



Populism or Empowerment: Understanding How Voters Perceive Freebies and Welfare Schemes

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Abstract

In recent years, the use of electoral freebies, such as goods, services, direct cash transfers, etc, has prompted critical debate about their legitimacy and long-term impact on democratic processes. This study investigates how voters perceive such electoral giveaways in contrast to welfare initiatives aiming at capacity building and social development. Specifically, this paper examines public perception of the distinction between populist giveaways and structured welfare, and whether such provisions are seen as tools of empowerment or instruments of dependency. Drawing on responses from over 60 individuals through a structured questionnaire, administered online, using non-probability snowball sampling, this research captures insights across diverse age groups, regions, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic strata. The findings reveal that educated, urban, middle and high-income respondents, particularly those aged 18-45, largely distinguished welfare as long-term, need-based support (eg, education and healthcare), while categorising election-time giveaways, like free electricity, devices, and direct cash, as manipulative. These were often criticised for fostering dependency and straining public resources. Notably, students and other young participants (18–25 years) frequently rejected freebies as manipulative rather than alluring. Even those who were apolitical and did not cast ballots had ethical and financial consciousness. Participants with high incomes (₹10L+ per year) raised concerns around sustainability and governance accountability. While some respondents acknowledged the appeal of short-term benefits, they only endorsed them when aligned with long-term development goals. The overall findings suggest that poorly targeted freebies may have adversely impacted political opinions, especially among informed voters. This study hopes to contribute to ongoing policy debates on welfare, electoral ethics, and governance by highlighting how voters interpret and evaluate state-provided benefits in a complex democratic landscape.

Keywords: Freebies; Welfare State; Political Parties; Citizen Perception; Voting Behaviour

1. Introduction

Globally, electoral democracies have become the order of the day, with different models of democracies prevalent across countries – such as representative democracies in countries like India, the United States of America (USA), liberal democracies in the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and representative democracies in Germany, Japan, among others (Nai et al., 2015). Political parties across different systems vie for the electorate's favour and employ various techniques to secure the mandate. In electoral democracy, several fundamental principles govern the political process: frequent elections, political plurality, universal suffrage, electoral transparency, and accountability of those in power. These methods are engineered to guarantee that elections are transparent, equitable, and competitive, providing all eligible individuals a legitimate opportunity to engage in the democratic process. Various political parties ought to contest elections freely, embodying a spectrum of perspectives. In practice, however, the execution frequently fails to meet the desired standard. When elections are swayed by inequitable advantages—such as the disproportionate use of financial resources or manipulation—the system may devolve into electoral tyranny. Likewise, inadequate safeguarding of civil freedoms can undermine the essence of democracy. Moreover, financial influence, partisan media, and populist discourse frequently result in distorted outcomes, prompting apprehensions regarding the integrity of democratic processes (Nai et al., 2015).

In addition to financial influence, political campaigns often utilise non-monetary incentives to sway public opinion and enhance voter engagement. These incentives encompass symbolic goods such as buttons, t-shirts, and bumper stickers, which function not just as statements of support but also as instruments for mobilising communal initiatives. Gerber et al. (2008) examine the significance of the causal impact of party identity, particularly for materials that can invigorate a base. An exemplary instance transpired during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, when Barack Obama's campaign adeptly utilised branded merchandise—such as the emblematic "Hope" poster—to cultivate a robust feeling of identification and communal fervour (End the Chaos, n.d.). These objects served as visual reminders and focal points, strengthening political commitment among voters. These artefacts serve as tools of social influence, discreetly promoting conformity and affiliation with political movements. Donning or exhibiting political paraphernalia can enable individuals to indicate their affiliation with a community, potentially strengthening group loyalty. Normative social influence, in this context, compels individuals to conform their behaviour to that of recognised in-groups.

In numerous cases, non-monetary advantages extend beyond campaign materials. Public services, including education, healthcare, transportation, and infrastructure, can function as strategic instruments in political politics. Access to these services frequently shapes residents' perceptions of political leaders, particularly in regions where patronage and clientelism are prevalent. Kaplan et al. (2010) argue that the distribution of such resources can be a deliberate tactic by political actors to cultivate loyalty and gain electoral advantage. Psychologically, this also activates cognitive biases. The anchoring effect means voters may form lasting impressions of a political leader based on their first receipt of a benefit. Similarly, the endowment effect leads people to assign increased value to what they already possess. Thus, when citizens receive a benefit from a political actor, they may subconsciously elevate the actor's value or credibility, skewing further judgment.

The politics of freebies first began in Tamil Nadu in 1967 when C.N. Annadurai, the founder of the political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), promised to offer the poor 4.5 kg of rice for Re 1 if elected, through the public distribution system (Padmanabhan, 2021). The scheme was implemented upon election but was soon scrapped due to financial strain (PW, n.d.). This set the precedence for several other political parties, who followed a similar strategy of offering free goods to targeted population groups – either the poor, women, children, or to socioeconomically weaker, but electorally significant sections – who despite their vulnerability are important as voter groups in the number game of a democratic election where candidates win depending on the number of votes secured.

The trend intensified in Tamil Nadu during the 2006 and 2011 assembly elections, with AIADMK and DMK promising free colour TVs, grinders, mixers, electric fans, laptops, land, and jobs. Political analyst Javed Ansari notes that this culture began in the 1980s and 1990s in Tamil Nadu and has since spread across India, particularly among ruling parties launching populist schemes (Dinkar, 2023). These programs are not only electoral inducements but also intricately ingrained strategies that harness essential psychological predispositions. Reciprocity theory posits that when individuals get a benefit, they frequently experience an implicit obligation to reciprocate. For voters, this may manifest as votes or demonstrations of allegiance. Even minor presents might elicit a psychological compulsion to reciprocate, impacting political decisions more than one may consciously acknowledge.

The Collins Dictionary defines a "freebie" as an item provided at no cost, usually by a corporation (Collins Dictionary, 2023). In the political sphere, however, gratuities assume a distinct significance. They frequently entail inflated or implausible commitments articulated by political parties within their election manifestos, intended to garner votes and diminish the likelihood of electoral loss. Candidates employ these alluring propositions to attract the populace, frequently obscuring voters with advantages that may lack economic viability or sustainability.

According to Dan Ariely, "People change their behavioral patterns and are more willing to comply when something free comes along. Free isn't just an indicator of price. It's a very powerful emotional trigger that's often so irresistible that it makes people lug home useless key chains and buy pants too tight just so they can get an extra pair at no cost" (Ariely, 2008). Ariely's assertion illustrates a wider reality of human behaviour: complementary items frequently evade rational evaluation and directly engage emotions. Political actors intentionally exploit this insight. Initially, providing a modest material incentive can acclimatise voters to subsequent, more substantial appeals for action—such as participating in demonstrations or voting.

Political freebies are typically designed to target specific voter demographics. Political strategists take into account factors such as caste, religion, regional identity, and economic status while tailoring their promises (Ali & Kamraju, 2024). As a result, election campaigns frequently include commitments like free electricity and water, monthly allowances for the unemployed or women, daily wage support, and the distribution of items such as laptops, mobile phones, and bicycles, all of which are intended to secure voter loyalty. The reservations in jobs and educational institutions are another form of freebies offered by political parties in India. When people receive these incentives, the psychological biases noted earlier—like the endowment effect—can entrench favorable perceptions of the giver.

In June 2022, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued a bulletin that defined freebies as "a public welfare measure provided without charge" (Sahoo et al., 2023). Some dictionary sources also equate freebies with gifts. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the term dates back to the 1920s in the United States, when it was formed arbitrarily from the word "free."

The extensive use of freebies in electoral politics has raised questions about voter perception and the legitimacy of the democratic process. Material incentives from political parties may be considered not only as welfare measures, but also as intentional attempts to sway voter choices or buy electoral support (Bavadekar, 2022). According to studies, voters are aware of this manipulation; many see campaign gifts and contributions as potential sources of political prejudice, casting doubt on election integrity. Furthermore, these dynamics indicate that what appears to be generous welfare is frequently a well-planned persuasion strategy that takes advantage of human psychology.

Such impressions can eventually erode public faith in political leaders and institutions. When voters come to believe that material benefits are being offered in exchange for political support, their faith in the system's legitimacy weakens. According to Nai et al. (2015), these concerns can lead to scepticism

about the true motives of political leaders, thereby threatening the health and credibility of democratic governance.

2. Freebies or Welfare: A Historical Overview

In ancient societies like Rome and Egypt, rudimentary forms of public assistance, such as grain distribution, were implemented to maintain social stability, while in China, support was extended to farmers. In 140 B.C., more than 2,000 years ago, the authoritarian Empire controlled Rome following the collapse of the Roman Republic. During this time, Romans rebelled against the government due to rampant famine, crowded towns, and inadequate sanitation. The government reacted to this by offering free food (flour, bread, and meat) and free entertainment (festivals, street parades, chariot races, and animal fights). This kept people content and preoccupied, preventing them from raising concerns about the government's inability to advance urban development.

In Western philosophy, Aristotle emphasised that well-being is shaped by our actions rather than our possessions (Ross, 2011), highlighting an early recognition of the human need for dignity and purposeful living beyond material wealth.

During the medieval period, between 500 and 1500 CE, the Catholic Church wielded power even greater than monarchs and operated an extensive welfare system for the poor across the Roman Empire. Religious traditions like zakat in Islam and tzedakah in Judaism also played significant roles in institutionalising charitable giving (Hansan, 2017).

The transition to the modern age, characterised by the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, resulted in extensive urban poverty, necessitating governmental action. Social insurance programs emerged, especially in Germany and other European nations, driven by social democratic and socialist movements. The post-World War period marked a significant expansion of welfare programs globally, influenced by Keynesian economics (Rahimi & Prabhakar, 2024). However, alongside this growth came increasing concerns for fiscal sustainability and welfare dependency. In contemporary times, globalisation and economic liberalisation have sparked debates on the design and effectiveness of welfare policies.

3. Political Freebies vs Welfare Schemes: Balancing Public Good and Party Gains

"The goals of welfare vary, as it seeks to promote work, well-being, education, or, in some cases, a higher standard of living. The fundamental motto of social welfare programs is to help the most vulnerable people in society. A social welfare function specifies a social ordering of alternatives for each profile of individual preferences in some domain of preference profiles" (Le Breton & Weymark, 2011).

Welfare schemes refer to government programs or initiatives designed to provide financial, social, or other forms of assistance to individuals or groups facing economic, social, or health-related challenges. These schemes aim to improve the well-being and quality of life for citizens, often focusing on vulnerable or disadvantaged populations (Drishti IAS, 2025). The term "welfare" indicates "well-being" or "prosperity". The state of doing well, particularly in terms of good fortune, well-being, happiness, or prosperity, a person's or group's welfare is defined as their comfort, health, and joy (Collins Dictionary, 2023).

In India, schemes like Ayushman Bharat, the food security bill, and PM KISAN Yojana cannot be termed as freebies because, in some way, they are going to be beneficial for the long-term growth of the nation. People who are needy and lack something are only getting the benefits of the above scheme.

When it comes to freebie culture, irrespective of income class, everyone gets the benefits, which is quite irresponsible. But if these schemes were truly delivering lasting impact in terms of intended outcomes, why do they still require expansion year after year? Why, despite a decade of Modi's governance, are farmers still drowning in increased debt, have low incomes, with millions of Indians still unable to afford basic healthcare and quality education?

Freebies and welfare schemes both aim to gain public support, but welfare schemes focus on long-term societal good, while freebies prioritise short-term political gain. Welfare programs depend on consistent funding and prudent planning, whereas giveaways can burden governmental finances. Welfare programs can empower individuals and mitigate disparities, yet handouts may foster dependency and distort economic decisions.

From a societal standpoint, the allocation of complimentary items may result in many adverse effects. As these benefits are predominantly financed by tax revenue, they may cultivate a sense of irresponsibility among the populace. Individuals may become indolent and unproductive, depending on assistance rather than pursuing a job or contributing to the economy. This frequently leads to rivalry and discord on the allocation of these advantages, diminishing the incentive to actively pursue employment. Moreover, the inequitable allocation and mismanagement of resources for such initiatives can exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, transforming the notion of "Revti (freebies) for one" into a "calamity for others." From an economic perspective, giveaways impose a lasting financial strain that impacts the balance sheet and fosters an unstable economy, as public expenditure becomes increasingly focused on subsidies rather than sustainable development. This results in an escalating fiscal imbalance, as imprudent commitments to free services exert significant pressure on government income and burden the state budget. Further, these practices can push the country a step away from environmental progress. When the focus shifts to giving out free electricity, water, or consumer products, it diverts essential resources away from investments in eco-efficient solutions, renewable energy, and improved public transportation. In the long run, this approach also harms future manufacturing prospects by reducing both quality and profitability, as the emphasis moves away from developing the efficient and productive infrastructure needed for optimal industrial performance.

4. Research Question:

The research questions for this study are:

1. What is the public perception of freebies? How do citizens distinguish between freebies and welfare schemes?
2. What kind of schemes or benefits are perceived as legitimate state support versus populist giveaways? Do they believe freebies promote dependency or empowerment?
3. To what extent do freebies influence voting behaviour across different demographics?

5. Research Methodology

This study uses a quantitative research design involving the use of a structured survey (online survey) administered to Indian citizens above the age of 18 across different age, geographical, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The survey explores whether and how people from different backgrounds understand the concept of freebies offered by political parties to influence the voting decisions of citizens before elections. Research enquiries included questions such as "Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?" or "When you hear about a political party offering freebies (like free water, electricity, or household items), what is your first reaction?" This aids

in comprehending their perspective and how they conceive freebies. Additionally, the survey also attempts to explore how average citizens comprehend and interpret freebies as a political tool.

With the help of a non-probability snowball sampling method, responses were collected from over 60 citizens from a diverse demographic profile. To start the process of data collection, an initial group of 10 respondents was identified, who were then requested to distribute the form amongst their social networks. Such an approach facilitated reaching diverse social and economic groups through existing social networks, enhanced response rates by leveraging personal trust among referrers, and captured organic, grassroots opinions that might be underrepresented in random sampling methods. The following table provides an overview of the sample.

6. Survey Findings

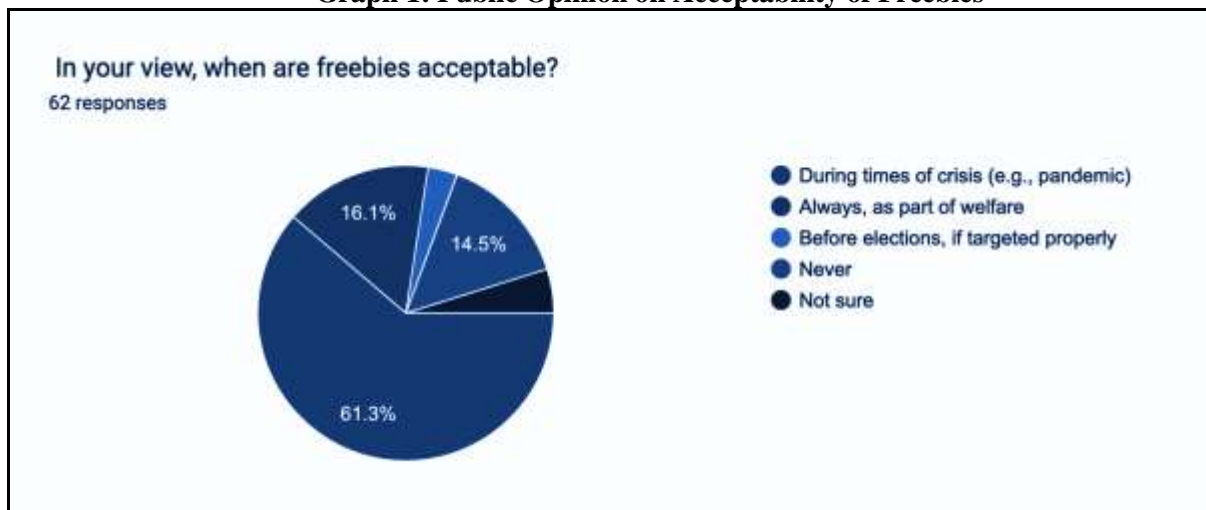
Table 1: Sample Overview

Category	Distribution	Frequency	Sample Share
Age	18-25	25	40.31
	26-35	16	25.81
	36-45	10	1.613
	46-60	7	11.29
	under 18	4	6.45
Gender	Male	33	53.23
	Female	28	45.16
	Prefer not to say	1	1.61
Education	Secondary	1	1.61
	Higher secondary	7	11.29
	Undergraduate	19	30.65
	Post graduate	29	46.77
	Above post-graduation	6	9.68
Occupation	Student	36	58.06
	Private sector employee	14	22.58
	Self employed	5	8.06
	Government employee	3	4.84
	Homemaker/Housewife	2	3.23
	Research paper	1	1.61
	Unemployed	1	1.61
Income	10 Lakhs	39	62.9

	3 Lakhs- 6 Lakhs	8	12.9
	6 Lakhs- 10 Lakhs	7	11.29
	Prefer not to say	3	4.84
	Below 1 Lakh	3	4.84
	1Lakh-3Lakh	2	3.23
Voting Pattern	I don't vote	15	24.19
	Only in national elections	5	8.06
	Only in state elections	1	1.61
	Only in municipal/ Local elections	1	1.61
	In all types of elections	40	64.52

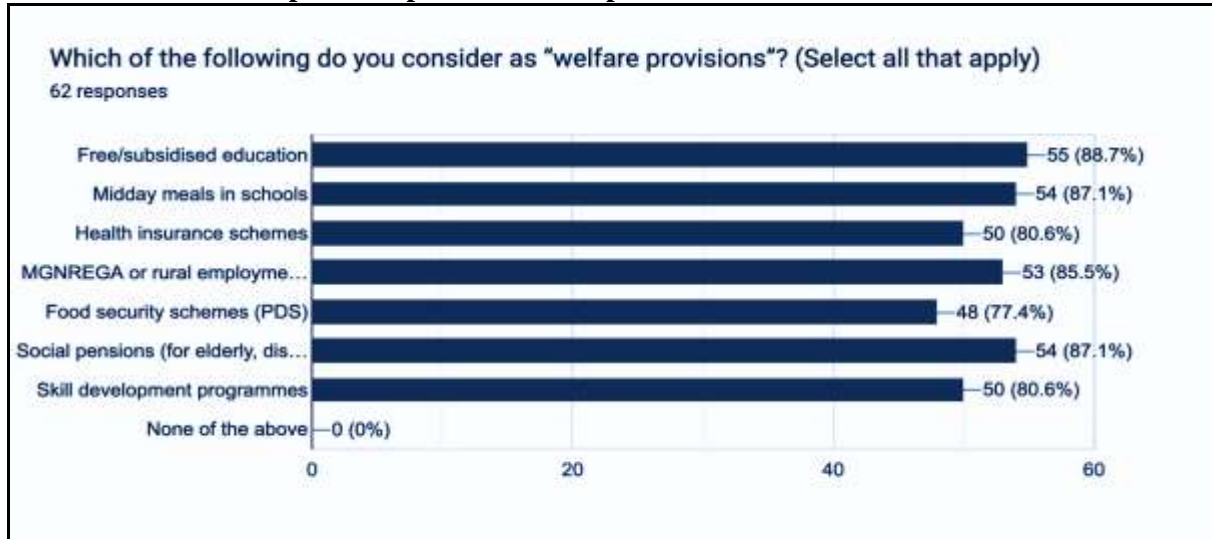
The majority of the respondents in the sample are young, well-educated, and relatively affluent individuals. Over 66% of the sample are under the age of 35, with the predominant age group being 18 to 25 years old (40.31%). The gender distribution in the sample is somewhat balanced, with 53.23% male respondents and 45.16% female respondents. The majority possess a high level of education: 30.65% hold undergraduate degrees, 9.68% have attained a PhD or higher, and 46.77% have completed postgraduate courses. Students are the predominant occupational category with 58.06%, succeeded by private sector employees at 22.58%. Concerning income, 62.9% of respondents report earning ₹10 lakhs or more annually, signifying that a considerable segment of the sample is financially stable. Collectively, these figures indicate a youthful, academically accomplished, and affluent demographic

Graph 1: Public Opinion on Acceptability of Freebies



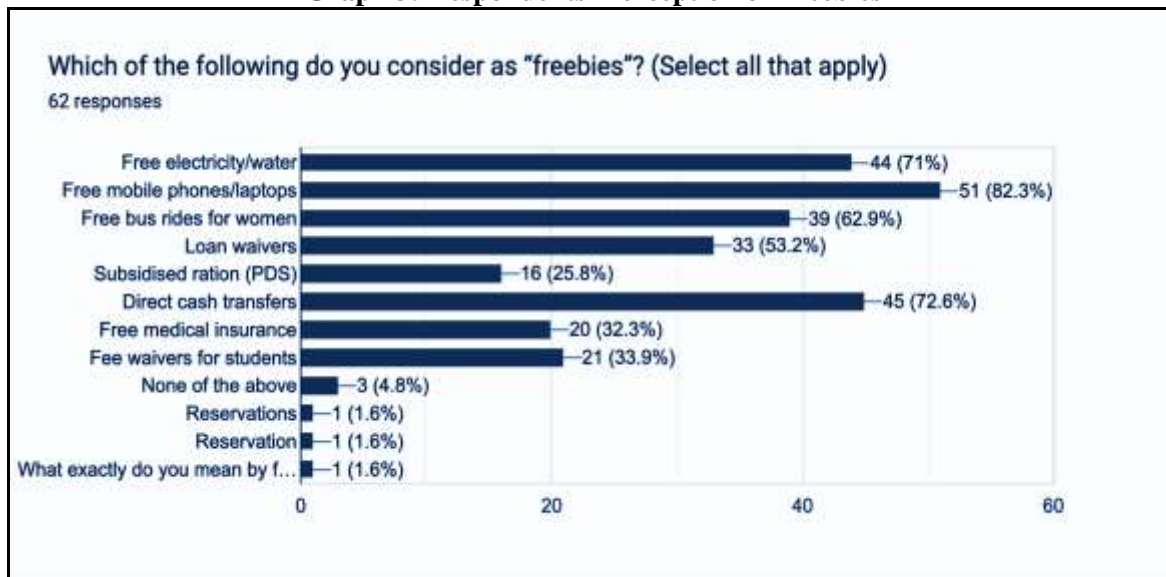
The majority of responders (61.3%) said that freebies were only appropriate in times of crisis, such as pandemics. Approximately 14.5% were open to their usage before elections if appropriately targeted, while a smaller segment (16.1%) believed they were justified as part of welfare. Indicating differing views on the circumstances under which freebies need to be provided, a minority (4.8%) was completely against them, while 3.2% were undecided.

Graph 2: Respondents' Perception of Welfare Provisions



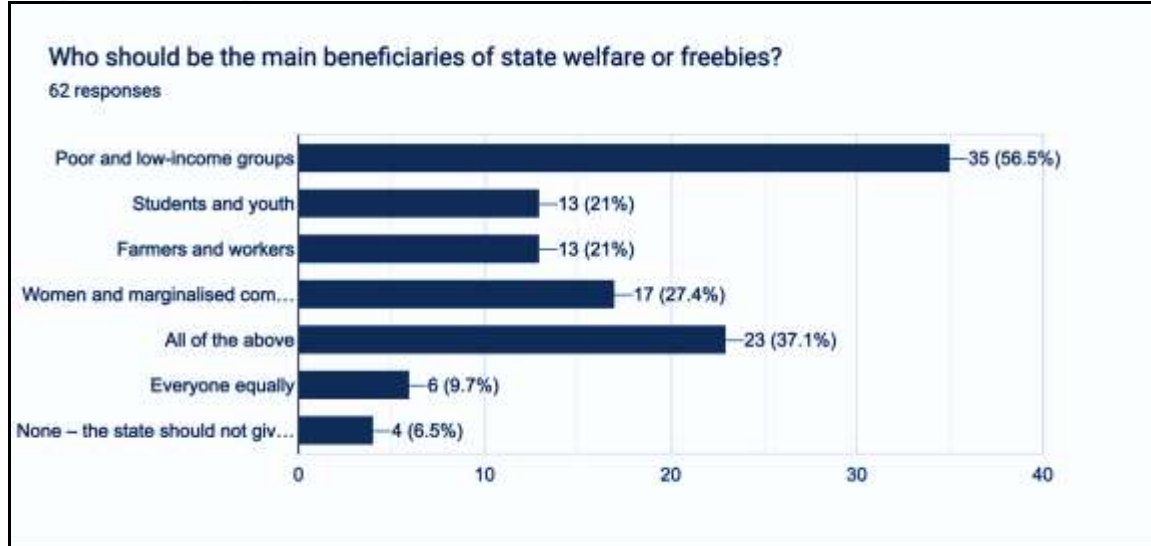
A large percentage of the respondents saw MGNREGA or rural employment schemes (85.5%), free or subsidised education (88.7%), and midday meals (87.1%) as welfare provisions. Social pensions (87.1%), food security programs (77.4%), health insurance programs, and skill development programs were all commonly regarded as welfare (80.6% each). There is broad agreement that these services are acceptable welfare measures.

Graph 3: Respondents' Perception of Freebies



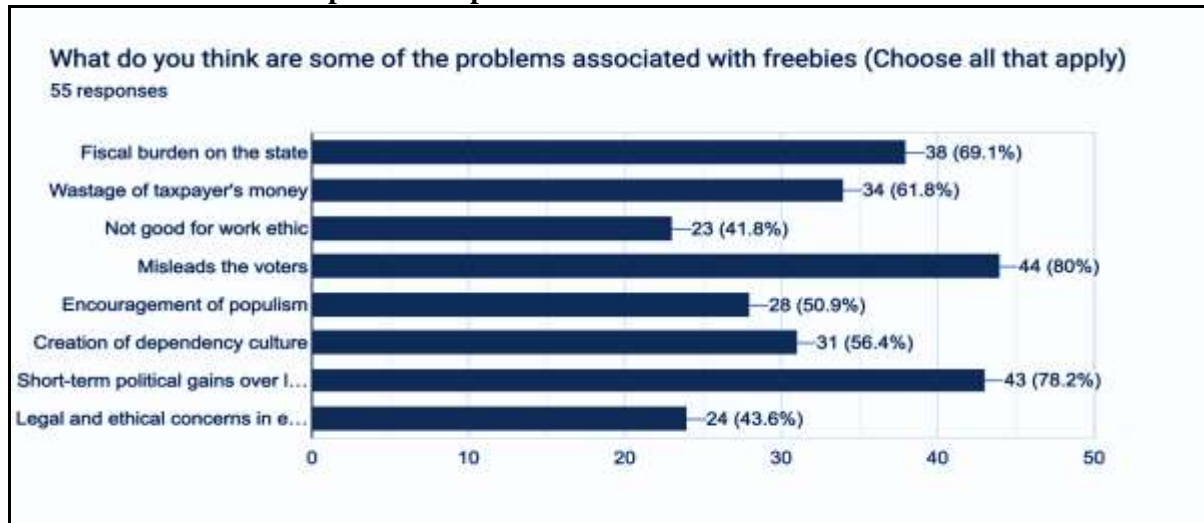
Direct cash transfers (~72%), free mobile phones/laptops (~83%), and free electricity/water (~85%) were the most often stated "freebies" among the 62 respondents, suggesting that they are the most obvious and well-known government perks. Other often stated items were subsidised ration (PDS) (~47%), debt waivers (~66%), and free bus fares for women (~71%). Free medical insurance (~42%), student fee exemptions (~40%), and reservations (~6%) were less commonly mentioned. The framing of them as "freebies" was rejected by 5% of respondents, who instead saw them as essential welfare measures. These results imply that the public's perception of "freebies" is varied, ranging from material commodities to more comprehensive social safeguards, with a minority criticising the politicised use of the phrase.

Graph 4: Public Opinion on Intended Beneficiaries of Freebies or Welfare Provisions



According to the above graph, a majority of the respondents (56.5%) think that the poor and low-income groups should get the bulk of government assistance or freebies. Furthermore, 37.1% of respondents selected “All of the above,” indicating widespread support for inclusive targeting. Notable support was also given to some groups, including farmers and workers (21%), students and youth (21%), women and marginalised communities (27.4%), and others. Meanwhile, 6.5% completely opposed governmental assistance, while 9.7% believed that everyone should have equal rights. The findings indicate a significant preference for needs-based welfare, while also recognising the importance of universal entitlement and targeted support for structurally disadvantaged individuals.

Graph 5: Perception towards Problems associated with Freebies



Respondents raised a number of challenges and drawbacks associated with freebies, with 80% saying that giveaways deceive voters and 78.2% viewing them as instruments for temporary political advantage. The state's financial load (69.1%), taxpayer waste (61.8%), and the development of a dependence culture (56.4%) were other significant issues. Freebies are seen as having significant negative effects on the economy, society, and politics, as seen by the large number of voters who supported the promotion of populism (50.9%) and ethical issues (43.6%).

7. Data Analysis

To examine the relationship between educational qualifications and perceptions of freebies, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The null hypothesis stated that there is no association between educational qualification and acceptance of freebies, while the alternative hypothesis proposed a significant difference between the two.

		n	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
	Highest Educational Qualification	62	2.81	2	1.27
	In your opinion, under what circumstances are freebies acceptable?	62	1.74	1	1.1

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U Test for Educational Qualifications and Acceptance of Freebies

	U	z	asymptotic p	exact p	r
	949	-5.08	<.001	<.001	0.46

The U value (949) and z-score (-5.08) indicate a significant difference, with both asymptotic and exact p-values < .001, confirming significance at the 5% level. The effect size (r = 0.46) reflects a moderate difference, suggesting individuals with higher education tend to score higher in their acceptance of freebies.

Further, to examine the relationship between Annual Household Income and whether receiving a freebie has influenced voting decisions, a Chi-square test was conducted. The null hypothesis stated that there is no difference across the five categories of the independent variable regarding the dependent variable, Annual Household Income. The alternative hypothesis proposed that a significant difference exists.

Table 3: Chi-square test for Annual Household Income and whether receiving a freebie has ever influenced voting decisions

		Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?					Total
		Not sure	Never	I do not receive any freebies	Always	Sometimes	
Annual Household Income (approximate value)	Prefer not to say	0.48	1.21	1.02	0.1	0.19	3
	Above 10lakhs	6.29	15.73	13.21	1.26	2.52	39
	3lakhs–6lakhs	1.29	3.23	2.71	0.26	0.52	8
	Below 1lakh	0.48	1.21	1.02	0.1	0.19	3

	6lakhs– 10lakhs	1.13	2.82	2.37	0.23	0.45	7
	1lakhs– 3lakhs	0.32	0.81	0.68	0.06	0.13	2
	Total	10	25	21	2	4	62

	Chi2	df	p
Annual Household Income (approximate value) - Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?	41.37	20	.003

The Chi-square value (41.37) with 20 degrees of freedom, along with a p-value of .003 (below the 0.05 threshold), indicates a statistically significant association between income levels and the impact of freebies on voting decisions.

Table 4: Mann-Whitney U test for age and perceptions of freebies

	n	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Your age?	62	3.34	3	1.09
What do you think are some of the problems associated with freebies (Choose all that apply)	62	14.24	12.5	12.08

	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Your age?	62	48.6	3013.5
What do you think are some of the problems associated with freebies (Choose all that apply)	62	76.4	4736.5
Total	124		

	U	z	asymptotic p	exact p	r
	1060.5	-4.35	<.001	<.001	0.39

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine the relationship between age and perceptions of problems associated with freebies. The test produced a U value of 1060.5, a z-score of -4.35, and a p-value of $< .001$, indicating a statistically significant difference at the 5% level. The effect size ($r = 0.39$) suggests a moderate difference, with younger respondents tending to assign lower scores. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5: Wilcoxon Test for acceptance of freebies and influence on voting decisions.

		Mean	Median	Standard deviation
In your opinion, under what circumstances are freebies acceptable?	62	1.74	1	1.09
Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?	62	2.44	2	1.01

		n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
In your opinion, under what circumstances are freebies acceptable? - Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?	Negative Ranks	39	24.1	940
	Positive Ranks	11	30.45	335
	Equal	12		
	Total	62		

	W	z	p	r
In your view, when are freebies acceptable? - Has receiving a freebie ever influenced your voting decision?	335	-2.98	.003	0.38

A Wilcoxon Test was conducted to assess whether there is a significant difference between views on when freebies are acceptable and whether receiving a freebie has influenced voting decisions. The null hypothesis states that there is no significant difference between individuals' views on the acceptability of freebies and whether receiving a freebie has influenced their voting decisions. The alternative hypothesis states that there is a significant difference between individuals' views on the acceptability of freebies and the influence of receiving freebies on their voting decisions.

The test produced a W value of 335, a z-score of -2.98, and a p-value of .003. As the p-value is below the 0.05 significance level, the result is statistically significant, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The effect size ($r = 0.38$) indicates a moderate effect.

Table 6: Kruskal-Wallis test for occupation, age, and whether the practice of offering election freebies is ethical

Groups	n	Median	Mean Rank
Your age	62	3	136.54
Occupation	62	1	73.52
Do you consider the practice of offering election freebies to be ethical?	62	2	70.44
Total	186	2	

Chi2	f	p
64.41		<.001

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference between the three categories of the independent variable in the dependent variable. The test produced a Chi-squared value of 64.41 with 2 degrees of freedom and a p-value of < .001. Since the p-value is below the 0.05 threshold, we reject the null hypothesis, concluding that there is a statistically significant difference among the three groups.

To identify exactly which groups differ, further post-hoc analysis, such as the Dunn-Bonferroni test, was conducted.

Table 7: Dunn-Bonferroni test between age, occupation, and perception of freebies

	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	p	Adj. p
Your age? - Occupation	63.02	9.3	6.78	<.001	<.001
Your age? - Do you consider the practice of offering election freebies to be ethical?	66.1	9.3	7.11	<.001	<.001
Occupation - Do you consider the practice of offering election freebies to be ethical?	3.07	9.3	0.33	.741	1

Adj. p: Values adjusted with Bonferroni correction.

8. Discussion

The study used a semi-structured instrument to poll more than 60 people and used several statistical methods to find strong links between attitudes towards election freebies and demographic factors like education, income, age, and job.

Using the Mann–Whitney U test, we can see that those with more education are more likely to think that freebies are okay. This means that education has a big impact on how people think about the moral and practical reasons for using electoral incentives (Pelham & Boninger, 2023). But this "freebie culture" has come under a lot of fire in India. The Supreme Court has warned that these kinds of actions could hurt citizen empowerment. Both the Supreme Court and the Madras High Court have associated them with economic comfort and a lack of will to work hard. In accordance with these comments, a Supreme Court bench, while considering a plea for refuge for the urban homeless, remarked that extensive 'freebies' risk producing a 'class of parasites'. According to Justice B. R. Gavai, because individuals receive rations and money without having to labour, they are "not willing to work," which hinders economic progress and erodes the national work ethic (Reuters, 2025).

There was a strong link between how respondents felt about getting free stuff and how it affected their voting behaviour. This shows that there is a difference between what people say they believe is right and what they do. A CPR survey (Mint, 2024) that backs up these findings shows that urban Indians are still doubtful: 78% think freebies are just a way to get votes, 56% think they are superfluous, and 61% are worried about the cost.

Age was also a significant factor: younger people perceived the difficulties associated with freebies as less serious than older people did. This shows that political opinions have changed over time. A Financial Express article (Financial Express, 2025) and the "Gen Zer's Tryst with Polls" study (Pareek, 2025) back this up. They show that while 74% of younger voters think freebies are important, their actual decisions are mostly based on manifestos (66%) or candidate credibility (62%), with peer influence only playing a small role (19%).

This study looked at both age and occupation together, showed that both factors affect how people judge freebies, but age was a stronger predictor. This shows how experiences from different generations can shape a person's moral perspective more than their job.

9. Conclusion

This study provides insights into how Indian citizens perceive electoral freebies and the extent to which such provisions shape voting behaviour across demographic groups. The findings highlight a nuanced distinction in public understanding between legitimate welfare schemes and populist giveaways, as well as differing views on whether such measures foster dependency or empowerment.

While the snowball sampling method enabled access to diverse respondents and captured underrepresented perspectives, it also introduced certain limitations, including possible overrepresentation of socially and ideologically similar groups and the exclusion of individuals with limited digital access. These constraints restrict the generalisability of the results to India's broader population.

Nevertheless, the study contributes to ongoing debates on welfare, populism, and political strategy in contemporary India, underscoring the importance of citizen perspectives in evaluating the legitimacy and long-term impact of state-provided benefits.

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