

Welfare Schemes And Electoral Politics

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Abstract

Welfare schemes are arguably one of the most embattled sites in Indian electoral politics both as a means of genuine redistribution and as a strategic tool for mobilizing coalitions. This paper provides an empirical testing of the association between state level welfare spending, scheme design and extent of beneficiary coverage with incumbent electoral performance in 10 major Indian states (2018–2024). Using official electoral data, budgetary records, survey responses from 1,840 voters across six states, and regression modelling we find that welfare spend as a share of Gross State Domestic Product has a statistically significant positive association with ruling-party vote share ($\beta = 0.847, p < 0.001$). Women-targeted direct benefit transfer schemes give the largest electoral gain (as much as 18.6 percentage points in some cases). Most importantly, these effects are moderated in a non-linear fashion by scheme-launch proximity to elections: schemes launched less than four months prior to polling yield weaker electoral returns than schemes with a six- to twelve-month gestation period, pointing towards voters responding to an impression of quality delivery rather than announcement alone. The paper informs the empirical studies of populism, clientelism and democratic accountability by showing that welfare politics in India cannot truly be understood as programmatic or clientelistic, but operates through a context specific logic where material distribution is not unrelated to caste mobilization and federalism, even when that distribution is rendered media visible.

Keywords: Welfare schemes, electoral politics, vote share, direct benefit transfer, redistributive policy, clientelism, Indian elections

1. Introduction

1.1 The Political Economy of Welfare in Democracies

But maybe the most incendiary and empirical consensus-orphaned question in comparative politics is this: do welfare programmers win elections. The short, intuitive answer is yes but that hides a rat's nest of causal pathways, confounders and context-dependence which any serious empirical analysis must wrestle with. India makes this especially interesting. The democratic apparatus of the country has been vastly deepened over seven decades, turnout regularly exceeds that in western democracies and yet delivery is usually patchy, leaky and therefore often coupled to political calculus so as to defy easy categorization as either Universalist redistribution or targeted patronage. Theoretical frameworks from political science also provide contradictory predictions. The programmatic politics model posits that voters reward political parties in line with their material interests, independent of ethnic or clientelistic attachments [1]. In contrast, a subliterate on clientele has developed the common view is that welfare transfers in low-income democracies are essentially contingent exchanges support for benefit; here incumbents [2] prefer individually targeted, traceable transfers to anonymous universal provision. By contrast, a third strands from populism studies highlights the symbolic and identity politics

of welfare: programs that speak to dignity, recognition or social protection have more electoral salience than their financial value [3].

1.2 Indian Welfare Architecture: Scale and Scope

The scale of India's welfare landscape is truly phenomenal. A single body like the central government administers more than 300 welfare schemes covering food security, housing, health insurance, agriculture income support, employment guarantee, cooking gas and sanitation [6]. Although state governments add an additional layer of schemes, competition among states has intensified since 2014 as political parties began to design 'freebies' cash transfers, free electricity, and free buses and subsidized grain as explicit electoral promises. This was observed by the Supreme Court of India in 2022 as well who expressed caution against fiscal irresponsibility even if the legal and normative quandary continues unresolved. [8].

The numbers are staggering. PM-KISAN provides annual income support to more than 112 million farmers. The Ayushman Bharat scheme insures more than 550 million. Monetary reinforcement due to COVID-19 through schemes like Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, which provided food grains free of all costs to 801 million recipients during and after the pandemic performed strongly but is politically inseparable from its electoral timing [9]. These are not marginal programmers. These schemes are for them and geolocating the

evidence of their most direct point of contact with the state, for huge portions of those in power: rural poor and women in low-income households, informal workers.

However, coverage and delivery are not the same thing. Comparatively, a 2022 Comptroller and Auditor General report on PM-KISAN highlighted about 31 million ineligible beneficiaries while eligible recipients were left out [10], confirming previous studies indicating wide gaps between beneficiary lists and actual receipt. The political impact of delivery gaps is theoretically indeterminate; citizens could pin responsibility on the government or rationalize any gap to local bureaucracy and retain favorable affect toward the central scheme and its political supporter. This attribution plays out in two distinct ways, based on literacy, media consumption and preconceptions.

1.3 Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Specifically, this study addressed three objectives. It first plugs in the statistical association between state-level welfare spending and incumbent vote share across assembly elections from 2018 to 2024. Second, it investigates whether the timing of schemes around elections mediates electoral returns. Third, it measures the perceptions of voters on the importance of welfare with respect to their vote, by sex and income as well as urban/rural residence. So here come some hypotheses that the basics are: H1: Higher welfare expenditure as a percentage of GSDP is positively related to incumbent vote share, holding constant other economic and demographic factors. H2: Short-term welfare schemes pay fewer dividends electorally than long-gestation schemes within a time period of six months after elections. H3: Compared to non-selective income support programmers, cash transfers schemes focused on women, yield larger electoral returns because they are more visible. The results of multivariate regression, cross-state comparative analysis as well as survey-based attitudinal data are reported in Section 4.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on welfare and electoral politics draws on economics, sociology, and political science, with distinct but intersecting trajectories in each field of study. The first empirical evidence studied political business cycles - the propensity of governments to spend heavily and reduce unemployment ahead of elections [11]. Transfer payments in US democracy increase systematically around elections Tufte as foundational study: this main finding replicated in other developed democracies at the macro-level. This design, however, needed to be very different when applied to developing countries with their different institutional context, weaker party systems and greater informality.

Since the early 2000s, when decentralized welfare delivery started expanding in India in particular, literature around it has burgeoned. MGNREGS, India's flagship employment guarantee programmer had observable positive impacts on incumbent vote share in 2009, as found by Chopra and Suri [13], with improved implementation of MGNREGS enhancing these effects in treated states. Gupta and Pal [14] entered this debate in a nuanced way, by showing that variation across caste lines mattered: upper-caste voters punished implementing governments, regarding MGNREGS as a low-caste entitlement while Dalit and OBC voters rewarded such governments. This sort of caste mediation of welfare politics is a familiar refrain that makes India much more complex than the simpler models of economic voting.

Vaishnav and Sircar showed that, although these welfare schemes have positive effects on average, evidence suggests the identity of the level of government implementing the scheme is crucially important. Voters allocate credit to central government to central schemes and state governments for state schemes finely. This has important implications for coalition governments and where state control and central government is with different parties, the example being West Bengal (1977-2011), Kerala (1957-1959) and Tamil Nadu (1967-1982). In those states and these, voters seem to engage in surprisingly sophisticated attribution exercises: they hold out state governments responsible for delivery, even when central funds are at place.

A somewhat distinct body of literature is that on direct benefit transfers. In a large randomized evaluation of DBT in Andhra Pradesh, there were substantial decreases in leakage and beneficiary ghosting without any adverse impacts on actual delivery [16]. Most importantly, recipients said they were more satisfied when their transfers reached bank accounts rather than via the physical distribution of goods. The fact that real-time information could be rendered by spending in the public sphere well-fed these bouquets also by State governments which have accelerated social security schemes through more or less stringent DBTs precisely because of its visibility and traceability. The political rationale is that if the beneficiary receives an SMS acknowledging receipt, the government earns a pat on its back; if the ration dealer decides to skimp and does not deliver rations to the phone's owner they can still expect a credit because of this scheme even if delivery-system fails. Specifically, you are concentrated on schemes pertaining to women. Building on this, Bardhan, Mookherjee and Parra Torrado analyzed how women's voting agency intersects with welfare receipt they found that when women become main beneficiaries of transfers their independent voting

behaviour increases they're less likely to cast a block vote with male household members and more likely to reward the scheme's sponsor. For example, this was demonstrated in Madhya Pradesh with the introduction of Ladli Behna scheme that provided direct bank transfer of Rs 1,000 per month into women's accounts. Meanwhile, post-election surveys conducted by Lokniti show that women's turnout in MP increased by 3.4 percentage points from 2018 to 2023, and the party's vote share among women was higher than among men for the first time ever: BJP's overall lead over Congress among women was 5.6 points larger than its lead over men [19].

The widely drawn example of welfare politics in Indian elections and for free rice narrative is found in the 1967 Tamil Nadu victory of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [19]. The joker vocabulary has since swelled to include free TVs (Tamil Nadu, 2006), laptops (Uttar Pradesh, 2012), smartphones (Rajasthan, 2022) and cycles (Bihar, 2005) as well as less whimsical but more substantial transfers like housing and health insurance. Critics of this maintain it breeds fiscal un-sustainability and a 'welfare trap' [20]; defenders contend public investment on human welfare is precisely what democratically accountable governments were created to do, and the 'freebie' label conveniently picks out fuzzy recipients [21].

Comparative work adds important context. In Brazil, Bolsa Família is a conditional cash transfer programme that Zhang et al. Of course, the comparison with India is imperfect - India's electoral system is much more fragmented, with complex interactions between caste identities and class interests that facilitate this pattern of beneficiary loyalty in Brazil; a two party convergence along these lines has not occurred; etc. That layering is what sets India apart voters can simultaneously be MGNREGS beneficiaries, PM-KISAN recipients and holders of Ayushman Bharat cards meaning there is no way researchers or even the voters themselves could disentangle the electoral impact of one particular scheme from another. [23].

Lastly, a thread of critical research has interrogated the very speculative structure of electoral welfare politics since a rights standpoint. Jayal [24] contends that how welfare is framed as an electoral tool corrupts the very nature of social policy in a democracy, as it subordinates entitlement to contingency. For example, the legal recognition of the 2013 Right to Food Act is as an entitlement that cannot be legally withdrawn; however its politically mediated practice means that the entitlement in fact operates as a favour. This tension between a rights based framework of welfare entitlements and the political economy of distribution is not simply normative it has far-reaching empirical

consequences for how voters think about, and respond to, welfare.

3. Methodology

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study utilized secondary quantitative data (multivariate regression analysis) and a primary voter perception survey. Quantitative part- this study uses state election results compiled from the Election Commission of India (2018–2024), state budget documents collected from their Finance Departments and Union Budget, welfare expenditure data from CAG annual reports, and beneficiary coverage statistics from the DBT Mission portal maintained by our Finance Ministry. We chose the ten largest states based on if they held assembly elections between 2018 and 2024 and also had disaggregated welfare expenditure data: Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Telangana Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. Welfare intensity index was calculated by normalizing welfare expenditure as a percentage of GSDP; this was weighted by (a) the number of active welfare schemes and (b) beneficiary coverage relative to the state's Below Poverty Line numbers. Due to the small state-level sample, we use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) to conduct our regression framework corrected using the Huber/White/sandwich estimator of variance for heteroskedasticity. The dependent variable is the change of ruling party vote share between successive elections. The control variables are log of per capita income, urban-rural ratio, caste fractionalization index (based on linguistic caste composition data), number of months from scheme launch to day polling + average for active schemes in state at time of poll date and total number of ongoing central + state schemes. Collinearity was evaluated by Variance Inflation Factors all VIF values were less than 3.1 (acceptable). For cross-section state-level regression, the models' explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.714$) is high, though given the small N so interpretive caution needed since these coefficients should be considered as associations rather than causal estimates. Robustness checks involve dropping outlier states (Odisha, where the BJD's organizational hegemony had been extraordinary until its defeat in 2024) and alternative measures for welfare expenditure.

The main survey was conducted in six states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha) for the period of January to March 2024 while drawing a sample of 1,840 from urban and rural constituencies through stratified random sampling. The (38 question) survey instrument included questions on welfare receipt, its salience, attribution of responsibility and self-reported voting behavior, that had been developed and pre-tested in two rounds of cognitive

interviews. To assess the effect of social desirability bias, and to limit this bias, they fielded their survey after elections had completed raising claimants preferred not to be seen as influenced by welfare. Responses were collected on five-point Likert scales and from dichotomous items. This was confirmed through factor analysis revealing three clear attitudinal dimensions: welfare salience, government attribution, and satisfaction with delivery. Regression-weighted estimates, fully corrected for sampling imbalances by gender, income quintile and state are presented. All data analysis was conducted using R (version 4.3.1) with the help of survey, lm and car packages.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Five analytical datasets were created and are described in the Do some analysis section. Table 1 provides state-level totals of welfare spending and electoral results. The small table maps the scheme-wise beneficiary coverage to how pro incumbent voting is. Temporal discrepancies between scheme launches and election dates are detailed in Table 3. The results of the multivariate model are presented in Table 4 (in terms of regression coefficients). Voter perceptions Total vote intent 10/31/1989 Table 5 Aggregated Survey responses.

Table 1: State-wise Welfare Expenditure (% GSDP), Beneficiary Coverage, and Electoral Outcomes (2018–2024)

State	Welfare Spend (% GSDP)	Ruling Party Vote Share (%)	Welfare Beneficiaries (Millions)	Re-election Outcome
Uttar Pradesh	8.3	41.7	62.4	Won (2022)
West Bengal	7.1	47.9	38.2	Won (2021)
Rajasthan	6.4	41.7	28.6	Lost (2023)
Odisha	9.1	52.3	31.5	Lost (2024)
Madhya Pradesh	5.8	48.5	34.7	Won (2023)
Chhattisgarh	6.9	35.2	18.3	Lost (2023)
Karnataka	7.4	43.0	29.8	Lost (2023)
Telangana	8.6	39.4	22.7	Lost (2023)
Gujarat	5.2	52.5	38.1	Won (2022)
Himachal Pradesh	7.7	43.9	5.2	Won (2022)

Table 1 shows considerable state-level variation in welfare intensity. Odisha and Uttar Pradesh have the highest welfare-to-GSDP ratios, though only Uttar Pradesh returned its incumbent; Odisha's 2024 result, where BJD lost to BJP despite the state's highest welfare intensity score, is a notable exception to H1 and is discussed further below. Lost: Rajasthan, Karnataka and Telangana each register a lower intensity score in comparison to the

previous electoral cycle. Chhattisgarh is a partial exception with Judicious spend ratios but BJP got a clear win in 2023, might be due to factors at candidate level, or maybe culmination of anti-incumbency after 15 years of Congress rule per se, not pointing to welfare effects. The aggregate pattern is consistent with H1 in general, but significant deviations at the state level highlight the need for moderation within context.

Table 2: Scheme-wise Beneficiary Coverage and Pro-Incumbent Voting Propensity

Scheme	Beneficiaries (Millions)	Pro-Incumbent Vote (%)	Anti-Incumbent Vote (%)	Swing (pp)
PM-KISAN	112.2	58.3	41.7	+6.4
PMGSY	86.4	54.7	45.3	+3.9
PM Awas Yojana	73.5	61.2	38.8	+8.1
Ayushman Bharat	107.6	57.4	42.6	+5.2
MGNREGS	142.8	52.6	47.4	+2.1
PM Ujjwala	93.7	63.5	36.5	+9.7
Free Ration (PMGKAY)	801.3	66.1	33.9	+12.3
Ladli Behna/Sister Schemes	31.4	71.2	28.8	+18.6

Table 2 what this paper does is demonstrate the high electoral premium associated with women-targeted cash transfer programs. The vote cut in favour of Ladli Behna-type programmes is an estimated 18.6 percentage points, while for MGNREGS it is just 2.1 points. This is not only a function of the size of transfer PM-KISAN transfers more money per annum, per beneficiary than most women's schemes but likely captures visibility, novelty and symbolic recognition dimensions with respect to payments to

women who were otherwise cut out from financial flows. PM Ujjwala-style initiatives supply a comparable degree of momentum but command just a small direct monetary value, suggesting that dignity-enhancing interventions hold disproportionate electoral value relative to direct cost. Free ration under PMGKAY has the most absolute coverage but the lowest per-point swing, possibly because food security is now seen as a right, not a pleasant surprise.

Table 3: Scheme Launch Proximity to Elections and Electoral Outcomes

Scheme / State	Launch Date	Election Date	Months Prior	Incumbent Result
Ladli Behna (MP)	March 2023	November 2023	8	Won (+7.8%)
Griha Lakshmi (Karnataka)	August 2023	May 2023 (pre-launch)	N/A (post-poll)	Lost
Rupashree (West Bengal)	February 2018	April 2021	38	Won
PM-KISAN (National)	February 2019	May 2019	3	Won
Free Ration Ext. (National)	September 2022	Various 2023	3-12	Mixed
Kaliya (Odisha)	December 2018	May 2019	5	Won (+4.2%)
Rythu Bandhu (Telangana)	May 2018	December 2018	7	Won (2018), Lost (2023)
Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman (Delhi)	March 2024	February 2025	11	Lost

Table 3 speaks directly to H2. There is not a monotonic function between near-launch and electoral results. In the case of Ladli Behna unveiled 8 months ahead of the November 2023 MP polls there was simply more time for beneficiaries to receive multiple monthly instalments and for common folks to vouch for its credibility through word-of-mouth; hence a 7.8 percentage points swing fall in favour of the BJP. The 2019 elections were an exception to this: due to a pre-launch period at the interim budget stage, the scheme was already

somewhat up and running (PM-KISAN) before its official announcement just three months before polls in May. Though the scheme was announced 11 months in advance of the 2025 elections, it was only partly rolled out post-poll to have an electoral impact. The other promising scheme: Delhi Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman also bombed. This pattern is consistent with H2's central assertion that it is delivery experience rather than announcement that generates electoral credit but contrasts with the easy proximity hypothesis.

Table 4: OLS Regression Results Welfare Intensity and Vote Share Change (N=90 constituency-level pooled observations)

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Welfare Expenditure (% GSDP)	0.847	0.213	3.97	0.001**
No. of Active Schemes	0.312	0.098	3.18	0.004**
Scheme Launch Proximity (months)	-0.421	0.176	-2.39	0.024*
Beneficiary Coverage (millions)	0.189	0.067	2.82	0.009**
Per Capita Income (log)	-0.233	0.145	-1.61	0.121
Urban-Rural Ratio	-0.178	0.109	-1.63	0.117
Caste Fractionalization Index	0.294	0.133	2.21	0.036*
Constant	12.430	3.214	3.87	0.001**
R ² = 0.714, Adj. R ² = 0.681, F(7,82) = 28.94, p < 0.001				

Table 4 reports the regression results. Both the GSDP share of welfare expenditure ($\beta = 0.847$) and beneficiary coverage ($\beta = 0.189$), which support H1, are positive and statistically significant at the 5% level. The positive coefficient for the number of active schemes ($\beta = 0.312$) implies that portfolio breadth also matters independently of expenditure depth. Scheme-launch proximity ($\beta = -0.421$) is again negative and reaches conventional levels of significance, thus confirming H2: longer gestation before elections improves electoral returns rather

than lowers them. The effect of caste fractionalization ($\beta = 0.294$) is positive more fragmented caste environments may render targeted welfare electorally more favorable by increasing the capacity for designing welfare-for-votes that favor numerically stronger OBC or SC/ST groups. In this specification per capita income and the urban-rural ratio are insignificant, suggesting that welfare effects are not just census proxies for underlying income or urbanisation.

Table 5: Voter Perception Survey Welfare Salience and Electoral Behaviour (N=1,840)

Survey Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Welfare schemes influenced my vote	34.7	28.4	22.1	14.8
Direct benefit transfers feel more reliable	41.2	31.6	17.3	9.9
Schemes announced close to elections seem political	38.9	27.8	20.6	12.7
I would vote against a govt that cuts welfare	29.3	34.6	24.7	11.4
Women-targeted schemes changed household voting	44.1	29.8	16.3	9.8
I believe government takes credit without delivery	26.7	33.2	28.4	11.7
Welfare delivery improved in election year	32.4	30.1	22.8	14.7

Table 5 demonstrates that a simple majority (63.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed that welfare schemes impacted their vote choice. And on the punitive end there is outright consensus: 63.9% would vote against any government damaging welfare provision. This implies that welfare engendered a political constituency not just for incumbents who grow it but against parties likely to do the reverse an institutionalization of voters' preferences in favorable conditions for powerful fiscal tight-rope walking. Indeed, the result that 44.1% of households agree or strongly agree that household voting was swayed by schemes directed at women comes out at a level quite different from 0, and is also consistent with Table 2's aggregate evidence on schemes: The sense that welfare delivery is better in election years (62.5% agree) suggests voters are aware of this manipulation, but does not appear to be angered by it accepting this as the nature of politics.

5. Discussion

In summary, the results create a picture that is far more complex than simply 'welfare wins elections'. The coefficient on welfare expenditure is positive and significant, yes. Yet, the negative coefficient on distance to scheme launch prevents a cynical view

in which government's time announcement so as have maximal electoral impact. But what the data rather suggest is that voters respond to delivery, rather than announcement a result with theoretical significance. In other words, Indian voters are at least in aggregate conducting a very simple but substantive quality assessment of government performance. That scheme has to be externally visible, reach the beneficiary and happen before election day. We know that is not a perfect form of democratic accountability, but it is democracy at work.

These findings are interpreted in light of earlier research to elucidate what makes the current moment uncharacteristic. For example, Chopra and Suri [13] conducted an analysis of MGNREGS in 2009 and found evidence of a positive effect limited to states with more effective implementation. The current study carries this finding over broader set of schemes and demonstrates that implementation quality (as proxied by delivery timing) matters everywhere, not only in strong-state settings. This aligns with the DBT hypothesis that the infrastructure lined up for reliable delivery has improved to the point where electoral linkages extend in those cases where states had weaker administrative capacity in historical comparisons.

Direct benefit transfer is now much different in practice than what you imagined with the growth of Jan Dhan bank accounts, Aadhaar linkage and mobile penetration.

The targeting of women is the strongest result in this dataset but merits cautious interpretation. It would be easy to dismiss this as a case of money for women is going to get you more votes than money for men. The actual mechanisms are likely more complex. A transfer to women directly provides them with more leverage inside the household by increasing their financial autonomy. Their turnout rises. Direct economic interests increase their engagement in political awareness often measured elsewhere as interest in the consumption and discussion of news [25]. The prominence and uniqueness of being a direct beneficiary may also incite a gratitude politics which is different from the more generalized satisfaction stimulated by broader infrastructure spending. The Ladli Behna case is as notable for the electoral results but also in terms of what it exposed about BJP: a party traditionally stronger among men, until recently horribly underutilizing women as an electoral constituency.

Freebies debate need a much more empirical-based framing than what is being mostly done by public discourse. While critics treat any transfer as irresponsibly low, the data argue against fiscal uniformity of welfare intensity [20]. One reason Odisha, which scores highest on the welfare index, also ends up faring relatively better on state finances than peer states is that as far back as 2005, the BJD government made big improvements to its fiscal health by being disciplined with scheme design targeting is focused and tightening processes to limit leakages are prioritised because the political cost of poor delivery is high [26]. However, Odisha's 2024 outcome, where the BJD lost despite this fiscal discipline and high welfare intensity, suggests that strong welfare delivery alone does not guarantee continued incumbency once anti- incumbency (after 24 years in power) or local organizational and candidate-level factors come into play. This reinforces the conclusion as to what constitutes welfare politics that succeeds electorally: not flashy announcements without infrastructure but rather substantive measures, though even this is not sufficient on its own — recent experience with states would seem to support this.

It points towards a more transactional relationship wherein the voters engage with and because of that do not fall for the political logic of welfare. This is consistent with Pattenden's [27] ethnographic study of political consciousness in rural South India, where voters cleanly distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' political leaders (the former being those who deliver good public goods and the latter those who only promise them) without feeling that this transactional assessment undermines the democratic

process. These findings have important theoretical implications for democracy: electoral accountability can occur through material channels even if voters are aware that those channels are at work politically. Limitations to be Aware Of However, state-level regression has a small N, and although constituency-level pooling increases the size of the effective sample size, clustering effects due to state-level welfare policies may mean that standard errors are underestimated. The cross-sectional design of the survey means that respondents are necessarily retrospectively reporting how much they think welfare influenced their voting, which is open to recall bias and social desirability. However, was conducted relatively soon after the election so we would expect that social desirability effects would be limited. A deliberate mix, but the ten states largely exclude the South (with a few exceptions in Karnataka and Telangana) the subcontinent's most populous region as well as the Northeast almost completely. The identification for the mechanism that links welfare to voting remains only partial: The regression cannot tell us whether the effect is causal, what Eduardo Silva and Zander Underwood made core components of their theory in which it could be driven by direct effects of welfares and votes itself but also from an unobserved organizational strength behind parties; If strong party mobilisation capabilities are behind both types of activism.

In the future, quasi-experimental designs should be attempted using the staggered rollout of a welfare scheme across districts or beneficiary cohorts where possible, following similar approaches to that of Muralidharan, Niehaus and Sukhtankar [16] for the evaluation of DBT. Rather than identifying the effect of welfare on single-election vote choice, longitudinal panel surveys tracking voters across electoral cycles would allow for cleaner estimates of welfare's impact on political identification. Above all, the gender dimension should receive specific attention the interplay between the economic empowerment of women through welfare transfers and independent political voice is a frontier for further investigation with implications that extend beyond India.

6. Conclusion

Theoretical hypothesis, Chakravarti and Gupta pursued this paper in order to empirically test what many seem to take for granted (and not rigorously check): that welfare schemes affect electoral performance in India. This is the evidence but with significant caveats. Incumbents are more likely to receive votes in a region the higher their share of welfare. Direct transfer programs to empower women yield the most robust electoral returns. Voters reward scheme delivery, not just announcement. This also makes sense: Indian voters are sophisticated enough to spot the difference

between a performing government and one that merely announces schemes, as seen in the negative coefficient on proximity to scheme launch and survey responses showing how little they care for opportunistic politics.

Whether these findings are good or bad depends on your priors. The data encourage some hope, at least for those who fear fiscal or clientelistic populism: voters punish non-delivery and even mostly give credit for real-looking redistribution. For those who believe welfare politics are inherently corrupting democratic accountability the ambassador the delivery-reward mechanism exists but lives on in tandem with an insatiable awareness that welfare is being instrumentalized as a political weapon. In this reading, India's democracy is neither the healthy programmatic democracy of textbook democracies nor a corrupted clientelistic polity catering to cynical critique. It is something more exotic: a mix of commodity provision with democratic contestation so deeply entwined that disentangling the structure of material from the conduct of electoral competition may no longer be possible, let alone desirable..

The policy implication is straightforward. If governments are going to treat welfare programmes as political tools and everything in the evidence suggests they will, whether it is normatively acceptable or not then they have compelling incentives to make them work. The electorate punishes non-delivery. That's not an all-time guarantee of good governance, but it's something. In a country of 1.4 billion people, where for many the state most clearly makes an appearance in their lives via a monthly DBT credit or a ration card, that may be a much thicker form of accountability than at election time alone.

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