



THE POLITICS OF ENFORCEABLE ASSURANCES: SUBNATIONAL WELFARE GUARANTEES AS ELECTORAL STRATEGY IN KARNATAKA

Dr. S Pushpalatha

Associate Professor of Political Science Maharani's Arts College for Women Mysore-570005

ABSTRACT This research article examines the structural, psychological, and fiscal dimensions of the "politics of guarantees" within Indian subnational governance, focusing explicitly on the 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election. During this election, the Indian National Congress (INC) successfully secured a decisive legislative majority by deploying five sweeping welfare guarantees (Shakti, Gruha Lakshmi, Anna Bhagya, Gruha Jyothi, and Yuva Nidhi). This paper argues that these targeted interventions represent a sophisticated structural evolution in electoral strategy. By shifting the campaign narrative from speculative, non-binding manifesto promises (aashwasana) to explicit, non-negotiable legal entitlements (bhavase), political actors effectively lowered the voter's cognitive burden of verification and constructed a powerful psychological contract with the electorate. Furthermore, the article explores how these schemes function as offensive strategic instruments for narrative domination, forcing opposition parties into a defensive paradigm of competitive populism. Finally, it addresses the long-term structural trade-offs of this strategy, analyzing the tension between short-term electoral optimization and the structural preservation of subnational public finances and state capacity.

KEYWORDS : Subnational Governance, Electoral Strategy, Karnataka Politics, Competitive Populism, Welfare Guarantees, Voter Mobilization, Fiscal Capacity.

In contemporary Indian democratic politics, subnational governance has increasingly become an arena for intensive policy experimentation, primarily characterized by a transition from traditional patronage networks to highly organized, programmatic welfare regimes. The 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election marked a watershed moment in this evolution, fundamentally redefining campaign architecture through the deployment of explicit, legally and politically binding promises known as the "Five Guarantees". Introduced by the Indian National Congress (INC) to secure a decisive legislative majority, these targeted interventions—spanning direct cash transfers, food security, free public transit, utility quotas, and youth unemployment stipends—were strategically packaged not merely as standard campaign manifesto items, but as non-negotiable entitlements. This research article examines the structural, psychological, and fiscal dimensions of the "politics of guarantees" within Karnataka, demonstrating how these initiatives function as a highly sophisticated electoral strategy designed to lower the voter's verification burden, secure structural narrative control, and fundamentally restructure subnational political economy.

To understand the strategic utility of Karnataka's guarantees, it is necessary to outline the core components of the welfare architecture deployed by the Siddaramaiah-led administration. The framework relies on five main pillars targeting multidimensional poverty and economic vulnerability:

1. **Shakti:** A scheme providing free public transport for women across state-run corporations, engineered to enhance physical mobility and access to labor markets.
2. **Gruha Lakshmi:** A direct cash transfer of ₹2,000 monthly to the designated woman head of a household, aimed at establishing financial autonomy at the grassroots.
3. **Anna Bhagya:** An expansion of the existing subsidized food grain model, promising 10 kg of free rice per person to Below Poverty Line (BPL) families.
4. **Gruha Jyothi:** A domestic utility subsidy granting up to 200 units of free electricity per month to eligible households.
5. **Yuva Nidhi:** A time-bound financial allowance supporting unemployed graduates and diploma holders for up to two years.

Collectively, these programs were budgeted to cost approximately ₹52,000 crore annually, directly impacting over 5.10 crore citizens. The overarching political objective was clear: circumvent abstract institutional performance metrics by replacing them with immediate, quantifiable material returns directly delivered to the domestic sphere.

From an electoral behavior standpoint, the strategic value of the "Guarantee" framing lies in its capacity to resolve a historical problem in Indian democratic campaigns—voter cynicism toward political promises. Historically, campaign manifestos have been treated by the electorate as non-binding rhetoric. By shifting the vernacular from a "promise" (*aashwasana*) to a "guarantee" (*bhavase*), the Congress party constructed a strong psychological contract with the electorate. Empirical research conducted by independent bodies like the Fiscal

Policy Institute in Bengaluru and Lokniti-CSDS indicates that the framing succeeded because a vast majority of the public rapidly internalised these schemes as "people's rights" rather than state charity or discretionary "freebies". By physically issuing mock "guarantee cards" signed by top political leaders during the campaign trail, the political strategy effectively lowered the voter's cognitive burden of verification, transforming expected policy actions into enforceable civic claims.

Beyond individual voter psychology, guarantee schemes function as an aggressive offensive instrument for narrative domination. The announcement of five sweeping, universalist provisions early in the campaign cycle established structural parameters that opposition parties found difficult to counter. Opponents, primarily the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), were thrust into a dual strategic dilemma: either attack the schemes on the grounds of fiscal irresponsibility—which risked alienating low-income and gendered voter blocs—or attempt to match the policy breadth with competitive populist models of their own. The strategic success of this approach is evidenced by its subsequent replication across Indian subnational politics. Following the electoral shift in Karnataka, rival parties across multiple states like Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Bihar were compelled to adopt comparable cash transfer and direct subsidy architectures to remain electorally competitive.

However, the political utility of competitive populism introduces profound structural complications for subnational political economies. Critics highlight the institutional stress induced by diverting significant portions of state revenue to finance recurring, non-discretionary subsidy bills. Political and civil society actors have repeatedly flagged the reallocation of capital away from infrastructure and targeted developmental sub-plans—such as the Scheduled Caste and Tribal Sub-Plans (SCSP/TSP)—to keep the guarantees funded, warning of a long-term "hollowing out" of state capacity. Furthermore, structural distortions in local labor markets, including reported shortages of agricultural laborers in rural districts following the expansion of unconditional household financial support, underscore the friction between short-term electoral optimization and long-term economic equilibrium.

In conclusion, the proliferation of guarantee schemes in Karnataka demonstrates a structural evolution in how political power is contested and consolidated in Indian states. As an electoral strategy, it offers a highly rational mechanism to secure broad-based, cross-caste voter mobilization by delivering direct, unmediated material relief to vulnerable populations. Yet, the ultimate test of this strategic paradigm lies in its fiscal durability. When the political necessity of securing electoral victory outpaces a subnational state's capacity to generate sustainable revenues, the structural foundation of governance risks destabilization, proving that while guarantees can efficiently deliver legislative majorities, they require meticulous economic balancing to preserve the institutional health of the state.

REFERENCES

1. Deshpande, Vasanth N. K. "Karnataka: Politics of 'Guarantees'." *People's Democracy*, vol. 47, no. 26, 2023, peoplesdemocracy.in/2023/0625_pd/karnataka-politics-%E2%80%98guarantees%E2%80%99. Accessed 24 Sept. 2026.
2. Elizabeth, Shilpa. "Karnataka's Guarantee Schemes Offer Financial Fillip to Women Beneficiaries and Families, Finds Study." *The Hindu*, 28 Sept. 2025,
3. *Fiscal Policy Institute Journal of Economics and Governance: Special Issue on the Impact Assessment of Karnataka Government's Five Guarantee Schemes*. Fiscal Policy Institute, Government of Karnataka, vol. 20, 2025
4. Indus Action, Lokniti-CSDS, Bangalore University, and Tumkur University. *Impact Evaluation for Government of Karnataka's 5 Guarantees*. Open City Data Repository, 2025.
5. "Will the Congress' Five Guarantees Burden Karnataka's Economy?" *Frontline*, The Hindu Group, 25 Aug. 2023, thehindu.com. Accessed 24 Sept. 2026.