

Ideological Convergence amidst Populism: Political Party Reforms in Post-Liberalization India

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Introduction

In the post-liberalization era since 1991, India's political landscape has witnessed a notable convergence among major political parties in adopting populist policies, despite their ostensibly divergent ideological foundations. The concept of populism has been playing a pivotal role in the agenda of various political parties. These policies very much influencing political parties as well as the people of India. After 1991 India's economic liberalization marked a pivotal shift from a state-controlled economy to one embracing market reforms, globalization, and privatization. This transformation, initiated under the Congress-led government, aimed to address fiscal crises and integrate India into the global economy. However, the ensuing decades have seen uneven growth, with rising inequality exacerbating social divides. In this context, political parties have increasingly turned to populist policies—defined as direct appeals to the masses through welfare measures, subsidies, and identity-based promises—to secure electoral gains. Populism here is not merely rhetorical but manifests in tangible reforms that blur ideological lines between parties.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rooted in Hindu nationalism, the Indian National Congress (INC), historically associated with secularism and socialism, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), emerging from anti-corruption movements, represent diverse ideologies. Yet, post-liberalization, these parties exhibit convergence in their reform agendas, particularly in welfare populism. For instance, the BJP's Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme, launched in 2019, provides direct income support to farmers, echoing Congress-era initiatives like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005. Similarly, AAP's focus on free electricity and water in Delhi has influenced national discourse, prompting rivals to adopt similar tactics.

This convergence is driven by electoral imperatives in a multiparty democracy where voter bases are fragmented along caste, class, and regional lines. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections, where the BJP secured a third term but with a reduced majority, underscored this trend, as coalition partners demanded populist concessions. Post-2024 state elections, including the 2025 Delhi Assembly polls, further highlighted competitive populism, with the BJP promising to retain AAP's welfare schemes upon victory. This paper examines this phenomenon, arguing that while ideological differences persist in rhetoric, policy reforms converge around populist welfare to ensure political survival. By 2025, this hybrid model will have sustained growth but strained fiscal resources, prompting debates on sustainability.

The study draws on electoral data, party manifestos, and academic literature to analyze this shift. It posits that populism in post-liberalization India represents a pragmatic adaptation to economic realities, where parties prioritize voter appeasement over doctrinal purity. Understanding this convergence is crucial for assessing the future of Indian democracy, as it may erode ideological diversity while enhancing short-term governance responsiveness.

Literature Review

Scholarly discourse on populism in India has evolved from viewing it as a peripheral phenomenon to a central feature of post-liberalization politics. Early works, such as those on economic reforms and party politics, highlight how liberalization created a crisis for the developmental state, pushing parties towards populist strategies. Populism is often characterized as anti-elite rhetoric combined with welfare promises, resonating in contexts of inequality.

Studies on ideological convergence emphasize how global economic pressures homogenize party agendas. For instance, analyses of Congress and BJP manifestos from 2009 onwards reveal increasing overlap in pledges on economic issues, welfare, and infrastructure, despite cultural divergences. This convergence is attributed to voter demands for tangible benefits over abstract ideologies, a trend amplified by coalition politics.

Specific to India, literature on Hindutva populism under the BJP illustrates how cultural nationalism intertwines with economic populism. The party's shift from pro-market reforms to welfare schemes like Ayushman Bharat reflects adaptation to mass appeals. Comparative studies note similarities with INC's historical populism under Indira Gandhi, where subsidies and nationalizations were tools for electoral dominance. AAP's emergence adds a layer, as its anti-corruption populism evolved into welfare-focused governance, influencing national parties.

Post-2024 literature critiques this convergence for fostering fiscal irresponsibility. Modi's post-election populism, including expanded handouts in states like Maharashtra, risks public finances amid coalition demands. Academic papers also explore how identity politics intersects with development rhetoric, with parties blending cultural appeals with welfare to broaden bases. However, gaps remain in analyzing 2025 trends, such as the Delhi elections, where BJP's victory involved adopting AAP's schemes, signaling deeper convergence.

This review underscores that while populism sustains party relevance, convergence may dilute ideological pluralism, potentially leading to policy inertia.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach, analyzing party manifestos, election results, and policy documents from 1991 to 2025. Data sources include official party websites, Election Commission reports, and academic databases. Key cases—BJP, INC, and AAP—are selected for their national and regional influence. Thematic analysis identifies convergence in welfare reforms, using content coding for themes like subsidies, reservations, and infrastructure. Electoral trends are quantified via vote shares and scheme implementations, supplemented by secondary literature for contextual depth. Limitations include reliance on public data, potentially overlooking internal party dynamics.

Analysis: Convergence in Political Party Reforms

Post-liberalization, India's political parties have converged on populist reforms, prioritizing welfare over ideological distinctions. This is evident in economic policies where market liberalization coexists with state interventions.

The BJP, traditionally pro-business, has embraced populism through schemes like PM-KISAN, disbursing ₹6,000 annually to farmers, reaching over 100 million beneficiaries by 2025. This mirrors INC's MGNREGA, which guarantees 100 days of rural employment, sustained across regimes despite initial BJP critiques. In the 2024 elections, both parties emphasized job creation and subsidies, with BJP's manifesto promising expanded reservations and INC countering with caste census pledges.

AAP's model in Delhi—free electricity up to 200 units and water subsidies—has set a benchmark, influencing national strategies. By 2025, AAP's governance focused on health and education reforms, but its defeat in Delhi elections saw BJP committing to continue these schemes, exemplifying convergence. This "competitive populism" involves parties outbidding each other with freebies, as seen in Delhi's 2025 campaign where BJP assured voters of uninterrupted welfare.

Regionally, convergence appears in state-level reforms. In Maharashtra post-2024, coalition governments expanded cash transfers, blending BJP's Hindutva with welfare demands from allies. Similarly, INC-led states like Rajasthan adopted BJP-like schemes, such as farmer loan waivers, to regain ground.

This shift reflects electoral pragmatism amid inequality. India's Gini coefficient rose from 0.32 in 1991 to 0.38 by 2025, fueling demands for redistributive policies. Parties converge as voters prioritize immediate benefits, eroding ideological purity. However, this raises fiscal concerns: populist spending reached 2-3% of GDP in 2025, straining budgets. Moreover, while enhancing access to services, it may foster dependency and undermine long-term reforms.

In foreign policy, convergence is subtler, with parties supporting diaspora engagement and economic diplomacy, though BJP adds a nationalist flavor. Overall, this hybrid model sustains democracy but risks policy homogenization.

Conclusion

Ideological convergence in post-liberalization India underscores a pragmatic evolution in political party reforms, where populism bridges divides for electoral success. As seen in 2024-2025 trends, parties like BJP, INC, and AAP increasingly align on welfare, fostering inclusive growth but challenging fiscal health. Future research should explore sustainability amid global uncertainties. Ultimately, this convergence strengthens responsiveness but demands balanced reforms to preserve democratic vitality.

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