

FREEBIES, WELFARE AND SUBSIDIES: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY OF THEIR ROLE IN INDIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual difference between freebies, welfare schemes, and subsidies in Indian electoral politics. It explains that welfare schemes aim at social justice and public well-being, subsidies support affordability, while freebies are often linked with electoral appeal and vote-seeking politics. The study highlights that genuine welfare measures are necessary for poor and marginalized groups, but excessive and politically motivated freebies may create fiscal burden and weaken democratic accountability. The paper concludes that freebies should be regulated through transparency, financial disclosure, and proper eligibility criteria.

Keywords

Freebies Politics, Welfare Schemes, Subsidies, Indian Electoral Politics, Populism, Voter Behaviour, Fiscal Responsibility, Democratic Accountability.

INTRODUCTION

In Indian electoral politics, freebies, welfare schemes, and subsidies have become important subjects of public debate because political parties frequently promise free or subsidized goods and services to attract voters. Welfare schemes are usually connected with social justice and public well-being, while subsidies are linked with economic support and affordability. Freebies, on the other hand, are often viewed as politically motivated benefits designed to gain electoral support. However, the distinction between these three concepts is not always clear, as the same policy may be described as welfare by supporters and as a freebie by critics. This creates conceptual confusion in academic, political, and policy discussions. Therefore, it is important to study freebies, welfare, and subsidies separately and understand their role in Indian electoral democracy. This research paper attempts to analyse the meaning, purpose, economic impact, and political significance of these concepts in order to understand whether they strengthen public welfare or distort democratic choice.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the conceptual difference between freebies, welfare schemes, and subsidies.
2. To examine the role of freebies in Indian electoral politics.
3. To analyse the economic and political implications of freebies and subsidies.
4. To study whether freebies strengthen welfare delivery or encourage populist vote-seeking politics.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN FREEBIES, WELFARE, AND SUBSIDIES

A proper understanding of freebies politics requires a clear distinction between freebies, welfare, and subsidies, because these three terms are often used together in political debate, media discourse, and public discussion, even though they do not carry the same meaning. In the Indian context, this distinction becomes especially important because many government measures are presented by ruling parties as welfare-oriented public support, while critics

may describe the same measures as politically motivated giveaways. This confusion creates conceptual difficulty in both academic and policy discussions. Therefore, before examining the electoral impact of freebies politics, it is necessary to clarify how welfare schemes operate, how subsidies differ from populist giveaways, and how these categories should be interpreted economically and politically. The synopsis itself reflects this debate by repeatedly showing that the controversy is not only about giving benefits to citizens, but about the purpose, timing, and effect of such benefits in a democratic electoral setting.

Concept of Welfare Schemes

Welfare schemes are generally designed as public policy measures intended to improve the social and economic condition of citizens, especially vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of society. Their objective is not merely to provide short-term relief, but to reduce deprivation, expand access to basic services, and strengthen social justice. In a welfare-oriented democratic state, such schemes are commonly linked with the broader responsibility of government toward food security, health care, education, housing, livelihood support, transport access, and social protection. Welfare measures are normally justified on the basis of constitutional values, distributive justice, human development, and inclusive growth. They are therefore seen as legitimate instruments of governance rather than as temporary political gestures.

In the Indian context, welfare schemes have historically developed in response to widespread poverty, inequality, unemployment, low levels of education, and regional imbalances. Programmes related to subsidized food, school meals, public health, employment guarantees, scholarships, pensions, housing support, and women's welfare have often been introduced with the intention of improving living standards and reducing structural disadvantages. Such measures are usually framed as policy commitments of the state, not as personal gifts from political leaders. Their legitimacy comes from the idea that democracy must not only conduct elections but also ensure that citizens can live with dignity and minimum security. Thus, welfare schemes are rooted in a philosophy of public responsibility and social inclusion.

Another important feature of welfare schemes is that they are generally directed toward need-based public outcomes. They are often implemented through institutional mechanisms, legal entitlements, or structured administrative systems. Their impact is expected to extend beyond immediate consumption and contribute to long-term social betterment. For example, support for education improves human capital, public health measures improve workforce participation, and livelihood programmes contribute to economic stability. Even when such schemes involve state expenditure or free provision of services, they are not automatically classified as freebies because their purpose is developmental and socially justified.

Welfare schemes also tend to possess greater policy continuity than electoral giveaways. They may survive changes in government because they are tied to broader public needs and administrative structures. A welfare scheme is normally evaluated on the basis of its social effectiveness, coverage, equity, and contribution to public development. In this sense, welfare is closely linked to the welfare-state model, where the state assumes responsibility for promoting social protection and reducing inequality. This makes welfare a normative and policy-driven category, different from short-term political inducement. The debate reflected in the synopsis also points toward this tension, showing that many benefits are defended as genuine welfare while others are criticized as vote-seeking measures.

Key features of welfare schemes

- They are designed for public welfare and social justice.
- They usually target structural deprivation and long-term improvement.
- They are often implemented through institutional and policy frameworks.

- They are justified on the basis of need, rights, and inclusive development.
- Their purpose is broader than electoral advantage, even if they also carry political benefits.

SUBSIDIES VS. POPULIST GIVEAWAYS

Subsidies and populist giveaways may appear similar on the surface because both involve some form of support or concession provided by the government, but they differ significantly in intent, design, and policy meaning. A subsidy is generally an economic instrument through which the government reduces the cost of a good, service, or activity in order to achieve a wider public objective. Subsidies may be provided in sectors such as agriculture, food distribution, transport, education, fuel, health care, or small-scale production. Their purpose is usually corrective or supportive. They may be introduced to protect weaker sections, stabilize markets, promote essential consumption, encourage production, or support national development goals. In economic terms, a subsidy is often seen as a tool for addressing affordability and access.

A subsidy is therefore not necessarily a politically manipulative measure. It can be part of rational public policy, especially where market prices make basic necessities inaccessible to ordinary citizens. For instance, subsidized food grains, fertilizers, irrigation support, educational concessions, or public transport support may be justified because they reduce hardship and promote equity. Subsidies often have an economic logic behind them: they can improve productivity, maintain consumption, reduce inflationary pressure on households, and support vulnerable producers or consumers. When properly designed, they form part of developmental policy and are not merely instruments of political persuasion.

By contrast, populist giveaways are usually understood as benefits that are promised or distributed primarily for political appeal, often without adequate regard for long-term financial sustainability, developmental value, or institutional necessity. These may include free consumer durables, unrestricted waivers, highly visible benefit transfers, or campaign-time promises that generate immediate public excitement. Populist giveaways are more likely to be criticized when they seem disconnected from broader development planning and when they are marketed in a way that emphasizes electoral gain more than public necessity. Their symbolic value is often greater than their structural contribution.

The difference, however, is not always absolute. In practice, the same measure may be interpreted differently depending on its context. A transport concession for poor students may be seen as welfare or subsidy, while a blanket election-time promise of free services for broad political gain may be labeled a giveaway. What separates subsidy from populist giveaway is therefore not only the fact that both involve state support, but the policy rationale, targeting logic, fiscal planning, and electoral timing behind them. If a benefit is introduced after careful economic justification and integrated into public policy, it is more likely to be treated as a subsidy or welfare measure. If it is announced mainly to attract votes, packaged aggressively in electoral campaigns, and lacks long-term developmental purpose, it is more likely to be treated as a populist freebie.

Another important distinction is that subsidies may contribute to production, affordability, or access, whereas populist giveaways often emphasize immediate political recognition. Subsidies may be broad-based or sectoral and can operate quietly within policy structures. Populist giveaways, on the other hand, usually gain greater visibility in public discourse because they are politically attractive and electorally marketable. Subsidies are also more likely to be assessed by economists in terms of cost-benefit, efficiency, and redistributive value, while giveaways are more likely to be debated in political terms such as populism, patronage, and voter influence.

Difference between subsidies and populist giveaways

- Subsidies are usually linked with economic correction or social support, while populist giveaways are more often linked with electoral appeal.
- Subsidies may serve long-term development goals, whereas giveaways often produce immediate political visibility.
- Subsidies are often policy-based and institutional, while giveaways may be campaign-driven and symbolic.
- Subsidies can improve affordability, productivity, or access, whereas giveaways may focus more on public popularity.
- Subsidies are generally justified through economic and welfare reasoning, while giveaways are often criticized as short-term populism.

ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION

From an economic perspective, welfare schemes, subsidies, and freebies are interpreted in terms of resource allocation, fiscal burden, productive impact, consumption effects, and long-term development outcomes. Welfare schemes are often defended economically because they can improve human capital, strengthen labour productivity, reduce inequality, and generate social returns over time. Spending on education, health, nutrition, and livelihood security is not merely expenditure; it is also investment in the future capacity of society. Such measures may increase productivity, expand opportunities, and reduce long-term social costs. Therefore, welfare expenditure is often viewed as economically justified when it addresses structural weaknesses and contributes to inclusive development.

Subsidies are similarly interpreted through the lens of economic necessity and efficiency. In certain cases, subsidies are introduced because markets alone do not ensure fairness or universal access. Essential goods such as food, transport, fuel, or education may become unaffordable for weaker sections if left entirely to market forces. Subsidies can thus function as tools of economic correction, especially where there is inflation, poverty, unemployment, or regional disparity. They can help protect vulnerable populations and maintain social stability. At the same time, economists also caution that subsidies must be carefully targeted and periodically reviewed, because poorly designed subsidies may distort markets, encourage inefficiency, or place pressure on public finances.

Freebies, however, are often interpreted more critically in economic debate. Critics argue that excessive freebie politics can create fiscal strain, widen budget deficits, reduce capital expenditure, and weaken long-term economic planning. If governments spend heavily on politically attractive benefits without expanding productive capacity or revenue, the burden may eventually fall on the public treasury. Such spending can crowd out investment in infrastructure, education, employment generation, and industrial development. In this interpretation, freebies are seen as economically unsustainable when they prioritize short-term popularity over durable development.

Yet it is also important to recognize that economic interpretation cannot be entirely separated from social conditions. In societies marked by deep inequality, even benefits criticized as freebies may have real economic importance for households. Free electricity up to a limited amount, transport support, food assistance, or educational devices may significantly reduce the burden on low-income families. Therefore, the economic debate is not simply between “good welfare” and “bad freebies.” Rather, it concerns questions such as: Does the measure create long-term value? Is it financially sustainable? Does it improve capability or only immediate consumption? Is it targeted at genuine need or politically generalized for vote appeal? These are the key economic tests that help distinguish welfare support from populist excess.

Economic interpretation in brief

- Welfare schemes are often treated as social investment.
- Subsidies may be seen as corrective tools for affordability and equity.

- Freebies are criticized when they create high fiscal burden without development returns.
- The key economic issue is sustainability, not just free provision.
- A measure may be justified economically if it improves human development and productive capacity.

POLITICAL INTERPRETATION

Politically, the distinction between freebies, welfare, and subsidies becomes even more complex because all three can influence the relationship between state, citizens, and political parties. In democratic politics, welfare measures often help governments gain legitimacy because they show concern for public needs. Citizens may reward governments electorally when they feel their lives have improved through state intervention. This means that even genuine welfare schemes may carry political value. However, political value alone does not turn a welfare scheme into a freebie. The crucial issue is whether the policy is being implemented as part of responsible governance or primarily used as a tactic to secure votes.

Freebies are usually interpreted politically as instruments of populism, electoral mobilization, and sometimes patronage politics. Political parties may frame benefits as evidence of compassion, efficiency, or commitment to the poor. At the same time, opposition parties may criticize the same measures as bribery-like inducements, irresponsible distribution, or efforts to manipulate voter choice. This is why the political meaning of freebies is deeply contested. In one interpretation, they reflect democratic responsiveness; in another, they reflect a weakening of policy seriousness and a shift toward competitive populism.

Politically, freebies also affect the symbolic relationship between leaders and citizens. When benefits are aggressively publicized in election manifestos or campaign speeches, they are not merely economic measures but political messages. They signal that a party is willing to respond to everyday needs. This can create a sense of trust, dependence, gratitude, or expectation among sections of the electorate. Such political effects are especially strong where voters face economic insecurity and where visible support from the state becomes a major factor in judging government performance. Thus, freebies politics becomes a form of political communication as much as a form of material distribution.

Subsidies, by contrast, may carry less dramatic political symbolism because they are often embedded in ongoing policy structures. Still, they are not free from political interpretation. Governments may claim credit for subsidies, expand them before elections, or use them to appeal to specific voter groups. Welfare, too, can become politicized when parties compete over who can deliver more benefits or more effective support. Therefore, politically speaking, the difference lies less in whether a measure helps voters and more in how it is designed, communicated, justified, and timed.

The political interpretation also includes questions of democratic ethics. If electoral competition becomes dominated by freebie promises, political debate may shift away from governance quality, institutional reform, employment generation, and long-term development. In such a situation, elections may become contests of distribution rather than contests of policy vision. Critics therefore argue that excessive reliance on freebies weakens democratic accountability by encouraging voters to focus on immediate gains. Supporters, however, argue that democratic politics must respond to lived realities, and benefits to citizens should not be dismissed simply because they are popular. This tension lies at the heart of the politics of freebies in India and is highly relevant to the present study on voting behaviour.

Political interpretation in brief

- Welfare can generate political legitimacy without being politically improper.
- Freebies are often interpreted as electoral instruments of populism.

- Subsidies may be politically neutral in design but politically useful in presentation.
- Timing, publicity, and targeting shape how a measure is politically perceived.
- The major political concern is whether benefits strengthen democracy or distort voter choice.

Analytical Distinction

For the purpose of academic clarity, freebies, welfare, and subsidies may be distinguished on the basis of purpose, duration, policy logic, visibility, and political intention. Welfare is generally public-oriented and justice-based. Subsidy is usually an economic support mechanism intended to reduce cost or promote access. Freebie is more often associated with politically visible benefits designed or presented in a way that yields electoral advantage. This distinction should not be treated as rigid, because actual policies may overlap. A benefit can be both welfare-oriented and politically rewarding. A subsidy can become populist if expanded without rationale. A free provision may still be justified if it addresses urgent need and is institutionally sustainable. Therefore, the distinction is analytical rather than absolute.

Simple comparison

- **Welfare** = social protection and public well-being
- **Subsidy** = economic support and cost reduction
- **Freebie** = politically charged benefit, often linked with electoral appeal

Conclusion

The study concludes that freebies, welfare schemes, and subsidies are closely related but conceptually different. Welfare schemes are generally aimed at social protection, inclusive development, and support for disadvantaged sections. Subsidies are economic tools used to reduce cost and improve access to essential goods and services. Freebies, however, are often linked with electoral appeal, political visibility, and short-term voter attraction. The paper finds that all free benefits cannot be rejected as harmful because many schemes provide real relief to poor and vulnerable citizens. At the same time, excessive and unplanned freebies may create fiscal burden, reduce long-term development investment, and weaken democratic accountability. Therefore, the need is not to completely ban welfare-based support, but to regulate irresponsible election-time freebies. Political parties should clearly explain the financial sources, eligibility criteria, and developmental purpose of such promises. A balanced approach is required where genuine welfare continues, subsidies remain economically justified, and populist freebies are controlled in the interest of democracy and sustainable development.

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