Digital India? an email experiment with Indian legislators

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ABSTRACT
Of the many tasks elected representatives perform, constituency service is among the most difficult to observe and, therefore, to measure. However, a burgeoning literature uses digital tools such as email to experimentally evaluate the responsiveness of political elites to requests for constituency service. To date, this literature has overwhelmingly focused on the developed world. In this article, we describe the results of an email experiment in which we sent plausible, but fictitious constituency service requests to national legislators in India to evaluate their responsiveness, helpfulness, and possibly discriminatory behavior. While the overall response rate to our request is quite poor, those that do respond tend to offer “meaningful” responses. We find scant evidence of legislators discriminating on religious lines.

Elected representatives in most modern democracies perform three core functions. First, elected representatives legislate; they engage in the act of introducing, debating, and ultimately voting on proposed legislation. As a part of the legislative process, they participate in parliamentary debates, committee hearings, and other procedural matters. In parliamentary democracies, some legislators also govern; they serve as ministers in the government with management responsibility over government departments and agencies. Finally, elected representatives serve as intermediaries between citizens and the state. In this capacity, representatives regularly interact with the bureaucracy on behalf of their constituents.

In this third avatar, representatives engage in one of the two types of behavior. The first type involves delivering “contingent” benefits; that is, directing the transfer of benefits and resources to constituents in exchange for political support. Arguably, some of this activity is not strictly contingent in that lawmakers often lack an iron-clad method of ensuring that those who receive benefits actually provide electoral or political support. But even when quid pro quos at the individual level is not feasible, lawmakers might use political or electoral criteria for determining when and where to intervene in the process of administering transfers, benefits or public sector jobs.
Insofar as the comparative politics literature has focused on the politics of implementation, it has been largely preoccupied with contingent activities. Yet, there is a second type of behavior, studied intensely by scholars of American politics but until recently ignored by comparative political scientists,\(^3\) that involves old-fashioned constituency service.\(^4\) Constituency service typically comprises the everyday actions that elected representatives engage in, to service the needs of their constituents without any express expectation of political support.\(^5\) Although this non-contingent activity is thought to occupy a significant share of elected representatives’ daily lives, it is surprisingly understudied.

One reason for this neglect has to do with problems of measurement. Legislative performance can be easily quantified with observational data on parliamentary attendance, debate participation, bill sponsorship, or committee deliberations. When it comes to governing, measuring the performance of the heads of government agencies is also possible – especially if one measures the outputs of flagship programs overseen by the relevant minister as a proxy. Constituency service, on the other hand, cannot easily be quantified. For obvious reasons, representatives have incentives to misrepresent the level of constituent service they provide. Existing observational data typically shed light on the outcome variable – those constituents who are served – without measuring the latent demand for constituent services. Qualitative study of constituency service is highly valuable but poses difficulties for aggregating across a large number of elected representatives.

Because of these data constraints, the literature on constituency service has taken an experimental turn, leveraging the information revolution through email and other electronic forms of communication to directly measure the responsiveness of representatives to constituent service requests.\(^6\) This new body of work is part of a larger trend toward using field experiments to study political institutions, as opposed to political behavior – which has a longer lineage.

For the most part, this literature has focused on advanced economies, where information and communications technology (ICT) penetration is greatest. However, the ICT revolution is bringing these new digital communications platforms to the developing world at a rapid clip, opening up the potential to study constituency service in newer or less economically developed democracies.\(^7\) Indeed, the World Bank’s 2016 World Development Report devotes significant attention to the rise of “digital governance,” arguing that the proliferation of new technologies has expanded the ways in which citizens around the world can interact with their governments to provide feedback, request assistance or monitor public officials.\(^8\)

In this article, we describe one of the first attempts to use email to study the responsiveness of Indian legislators to the constituents they are elected to serve. We emailed a plausible request for assistance from a fictitious constituent to every Indian Member of Parliament (MP), from both the lower
and upper houses, with a working email address. The simple request asked for basic information on how to avail of special educational quotas that are filled through nomination by MP. For reasons discussed later, deception was a necessary element of this exercise. However, we took care to ensure that the fictitious request placed a minimal burden on the MP and/or their staff.

The objective of this study is to identify answers to three questions. First, how responsive are Indian legislators to requests for assistance they receive from constituents? Second, how helpful are the responses that legislators provide? And third, do legislators discriminate against certain types of constituents? In keeping with the prevailing literature, which has detected significant evidence of discriminatory behavior in other democratic settings, we randomly varied the names of the fictitious constituents along religious lines to explore this third question.

To preview our results, we find that the general responsiveness of Indian legislators to constituency service requests received by email is extremely limited; fewer than 10% of legislators we emailed responded to our inquiry. This level of responsiveness is far below what studies from other democracies have uncovered. While this could reflect the unpopularity of email relative to other media among India’s elected representatives, two recent papers both report very similar response rates for constituency service experiments in India that leverage mailed letters, text messages, and WhatsApp.9

When it comes to the correlates of responsiveness, MP demographic characteristics such as age, gender or educational attainment are not significant predictors of responsiveness. However, members of the Lok Sabha (who are directly elected) are more than five times as likely to respond when compared to members of the Rajya Sabha (who are indirectly elected by India’s state legislatures). MPs affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), wealthier MPs, and those who have a greater digital presence also exhibit higher response rates.

Of those lawmakers who did respond, the majority sent responses we subjectively coded to be “helpful,” in that they contained information that was directly responsive to the constituent’s request. Finally, we found scant evidence of discriminatory behavior on the part of MPs. Legislators were equally responsive (or not) to Hindus and Muslims, and this holds even when we consider the Hindu/Muslim identity of the MP in question. Interestingly, we find that non-BJP MPs are somewhat more likely to respond to Hindu constituents than Muslim constituents (in contrast to the responses of BJP MPs).

Altogether, this paper has relevance for several strands of the comparative politics literature. Most obviously, it advances the literature on constituency service by addressing two sources of bias. While the existing experimental literature is largely focused on advanced economies, research on the developing world tends to underplay constituency service. This paper attempts to fill this lacuna by studying routine constituency service in a major developing country.
Second, this paper speaks to the literature on descriptive representation, which suggests that elected officials will better represent the interests of those constituents with whom they share common outward characteristics such as race, gender, or ethnicity.\textsuperscript{10} Finally, this paper also contributes to the literature from India on how class identity shapes the nature of citizen–state interaction. For instance, there is a well-known body of work that argues that the middle class in India tends to petition the state indirectly using civil society, rather than directly contacting elected officials or party brokers.\textsuperscript{11} This is perhaps why middle class “exit” from the state has rendered middle-class individuals electorally marginal from the vantage point of politicians. The poor, on the other hand, are more likely to engage with elected officials (and to turn out to vote in large numbers).\textsuperscript{12} To the extent the request employed in this paper signifies a typically “middle class” request, the low response rate arguably strengthens this conventional wisdom.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we briefly describe the extant experimental literature that uses ICT to measure constituency service. We then discuss the relevance of undertaking this study in the Indian context, highlighting the push towards e-governance on the part of the current government. Next, we summarize the basic setup of the experiment, the content of the fictitious emails, and the challenges of using email for this study. We follow this with a discussion of important ethical considerations involved in an experiment of this type. In the penultimate section, we discuss our key results and initial answers to the three core questions guiding this study. Finally, we end with one important policy recommendation as well as ideas about fruitful avenues for future research in this area.

**Revisiting constituency service**

There is a long tradition, borne out of the American politics literature, of studying constituency service and the responsiveness of political elites to constituents. The earliest studies in this genre were observational in nature and focused on the “home styles” of elected representatives.\textsuperscript{13} In recent years, this literature has taken an experimental turn, thanks to the rise of digital technologies such as email as well as the myriad benefits from a causal inference perspective when one can manipulate key attributes of “constituents” to gauge the variation in elite responsiveness.

The ability to send out a large number of electronic communications using names that can be strategically manipulated has also meant that this literature has been an excellent venue for measuring the extent of discriminatory behavior in practice. Most studies have randomly varied the names of the constituents making service requests to test for differential responses on the basis of ethnicity or racial identity.
The first (and arguably most seminal) study in this emerging political science literature is a paper by Daniel M. Butler and David E. Broockman, who conducted an experiment to measure the responsiveness of state legislators in the United States to constituency requests for voter registration assistance. The authors sent nearly 5,000 state legislators a simple request via email, randomly manipulating the identity of the sender using putatively black or white names. They also randomized whether the sender explicitly mentions his partisan preference. The study found that legislators are significantly less likely to respond to requests from the black alias, and that this result held even once partisanship is considered. Interestingly, black legislators were more responsive to supposedly black names, which suggests that descriptive representation has a meaningful impact on responsiveness. As the authors put it, “the race of elected officials significantly affects how well minorities are represented.”

Given the origins of the constituency service literature, it is not surprising that the United States also dominates the new experimental literature. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Mia Costa analyzed the findings of 41 experiments from 20 studies; 33 of these experiments were carried out in the United States. Costa’s review highlights three major takeaways from the existing literature.

First, the average response rate of elites to constituency communication is around 53% (although, there is a high degree of variation; response rates across studies range from 19% to 79%). When considering the 19 experiments that actually measured the quality of responses, around 45% of responses received were deemed by the authors to be “meaningful.”

Second, there is widespread variation in terms of responsiveness, which seems to be a result of discrimination, as opposed to design-based factors. In her meta-analysis, Costa reports that minority constituents are 10 percentage points less likely to receive a response from elites, on average. Design elements like the deadline for considering replies, nature of the service request, and level of government have no discernible effect. Third, descriptive representation does seem to matter; in other words, minority legislators are more likely to respond to minority constituents.

While the cumulative results of these experiments are indicative of an overall trend, there is one obvious shortcoming: very few studies have examined developing countries. Indeed, in the conclusion to her meta-analysis, Costa calls for more research outside of the United States, which is desirable on its own merits and can also help contextualize the results from the United States.

One notable exception is a paper by Gwyneth McClendon, who modified the Butler and Broockman methodology, applying it to local politics in South Africa. In this study, the researcher sent emails to more than 1,200 local councilors in four provinces, manipulating the name of the sender to signal either a black or white racial identity. The emails themselves contained constituent queries about local public goods provision. The study revealed that the response rate in South Africa was much lower than the median from previous studies, as reported by Costa.
Only 21% of local councilors responded (compared to a median of 53% from previous studies) and only 13% of responses contained a legitimate “answer” to the question posed (compared to a median of 45%). In line with the prevailing wisdom in the literature, the study also found that same-race bias exists for both the dominant political party and the main opposition.

At least two recent papers examine these issues in the context of India. Gareth Nellis and Nikhar Gaikwad conduct two experiments to gauge the responsiveness of municipal councilors in 28 cities to local constituency service requests. In their first experiment, which involves mailed letters, the authors report an average callback rate of 14% (with an average response time of 7 days). Notably, they find that migrants are 23% less likely to receive a phone call in response to their request than a similar native. In a second experiment, which relies on SMS technology, the researchers send requests to a subset of councilors, randomizing the migrant status of constituents and their voting registration status. Response rates in the SMS-based experiment range between 10% and 15%, depending on the treatment condition. In this experiment, migrants are equally likely to receive a response from politicians, but only when they signal that they are registered voters.

Jennifer Bussell conducts a field experiment using WhatsApp and text messages sent to more than 4,000 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) across India. These messages from fictional constituents request assistance with obtaining either local infrastructure (i.e. a street lamp) or a ration card. Bussell randomizes four dimensions of the fictitious constituent: name, electoral preferences, prior requests for help from local officials, and the type of good requested. Overall, Bussell reports a 9% response rate (virtually identical to the response rate in our email study). While the response rate does not vary significantly depending on the type of good requested, the content of the response does: politicians are more likely to ask for a personal visit if constituents ask about a ration card while they typically demand more information if infrastructure is the good requested.

What India can learn from audit experiments

There are several reasons why India is an interesting venue for a study of this kind. India’s size – it boasts an electorate nearing 870 million – and the fact that it is the most enduring democracy in the developing world suggest that it is an important case study in which to examine democratic responsiveness.

Second, there is an extensive literature highlighting the fact that constituency service is an essential function of Indian legislators. Both legislators and the voters they represent view the former’s primary role as a fixer in the process of policy implementation. Legislating – given India’s stringent anti-defection law, which restricts the ability of individual legislators to vote against a party whip – is typically a secondary or tertiary concern.
Third, there is a history of politically salient social cleavages in India, which suggests at least some proportion of politicians engage in discriminatory practices. While there are multiple social cleavages that intersect with everyday social and political dynamics, one of the most salient is religion. The 2006 Sachar Committee report, for instance, found significant evidence that Muslims in India suffered from both overt discrimination and deeply entrenched inequalities.

Religious differences have arguably become even more prominent in recent years, with the rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Since the BJP government assumed power in May 2014, there have been numerous instances of party legislators and senior officials issuing controversial majoritarian statements that betray a pro-Hindu bias. Muslims also find very little formal, electoral representation within the BJP; despite holding 282 seats in the lower house of Parliament, not a single elected BJP legislator hails from the Muslim community.

Last but certainly not least, there is a renewed emphasis on digital governance in India. E-governance in India grew in popularity in the 1990s but was slowed by implementation and infrastructure shortcomings. However, there were also important successes, as discussed in-depth in a 2012 book by Jennifer Bussell. Collectively, increased mobile phone density, improvements in Internet connectivity, and the advent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “Digital India” campaign suggest that the conditions for electronic communication between constituents and their elected representatives are more propitious today than in years past. As of 2015, according to World Bank data, roughly 80% of Indians have a mobile phone subscription. While just 26% of Indians are Internet users, this share has more than doubled since 2012 and increased nearly six-fold since 2008.

Indeed, the Digital India program has established a strong normative preference for using improved ICT infrastructure to make government services more citizen-friendly; in fact, one of its pillars is titled “E-Governance – Reforming Government Through Technology.” Prime Minister Modi has even remarked that “access to governance has to be guaranteed with transparent systems that that deliver responses and outcomes” (emphasis added). For the first time in India’s history, the state has made it a top priority to inculcate citizens with the expectation that they should be able to use ICT to engage the government. This shift in normative preferences is a direct reflection of Modi’s overarching emphasis on bureaucratic monitoring and efficiency, which has been a mainstay of his administration in its first several years in office.

**Research design**

Our constituency service experiment, patterned on recent studies in this vein, is the first attempt (at least to our knowledge) to use email to study
the responsiveness of Indian legislators to their constituents. Our experiment covered the entirety of India’s national legislature: members of the Lok Sabha (lower house), directly elected from 543 single member district constituencies; and members of the Rajya Sabha (upper house), elected by India’s state assemblies.

The objective of the study is to answer three questions: How responsive are legislators to their constituents? How helpful are their responses? And, in an experiment where legislators are randomly assigned to receive the request from a Hindu or Muslim constituent, do they discriminate against constituents on the basis of religious identity?

The basic setup is as follows. We sent one email from a fictitious constituent to all MPs with working email addresses. Prior to sending out these emails, we tested the accuracy of MP’s emails by sending a simple note using an anonymous email ID created just for this purpose (and later discarded). All MPs with email addresses that bounced, and where replacement emails could not be identified, were discarded. As an aside, it is very difficult to locate emails for all MPs. We began by collecting all email addresses listed on the official websites of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. During the testing phase, we found that many of these emails were either incomplete or non-functioning. Surprisingly, a significant number of official email addresses (that is, those with a government-issued “sansad.nic.in” domain) bounced back. Where addresses were either wrong or missing, we searched alternative sources, namely affidavits candidates submit to the Election Commission, personal websites, and the websites of leading civil society groups that often compile this information. We began with a list of 786 parliamentary seats, of which six lay vacant. Of the remaining 780, we could not locate working emails for 53 others — leaving us with 727 working email addresses. Of the 727 we successfully contacted, 173 MPs did not have a working government-issued email ID.

While the experimental literature has tested both policy and service-based requests, we focused on the latter. Given what legislators say they prioritize in India (which is aligned with constituent beliefs), we felt that inquiring about access to services was more consistent with the kinds of issue Indian legislators deal with on a daily basis.

The constituent emails asked MPs to provide information about accessing MPs’ quotas for admission in Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) schools. KV schools are well-regarded central government schools that are primarily intended for the children of central government employees. According to program guidelines, each MP can allot 10 seats in KV schools to their constituents each academic year entirely on a discretionary basis. The only condition is that these individuals must be legal residents of the MP’s constituency – that is, they must reside in the electoral district of Lok Sabha MPs (or the respective states of Rajya Sabha MPs). We pre-programmed the emails to be sent
simultaneously the morning of July 20, 2016 – less than two weeks before the July 31 deadline for KV admission.

By sending the requests so close to the admission date, we figured it would make it relatively easy for MPs to respond to the request since they would have a good idea of whether their discretionary quota had been filled or not at that point in time. Contrary to expectation, there is evidence that MPs do not always fully utilize their KV quota.\textsuperscript{35} We also chose to send the emails out on a day Parliament was in session in order to hold the whereabouts of the MPs and their staff members constant. When Parliament is not in session, MPs are often traveling in their constituencies or on delegations abroad. When Parliament is in session, MPs reside in Delhi and their offices are hubs of activity at all hours of the day. Given that not all MPs are fully proficient in English, we translated the requests into 13 different languages, based on the predominant language spoken in the state (i.e. Gujarati in Gujarat, Bengali in West Bengal, Hindi in Uttar Pradesh, and so on).\textsuperscript{36}

We randomized the religious identity of the sender, using either the name “S. Mohamed” (to represent a generic Muslim constituent) or “R. Krishna” (to represent a generic Hindu constituent). Indian names can be quite regionally specific, which makes using just two names throughout the country very difficult. Therefore, we took care to choose names that are generic enough that they could plausibly be found in most parts of India. Additionally, we took care to choose a Hindu name that did not strongly signal membership in a particular caste. We employed a blocked randomization design, blocking on three characteristics: the house of Parliament (Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha), the age of the MP (above or below the median age of incumbent parliamentarians), and religious identity of the MP (Hindu or Muslim). To ensure that the randomization was executed effectively, Table 1 displays balance statistics on key covariates. As the data demonstrate, treatment (which we consider to be the Muslim sender) and control groups are well balanced.

The text of the email read as follows:

Subject: Kendriya Vidyalaya Form?

Shri/Smt [insert MP name]:

I am a resident of your constituency. I understand that each MP can recommend ten students for admission in a Kendriya Vidyalaya school. My household help has a son looking to gain admission for the 2016–17 year. I would like to request your help in this matter. Could you tell me what forms I need to complete?

Thank you,

[randomly insert S. Mohamed/R. Krishna]
**Ethical considerations**

There are obvious ethical concerns that arise in the context of any experiment that involves deception. Researchers who have conducted experiments similar to our own have taken these concerns seriously, as do we, and we did our best to minimize any possible adverse impacts. Overall, we believe that the benefits of understanding the responsiveness of legislators to requests for constituency service outweigh the costs associated with deception.

Deception was a necessary element of our experiment for at least two reasons. First, our constituent request asked for information that is not easily found short of getting in touch with an MP directly. As Costa writes, deception “is largely unavoidable as to observe legislators in their natural context.” Second, deception was also necessary to test for discrimination on the basis of religious identity. As Butler and Broockman put it, “the ability to randomly assign these characteristics [in their case, racial] to individuals is only available in a field experiment with fictitious individuals.”

However, we took great care to minimize the burden placed on our subjects. Although MPs are high-profile subjects, we maintained the anonymity of the actual identity of the MPs and employ a “between-subjects” design so that we are comparing how representatives, on average, respond to constituents of a certain type (rather than how any one MP responds to both a Hindu and a Muslim). We also kept in mind the possible opportunity cost for legislators to perform this study’s task rather than a task their constituents value more highly – known as the “secondary or tertiary costs” of an experiment of this nature. To this end, we placed only a minimal burden on legislators (and/or their staffs) when it comes to the form and content of their responses. We chose a simple informational request that would require an easily determined answer. Most MPs could fulfill the request by simply asking constituents to

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**Table 1. Balance statistics.**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean control</th>
<th>Mean treatment</th>
<th>T-statistic</th>
<th>P-value</th>
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<td>0.11</td>
<td>−0.62</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.87</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.19</td>
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</table>
contact a staff member, visit their office, or by informing them the quota was already filled up for the upcoming academic year. Indeed, the average response we received was typically just a few sentences.

**Experimental analysis**

We begin by addressing the first question: how responsive are MPs to constituent requests for service? We measured responsiveness in a dichotomous manner, giving any response (that was not automatically generated) a value of 1. Out of 727 emails successfully sent by the research team, we received just 69 responses, for a response rate of 9.5%. That means that fewer than one in 10 MPs responded to our request for information about accessing the KV quota which – to reiterate – is completely under the discretion of MPs. Of the 69 responses we received, just 7 were from official government-issued email accounts.\(^42\)

This low response rate is in line with the findings of existing papers on India which test technologies other than email.\(^43\) How does the responsiveness of Indian legislators compare to their counterparts globally? Figure 1 places this number in a comparative context. The median response rate, as described by Costa in her meta-analysis, is 53%.\(^44\) As the figure shows, there is considerable variation, even within the United States. The response rate we observe in India is closest that of South Africa, as reported by McClendon, although it is still only half as large.\(^45\)

In terms of response time, 42 responses (61% of the total) came within the first 24 h of sending the email (see Figure 2). Another 16 responses (almost one-quarter) came the second day and all but two of the remaining responses arrived within the first week.

In terms of partisan breakdown, the largest number of responses (42 out of 69) came from the ruling BJP. This is perhaps not surprising given that BJP MPs make up almost 44% of our subject pool. When one looks at the partisan response in relative (rather than absolute) terms, the BJP stands in the middle of the pack with 13% of party legislators responding to requests (see Figure 3). It should be said that the parties that fare well using this measure have relatively few MPs, although there are exceptions. For instance, 24% of the Shiv Sena’s 21 legislators responded to our request. The Congress Party fares poorly, both in relative and absolute terms, with just a 6% response rate.

Next, we examine the correlates of responsiveness, estimating a standard linear probability model with a simple binary outcome of responsiveness and a set of MP-level characteristics as regressors. In Column 1 of Table 2, we examine the correlates of responsiveness for the combined sample of MPs from both houses of Parliament. The results demonstrate that there are no clear differences by age, gender, education, criminal status, ministerial status, or parliamentary performance. However, there do appear to be statistically significant differences on at least three counts.
First, Lok Sabha MPs are five times more likely to respond to constituents than Rajya Sabha MPs. The response rate for the former is 12.2%, compared to only 2.4% for the latter. This divergence accords with our intuition – given that Lok Sabha MPs are directly elected by voters in their constituencies whereas Rajya Sabha MPs are indirectly elected by the state assemblies and are expected
to represent the interests of their states at large. Second, as the descriptive evidence above suggests, BJP MPs are significantly more likely to respond than their peers. Third, wealthier MPs are modestly more likely to respond, which could be a function of greater staff resources. Since MPs have minimal staff, some MPs (based on anecdotal evidence) often end up paying for extra staff out of their own pockets.

In Column 2, we restrict our focus to Lok Sabha MPs, which allows us to incorporate two additional variables for which data does not exist for members of the Rajya Sabha. First, we add a variable for an MP’s presence on social media (measured using an index that captures an MP’s engagement on various social media platforms). Second, we add data on the (logged) population density of the MPs’ constituencies, since one might expect MPs from more rural areas to be less responsive to emails. The results in Column 2 reveal that MPs who are more active on social media are indeed more likely to respond to requests. However, we do not find a significant relationship between a constituency’s population density and MP responsiveness.
In sum, the overall response rate of MPs is quite low, even by developing country standards, although it is consistent with the two other India-based studies we identified. The responses that we did receive largely arrived within the first 48 h, with considerable drop-off after that initial window of time. While there is systematic variation in terms of who responds, contrary to what one might expect, younger MPs (who might have greater facility with technology) are not more likely to respond nor are more educated MPs.

We now turn to our second question, which concerns the helpfulness of the responses. Of the 69 responses that came in, we dichotomously coded 40 (or 58% of the total) as “helpful.” We coded responses as “helpful” if they provided useful information that helped answer our constituency service request. This could be any information about how to access the quota, how to apply next year, or how to get in touch with a staff member to discuss the quota. To help make this concrete, the following is a response we received that we deemed to be helpful:

Thank you for your email below. Unfortunately, this year’s KV admissions have already been completed—the form was submitted two months ago and the nominated...
students are already in the classroom. Please ask your staff member to get in touch with our [constituency name] office and they will try and add her application to the list for next year.

And here is a response we received that we deemed to be unhelpful:

*Aap bahut late ho gaye hain. Naam aur form hum bhej chuke hain.* [You are very late. We have already sent the names and forms.]

On this metric of “helpfulness,” India fares much better in relative comparison. Although the overall number of responses received is quite low, their quality is better than average. According to the meta-analysis conducted by Costa, 45% of responses across the studies she examined are deemed meaningful or useful (see Figure 4).

One interesting question to ask here, from the perspective of digital governance, is whether the follow-up suggested by the helpful responses occurs online or offline. Of the 40 helpful responses we received, slightly less than two-thirds (25 total) suggest follow-up offline (typically, either on the phone or in person) while one-third suggests follow-up online.

The third and final question we are interested in addressing is whether there was discrimination in terms of responsiveness. When we look at the average response rate, Muslim constituents were just as likely (or just as unlikely, to state it accurately) as Hindu constituents to receive a response. The average response rate was 10% for Hindu constituents and 9% for Muslims constituents. These differences are not statistically significant. This is at odds with expectations and

![Figure 4](image-url). MP helpfulness, in comparative terms.
the findings of Gaikwad and Nellis, who find that constituents with Hindu-sounding names are much more likely than their Muslim counterparts to receive responses.\textsuperscript{53}

The corollary to this question is whether there is variation based on the identity of the recipient MP. Other studies have found that minority representatives or officials are more likely to respond to requests coming from minority constituents and vice versa. As shown in Figure 5, we do not find any evidence of such dynamics. The average response of a Hindu MP to Hindu and Muslim constituents is, statistically speaking, indistinguishable (11% versus 9%). The same is true if we look at Muslims MPs: Muslim MPs are no more responsive to Muslim constituents than to Hindu ones (6% response rate versus 5%).\textsuperscript{54}

One rather curious finding emerges from our analysis when we scrutinize responsiveness after disaggregating BJP versus non-BJP MPs. We do not detect a statistically significant difference in the response rate to Hindu and Muslim constituents when the recipient is a member of the BJP, but we do find that non-BJP MPs are significantly more likely to respond to Hindu constituents than Muslim constituents. Non-BJP MPs appear twice as likely to respond to Hindu constituents as to Muslim ones. Given that the BJP is an avowedly pro-Hindu party, this is surprising (although one has to keep in mind that the response rates are still very small). This result deserves fuller exploration.

![Figure 5](image-url). Hindu–Muslim sender response rate difference. Note: The y-axis captures the difference in response rates between Hindu and Muslim senders. The x-axis captures different categories of MPs. Values greater than zero mean a higher response rate for Hindu senders. The vertical bars represent the 95% confidence intervals from a simple difference in means t-test, and the dots are the average response rates. Vertical bars which cross zero are not statistically significant with 95% confidence.
Conclusion

The results of this article suggest that while e-governance holds immense potential for connecting constituents with their representatives, it still has a long way to go in India. Despite the massive strides made in ICT infrastructure and mobile and Internet penetration in recent years, the role of email as a mechanism for providing constituency service is quite nascent and uneven. The overall responsiveness of MPs to email requests for service is extremely low when compared to other settings, including at least one other developing democracy (South Africa). Furthermore, even when constituency contact is initiated online, the suggested follow-up is offline – which implies that e-governance still requires interactions outside of the digital space in practical terms.

From a policy perspective, if the government were truly interested in facilitating online exchanges between representatives and their constituents, one simple fix it could undertake is to ensure that all MPs have working email addresses listed and easily accessible on their official pages. As it is, most MPs do have email addresses listed on their official homepages, but these are often not accurate. In fact, emails to official government email accounts regularly bounce back and, judging from the fact that the vast majority of responses we received came from personal accounts, MPs themselves do not seem to make use of the official government system. Independent of which email account MPs rely on, civil society groups that are in the business of working with parliamentarians on educational, training, and outreach initiatives might also encourage the use of email as one tool to promote e-governance.

Why might ensuring that MPs possess – and utilize – government-issued email accounts be a desirable outcome? For starters, doing so would ensure that government business is transacted on a government system, which is beneficial from a record-keeping perspective. In addition, uniformity promotes access; if all MPs had working government-issued email IDs, these addresses could easily be placed in the public domain on their official homepages on the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha websites. Finally, standardization might also help inculcate the norm the government has rhetorically embraced, which is that digital platforms should become standard venues for citizen–state interaction.

Beyond policy, our findings also suggest three concrete avenues for further research.

First, does the responsiveness of representatives vary by the level of government? For instance, one hypothesis is that responsiveness and legislator distance are inversely related. In other words, one might expect MPs to be relatively unresponsive to constituent requests given that they are based in Delhi for large parts of the year and also represent a much larger pool of citizens than state legislators or local officials. While Gaikwad and Nellis and Bussell suggest that responsiveness is also quite low at lower levels of government, future researchers
could field the same experiment at multiple levels of government to devise a comparable measure of differences across tiers.  

Second, we decided to focus on the dominant religious cleavage in Indian society to examine the extent of discriminatory behavior among MPs. We intentionally held class – another salient social cleavage – constant by describing the petitioners as having household help, and by using an ICT medium accessible to a quarter of Indians. Because there are multiple salient social cleavages in Indian politics, further research might explore alternatives, such as class, caste, gender, age, or language.

Finally, one limitation of this study is its reliance on email. In India, one could argue that SMS or WhatsApp is far more widespread as method for digital communication. If email culture is not deeply embedded in Indian society, then our findings might be highly contingent on the medium employed. Indeed, the mobile phone is a ubiquitous presence in Indian politics; politicians can rarely be seen without one in their hands. While this is a possibility worth exploring further, related evidence suggests that the response rates to these technologies are also relatively low.

We hope to explore some of these opportunities in the future research.

Notes


16. Cf. Costa 2017. Of the remaining studies Costa analyzes, 3 focused on China, 3 on Germany, 1 on South Africa, and 1 on the European Union.


19. Ibid.


27. Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Government of India, Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India (New Delhi: Government of India, 2006).


31. This quote appears on the Digital India website: http://www.digitalindia.gov.in/content/e-governance-%E2%80%93-reforming-government-through-technology.

32. For instance, one of the government’s initiatives in this area is the creation of a new “MyGov” website. MyGov is a portal that aims to facilitate communication between government organizations and private citizens by providing an online forum to listen to lectures, read blogs, participate in discussion boards, take surveys, and participate in design contests.

33. We also disregarded nominated members of parliament.

34. Roughly one-third of MPs listed multiple email accounts. In these instances, we copied all relevant email accounts when sending requests for assistance but we did not penalize MPs if they only responded from one account.


36. The languages were Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Tamil, and Telugu. The authors are deeply grateful to a team of volunteers for assisting with these translations. Because of concerns that fonts associated with these different languages may not be recognized by the recipient’s email software, we sent all messages using Roman script.


42. Of those 69 MPs who responded, 17 did not possess a working “sansad.nic.in” (official) email account; 2 only had an official email account; and the remaining 50 listed both official and personal email accounts.


46. Quite often, Rajya Sabha MPs have little organic connection to the state which they represent in Parliament. To be nominated from a state, all that is required of a prospective MP is to have a nominal mailing address in that state.

47. We are grateful to PRS Legislative Research for sharing this data with us.


49. We also test whether replacing logged population density with two other measures – a binary indicator for whether a constituency is above or below the median population density and a categorical variable for whether constituencies are urban, rural, or semi-urban – changes our results. We find no change in results using these alternate
measures. We thank the Trivedi Centre for Political Data for graciously sharing the
categorical data classifying constituencies as urban, rural, or semi-urban.

50. Determining what constitutes a “helpful” response is a subjective enterprise. To ensure
consistency, two of the authors independently coded responses before comparing
notes. Their assessments concurred in all but two instances.

51. It is possible that the relatively high proportion of “helpful” responses is a product of
selection bias. That is, MPs who take the time to respond could be more inclined to be
helpful, whereas those that do not bother would be more likely to be unhelpful, even if
they did respond. While an intriguing possibility, this is not what other researchers
have found in other settings where the overall response rate has been much higher than
we observe, yet the share of helpful responses is much lower.

54. There are 37 Muslim MPs in our sample across both houses of Parliament.

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