

**FREEBIES POLITICS IN INDIA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF POLITICAL DEBATES,  
VOTING BEHAVIOR, AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS**

**<sup>1</sup> Meena, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Manoj Kumar Tripathi (Associate Professor)**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Supervisor

<sup>1-2</sup> Department of Liberal Arts & Humanities (Political Science), Faculty of Art and Humanities,  
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.

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**Abstract**

"Freebies politics" in India is no longer a mere election campaign issue; it has grown into a constitutional, fiscal and a democratic issue. Especially during elections, political parties offer free electricity, cash transfers, waiving farm loans, transport subsidies-consumer durables as part of their election manifesto. Supporters see freebies as redistributive welfare and social protection in a highly uneven society. Critics see them as an attempt to pander to voters, to distort public finances, to weaken deliberative politics, and to transform citizenship into an expectation of quid pro quo from the state. This paper analyzes freebies within modern Indian democracy by bringing together political discourse, electoral behavior and democracy. First it explains the conceptual difference between the terms welfare, subsidy, entitlement, and electoral freebie, and then reviews the literature on various aspects of clientelism, vote responsiveness, welfare targeting and electoral manifesto in India. The study also examines the legal-institutional development owing to the Supreme Court's judgment in S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu, the ECI's manifesto regulation and various other subsequent initiatives to improve the compliance, feasibility and transparency of electoral promises. The methodological framework includes a mixed method approach, a document analysis of manifestos, policy and judicial documents, and an empirically structured survey-based study to assess the extent to which a freebie-oriented electoral promise is related to short-term electoral outcomes or situated in the arena of governance, social justice or state credibility. It finds that freebies politics in India cannot be clearly understood as either welfarist or wasteful; instead, their consequences for democracy depend on whether they are targeted, fiscally sustainable, transparent, and whether political competition is based on public reasoning or distributive bidding wars. The study notes that improving democratic accountability in Indian freebies politics would require improved manifesto disclosure institutions, better fiscal transparency, and the separation of developmental welfare from electorally motivated populism.

**Keywords:** politics of freebies, election manifestos, behavior, clientelism, welfare politics, democratic accountability, India, electoral competition

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Parties in India typically use electoral manifestos to promise the provision of direct benefits to voters in the short run (e.g. subsidized electricity, free public transport, cash transfers, gifts, consumer appliances, farm products, and social welfare). This is most relevant in states with small vote margins and multi-party contests in a federal environment, where welfare provision has become a key component of party image. The normative controversy lies in the fact that they sit at the intersection of redistributive justice, electoral politics and fiscal management. Welfare for one party is a freebie for another. This is not merely semantic, but a question of the nature of the state, the meaning of citizenship, and the very basis of electoral legitimacy.

### **1.2 Conceptual Context: Welfare, Subsidy, and Freebie**

Conceptual separation from welfare measures is warranted because they are intended to be protective and capability-improving for vulnerable citizens. Subsidies are amounts by which a consumer or producer must pay less to certain identified recipients. Entitlements are governments' benefits for specific groups defined by government or legal arrangement, often in the context of constitutional provisions on social justice. Freebies, by contrast, are political promises of direct material benefit with large electoral promise but nebulous development logic. Kumar (2024) notes that the Indian freebie discussion can be framed as the conflict between two budget ideologies: the growth-led budget, which prioritizes economic growth, and the redistribution-led budget which prioritizes inclusion. This discussion cannot be treated as value-neutral, and is ultimately a political label that is part of the struggle over budget priorities and social legitimacy.

### **1.3 Why the Debate Has Strengthened**

The debate has sharpened for three reasons: state-level competition, as parties try to differentiate themselves in clear and visible welfare promises; and the involvement of judicial and regulatory institutions, as the performance of the electoral system is affected by manifesto promises. Third, growing concerns about state debt, subsidies, and collapsing fiscal space all threaten the potential universality of untargeted benefits. It has been demonstrated in the policy literature that rising subsidy exposure can consume fiscal space and can crowd out development spending, especially where exposure in other areas of committed spending is already high. Subsequently, it has been increasingly considered in terms not merely of political strategy but also of public finance and the design of democracies.

### **1.4 Rationale of the Study**

The importance of this study resides in the fact that the present debate tends to reduce complex realities to moral slogans. A purely critical perspective overlooks the welfare, inclusion, or human development functions of many so-called freebies. Highlighting the celebratory dimensions of this view may overlook the budgetary implications of electoral promises, as well as their tendency to reduce policy discussions to patronage competition. Thus, this study adopts a more analytic view of electoral promises. It seeks to explore how political actors frame electoral promises, how voters perceive them, and how they influence democratic accountability and public reasoning.

### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study were:

- (i) to investigate the theoretical and political roots of freebies politics in India
- (ii) understanding how the electoral appeal of the immediate benefits influences voter behavior and perceptions of governance;
- (iii) the legal, institutional, and fiscal arguments behind the welfare interventions promised in manifestos;
- (iv) to consider competitive freebie politics and its democratic implications.
- (v) to suggest a way to distinguish between welfare-seeking promises and electorally calculated promises.

### 1.6 Research Questions

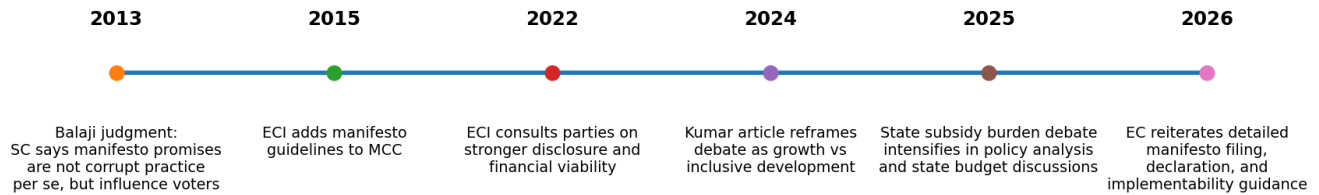
We ask two questions in this paper. The first is how an electoral promise differs from a welfare commitment in the electoral context in India? The second is how do voters interpret and respond to direct benefit electoral promises? What is the role of judicial and electoral institutions in regulating manifesto promises? What does the politics of freebies hold for democratic accountability, fiscal discipline and issue-based electoral competition?

**Table 1. Analytical distinction between welfare measures and electoral freebies**

Dimension	Welfare / entitlement	Subsidy / support	Electoral freebie tendency
Primary rationale	Social protection, equity, rights, capability building	Price relief, sector support, economic adjustment	Electoral attraction through immediate visible benefit
Targeting logic	Usually based on need, vulnerability, or policy objective	May be sectoral, universal, or category-based	Often broad, highly visible, and politically marketable
Time horizon	Medium- to long-term welfare or human development	Can be short- or medium-term	Short-term electoral cycle often prominent
Fiscal disclosure	Expected to be policy-budget linked	Depends on scheme design	Frequently weak or politically under-specified
Democratic risk	Lower when transparent and rights-based	Moderate when distortions	Higher when promises become competitive inducements

Source: Analytical classification developed.

Figure 1. Selected institutional milestones in the freebies debate, 2013–2026



Source: Prepared by the author using the Supreme Court judgment in *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu*, Election Commission communications, and DD News reporting on 2026 manifesto guidance.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Freebies Politics and Political Economy

More recently, scholars have argued in different directions. Kumar (2024) observed that the question of freebies is indicative of deeper policy choices between growth-first versus redistribution-first budgeting. Instead of merely considering the economics of giveaway measures, analysts need also to ask whether they serve the purpose of human development, reducing deprivation, and/or politically symbolic purposes. From this broader point of view, the politics of the freebies is inseparable from the political economy of Indian federalism, in which state governments have developed a political reliance on visible welfare delivery to create durable electoral majorities. The perception is useful because it reduces the likelihood of 'knee-jerk' moral judgments and situates manifesto promises in a wider development marketplace.

### 2.2 Clientelism, Vote Buying, and Electoral Responsiveness

A strong finding that comes out of research on clientelism is that voters react positively to small rewards when their institutions are weak and state provision is uncertain (Heath and Tillin 2018). This suggests that voters' responses to rewards are in part driven by the likelihood that the state will provide them. Auerbach and Thachil (2020) further showed that intermediaries and neighborhood brokers wield power in urban and low-income settings not because of their identity, but through the access they provide to state resources. Thus, electoral responsiveness to freebies politics often does not originate in campaign announcements (top down), but is instead eased through local networks of mediation, credibility and access (bottom up).

### 2.3 Welfare benefits and voting behavior in the Indian context

Also in West Bengal, the results contradict the view that all distributive politics in rural India is short-term clientelism. Bardhan et al. (2024) found that voter responsiveness to excludable welfare transfers but not to public-good programs, even when respondents report receiving both. In a related study, Maitra et al (2024) found that the "central" benefits introduced in West Bengal post-2014 did not become more targeted or less clientelistic than the older state benefits. The authors also show that receiving these post-2014 "central" benefits increased the probability of switching political support to the BJP. Overall, they find that, while freebies may matter for elections, their impact is mediated by partisan identity, ideology, and local political competition. If voters are responsive to direct benefits, it is within a complex web of trust, belonging, and political narrative, rather than a straightforward economic calculation.

### 2.4 Manifestos, Regulation, and Electoral Norms

The legal-institutional aspect of freebies politics was dealt with in *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu*. Here, the Supreme Court held that electoral promises made in election manifestos cannot be ipso facto construed as corrupt practices under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, as the Section applies to candidates and agents, but not political parties. The Court also recognized the possibility of freebies influencing voters and weakening the equality of elections, and directed the Election Commission to frame rules for the regulation of election manifestos. The judgement has been cited as a precedent in subsequent discussion of the issue of election manifestos. It was focused instead on regulatory guidance and institutional restraint (*S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu*, 2013).

### **2.5 Election Commission guidance and transparency issues**

Subsequent Court orders led the Election Commission to incorporate manifesto advisories in the Model Code of Conduct. Later, the Commission demanded stricter disclosure regulations. In their 2022 consultations, the Commission's emphasis was on informed voting and ready information on the financial viability of promises. In 2026, circulars reiterated parties' need to specify the logic behind manifesto promises, the resources required, and the means of implementation, while ensuring promises made are realizable and implementable. This represented a shift from abstract concern to regulation that stressed transparency and feasibility, albeit with limited enforceability (Election Commission of India, 2022; DD News, 2026).

### **2.6 Fiscal Stress and Democratic Trade-offs**

Fiscal side has gained traction, as states are facing high committed expenditures, debt, and subsidy burdens. PRS Legislative Research (2024) argued that rising levels of subsidies and transfers can crowd out development expenditure and reduce fiscal space. This is especially true for a state with a chronic revenue deficit. But mere fiscal criticism cannot answer the democratic question; where social deprivation is extreme, redistribution can be justified, in constitutional and even moral terms. The issue is not whether these promises are targetable, transparent, and developmentally defensible, but whether they push elections into a race to the bottom of ever-increasing material inducements, such that the problem lies, again, not with redistribution itself, but with what essentially incentivizes electoral competition: the pursuit for immediate consumptive returns over public reasoning.

### **2.7 Research Gap**

The literature is fragmented; though the economic and political-science literature describes how these direct benefits influence voting behavior, the legal and policy literature grapples with the regulation of manifestos and their cost. However, much less has been done to bring together considerations of the normative political debate, the perceptions of voters, and their implications for democracy in the Indian context. This paper attempts to fill this gap by bringing together political economy, voting behavior, legal and fiscal perspectives into one common framework for the Indian context.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The paper pursues an analytical mixed-method methodology of qualitative document analysis and a proposed quantitative survey experiment of voters. The qualitative study surveys the discourse on freebies in judicial verdicts, documents of the Election Commission of India, policy documents, political party manifestos, etc. The quantitative study elicits voter attitudes towards freebie promises, legality of welfare transfers, and how freebies impact their vote choice. This blended design is appropriate because freebies politics is a discursive, institutional and behavioral phenomenon in nature.

### **3.2 Scope and unit of analysis**

Though the study is national in scope, its key bases of evidence are the states of India and the developments in the country's legal-regulatory environment. The principal units of analysis are (i) election manifestos and

political statements, (ii) judicial and regulatory documents and (iii) a structured survey of eligible voters. This might not be the case in every state, however, as regional political competition, welfare regimes, and fiscal capacity, for example, can alter the nature of freebies politics and electoral pledges.

### 3.3 Data Sources

The paper is based on: the Supreme Court's judgment in S. Subramaniam Balaji, the Election Commission's comments on manifesto regulation, a budget report by PRS Legislative Research, the contemporary discourse on fiscal constraints and subsidies, and scholarly literature on clientelism, manifesto politics, and electoral choices. The core data source is a survey of voters, including several Likert-scale questions regarding the legitimacy of benefits, perceived impact on voting, trust in parties' electoral pledges, and attitudes towards targeting versus universalism.

### 3.4 Sampling Design for the Proposed Survey

For the paper's empirical extension, multistage sampling is suggested. First, states could be selected in a way that captures variation in welfare intensity, party regional strength, and budgetary disputes. You can choose your constituencies in urban and rural areas of your chosen state and then randomize the selection of households or survey units. An article-sized project would need around 400-600 respondents for reliable descriptive and inferential statistics. Stratification by age, gender, education, and income would improve representativeness.

### 3.5 Proposed Variables

The dependent variable is voting intention based on welfare policy promises. The independent variables are perceptions of the legitimacy of welfare benefits, the credibility of manifesto pledges, awareness of public expenditure impact, party identification, and satisfaction with public service delivery. Control variables include age, income, education, caste and locality of an individual and whether an individual received the benefit before the election or not. This allows for testing whether responsiveness to freebies is higher in places where institutional delivery and dependence on the benefit is lower.

### 3.6 Reliability, Validity, and Ethics

All items must be pre-tested for comprehensibility and neutrality. The validity of multi-item constructs such as the "perceived democratic legitimacy of freebie promises" or "fiscal awareness" may be tested with Cronbach's alpha. Content validity would be ensured by having political science public policy experts. Ethical safeguards would address informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and that field work would not pressure or otherwise identify political party members.

**Table 2. Proposed variables, indicators, and methods of analysis**

Construct	Illustrative indicators	Data source	Suggested analysis
Voting influence of benefits	Importance of cash/subsidy promises in vote choice	Structured survey	Descriptive statistics, regression
Legitimacy of welfare promises	Perceived fairness, need-basis, social justice	Structured survey	Mean scores, factor reliability
Fiscal awareness	Knowledge of costs, debt, budget trade-offs	Survey + document analysis	Cross-tabulation, correlation
Manifesto transparency	Presence of cost estimate, funding source, implementation plan	Manifesto coding sheet	Content analysis, index score
Institutional trust	Trust in party delivery and public institutions	Structured survey	Regression / mediation

*Source: Proposed analytical framework.*

## **4. Data Collection and Data Analysis Framework**

### **4.1 Key Steps of Data Collection**

The proposed data collection process comprises the following:

- (i) identify relevant Supreme Court, Election Commission and policy documents.
- (ii) compile a purposive sample of party manifestos and campaign pledges;
- (iii) prepare a coding sheet classifying promises by target group, type of benefit, universality, fiscal disclosure, and development rationale;
- (iv) design and pretest the voter questionnaire;
- (v) conduct the field survey across selected constituencies;
- (vi) clean and code the data; and
- (vii) integrate qualitative and quantitative findings through triangulation.

### **4.2 Documentary Coding Strategy**

In this taxonomy, each promise would be coded for four additional features: the distributive form (whether the promise was a cash grant, subsidy, service, durable good, or entitlement), target design (whether it was universalist or targeted), developmental justification (whether the promise was consumptive, capability-improving, or productive), and institutional transparency (whether the promise included a cost estimate, a source for funding, and a plan for implementing the promise). This would allow promises to be analyzed with greater precision than simply broadly categorizing promises as "freebie".

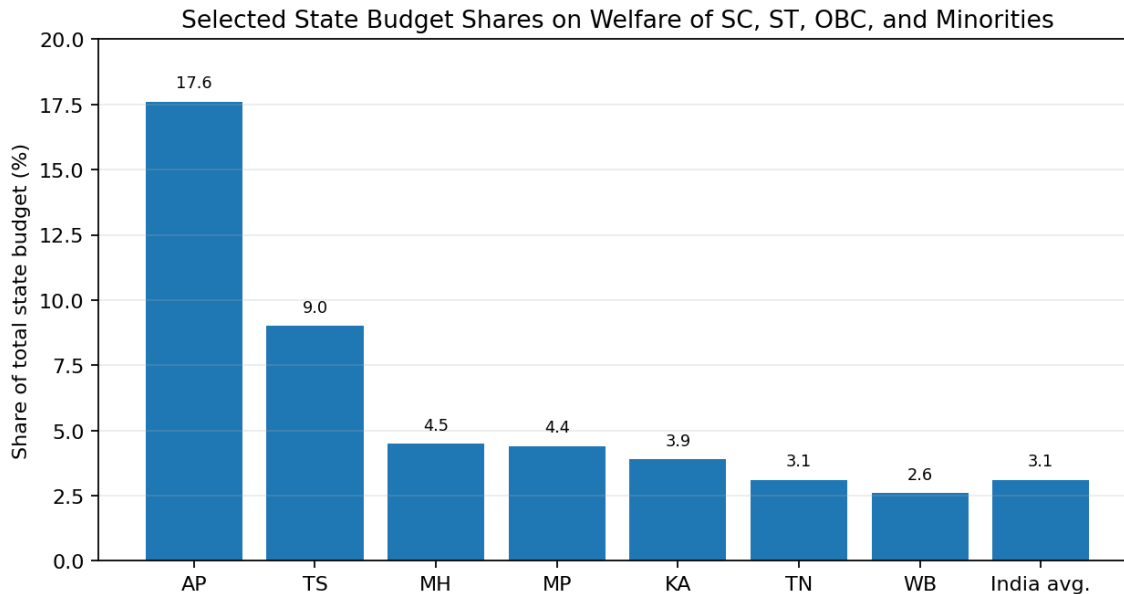
### **4.3 Statistical Plan**

To begin with, descriptive statistics may be calculated for each key construct. Then, with the help of cross tabulations, social differences may be identified. Independent sample t-tests and/or ANOVA tests will be performed where relevant, for example to compare between respondents who received government benefits and those who did not. Correlational and multiple regression analyzes could be conducted to assess the predictive validity of perceived legitimacy, benefit expectation, and trust in institution on voting intention. When possible, mediation analysis could also be conducted to explore whether trust in delivery mediates the effect of welfare preference on voting intention.

### **4.4 Analytical Value of Triangulation**

Triangulation is key; the promise can be described differently in different sources. A manifesto might be framed as social justice, and fiscal critics might label it as a subsidy burden. Voters might believe it either delivers relief or is a cynical pretence, based on their own experiences with such claims. It is by layering evidence thus, rather than relying on just one source, that a more compelling analytical explanation might be reached.

**Figure 2. Selected state budget shares on welfare of SC, ST, OBC, and minorities**



Source: Prepared by the author from PRS Legislative Research (2024), *State of State Finances 2024–25*. Values shown are selected state observations and the all-state average reported in the PRS compilation.

## 5. Analytical Discussion

### 5.1 Political Debates Around Freebies in India

Politically, freebies may not be purely an economic debate. National parties may accuse regional parties of "revdi culture" or populism while defending their own guarantees of welfare as developmental or pro-poor. This asymmetry implies that the term "freebie" is itself another political weapon. Such rhetoric is too often selectively invoked to delegitimize other redistributive initiatives. As Kumar (2024) ably notes, the debate must therefore be understood in the context of India's broader political economy, not as an isolated technical budget issue.

### 5.2 The Logic of Immediate Benefit in Voting Behavior

Direct benefits can be electorally more effective when state institutions are weak, or citizens believe that public goods will not be consistently provided (Heath & Tillin, 2018). In some cases in India, direct benefits that are more easily targeted than local public goods are more electorally effective (Bardhan et al., 2024). It would therefore be reductionist to conclude that voters are merely "bought" through instrumentally rational calculations. Other things that a voter weighs in determining how to distribute include conceptions of fairness, respect, responsiveness to citizen needs, and the ruling party's right to rule. In this regard, short-term benefits are both a transactional inducement and a form of signaling of the state's presence.

### 5.3 Democratic Implications

The effect of freebie politics on democracy is contested. It may be inclusionary if it forces political parties to address deprivation in order to attract votes. Citizens on the margins of society may gain bargaining power as parties compete to deliver material social assistance. Conversely, the proliferation of pledges to create material goods may reduce the range of issues that are negotiated as policy, encouraging short-termism. Elections have become a bidding war on the cheeriest possible future, but without revealing the likely cost. This is why manifesto transparency and fiscal accountability are important for democratic accountability and deliberation.

### 5.4 The Institutional Question

Available online at: <https://intesabaalami.org>

The Balaji judgment of the Supreme Court is relevant, because the Supreme Court recognized the limits of law and the dangers of democracy when it refused to extend the corrupt-practice doctrine beyond the statutory prohibition to freebies' impact on free and fair elections. Later ECI guidelines have shifted the debate from prohibition to disclosure, realism, and consultative regulation. While this approach is institutionally appropriate, it is weakly enforced and lacking standardized reporting on costs and funding sources as well as logic for implementation of transparency.

### **5.5 Fiscal Prudence and Welfare Legitimacy.**

Therefore, fiscal concerns cannot be dismissed as anti-poor. States that are already indebted and have public spending commitments may have less fiscal space for other public investments due to the fiscal burden of the subsidized tariff (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). However, fiscal stress does not justify abandoning all redistributive policy. I argue the next section distinguishes between (i) capability-improving and targeted welfare with credible revenue, (ii) broad subsidies justifiable on equity or human development grounds, and (iii) consumption promises aimed at winning elections with low transparency and weak developmental rationales. This three-part distinction is analytically more useful than a blanket denunciation of all benefits.

### **5.6 Toward a More Democratic Standard**

A better democratic standard would ask political parties to explain not just what they promise, but why it is socially justified, how much it will cost, who will pay for it, and what trade-offs it may produce. Such a standard would not necessarily preclude any welfare competition. Instead, it would discipline political competition through transparency and public reason: the electorate would still have the democratic right to vote for redistributive manifestos, but would be better informed about their fiscal consequences and the purposes of policies.

### **5.7 Implications for Federal Politics and Social Citizenship**

Likewise, politics around freebies also plays into various articulations of Indian federalism, specifically where regional parties try to articulate region-specific concepts of citizenship and legitimacy of welfare that challenge the hegemony of centre-led developmental discourse. Therefore, freebie politics should not necessarily be seen as an electoral strategy, but also seen as a politics of statecraft over the forms of social claims that the state recognizes. A democratic analysis of this politics must recognize that some of the promises it contained have roots in longer histories of regional redistribution, public provisioning and political inclusion, however much they were rhetorically cast as populist giveaways.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

### **6.1 Standardized Manifesto Disclosure**

The first institutional change I propose is requiring all major manifesto pledges to contain three things: the fiscal cost, the beneficiaries, and the mechanism of implementation and funding. These would not prevent redistributive politics from occurring, but it would increase transparency and the amount of information available to voters about the pledges of the parties. The form should also make clear whether the promise is universal, targeted, temporary or recurring.

### **6.2 Rights-Based Welfare vs. Electoral Inducement**

It would be helpful to have a clear normative boundary separating rights-based or capability-improving welfare from one-off or weakly justified inducement. However, this does not mean that all other forms of benefit are illegitimate. The public reasoning needs to ask whether this promise also really addresses structural deprivation, builds human capabilities or is ultimately based on short-term electoral gains and not sustainable development.

### **6.3 Independent Fiscal Appraisal**

The state finance departments, legislative budget offices, and similar public institutions could be mandated to independently assess manifesto pledges with meaningful long-term costs. Even non-binding, publishing such

assessments pre- or post-manifesto would improve accountability and lessen the planned non-transparency of parties' manifestos (in some cases, their lack of specificity).

#### **6.4 Voter Information and Democratic Literacy**

Election-time transparency is only effective if voters understand it: civic education campaigns could explain the differences between subsidies, rights-based welfare, and electorally attractive but fiscally uncertain promises that are often favored by voters. Democratic literacy must include literacy of the budget, so voters can engage substantively (rather than symbolically) with competing manifestos.

### **7. Limitations and Future Research**

#### **7.1 Limitations**

This paper is an analytical one and is not interested in providing completed primary empirical evidence on the topic. Thus, it is based on a theoretical synthesis of legal, policy and academic literature and a potential mixed-methods framework to be explored in future research. In addition, since freebies can be politically controversial, any definition of freebies would necessarily involve explicit criteria. Finally, state-level heterogeneity may limit generalizability as states in India differ in terms of welfare regimes and fiscal capacities.

#### **7.2 Future research directions**

Future experiments could also test whether citizens care about whether parties make universal or targeted promises, whether promises are for capability-improving welfare or consumptive goods, or whether promises are costed in any way. They could further test whether parties are rewarded or punished more when they make promises conditional on the costs and trade-offs of manifesto pledges. More systematic cross-federal work will tell us whether this welfare populism debate around freebies in India is indeed a distinct phenomenon or part of a broader discussion.

### **8. Summary and Conclusion**

#### **8.1 Conclusion**

In this paper, we examined freebies politics in India in the context of political speech, voting behavior and democratic politics. We argue that freebies politics cannot be reduced to corruption or to welfare virtue. This presents a battleground where political parties seek electoral advantage, voters compare material and symbolic benefits, and institutions endeavor to maintain electoral integrity while remaining within the limits established by legal frameworks. Both academic research and the legal-regulatory landscape indicate that provision of material benefits to secure votes is a risk when institutions are weak and excludable welfare is prioritized, reflecting an age-old concern that untrammelled manifesto promises may distort the level playing field.

#### **8.2 Final Inference**

The question is not whether redistributive promises should be allowed on the electoral stage but under what conditions we can make such promises accountable, transparent and fiscally responsible. Targeted, justified, and costed welfare promises can expand democratic inclusion. In contrast, opaque, electorally timed material inducements risk narrowing democratic choice and encouraging a politics of competitive patronage. Future observational work should test these predictions among states and voters more directly. Deepening democracy in India might just require better manifesto disclosure, more fiscal transparency, and a finer analytic distinction between rights-based welfare and opportunistic freebie populism.

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