

Electoral Promises and Voter Preferences in Assam: Freebies vs. Issue-Based Commitments

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Abstract: *This study employs the Assam assembly elections of 2016 and 2021 as benchmarks to examine voter preferences for freebies in comparison to issue-based pledges. This study's main research questions are how much do freebie promises affect the voters of Assam's preferences compared to issue based commitments and what do voters of Assam prefer when it comes to choosing between welfare and development commitments and promises of freebies? Based on these questions, the study proposes an argument that long-term developmental promises are more important to the voters of Assam than freebie promises, which stimulate short-term voter interest. This study utilises surveys with a structured questionnaire as its major data collection method. Based on population and urban-rural classification, information was gathered from 400 respondents in four districts of Assam namely Kamrup (M), Nagaon, Sonitpur, and Dhubri. The results demonstrate that although voters give governance-related concerns like healthcare, education, the economy, and illegal immigration top priority, they also clearly favour welfare-oriented giveaways that provide long-term advantages over immediate handouts. This study advances our knowledge of voter reasoning and decision-making in Assam's electoral democracy by examining these processes.*

Keywords: Freebies, Election Manifesto, Voting Behaviour, Assam, Election Promises.

INTRODUCTION:

Elections in democratic societies are complex phenomena shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including political parties, candidates, and campaign strategies. Among these, election manifestos have the potential to play a crucial role in influencing voter behaviour, as they serve as political documents outlining the promises made by parties to garner electoral support. The term “manifesto” originates from the Latin word “manifestum,” meaning clear or conspicuous (Kanungo, 2020). In the Indian political landscape, particularly in Assam, campaigns, media influence have gained significance as determinants of voting patterns. Notably, the state witnessed a rise in pre-campaign deciders during the 2014 and 2016 national and state elections (Sardesai & Mishra, 2017). Research indicates that voters with lower initial political engagement, especially in regions with intense campaigning, tend to make electoral decisions earlier than those in less-exposed areas. In contrast, highly politically engaged voters exhibit no such pattern (Henderson & Hillygus, 2016). Furthermore, less partisan voters, despite their initial political apathy, actively process campaign information and align their choices accordingly (Gidengil & Nevitte, 2003). The political sophistication model posits that well-informed voters are more capable of making rational decisions based on various determinants (Marzècki, 2017).

This study examines the role of manifesto promises in Assam's electoral politics, with a specific focus on freebie-driven promises in contrast to issue-based promises. Freebies refer to material incentives such as financial aid, consumer goods, or subsidies offered by political parties to attract voters. In contrast, issue-based promises encompass policy commitments related to long-term welfare, infrastructure, and development. The strategic use of freebies in Indian elections has sparked debates regarding their implications for democratic integrity, governance quality, and fiscal responsibility. While such promises may successfully mobilize voter support, they also raise ethical concerns by potentially diverting attention from substantive policy discussions (Kumar, 2024). Psychological studies suggest that freebie distribution increases electoral backing for the parties offering them, even though it does not necessarily translate into better governance or economic progress (Verma et al., 2022). Despite these insights, there is a lack of empirical studies assessing how voters in Assam prioritize freebie promises relative to developmental commitments.

Political parties in Assam have also engaged in freebie-driven electoral strategies. For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promised free scooters to female students

pursuing postgraduate education (BJP, Assam Vision Document 2016-2025), while the Indian National Congress (INC) pledged 200 units of free electricity (Patel & Nath, 2021). Given these precedents, this research aims to analyze voter preferences regarding freebies compared to issue-based promises by using the 2016 and 2021 Assam assembly elections as reference points. The key research questions guiding this study are: (1) To what extent do freebie promises influence voter preferences in Assam? (2) How do voters weigh freebie promises against welfare and developmental commitments? Based on these inquiries, the study hypothesizes that while freebie promises attract short-term voter interest, long-term developmental promises hold greater significance for politically aware voters. By investigating these dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of voter rationality and decision-making within Assam's electoral democracy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURES:

The impact of freebie promises on voting behaviour is a multidimensional issue encompassing ethical, economic, and psychological perspectives. As part of political campaigns, freebies-ranging from direct cash transfers to material incentives-have been found to shape electoral preferences by altering voters' perceptions of parties and candidates. The strategic distribution of these incentives plays a crucial role in mobilizing voter turnout and garnering electoral support. While some scholars argue that freebies serve as instruments of political manipulation, others contend that they address immediate welfare needs, particularly among socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Studies have demonstrated that voters are more inclined to support parties that offer tangible benefits, such as cash payments or consumer goods, during election campaigns (Verma et al., 2022). Empirical evidence from Latin American countries indicates that vote-buying strategies, often characterized by the distribution of freebies, are associated with higher electoral participation, reinforcing the idea that material incentives can be a decisive factor in voter mobilization (Školník, 2022). However, the extent to which these promises influence electoral outcomes is contingent on additional determinants such as candidate credibility, perceived integrity, and leadership qualities (Halida et al., 2022).

The role of freebies in Indian elections has been a subject of significant debate, particularly concerning their ethical and administrative implications. While they may function as immediate vote-garnering mechanisms, freebie-driven electoral strategies pose concerns regarding the misallocation of public resources and the distortion of democratic principles. Scholars argue that such promises often prioritize short-term political gains over sustainable governance, thereby complicating the efficient implementation of welfare programs (Moundekar et al., 2025). The strategic use of freebie promises in India has further raised concerns regarding their impact on governance quality, fiscal responsibility, and democratic integrity. Kumar (2024) highlights that while these promises may enhance voter mobilization, they risk diverting public discourse away from substantive policy debates, undermining informed electoral decision-making. The case of Tamil Nadu provides an illustrative example, where an entrenched culture of freebie distribution has been linked to the erosion of democratic accountability. Padmanabhan (2021) argues that the proliferation of such promises in Tamil Nadu's electoral

landscape compromises the integrity of the democratic process by fostering a culture where voters prioritize short-term material gains over long-term policy considerations. However, while several studies address the broader implications of manifesto pledges in Indian elections, fewer works have specifically examined the relative impact of freebie-driven and issue-based promises on voter behaviour (Adhikari et al., 2024).

Assam's electoral dynamics also reflect a growing trend of freebie-driven campaigns, with major political parties employing material incentives to consolidate voter support. In the 2016 Assam Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pledged free scooters for female students pursuing postgraduate education as part of its electoral manifesto (BJP, Assam Vision Document 2016-2025). Similarly, the Indian National Congress (INC), in its 2021 manifesto, promised 200 units of free electricity to voters as a key campaign promise (Patel & Nath, 2021). These commitments indicate a broader shift in electoral strategies, wherein political parties increasingly rely on direct benefit transfers and subsidy-based incentives to appeal to the electorate. Despite the growing prevalence of freebie-driven politics in Assam, there remains a lack of empirical research assessing its influence on voter decision-making, particularly in comparison to issue-based promises.

While extensive research has examined electoral trends in large Indian state such as Tamil Nadu, relatively few studies have focused on voter preferences in Assam. Given the state's distinct socio-political landscape-marked by ethnic diversity, migration issues, and regional party dynamics-a localized study is crucial to understanding how voters navigate between freebie and issue-based promises. Additionally, existing literature often discusses the impact of freebies in isolation without systematically comparing them to other determinants such as employment policies, infrastructure development, or governance initiatives. This study seeks to bridge this gap by offering an empirical analysis of how voters in Assam prioritize freebie promises relative to broader developmental commitments, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of electoral decision-making in the region.

METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a primary data collection approach, utilizing surveys through a structured questionnaire. The sampling strategy follows a purposive and proportionate stratified systematic random sampling method to ensure balanced representation from both urban and rural populations in Assam's most populated districts. Kamrup Metro, identified as having the largest urban local body, is selected for the urban sample, with two constituencies chosen from this district. For the rural sample, Nagaon is selected due to its highest population as per the 2011 Census, and two constituencies from this district are included. Additionally, Dhubri and Sonitpur, which have the second and third highest populations, are incorporated into the study, with one urban and one rural constituency chosen from each. The constituencies are determined through systematic random sampling. In the systematic random sampling process, the total district population is divided by the intended sample size of 400, and the resulting number's initial serves as the selection interval. Within each selected constituency, four polling stations are further chosen using systematic random sampling. From each polling station, 25

respondents are identified following the same methodology. Considering Assam's Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of 3.7%, as well as the state's sex ratio of 958 females per 1,000 males (Census 2011), the study ensures inclusion by selecting one ST male and one ST female alternately from each polling station. The remaining respondents are drawn from the non-tribal population.

To maintain proportional representation of religious demographics as per the 2011 Census (61% Hindu, 34% Muslim, and 4% Christian), the sample distribution is structured as follows:

Table 1: Number of Respondents Demography Wise

Number of Respondents	Hindu (Male)	Hindu (Female)	Muslim (Male)	Muslim (Female)	Other Religions (Male)	Other Religions (Female)	ST (Male)	ST (Female)
25 per polling station	8	7	4	4	1 (alternating)	1 (alternating)	1 (alternating)	1 (alternating)

Source: Author.

The data collected through structured surveys and interviews were analyzed using quantitative statistical methods to examine voter preferences regarding key electoral issues and their inclination toward freebie-based promises. The analysis was conducted in two major sections:

1. Analysis of Issue Importance Among Voters

To assess the significance of various electoral issues, responses were categorized into "Important" and "Not Important" for five key issues: Illegal Immigration, Healthcare, Education, Economy, and Freebies. The data was then processed using descriptive statistics, presenting the frequency and percentage distribution of voter responses for each issue. A bar chart was employed to visually represent the comparative importance of these issues among respondents. Each category's percentage was calculated relative to the total sample, enabling a direct comparison between issues that voters prioritized and those they considered less significant. This allowed for the identification of trends in voter concerns and their relative emphasis on governance-related versus populist factors.

2. Analysis of Voter Preference for Populist/Freebie Promises (2016 and 2021)

To examine choices of voters regarding populist or freebie-based electoral promises, the data was segregated by freebie promises preference across two election cycles: 2016 and 2021. The responses indicating a preference for freebie promises were mapped to the four major political parties in Assam: BJP, AGP, AIUDF, and INC. A comparative analysis was conducted using percentage distribution, tracking choices in voter support for each freebie promises. The results were visualized through a line graph, highlighting the voters' choices for the freebie promises.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

For conducting the relative importance study of the freebie promises compared to other issue based promises among the voters of Assam, the freebie promises made by the four major political parties in terms of seat share (See Table 2) in Assam are considered to incorporate in the questionnaire to survey the respondent sample voters. The promises are listed below:

Populist/Freebie Promises:

- BJP2016: Free sanitary napkin and iron pills along with free education for BPL boys, free education for girls from class 10 to university level and scooter for girls living 15km away from colleges.

- AGP2016: Free health checkup for elderly citizens once in a year and for students, once in three years.

- AIUDF2016: Free housing for all the flood and erosion affected families under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

- INC2016: Free electricity up to 200 units for all households.

- BJP2021: Free sanitary napkins and folic acid, free scooter for girls up to post-graduation level, free medical treatment to the next of kin to the martyrs of the Assam agitation, Bodo agitation and Karbi agitation, free treatment & care for widespread issues like cardiac diseases, dialysis, joint replacement for all citizens of Assam over the age of 75.

- AGP2021: Free cancer screening test for women.

- AIUDF2021: Free medicine for the patients belonging to the financially weaker section.

- INC2021: A monthly income of Rs 2,000 to housewives and 200 units of free electricity

Table 2: Seats Won in the 2016 and 2021 Assam Assembly Election (Party Wise)

Name of the Party	Seats won in 2016 Assembly	Seats won in 2021 Assembly Election
Congress	26	29
AGP	14	09
BJP	60	60
AIUDF	13	16
BPPF	12	04
Others	01	07

Source: Chief Electoral Officer, Assam.

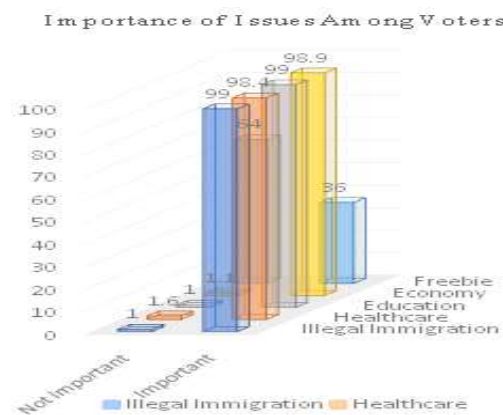


Figure 1: Author.

The analysis presented in Figure 1 underscores a clear voter preference for fundamental governance issues such as healthcare, education, the economy, and illegal immigration, with an overwhelming majority considering these aspects crucial in shaping their electoral choices. This suggests that voters in Assam are increasingly prioritizing policies that offer long-term developmental benefits over immediate material incentives. The comparatively lower importance attributed to freebie-based promises, with only 36% of voters prioritizing them, signals a shift in the electorate's expectations from political parties-indicating that policy-driven governance and structural reforms are gaining precedence over short-term populist measures. This trend may reflect growing political awareness, improved literacy rates, or a broader aspiration for sustainable socio-economic progress, rather than reliance on one-time direct benefits such as cash transfers or free consumer goods.

Furthermore, the emphasis on healthcare and education aligns with the broader human development

perspective, where voters recognize the need for quality public services and infrastructure that have a tangible and lasting impact on society. The concern for illegal immigration also highlights a demographic and political dynamic unique to Assam, where identity politics, resource distribution, and local socio-cultural preservation play a significant role in voter decision-making. Meanwhile, the relatively lower prioritization of freebies suggests that while voters may not outright reject such promises, they view them as secondary to broader governance priorities. This distinction between structural welfare policies and direct populist incentives is critical, as it implies that voters are increasingly assessing electoral promises based on long-term feasibility, implementation potential, and overall societal impact rather than being swayed solely by immediate benefits.

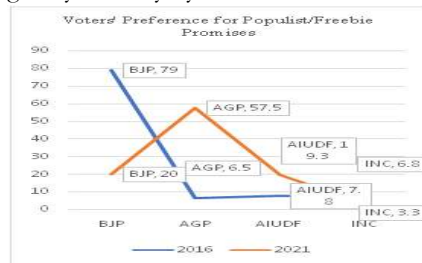


Figure 2: Author.

Though freebie/populist issues are the least important among the respondent voters (Freebie Not Important- 64%) , if given a choice, they preferred the healthcare related and development oriented freebie promises (BJP 2016- 79% and AGP 2021- 57.5%) as demonstrated in Figure 2. The analysis additionally also indicates that voter preferences in Assam are more towards welfare-oriented freebie promises that provide long-term benefits. This is evident from the fact that BJP's 2016 manifesto, which included provisions such as free sanitary napkins and iron supplements for women, and AGP's 2021 manifesto, which promised free cancer screening for women, received the highest preference among voters when they were asked to choose between different freebie promises without being informed about the party that made them. This suggests that rather than favouring short-term direct benefits, voters in Assam exhibit a stronger inclination towards welfare-driven initiatives that contribute to broader and more sustainable societal well-being. The study underscores the evolving nature of voter behaviour in Assam, where political consciousness, governance expectations, and developmental aspirations are playing an increasingly central role in shaping electoral preferences.

CONCLUSION:

The study provides key insights into voter behaviour in Assam, particularly regarding the influence of freebie promises in shaping electoral choices. The findings indicate that while voters prioritize governance-related issues such as healthcare, education, the economy, and illegal immigration, they also show a distinct preference for welfare-oriented freebies that offer long-term benefits rather than short-term direct handouts. This is evident from the shift in voter preference from BJP's 2016 manifesto promises of free sanitary napkins and iron supplements to AGP's 2021 promise of free cancer screening for women, which received higher support when assessed without party labels. Such trends suggest that voters are becoming increasingly discerning, favouring policy-driven welfare measures over mere populist incentives. However, this also raises critical

policy concerns regarding the regulation of freebie-based promises in electoral campaigns. There is a need for greater transparency and accountability in political manifestos to ensure that proposed welfare initiatives are financially and administratively sustainable. Electoral bodies should consider frameworks to regulate and scrutinize freebie pledges, ensuring that they contribute to long-term development rather than serving as short-term electoral strategies. Additionally, enhancing voter awareness is crucial, as a more informed electorate can make rational choices based on policy feasibility rather than immediate material gains. Political parties, in turn, should focus on structural welfare programs that promote sustainable economic and social development rather than short-lived benefits. While this study offers valuable insights, future research in this line can be undertaken to enrich the literatures dealing with voting behaviour by undertaking longitudinal study beyond 2021 that would also offer a clearer perspective on how voter preferences evolve over multiple electoral cycles. Overall, the study highlights the complex interplay between freebie politics, governance priorities, and voter awareness, underscoring the need for policy-driven electoral discourse that aligns with sustainable development and long-term public welfare.

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