

Electoral Populism and Democratic Governance in India

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Introduction

The rise of populism has become a prominent global phenomenon, reshaping political landscapes across diverse regions. The recent electoral successes of populist movements suggest that a re-evaluation of our understanding of global and domestic institutions is required. Populism is often conceptualized as a discourse emerging in response to transformations in state-society relations and the norms of statehood. It frequently arises from a perceived disconnect between internationalized elites and the general populace, capitalizing on material and cultural anxieties.

Populism is often described as a thin ideology, characterized by an "us versus them" mentality, where "the people" are pitted against a corrupt elite and dangerous "others". This framework allows populist leaders to claim they represent the true interests of the sovereign people, often emphasizing national sovereignty and a rejection of globalization. However, the specific manifestations of populism vary significantly, shaped by the thicker ideological traditions with which it interacts. These variations can be observed across the left-right spectrum, with different populist parties emphasizing different aspects of society and employing distinct strategies.

Comparative studies of populism have become increasingly common, moving beyond the traditional focus on Latin America. This comparative approach has led to the development of ideational conceptualizations of populism, drawing on discursive theories. These conceptualizations emphasize the importance of understanding populism as a specific type of political discourse, rather than solely as a structural, economic, or political-strategic phenomenon.

In the Indian context, populism is often intertwined with Hindu nationalism, with leaders like Narendra Modi employing discursive strategies to construct a "people versus elite" antagonism. This involves the use of cultural symbols and historical narratives to create a sense of national identity and to differentiate "the people" from "others". Populist leaders in India often leverage ethno-religious tensions and attempt to delegitimize independent news media, portraying them as enemies of the people.

The rise of populism in India can also be understood in relation to broader processes of state transformation and internationalization. As elites become increasingly insulated from popular scrutiny, populist movements can emerge to challenge the status quo and claim to represent the "real people". This is achieved by articulating social demands in a way that challenges the perceived universality of internationalization.

However, the concept of populism remains contested, and its application to specific cases requires careful consideration. It is important to avoid conflating populism with other political ideologies, such as nationalism or authoritarianism, although these can often overlap. Populist leaders may also adopt seemingly contradictory positions, such as protectionism in trade while simultaneously pursuing trade deals that favour their interests.

The relationship between populism and neoliberalism is also complex and multifaceted. Some scholars argue that populism can be seen as a reaction against the negative consequences of neoliberal policies, such as increased inequality and economic insecurity. Others suggest that populist leaders may, in fact, continue to implement neoliberal policies while couching their rhetoric in nationalist terms. It is also observed that the current infatuation of civil society is accompanied by alarming increases in civic strife, escalation in war, and reports of dramatic growth in countries of domestic violence, rape, child abuse, and prison populations.

The impact of populism on democratic governance is a central concern for scholars and policymakers. While populism can potentially enhance political inclusion and challenge established power structures, it also carries risks of eroding democratic norms and institutions. Populist leaders may undermine independent judiciaries, curtail civil liberties, and engage in practices that undermine the fairness of elections.

Conceptual Understanding of Populism and Democratic Governance: Populism has become a prominent feature of contemporary politics, demanding a clear conceptual understanding, especially within the context of electoral democracies and its distinction from welfare policies. This section aims to define populism, explore its manifestations within the Indian context, and differentiate it from welfare to provide a robust framework for analysing its impact on democratic governance.

Defining Populism in Electoral Democracies: Defining populism is a complex task due to its varied interpretations and manifestations. Scholars often describe it as a "thin ideology", characterized by a few core tenets. At its heart, populism posits a dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite", where "the people" are portrayed as virtuous and homogeneous, and "the elite" are seen as corrupt and self-serving. This division is central to the populist narrative. Populism asserts that the will of the people should be the primary basis of political legitimacy.

Populist leaders often claim to represent the "true" interests of the sovereign people, setting themselves apart from traditional political actors. This claim often involves a rejection of pluralism and a belief that there is a single, unified "popular will". Populism can be understood as a political logic that can be invoked for different goals across the political spectrum, from the radical left to the right. This makes it a versatile tool. The rise of populism can be seen as a response to the perceived failures of established political systems to address the needs and grievances of ordinary citizens.

Populist movements often arise during times of crisis or rapid social and economic change, when people feel that their concerns are not being adequately represented by mainstream parties. These movements can take various forms, ranging from charismatic leaders mobilizing mass constituencies to the development of organized parties that seek to capture state power. The success of populist parties in electoral democracies has raised concerns about their impact on democratic norms and institutions.

Populism in the Indian Context: In India, populism has deep historical roots and contemporary relevance. The rise of populist politics in India is shaped by its unique socio-political context, characterized by deep social divisions, economic inequality, and a complex interplay of identity politics. Populist leaders in India often employ rhetoric of nationalism and social justice, appealing to the sentiments of the masses while contrasting themselves with conventional politicians. The success of Narendra Modi exemplifies this trend, with his emphasis on anti-elitism and direct communication with the public.

However, populism in India is not a monolithic phenomenon. Different populist leaders and parties may draw upon different ideological traditions and appeal to different segments of the population. For example, some populist movements may focus on religious or ethnic identity, while others may prioritize economic issues and social welfare. The role of the political campaign industry in mobilizing narratives and electoral discourses is also significant in the Indian context. These campaigns often rely on mass media and cyber armies to shape public opinion and manufacture allegiance.

The intersection of populism with authoritarian tendencies is a growing concern in India. Some scholars argue that populist leaders may undermine democratic institutions and civil rights in their pursuit of power. This can manifest in the form of executive aggrandizement, erosion of democratic accountability, and the suppression of dissent. The use of divisive hyper-nationalism to brand opponents as traitors is also a characteristic of authoritarian populism in India.

Populism vs. Welfare: Drawing the Line: While populism often involves promises of enhanced welfare and social justice, it is crucial to distinguish it from genuine welfare policies. Welfare policies are typically based on universal rights and aim to provide a safety net for all citizens. In contrast, populist schemes are often targeted at specific groups and are designed to cultivate political support rather than address fundamental social needs. The focus on short term gains and electoral benefits can undermine the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of these schemes. Populist welfare measures can also lead to fiscal stress and economic instability, as they may not be based on sound economic principles or sustainable financing mechanisms. Furthermore, the emphasis on direct distribution of benefits can erode democratic accountability and promote clientelism, where citizens become dependent on the state for their well-being and are less likely to hold their leaders accountable. Distinguishing populism from welfare requires careful analysis of the motivations behind policy decisions, the targeting of benefits, and the long-term consequences for democratic governance and economic sustainability.

Electoral Populism in Indian States- Trends and Patterns:

The rise of populism in Indian states represents a significant shift in the political landscape, characterized by policies and schemes designed to appeal directly to the masses. This trend is not unique to India; populism has seen a global resurgence, challenging established political norms and institutions. In the Indian context, this has manifested in various forms, often intertwined with welfare policies and electoral strategies. Understanding the trends and patterns of electoral populism in Indian states requires examining the factors driving its emergence, the role of state governments, and specific examples of populist schemes.

Several factors have contributed to the rise of populist politics in Indian states. Persistent poverty and economic disparities in many regions create fertile ground for populist leaders who promise quick solutions and direct benefits to the marginalized. The promise of addressing these inequalities resonates with voters who feel left behind by mainstream economic development. Moreover, a perceived disconnect between the ruling elite and the common people fuels anti-establishment sentiments, which populist leaders effectively exploit. This anti-elitism is a core component of populism, where leaders claim to represent the "true" interests of the sovereign people against corrupt or indifferent elite. The rise of Hindu nationalism has also contributed to the increase in populism.

State governments in India play a crucial role in promoting what can be termed "welfare populism." This involves implementing schemes that provide direct benefits to voters, such as subsidized food, free electricity, or cash transfers. While these schemes are often framed as

measures to alleviate poverty and promote social welfare, they also serve as effective tools for gaining electoral support. The political economy of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India exemplifies this dynamic, with state governments using food subsidies to enhance their popularity. However, there are contradictory tendencies, with economic rationalization pushing in different directions. The latter tendency is so strong that drastic curtailment of the program is unlikely.

Several Indian states offer notable examples of populist schemes. Tamil Nadu has long been known for its extensive welfare programs, including subsidized food, free laptops for students, and marriage assistance schemes. These initiatives have contributed to the state's relatively high human development indicators, but also raised concerns about fiscal sustainability. Telangana has implemented schemes such as the "Rythu Bandhu" program, which provides direct cash transfers to farmers, and the "Aasara" pension scheme for elderly and disabled individuals. These schemes have proven popular among voters, but have also increased the state's debt burden. Delhi's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has gained prominence through its focus on providing subsidized water, electricity, and free healthcare services. While these measures have improved access to essential services for many residents, they have also sparked debates about the long-term financial implications and the potential for creating a culture of dependency. These examples highlight the complex interplay between electoral populism and democratic governance in Indian states. While populist schemes can deliver tangible benefits to citizens and enhance political inclusion, they also pose risks to fiscal stability, democratic accountability, and long-term policy planning. Understanding these trends and patterns is crucial for assessing the overall impact of populism on the quality of governance and the wellbeing of Indian states. The rise of right-wing leaders combining nationalist rhetoric and challenging the effects of neoliberalism is a global phenomenon.

Impact of Populist Schemes on Democratic Governance:

Populist schemes in Indian states exert a significant and multifaceted influence on democratic governance, reflecting a blend of empowerment and constraint. On the positive side, such schemes often enhance political inclusion by directly addressing the needs of historically marginalised groups. By expanding access to essential services—such as healthcare, education, food security, and financial assistance—these initiatives help bridge socio-economic gaps and strengthen citizens' sense of belonging within the democratic framework. Populist welfare measures also increase political participation, as beneficiaries become more engaged with the political process and more aware of state institutions' roles in shaping their lives. In this sense, populism can serve as a corrective force, compelling governments to respond to grassroots demands and prioritise social welfare.

However, these gains are accompanied by significant drawbacks that pose challenges to democratic health. A major concern is the fiscal burden created by heavily subsidised or universally distributed benefits, which can strain state budgets, crowd out long-term developmental spending, and lead to unsustainable economic practices. Additionally, populist schemes may contribute to a culture of dependency, where short-term benefits are prioritised over structural reforms that could create durable improvements in living conditions.

Political accountability can also be weakened when populist schemes are deployed primarily as electoral tools rather than as components of coherent policy frameworks. Leaders may use welfare initiatives to cultivate personal loyalty or shape polarised identities, potentially centralising power and marginalising institutional checks and balances. This can erode

transparency, weaken bureaucratic autonomy, and reduce the space for deliberative policy-making.

Welfare Delivery and Poverty Alleviation

One of the most significant positive impacts of populist schemes is their potential to enhance welfare delivery and alleviate poverty. By directly targeting marginalized populations with specific benefits, these schemes can address immediate needs and improve living standards. For instance, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated the capacity of the Indian state to deliver economic rights to the rural poor. This scheme provided employment and income, contributing to poverty reduction and improved livelihoods in the region. Direct welfare measures can increase security at both the national and household level.

Political Inclusion and Electoral Participation:

Populist schemes can also foster political inclusion and increase electoral participation among previously marginalized groups. By directly addressing the needs and concerns of these populations, such schemes can empower them and encourage their engagement in the democratic process. When citizens perceive that the government is responsive to their needs, they are more likely to participate in elections and other forms of political activity.

However, it's important to note that the link between welfare and political participation is not always straightforward. While some studies suggest that targeted programs can increase political engagement, others have found that clientelistic practices can undermine genuine participation. The key lies in ensuring that populist schemes are implemented in a transparent and accountable manner, empowering citizens rather than simply making them dependent on the state.

Fiscal Stress and Economic Sustainability: Despite their potential benefits, populist schemes can also have negative consequences for democratic governance, particularly in terms of fiscal stress and economic sustainability. The implementation of such schemes often requires significant financial resources, which can strain state budgets and lead to increased debt. If not managed carefully, this can result in a reduction in public investment in other essential sectors, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Moreover, the long-term economic sustainability of populist schemes is often questionable. Many of these schemes rely on subsidies and other forms of financial assistance, which may not be sustainable in the long run. This can create a situation where states become dependent on populist measures to maintain political support, leading to a cycle of unsustainable spending and economic instability.

Erosion of Democratic Accountability and Clientelism:

Another significant concern is the potential for populist schemes to erode democratic accountability and promote clientelism. When these schemes are implemented in a nontransparent manner, they can become tools for political patronage, benefiting specific groups or individuals in exchange for political support. This can undermine the principles of fairness and equality, leading to a situation where access to public services is determined by political affiliation rather than need.

Clientelism reveals why the state often fails to deliver basic rights such as the right to work, health, and education. Patronage politics can distort the allocation of resources, diverting them away from essential services and towards politically connected individuals or groups. This can further exacerbate inequalities and undermine public trust in government.

Short-Termism in Governance and Policy Making:

Populist politics often prioritize short-term gains over long-term planning, leading to shorttermism in governance and policy making. In order to maintain political support, populist leaders may focus on implementing policies that provide immediate benefits to voters, even if these policies are not sustainable or beneficial in the long run. This can result in a neglect of long-term challenges, such as climate change, infrastructure development, and economic diversification.

Conclusion

The study has examined the rise of populist politics in India since 2014, focusing on how state governments have expanded welfare populism and how various populist schemes have influenced governance. Through detailed case studies, it highlights the dual nature of these developments. On the positive side, populist initiatives have enhanced welfare delivery, broadened political inclusion, and addressed long-standing socio-economic gaps. However, the analysis also underscores significant challenges, including growing fiscal stress, dependence on subsidy-driven politics, and a gradual erosion of democratic accountability. Overall, the findings reveal a complex landscape where populism simultaneously empowers citizens and strains institutional norms.

Ultimately, whether electoral populism is a boon or bane for democratic governance in Indian states is a complex question with no simple answer. While populist schemes can provide immediate relief and enhance political participation, they also pose risks to long-term economic stability and democratic norms. The key lies in striking a balance between addressing the needs of the people and ensuring sustainable and accountable governance. Policy recommendations must focus on mitigating the negative consequences while harnessing the potential benefits of populist measures. States need to be aware of the potential for populism to lead to fiscal stress, and design policies that promote long-term economic sustainability. Furthermore, mechanisms for ensuring democratic accountability must be strengthened to prevent the erosion of governance standards. It's crucial to note that the impact of populism can vary significantly depending on the specific context and implementation.

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