

## **Electoral Democracy, Political Parties, and Competitive Populism in Post-Reform India**

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### **I. Introduction**

India's adoption of economic liberalization in 1991 represents one of the most significant turning points in its post-independence political and economic history. Triggered by a severe balance-of-payments crisis, the reforms marked a decisive departure from the state-led development strategy that had dominated India's political economy for over four decades. The new policy framework emphasized market-oriented reforms such as deregulation, privatization, reduction of trade barriers, and integration into the global economy (Jenkins, 1999; Panagariya, 2008). These changes reshaped not only economic institutions but also the broader relationship between the state, market, and society.

While the economic consequences of liberalization—particularly higher growth rates and global integration—have been widely debated, its political implications remain a subject of continuing scholarly interest. Unlike many developing countries that implemented neoliberal reforms under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, India pursued liberalization within a competitive electoral democracy. Universal adult franchise, regular elections, high voter turnout, and a multi-party system ensured that economic reforms were constantly mediated through democratic pressures and electoral incentives (Jenkins, 1999).

The coexistence of neoliberal reforms and electoral democracy generated new political tensions. On the one hand, market-oriented reforms reduced the state's direct role in production, employment generation, and universal welfare provisioning. On the other hand, democratic politics continued to generate strong popular expectations for state intervention, redistribution, and social protection. As Drèze and Sen (2013) observe, economic growth in post-reform India has been accompanied by persistent inequality, informalization of labor, and uneven access to public goods. These conditions intensified popular anxieties and placed electoral pressures on political parties.

In this context, populist politics acquired renewed significance. Political parties increasingly relied on welfare promises, subsidies, cash transfers, and symbolic appeals to secure electoral support. However, unlike classical populism driven by charismatic leaders or anti-elite mobilization, populism in post-reform India is largely shaped by electoral competition among parties. Despite a growing literature on populism and neoliberalism, limited attention has been paid to how electoral rivalry itself structures populist strategies in India.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the rise of **competitive populism** in post-reform India. It argues that competitive populism represents an adaptive political strategy through which parties reconcile market-oriented reforms with democratic accountability. By focusing on party competition, manifesto politics, and voter mobilization, the paper offers a political economy perspective on contemporary Indian democracy.

### **II. Economic Reforms and Democratic Politics in India**

The economic reforms introduced in 1991 were shaped by neoliberal policy ideas emphasizing fiscal discipline, market efficiency, and reduced state intervention in economic activity. Facing a foreign exchange crisis and mounting fiscal deficits, the Indian state undertook

structural adjustment measures that transformed the role of the government in the economy (Panagariya, 2008). Industrial licensing was dismantled, trade barriers were reduced, public sector dominance was curtailed, and private and foreign investment were encouraged.

These reforms significantly altered the nature of the Indian state. From being a direct producer and distributor of goods and services, the state increasingly assumed the role of a regulator and facilitator of market-led growth. While liberalization contributed to accelerated economic growth and global integration, it also produced uneven social outcomes, regional disparities, and employment insecurities (Bardhan, 2010). Growth was concentrated in specific sectors and regions, while large sections of the population remained vulnerable to market fluctuations.

From a political perspective, liberalization transformed state–society relations. The reduction of state intervention in economic activity constrained traditional redistributive mechanisms associated with the developmental state. At the same time, electoral democracy continued to generate demands for welfare, employment, and social protection. This contradiction between market-oriented reforms and democratic expectations reshaped the terrain of Indian politics (Jenkins, 1999).

Rather than abandoning welfare commitments altogether, successive governments adapted their strategies. Universal welfare approaches were increasingly replaced by targeted schemes aimed at specific social groups. This shift reflected both fiscal constraints and electoral incentives. Targeted welfare programs allowed political parties to demonstrate responsiveness while maintaining commitment to neoliberal reforms. In this context, populist strategies emerged as a means of mediating the tensions between liberalization and democratic politics.

### **III. Conceptual Framework: Competitive Populism and Party Politics**

Populism is one of the most debated concepts in contemporary political analysis. In its widely accepted formulation, populism is understood as a thin-centered ideology that constructs a moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and claims that politics should reflect the general will of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). While this definition captures ideological populism, it does not fully explain populist practices in institutionalized electoral democracies with strong party systems.

In competitive democratic systems, populism often assumes a strategic rather than ideological form. This paper adopts the concept of **competitive populism** to explain populist politics in post-reform India. Competitive populism refers to the strategic deployment of populist appeals by political parties competing electorally through welfare promises, targeted benefits, and symbolic representations of popular will. Unlike charismatic populism, competitive populism is driven by electoral rivalry rather than by anti-system mobilization.

In India, competitive populism is deeply embedded in party politics and electoral competition. Political parties operate within a fragmented and highly competitive party system characterized by coalition governments and regional diversity. As Chatterjee (2004) argues, democratic politics in postcolonial societies often involve negotiations between formal institutions and popular demands expressed through informal and symbolic channels. Competitive populism provides parties with a means of engaging with these demands while operating within neoliberal constraints.

Importantly, competitive populism does not necessarily oppose economic reforms. Instead, it adapts to neoliberalism by offering compensatory welfare measures that mitigate social discontent without fundamentally altering market-oriented policies. Clientelistic

exchanges, targeted transfers, and welfare promises become instruments through which parties seek electoral advantage (Stokes et al., 2013). This conceptual framework provides a useful lens for understanding the persistence and normalization of populism in post-reform India.

#### **IV. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary sources. Given the conceptual and political economy focus of the paper, a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining the evolution of populist strategies within electoral democracy. The analysis draws on academic books and journal articles, party manifestos, election studies, government policy documents, and reports published since the initiation of economic reforms in 1991.

Party manifestos are treated as key political texts that reveal party priorities, welfare commitments, and populist strategies. Election studies and policy analyses are used to contextualize these strategies within broader political and economic developments. The study does not rely on primary survey data; instead, it synthesizes existing scholarship to identify recurring patterns of competitive populism across national and state-level politics.

The time frame of analysis spans the post-1991 period, allowing for an examination of long-term trends in electoral competition and populist politics. By integrating insights from political economy and electoral studies, the methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how democratic competition shapes political strategies under neoliberal conditions.

#### **V. Political Parties and Competitive Populism in India**

Political parties occupy a central position in India's democratic system, functioning as intermediaries between the state and society. In the post-reform era, political parties have played a crucial role in translating popular demands into electoral strategies. As economic liberalization constrained traditional redistributive policies, parties increasingly turned to populist welfare commitments to maintain electoral support.

National political parties typically employ broad-based welfare narratives framed around economic security, social protection, and inclusive development. Election manifestos emphasize subsidies, income support, and welfare guarantees as markers of political responsiveness. These narratives are often complemented by leadership-centered campaigns that project political leaders as direct representatives of popular aspirations.

Regional parties, operating within specific socio-economic and cultural contexts, combine welfare populism with identity-based appeals. By linking material benefits to regional identity, language, and cultural autonomy, regional parties mobilize voters in competitive electoral environments (Chatterjee, 2004). This combination of welfare promises and identity politics reinforces the logic of competitive populism.

The intensification of electoral competition has encouraged parties to engage in populist bidding, seeking to outdo rivals through increasingly ambitious promises. This dynamic has contributed to the institutionalization of competitive populism as a routine feature of Indian electoral politics.

The growing reliance on welfare-oriented populism reflects structural changes in India's political economy. As formal employment generation declined and informal labor expanded in the post-reform period, political parties increasingly addressed economic insecurity through distributive promises rather than structural reforms. Competitive populism thus emerged not merely as a rhetorical device but as a systematic electoral strategy embedded in party competition.

Election manifestos illustrate this trend clearly. They function not only as policy documents but also as symbolic commitments to popular welfare. Manifestos increasingly emphasize subsidies, social assistance, and targeted benefits rather than long-term institutional reforms. This reflects the logic of electoral competition, where visible and immediate benefits are more electorally rewarding than complex policy changes (Stokes et al., 2013).

Moreover, coalition politics has reinforced competitive populism. The fragmentation of the party system and the rise of regional parties have intensified electoral competition, encouraging populist outbidding. Parties seek to differentiate themselves through welfare commitments while remaining within the broader neoliberal framework. Competitive populism thus becomes a mechanism through which parties navigate the constraints of coalition governance and fiscal discipline.

## **VI. Electoral Competition and Voter Mobilization**

Electoral competition in post-reform India has increasingly centered on strategies of voter mobilization that emphasize welfare delivery and symbolic responsiveness. Political parties frame elections less as contests between ideological alternatives and more as evaluations of performance, delivery, and responsiveness. This shift reflects broader changes in voter expectations and political communication.

Welfare schemes, cash transfers, and subsidies function as tangible signals of political commitment. These measures allow parties to demonstrate concern for popular welfare without fundamentally challenging market-oriented economic policies. From an electoral perspective, such strategies reduce uncertainty for voters by offering immediate and visible benefits (Stokes et al., 2013).

The expansion of mass media and the personalization of political leadership have further amplified populist narratives. Political leaders increasingly portray themselves as direct representatives of the people, claiming to bypass bureaucratic and institutional intermediaries. This personalization enhances emotional appeal and reinforces populist symbolism, even within institutionalized democratic systems (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

While these strategies enhance voter participation and engagement, they also reshape the nature of democratic accountability. Electoral competition driven by competitive populism risks reducing democratic politics to transactional exchanges, where short-term benefits overshadow long-term policy commitments. This transformation has significant implications for governance and institutional development.

## **VII. Competitive Populism at National and State Levels**

Competitive populism manifests differently across national and sub-national contexts in India. At the national level, populist strategies often emphasize large-scale welfare initiatives, leadership charisma, and appeals to national identity. These strategies aim to construct broad electoral coalitions that transcend regional and social divisions.

National-level populism frequently relies on centralized welfare schemes and symbolic narratives of inclusion and development. Such strategies allow political parties to claim credit for welfare delivery while maintaining control over policy direction. Competitive populism at the national level thus combines material benefits with symbolic representations of national unity and leadership authority.

At the state level, competitive populism is shaped by regional socio-economic conditions, fiscal capacities, and distinctive party systems. Regional parties tailor populist appeals to local contexts, linking welfare promises to regional identity, language, and cultural autonomy

(Chatterjee, 2004). Fiscal constraints at the state level often intensify populist competition, as parties seek to maximize electoral returns within limited resources.

Despite these contextual variations, a common pattern persists across levels: electoral competition incentivizes parties to prioritize short-term populist gains over long-term policy coherence. This underscores the structural embeddedness of competitive populism in India's multi-level democratic system.

### **VIII. Discussion**

The rise of competitive populism in post-reform India highlights the adaptive capacity of democratic politics under neoliberal conditions. Rather than undermining economic reforms, competitive populism enables their political sustainability by addressing popular insecurities through targeted welfare interventions. This adaptive strategy reflects pragmatic calculations by political parties operating within competitive electoral environments.

From a political economy perspective, competitive populism represents a form of negotiated governance. It allows political elites to pursue market-oriented reforms while maintaining electoral legitimacy. Welfare schemes and subsidies function as compensatory mechanisms that mitigate the social costs of liberalization without challenging its underlying logic (Bardhan, 2010).

However, competitive populism also raises important normative and governance-related concerns. The emphasis on short-term electoral gains may divert attention from structural reforms in employment generation, education, healthcare, and institutional capacity-building. As Drèze and Sen (2013) argue, sustainable development requires long-term investments in human capabilities rather than fragmented welfare interventions.

Moreover, the escalation of populist commitments risks fiscal stress and policy fragmentation. Competitive populism may weaken democratic accountability by prioritizing electoral responsiveness over deliberative policymaking. These tensions reveal the complex trade-offs inherent in reconciling electoral democracy with neoliberal governance.

### **IX. Conclusion**

This paper has examined the relationship between electoral democracy, political parties, and the rise of competitive populism in post-reform India. It has argued that competitive populism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary Indian politics, shaped by the interaction between neoliberal economic reforms and democratic competition. Unlike ideological or anti-system populism, competitive populism operates within institutionalized party systems and electoral frameworks.

By conceptualizing populism as a party-driven electoral strategy, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of democratic adaptation in liberalized economies. Competitive populism enables political parties to reconcile market-oriented reforms with popular demands for welfare and inclusion. At the same time, it reshapes democratic politics by privileging short-term responsiveness over long-term policy coherence.

While competitive populism has enhanced electoral participation and political engagement, it also poses challenges for governance, fiscal sustainability, and democratic accountability. Future research should explore the long-term implications of competitive populism for institutional development, policy effectiveness, and democratic quality in India.

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