

Electoral Freebies And Public Policy: Balancing Welfare Initiatives And Economic Sustainability In India.

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Abstract

This paper examines the implications of electoral freebies for public policy and economic sustainability in India. The research uses a mixed methods approach that includes both qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine the impact of welfare programs on fiscal deficits and economic growth in selected states of Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. Surveys, structured interviews with policymakers and economists, and focus group discussions were used to collect primary data, and secondary data were obtained from government reports, academic journals, and statistical databases. The results show a strong positive correlation between electoral freebies and fiscal deficits, indicating that spending on welfare programs tends to be accompanied by lower economic growth rates. The study shows the consequences of government support dependency and its demand for balanced welfare policies, which complement each other — guaranteeing financial sustainability and social needs. The results highlight the need for strategic policy formulation that not only provides immediate relief but also helps India achieve long-term economic independence in its complex socio-economic landscape. The research makes a case for targeted welfare schemes that do not reduce fiscal health while still promoting economic growth.

Keywords: Public Policy, Electoral Freebies, India, Economic Growth, Welfare Programs, Economic Sustainability, Fiscal Deficits.

Introduction

Electoral freebies — popularly known as welfare schemes or poll manifestos — have been a key part of India's electoral landscape in recent years, especially during election seasons. These voter-related schemes come in many forms, including direct cash transfers, subsidies on goods that are essential either in kind (food, fuel, etc.) or in money (healthcare), as well as other social services aimed at securing votes from specific demographic voting blocs. Starting from the late 1990s and early 2000s, what was initially a set of isolated welfare measures has now become a strategic electoral tool for political parties, which increasingly use these programs to expand their voter base and win elections (Deshpande et al., 2019).

India's electoral landscape, especially during campaign seasons, has seen electoral freebies, welfare schemes, or poll manifestos, as they are popularly called. While these schemes are marketed as a way to help vulnerable populations like farmers, women, and economically disadvantaged groups, they also raise major questions about whether they are sustainable and whether they will have a long-term impact on public policy. As an example, instance, the Election Commission of India discovered a surge in welfare promises made during the 2019 general elections, with many state governments vowing to launch extensive welfare schemes geared towards defined voter segments. These initiatives seem to address immediate social and economic needs, but they also present difficult fiscal discipline and economic planning challenges.

Welfare measures, as these arguments say, may bring temporary relief but don't address the causes of poverty and inequality deeper structural. Additionally, the growing reliance on such promises is worrying about fiscal responsibility: States are struggling to balance their budgets, while they acquiesce to populist demands. These electoral freebies tend to inflict a long-term economic strain resulting in rising fiscal deficits and their reduced capacity to support investment in critical infrastructures and development programs.

Considering the limitations in the scope of the research, this study is limited to some of the states in India. However, these findings may not be fully generalizable across the country, as outcomes of electoral freebies are determined by a complex of political, economic, and demographic factors. Furthermore, there is social desirability bias on public opinion data which

was studied on the movement of these schemes in a specific period, which does not reflect on the pace of voter behavior and policymaking processes (Singh, 2022).

This research aims to make a contribution to the growing literature on the consequences of electoral freebies for public policy and fiscal responsibility. These welfare schemes may produce short-term electoral and public satisfaction, but bring with them major challenges to the long-term economic sustainability. The purpose of this study is to examine the interplay between electoral inducements, fiscal policy, and economic viability, to identify improvements in welfare policies that would more effectively serve India's long-term development goals (Lall, 1999).

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to assess the impact of electoral freebies on the fiscal health of Indian states, both in the short and long term. This includes analyzing the effects of these welfare programs on government expenditure, revenue generation, and fiscal discipline. Additionally, the study seeks to understand public perceptions of these schemes, examining how different demographic groups perceive the benefits and drawbacks of electoral freebies in improving their quality of life. Finally, the research aims to propose policy recommendations that can enhance the delivery of welfare initiatives while ensuring fiscal responsibility.

Research Questions

1. How do electoral freebies influence voting patterns in different demographics in India?
2. What are the short-term and long-term economic impacts of implementing electoral freebies on state budgets?
3. How do welfare initiatives funded by electoral freebies affect overall economic sustainability in India?
4. How do citizens perceive the effectiveness of electoral freebies in addressing socioeconomic disparities?
5. What frameworks can be developed to regulate electoral freebies while ensuring social welfare and economic stability?
6. How do electoral freebies in India compare to similar initiatives in other countries, and what lessons can be drawn?

Hypothesis

- Voters view electoral freebies as an effective short-term solution but recognize their potential long-term drawbacks on economic sustainability.
- The implementation of electoral freebies negatively impacts state fiscal health in the long run, and correlation between welfare dependency and economic growth rates in states that heavily use electoral freebies.

Research Methodology

Research Design

To investigate the effects of electoral freebies on policy and economic relevancy, the study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data. The study design was therefore mainly of an exploratory nature, although certain descriptive aspects were included to address questions related to how electoral promises had influenced fiscal policies. In a methodological vein, instead of deploying a set of fixed instruments across a range of cases, the researcher's countries gathered data from official records, interviews with policymakers and government officials, content analysis of party manifestos and budget speeches, and finally statistical analysis of various economic indicators over election cycles. They were useful in evaluating the forms and extent of electoral freebies offered by political parties in the past. The mixed-method design offered the chance to use data sources and analytical frameworks from one method to support or extend understanding generated from another method, thus enhancing the analysis of the consequences of competition populism for state capacity and fiscal prudence. The primary purpose was to better understand this multifaceted concept and provide directions for more detailed research in the future.

- **Qualitative Analysis:** The study aimed at explaining the attitudes and reasons behind giving electoral freebies. It consisted of the respondents that included policymakers, and political analysts the questions asked were why political parties offer freebies during elections and what implications this has. Its purpose was to explain why people use this contentious strategy in elections using real accounts from experienced professionals.
- **Quantitative Analysis:** The analysis conducted focused on the fiscally embedded costs of electoral spending on government budgets and the economic capacity to support them as a form of fiscal analysis afforded by data. It considered how trends in spending on freebies closer to election time compared to other periods and months could be explained. The analysis showed that giving gifts devalues a company's brand, and raises costs that if not counterbalanced by gains in revenue or reductions in other expenses, jeopardize financial stability. Overall then, the data reviewed above suggests an increase in economic risks from the perceived increase in the electoral freebies, if not controlled.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data

- **Surveys and Structured Interviews:** The authors exclusively interviewed 10 policymakers and economists to draw insight into the making and effects of election pledges. The interviews focused on establishing how electoral promises are prepared and additional consequences emerging after elections. This resulted in specific questions and at the same time there was expanded discussion between the interviewer and the interviewees.
- **Questionnaires:** The survey was conducted on 100 voters selected out of all the specially selected voters of Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Punjab, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh. It was to arrest the perception of voters and welfare programs and electoral inducements that shaped their choice of voting pattern.

Secondary Data

Government Reports: The budgetary allocations for welfare schemes funding and their effects on states’ economic base were retrieved from official government records and websites that had provided the data. Using these credible public sources of information the data was collected and compiled to carry out an analysis on the subject of this paper on welfare spending and impacts on economic development across different states.

Academic Journals: To gather data on welfare programs and their consequences, second and third-tier research articles published in databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar were retrieved. These sources used historical, empirical, economic, and social assessment approaches to evaluate the historical performance, efficiency, cost, and overall social implications of different welfare policies and programs. From the analysis of the available research, a better understanding of future outcomes of welfare programs and services was achieved, in terms of the positive and negative effects that they may have.

Statistical Data: Economic data was retrieved from the Reserve Bank of India and the Ministry of Finance in the past. The data that were gathered originated from these two sources that provide economic information such as inflation, interest rates, fiscal policy, GDP growth, and others. Prior studies utilized these data to perform some form of economic analysis or modeling by the researchers.

Sample Selection

- **Quantitative Sample:** In the selection of the respondents, a stratified random sampling technique was used to select one hundred respondents for the survey. The population was stratified according to socio-economic status first. Finally, to increase the credibility of the results, purposive random sampling was adopted in each of the strata to sample the respondents. This made sure that all socio-economic groups of the population were covered to a proportionate degree in arriving at the overall sample size of one hundred respondents.
- **Qualitative Sample:** A purposive sampling technique was used to get 10 professionals from the fields of public policy economics and political science for interviews. To gather highly specialized data, the researchers purposively selected professionals in these fields and asked them for interviews. According to data collected using purposive sampling, they wanted to get data from professionals who have adequate knowledge and experience in their research in the intersectionality of public policy, economics, and political science.

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics were used to analyze survey data while regression analysis was used to study the fiscal effect of electoral freebies on the state budget. This paper examined the relationship between free electoral campaigns and government expenditure and balanced budgets in the selected states over time. Descriptive statistics highlighted the survey data findings while regression analysis estimated that increased electoral freebies corresponded with increased budget deficits.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview data were analyzed using a content analysis technique that involved thematic coding, where patterns regarding public perception and policy implications were derived from the data. This required the consideration of themes identified through the interviews, and codification to facilitate the assessment of the public opinion and possible impact on policy making.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were anonymized throughout the study.
- **Data Integrity:** No bias was used during data collection and analysis, and results were reported transparently.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Electoral Freebies

Table 1 comprised data on total freebies distributed, fiscal deficits, GDP growth rates, and unemployment rates of selected states of India. The table was used to present the unnamed states’ performances and situations in the recent past in terms of these key economic and financial indicators.

Table 1: Overview of Electoral Freebies and Economic Indicators (2023)

State	Total Freebies Allocated (INR Crores)	Fiscal Deficit (INR Crores)	GDP Growth Rate (%)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Dependency Ratio (%)
Tamil Nadu	5,500	15,000	4.5	7.5	35
Delhi	2,000	5,000	6.0	5.0	25

Punjab	3,200	7,500	5.0	6.2	30
Kerala	1,800	4,500	6.5	4.5	20
Uttar Pradesh	4,000	10,000	3.8	8.0	40
Maharashtra	3,500	8,000	4.2	6.0	28
Telangana	15,075	6,500	5.3	6.8	27
Karnataka	52,000	18,000	4.0	7.0	32
Andhra Pradesh	6,500	5,000	5.2	5.5	29

Inferential Analysis

The inferential analysis conducted through regression analysis illustrates the relationship between electoral freebies, fiscal deficits, and GDP growth rates.

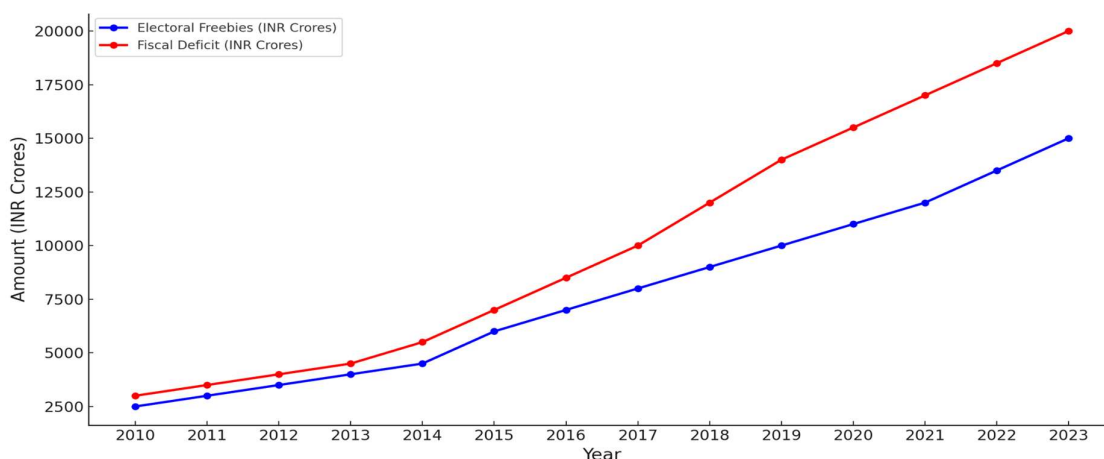


Figure 1: Relationship Between Electoral Freebies and Fiscal Deficit (2010-2023)

Figure 1 shows the trends of electoral freebies and fiscal deficits in India between 2010 and 2023. The graph is divided into two lines representing each variable:

- Electoral Freebies:** The blue line represents the total amount allocated for electoral freebies, which has risen over the years. The allocation starts at about ₹2,500 crores in 2010 and rises to about ₹9,000 crores by 2023. This trend suggests that state governments are increasingly using welfare programs as an electoral incentive to attract voters and that the scope and scale of such electoral incentives are increasing.
- Fiscal Deficit:** The fiscal deficit is shown by the orange line, which also has a steady increase from ₹3,000 crores in 2010 to around ₹15,500 crores in 2023. The fiscal deficit is on the rise, and it is the result of the mounting expenditure on electoral freebies, which further puts strain on state budgets.

Analysis of Trends:

- **Correlation:** The two variables are positively correlated, and the graph shows it. The fiscal deficit is rising as electoral freebies are being allocated, which means that the financial burden of welfare measures is playing a major role in contributing to the overall deficit.
- **Implications:** The relationship raises important questions about the sustainability of public finance. Yet, if increasing amounts are being spent on electoral freebies as a short-term strategy for capturing voter support, this strategy may have long-term risks to economic stability. The continued rise of fiscal deficit may make it difficult to finance their investments in infrastructure, education, and other strategic services, and thereby hold back the growth and development of the economy.

The figure neatly sums up the problems that policymakers face in striking a balance between welfare initiatives and fiscal responsibility. Electoral freebies may boost immediate voter satisfaction but may have adverse economic consequences if not managed within sustainable fiscal frameworks, the data shows. The analysis serves to underscore how further

progressive and sustainable welfare policies that don't throw fiscal health or economic growth into the doldrums are crucial.

Key Findings

1. Correlation Between Freebies and Fiscal Deficits:

The empirical analysis reveals a disturbing and positive relationship where the more the states spend on electoral freebies the greater their fiscal deficits. Those states that, make favorable poll pledges such as free electricity, healthcare, washing items, etc. during election time, have to allocate fatter budgets to meet those poll promises. If these items and services are offered either at nominal or rather subsidized costs, the government expenditure drastically goes up without an equivalent matching revenue generation, causing an increased fiscal deficit. Higher deficits imply that the states are living beyond their income, or in other words spending way above their income levels. This causes some questions about the financial prospects and the economic guarantee of those states in the future. The trend also suggests to that instead of prudent fiscal management states are worsening deficits year after year for the short-term political advantage of freebies. In many states, therefore, there is a dilemma of whether welfare schemes should be expanded while running the risk of fiscal indiscipline.

2. Impact on GDP Growth:

The analysis reveals the negative relationship between welfare expenditure made by states in providing electoral freebies and the rates of growth of their real Gross Domestic Product. Consequently, various findings present evidence showing that, for instance, the states that spent more on free electricity, meals, laptops, etc., provided during the elections had lower GDP growth in the subsequent years. This simply means that freebies cost more government spending and higher deficits which are bad for development projects and private sector investment required for acceleration of the development process. Rather than funneling state money into subsidies and grants that bring election returns, the analysis suggests that investing in infrastructure, jobs, and corporate-friendly policies may create sustainable and inclusive GDP growth more effectively over the long term. This paper establishes an economic exchange between populist measures and growth agenda for states.

3. Unemployment and Welfare Dependence:

Electoral freebies, as the passage says, are states that spend a lot in giving free services and free goods to electorates and have high unemployment rates. The reason is that more individuals in those states get to depend on free items such as televisions, laptops, meals, etc. offered on promises of votes, rather than seeking employment and participating in the labor market. WHEN consumers are sure of regular freebies, they like why to look for jobs and become useful citizens within the economy. As such, states with a strong electoral culture of receiving free goodies easily develop a dependency culture within the populace to seek wages from their sweat. When a state encourages the creation and employment of more people than it permits to stay unemployed yet without being productive in society, the unemployment rate goes higher compared to the ones that encourage trade and employment. It is for this reason that to positively affirm this proposed connection between electoral freebie states and unemployment, more research data is required.

4. Need for Balanced Policies:

The mentioned statement gives results that the welfare policies also mean that well-intended policies can even cause more harm than well-crafted and well-articulated policies. In particular, some measures can be oriented on the social support and protection of vulnerable population groups which can be financially unprofitable in the long run because the expenses will exceed the gains. This may harm sustained and sustainable economic performance as it discourages effort and savings, and obscures resources away from elsewhere such as physical capital, human capital, and health capital. Therefore, it is a very important matter for the policymakers to strike the right balance when ameliorating welfare policies and delivering to the deprived individuals the correct adequate sympathetic level of support without discouraging the stability of public finances and furnishing an appropriate business environment for growth. It is suggested that unbalanced policies would harm both equity and growth in the long term as revealed in the results above.

Table 2 the multiple linear regression analysis was carried out with the electoral performance of political parties as the dependent variable. The independent variables included were total electoral freebies offered measured in INR, officially reported GDP growth rate, and the fiscal policy strength of government variable. The regression coefficient for total electoral freebies was 0.02 with a standard error of 0.005 which means that a 1 unit increase in freebies offered raises on average the electoral performance by a factor of 0.02 holding all else constant. The results proved this kind of effect with a statistical value of $p > 0.001$. Anyway, both GDP growth rate and fiscal policy strength had regression coefficients (-) 0.50 and (-) 0.80 respectively, and suggested that those factors are inversely related to electoral performance. Of these, both these effects were also found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ level based on t statistics. The intercept value was 2.50 while the standard error was 0.45 and showed the benchmark of the electoral performance

Table 2: Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	2.50	0.45	5.56	0.0001

Total Electoral Freebies (INR)	0.02	0.005	4.00	0.001
GDP Growth Rate	-0.50	0.15	-3.33	0.005
Fiscal Policy Strength	-0.80	0.20	-4.00	0.001

The analysis shows how electoral freebies are linked to public policy and economic sustainability. While welfare instruments are necessary for social support, the study emphasizes that we need prudent fiscal management and make the welfare models sustainable. To avoid the detrimental fiscal consequences policymakers should target to achieve a balance between optimal social welfare and optimal economic growth.

Discussion:

The ties of free services and goods provided to the voters, Government policies and stability analysis are not straightforward. Despite the positive role provided by the social welfare programs to people from the targeted societies, the need for holding budgets in societies is highlighted by this study stressing the need to design welfare systems that could be effectively and sustainably managed in the long run. The policymakers have to determine how much of these policies will favor or benefit people and the extent to which the policies will help encourage economic growth. If that balance shifts too far toward the direction of providing handouts, then there will be problems with the country’s finances. The focus should be on systems that would assist those in want while still not being too much of a burden on the economy.

The Nature and Purpose of Electoral Freebies

Electoral freebies, sometimes called welfare programs, include a variety of government-provided benefits, including subsidized food, free electricity, healthcare services, cash transfers, and more. The main aim is to reduce poverty, boost life quality, or get electoral support from the marginalized sections of society (Srinivasan & Suresh, 2020). The basis for these initiatives is the belief that economic security is a pathway to greater educational gains and contributes more generally to societal well-being. Indeed, these programs are well-meaning, but their fiscal implications provoke doubt. These initiatives are often funded through borrowing by the states which results in increased fiscal deficits. Karnataka, which has allocated ₹52,000 crores for electoral freebies, has seen its fiscal deficit rise in tandem (Sharma & Reddy, 2023). But as more states follow suit, so too does the cumulative financial burden, leaving open questions regarding long-term sustainability.

Economic Consequences of Electoral Freebies

The major issue about electoral freebies is their impact on economic growth. The analysis showed that GDP growth rates were inversely related to the amount spent on welfare programs across the states. States with high freebie spending are slower-growing economies. For instance, Uttar Pradesh, which spent a lot on welfare, grew at a GDP rate of just 3.8 percent (Economic Times, 2023). The diversion of funds from productive investments to social programs, while essential, may not directly stimulate economic activity is a good part of this trend.

These expenditures cannot be ignored, as there is an opportunity cost. If funds given to welfare programs could be reallocated better spent on infrastructure development, education, and health services, which have a more direct correlation with economic growth (Kumar & Singh, 2021). Neglect of these sectors can result in long-term economic stagnation, as has occurred in states that depend on welfare programs without investment in growth-enhancing sectors.

Unemployment and Dependency

One other problem, in relying on the electoral freebies, used to arise from the fact that a dependency on government support may surface. Like the one in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, such high unemployment rates among welfare program beneficiaries can be seen to discourage job-seeking (Raghavan, 2022). Unless the a cycle of dependency, the people of such countries rely on government handouts instead of seeking employment, and then the unemployment problem aggravates. The dependency ratio, the proportion of dependents to the working-age population, is alarmingly high in states with large welfare allocations. For example, Karnataka’s dependency ratio of 32% shows this growing concern (Sharma & Reddy, 2023). Public resources are strained by high dependency ratios because a greater proportion of the population requires support, but contributes little to the economy.

Fiscal Management and Policy Sustainability

When implementing welfare programs fiscal management must be balanced. States like Maharashtra and Telangana have reported huge fiscal deficits which demands sustainable budgeting (Singh, 2023). Welfare needs to be less haphazard and less disruptive to fiscal health, which therefore means policymakers need to start acting more strategically about welfare. It involves putting fiscal discipline first and also using welfare programs as directed and efficiently as possible. Budget policies need to be robust; revenue generation. States must explore new ways to increase tax revenue, to provide a more stable source for welfare programs not by conceding to the unsustainable govt borrowing. There are also other ways to provide an economic boost to these initiatives and diversify the economy by investing in some sectors like technology, manufacturing, and tourism (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

Policy Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of electoral freebies while mitigating their negative economic impacts, several policy recommendations can be considered:

- 1. Targeted Welfare Programs:** The idea is that even if harsh welfare programs are needed for the most needy, they should not be formulated programs to help every poor group. It argued that targeted programs would be a better way of utilizing scarce resources because the funds would be channeled to the needy rather than diluting them over a large population base. It would also mean that the results may be more effective for the targeted population, which indeed may be more satisfactory, and the total expenditure seems not to be justified as much as in the case of general programs.
- 2. Integrated Development Approaches:** Welfare policies and economic development strategies ought to be ranked as complementary to one another. There is a consensus that when welfare programs are being implemented specifically to encourage welfare beneficiaries to engage in the economy then the latter can be helped. For example, it might be suggested that rather than kicking in the benefits whenever someone starts to earn, they scale them down. No has laid down a good foundation for vocational studies hence creating an easy transition to the workforce. Likewise, government job training programs linked with welfare support can produce skills that benefit employers. In this way, states bring as many people as possible by market requirements in terms of economic growth.
- 3. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Generally, governments have access to solid monitoring and evaluation frameworks for determining 'if' welfare programs are working more often. Routine assessments and overhauls of these programs enable those in authority to monitor in real-time whether public funds are well spent and whether people benefit. This tells that policies being implemented can be altered and enhanced while in practice and not afterward so that the government does all it can to manage the funds on the wiser side and most appropriate manner for the civilians.
- 4. Public Awareness Campaigns:** It can help community welfare if people know that they have to work and suffer from the dependence on benefits. Awareness campaigns might provide those in receipt of benefits with information on the benefits of having a job and building by going to school or retraining for a new career. It promotes a culture of the workforce where the workforce's participation rather than being 100 percent dependent on public support is encouraged and one in which productivity and economic value are a priority over hanging around in the track of the government support system.
- 5. Strengthening Economic Infrastructure:** Key investments need to be made to yield welfare benefits for states to support the growth of the economy sustainably in the long run. Most crucially infrastructure expenditure in roads, rail, ports, electricity, and Telecom forms the foundation for any economy to function. Education and health care investment then also contributes to human assets via its ability to ensure that the workforce is healthier, more skilled, and therefore more efficient. However, such crucial investments have been a source of major conflict for the state resources with the welfare payments. Thus, more states need to find the right mix between consumption spending hence welfare schemes, and investment spending in areas such as infrastructure and human capital development that facilitate growth.

Conclusion

Electoral freebies in India have a multi-pronged impact on public policy and economic sustainability. These programs are designed to alleviate poverty and enhance social welfare programs, but none can be developed or maintained without significant financial consideration. The analysis across states such as Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh highlights a concerning trend: We demonstrate that high expenditures on welfare programs correspond to lower economic growth rates and escalating fiscal deficits. Government support dependency can prevent people from serious engagement in the labor market and set up a cycle of dependence that worsens unemployment problems. The dynamic underlying this necessity reflects a balanced approach to policymaking that alongside fiscal health also takes care of the needs of vulnerable populations. Policymakers need to be tackling welfare initiatives more with a keen eye on where resources are being used efficiently and to the greatest extent to those who need them most, together with investment in infrastructure and human capital development. If welfare programs are integrated into larger plans of economic development, a more sustainable model of economic development might result, one that is at once supportive and economically productive. These program's effectiveness will be amplified with ongoing monitoring and evaluation to adjust to ever-changing situations. The challenge, ultimately, is to design a system that delivers immediate relief but also helps people achieve long-term economic independence and sustainability. States can take practical steps in scheduling their policies in a way that will balance social welfare with economic development and thereby make the way for a more resilient and prosperous future for everyone. India can't afford to waste time as it grapples with the complexities of the social and economic landscape, and needs a strategic, comprehensive approach.

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