

# Competitive Welfarism: BJP and Congress Manifestos' Vision for Change

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For some time now, significant attention to detail in intellectual debates amongst social scientists, political economists, and commentators, attributes ideas and new opinions on the nature of competitive welfarism observed in the developmental plank pitch of India's two main national parties –and how they perceive change for the electorate while contesting each other.

From a review of the two parties' manifestos, in terms of welfare, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) ten-year economic policy report card embraces an application of a top-down, centralised techno-centric welfare delivery mechanism for the poor that is built upon providing affordable housing, cooking fuel to women, free ration to 80 crore people, direct benefit transfers via the Jan Dhan Yojana, etc. to the lesser privileged sections of the society.

The effectiveness of this model is measured by the ability of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to deliver on the promises of the party directly to the grassroots voter – when (s)he has an image of the PM on the bag of the ration (s)he gets. State or local-level governance has less agency or credibility to claim in this model.

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## **Competitive Welfarism: The Differing Visions**

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For the Congress, its social, and economic justice vision is built on incubating and building a rights-based decentralised governance model, that combines both, access to welfare benefits with promised economic opportunity.

Ideas of providing unconditional cash transfers (schemes like Mahalakshmi), job security (via plans like MGNREGA), writing off student debt, and legal aid for gig workers with transfers directed at the upward mobility of the vulnerable and marginalised, remain central to the Grand Old Party's manifested vision (consistent with the NYAYA vision of 2019).

What does one see when it comes to the two distinct (competing) welfare visions?

The shifting sands of a state-led economic ideology of welfare – drawn from a model of Nehruvian socialism – have seen a gradual, transient shift to a new, top-down technocentric model of competitive welfarism under the Modi era.

## **In J&K, A Lack of Unity In Leadership Hints At Fractured Politics Ahead Of Polls**

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The change in vision from the projected campaigns of the incumbent political establishment also finds greater resonance amongst the electorate in national elections (if vote share for the BJP in elections is any such indicative marker for the party's rise and success), striving for aspirational growth as against being 'content' with any unilateral assistance (in aid and direct transfers) alone.

The BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' manifesto focuses on extensive detail about what the current government has done in the last ten years for different sections of society: the poor, the young, the farmers, the women, and the workers. However, it is hinged more on the issues in the past than addressing contemporary ones.

BJP's model aims to synergise business-friendly policies with focused welfare programmes to elevate underprivileged communities and stimulate economic growth. It's worked in a K-shaped economic structure up until now (as discussed here).

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## **BJP's Self-Aggrandising vs Congress' Idealistic Approach**

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It is no surprise till now that the current BJP government has also very carefully deflected from addressing some of the more core issues in its public addresses (from speeches to election manifestos) that have been affecting the citizenry at large: from unemployment to price rise to debt, to a more polarised society, especially when it comes to minorities.

Nationally, they have abstained from acknowledging any of this head-on. On the contrary, the government's vision is to tap into the larger-than-life persona of a 'supreme leader' and provide 'guarantees' in his name to each section of society.

It has been discussed earlier by the author that the Congress manifesto, in content, design, and form, seeks change on grounds of social, economic, and political justice (or removal from a state of unfreedoms) for all communities. The document is rich in scope and provides empirical details on the nature of intervention the party seeks to bring if voted into power.

The unfortunate reality of its intellectually stimulating document is that it can be seen to be less fiscally profligate (in the current state and union debt position) and appears off-topic, poorly coordinated in the party's own electoral strategy on the ground. None of the ideas have any resonance on the ground if one were to visit a Congress-contested constituency.

On the contrary, the BJP's push for 'Modi ki Guarantee' has a stronger resonance across the electorate or public achieved with the sheer brute of the party's PR campaign and electoral communication strategy.

The BJP bandwagon under Modi since 2014 has championed its welfarist push (combined with aspirational growth in future continuous tense) amongst voters who seem to be voting the party back into power without checking on accountability for the party's own actions (and outcomes of intended promises). One cannot attribute all of this or the success of a subpar manifesto's dominant outreach to just 'money' or 'power over institutions' by the incumbent. There's more to it.

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## Can Modi's 'Guarantees' Steer the BJP to Electoral Success?

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The BJP's communication strategy rallies more strongly around a central idea and manifests its vision with its to-do action plan around that for longer time intervals before an upcoming election. It almost seems as if the party started its preparation for the next election from day 1 of victory from the current one.

In terms of central ideas, if it was *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas* in 2014, and Hypernationalism (in response to the Pulwama attack) in 2019, 2024 seems to be more centered around *Modi ki Guarantees*. Each of the BJP's central idea pushes has been to create a vision (goal) in the future continuous tense without attributing to the core issues affecting the larger electorate.

But, it's not all well for the party's electoral successes.

In state/localised elections, deflection strategies like these have worked less well for the incumbent (BJP) government. Modi's charisma has a limited appeal there. The Opposition taps into the general discontent of the electorate and is able to galvanise an alternative vision around a given counter-electoral strategy at a state level much better.

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In national elections, however, tapping into a larger, more aspirational message (without sticking to facts on the ground) has worked reasonably well for the BJP employing its supreme leader as the face of any national-level projection.

This also speaks more of the inability of the political opposition to centralise its counter-electoral strategy against the BJP (which seems more capable of doing so at regional or local/state levels) more successfully at a national level.

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Furthermore, the national election of 2024 may be set up by the BJP as a direct contest with the Congress more as a conscious strategy, as the BJP has consistently done well fighting against the Congress in a direct fight (as against competing with regional or state-level party actors).

What's clear though is the transformation observed in policy thinking – away from the Fabian model of applying Nehruvian socialism to a new model of competitive welfarism, marking a pivotal shift in India's political landscape while displaying its adaptability to the evolving aspirations and needs of its diverse population.

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