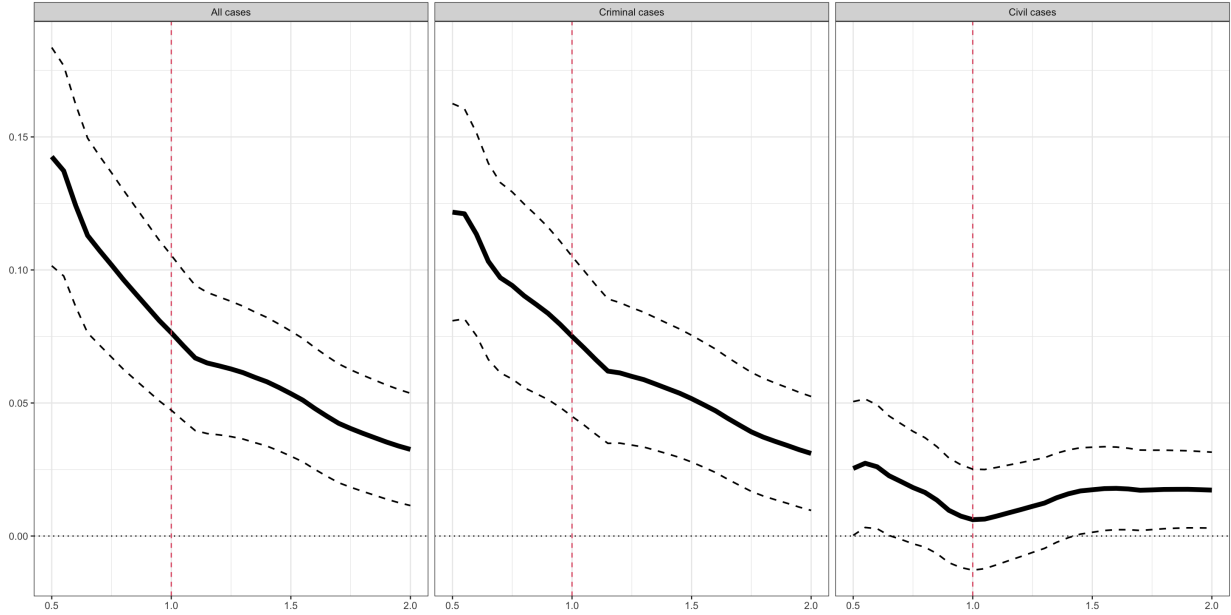
In this section, I present sensitivity tests for bandwidth selection. I follow the suggestions of Bueno and Tunon (2015)<sup>6</sup> and vary bandwidth from 50% to 200% of the Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) estimate in Figure A6. We see that our results are not sensitive to the choice of bandwidth.

### 4.2 Sensitivity to District Characteristics

Due to the large size of the state, Maharashtra has a lot of geographic variation. For instance, some districts could be more geographically compact that allows individuals to access courts

<sup>6</sup>Graphical Presentation of Regression Discontinuity Results, The Society for Political Methodology Blog. Available at: <https://bit.ly/rd-link>

Figure A6: Sensitivity to Bandwidth Choice



*Note:* The above plot shows the sensitivity to bandwidth choice by category: all cases, civil cases and criminal cases.

easily as compared to districts that are more geographically spread out. Other districts are I run the analysis by dropping one district at a time to investigate district-wide heterogeneity. The results are in Figure A7.

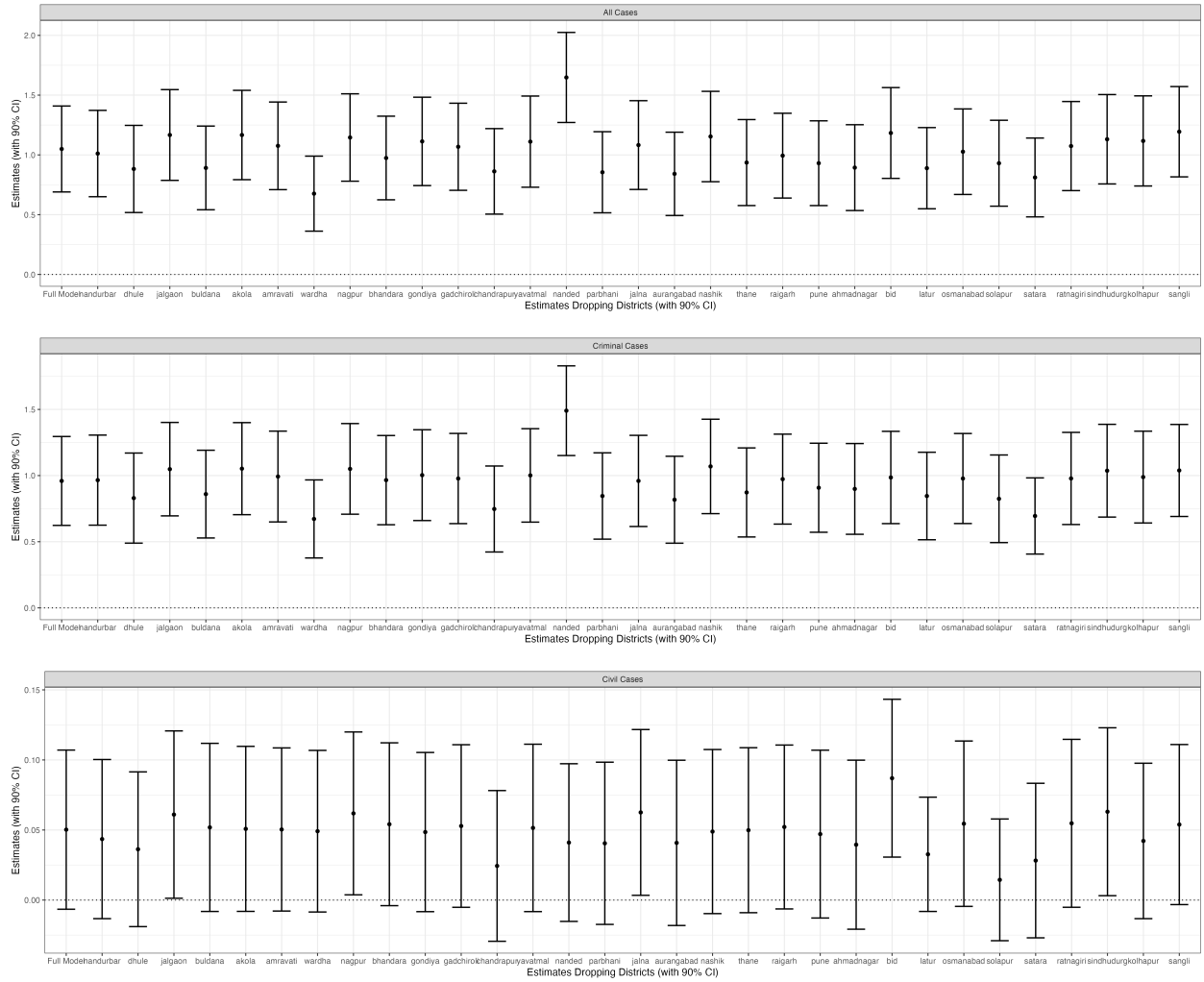
### 4.3 Sensitivity to Functional Form

In Figure A8, I show that the results are robust to changing the functional form: using linear ( $p=1$ ), quadratic ( $p=2$ ), cubic ( $p=3$ ) and quartic ( $p=4$ ).

### 4.4 Results at a Placebo cut-off

In Table A10, I produce results at half of the cutoffs: that is, I produce the results using a placebo cutoff of 750, 2250 and 3750 persons. I cannot use half the 3000 and 6000 cutoffs, since that gives me 1500 and 3000, which themselves are cutoffs. Nevertheless, I find that there is no discernible treatment effect at half the cutoffs for the cutoffs analysed.

Figure A7: Sensitivity to District Characteristics

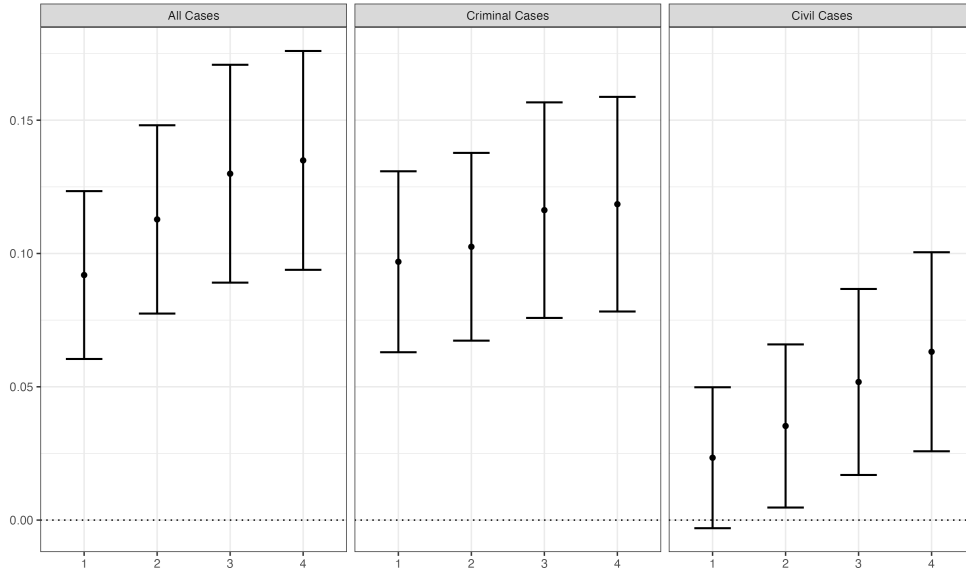


*Note:* The above plots show the sensitivity to district characteristics by each case category separately – that is, for all cases, criminal cases and civil cases.

## 4.5 Alternate Design: Newly formed councils only

In this section, I show that my results are robust to restricting the data to newly formed councils. There are about 2221 new councils that were formed between 2018 and 2022. These new councils are typically created by taking the local areas that form the older council, and splitting them into two or more councils. For example, in June 2025, a council comprising three villages: Panchala (Bk), Panchala (Kh) and Guguldosh, in Ramtek, Nagpur, was split into two groups: the first group named Panchala (Bk) comprised of Panchala (Bk) and

Figure A8: Sensitivity to Functional Form



*Note:* The above plots show the sensitivity to functional form (given on the x-axis) by each case category separately – that is, for all cases, criminal cases and civil cases.

Table A10: Outcomes at a Placebo Cutoff

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	All Cases	Civil Cases	Criminal Cases
LATE	−0.02 (0.10)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.06 (0.07)
Obs. (L)	82376	82376	82376
Obs. (R)	98024	98024	98024
Effective Obs. (L)	19648	25472	16968
Effective Obs. (R)	21488	28664	18544
Bandwidth	184	239	158
Bandwidth (Bias)	334	387	273

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council-year level. Each observation is number of cases measured from a village in each year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons. The values in brackets indicate the robust standard errors.

Panchala (Kh), while the second group named Gugoldoh comprised of the Gugaldoh village<sup>7</sup>.

While some of these newly created councils get assigned a smaller council size (based on the

<sup>7</sup>Details obtained from Maharashtra Rural Development Ministry Website, <http://bit.ly/4lpGN8u>, Last Accessed on 10 July, 2025. Page archived for reference. Notifications for several other examples can be accessed on the ‘Notifications’ page here: <http://bit.ly/4IREWsZ>

same population thresholds), others get assigned a larger council size with two additional members. I run the main analysis for these villages only in Table A11. We observe partially consistent results here – having two additional council members increases the number of cases filed from the newly formed councils with larger councils, however the effects are not statistically significant.

Table A11: Newly Formed Councils

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	All cases	Criminal	Civil
LATE	0.74 (0.76)	0.58 (0.46)	0.15 (0.47)
Obs. (L)	2067	2067	2067
Obs. (R)	976	976	976
Effective Obs. (L)	357	371	497
Effective Obs. (R)	243	250	294
Bandwidth	152	157	212
Bandwidth (Bias)	293	317	313

*Note:* \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Standard errors in paranthesis clustered at the council level. Each observation is number of cases measured from a village for each year. Obs. (L) and Obs. (R) indicate the number (and effective number) of observations to the left and right of the cutoff respectively. Bandwidth is in number of persons.

## 5 Additional details

### 5.1 Rural Economic and Demographic Survey Questions Used

I accessed data from the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey conducted in 2005-06 by obtaining a minimal risk research IRB approval from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I submitted the same to Dr. Andrew Foster, who shared the restricted data for the 2005-06 years. I restrict the analysis to respondents from Maharashtra, which covers 5078 respondents across 17 villages.

Below, I reproduce the exact wording of the questions from which the outcomes are constructed for the difference-in-differences analysis. Each response takes an ordinal outcome taking

values between 1 and 4, with 1 being the highest rating for the question [High=1; Medium=2; Low=3; Not aware=4].

1. Honesty: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Honesty and fairness: p83q3, p83q4]
2. Qualifications: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Technical qualifications of the candidate: p83q9, p83q10]
3. Knowledge: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Knowledge of national problems: p83q12, p83q13]
4. Beneficiary Fairness: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Ability to conduct beneficiary selection in a fair and effective way: p83q21, p83q22]
5. Represent problems: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Ability to represent village problems to government: p83q24, p83q25]
6. Solve social problems: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Ability to solve social problems, such as disputes over land, marriage etc: p83q18, p83q19]
7. Solve local problems: Evaluation of Elected Representatives [Ability to solve local problems such as roads, education, water etc: p83q15, p83q16]

## 5.2 Questionnaire for informational interviews

In Summer 2025, I conducted interviews with 19 council members in Maharashtra. I started with collecting the contact details of currently serving council members in Maharashtra, from which I drew a random sample of 100 contact numbers. I then hired an agency to reach out to the phone numbers and ask the following questions:

1. How many years have you been a council member?
2. Do villagers come to you to solve disputes?
  - a. What kinds of disputes do you not attempt to resolve?
  - b. What types of cases do villagers typically approach you to resolve?
  - c. What types of cases do villagers typically not approach you to resolve?

3. There is a property dispute in a family in your village. They approach you for help.  
How do you help them?
4. There is a murder in your village. You are approached by the family of the deceased  
for help. How do you help them?
5. Why do you help villagers with their problems?
6. Do you know any lawyers? How?
7. Do you know anyone from the police force? How?



## References

- Calonico, Sebastian, Matias D. Cattaneo, and Rocio Titiunik. 2014. “Robust Nonparametric Confidence Intervals for Regression-Discontinuity Designs: Robust Nonparametric Confidence Intervals.” *Econometrica* 82 (6): 2295–2326. <https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA11757>.
- Cattaneo, Matias D., Michael Jansson, and Xinwei Ma. 2020. “Simple Local Polynomial Density Estimators.” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 115 (531): 1449–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01621459.2019.1635480>.
- Jassal, Nirvikar. 2024. “Does Victim Gender Matter for Justice Delivery? Police and Judicial Responses to Women’s Cases in India.” *American Political Science Review* 118 (3): 1278–1304. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000916>.