

# Strategic Interests and Public Roles: Village Council Presidents in India

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Abstract: Village council presidents in India represent one of the largest populations of local elected executives in the democratic world. Yet, we have only limited insights into their political behavior, the degree to which their actions reflect stated goals for local councils, and how their acts affect governance and development outcomes in practice. This article sheds new light on the strategies local council presidents use to further their professional and personal interests. Drawing on multi-day shadowing of fourteen council presidents in Uttar Pradesh, I show that these political elites allocate time in a manner that enables them to execute their formal responsibilities while also engaging in activities that help to build their personal reputation. In particular, they spend a disproportionate amount of time on general activities in the constituency and executive tasks over which they have autonomous control, relative to those legislative tasks that are the core formal responsibility of the local council. I suggest that while this tendency may help to build a president's reputation in the district, it can also result in unequal access to government services among her constituents, thus limiting the benefits of delegating public programs to the local level.

## Introduction

By nine o'clock in the morning, a small group of people had already congregated at Dheeraj Yadav's home office—the base of operations for this local council president in Uttar Pradesh, India.<sup>1</sup> They were chatting animatedly with Yadav about work in the village that needed to be completed. Two additional men approached the president and asked him to provide their domicile certificates, which he quickly did.<sup>2</sup> An older man then arrived and asked Yadav about the status of his ration card,<sup>3</sup> while at the same time another man called to ask about the status of an event planned that day for disabled persons living in the area. Amidst these requests, the council president discussed current events with the gathered crowd, including an upcoming rally by the president of a national political party and recent government actions against neighboring Pakistan. Two more men arrived with requests, one about the status of his pension and the other about gaining access to a new program providing natural gas connections for cooking. The president asked for their documentation and said he would help them with how to proceed. Another individual then raised a question about a central government scheme to build toilets in private homes, but Yadav had to tell his constituents that the money for the scheme had not yet arrived. Meanwhile, a teacher called the president and made plans to talk with him later that day at the local government office. By this point, the crowd had dispersed, and the council president went inside to prepare for the rest of his day.

In this manner, over fewer than two hours, a local politician in India engaged in a range of professional activities, from the creation and delivery of official documents, to the dissemination of information about government programs, and intervened on behalf of multiple individuals in need of government programs, while also engaging in informal political discussion and planning for public and professional activities in the area later in the day. How do we characterize these various actions by a local elected official? Do these behaviors

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<sup>1</sup>Shadowing subject P(O)

<sup>2</sup>Domicile certificates are official proof of residence documents.

<sup>3</sup>Ration cards are identity documents that enable holders to acquire government-subsidized foodstuffs.

fit our expectations about the anticipated role for local council presidents in India? Or do the patterns of behavior by such politicians instead tell us something different about the incentives of these local political elites? Can the behavior of village council presidents in India shed light on how institutional expectations can meet with individual interests to produce particular, perhaps unanticipated, political and governance outcomes?

In this paper, I investigate the role of village council presidents—the elected executives of India’s approximately 250,000 *gram panchayats*—in daily village life. These individuals, known, *inter alia* as *pradhan*, *sarpanch*, and *mukhiya*, occupy an important space in local governance structures. As Chauchard shows, village council presidents play both executive and legislative roles at the village level (Chauchard (2017)). They select local infrastructure projects, oversee implementation of programs—including controlling access and distribution of resources—and also serve as a primary intermediary between citizens and higher-level authorities (Chauchard (2017), Kruks-Wisner (2018), Bussell (2019a)). These formal and informal activities related to “development” and the functioning of state programs make up the predominant portion of their daily activities (Bussell (2019a)).<sup>4</sup>

Yet, to what extent do presidents’ distribution of time and effort to these activities reflect the official goals for local councils? Are council presidents primarily involved in decision-making and implementation of government works and development programs in the community? Or are they focused more on those activities, whether official or unofficial, which may help to pave the way for their goals beyond local politics? If the latter, what are the implications for overall governance outcomes in the community?

I argue that these local politicians establish routines by which they use their position to pursue endeavors that are most likely to build their reputation among constituents. In particular, I highlight the manner by which daily routines, and specific patterns of behavior, enable these actors to spend a disproportionate amount of time on general activities in the

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<sup>4</sup>Village council presidents surveyed in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh report spending a total of 87% of their time either meeting with citizens, bureaucrats, and other politicians, or conducting “office work” (Bussell (2019a): 183).

constituency and tasks over which they have autonomous control, relative to those tasks that are the core responsibility of the local council and over which they share authority with other council members. Thus, they are likely to spend time doing things that allow them to be seen in the community and to claim credit for the outcomes of their efforts. I base these claims on data from the shadowing of fourteen village council presidents in Uttar Pradesh. This intensive observation of presidents in their daily routines offers an opportunity to develop a clearer picture of the ways in which these individuals practice politics.

Observations of village council presidents were conducted via a process of structured observation, in which subjects were “shadowed” for approximately two days, as they went about their regular daily activities. This method allows for highly detailed descriptions of president behavior and interactions. To establish the basic patterns of behavior among the shadowed politicians, I first use text analysis and structured topic modeling, applied to the corpus of text generated over the full set of shadowing days and all fourteen politicians. Having established basic trends, and differences, across these politicians, I then draw on qualitative coding of the same documentation to elaborate in greater detail what constitutes these specific configurations of behavior. In doing so, I also offer specific narrative examples to highlight the dynamics of these activities within the lives of individual politicians.

This analysis offers a number of new insights into the behavior of political elites and the nature of governance in India. First, I show that there are clear patterns of behavior across the shadowed politicians, such that we can begin to elaborate characteristics of behavior among this relatively new, but very large, political class. Yet, and second, the behaviors of these elected representatives do not necessarily reflect the purported goals of the legislation that empowers them. Thus, and finally, the analysis presented here uncovers an important need for reevaluation of the ways in which local council institutions in India, rather than broadening the representative base at the village level, may instead be reinforcing dynamics of exclusion that threaten India’s developmental goals.

In the next section, I consider our existing frameworks for characterizing the behavior

of local Indian politicians, and build on this work to suggest how we might expect village council presidents to act, given the constraints and opportunities of their institutional setting. I then describe in greater detail the shadowing methodology and how it was implemented in this project. In the fourth section, I draw on the methods of text analysis to uncover patterns within the written records produced by the shadowing engagements and discuss the results of the unsupervised text analysis and structural topic model, before moving in the fifth section to elaborate on details of the patterns identified via qualitative coding. I conclude with a consideration of what the findings of this analysis imply for our understanding of the relationship between India's local governance reforms and the quality of development outcomes on the ground.

## The Village Council President in Indian Politics

Since the constitutional amendment of 1992, *gram panchayats*, or village councils, have the formal status as India's most local elected bodies.<sup>5</sup> While the introduction of these bodies has differed across the country, formal elections have been held at least since 2010 across all of India's states.<sup>6</sup> The presidents of these councils are then the elected executive officers that sit closest to India's predominant rural population. They live near their constituents and often know well the people they meet at home or on the street.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, is the role that these actors play in line with what was expected by the 73rd Amendment? The primary functions of village councils, as outlined in the amendment, are to, on the basis of activities delegated by the state legislature, oversee and implement programs across a wide range of 29 areas listed in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution, including agriculture, education, housing, drinking water, and poverty alleviation. Do village

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<sup>5</sup>The 73rd Amendment to India's Constitution laid down a framework for three levels of rural councils, while the 74th Amendment established a framework for urban elected bodies

<sup>6</sup>Bohlken 2016. Jharkhand, the last state to officially implement village councils, held its first elections in 2010.

<sup>7</sup>In Bussell (2019a), I find that the village council presidents here independently mentioned the name of the person visiting them in 77% of the 108 cases of individual requests we observed citizens making to their presidents. Bussell (2019a): 193. See also Schneider (2019) for some limitations on this knowledge.

councils and, in particular, their presidents, serve primarily to oversee the government’s implementation of development programs in these areas? If so, how, if at all, do the personal interests of elected presidents affect the manner by which these goals are pursued?

Existing work suggests that a president’s incentives to engage in different types of professional activities may be shaped by expectations of the control they hold over outcomes. In an analysis of differences across scheduled caste and non-scheduled caste<sup>8</sup> village council presidents, Chauchard effectively distinguishes between those responsibilities of village council presidents over which there is considerable variation in individual leverage and those over which all presidents are likely to exert independent control (Chauchard (2017)). For example, he finds that beneficiary selection for government welfare schemes exhibits characteristics of shared influence across members of the village council and local bureaucracy. Thus, there are areas where the full council and secretary have influence over decisions, which he terms *legislative*, and where we may expect a more limited, or at least varied, role of council presidents.

In contrast, village council presidents also have important formal and informal powers where their influence is not shared with other actors. Their official powers are primarily related to government documentation—“the sarpanch’s signature and stamp are required on all official documents produced by the gram panchayat”—and the disbursement of funds for the construction of public works (Chauchard (2017): 92). These roles “make sarpanches highly visible in village life. They also provide them with a great deal of influence on various sets of villagers, regardless of their impact on formal decision-making within the council” (Chauchard (2017): 93, emphasis in original).

In addition, council presidents have substantial informal authority, thanks to these various forms of influence in other areas. They have leverage to negotiate with various government actors, including the police and local bureaucrats, and are frequently a part of public

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<sup>8</sup>Scheduled castes are those social groups included on an official list (schedule) allocating to them particular rights. In the case of village councils, a portion of each state’s village council president positions is reserved only for candidates from the scheduled castes each election.

discussions in the community. As a result, presidents often play the role of intermediary between individuals in the community and other actors (Chauchard (2017): 94). Indeed, research on council presidents across northern India shows that they are the most likely across a range of public and private actors to be recipients of requests for assistance and intermediation from citizens (Kruks-Wisner (2018), Bussell (2019a)).

Key to this informal intermediary role, however, is the license it gives to council presidents to favor certain individuals over others. As shown in related work, individuals who share the political party preference of their local council president are more likely to receive government benefits allocated by the local council (Dunning and Nilekani (2013), Bussell (2019a): 194-198). In addition, individuals perceive these preferences. Survey respondents considering potential candidates for elected village office, in a hypothetical experimental setting, are more likely to say they expect to receive a job or benefit if the winning candidate shares their political party preference (Bussell (2019a): 199-200). This suggests that presidents may take advantage of their executive powers to build and retain their support base in the community (Stokes et al. (2013)).

Village council presidents might also have reasons to engage in other types of activities than those explicitly associated with their official role. As prominent members of the local community, they are likely to participate in many public and private activities, such as festivals, weddings, and funerals. Being “seen” in the community may be particularly important given that most presidents do not expect to remain in their elected role indefinitely. Past work highlights that many individuals pursue the role of village council president in order to achieve more lucrative goals later, such as a change in career or higher political office (Chauchard (2017): 96). Thus, engaging with other actors in the community and generally building their reputation, rather than specifically working on council-related activities, may also be an important element of presidents’ daily lives.

These distinctions between the shared influence of presidents over official council activities and the generally autonomous leverage they hold over other official and unofficial business,

as well as the incentives for general engagement with the community, suggest that we might expect to see presidents place a greater emphasis on those tasks over which they have autonomous control and general community activities, even where the official actions shared with other members of the council fall more precisely within the ambit of the village elected body. In the remainder of this article, I test these expectations, through an investigation of village council president activities, offering specific attention to how presidents may, or may not, emphasize their autonomous and general roles relative to those more closely tied to the shared work of the council as a whole.

In order to distinguish between these different types of activities in the empirical record, I make the following conceptual distinctions: shared tasks are those tied directly to the role of the village council in executing “development works” in the council domain. This may include the selection of beneficiaries for schemes, choices over construction projects, and assistance in the distribution of various government benefits. Autonomous tasks are those explicitly within the domain of the village council president, such as the provision of official documents, supervision of government works, and intermediation between citizens and other actors. Finally, general activities are those in which the president is engaged in her official role, but is not executing specific council tasks. This could include informal discussions in the village, participation in public events, and other work-related actions such as travel between official activities.

## **Shadowing Village Council Presidents**

The empirical material in this article is drawn from the detailed study of fourteen (14) village council presidents in Uttar Pradesh. The primary method of data collection was shadowing presidents in the course of their regular activities. Shadowing involves the direct observation of subjects in their daily lives, with detailed documentation on a regularized basis throughout the course of the observation (Bussell (2019a)). In this study, we typically shadowed each



president for two days, during which the shadower followed the politician as she engaged in a range of activities—from surveying construction sites to drinking tea—at home and in the constituency. Observations were made at a minimum of every fifteen minutes and accounted for the subject’s location, activities, companions, and other commentary.<sup>9</sup>

The sample of shadowed presidents was selected as a part of a larger study that also included shadowing of state legislators in Uttar Pradesh<sup>10</sup>. Seven legislators were selected via a stratified random sample. Once these shadowing studies were completed, we identified the list of village councils that sat within the constituencies. Village councils were randomly selected from this list to prioritize potential subjects, who were then contacted to request a shadowing engagement. This process was followed until we were able to secure shadowing appointments with two president respondents from each constituency. Shadowing engagements were then completed between July and September 2016, approximately eight months after the village council elections of 2015 and five months before the state legislative elections held in 2017. I include in the Appendix to this paper the anonymized fieldnotes on which the analyses are based.

To illustrate the character of observations made possible through shadowing, and to provide an introduction to many of the typical activities of presidents shadowed in this study, I include here a summary of the observations for one village council president, who I refer to as Subhash Yadav.<sup>11</sup> Note that in Uttar Pradesh, village council presidents are called *pradhan*.

(8:30) Subhash Yadav is already sitting outside his house with his son when the shadower arrives. Shortly thereafter, a villager arrives to tell the Pradhan that his Samajwadi pension—a new state program for the poor—has been deposited in his account. After this man leaves, Yadav’s house grows quiet and there are no more visitors. The Pradhan decides to take his

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<sup>9</sup>Shadowing engagements were completed by a team of enumerators from MORSEL Research and Development in coordination with the author.

<sup>10</sup>See Bussell (2019a)

<sup>11</sup>Shadowing subject P(A). Note that this account draws on material also discussed in Bussell (2019a): Chapter 6)

breakfast, and then announces that he did not sleep well and is going to take this opportunity to get some rest. He goes into the house and does not return for two hours.

(12:30) The Pradhan receives a phone call telling him that the son of a villager has drowned. He leaves immediately to go to the location and sees that the boy has indeed passed away. He makes a call to the police station to inform them and then tells the group of about 50 people gathered in the area that the police will have to decide whether or not to do a post mortem. If not, then they will all make plans to cremate the body.

(2:00) After consulting with all the relevant parties, Yadav tells the parents of the boy that they may take the body. He then receives a phone call from a friend asking him to come to the police station. He makes plans to go to the station that afternoon, but he must attend a meeting at the block office first. The Pradhan participates in the meeting and then stops by a shop in the nearby market to check on a sign that is being produced with his photo. The purpose of the sign is not clear, but Yadav seems satisfied.

(3:15) By mid-afternoon, the Pradhan arrives at the Police station, greets his colleague, and meets with the in-charge officer. The subject matter of their meeting seems less related to the death of the boy, and more concerned with an upcoming vacancy at the station. His friend has a photo that Yadav gives to the officer in-charge, ostensibly to support an application for the open position. Once this transaction is complete, he goes outside and takes a break to have tea nearby.

(4:30) Yadav begins to make his way home, via two villages in his council area. In the first village, a number of people stop him to complain that the electricity wire has not yet been connected. He discusses the problem and then departs for another village before finally making it back to his house and ending his work for the day (6:00).

(8:00) In the morning on the next day, Yadav is having tea outside his house when the owner of a local shop stops by to complain that the electricity was out all night, causing problems for his mobile phone recharge business. Shortly thereafter, a woman comes to the Pradhan and tells him that her husband beat her the previous night and she wants Yadav's

help in dealing with him. Their conversation is interrupted by a phone call from the President of the local Pradhan union, who informs Yadav that there will be a meeting the following day. The Pradhan notes that they will need to arrange money for the meeting as well.

(9:15) A group of about 15 villagers arrives at the Pradhan's house asking about when drought relief packages will be distributed. Yadav tells them that it will happen today by 3 PM at the latest. He then continues to talk with the gathered group, before making a phone call to one of the other council members. The Pradhan told the other councilor to inform people with Above Poverty Line (APL) ration cards about how to submit documentation for their cards. The general conversation continues until Yadav makes a call to the local area's education officer to inform him that there will be a distribution of school uniforms at the primary school today and the officer should be there for it. The rather quiet morning continues until Yadav announces that he must prepare for the event at the school.

(11:45) At midday, the Pradhan is ready to depart for the school, which he explains was opened by a manufacturing company, rather than the government. When he arrives, there is a group of approximately 70 people gathered, including the school's teachers and all of the students. Shortly thereafter, two company representatives also arrive and participate with Yadav in distributing uniforms to the children. When the ceremony is complete, the Pradhan also stops to check on the nearby primary and junior schools. In the process, he notes that the center for small children is not open and asks the teacher why this is the case. She is unable to give him an answer.

(1:30) With the school visits completed, Yadav departs for a meeting at the block office with the Chief Development Officer for his area. There are a number of other pradhans also at the meeting and Yadav takes this opportunity to encourage them to attend the Pradhan union meeting the next day and to give a cash donation to support the union. (3:15) After the meeting, the Pradhan stops by a bank and then takes a break to have tea at a nearby shop.

(3:45) During his break, Yadav receives a call from the operator of the local ration shop,

who asks him to come now to his house. When the Pradhan arrives, he sees that the operator has prepared all of the packages for the drought relief distribution. Yadav joins the operator and stands in front of the more than 50 people who have gathered to receive their relief packages. (5:00) They spend more than half an hour handing out the bags of vegetables, at which point the Pradhan asks the shop operator to continue the process without him. Yadav heads home, having completed his work for the day.

This summary highlights the broad range of activities in which shadowed presidents were typically engaged, including both those that appeared to be scheduled in advance and those that arose from unexpected events in the constituency. I now turn to the first set of analyses to illuminate and evaluate characteristics of behavior by these political elites.

## **Patterns of Behavior Across Village Council Presidents**

As highlighted in the previous section, shadowing produces a large corpus of written materials documenting the daily life of shadowed individuals. In the case of this project, there are 1,041 individual time-based observations across the 14 subjects and 29 days of observation. Two representative examples of such observations, randomly chosen from the full set of text, are:

“Pradhan ji stopped at a local place [anonymized], a man asked him about his form submission.”<sup>12</sup>

“Pradhan and a ward member<sup>13</sup> are walking and after few steps they stop in front of someone’s house and Pradhan said to the ward member to note down his name in the list of Prime Minister House Scheme. I asked Pradhan whose house is this? He told me whose house it is.”<sup>14</sup>

To summarize the details of these observations is a substantial task. I begin with a

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<sup>12</sup>Observation ID 678, subject P(J).

<sup>13</sup>Ward members are other members of the village council

<sup>14</sup>Observation ID 814, subject P(L).

form of text analysis that utilizes unsupervised machine learning to identify patterns in the associations between words and to uncover “topics” based on these patterns. Specifically, I use a structural topic model (STM) that allows for the addition of metadata—such as the identity of the shadowee or the time of day—to the analyzed text and then enables statistical modeling of the associations between these metadata and the identified topics.

For the shadowing data from my village council president sample, and using the strategies outlined in Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley (2019), I implement a twenty (20) topic model that includes the following metadata for each observation: subject (shadowee ID), the day of the shadowing study, whether it was the weekend, and whether it was morning.<sup>15</sup> These covariates were chosen to evaluate the presence of differing activities across times of the day and week, variations across presidents, and any possible changes in observer effects over the shadowing period.

## Summary of Topics

By design, the model results in a set of twenty “topics,” or sets of words that tend to appear together in the corpus of text. The model does not provide a substantive summary of the topics and this is left to the interpretation of the researcher. Here, I reviewed the top ten words associated with each topic, and then implemented a word cloud for each one, which displayed the top words sized according to the frequency of their appearance in the text. Based on these clouds, I interpreted the theme of, and determined a related name for, each topic. The topics, with names and top ten associated words are shown in Table 1. Representative word clouds are shown in Figures 1-3. In the Appendix, I also provide a short summary of how I interpret the substance underlying each topic, based on the most common words, the word clouds, and my knowledge of the local environment.

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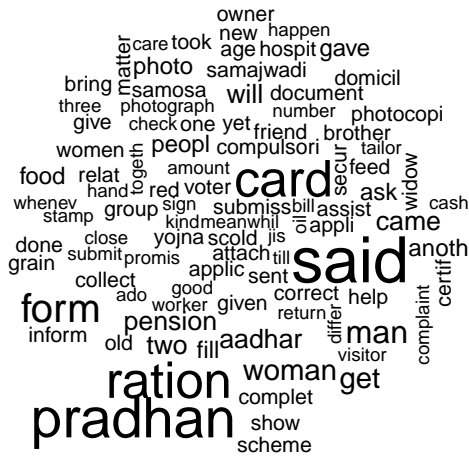
<sup>15</sup>I also implemented models with a different number of set topics. 14 topics was the lowest number for which the models would converge within 200 iterations. The set of topics produced in the 20-topic model seemed the most reasonably distinct, while not becoming overly repetitive in content.

Table 1 - Summary of Topics

Topic	Description	Highest Probability Words	Type
1	Planning	will, discuss, start, soon, parti, elect, support, get	Autonomous
2	Distribution	head, toward, distribut, polic, packet, drought, now, relief	Shared
3	Home	still, insid, home, travel, drive, meal, goingi, placei	Personal
4	President	pradhan, way, busi, farm, check, friend, will, issu	Personal
5	Paperwork	paper, submit, money, ask, will, work, answer, need	Autonomous
6	Education	school, say, will, son, primari, teacher, pleas, distribut	Autonomous
7	Questions	ask, name, told, man, person, anoth, ladi, make	Shadowing
8	Secretary	also, left, secretari, car, time, anoth, repli, got	Shared
9	At a House	hous, whose, sit, stop, someon, arrang, friend, care	General
10	In Village	villag, peopl, say, will, said, two, tell, panchayat	General
11	Phone Calls	call, talk, come, someon, ask, phone, said, will	General
12	Travel/Meals	said, went, place, leav, lunch, wait, let, outsid	Personal
13	Connections	meet, now, gas, connect, will, tomorrow, chief, lpg	Shared
14	Construction	work, construct, said, done, toilet, road, land, see	Autonomous
15	Tea Breaks	take, tea, shop, boy, everyon, owner, bath, brought	Personal
16	Public Events	sit, peopl, reach, back, greet, give, panchayat, speech	General
17	Rations	said, pradhan, card, ration, form, man, woman, get	Autonomous
18	Block Office	offic, block, reach, said, bike, present, bdo, somewher	Autonomous
19	Beneficiary Lists	list, ward, member, repli, woman, survey, come, also	Shared
20	Visits	came, samaj, welfar, regular, sat, visitor, given, depart	Autonomous

Figure 1 displays the word cloud for the “Rations” topic. The most prominent substantive words displayed here are pradhan, ration, card, and form, with a wide range of other associated words, including photograph, food, aadhar,<sup>16</sup> man, woman, and submit. The majority of the words shown here seem to reference requests to the pradhan for assistance in acquiring a ration card or other government document, or accessing the benefits associated with these documents.

Figure 1 - “Rations” topic #17



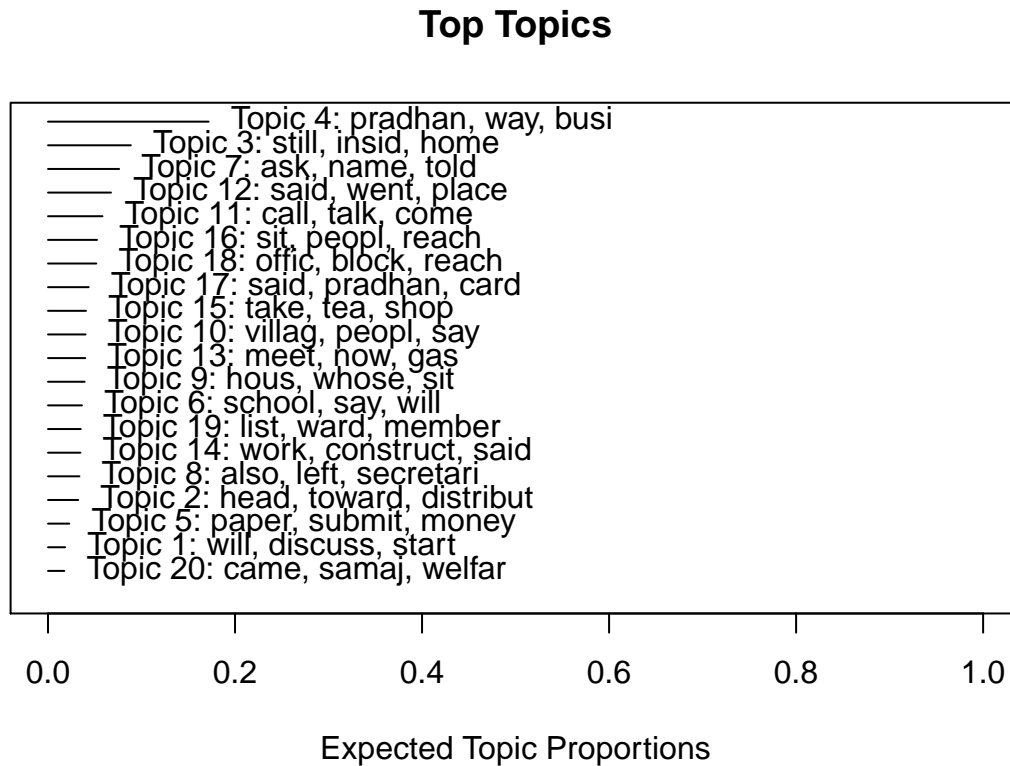
<sup>16</sup>Aadhar is a biometric ID that is now required for many government benefits







Figure 4 - Prevalence of Topics in Shadowing Fieldnotes



In Table 1, I also categorize each topic as one of five different activity types. As previously noted, I distinguish here between *autonomous* acts—those functions for which the president can be solely responsible, such as providing of official documentation and intermediating on behalf of individuals and groups—and *shared* activities—those that are more directly tied to decisions about and discharge of government programs, and over which the president may have less exclusive control. *General* activities are those conducted in the guise of the president but without clear indications of a specific purpose, such as visits to public spaces in the villages, and *personal* activities are those concerned with daily, non-professional, actions, such as meals. Finally, *shadowing* activities are those specific to the observations or questions of the shadower. Autonomous topics make up 35% of the topics from the corpus (7 topics), shared topics are 20% (4), general topics are 20% (4), personal topics are 20% (4), and shadowing is 5% (1).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Note that this does not necessarily mean that presidents divide their time across activities in the same proportions. I consider time allocation in the next section.

This categorization of topics allows us to consider in a different manner the degree to which different types of activities make up the set of observations. Using these categories, in combination with the results shown in Figure 4, we see that the five most common topics are primarily related to personal activities, in addition to one each general and shadowing topics. The next five, however, are much more diverse with two autonomous topics, and one each shared, general, and personal topics. The third group is a split of autonomous (2) and general (2) topics, with one shared topic. Finally, the least common topics are a mix of autonomous and shared. Overall, this ranking suggests that personal and general topics make up a large portion of what was reported during shadowing. The former may be unsurprising given the inclusion of all daily activities (including meals, etc.) in the observations. The latter, with the emphasis on general activities, is perhaps more unexpected, particularly relative to official tasks, and merits further investigation. A second interesting finding is that autonomous topics are not only more predominant in the absolute number of topics versus shared topics, but they also tend to make up a larger portion of the topic corpus overall. This suggests that village council presidents may be spending more time on those activities over which they have greater influence. I consider these initial findings in greater detail in the next section.

## **Modeling Topics and Their Correlates**

Beyond these summaries of the data, the inclusion of metadata for each observation allows for an analysis of whether the appearance of specific topics is associated with other variables in the data. I implemented a multivariate structural topic model that measures the correlation between subject identity, shadowing day, whether the observation occurred on the weekend, and the time of day (morning versus afternoon).

Existing research suggests that we may plausibly observe variations in behavior across local council presidents on each of these dimensions, and that these variations may differ depending on the type of activity concerned. As Chauchard observes, “the role played by

sarpanches in village life varies tremendously from one village to the next” (Chauchard (2017): 66). Though he posits that this variation is most predominantly associated with social status (Ibid.), he also finds that council presidents are most similar when engaging in their “executive” and “intermediary” functions (Chauchard (2017): 92-93). In other words, when presidents are providing official documentation, overseeing government works programs, and intervening with bureaucrats on behalf of private citizens, they should be least likely to differ from each other.

The day of the week may be pertinent to local presidents’ behavior given regular cycles of business and school activities. In other words, visitors may still come to request things of the president on weekends, and may even be more likely to make requests, but the president may be less able to act on these requests until regular business hours during the week. Similarly, public events at schools should be less likely to occur on the weekends than on other days of the week.

Regarding the time of day, in related work on higher level politicians in India (Bussell (2019a)), I noted a typical daily rhythm to a politician’s day. In the morning, representatives were most likely to be at their home offices, with doors open for visitors. In the afternoons, politicians were more likely to be out in their constituencies, following up on previous requests, meeting with bureaucrats, and participating in public events. While local council presidents sit at a much lower level of office than the state legislators that were the primary focus of these observations, I expect that we may see a similar pattern for these actors. Better understanding these rhythms of activity will help to uncover the strategies local presidents use to allocate their time and effort.

Finally, variations in activities related to the stage of the shadowing study may help us to understand the ways in which observer effects can shape observations during shadowing studies in general and of these village council presidents in particular. Research on observer (or Hawthorne) effects posits that individuals will behave differently than they would otherwise when they know they are being observed. While this is a risk with nearly all research that

involves direct data collection on subjects by a researcher, the potential for observer effects is thought by some to be magnified when there is a shadower observing all of the daily activities of the subject. While I consider these risks more generally elsewhere (Bussell (2019b)), here I suggest that we may be able to uncover some potential areas for greater, or lesser, concern by evaluating any correlations between the shadowing day and local presidents' activities. As McDonald notes, the shadowee may grow accustomed to being observed quite quickly, suggesting that we may observe differences in behavior even from the first to the second day of a shadowing engagement (McDonald (2005): 459).

Based on this discussion, I test the following hypotheses about potential patterns of behavior:

- H1: Presidents will differ more in their behavior when engaged in shared versus autonomous tasks.
- H2. Activities will differ on the weekend versus on a weekday
- H3. Activities will differ in the morning versus in the afternoon
- H4. Activities will differ after the first shadowing day, due to the shadowee growing accustomed to the presence of the shadower.

In the model, I compare each of the subjects to one excluded subject, Pradhan A (H1). The remaining variables are each dummies, with 1 representing an observation that occurred on the weekend (H2), in the morning (H3), or on the second (or third) shadowing day (H4).

## **Patterns of Politician Behavior**

This analysis results in a number of interesting observations about patterns of politician behavior.<sup>18</sup> First, with regard to the first hypothesis and variations across politicians, and in line with Chauchard's (2017) observations, there are quite substantial differences in the degree to which specific topics appear in the corpus of text for each politician. However, the

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<sup>18</sup>The results for all twenty (20) models are provided in the Appendix

degree of variation depends highly on the topic itself. For topics 10, 11, and 15, which concern visits in the constituency, phone conversations, and breaks for tea, and are all categorized as general or personal activities, we see rather minimal variation across the observed politicians. For eight of the topics, there is slightly more variation, with either three or four subjects (21% - 28%) exhibiting statistically significant differences from the comparison subject. Here, four topics (50%) are categorized as autonomous, two (25%) as personal, and two (25%) as shared. In the next six topics, for which six to eight subjects exhibit statistically significant differences in the presence of the topic versus the comparison subject, three (50%) are categorized as autonomous, two (33%) as general, and one (17%) as shared. In the remaining three topics, for which the majority of subjects differed from the excluded subject, one topic each falls in the shared, personal, and shadowing categories. These findings suggest that there are considerable differences across local presidents in the activities observed during shadowing and that these differences may be somewhat associated with the type of activity. Overall, general activities topics display the least variation. Autonomous activities seem to display somewhat less variation than shared activities, as expected, but this differentiation is not stark. Personal activities seem to exhibit the greatest variation overall, which may simply highlight diversity in the individuals included in the sample.

With regard to the day of the week, we observe no difference in the presence of more than half of the topics (12) on the weekend versus during the week. Of the four topics that were less likely on the weekend, two (50%) are categorized as autonomous, 1 (20%) as general, and 1 (20%) as shadowing. And for the four topics that are more likely on the weekend, one each is categorized a general, autonomous, shared, and personal. These findings suggest that most activities occur throughout the week, but that autonomous actions may be somewhat less likely on the weekend, and that the time devoted to these activities may instead be allocated to general and other activities.

In addition to variations across the week, we see several variations in the presence of topics across time during an individual day. There is no statistically significant difference

for seven topics, three (43%) of which are autonomous, three (43%) are general, and one (14%) is personal. Six topics were more likely in the morning, of which three (50%) were autonomous, and one each (17% each) of shared, general, and shadowing. In contrast, among the seven topics that were less likely in the morning, three were shared (43%), three (43%) were personal, and one (14%) was autonomous. The content of these activities suggests that politicians were more likely to make arrangements (topic 11) and to receive visitors requesting assistance with government programs (topics 17 and 20) in the morning, whereas they were more likely to travel (topic 12) and engage with bureaucrats (topics 8 and 18) in the afternoon. This suggests that there may be a general pattern of accepting visitors and petitioners at home or in the office in the morning, and then traveling to other locations in the afternoon. At the same time, the wide range of things that happened regardless of the time of day, including paperwork (topic 5), visits to schools and construction sites (topics 6 and 14), and engaging in public discussions (topics 10 and 16), highlights the persistent character of a village council president's work and the range of demands that can be placed on them in a given day.

Finally, I consider the degree to which topics tended to change on the second day of shadowing. For twelve of the topics (60%), we see no changes associated with the day of the shadowing engagement. Of these topics, five (42%) are autonomous topics, three (25%) are shared, three (25%) are general, and one (8%) is personal. This distribution approximately matches that of the overall corpus. For four of the topics, we see an increase in the prevalence of a topic after the first day of shadowing. Three of these were personal topics (75%) and one (25%) was a shared topic. This suggests that personal activities are disproportionately more likely on the second or third shadowing day. In contrast, among the four topics that were less likely after the first shadowing day, two (50%) were autonomous and one each (25% each) was general and shadowing. Among these topics, it is worth noting that two of the non-shadowing topics were related to quite public events: visits to schools (topic 6) and public meetings (topic 16), and the final non-shadowing topic concerned visits by others

to the politician (topic 20). This indicates that politicians may have been more likely to attend to these kinds of events and activities—which are clearly related to their professional responsibilities—on the first day, whereas they were more willing to spend time on personal activities once the shadower had spent one day with them. These findings overall reinforce the expectation that there may be observer effects in a shadowing engagement, but also that these effects may be limited to a relatively small proportion of activities and that they change after the first day of the engagement in ways that are discernable in the field record. In addition, a wide range of events and activities that demand a politician’s time may be largely out of the control of the presidents themselves, thereby minimizing some risks of bias in observations associated with observer effects.

## **The Details of Village Political Life**

The unsupervised text analysis offers an initial evaluation of trends in village council president behavior, but in a manner that abstracts away from the specificities of these activities. It also brings to light preliminary insights into the relative amounts of time presidents spend on different activities. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of presidents’ roles in their communities, and to test further expectations about the degree to which presidents emphasize certain kinds of activities in their work, I conducted a second coding exercise using qualitative coding techniques based on direct reading of the shadowing fieldnotes. In related work, I used a similar technique to examine the role of local council presidents specifically with regard to processes of distribution (Bussell (2019a): 178-182). Here, the coding process is aligned with the categories outlined in the previous section and focuses on the full range of president activities, in order to illuminate a more complete picture of their work. By developing a coding scheme with a finer grain of detail than is possible with the topic model, I can more easily examine the specific types of activities that make up these broader categories.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>The detailed coding scheme is provided in the Appendix



The coding of timed field observations also allows me to quantify the amount of time spent on various activities. Because the fieldnotes include the time of each observation, and observations were typically taken every fifteen minutes, I can use this information to make rough estimates of the time spent on each type of activity. I refer to these estimates as “observation time” and use that term here to clarify that I am referring to the time spent on activities based on these calculations, rather than more precise measures of the exact time spent. While this means that I may lose some nuances of time allocation, the frequency with which observations were made should allow for these estimates generally to reflect the actual allocation of presidents’ time to various tasks and activities.

A summary of time spent on various undertakings is provided in Table 2. Overall, I find that activities falling in the “general” category make up the plurality of observed politicians’ time, accounting for 42% of total observation time. Consider Naveen Singh<sup>20</sup> who, on the second day of shadowing, spent much of the first three hours of his day in general conversation with visitors to his home office. By late morning, he left to go out into the village, where he visited two different homes to talk with the people there. Later in the afternoon he went out to the market and sat outside a shop talking with a gathered crowd. While he also engaged in many other activities over the course of the shadowing engagement, visiting and chatting with people in the community was clearly a regular component of his time. The second day of shadowing Ajay Singh<sup>21</sup> was remarkably similar. When the shadower arrived at the president’s home, multiple people from the village were already there talking with him about various government programs. In the midst of the discussion, a few people came to ask for help with documentation, but the majority of the morning was spent in general conversation, often related to planned projects under a national work program.<sup>22</sup> After a break for lunch, the president went to the market and talked with people there before receiving a phone call about a family emergency. These types of activities—in which presidents engage with others

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<sup>20</sup>Shadowing subject P(F)

<sup>21</sup>Shadowing subject P(G)

<sup>22</sup>The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act assures all citizens of access to at least 100 days of pay work each year and achieves this goal largely through the implementation of public works projects.

in the guise of their professional role, but without a specific task—make up approximately half of “general” observation time, while travel makes up another 40% and the remainder is made up of phone calls<sup>23</sup>

Table 2 - Time Allocated to Different Activities

Theme	Sub-theme	Share of Time (percent)
Autonomous	Documentation	5
	Intermediary	5
	Supervision	8
	Administrative	3
Shared	Beneficiary Selection	5
	Distribution	5
General	Discussion at Home	8
	Discussion in Village	7
	Phone calls	4
	Travel	16
	Discussion at other Home	6
Personal	Meals/Tea	7
	Down Time at Home	14
	Activities Outside Home	3
Shadowing	Discussion with Subject	2
	Shadower Activities	<1
	Excluded Activities	2

The next most common activities were those of a personal nature (24% of total observation time) and autonomous actions (21% of total observation time). I do not elaborate here on the content of presidents’ personal time, other than to say that it is made up predominantly

<sup>23</sup>Where possible, I code phone calls based on the content of the call, so that these observations fall within the relevant substantive category. Where this is not possible, I code them generically as phone calls, and that is what appears here as a part of the General category.

of resting at home, meals, and drinking tea. Autonomous actions, however, represent a key element of presidents' time dedicated to professional activities, in line with the expectations set forth by the text analysis. For Badri Prasad,<sup>24</sup> this meant a morning of visitors to his home making requests for assistance with domicile certificates and photo verifications. For Sridevi,<sup>25</sup> executive actions are interspersed throughout her day, from requests for assistance with residence letters and intervention in the aftermath of an auto accident in the morning, to paperwork and visits to the local primary school in the afternoon. Similarly, Raj Singh<sup>26</sup> spent a considerable amount of his day supervising a road construction project and visiting a primary school, in addition to entertaining multiple requests for assistance with ration cards. These examples highlight a general pattern in autonomous activities, of which 40% of total observation time is made up of supervisory activities and 23% each documentation and intermediary actions, with the remainder being general administrative duties.

Perhaps surprisingly, shared activities, such as the selection of beneficiaries for schemes and participation in distribution activities, make up only 9% of total observation time. One explanation for this may be that engaging in these kinds of actions requires that there be a particular program requiring attention. For example, when Prakash Yadav<sup>27</sup> participated in public meetings to distribute drought relief packages, this accounted for more than seven hours of observation time over two days. And when Raj Singh and Jaideep Dwivedi<sup>28</sup> were each charged with assisting to make a list of houses for inclusion in a central government toilet construction scheme, this occupied substantial parts of their day with visits to homes and attending to other aspects of the process.

Even taking into account the uneven nature of program implementation activities, it is striking that autonomous activities make up more than double the observation time of shared actions. This offers considerable evidence, in line with the findings from the text analysis,

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<sup>24</sup>Shadowing subject P(I)

<sup>25</sup>Shadowing subject P(H)

<sup>26</sup>Shadowing subject P(B)

<sup>27</sup>Shadowing subject P(E)

<sup>28</sup>Shadowing subjects P(B) and P(D), respectively

that village council presidents allocate substantial personal resources, at the very least in terms of time, to those actions over which they are more likely to have individual control. Rather than shared activities, for which other council members and the council secretary might also reasonably claim credit, presidents emphasize those autonomous actions with which they can directly build their personal reputation.

It is also worth reiterating here that it is primarily during the creation of beneficiary lists that we observed presidents spending considerable time with other council members, as indicated in the topic analysis. Most of their other activities instead involved friends, family, and assistants, in addition to the general public. This observation accords with the conceptual distinction between shared and autonomous tasks, the former of which involve more official duties of the council as a whole, while the latter require only the president herself.

Overall, the findings from the qualitative coding reinforce and provide detail to those from the topic model: local council presidents are predominantly engaged in general and autonomous actions as a part of their professional life. If we discount time allocated to travel, given that this is not a citizen-facing activity, the time allocated to other general and autonomous activities is 46% of total observation time, or 86% of time not allocated to personal, shadowing, or travel activities. Thus, the evidence from shadowing suggests that local council presidents are significantly more likely to spend their time on autonomous and general activities than on those shared actions most closely associated with the formal responsibilities of the village council.

## **Conclusions**

India has placed substantial responsibility in the hands of the approximately 250,000 elected village councils that are now the lead institutions of rural local governance. Yet, we are only beginning to understand how the particular character of these local bodies, their electoral

rules, and the responsibilities with which they have been tasked do, or do not, result in improvements in local social and economic outcomes.<sup>29</sup> Does delegation of responsibility for governance to local elected bodies improve development outcomes for the population as a whole? Or do entrenched loyalties and social ties, as well as emerging political allegiances, interact with new institutional structures to replicate existing inequalities?

In this paper, I have attempted to shed light on these questions through attention to a single actor, the village council president, in one state, Uttar Pradesh. The subjects of the study engaged in a wide range of activities over the time in which we observed them at work, and they frequently offered evidence of the quite busy and difficult jobs that they have taken on as local representatives. Presidents are important entities in local village life and they are frequently called upon to engage in a multitude of different tasks.

Yet, the analysis offered here also shows that there are patterns to these activities and the degree to which council presidents are willing to dedicate their time to particular kinds of tasks. These actors spend a substantial portion of their time engaged in informal discussions and public events with their fellow villagers. In these activities, they are frequently playing a leading role, guiding discussions to specific topics and structuring the flow of events. They are also regularly engaged in autonomous actions associated with overseeing government programs, providing official documents, and intermediating with various actors on behalf of other citizens. In contrast, presidents seem to exert more limited, or at least intermittent, attention to shared actions of the council.

What are the implications of this predominant focus on general and autonomous actions over those tasks more closely tied to the shared roles and responsibilities of the local council? The most potentially problematic aspect of this pattern, I posit, lies in the relative importance placed on autonomous tasks. When presidents emphasize those actions where they have more discretion, this means, on the one hand, that they are available to the community as needed when there are failures in the implementation of programs or other issues. But, on

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<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Mullen (2012)

the other hand, this also means that presidents can use discretion to favor certain individuals over others, as has been shown in other work (Dunning and Nilekani (2013), Bussell (2019a)). Where there is frequently a demand for intermediation, as is often the case in rural India, this can feasibly lead to highly unequal access to government services, depending on personal relationships with the local president (Kruks-Wisner (2018), Bussell (2019a)).

Thus, the implementation of India's local village councils may well not be associated with the improved governance outcomes anticipated by many at the time of the reform. Institutional structures that constrain presidents' behaviors in certain areas may then encourage those presidents to look elsewhere for ways to gain from their position. Because council institutions also allocate autonomous powers to presidents, a shift toward these activities is to be expected. But, structures that create incentives for individuals to leverage their autonomous power can contribute, intentionally or inadvertently, to dynamics that result in inequality of access for individual citizens. Where politicians have incentives to favor certain individuals, due to their interest in building a political support base or out of a desire to build other professional ties, the chances are good that they will use whatever tools are available to pursue these interests. When those tools are tied to the implementation of government programs, we should not be surprised when only certain parties benefit from their local representative's efforts.

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