



WELFARE PROMISES AND VOTER TARGETING IN INDIAN ELECTIONS

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Abstract

This paper studies how welfare promises are used as a strategy for voter targeting in Indian elections. Political parties often include promises such as free electricity, water, transport, cash support, ration, loan waivers, and women-focused benefits in their election campaigns to attract specific voter groups. These promises are presented as welfare measures, but they may also work as electoral tools to influence voter preference and party loyalty. The study highlights that welfare promises are effective when voters consider them credible, visible, and useful in everyday life. However, excessive dependence on such promises may weaken issue-based politics and create concerns about fiscal responsibility and democratic accountability.

Keywords

Welfare Promises, Voter Targeting, Indian Elections, Freebies Politics, Election Manifestos, Electoral Strategy, Voting Behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Welfare promises have become an important part of Indian electoral politics because political parties use visible and direct benefits to appeal to voters beyond ideology, caste, leadership, and development claims. Election manifestos are now used not only to present policy ideas but also to communicate attractive benefit-based promises to women, farmers, youth, poor households, and other targeted groups. Studies on Delhi elections also show that programmatic welfare can become an effective political strategy when voters connect welfare delivery with party credibility. At the same time, research on welfare and voting suggests that voters are not passive recipients; they judge delivery, access, credit attribution, and credibility before converting welfare benefits into electoral support.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of welfare promises in Indian election campaigns.
2. To study how political parties use welfare promises for voter targeting.
3. To analyse the impact of welfare-based promises on voter preference and electoral behaviour.
4. To understand the democratic and fiscal concerns related to welfare promises in elections

FREEBIES POLITICS IN THE INDIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Freebies politics has become a major feature of the Indian electoral system because elections are no longer fought only on ideology, party identity, leadership charisma, caste equations, or development claims. They are also fought through the promise of direct, visible, and emotionally persuasive benefits that voters can easily understand in everyday life. In this context, election promises such as free electricity, water, transport, cash support, farm loan waivers, household goods, educational incentives, or women-focused transfers often become central to campaign communication. This makes freebies politics part of a broader shift in Indian democracy, where electoral competition increasingly depends on how effectively parties present themselves as providers of relief, welfare, and immediate benefit. The legal and institutional debate around this issue has also become stronger over time. In *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu* (2013), the Supreme Court recognized that manifesto promises of freebies can influence voters and affect the fairness of elections, even though it held that such promises were not “corrupt



practice” under the existing law. The Court then directed the Election Commission to frame guidelines for manifestos, which later became part of the Model Code of Conduct.

Role of Political Parties and Election Manifestos

Political parties play the central role in transforming welfare promises into electoral instruments. In the Indian electoral system, the manifesto is not merely a symbolic document; it is a public declaration of policy priorities, electoral commitments, and political intent. The Supreme Court in *Balaji* explicitly described a manifesto as a statement of party policy and noted that the implementation of manifesto promises arises only if the party forms the government. At the same time, the Court also acknowledged that promises of freebies can influence people and disturb the level playing field in elections. This dual position is important. It shows that manifestos are formally legitimate democratic documents, but they can also become vehicles for promises designed to create strong electoral appeal. Thus, political parties use manifestos not only to communicate ideology and governance vision, but also to package welfare and benefit promises in ways that maximize political advantage.

The Election Commission’s manifesto guidelines were introduced precisely because of this concern. Under the manifesto-related guidelines later incorporated into the Model Code of Conduct, parties are expected to avoid promises that may vitiate the purity of the election process or exert undue influence on voters. The guidelines also say that manifestos should reflect the rationale for promises and broadly indicate the ways and means to meet the financial requirement, so that trust is sought only on promises that are realistically capable of being fulfilled. This indicates that the Indian electoral system formally recognizes the manifesto as a legitimate campaign tool, but also treats it as an area where unchecked promise-making can undermine electoral fairness. In practice, however, manifestos continue to be used strategically to convert public needs into politically persuasive commitments.

Political parties also use manifestos to establish issue ownership. A party that promises free or subsidized public services seeks to project itself as pro-poor, accessible, and responsive to everyday hardship. In a federal and highly competitive democracy like India, this becomes even more important because parties must continuously differentiate themselves from rivals. Research on Indian welfare politics shows that parties compete not only over benefit delivery itself but also over credit attribution—that is, ensuring that voters recognize which party or level of government should be rewarded for a scheme. Gupta, Goyal, and Bhattacharya (2022) show that welfare delivery and the ability of voters to assign credit for it can matter electorally, even if it is not always decisive enough to determine the final outcome. This means manifestos are politically powerful because they help parties claim ownership over future and past benefits at the same time.

Another important role of manifestos is that they simplify political communication. Long-term reforms in employment, institutional quality, judicial efficiency, or industrial growth are often difficult to communicate in a campaign setting. By contrast, a promise such as free bus travel, zero-cost utilities up to a threshold, or direct cash assistance is immediately understandable. Manifestos therefore act as instruments of translation: they convert broad political competition into direct benefit language that is easier for voters to evaluate. This is one reason why freebies politics has become deeply embedded in the Indian electoral system. It allows parties to speak to citizens in concrete household terms rather than abstract policy language. That communicative advantage makes election manifestos a key site through which freebies politics is legitimized, publicized, and normalized.

Role of political parties and manifestos in freebies politics

- Political parties use manifestos to convert policy promises into electoral appeal.
- Manifestos help parties project themselves as welfare-oriented and voter-responsive.
- They enable credit claiming for benefits already delivered or promised.



- They simplify campaign communication through visible and understandable promises.
- They can shape voter expectation before polling by presenting benefits as future guarantees.

FREEBIES AS ELECTORAL STRATEGY

Freebies become an electoral strategy when political actors deliberately use material promises to attract, consolidate, or expand support among voters. In this sense, freebies are not accidental outcomes of governance; they are structured campaign tools. Their strategic value lies in their visibility, immediacy, and emotional resonance. A promise of a direct benefit is easier to remember than a detailed policy document, and it can be linked with gratitude, security, and trust. This is why freebies politics has become attractive to both national and regional parties. In intensely competitive elections, direct benefits may help parties reduce ideological distance, broaden their social base, and attract undecided or economically vulnerable voters.

The Delhi case is especially useful in understanding this point. Barthwal and Ali (2021), in their study of the 2020 Delhi Assembly election, argue that broad-based welfare policies helped the Aam Aadmi Party avoid the limitations of narrow patronage politics and instead build wider social support. Their analysis suggests that policy-focused welfare can operate as an effective electoral strategy precisely because it reaches beyond small patronage networks and appeals to larger groups of voters, including those who do not normally participate in clientelist exchange. This is significant for the study of freebies politics because it shows that electoral strategy today may rely less on individualized inducements and more on widely visible welfare-style promises that still yield political returns. In other words, freebies strategy in India can take both targeted and broad-based forms.

The strategic value of freebies is also tied to voter memory and campaign repetition. A benefit that affects monthly household expenses—such as electricity, water, food, or transport—can generate recurring political reminders. Parties know that such benefits are easier to keep alive in public discourse because voters experience them repeatedly in daily life. This makes freebies strategically stronger than one-time abstract claims. At the same time, parties often combine such promises with emotional framing, presenting them as support for women, the poor, students, farmers, youth, or senior citizens. By doing this, they convert material provision into moral and political identity. The benefit is not presented simply as expenditure; it is presented as care, justice, empowerment, or recognition. This strengthens its electoral value.

A further strategic element is that freebies can help parties reposition themselves in the political field. A party that may otherwise lack strong ideological appeal or deep organizational penetration can use welfare-oriented promises to build credibility. In some cases, such promises allow a party to compete against identity-based mobilization by shifting the agenda toward governance and household economics. In Delhi, the evidence suggests that policy concerns and welfare delivery were central to electoral success, alongside the reduction of ideological distance with competitors. This indicates that freebies and welfare-based promises are often used not only to “buy support” in a crude sense, but to strategically redefine the terms of electoral competition itself.

At the same time, this strategy has limits. Recent work on Indian elections also shows that voters are not entirely passive recipients of welfare promises. The 2024 analysis by Verma and Chhibber argues that welfare provisioning does not convert automatically into votes; voters remain discerning and also care about access and delivery quality. This means freebies can be electorally useful, but they work best when linked with credible implementation and visible governance. Hence, freebies as electoral strategy should be understood not as a guaranteed formula, but as a calculated political instrument whose effectiveness depends on context, credibility, and voter interpretation.

Why freebies work as electoral strategy



- They are easy to communicate and easy for voters to remember.
- They create a sense of immediate household benefit.
- They help parties frame themselves as compassionate and responsive.
- They can widen a party's support beyond traditional social bases.
- They are most effective when voters believe the promise is credible and deliverable.

VOTER TARGETING AND CAMPAIGN PRACTICES

Voter targeting is a major part of freebies politics in the Indian electoral system. Parties rarely distribute or promise benefits in a politically neutral way. Instead, they identify social groups whose support is electorally valuable and design campaign messages accordingly. These groups may include women, farmers, youth, lower-income households, caste communities, urban service users, or recipients of existing welfare programmes. The purpose of targeting is to make the electoral message appear personally relevant. A universal promise may have broad appeal, but a tailored promise can generate stronger emotional identification among specific voters. This is why contemporary election campaigns frequently include women-centered transfers, farmer waivers, youth devices, or urban utility support.

Research on Indian electoral behaviour shows that targeting is closely connected with credit attribution and perceived access. Gupta, Goyal, and Bhattacharya (2022) demonstrate that welfare delivery mattered politically when voters could identify who should receive credit for the benefit. This is important because campaign practices do not end with announcing schemes; parties must also ensure that beneficiaries associate those schemes with the right political actor. Hence, campaign messaging often emphasizes the name of the scheme, the leader behind it, the government that introduced it, and the specific group it is intended to help. In electoral terms, a benefit is most effective when it is not only delivered but also politically owned.

The broader literature on patronage and clientelism is also relevant here. Studies of welfare targeting in India suggest that private or excludable benefits can influence electoral response more strongly than diffuse public goods. Bardhan and coauthors find that voters respond positively to excludable welfare benefits, even when they also benefit from local public goods, which supports the argument that tangible and attributable benefits are particularly potent in electoral politics. Likewise, research on local targeting in West Bengal shows continuing evidence of clientelistic allocation patterns in some contexts. These findings suggest that campaign practices around freebies are often built around the strategic distribution or promise of benefits that are visible, attributable, and politically useful.

Campaign practices also include the symbolic language through which targeting is justified. A promise may be framed as women's empowerment, youth advancement, farmer relief, social justice, or urban affordability. Such framing helps parties avoid the impression of crude inducement and instead place the promise within a morally defensible narrative. This is especially important in India, where electoral politics must speak simultaneously to welfare need, fiscal legitimacy, and democratic morality. As a result, campaign targeting is often layered: the same promise speaks economically to one group, emotionally to another, and symbolically to the broader electorate.

Another aspect of campaign practice is the move from localized patronage to broad-based beneficiary politics. Earlier patterns of electoral targeting often depended heavily on brokers, intermediaries, and local networks. In many contemporary cases, however, direct benefit transfer systems, digital identification, and large welfare databases have made it easier for parties to campaign around beneficiary categories at scale. Even when the benefit itself is rule-based, the campaign around it can still be highly strategic. Parties tell beneficiaries that their relief depends on the continuation of the ruling party or that rival parties will discontinue it. This allows broad welfare to function electorally in ways that resemble targeted politics, even without classic face-to-face patronage networks.



Finally, voter targeting through freebies must be understood in relation to India's social diversity. Parties often combine welfare promises with caste, class, gender, religion, locality, and occupation-based appeals. In many elections, freebies do not replace identity politics; they interact with it. A party may target women as beneficiaries while also targeting caste blocs, urban poor, or regional voters. This layered campaign style explains why freebies politics has become so effective in India. It allows parties to move from broad populist rhetoric to highly specific beneficiary appeals without abandoning other electoral strategies. Therefore, voter targeting and campaign practices are not side issues in freebies politics; they are among its most important operational mechanisms.

Common campaign practices linked with freebies politics

- Announcing benefits for specific voter groups such as women, farmers, students, or poor households.
- Repeating scheme names and leader images to strengthen credit attribution.
- Framing promises as empowerment, justice, affordability, or relief.
- Linking benefits to party continuity during campaign speeches.
- Combining welfare promises with caste, class, regional, and gender appeals.

FREEBIES POLITICS AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION

Freebies politics has altered the nature of electoral competition in India by pushing parties toward benefit-centered contests. Instead of debating only broad policy ideology, many parties now compete over who can promise more visible, immediate, and relatable relief. This does not mean ideology has disappeared, but it does mean that electoral competition increasingly operates through the language of household economics. Where parties can promise reductions in everyday costs, they gain a practical edge in persuading voters. The Election Commission's concern that manifestos should include a rationale and indicate financial means reflects this broader reality: election competition can be distorted when promises are made without accountability or feasibility. This form of competition also reshapes democratic expectations. Voters begin to judge governments not only by macro-performance but by whether they receive identifiable support that improves daily life. Parties, in turn, become more likely to design campaigns around beneficiaries. As a result, electoral democracy develops a more transactional appearance, though not always in an illegal sense. The transaction may not be a direct vote purchase, but it still structures the relationship between citizen and party through expected benefit. This is one reason the freebies debate remains so powerful in India: it concerns not just economics, but the changing character of democratic competition itself.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that welfare promises have become a powerful instrument of voter targeting in Indian elections. Political parties use benefit-based promises to appeal to specific social groups and to project themselves as responsive and welfare-oriented. Such promises may help poor and marginalized citizens when they are properly designed and implemented. However, when welfare promises are used mainly for electoral gain without financial planning or accountability, they may encourage populism and weaken democratic debate. Therefore, election promises should be transparent, financially responsible, and linked with genuine public welfare rather than short-term vote-seeking politics.

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