

Social Welfare or Vote-Buying?: Investigating the Ethical and Administrative Challenges of Freebie-Driven Governance

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ethical and administrative difficulties linked to freebie-driven governance, a practice where political parties provide financial incentives or welfare schemes to gain voter support. It questions whether these measures are truly aimed at improving social welfare or if they serve as tools for political manipulation. By examining case studies from countries like India, Brazil, and the United States, the research explores the political, economic, and societal impacts of these policies. It evaluates the strain they place on public resources, their potential to undermine democratic processes, and the ethical concerns of using public funds for electoral advantage.

The study also addresses the complexities of implementing effective welfare programs while ensuring both sustainability and the immediate needs of society are met. It highlights problems such as corruption, inefficiency, and the misuse of resources that often accompany freebie-driven policies. In conclusion, the paper offers policy suggestions that emphasize the importance of transparency, accountability, and a shift towards more sustainable welfare systems. It calls for a focus on long-term development, citizen empowerment, and ethical governance to protect democratic values and foster equitable social advancement.

Keywords: Freebie-driven governance, social welfare, vote-buying, ethical challenges, administrative challenges, political manipulation, electoral promises, welfare policies, fiscal impact, transparency, accountability, sustainability, democratic integrity, public resources, policy recommendations.

1. Introduction

Freebie-driven governance refers to the practice of governments providing goods, services, or financial benefits to citizens at no cost. While often framed as welfare measures, these initiatives are primarily used as electoral strategies to influence voter preferences. Freebies can include utilities such as free water and electricity, public transport, meals, consumer goods, and even direct cash transfers. This practice often intertwines with political motives, raising concerns about its ethical implications, legality, and long-term effects on governance.

The culture of freebies has grown to the extent that some political parties heavily center their election campaigns around such promises. This approach explicitly signals to voters that significant benefits await them if the party is elected to power [1]. The adage "nothing in this world is free" aptly applies here; however, human psychology tends to gravitate toward the allure of free offerings. Marketing companies

use this tactic effectively and transparently to convert prospects into customers. Yet, the incorporation of such strategies into a country’s democratic process, especially in India, warrants deeper examination. In India, the trend of political parties leveraging freebies during election campaigns has become increasingly prominent. Monetary incentives for voters and promises of free electricity, water, internet, public transport, and meals now frequently dominate election agendas. For some political parties, the provision of freebies has become their primary strategy to sway voter decisions [1]. This raises pressing ethical, legal, and democratic concerns about the implications of using freebies as a tool for voter manipulation.

The origins of India’s freebie culture date back to the 1960s, when political parties in South India began distributing free or subsidized rice. Over time, this strategy expanded nationwide, with initiatives like free education and healthcare aligning with Constitutional welfare objectives. However, in 2015, this trend shifted when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) introduced promises of free water and electricity to urban voters. While ensuring 24x7 reliable electricity is a valid governance goal, the provision of free electricity and water appears inconsistent with Constitutional principles, leaning more toward a transactional quid pro quo arrangement [1].

As one of the world's oldest democracies, India’s post-independence evolution reflects its status as a young nation. Its legal framework continues to develop, Constitutional interpretations are ongoing, and political parties are constantly innovating to shape voter behavior. Although the Representation of the People Act, 1951, explicitly prohibits corrupt practices such as bribery, political parties have found indirect methods to sway voters. The widespread practice of offering freebies—ranging from education and healthcare to consumer goods and services—highlights the extent to which election rules are exploited in the pursuit of political power [1].

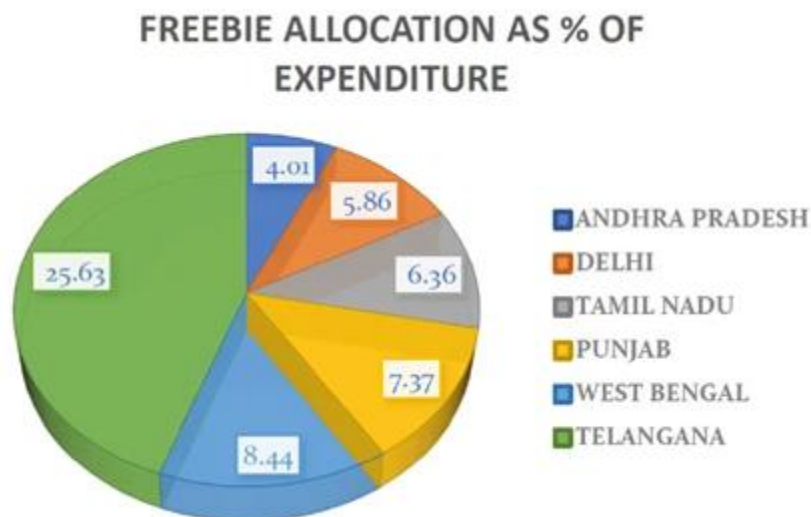


Fig 1. The allocation of freebies as a percentage of the total expenditure by various Indian states. The data is divided into six segments, each labeled with the state name and its respective percentage. The largest portion is allocated by West Bengal (25.63%), while Telangana has the smallest allocation (4.01%).

1.1 Prime Minister’s Critique of Freebie Culture

The Prime Minister’s critique of the "freebie" culture highlights profound concerns that extend beyond

fiscal impacts, addressing broader issues such as governance, economic progress, and intergenerational equity [2].

1.1.1 Sustainability of the Energy Transition

The Prime Minister emphasizes the critical financial challenges faced by state electricity boards (DISCOMs) and their inability to facilitate the transition to renewable energy, such as solar power. Financially unstable DISCOMs struggle to create viable tariff structures required for clean energy investments, hindering India's global commitments like COP21 and COP26 [3]. Subsidized electricity, a common freebie, worsens this financial strain and obstructs the move toward sustainable energy systems. Unrealistic tariffs and reliance on cross-subsidies further complicate the adoption of balanced energy strategies, increasing dependence on fossil fuels. While these policies appear affordable in the short term, they carry long-term costs, including fiscal strain, inefficiencies, and environmental damage [4].

1.1.2 Inequity and Social Empowerment

In contrast, the Modi government prioritizes addressing inequities in access to fundamental services like banking, housing, clean cooking fuel, and insurance through structured and sustainable welfare measures. By ensuring equitable access to these essentials, the government aims to enhance productivity and reduce barriers that limit economic participation for large population segments [1,5]. Initiatives such as the PM Awas Yojana (housing) and the Jal Jeevan Mission (water supply) have been transformative, helping families acquire assets and improve their quality of life. The Prime Minister emphasizes that reducing inequities through targeted, sustainable policies—rather than universal subsidies—ensures long-term empowerment.

1.1.3 Technology and Direct Benefit Transfers

The integration of technology into welfare delivery systems, especially through direct benefit transfers (DBTs), ensures that resources are directed to those in genuine need. Tools like the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) enable precise identification of beneficiaries, reducing inefficiencies and leakages often associated with freebie models [6].

For instance, while Delhi's free water schemes benefit some, many underprivileged groups still lack access to clean water and rely on expensive alternatives. Such gaps highlight the importance of well-targeted support over blanket subsidies [4].

1.1.4 Expenditure Prioritization and Fiscal Discipline

The Prime Minister frequently critiques how freebie-driven politics distorts government spending priorities, favoring short-term populism over long-term growth-enhancing investments. This approach creates fiscal burdens passed onto future generations, leading to intergenerational inequity [7]. The government's return to fiscal discipline in 2014 stands out as a major achievement, reaffirming principles established under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of 2003. Maintaining fiscal responsibility is crucial for economic stability and sustainable growth [7].

1.1.5 Impact on Manufacturing and Employment

Freebie policies, by diverting resources from infrastructure and productive investments, negatively impact the manufacturing sector and job creation. Such policies reduce manufacturing competitiveness and quality, stalling economic growth and limiting the creation of employment opportunities essential for upward mobility and expansion [4].

1.1.6 The Philosophical Perspective

The Prime Minister's argument does not dismiss welfare programs but calls for a balanced approach that

sustainably empowers the underprivileged. This aligns with Aristotle's view: "The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal." While targeted support is necessary, universal subsidies fail to foster genuine equality or prosperity [8].

Short-term policies aimed at gaining immediate popularity risk long-term repercussions, including economic instability, social unrest, and strategic failures. The Prime Minister advocates for designing policies that encourage equitable growth, fiscal responsibility, and sustainable development to ensure a stable and prosperous future [6].

1.2 Objective of the Research

The research aims to critically examine the practice of offering freebies in governance and elections, with a focus on determining whether such initiatives genuinely address societal needs or serve primarily as political tools to influence voter behavior. This analysis is particularly significant in democracies like India, where resources are limited, and welfare decisions have far-reaching implications. The study addresses five core areas to provide a detailed understanding of this phenomenon.

The first objective is to explore the link between freebies and social welfare. The study investigates whether these measures effectively address critical challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality, with particular attention to their impact on vulnerable populations [9]. Additionally, it examines the sustainability of these policies and their ability to foster long-term improvements in essential areas like education, healthcare, and access to basic services [10]. By analyzing case studies from India and other countries, the research seeks to determine whether freebies provide meaningful benefits or merely temporary relief [11].

The second area of focus is to assess the political motivations behind freebie culture. The study examines whether political parties use freebies to genuinely address public needs or primarily to gain electoral advantage [12]. It analyzes how voters perceive these promises and the extent to which they influence election results. The research also investigates whether such practices manipulate voter behavior, compromise electoral fairness, and prioritize short-term political gains over the public good [13].

The research also delves into the economic and financial implications of freebies. It explores how these policies impact public finances, particularly when funds are redirected from critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure [14]. The study evaluates the long-term sustainability of freebies and their potential to impose fiscal burdens on future generations [15]. Furthermore, it examines the effects of freebies on economic growth, job creation, and the government's capacity to invest in development projects. For instance, while offering free electricity or water may provide immediate relief, it could weaken state-owned utilities and hinder investment in renewable energy or infrastructure [16].

Another key aspect of the research is the ethical and legal dimensions of offering freebies. The study questions whether it is ethical for political parties to use public funds for election promises, especially when such promises may not align with the broader public interest [17]. It also evaluates the compatibility of freebies with laws like the Representation of the People Act (1951), which prohibits bribery and undue influence during elections [18]. Moreover, the research considers the broader implications of freebies on governance, such as the erosion of public trust and the prioritization of short-term benefits over long-term development [19].

Finally, the research proposes balanced alternatives to freebies. It explores welfare strategies that empower individuals through initiatives like skill development, job creation, and enhanced public services, thereby reducing dependency and fostering self-reliance [20]. The study also examines targeted welfare

mechanisms, such as direct benefit transfers (DBTs), to ensure resources reach those in genuine need while minimizing inefficiencies and wastage [21]. By proposing strategies that balance immediate public expectations with long-term development goals, the research aims to suggest welfare policies that are both socially impactful and financially sustainable [22].

2. Methodology

The methodology outlines the approach taken to investigate the ethical and administrative challenges of freebie-driven governance. It involves a multi-pronged research strategy combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis.

2.1. Research Design

Descriptive and Analytical Approach: The study employs a descriptive approach to outline existing freebie policies and their impact, paired with analytical techniques to evaluate their ethical and administrative dimensions. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research balances the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative data.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

2.2.1 Primary Data

- **Surveys and Interviews:** Structured surveys and semi-structured interviews are conducted with policymakers, beneficiaries, and experts in governance. Surveys focus on public perceptions of freebie policies, while interviews delve into policymakers' motivations and ethical considerations.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs with beneficiaries provide nuanced insights into how freebie programs affect their quality of life and long-term socio-economic behavior.

2.2.2 Secondary Data

- **Document Analysis:** Policy documents, government budgets, and electoral manifestos are examined to identify the scope and nature of freebie-driven initiatives.
- **Case Studies:** Existing case studies, such as India's PDS and Brazil's Bolsa Família, are reviewed to compare the effectiveness and challenges of similar programs.
- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journals, books, and reports provide theoretical insights and empirical data to support the analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Statistical tools are used to analyze survey data, focusing on metrics such as the cost-benefit ratio of freebie programs and public satisfaction levels.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Thematic analysis is applied to interview transcripts and focus group discussions, identifying recurring themes such as dependency, empowerment, and political motivations.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparative techniques are employed to evaluate freebie policies across different regions and governance structures, identifying best practices and pitfalls.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Participants in surveys, interviews, and FGDs are informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent is obtained.
- **Confidentiality:** Personal information and responses are anonymized to ensure participants' privacy.

- **Avoiding Bias:** The research design incorporates diverse perspectives, including those of critics and proponents of freebie policies, to maintain objectivity.

2.5. Limitations

- **Scope of Study:** The research focuses on specific freebie programs in selected regions, which may limit the generalizability of findings.
- **Access to Data:** Restricted access to certain policy documents or sensitive government data may pose challenges.
- **Respondent Bias:** Beneficiaries may overstate the benefits or downplay the drawbacks of freebies due to social desirability bias.

3. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Freebie-Driven Governance

The theoretical framework for analyzing freebie-driven governance focuses on the philosophical and theoretical foundations that inform such policies. It combines established theories and ethical considerations to evaluate whether these practices align with social welfare ideals or devolve into vote-buying mechanisms.

3.1. Social Contract Theory and Welfare State Principles

3.1.1 Social Contract Theory

- **Origins and Definition:** Social contract theory, developed by thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, suggests a tacit agreement between the governed and the governing authority. The state derives its legitimacy from its capacity to provide security, welfare, and justice in exchange for citizens' compliance with laws [23].
- **Freebies as Fulfillment of the Contract:** In modern democracies, governments often distribute freebies as part of their efforts to fulfill obligations under the social contract, particularly for marginalized groups. Programs like subsidized food, free healthcare, and educational resources address urgent needs and bolster the state's legitimacy [24].
- **Key Question:** While freebies can strengthen the social contract by meeting immediate needs, concerns arise about long-term dependency. Do these measures empower citizens to become self-sufficient, or do they encourage continued reliance on state support?

3.1.2 Welfare State Principles

- **Foundation of Welfare States:** A welfare state seeks to mitigate inequality and provide basic services, ensuring social justice and equity. Esping-Andersen's categorization of welfare regimes emphasizes the role of state intervention in addressing socio-economic disparities [25].
- **Alignment with Welfare Goals:** Policies offering freebies, such as free school meals or unemployment benefits, often align with the welfare state's objectives of improving access to essential services. For example, India's Public Distribution System (PDS) and Brazil's Bolsa Família program are designed to alleviate poverty.
- **Risks to Sustainability:** Over-reliance on freebies can strain public finances and divert resources from sustainable development initiatives. As Barr (2012) suggests, welfare policies should be carefully analyzed to ensure that short-term benefits do not undermine fiscal health in the long run [26].

3.2. Public Choice Theory and Vote-Buying Implications

3.2.1 Public Choice Theory

- **Overview:** Public choice theory, introduced by James M. Buchanan, analyzes political behavior through an economic lens, assuming that politicians, like market participants, act based on self-interest, often prioritizing electoral success over public welfare [27].
- **Freebies as Political Tools:** Freebie programs can be used by politicians as instruments to secure votes by appealing to voters' immediate material needs. Such policies often lack alignment with long-term goals, reflecting a focus on electoral gains rather than societal welfare [28].
- **Economic Distortions:** Public choice theory highlights how using public funds for populist measures rather than productive investments creates inefficiencies. Over time, these distortions can undermine economic growth and erode public trust in governance.

3.2.2 Vote-Buying

- **Definition and Context:** Vote-buying typically involves offering material benefits or promises in exchange for electoral support. While often considered illegal, the institutionalization of freebie promises within governance frameworks blurs the line between legal policies and vote-buying [29].
- **Examples and Implications:** In countries like India, freebie promises—such as free electricity or farm loan waivers—are frequently targeted at specific voter groups. These programs reinforce vote bank politics, potentially undermining fiscal responsibility and equitable governance [30].
- **Ethical Concerns:** When the priority is on short-term electoral gains, vote-buying through freebies may divert attention from long-term welfare policies that require sustained effort and planning.

3.3 Ethical Considerations in Governance

3.3.1 Moral Justifications for Freebies

- **Addressing Inequality:** Governments have an ethical obligation to address poverty and inequality. Freebies can be morally justified as short-term relief measures for vulnerable populations, ensuring access to basic rights like food, healthcare, and education [31].
- **Transparency and Fairness:** Ethical governance requires transparency in designing and implementing freebie programs, ensuring that they benefit those genuinely in need without being influenced by political favouritism.

3.3.2 Challenges of Ethical Governance

- **Dependency vs. Empowerment:** Excessive reliance on freebies can foster a culture of entitlement, discouraging self-reliance and innovation. For instance, unemployment benefits without accompanying skill development initiatives may perpetuate joblessness.
- **Equity Issues:** If freebies are distributed inequitably or to specific groups for political advantage, they risk exacerbating existing social inequalities [32].

3.3.3 Accountability and Integrity

- **Evaluating Impact:** Ethical governance necessitates robust mechanisms to evaluate whether freebies achieve their intended social impact. Policymakers must rely on data-driven assessments to ensure resources are allocated effectively and equitably [33].
- **Preventing Abuse:** Freebie programs must include safeguards against corruption and misuse of funds. Transparent processes and third-party audits can help improve accountability.

This framework provides a comprehensive lens for examining freebie-driven governance. It underscores the need to balance short-term relief with long-term development goals while addressing ethical and ad-

ministrative challenges that policymakers face.

4. Political Context

4.1 Role of Freebies in Electoral Politics

Freebies are frequently used in electoral politics as a strategic tool for gaining voter support. Political parties and candidates leverage material benefits to influence voting behavior, mobilize constituents, and secure electoral victories. Below is an analysis of the role freebies play in electoral politics, including their implications and challenges:

1. Political Strategy and Voter Appeal

- **Targeting Specific Voter Groups:** Freebies are often tailored to appeal to particular demographics, such as low-income groups, rural voters, or specific age groups. For example, free electricity may be aimed at economically disadvantaged communities, while free data packages might target younger, tech-savvy voters. By providing immediate benefits, freebies help in creating a sense of favorability towards the distributing party.
- **Short-Term Electoral Gains:** Politicians often offer freebies in the lead-up to elections, capitalizing on voters' immediate material needs. These programs are designed to generate quick electoral support by providing tangible benefits, particularly in areas with significant socio-economic disparities.
- **Building Voter Loyalty:** Through the strategic allocation of freebies, political parties aim to foster a loyal voter base. By regularly offering material benefits, parties may ensure continued support from those who perceive these handouts as rewards for their votes, thus securing long-term electoral victories.

2. Vote-Buying or Clientelism

- **Vote-Buying and Clientelism:** While vote-buying traditionally refers to the direct exchange of money or gifts for votes, the practice of promising freebies can blur these lines. Freebies become a tool for clientelism, where politicians exchange material benefits for votes, creating transactional relationships between the state and the electorate [29]. This system institutionalizes the exchange of benefits for political support, leading to a shift from policy-based to benefit-based campaigning.
- **Institutionalized Vote-Buying:** Over time, the promise of freebies may become embedded in the electoral process, transforming political exchanges into an expectation rather than an exception. As such, voters may begin to expect material rewards as a prerequisite for electoral support, reducing the importance of long-term policy proposals.

3. Economic and Fiscal Implications

- **Strain on Public Resources:** While freebies may help politicians win votes, they often place a significant burden on public finances. The resources allocated for these programs can come at the expense of critical development initiatives. Public funds that are directed toward freebies may reduce the available budget for infrastructure projects, education, or healthcare, thus undermining long-term growth [28].
- **Economic Distortions:** Freebie-driven politics can lead to inefficiencies in resource allocation. Rather than investing in long-term economic development, funds are often diverted to short-term populist measures, which may not yield sustainable improvements. This focus on immediate electoral gains can stunt economic growth and reduce the efficacy of government spending [27].

4. Ethical and Governance Concerns

- **Dependency vs. Empowerment:** Although freebies may provide temporary relief to vulnerable groups,

ps, there is a concern that they foster dependency on state support. When governments focus heavily on providing handouts without accompanying empowerment initiatives such as skill development, they risk cultivating a culture of reliance rather than self-sufficiency [28].

- **Undermining Democratic Integrity:** The use of freebies to gain votes undermines the democratic process by shifting the focus from policy discussions to material exchanges. This can erode the quality of political discourse and reduce the focus on effective governance. Over time, politicians may prioritize giving away benefits over addressing fundamental societal issues [32].
- **Equity and Fairness:** Freebie policies that are designed with political gain in mind may not always be equitable. When the distribution of benefits is skewed toward specific demographics for electoral advantage, it can deepen existing social inequalities, reducing the fairness of the electoral process [33].

5. Long-Term Implications for Governance

- **Short-Term vs. Long-Term Policy Goals:** Freebie programs are often designed to address immediate needs, but they do not contribute to sustainable development. By prioritizing short-term relief, governments may neglect investments in areas like education, healthcare, and infrastructure that are necessary for long-term national growth [24].
- **Reduced Civic Engagement:** When voters are primarily focused on receiving freebies, their involvement in the democratic process can diminish. A focus on material benefits rather than policy evaluation reduces the electorate's ability to make informed decisions, weakening the overall democratic system [23].

4.2 EXAMPLES OF FREEBIE PROMISES AND THEIR INFLUENCE

In 2022, the issue of "freebies" or subsidized goods and services provided by political parties became a significant topic of debate in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised concerns about the long-term consequences of this practice, warning that it could hinder the country's development and future growth. His remarks, made on July 16th, 2022, sparked wider discussions about the impact of political promises of free goods or services on governance and the economy (The Hindu, 2022; Times of India, 2022) [34,35]. The controversy was further intensified by a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay in the Supreme Court on January 22, 2022. The PIL challenged the practice of offering "irrational freebies," arguing that such promises waste public funds, encourage irresponsible expenditure, and detract from addressing more pressing societal issues. The PIL called for the regulation of these freebie policies, which are often used by political parties to gain electoral advantage (The Economic Times, 2022) [36].

In response to this petition, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) sought to oppose the PIL on August 9, 2022. The AAP defended its promises of free services such as water, electricity, and public transport, stating that they are essential for providing basic resources to the people, especially in a country like India, where there is significant inequality. They argued that these services are vital for improving the quality of life for citizens and ensuring equitable access to resources. Additionally, the AAP accused the petition of being politically motivated, claiming it was an attempt to undermine opposition parties and further the political agenda of Mr. Upadhyay (India Today, 2022) [37].

On August 3, 2022, the Supreme Court bench, consisting of Chief Justice N.V. Ramana, Justices Krishna Murari, and Hima Kohli, proposed the formation of an expert committee to examine the issue in a neutral and objective manner. The committee, they suggested, would include members from key governmental and financial institutions such as the Finance Commission, Niti Aayog, the Law Commission, and the

Reserve Bank of India, as well as representatives from political parties. The Court directed all parties to submit their suggestions on the composition of the committee, signaling the seriousness of addressing the concerns related to freebies in Indian politics [38].

This legal and political discourse reflects the ongoing tension between providing immediate relief to citizens through freebies and ensuring sustainable economic development. The Supreme Court's intervention aims to find a balanced approach that considers both the immediate welfare of the people and the long-term fiscal health of the country.

4.3 Case Study: Rewadi (Freebie) Culture and Its Impact on Governance

Rewadi culture, or freebie culture, has become a central issue in Indian politics, with a growing debate over its economic and social consequences. While some economists and policy experts criticize the practice for undermining fiscal discipline, many political leaders advocate for freebies as a means of addressing citizens' needs. The situation in Sri Lanka serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the risks associated with reckless government spending on freebies. In Sri Lanka, political promises of tax cuts and the distribution of free goods and services in the run-up to elections led to a financial collapse, raising questions about fiscal prudence and governance (Dorn, 2022) [39].

In the Indian context, freebies are often tied to electoral promises, with political parties offering various forms of assistance in their manifestos. Incumbent parties may also distribute freebies close to elections to garner support. While these promises may help secure votes in the short term, they have long-term consequences. The practice of offering freebies reflects a lower allocation of funds to essential sectors such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and research & development. This trade-off often results in budgetary crises, as governments divert resources from crucial developmental needs to finance short-term electoral gains (Jain, 2021)[40].

A 2019 survey conducted by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a Delhi-based NGO, revealed that more than 42% of voters in 543 parliamentary constituencies in India considered the distribution of cash, liquor, and freebies to be a key factor influencing their voting decisions. This highlights the growing importance of freebies in shaping voter behavior, often overshadowing candidates' proposed welfare plans (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2019)[41].

The phenomenon of freebie politics is not unique to India. In the Philippines, election spending has been a significant driver of political campaigns. According to Wurfel (1988), money plays a crucial role in Philippine elections, where candidates heavily invest in promotional materials, charitable donations, and even directly buying votes. In 1961, election spending accounted for a considerable portion of the country's GDP and government budget. The Philippines' voting system reinforced the influence of local patronage networks, particularly among illiterate voters who relied on political machines to help them navigate the electoral process [42].

From the 1930s onward, the relationship between voters and political leaders in the Philippines became more transactional. Local leaders would provide specific services in exchange for votes, and voters, if dissatisfied with the services, would withhold their support. To ensure voters honored their bargain, politicians often paid in two installments—half before the election and the other half after proof of voting was provided. Over time, this patronage shifted from local to national control, as political factions became increasingly reliant on access to national government resources rather than local economic power. The shift was also influenced by reforms that made it harder to enforce vote-buying agreements, leading to an

increase in violence and coercion during elections, with private armies becoming involved by the 1960s [43].

5. Economic Implications

A significant portion of the government's revenue is derived from both direct and indirect taxes. These revenues help the government cover its expenditures, including interest payments on loans, defense spending, non-recurring expenses, and the salaries of government employees. Additionally, these funds are used to finance various public welfare schemes, such as healthcare, education, and social security programs. These schemes are a fixed part of the government's total expenditure, and the resources to fund them are primarily sourced from taxpayers [44].

Subsidies, in simple terms, are financial discounts provided on essential goods and services such as food, fuel, and education. While subsidies can be vital in ensuring access to basic necessities, they require careful management. Excessive expenditure on subsidies, especially when directed towards electoral promises or freebies, can reduce the amount available for other critical areas, including long-term welfare programs. Often, political leaders, in an effort to attract voters, resort to promising freebies, especially when their election campaigns lack a clear manifesto. However, from an economic perspective, this practice contradicts basic economic principles, which assert that everything has a cost. While the government may provide these freebies, the funds ultimately come from taxpayers, thus increasing the fiscal deficit [45].

For instance, India's fiscal deficit in the previous year was 6.71% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is significantly higher than the target of 3% set by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act. The larger the fiscal deficit, the greater the strain on the economy, limiting the government's ability to invest in infrastructure, development, and other essential sectors [46].

The concept of optimum resource allocation also plays a key role in discussions about subsidies and freebies. Water, for example, is a scarce resource. Providing free water to all citizens, while well-intentioned, increases government expenditure. While water is considered a fundamental human right, ensuring its safety and accessibility involves substantial costs. If provided for free, this may lead to a lack of incentive for citizens to conserve it or use it wisely. In contrast, charging reasonable prices for water would encourage responsible consumption and reduce government spending, potentially freeing up resources for other critical areas [44].

The broader economic impact of providing freebies is complex. According to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), excessive freebies can undermine the credit culture by distorting market prices through cross-subsidization. Additionally, such policies erode incentives for private investment and reduce work incentives at current wage levels, leading to a decrease in labor force participation. This can ultimately lead to slower economic growth, as both public and private sectors face constraints in allocating resources efficiently [46].

5.1 Short-Term and Long-Term Economic Impacts

5.1.1 Short-Term Impacts:

- **Increased government spending:** The immediate fiscal impact of freebies is an increase in government expenditure, which may boost short-term consumer demand, especially in the pre-election period.

- **Voter appeasement:** Freebies may enhance the ruling party's popularity, leading to electoral success in the short term.
- **Boost in consumption:** Some goods and services, like free food or fuel, may see a temporary rise in demand, but these gains are often unsustainable.

5.1.2 Long-Term Impacts:

- **Fiscal deficit expansion:** A prolonged commitment to providing freebies can significantly increase the fiscal deficit, limiting the government's ability to invest in infrastructure and development.
- **Economic inefficiencies:** Long-term subsidies can distort the market, creating inefficiencies and reducing the incentive for consumers and businesses to allocate resources efficiently.
- **Negative impact on productivity:** By disincentivizing work at current wage rates, the labor force may shrink, leading to reduced productivity and economic stagnation.
- **Public debt accumulation:** As the government borrows more to fund freebies, public debt rises, potentially impacting credit ratings and increasing future debt servicing costs.

Thus, while freebies may provide short-term electoral gains, their long-term impact can be detrimental to the economy by reducing the ability of the government to fund essential development projects, leading to unsustainable fiscal policies [47].

5.2 Cost-benefit analysis of freebies versus sustainable welfare policies

A cost-benefit analysis of freebies versus sustainable welfare policies reveals distinct advantages and disadvantages for each approach in terms of economic impact, social equity, and government expenditure. Freebies, which refer to government-provided goods or services without charge to beneficiaries, offer immediate relief and tangible support, particularly during economic crises or for marginalized groups. These benefits often lead to short-term voter support and help alleviate urgent needs, such as providing free electricity, food, or healthcare. However, the long-term costs associated with freebies can be significant. They impose a heavy fiscal burden on the government, often leading to increased debt, inflation, and resource misallocation. Additionally, continuous reliance on freebies can create dependency among beneficiaries, disincentivizing self-sufficiency and reducing the incentive for hard work or innovation. For instance, some Indian states have faced criticism for implementing such freebie schemes, as they contribute to financial strain on the state's budget, without necessarily fostering long-term sustainable growth (Sood, 2019) [48].

On the other hand, sustainable welfare policies, such as investments in education, healthcare, skill development, and social insurance, aim to provide long-term empowerment and reduce the need for ongoing assistance. These policies focus on building a healthier, more educated, and skilled workforce, which, in turn, can increase productivity, foster economic development, and contribute to a more equitable society. Although sustainable welfare programs require higher initial investments and the political will to ensure their continuity, their benefits are more enduring. These policies help create a self-sufficient population, less reliant on government support and more capable of contributing to the economy. Countries such as those in the Nordic region—like Sweden and Norway—serve as examples where comprehensive welfare systems, including universal healthcare and free education, have contributed to high standards of living and impressive human development indices (Chand, 2017) [49]. While the returns on these policies are slower and require careful long-term planning, the sustainability and resilience they build within societies are unparalleled.

We can say that, while freebies may provide immediate relief and political gains, they are financially unsustainable and can hinder long-term societal progress. Sustainable welfare policies, though requiring more initial investment and commitment, ultimately promote a more productive, self-sufficient, and equitable society. Therefore, sustainable welfare is a more cost-effective and socially beneficial approach in the long run.

6. Social Welfare Perspective

Freebie policies are typically designed to address the urgent needs of underprivileged and marginalized groups within society. By offering essential services or goods at no cost, governments can create a safety net for individuals who might otherwise struggle to access fundamental resources. Examples of such freebies include free healthcare services, subsidized food, and accessible education, all of which benefit disadvantaged populations directly. These programs are particularly important during economic downturns or when individuals face significant financial hardship. In countries like India, the Public Distribution System (PDS) plays a critical role in providing food to people living below the poverty line. By offering food grains at subsidized rates to millions of citizens, such initiatives help alleviate hunger and contribute to food security in the short term [50]. These programs act as immediate relief measures, ensuring that basic needs are met during challenging times.

6.1 The Role of Freebies in Bridging Socio-Economic Gaps

Freebie programs are often used as tools to reduce socio-economic disparities by ensuring access to essential services like healthcare, education, and nutrition, regardless of a person's income. These initiatives promote greater social equity by providing opportunities to marginalized groups, who may otherwise be excluded from quality services. For example, free healthcare services can reduce health inequalities in rural or impoverished urban areas, where private healthcare may be unaffordable. Likewise, free or subsidized education helps break the cycle of poverty by offering underprivileged children opportunities for learning and personal development, which can lead to upward mobility. In nations with wide income disparities, these programs can play a crucial role in narrowing the gap between wealthy and impoverished populations, fostering social inclusion and offering avenues for economic advancement [50].

6.2 Analysis of Successful and Unsuccessful Freebie Initiatives

The effectiveness of freebie initiatives depends on their design, the way they are implemented, and whether the government can maintain them over time.

6.2.1 Successful Initiatives:

- **India's Public Distribution System (PDS):** One of India's largest freebie programs, the PDS distributes food grains to millions of low-income citizens, particularly in rural areas. This initiative has been central in reducing hunger and food insecurity. Despite facing challenges such as corruption and inefficiency, the PDS has been crucial in providing basic food to the underprivileged [51].
- **Brazil's Bolsa Família:** Brazil's Bolsa Família program, which provides conditional cash transfers to low-income families, is another example of a successful freebie initiative. The program requires families to ensure that their children attend school and receive vaccinations. This initiative has been instrumental in reducing poverty, encouraging education, and improving healthcare access, promoting greater social inclusion [52].

6.2.2 Unsuccessful Initiatives:

- **Sri Lanka's Freebie Politics:** Sri Lanka offers a cautionary tale of freebie-driven governance. Successive governments introduced large-scale tax cuts and distributed free goods and services to gain electoral support. However, this led to a fiscal crisis, with soaring public debt, inflation, and a collapse of public services. This scenario highlights the dangers of implementing unsustainable freebie policies that lack proper fiscal planning and long-term strategies [53].
- **India's Cash-for-Votes Programs:** In several Indian states, politicians have used cash and goods distribution as part of their electoral campaigns. While these policies may yield short-term electoral success, they fail to address deeper systemic issues like unemployment and poverty. Rather than building sustainable welfare systems, such initiatives often reinforce patronage politics, creating dependence on state support, which can hinder long-term socio-economic development [54].

7. Ethical Challenges of Freebies

Political parties in recent state assembly elections have announced various freebies such as free bus rides, free electricity, subsidized rice (5-10 kg), and cylinders, aiming to attract voters and address immediate needs. However, such promises often raise significant ethical concerns.

- **The Classic Adage:** "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." This highlights the difference between providing temporary relief and empowering individuals to become self-sufficient.
- **RBI's Perspective on Freebies:** "Freebies are never free... especially harmful are subsidies that distort prices." Political parties that offer such programs must clearly explain to voters how these schemes will be financed and what the trade-offs will be in terms of long-term consequences on the economy and resources [55].

7.1 Ethical Issues Associated with Freebies

1. **Dependency Syndrome:** Freebies can create a culture of dependency, where recipients begin to expect continuous assistance and are less motivated to work or contribute to the economy. For instance, providing rice at Rs. 1 per kg or free electricity can undermine the sense of responsibility and accountability among beneficiaries, making them reliant on external support [56].
2. **Failure to Meet Obligations:** Freebie schemes can adversely affect a government's fiscal health and lead to economic instability. Programs such as loan waivers, unemployment allowances, or pension schemes can result in increased public expenditure, subsidies, deficits, and inflation, making it difficult for governments to invest in other crucial sectors or meet their financial obligations [57].
3. **Inducing Corruption:** Offering freebies can promote corrupt practices, as these programs may be used as tools for political gain. For example, items like bicycles or laptops provided as freebies might be of substandard quality or outdated models compared to what is available in the market [58].
4. **Compromising Quality:** Freebies can lower the quality of services and goods offered, reducing competition and incentives for improvement. When goods are given for free, it reduces the pressure for innovation and quality upgrades [59].
5. **Distorting Resource Allocation:** Freebies often divert public funds away from productive sectors, leading to misallocation of resources. Essential areas like infrastructure, agriculture, and industry may be underfunded while resources are poured into less vital freebie schemes. For instance, the

distribution of mobile phones or laptops may consume significant portions of the budget, reducing the government's capacity to invest in infrastructure such as roads and bridges [60].

6. **Environmental Degradation:** Freebie schemes can contribute to overuse and wastage of natural resources, which harms the environment. Free electricity, water, or gas can encourage overconsumption, reduce incentives for conservation, and contribute to environmental pollution. For example, free electricity for farmers in Punjab has led to excessive use and wastage of power, further straining the resources of the state's power utility [61].

7.2 Ethical Perspective on Freebies

1. Government Perspective:

- **Moral Responsibility:** The government has an ethical duty to uplift marginalized sections of society, and welfare measures, such as subsidies and free services, can fulfill this duty. However, a balance must be struck to ensure that these measures do not become mere populist strategies aimed at gaining votes [62].
- **Accountability and Transparency:** It is essential for the government to ensure that freebie schemes are transparent, targeted, and sustainable. This would help avoid misuse of public funds for electoral purposes, ensuring the long-term viability of such programs [63].
- **Distortion of Incentives:** Freebie programs must be evaluated to ensure they do not create disincentives for hard work or reduce productivity. Ethical governance should encourage self-sufficiency and promote productive economic activity, rather than fostering dependency [64].

2. Citizens' Perspective:

- **Responsibility of Citizens:** While citizens may benefit from freebies, they must also engage in responsible behavior, such as managing resources wisely and seeking ways to improve their circumstances. Dependence on government aid can hinder personal and community growth [65].
- **Equity and Justice:** The allocation of freebies must be scrutinized to ensure fairness. Ethical considerations should include whether these measures address the root causes of poverty and whether they disproportionately favor specific groups [66].
- **Public Perception and Social Values:** The culture of freebies can affect societal values, potentially fostering a sense of entitlement rather than responsibility. This could have long-term implications for civic engagement and community welfare [67].

7.3 Advantages of Freebies

1. **Increase Trust and Faith:** Freebies can increase public trust and satisfaction with the government by demonstrating its responsiveness and commitment to addressing citizens' needs. For example, the PM Kisan Samman Yojana and Old Age and Widow Pension Yojana have helped enhance the welfare of vulnerable groups [68].
2. **Enhance Accountability:** These programs can promote feedback and dialogue between the government and its citizens, enhancing transparency and democracy. For instance, improvements in bus services for women in some states have been implemented in response to public demands [69].
3. **Inclusive Growth:** Freebie programs can foster economic growth by increasing the workforce's productive capacity, especially in less developed regions. For example, providing bicycles, laptops, or sewing machines to the poor and rural populations can help improve skills, mobility, and income opportunities [70].

4. **Social Welfare:** Freebies provide vital support to marginalized groups, offering basic necessities like food, healthcare, and education, which can improve quality of life. Programs that offer school uniforms, textbooks, or health insurance contribute to the well-being of needy populations [71].
5. **Income Equality:** Freebies can reduce income inequality by redistributing wealth and resources more equitably. Cash transfers, loan waivers, and other such schemes empower low-income households and help improve their financial security [72].
6. **Improvement in Civic Engagement:** A study by the Centre for Policy Research found that providing essential items like rice, laptops, and bicycles can positively influence voter turnout, political awareness, and satisfaction with the government [73].

7.4 Disadvantages of Freebies

1. **Burden on Public Finances:** Freebie schemes place a significant strain on public finances, with states spending large portions of their revenue on subsidies. In some states, like Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, more than 10% of the revenue is allocated to such schemes, diverting resources away from essential infrastructure [74].
2. **Against Free and Fair Elections:** Offering freebies before elections can unduly influence voters and undermine the fairness of the electoral process, akin to bribing the electorate. This practice can distort the democratic process [75].
3. **Distortion in Resource Allocation:** The focus on freebies can divert funding from more pressing issues such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. NITI Aayog has criticized the provision of laptops in Uttar Pradesh, arguing that it detracted from addressing the state's urgent educational needs [76].
4. **Dependency Culture:** Freebies may cultivate a culture of dependency, undermining the spirit of self-reliance and entrepreneurship, which are essential for long-term economic growth [77].
5. **Reduced Accountability:** Political parties may use freebies as a distraction from their failures in governance and public service delivery, thereby reducing accountability in government operations [78].
6. **Environmental Impact:** Freebies can contribute to the overuse of natural resources, such as water and electricity, increasing pollution and carbon footprints. Free electricity for farmers in Punjab has led to environmental degradation and poor quality service delivery from the state utility [79].

8. Addressing Administrative Challenges in Implementing Welfare Schemes

The implementation of welfare schemes is a cornerstone of public policy aimed at improving socio-economic conditions. However, it is fraught with challenges that need to be addressed for effective delivery and meaningful impact. Below are some of the key administrative challenges, along with possible solutions:

1. **Inefficient Targeting and Identification of Beneficiaries**
 - Challenges: Misidentification of beneficiaries leads to resource leakage and denial of benefits to deserving individuals. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2023) [80], audits have revealed inconsistencies in beneficiary lists.
 - Solution: Utilizing technology like Aadhaar for biometric authentication can improve accuracy (Gupta, 2021) [81].
2. **Corruption and Leakages in Delivery Mechanisms**

- Challenges: Corruption remains a pervasive issue, leading to siphoning off funds and delayed benefits (Singh, 2020) [82].
- Solution: Implementing direct benefit transfers (DBT) through robust IT infrastructure can minimize middlemen and reduce corruption (NITI Aayog, 2023) [83].
- 3. **Lack of Awareness Among Beneficiaries**
 - Challenges: Many beneficiaries are unaware of their entitlements, which results in underutilization of welfare schemes (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022) [84].
 - Solution: Conducting grassroots-level awareness campaigns and leveraging local governance structures can address this gap (Khera, 2022) [85].
- 4. **Inadequate Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**
 - Challenges: Lack of real-time monitoring and evaluation hampers timely corrective measures (Sharma, 2023) [86].
 - Solution: Establishing a comprehensive monitoring framework, including third-party audits, can enhance accountability (Economic Survey of India, 2023) [87].
- 5. **Fiscal Constraints and Resource Allocation**
 - Challenges: Welfare schemes often strain public finances, especially in states with limited revenue sources (Reserve Bank of India, 2022) [88].
 - Solution: Prioritizing schemes based on impact assessment and improving tax collection mechanisms can address fiscal concerns (Basu, 2023) [89].
- 6. **Freebie Culture and Its Long-Term Implications**
 - Challenges: Populist policies offering freebies may undermine fiscal discipline and create dependency (Dutta, 2022) [90].
 - Solution: Balancing populist measures with sustainable welfare initiatives is crucial (Jain & Verma, 2022) [91].
- 7. **Infrastructural Deficiencies in Rural Areas**
 - Challenges: Poor infrastructure, such as roads and digital connectivity, hampers last-mile delivery of services (Sainath, 2021) [92].
 - Solution: Investing in rural infrastructure development and digital inclusion can bridge this gap (Press Information Bureau, 2022) [93].
- 8. **Fragmented Implementation Across States**
 - Challenges: Variations in state-level capacities and governance structures lead to uneven implementation of central schemes (NIPFP, 2023) [94].
 - Solution: Strengthening center-state coordination and sharing best practices can harmonize implementation (Sharma, 2023) [86].
- 9. **Resistance to Technological Adoption**
 - Challenges: Resistance from officials and beneficiaries, coupled with a lack of digital literacy, impedes the adoption of new technologies (Khera, 2022) [85].
 - Solution: Providing training programs and incentives for technological adoption can overcome these barriers (Gupta, 2021) [81].
- 10. **Gender and Social Disparities in Welfare Access**
 - Challenges: Social biases and patriarchal norms often restrict women's access to welfare benefits (Sharma, 2023) [86].

- Solution: Implementing gender-sensitive policies and ensuring inclusive program designs can mitigate these disparities (Economic Survey of India, 2023) [87].

By addressing these challenges with targeted solutions, policymakers can enhance the efficacy of welfare schemes, ensuring that they reach the intended beneficiaries and achieve the desired socio-economic outcomes.

9. Psychological And Emotional Appeal Of Freebies To Voters

Freebies in politics have a significant psychological and emotional impact on voters, tapping into various psychological factors that shape human behavior. The following highlights the key aspects of their appeal:

9.1 Reciprocity:

The principle of reciprocity plays a central role in the allure of freebies. When voters receive something for free, they often feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate by supporting the party or candidate that provided the benefit. This creates a psychological bond, influencing voters to show loyalty and support through votes [95].

9.2 Perceived Value:

Freebies are seen as valuable benefits that require little to no effort or cost from voters. This perception triggers positive emotions as people feel they are receiving something worthwhile without any financial burden. The excitement and gratitude that come from receiving something for free further enhance its emotional appeal [96].

9.3 Sense of Belonging and Identity:

Offering freebies fosters a sense of belonging and identity among voters. By targeting specific groups with tailored benefits, parties show that they understand the needs of those communities. This recognition makes voters feel valued and included, deepening their emotional connection to the political party [97].

9.4 Gratification:

Freebies provide immediate rewards, catering to the human desire for instant gratification. Voters are more likely to prioritize immediate benefits, which satisfy their current needs or desires. The appeal of quick, tangible rewards can often influence voting decisions over long-term considerations [98].

9.5 Sense of Empowerment:

Freebies can create a feeling of empowerment by presenting parties as agents of positive change in people's lives. By offering tangible benefits, parties are seen as addressing voters' aspirations for a better future. This emotional connection enhances their attachment to the party, as voters feel their socioeconomic status is being uplifted [99].

9.6 Influence on Voter Behavior and Decision-Making:

Freebies have a notable influence on how voters make decisions and behave:

- **Vote Choice:** The provision of freebies can significantly alter voting choices. When the benefits directly meet the immediate needs or desires of voters, it can push them to favor the party offering such benefits, often prioritizing short-term rewards over long-term factors.
- **Loyalty and Affiliation:** Freebies can strengthen voter loyalty and affiliation. When voters receive benefits, they may feel indebted and develop a long-term connection with the party, which could lead to continued support in future elections.
- **Persuasion and Influence:** The promise of freebies is a powerful tool in persuading undecided voters or those without strong party allegiance. The prospect of receiving something of value without cost can be compelling and sway voting decisions.

- **Voter Mobilization:** Freebies are effective in mobilizing voters and increasing turnout. The promise of immediate benefits can motivate people, even those who are generally disengaged, to actively participate in elections. It helps generate enthusiasm and encourages voter participation.
- **Perception of Party's Intentions:** Offering freebies can shape how voters perceive a party's intentions. Voters may interpret the provision of freebies as evidence that a party is genuinely addressing their needs, which can enhance the party's image and attract greater support [100].

9.7 Welfare Dependency and Its Psychological and Behavioral Consequences:

Prolonged reliance on government-provided freebies can have certain negative effects, particularly among young adults from welfare-recipient families. Studies indicate that these individuals, particularly those from poor backgrounds, report higher levels of depression, with females being more affected. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and dependency, negatively impacting their mental well-being [101].

However, social welfare programs also have significant positive effects, such as:

- **Improving Standards of Living:** Social welfare schemes help improve living conditions and provide individuals with equal opportunities for growth.
- **Reducing Poverty:** Well-designed welfare programs can help individuals escape or avoid poverty, improving their financial stability.
- **Providing Livelihood Security:** Direct welfare assistance, like cash transfers, ensures livelihood security, offering financial stability during tough times.
- **Reducing Corruption:** Direct transfers to voters can minimize corruption by reducing favoritism, ensuring benefits reach the intended recipients fairly.

By balancing the emotional and psychological factors associated with freebies, welfare programs can play an essential role in improving people's lives while also encouraging responsible political engagement [101].

10. Comparative Analysis of Freebie-Driven Governance Models

1. Cross-Country Comparison of Freebie-Driven Governance Models

- **India:** India's use of freebie policies, such as farm loan waivers and subsidized housing, is often linked to electoral cycles. These policies aim to alleviate immediate financial pressures, particularly among rural voters. However, they have faced criticism for their long-term fiscal consequences.
- **Brazil:** Brazil's *Bolsa Família* program provides conditional cash transfers to low-income families in exchange for key conditions, like school attendance and healthcare check-ups. This program has been praised internationally for balancing short-term aid with long-term development goals, ensuring that immediate relief contributes to sustainable progress.
- **United States:** In the U.S., welfare programs like *SNAP* (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and *Medicaid* target low-income populations, providing need-based assistance. However, these programs face political challenges and ongoing debates regarding the extent of government involvement in welfare services.

2. Lessons from Countries That Have Regulated or Limited Freebie Promises

- **Sweden:** Sweden's welfare model is built on universal benefits funded through high taxes. It has established strict welfare distribution frameworks that ensure fairness and sustainability, avoiding the politicization of welfare promises. This structured approach helps maintain the integrity of the welfare state.
- **Germany:** Germany focuses on skill development and employment generation rather than direct

freebies. Reforms like *Hartz IV* aim to reduce dependency by linking social benefits to job-seeking efforts, encouraging individuals to become self-sufficient rather than relying solely on state support.

- **Singapore:** Singapore employs a mix of subsidies and mandatory savings programs, such as the Central Provident Fund, to provide both short-term relief and long-term financial security. This strategy minimizes the reliance on electoral freebies and focuses on long-term sustainability and individual responsibility.

10.1 Key Takeaways:

1. **Sustainability Matters:** Countries with well-established regulatory frameworks, such as Sweden, demonstrate that welfare programs can be sustainable and effective without undermining fiscal health.
2. **Conditional Transfers Work:** Programs like Brazil's *Bolsa Família*, which tie benefits to specific developmental goals, show that linking relief to long-term outcomes can enhance the lasting impact of welfare programs.
3. **Minimizing Electoral Motives:** Countries like Sweden, which depoliticize welfare distribution, ensure that resources are allocated equitably, helping prevent the manipulation of social benefits for electoral gain.

This comparative analysis highlights the importance of a balanced and strategic approach to welfare programs that not only address immediate needs but also promote long-term social and economic development [102 - 106].

11. Policy Recommendations: Addressing the Freebie Culture in Electoral Governance

The issue of political parties offering or promising freebies to voters has raised significant concerns, particularly regarding its impact on the public exchequer and democratic integrity. Based on recent judicial reviews and petitions, including the **S. Subramaniam Balaji vs. Government of Tamil Nadu** case, and subsequent petitions like the one filed by BJP leader Ashwini Upadhyay, the practice of "Rewari Culture"—where political parties offer freebies to sway voter preferences—has been scrutinized. The Supreme Court, alongside the Election Commission and the Central Government, has recommended measures to regulate this practice, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach between welfare and fiscal responsibility.

11.1 Moral Responsibility and Ethical Governance

Governments bear an ethical obligation to uplift marginalized communities, addressing issues like poverty and inequality through welfare initiatives. However, there is a thin line between genuine welfare efforts and populism, which often aims to secure votes by promising unsustainable freebies. To foster ethical governance, several principles should guide welfare policies:

- **Accountability and Transparency:** Welfare programs must be transparent, well-targeted, and sustainable to prevent misuse of public funds for political advantage.
- **Distortion of Incentives:** The over-reliance on freebies can distort market dynamics, creating disincentives for work and productivity. Ethical governance should encourage self-sufficiency rather than dependency, motivating citizens to engage in productive economic activities.
- **Strengthening Democratic Institutions:** Strengthening the autonomy of the Election Commission (ECI) is crucial for ensuring the effective monitoring and regulation of freebie promises, preserving the integrity of elections.
- **Voter Education:** Promoting voter awareness is critical for ensuring that citizens base their electoral decisions on long-term development plans rather than short-term incentives, thus enhancing the quality

of democracy.

11.2 Policy Recommendations for Regulating Freebie Culture

To move away from unsustainable freebie-driven governance, a more structured approach is needed—one that focuses on welfare policies that are transparent, targeted, and sustainable.

1. Frameworks for Ethical Governance with Welfare-Oriented Freebies

Balanced Freebie Policy: Welfare programs must provide relief to vulnerable populations while supporting sustainable development. This requires a nuanced approach that aligns immediate needs with broader economic goals. Ethical governance frameworks should include impact assessments to evaluate the long-term effects of freebies, ensuring that they do not become tools of electoral manipulation [107].

Targeting and Inclusivity: Welfare programs must be inclusive, targeting those most in need—such as the elderly, disabled, and those living in poverty. A targeted approach ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, reducing waste and ensuring that benefits reach those who need them most [108].

Evidence-Based Approach: Welfare programs should be regularly evaluated based on empirical evidence to assess their long-term effects on poverty reduction, employment, and health outcomes. This data-driven analysis helps ensure that programs meet their goals and are not just politically motivated [109].

2. Sustainable Alternatives to Freebie-Driven Governance

Instead of perpetuating reliance on handouts, governments should focus on long-term strategies to empower citizens and reduce dependency.

Capacity Building and Empowerment: Rather than offering short-term freebies, governments should invest in programs that empower individuals, such as vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and micro-financing. These initiatives equip people with the skills and resources they need to build self-reliant livelihoods [110].

Infrastructure and System Strengthening: Governments should prioritize investments in infrastructure—such as healthcare, education, and rural development—that provide long-term solutions. Strengthening these systems can lead to lasting economic growth, reducing the need for temporary handouts [111].

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): By collaborating with the private sector, governments can design more efficient and self-sustaining welfare programs. PPPs can attract private investments, which help improve resource utilization and innovation in addressing social issues [112].

3. Legal and Institutional Measures to Curb Misuse

Robust legal and institutional frameworks are necessary to prevent the misuse of welfare schemes for political gain.

Regulatory Frameworks: Governments must establish clear regulations to prevent the distribution of freebies during political campaigns. Such laws should hold political parties accountable for the misuse of public funds in electoral promises [112].

Independent Oversight Bodies: Independent oversight bodies should be responsible for ensuring that welfare programs are not manipulated for electoral purposes. These bodies would ensure that the funds are allocated effectively and that schemes meet their stated goals [107].

Public Awareness: Public education campaigns should inform citizens about the consequences of dependency on freebies. Promoting an understanding of programs that foster self-reliance and long-term development will help voters make more informed decisions and support policies that benefit society in the long run [111].

The issue of freebies in politics calls for a delicate balance between immediate welfare and long-term development goals. Ethical governance frameworks, focused on transparency, targeted relief, and sustainable empowerment, are essential for creating a system that addresses poverty without distorting democratic values. By prioritizing capacity-building, strengthening democratic institutions, and encouraging responsible welfare policies, governments can create a more equitable society that promotes both economic growth and social well-being.

12. Conclusion

The study critically examined the concept of freebie-driven governance, exploring its political, economic, and social ramifications. While freebies have historically served as tools to attract voters, especially during elections, their effectiveness in fostering genuine social welfare and ethical governance remains contentious. The analysis reveals that freebies, while addressing urgent socio-economic needs and providing temporary relief to marginalized populations, often lack long-term sustainability and effectiveness [107,108].

Politically, freebies significantly influence voter behavior, sometimes undermining democratic principles and fostering a culture of vote-buying [113]. The fiscal consequences of these policies are substantial, with cost-benefit analyses indicating that they can obstruct the development of sustainable welfare systems. Ethical concerns also arise from the use of public funds for political gains, questioning the fairness, equity, and moral responsibility of governments to prioritize long-term welfare over short-term populist measures [109,110].

Challenges in implementing freebie programs—such as inefficiencies, corruption, and potential resource misuse—highlight the complexities in achieving effective governance through such initiatives [114]. To prevent these programs from being exploited for political purposes, robust accountability mechanisms and regulatory frameworks are essential. Furthermore, public perception, which often views freebies as either a right or a political tactic, underscores the need for better voter education to enable informed decision-making [115].

International examples, including those from India, Brazil, and the United States, provide diverse perspectives on managing freebie-driven policies. These case studies offer insights into the regulation and limitation of such promises. Additionally, nations like Sweden and Singapore demonstrate successful models of sustainable welfare systems, balancing immediate relief with long-term development [114,117].

The policy recommendations presented in the study stress the need for ethical governance, transparency, and long-term planning in welfare initiatives. Governments must transition from freebie-based approaches to empowering citizens through strengthened social security systems, skill development, and economic growth. Clear legal frameworks, coupled with voter awareness programs, can help curb the misuse of public resources and encourage a more development-oriented political approach [112,115].

In conclusion, while freebies can address immediate socio-economic challenges, an overreliance on them poses significant risks to democratic integrity, economic stability, and sustainable development. A strategic shift toward sustainable welfare policies, ethical governance, and informed public engagement is essential to ensure equitable and lasting social progress [98,116].

13. Future Research Directions

The topic of freebie-driven governance presents several promising areas for future research. Key areas that could warrant further exploration include:

1. **Digitalization of Welfare Delivery:** As governments increasingly move towards digital platforms for welfare distribution, there will be significant opportunities to study the efficiency, accessibility, and transparency of these systems. Future research may focus on how digital tools can improve the targeting of benefits, reduce fraud, and ensure timely delivery. Additionally, investigating the potential challenges of digitalization for marginalized populations with limited access to technology or digital literacy will be crucial.
2. **Role of Media in Shaping Freebie Narratives:** Media will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of freebie policies. Future studies could examine how various media channels, including traditional and social media, influence the public's perception of these programs. Researchers may explore whether media coverage of freebies portrays them as legitimate welfare solutions or manipulative electoral tactics, and how this framing affects voter behavior and political engagement.
3. **Behavioral Impact of Freebies:** Future research could delve into the psychological effects that freebies have on individuals and communities. This research may focus on understanding whether such policies encourage dependency or empower people to seek self-sufficiency. Long-term studies could investigate the social consequences of welfare reliance versus empowerment through alternative initiatives, contributing to the ethical considerations of freebie-driven governance.
4. **Comparative Studies of Freebie Impact Across Different Regions:** More comprehensive comparative studies will be needed to understand the impact of freebie policies across various regions or demographic groups. Future research may examine whether such programs are more effective or equitable in rural areas compared to urban settings or how they affect different socio-economic groups. These insights could help tailor policies to address specific needs more effectively.
5. **Evaluating Alternative Welfare Models:** Given the challenges of freebie-driven policies, future research may explore alternative welfare models that focus on long-term self-sufficiency. For instance, social investment models that emphasize education, healthcare, and skill-building could be studied for their ability to create sustainable economic growth. Researchers may also explore hybrid models that combine financial relief with empowerment strategies, evaluating their effectiveness compared to traditional freebie-driven approaches.

Global Policy and Institutional Frameworks for Freebie Regulation: There is a potential to study how different nations regulate and manage freebie promises. Future research could focus on developing global standards or frameworks for the ethical distribution of welfare benefits. Additionally, examining how various political systems and governance structures influence the regulation of freebie policies could contribute to creating effective legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms.

14. Closing Statement

To conclude, the debate over freebie-driven governance reveals a complex balance between social welfare, political motives, and ethical concerns. While such policies can provide immediate relief to underserved populations, their long-term viability, financial sustainability, and potential for misuse remain critical challenges. The key issue lies in distinguishing between genuine welfare and political maneuvering, while ensuring governance systems are transparent, accountable, and focused on lasting societal benefits.

This research emphasizes the necessity of designing policies that empower citizens through education, skills development, and equitable access to essential services, rather than cultivating dependency. As governments confront the dilemma of balancing welfare provision with electoral incentives, it becomes

essential to shift towards governance models that prioritize long-term, sustainable growth and the protection of democratic integrity.

Moving forward, there is a need to establish stronger regulatory frameworks, boost public awareness, and encourage informed voter participation to prevent the misuse of public resources. Ultimately, the goal is to build a governance structure that upholds justice and equity, promotes long-term development, and remains true to the ethical principles at the core of democratic societies.

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