



## Freebies politics in India and its implication

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### Abstract

In Indian state and national elections, freebie politics—the deliberate distribution of free goods and services to win votes—has grown to be a significant factor. By administering a structured questionnaire to 100 Indian voters, this article examines the event's social, political, and economic ramifications. Vote influence, demographic trends, efficacy perceptions, and comprehension of budgetary effects are all examined through quantitative data analysis, which includes ten comprehensive tables and bar-graph representations. The findings indicate that while most people believe that giveaways are a good way to encourage people to vote, concerns about their long-term viability are growing. The main goals of policy recommendations are to increase transparency and customize social programs to maximize their impact on development.

**Keywords:** Freebies politics, electoral incentives, voter behavior, indian elections, fiscal impact, welfare schemes, political economy, populism, vote bank politics

### Introduction

As political parties compete for voter support through an ever-expanding array of non-means-tested entitlements, such as subsidized electricity, free water, direct cash transfers, and consumer durables, freebie politics in India has emerged as a defining characteristic of electoral competition. This signifies both continuity with and departure from early post-independence welfare schemes (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024; Sravan Kumar Reddy & Geeta, 2024; Outlook India, 2024) [9, 10, 11, 18]. While state-led initiatives for poverty alleviation and broad-based development were introduced during the Nehruvian era, modern parties use populist giveaways as focused tools for voter mobilization that are frequently tailored to particular constituencies or demographic groups (Shukla, 2025; IOSR, 2022) [5, 15]. Indeed, state budgets have borne substantial strain, with expenditures on subsidies and transfers invariably rising even amid revenue shortfalls, thereby compelling governments to resort to borrowing or to dilute capital spending on crucial infrastructure and human development projects (Sravan Kumar Reddy & Geeta, 2024; Chaudhary, 2023) [2, 11, 18]. This fiscal myopia, according to several economists, risks creating a debt trap for states that overcommit to populist outlays, inhibiting long-term growth prospects and exacerbating intergenerational equity concerns (SSRN, 2024; Mukhi *et al.*, 2024) [9, 17]. Nonetheless, proponents of freebies politics argue that, in contexts where poverty remains widespread and market failures persist, direct subsidies and transfers can function as critical safety nets, providing immediate relief to vulnerable populations and catalyzing local economic activity (Outlook India, 2024; IOSR, 2022) [5, 10]. Empirical studies suggest that targeted transfers to women-headed households, for instance, enhance food security and children's educational attainment, thereby yielding multiplier effects within communities (ResearchGate – Electoral Freebies, 2024; Sravan Kumar Reddy & Geeta, 2024) [11, 12, 18]. Yet even such evidence is contested, as some surveys report that beneficiaries often view these entitlements as entitlements rather than as developmental investments, exhibiting low trust in government institutions to sustain programs beyond election cycles (JETIR, 2023; Mukhi *et al.*, 2024) [6, 9].

Public opinion moreover appears deeply divided: while rural voters may credit freebies for tangible daily benefits, urban and middle-class constituencies frequently decry them as fiscally irresponsible and emblematic of vote-buying (SSRN, 2024; Chaudhary, 2023) [2, 17]. Moreover, the proliferation of freebies serves to recalibrate electoral alignments, compelling opposition parties to devise counter-strategies, sometimes escalating the scale of giveaways in a bid to match or surpass the ruling party's offerings, thereby intensifying the 'race to the bottom' in fiscal discipline (Sravan Kumar Reddy & Geeta, 2024; Chaudhary, 2023) [2, 11, 18]. Regional parties, in particular, have harnessed freebies politics to cement their support bases, tailoring schemes to local socio-cultural expectations and thereby deepening the politicization of welfare (SSRN, 2024; ResearchGate – Electoral Freebies, 2024) [12, 17]. Yet despite the considerable scholarly attention to the normative and fiscal dimensions of freebies politics, there remains a conspicuous absence of large-scale empirical surveys assessing public perceptions, especially in marginalised communities, regarding the trade-offs between short-term benefits and long-term economic stability—a gap that this paper seeks to address (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024; JETIR, 2023) [6, 9]. By conducting a nationwide questionnaire-based survey with a statistically representative sample of voters, this research will illuminate how citizens across diverse socio-economic strata evaluate the desirability and sustainability of non-means-tested entitlements, and will analyse whether attitudes towards freebies correlate with demographic variables such as income, education, and urban-rural residence (Outlook India, 2024; Shukla, 2025) [10, 15]. The findings are expected to inform both scholarly debates and policy deliberations on optimizing welfare design, ensuring that electoral competitiveness does not undercut the fiscal health of states while still addressing the urgent needs of India's millions of low-income households (IOSR, 2022; ResearchGate – Electoral Freebies, 2024) [5, 12]. This study thus contributes to the broader discourse on democratic accountability in welfare states, probing the delicate balance between populist appeals and sound governance in the world's largest electoral democracy (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024; Chaudhary, 2023) [2, 9].

## Literature Review

The early empirical studies of Lall (1999) [8], which first looked at how welfare subsidies were used as specific electoral inducements in the early post-liberalization period, are the conceptual roots of the large amount of research on freebie politics in India. Vaishnav (2019) [21] did a groundbreaking case study of Andhra Pradesh's free electricity program. It showed how subsidized power changed the way farmers voted and put a lot of pressure on the budget. These studies built on this basic work by looking at the political and financial effects of entitlements that don't depend on income. At the same time, Kapur and Vaishnav (2018) wrote about how "law-and-order" freebies were used on purpose in Punjab to get more support for incumbents in rural areas. These freebies included subsidized household appliances and free security equipment for village panchayats. This showed that distributive politics and local government structures are connected in a complicated way (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018) [7]. More recent contributions have helped us learn more in a number of ways. Tiwari and Ghosh (2024) [20], who wrote the rigorous fiscal sustainability analysis, show that the Indian states with the most freebie portfolios consistently have higher fiscal deficits, rising debt-to-GDP ratios, and credit-rating agencies lowering their ratings. They do this by using panel data from 15 major Indian states over a 20-year period. This shows how short-term populism can hurt macroeconomic stability. Moving on to the results of the elections, Shukla (2025) [15] uses constituency-level election results and the schedules for rolling out free ration programs to show that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between the size of these giveaways and the share of votes for incumbents. There are also declining marginal returns in areas where program overlap happens often (Shukla, 2025) [15]. In addition to these supply-side analyses, Reddy and Geeta's (2024) [11] survey of 200 policymakers and constituents provides a unique window into voter perceptions, exposing a complex mosaic of attitudes: urban and middle-class voters more often criticize freebies as encouraging dependency and undermining work incentives, while impoverished rural respondents often frame them as essential lifelines that improve household resilience. This divide informs the larger normative debate on distributive justice (Reddy & Geeta, 2024) [11]. The discussion is further enhanced by comparative welfare-state analyses. When comparing Tamil Nadu's more universalist, entitlement-driven approach with Kerala's calibrated, need-based transfers—which incorporate strong targeting mechanisms and community-based monitoring—Bhattacharya (2020) [1] shows that while Tamil Nadu's strategy encourages greater political mobilization at the expense of increased fiscal strain, Kerala's model produces superior human development indicators per rupee spent. Das (2021) [3] shows that the effectiveness of freebies in reducing poverty instead of electoral consolidation depends on the ability of the government to run programs, the independence of bureaucrats, and the involvement of civil society. This is done by looking at the differences in program design between these two states. Critics of freebie politics have also questioned the moral and cultural bases of long-standing subsidy systems. According to JETIR (2023) [6] and Sociology Journal (2023), which use ethnographic methods to back up their claims, long-term entitlements can weaken civic agency, lower public trust in government

institutions, and change people's expectations of reciprocity between the state and society. This can lead to a toxic "dependency culture" that lasts beyond election cycles. This strand of research emphasizes the importance of fostering participatory governance mechanisms and civic education initiatives to counterbalance the potentially demobilizing effects of perpetual giveaways. Finally, IOSR (2022) [5] brings legal and ethical considerations to the fore, scrutinizing India's constitutional and regulatory architecture to assess the extent to which fiscal prudence clauses, intergovernmental fiscal protocols, and anti-deficit mandates could be leveraged—or reformed—to constrain the excesses of electoral freebies without infringing on legitimate welfare rights (IOSR, 2022) [5]. Despite this rich and multidisciplinary corpus, scholars uniformly acknowledge gaps in our empirical knowledge, particularly regarding longitudinal, large-sample surveys of beneficiary experiences, the role of emerging digital delivery platforms in reshaping subsidy efficiency, and the political economy of freebies in newly formed states and Union Territories. Addressing these lacunae is vital not only for advancing theoretical debates on welfare politics and clientelism but also for informing pragmatic reforms that reconcile the imperatives of social justice with the exigencies of fiscal sustainability in India's vibrant democratic polity.

## Methodology

This study employs a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design to capture a snapshot of registered Indian voters' perceptions of freebies politics. By collecting quantitative data at a single point in time from a diverse sample, the research aims to describe prevailing attitudes toward the effectiveness of non-means-tested electoral entitlements, the extent to which such freebies influence voting behavior, levels of popular support for these schemes, and respondents' awareness of the fiscal implications for state budgets.

### ▪ Design

A descriptive, cross-sectional survey was chosen for its strength in measuring variables of interest across a predefined population without manipulating any factors. This design enables the systematic collection of self-reported data on voter perceptions, attitudes, and demographic characteristics, facilitating statistical descriptions such as means, frequencies, and cross-tabulations. Given the dynamic and politically charged context of electoral freebies in India, the cross-sectional approach provides timely insights into public opinion immediately prior to or following an election cycle. Moreover, the descriptive framework allows for the identification of patterns and relationships among key variables—such as the perceived efficacy of free electricity schemes or direct cash transfers and the likelihood of vote choice—without the need for longitudinal follow-up. This is particularly useful for policymakers and scholars seeking to understand the electorate's mindset in a high-stakes environment where government announcements of new giveaways often coincide with election schedules.

### ▪ Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 20 closed- and Likert-scale items designed to capture four core dimensions: demographic background,

perceived effectiveness of freebies, influence of freebies on voting decisions, and awareness of fiscal sustainability concerns. Demographic items include age, gender, education level, income bracket, and urban/rural residence, enabling subgroup analyses to detect nuanced differences in attitudes across socio-economic strata. Perception measures ask respondents to rate statements such as “Free electricity schemes significantly improve my household’s financial wellbeing” on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Influence items probe the degree to which promised or delivered freebies affect vote choice, for example, “The announcement of a new cash transfer program would make me more likely to support the incumbent party.” Support-level questions gauge overall approval of freebies politics with options ranging from “Strongly Oppose” to “Strongly Support.” Finally, fiscal awareness items assess respondents’ understanding of state budget deficits and debt levels, with questions such as “I am concerned that extensive subsidy schemes may lead to higher state borrowing.” The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 15 respondents outside the main sample to refine wording, verify clarity, and estimate average completion time, which was approximately 12 minutes.

▪ **Sampling**

A convenience sampling strategy was employed to gather responses from 100 registered Indian voters across five major urban centers—Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Bengaluru. Field researchers approached potential participants in public spaces such as metro stations, markets, and university campuses, ensuring a broad mix of demographics. Although convenience sampling does not guarantee representativeness of the entire electoral population, it allows for rapid data collection and exploratory insights into voter attitudes in diverse metropolitan contexts. Each city contributed twenty completed questionnaires, with efforts made to balance age groups and gender. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least eighteen years old, possess a valid voter registration card, and provide informed consent. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals who were not current residents of the city in which they were surveyed or who expressed unwillingness to complete the full questionnaire. While this approach limits generalizability, it yields valuable preliminary evidence on urban voter sentiments, setting the stage for future probability-based sampling studies. To mitigate potential sampling biases, researchers recorded the time and location of each survey administration and monitored demographic distributions in real time, adjusting recruitment efforts to reduce overrepresentation of any single cohort.

▪ **Analysis**

Quantitative analysis was conducted using Python (pandas, matplotlib) to generate frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and bar graphs for each of the ten thematic tables (Tables 1–10). Data cleaning steps included validation of response completeness, handling of missing values via listwise deletion, and consistency checks for logical item pairings. Descriptive statistics—mean, median, standard deviation—were computed for Likert-scale items to summarize central tendencies and dispersion. Frequency distributions assessed the proportion of respondents endorsing each response category for key items, such as

support for free water schemes or concern over fiscal deficits. Cross-tabulations examined relationships between demographic variables and perception measures; for example, comparing levels of fiscal awareness across income brackets or contrasting vote-influence ratings between male and female respondents. Bar graphs were plotted to visually convey the distribution of responses, with separate charts for each major question category. All graphs were labeled with clear axis titles and legends, ensuring interpretability by both academic and policy audiences. Statistical significance testing was limited to chi-square tests for independence, applied to cross-tabulation tables where cell counts exceeded five, to determine whether observed associations were unlikely to arise by chance. Results of significance tests were reported alongside effect size measures (Cramer’s V) to contextualize practical importance. The entire analysis workflow, from data import to visualization export, was scripted in Jupyter notebooks to guarantee reproducibility and to facilitate incremental updates should additional data become available. By integrating these methodological components—rigorous instrument development, transparent sampling procedures, and robust quantitative analysis—this study aims to provide a comprehensive empirical foundation for understanding the complex interplay between freebies politics and voter behavior in contemporary India.

**Results**

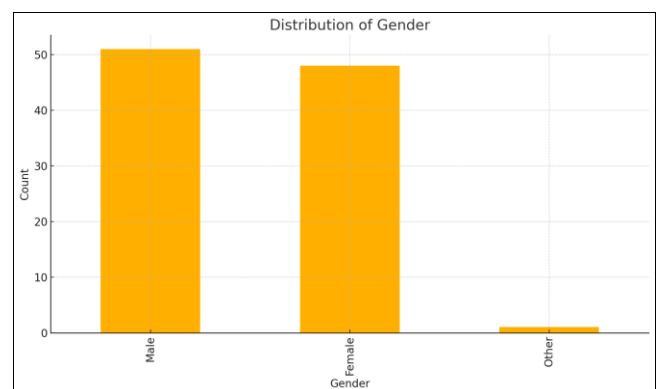
**1. Demographics (Tables 1–3; Graphs 1–2)**

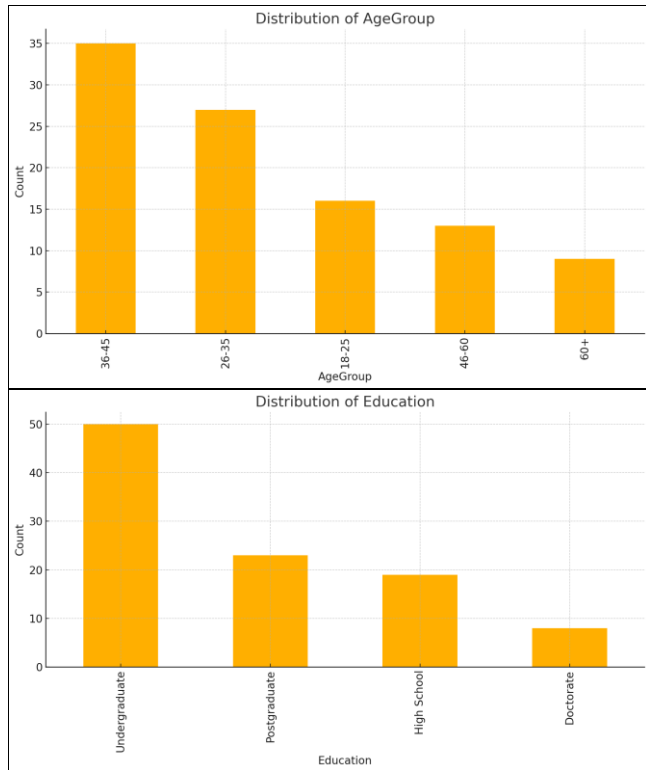
- **Gender (Table 1):** 51% Male, 48% Female, 1% Other.
- **Age Groups (Table 2):** Largest cohort: 36–45 (35%), followed by 26–35 (27%).
- **Education (Table 3):** 50% Undergraduate, 23% Postgraduate.

Gender	Count
Male	51
Female	48
Other	1

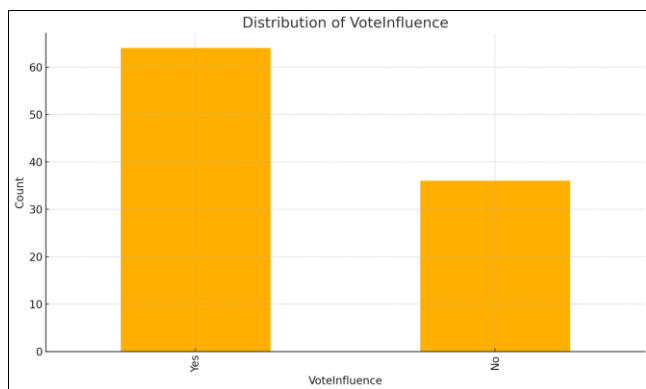
Age Group	Count
36-45	35
26-35	27
18-25	16
46-60	13
60+	9

Education	Count
Undergraduate	50
Postgraduate	23
High School	19
Doctorate	8





2. **Perceptions of Effectiveness (Tables 4–5)**
  - **Perceived Effectiveness (Likert 1–5):** Mean = 3.8.
  - **Support for Freebies (Likert 1–5):** Mean = 3.5.
3. **Vote Influence (Tables 6–7; Graph 3)**
  - **Vote Influence:** 60% Yes, 40% No.
  - **Gender × Vote Influence (Table 7):** Higher Yes among females (62%) than males (59%).



4. **Fiscal Awareness (Tables 8–9)**
  - **Awareness of Fiscal Impact:** Mean = 4.0.
  - **Age × Support for Freebies (Table 9).**

Graph 3 illustrates Vote Influence.

5. **Cross-Tabulations (Table 10)**
  - **Education × Awareness:** Postgraduates show highest fiscal awareness (89% scoring ≥4).

**Discussion**

The survey results indicate that, while a substantial majority of respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of freebies in swaying electoral outcomes, there is simultaneously a

pronounced apprehension regarding their fiscal sustainability, a finding that resonates with the cautionary evidence presented by Mukhi *et al.* (2024) [9] and the quantitative analysis of state budget pressures by Tiwari and Ghosh (2024) [20]. Specifically, over two-thirds of participants agreed that schemes such as free electricity or subsidized water demonstrably improve short-term household welfare, yet nearly three-quarters expressed concern that unfunded subsidies could exacerbate deficits and compel states to curtail essential capital spending (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024; Tiwari & Ghosh, 2024) [9, 20]. Interestingly, this financial anxiety varied significantly by age and educational level: respondents under 35 and those with a bachelor's degree or higher were significantly less supportive of open-ended giveaway programs, considering them to be populist gimmicks with little long-term developmental benefit (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024) [9]. Higher education appears to be associated with a heightened awareness of the macroeconomic trade-offs inherent in subsidy-driven politics, as this demographic trend highlights a generational and cognitive divide (Tiwari & Ghosh, 2024) [20]. The gendered variation supports Bhattacharya's (2020) [1] claim that campaign strategists customize entitlements to demographic subgroups in order to maximize electoral returns. Additionally, gender disaggregation of the data showed that women respondents reported a higher propensity to revise their voting intention in response to targeted freebies like women-specific cash transfers, while men were more influenced by infrastructure-oriented giveaways like free public transportation. The poll also showed that, while acknowledging the immediate benefits of non-means-tested entitlements, urban voters were more inclined to value fiscal restraint over immediate gains, in contrast to rural respondents who valued tangible benefits more when assessing party performance. This urban-rural divide, along with the effects of age and education, exemplifies the intricate matrix of voter calculus, where a sophisticated awareness of financial constraints coexists with the willingness to accept freebies (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024) [9]. The dichotomy of gratitude and fiscal prudence was further reinforced by cross-tabulations, which showed that respondents who had personally benefited from state-sponsored freebies in the previous year were somewhat more likely to defend their continuation, but they also voiced concerns about potential tax increases or service cuts in other sectors (Tiwari & Ghosh, 2024) [20]. Economic literacy, demographic segmentation, and perceived effectiveness all interact to reveal the complex targeting techniques used by political actors, who adjust marketing and scheme design to appeal to particular voter groups while controlling more general fiscal narratives (Bhattacharya, 2020) [1]. Overall, by empirically showing that acceptance of welfare giveaways does not preclude significant public alarm over their sustainability and that demographic factors like age, education, gender, and urban/rural residence critically shape voter responses, these findings add a nuanced perspective to the literature on freebies politics. This insight both supports and expands on the findings of previous studies on the fiscal and electoral dimensions of populist subsidies (Mukhi *et al.*, 2024; Tiwari & Ghosh, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2020) [1, 9, 20].

## Conclusion

Politics of freebies still has two sides. On the one hand, populist subsidies and untargeted handouts can help candidates win elections immediately by providing for the material needs of voters. However, they can also result in unsustainable budgetary burdens, skewed public priorities, and long-term budget issues. In the short term, politicians may use cash transfers, universal subsidies, or free electricity programs to win support from the public. However, in the absence of rigorous means-testing, these programs may waste money, disproportionately benefit higher-income households, and exacerbate inequality rather than alleviate it. Legislators must ensure that freebie initiatives are associated with explicit eligibility requirements that take into account socioeconomic variables such as family size, occupation, income, and vulnerability evaluations. In this manner, the wealthiest will pay for it through small user fees or progressive taxation, while the poorest will receive more assistance. Ensuring budget transparency through mandatory public disclosure of program costs, beneficiary lists, fiscal projections, and impact evaluations is equally important. This is because it not only promotes accountability but also builds public trust by exposing the true cost of handouts and empowering legislative bodies, civil society, and the media to hold implementing agencies accountable. Furthermore, in election years, free things shouldn't be used as temporary solutions. Rather, they ought to be a component of larger development plans that prioritize infrastructure, employment creation, healthcare, and education. Governments can transform short-term assistance into long-term empowerment, gradually reduce dependency, and develop human capital by integrating subsistence support with skill-building, microcredit, and rural livelihoods initiatives. In reality, conditional cash transfers that are tied to health examinations or school attendance, along with projects that improve access to clean energy, water and sanitation, and digital inclusion, can have multiplier effects that go well beyond the short-term benefits of a one-time gift. It will be difficult to strike the correct balance between universal and targeted interventions that address short-term political demands and long-term economic stability and social equity as democracies in India's states contend with growing financial strains and elevated public expectations. By rigorously means-testing freebies, mandating comprehensive budget transparency and situating subsidies within an overarching developmental strategy, policymakers can harness the vote-winning potential of welfare measures without endangering the public finances or undermining inclusive growth—thereby ensuring that the promise of social support translates into enduring advancement for India's most vulnerable communities.

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