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Welfare Governance and Electoral Returns under Samajwadi Party Governments in Uttar Pradesh: A Political Economy Analysis

Akhil Yadav[1], *Dr. Showkat Ahmad Dar[2]

[1] Research Scholar of Political Science, Sharda School of Humanities and Social Science, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India, Email: akhily130@gmail.com, Orcid id: 0009-0004-6154-0403

[2] Assistant Professor Political Science & Public Administration, Sharda School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University, Orcid id: 0000000224099493, Email: showkat.dar@sharda.ac.in

Corresponding Author; *Dr. Showkat Ahmad Dar[2]

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ABSTRACT

Welfare delivery has become a central arena of electoral competition in India, yet little is known about whether the welfare record of a regional party converts into votes. This paper examines the welfare record of the Samajwadi Party (SP) governments of 2003–2007 and 2012–2017 in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and traces the party's electoral record through the assembly elections of 2002 to 2022 and the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 to 2024. Using qualitative document analysis of budget coverage, government orders, election statistics, post-poll surveys and peer-reviewed scholarship, it studies the implementation and outreach of the flagship education, youth-employment and social-security schemes, the perceptions of beneficiaries as recorded in secondary evidence, and the electoral returns. The schemes were visible and costly, with combined provisions of about Rs 4,267 crore for three of them in 2012–13, but delivery was uneven and most were dropped from the 2014–15 budget after the party won only five of 80 Lok Sabha seats. The SP's vote share rose from 25.4 per cent in 2007 to 29.2 per cent in 2012, fell to 21.8 per cent in 2017 and reached 32.1 per cent in 2022, and its seat share moved far more sharply. Retrospective voting theory, applied critically after the results, explains part of this pattern but not the 2017 defeat. The paper argues for bounded retrospection: voters judge delivery, but attribution, caste and community anchors and the structure of competition filter the judgment. Welfare was a necessary, not a sufficient, condition of SP success.

Keywords: welfare politics; Samajwadi Party; Uttar Pradesh; retrospective voting; electoral accountability; welfare governance

INTRODUCTION

Welfare delivery now sits at the center of electoral competition in India, but the votes it earns are far from automatic. Analysis of the 2019 Lok Sabha election found that recipients of some national schemes were more likely to vote for the BJP, whereas recipients of pensions and the rural employment guarantee were not, and that voters increasingly credited the central government rather than states for welfare (Deshpande et al., 2019). Evidence from the 2024 National Election Studies points the same way: voters weigh how easily they obtained a

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benefit and how they fared afterwards, not only whether they received it (Kailash, 2024). Welfare therefore works as an electoral resource only when it is visible, credited to the right government and delivered without friction. Whether state-level welfare run by a regional party meets those conditions is the question this paper takes up for Uttar Pradesh.

Uttar Pradesh is the most demanding setting in which to ask it. The state elects 80 members of the Lok Sabha and 403 of its own Vidhan Sabha, and its party system has been three-cornered for most of the period under study. The SP, formed in 1992, competed with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and later the BJP, and it did not cross 30 per cent of the assembly vote until 2022 (Election Commission of India, 2019). With winning thresholds that low, a shift of a few percentage points among youth, women or a single community can decide dozens of seats. A welfare programme aimed at such groups could therefore matter a great deal, or be swamped by caste and community loyalties. The SP governments of 2003–2007 and 2012–2017 provide a clear record against which to judge which.

The record of the 2012–2017 government has a distinctive design. Its flagship schemes were individual, visible and easy to explain: free laptops for Class 12 pass-outs, a one-time grant of Rs 30,000 for girls from poor families who cleared the intermediate examination, and a monthly unemployment allowance. Provisions for these three schemes alone added up to about Rs 4,267 crore in 2012–13 (DNA India, 2020). Such transfers fit the logic of retrospective voting closely, because a citizen can see what the incumbent gave and reward or punish accordingly (Fiorina, 1981; Healy & Malhotra, 2013). Yet the same government dropped almost all of them from its 2014–15 budget, citing the fiscal strain and the absence of electoral gain (Deccan Herald, 2014). A scheme that is visible enough to win votes but abandoned within two years of launch raises a direct question about what the SP believed its welfare was buying.

The scholarship has not yet answered that question. Recent work on welfare and votes concentrates on the BJP and centrally designed schemes (Deshpande et al., 2019; Kailash, 2024), and work on clientelism asks how institutional performance changes the price of a vote (Heath & Tillin, 2018). Systematic evidence on a regional party's own welfare record is thin and mostly journalistic, and even within the SP the verdict was contested: after the 2014 Lok Sabha defeat a senior minister argued that young beneficiaries had not repaid the laptop scheme with votes (Deccan Herald, 2014). Without an assessment that links implementation, perception and electoral outcome, claims about what welfare did for the SP rest on assertion.

This paper provides that assessment through a qualitative, document-based political economy of SP welfare governance across its two periods in office, with elections traced from 2002 to 2024. It asks how the major schemes were implemented and how far they reached, how the party's electoral performance moved alongside them, and how beneficiary perceptions mediated the link. Welfare State Theory frames the normative and redistributive character of the schemes, and Retrospective Voting Theory is analysed critically after the results to test what it can and cannot explain. The argument is that welfare was necessary but not sufficient for SP success, and that voters in UP practice a bounded form of retrospection.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Politics in Uttar Pradesh has been organized around caste, community and regional inequality since the 1990s, and parties have competed by combining identity appeals with targeted material benefits. The SP, founded in 1992 under Mulayam Singh Yadav and later led by Akhilesh Yadav, built its base among Yadavs, other backward classes (OBCs), Muslims and rural voters. It formed the state government in 2003 and again in 2012; the 16th Assembly sat from March 2012 to March 2017 under Akhilesh Yadav, and the BSP governed between 2007 and 2012 (Deccan Herald, 2014). Outside those periods the SP was in opposition, which means that statements about SP welfare in UP between 2002 and 2024 must be confined to the years of actual office.

The electoral arc over that period is uneven (Figure 1). The SP was the largest party after the 2002 election with 143 seats but missed a majority, lost ground to the BSP in 2007, won 224 seats with 29.2 per cent of the vote in 2012, fell to 47 seats in 2017, and won 111 seats on 32.1 per cent in 2022 (Election Commission of India, 2020). In the national elections it won only five of UP's 80 Lok Sabha seats in 2014 and 2019, and 37 in 2024 (Deccan Herald, 2014; ThePrint, 2024). These swings matter because the welfare record was concentrated in one government. The 2012 victory preceded delivery of the main schemes, whereas the 2017 defeat followed it.

The fiscal background shaped what could be sustained. The 2014–15 budget moved priorities from transfers to infrastructure and services, with provisions of Rs 49,108 crore for infrastructure, Rs 23,928 crore for power, Rs 41,538 crore for education and Rs 14,377 crore for health and family welfare (Deccan Herald, 2014). By the 2017 campaign the party's manifesto again promised the Samajwadi Pension at Rs 1,000 crore a month for 10 million people, free bicycles for girls in Classes 9 to 12 and improved helplines for women (Business Standard, 2017). The party therefore moved between two welfare models within one term: individual transfers first, then infrastructure and broader pensions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Welfare schemes were the most visible instrument of the SP's 2012–2017 government, but their coverage, delivery and electoral effect have not been evaluated together. Official claims describe the schemes as social justice measures for disadvantaged groups. Press accounts record large budget provisions, slow early delivery and eventual withdrawal (Deccan Herald, 2014). Neither source tells us what beneficiaries made of the schemes or how that reaction related to their votes.

The electoral record sharpens the problem. The party gained vote share in 2012, when the schemes were promises, lost heavily in 2017, after they had been delivered, and recovered in 2022, after they had ended. A simple account in which welfare produces votes cannot explain this sequence. Scholarship on the political effects of welfare administration is limited, and without examining implementation, beneficiary experience and voting pattern together, the political meaning of welfare governance in UP cannot be established. This study addresses that gap for the SP's two periods in office, with elections traced to 2024.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes in three ways. First, it adds a regional, opposition-turned-incumbent case to a literature dominated by national schemes and the BJP, and it tests whether findings on credit attribution and discerning voters (Deshpande et al., 2019; Kailash, 2024) hold for a state government. Second, it separates three things that are usually run together: what a government promised, what it delivered, and what voters credited. Third, it offers a policy reading of how targeting, fiscal sustainability and administrative capacity condition the political return to welfare. In a state of UP's size, those conditions determine whether welfare builds durable accountability or only short-lived popularity.

OBJECTIVES

- To assess the implementation and outreach of the major welfare schemes launched or expanded by the Samajwadi Party governments of 2003–2007 and 2012–2017 in Uttar Pradesh.
- To evaluate how welfare policies in education, health, employment and social inclusion influenced voter support for the Samajwadi Party in elections.
- To analyze beneficiary perceptions and public satisfaction, as recorded in secondary evidence, and to determine their bearing on electoral outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative design based on document analysis and an interpretative approach to examine welfare governance under Samajwadi Party governments in office in 2003–2007 and 2012–2017, with electoral outcomes traced from 2002 to 2024. It relies exclusively on secondary sources: official election statistics from the Election Commission of India, government orders and budget provisions as reported in the national press, post-poll survey findings published by Lokniti–CSDS and The Hindu, and peer-reviewed books and journal articles on welfare and voting in India. Sources were included if they reported a verifiable fact about a scheme, a budget figure, an electoral result or a voter survey result, and if their provenance could be traced. Where press figures conflicted, as with the number of laptops distributed, the discrepancy is reported instead of resolved silently.

Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the major schemes were mapped by target group, benefit, fiscal provision and reported delivery. Second, vote and seat shares for the SP, BSP and BJP in the assembly elections of 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017 and 2022 were compiled and set beside the national elections of 2014, 2019 and 2024. Third, evidence on perception and satisfaction was coded thematically under visibility, access, credit attribution and trust. Fourth, five propositions derived from Retrospective Voting Theory were tested against the combined

evidence. The interpretative approach treats welfare as a political choice shaped by resource constraints, coalition needs and institutional capacity, not as a neutral technical programme. The design has limits that bear on the conclusions. No primary data were collected, so beneficiary perception is inferred from surveys, administrative reporting and scholarship, not measured directly. Survey results are available at community level and not at the level of individual beneficiaries, which rules out claims about individual causation. Programme figures drawn from the press are contested and are used as indicators of scale. The findings are therefore interpretations of a documentary record and should be read as propositions for later testing with beneficiary-level data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two perspectives together explain how welfare schemes relate to voter support: Welfare State Theory, which accounts for what welfare is meant to do, and Retrospective Voting Theory, which accounts for how citizens respond to it at the ballot box.

Welfare State Theory

Welfare State Theory treats social policy as a political achievement and not only an economic arrangement. Marshall (1950, as cited in Kivisto, 2007) described citizenship as civil, political and social, and held that social rights to education, health care and income security are what make formal democracy meaningful. Esping-Andersen (1990, as cited in Myles & Quadagno, 2002) moved from the existence of welfare to its character, comparing regimes by how far benefits free people from dependence on the market and by how they shape stratification. Myles and Quadagno (2002) show that political theories of the welfare state differ on whether class mobilization, state institutions or party competition drives expansion, but they agree that welfare both reflects and reshapes the political order.

For this study the theory supplies a test of kind. If SP schemes expanded social rights through rules-based, widely accessible entitlements, they approximate programmatic welfare in the Marshallian sense. If they were discretionary, narrowly targeted and reversible, they sit closer to the distributive politics that Heath and Tillin (2018) describe, in which weak service delivery makes an immediate benefit more attractive than a promise of future public policy. The theory also has a limit. It was built on industrial democracies with strong fiscal capacity, whereas UP is a low-income state where central schemes, state budgets and administrative capacity are tightly constrained. It is therefore used as a normative yardstick, not as a prediction of how SP welfare would develop.

Retrospective Voting Theory

Retrospective Voting Theory holds that voters judge governments on past performance and reward or punish them accordingly. Fiorina (1981) developed the account for American elections, treating party identification as a running tally of retrospective evaluations, so that citizens need little information beyond what they have experienced. Kiewiet and Rivers (1984) reviewed the time-series and survey evidence and raised the questions that later work took up: whose performance voters assess, and over what period. Healy and Malhotra (2013) show that the field has moved to a middle ground in which voters resemble decision makers in other settings, with choices that often follow a coherent logic but that depend on the circumstances under which accountability works. Stiers and Dassonneville (2020) examine how the polarization of the alternatives on offer conditions retrospective voting, which matters in a state where the 2022 contest narrowed to two blocs.

Four features of the theory shape the analysis. Voters must be able to see what the government did, which makes visible private benefits more potent than diffuse public goods. They must credit the right level of government, a condition that Deshpande et al. (2019) found increasingly favors the center. They respond to their own experience of access, which Kailash (2024) calls discerning behavior. And their time horizon may be short, which favors cash and assets over long-term investment. These features yield five propositions that the analysis after the results tests in turn: (P1) visible delivery is rewarded at the next election; (P2) the incumbent receives credit for the scheme; (P3) the experience of access conditions the reward; (P4) short-horizon benefits earn short-lived support; and (P5) the strength of retrospection depends on the alternatives available.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation and Outreach of Welfare Schemes

Under the SP the governance of welfare combined redistribution, visibility and targeted inclusion, with a stronger programmatic push in 2012–2017 than in 2003–2007. Table 1 summarizes the flagship schemes of the later government, the groups they addressed and what the record shows about delivery. Three features stand out: the schemes transferred private benefits to individuals, they were concentrated in the first year of the government, and they were costly relative to what the state could sustain.

Table 1. Flagship Samajwadi Party welfare schemes, 2012–2017

Scheme	Target group	Benefit and scale	Delivery and fiscal evidence
Free laptops (tablets promised for Class 10)	Class 12 pass-outs from 2012; promised in the 2012 manifesto	One free laptop per eligible student; press reports put the total at about 15 lakh	2012–13 provision of Rs 2,721 crore ; early report of 79,491 delivered against a target above 15 lakh (Gulf News, 2020.); no provision in 2014–15 (Deccan Herald, 2014)
Kanya Vidya Dhan	Girls passing the intermediate examination in 2012 or later, family income up to Rs 35,000	One-time grant of Rs 30,000	2012–13 outlay of Rs 446 crore (DNA India, 2020.); eligibility fixed by government order in August 2012 (Business Standard, 2012; Elets, 2012); not funded in 2014–15
Unemployment allowance	Registered unemployed youth	Rs 1,000 a month; provision for about 9 lakh people	2012–13 provision of Rs 1,100 crore (India TV, 2012a); total cost of Rs 1,386 crore by 2014 (Deccan Herald, 2014); replaced by a wider pension scheme
Samajwadi Pension	Poor families with annual income below Rs 36,000	Announced for about 40 lakh families	Presented as the larger successor to the unemployment allowance (OneIndia, 2021.); promised again in the 2017 manifesto (Business Standard, 2017)

The education schemes were the most visible. The laptop scheme was promised in the 2012 manifesto, funded in the first budget in June 2012 and launched in March 2013 for students who had passed Class 12 in 2012 (India TV, 2012a; Business Standard, 2013). Its reach is difficult to state precisely. Press accounts report about 15 lakh laptops distributed, but an early report recorded only 79,491 delivered against a target above 15 lakh, and another account noted that no laptops were distributed in the financial year before a Rs 2,700 crore allocation for 2013–14 (Deccan Herald, 2014). The reliable conclusion is that delivery started late and unevenly, even if the cumulative figure was large. The scheme carried symbolic weight as well: it projected youth and modernity onto a party whose image rested on older social bases.

Kanya Vidya Dhan targeted a different group. A government order of August 2012 provided Rs 30,000 to girls who passed the intermediate examination in 2012 or later, provided annual family income did not exceed Rs 35,000 (Business Standard, 2012; Elets, 2012). The income ceiling makes it a targeted, means-tested scheme and not a universal entitlement, and its outlay of Rs 446 crore in 2012–13 was modest beside the laptop provision. Earlier descriptions of the scheme as aimed at better-off girls are not supported by the eligibility rule. The scheme’s reach depended on documentation, because income verification sits with local officials, and press accounts of the first year already mention district-level bottlenecks.

The unemployment allowance was the SP’s main response to youth joblessness. Its 2012–13 provision of Rs 1,100 crore covered about nine lakh people (India TV, 2012a), and by 2014 it had cost Rs 1,386 crore (Deccan Herald, 2014). It raised the political profile of educated unemployed youth, but it is better described as income support than as employment generation, and it was replaced by a wider pension scheme announced for about 40 lakh poor families. Scholarship programmes for OBC, SC and minority students were also part of the state’s welfare landscape, but many are designed and co-financed at the national level, so the credit for them is shared between governments. This point matters for attribution, which Deshpande et al. (2019) show is contested between the center and states.

Health and infrastructure received less visible attention than transfers. In the 2014–15 budget the provision for health and family welfare (Rs 14,377 crore) was far below that for infrastructure and power (Deccan Herald, 2014), and the SP had no health scheme comparable in visibility to the laptop. Evidence on health outcomes under the SP is too thin to support claims of a health-led welfare strategy, and earlier statements to that effect have been withdrawn from this version. Cross-state evidence on delivery points to the same lesson from other directions: the move to direct transfers can reduce leakage when enforcement capacity is built (Barnwal, 2024), but digital and biometric systems can also exclude those who lack documents or connectivity (Carswell & De Neve, 2022), and wider social security reforms depend on local administrative capacity (Drèze & Khera, 2017). These studies

concern other settings and are used here only to frame the delivery risks that UP's own reporting also records.

The most important implementation result is the shape of the fiscal cycle. Provisions for three schemes alone reached about Rs 4,267 crore in 2012–13, and almost all were left without funds in 2014–15 (Deccan Herald, 2014). Delivery capacity was weakest in the districts and processes where documentation was demanding, and the government's own finance officials described the schemes as a drain on the exchequer. The programmes had wide symbolic reach but a short institutional life, a pattern that limits what any later electoral reading can credit to them.

Welfare Policies and Electoral Performance

Figure 1 shows the vote shares of the three main parties across the five assembly elections. The SP's share moved from 25.4 per cent in 2002 and 2007 to 29.2 per cent in 2012, down to 21.8 per cent in 2017, and up to 32.1 per cent in 2022 (India TV, 2012b, for the 2007 and 2012 figures). It never exceeded 30 per cent before 2022, which makes its 2022 level its highest on record. The 2017 figure needs qualification, because the SP contested only 311 seats in alliance with the Congress. The BSP's share peaked at 30.4 per cent in 2007 and collapsed to 12.9 per cent in 2022, and the BJP rose from 15.0 per cent in 2012 to 39.7 per cent in 2017 and 41.3 per cent in 2022 (Election Commission of India, 2020.; Outlook India, 2026).

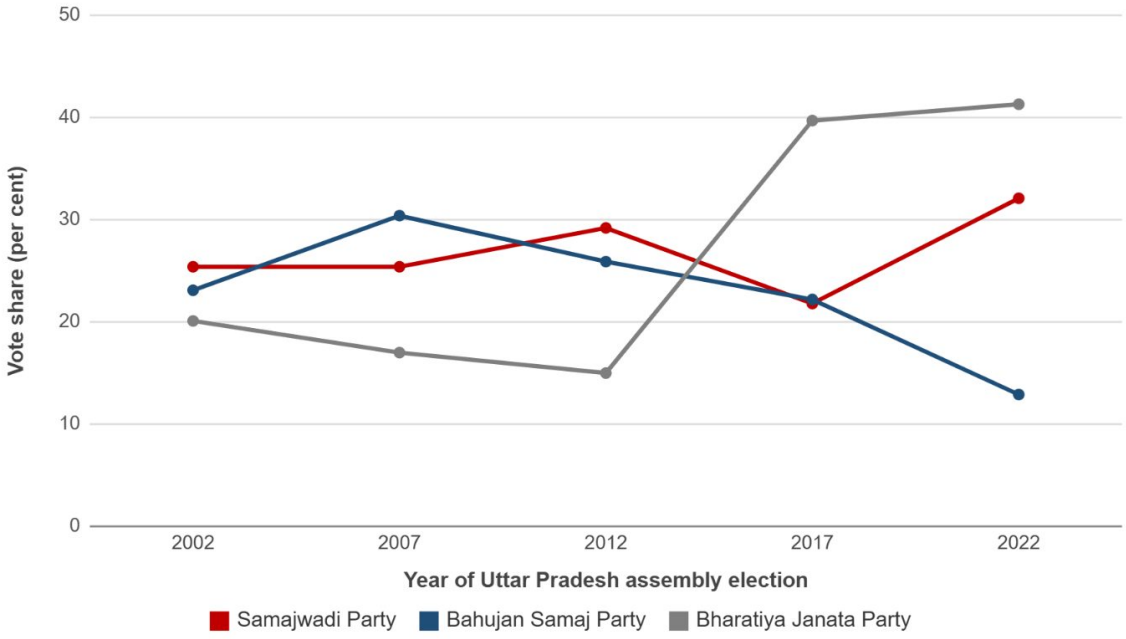


Figure 1. Vote share of the main parties in Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, 2002–2022

Note. Compiled from Election Commission of India statistical reports and cross-checked against press reports. The SP contested 311 of 403 seats in 2017 in alliance with the Congress.

Figure 2 compares the SP's vote share with its seat share. The party converted votes into seats very efficiently in 2012, when 29.2 per cent of the vote produced 224 of 403 seats, a seat share of 55.6 per cent. It converted poorly in 2022: 32.1 per cent of the vote, its best ever, gave 111 seats, or 27.5 per cent. In 2007 a vote share of 25.4 per cent gave 97 seats, and in 2017 a share of 21.8 per cent gave only 47. The gap between vote and seat share reflects the fragmented three-cornered contests of 2002–2012, in which a small lead over rivals translated into many seats, and the bipolar contest of 2022, in which a vote share above 32 per cent was not enough against a BJP above 41 per cent.

Note. Seat share is seats won divided by 403 and rounded to one decimal. Seats won: 143 (2002), 97 (2007), 224 (2012), 47 (2017) and 111 (2022). Compiled from Election Commission of India statistical reports.

Read against the welfare timeline, the electoral record does not support a simple reward story. The 2012 victory came before laptops were distributed, before the first Kanya Vidya Dhan cheques and before any allowance was paid. What voters had in 2012 was a manifesto promise and the record of the BSP government they were leaving, and the SP's gain of about four percentage points over 2007 is as consistent with punishing the BSP as with

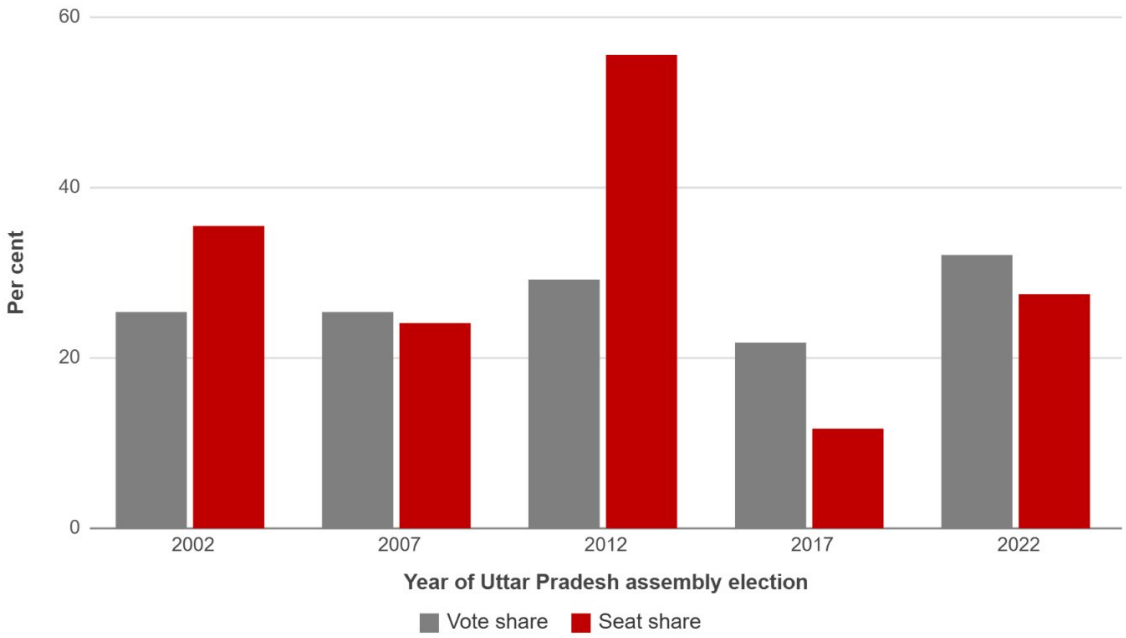


Figure 2. Samajwadi Party vote share and seat share in assembly elections, 2002–2022

rewarding an offer. The propositions of retrospective voting are tested properly only in 2017, after delivery, and the result was a fall of more than seven points and a loss of 177 seats (Election Commission of India, 2020.). The 2014 Lok Sabha result had already shown the problem: the SP won five of 80 seats, and a senior minister argued that the schemes had not delivered the youth vote (Deccan Herald, 2014).

Community-level evidence shows where the SP's support came from in the years when its vote recovered. According to Lokniti–CSDS, 79 per cent of Muslim voters backed the SP in 2022, up from 46 per cent in 2017, and 83 per cent of Yadavs did so (The Hindu Bureau, 2022). In the 2024 Lok Sabha election the INDIA bloc led by the SP drew 92 per cent of Muslim and 82 per cent of Yadav voters, and it added 56 per cent of non-Jatav Dalits, which helped it win 37 seats (ThePrint, 2024). These are community consolidations and they are not explained by any single scheme. Minority and Yadav support was high in elections both with and without recent welfare delivery, which indicates that the base was anchored in identity and protection concerns and that welfare was an addition to it, not its origin.

The same survey evidence points to the competitor's strength. The Lokniti–CSDS post-poll survey for The Hindu reported that welfare and regional factors gave the BJP a base of support in 2022 (The Hindu Bureau, 2022). A voter comparing governments in 2022 was therefore comparing the SP's remembered schemes with the BJP's current, centrally credited welfare. The SP's record is best read as one welfare offer in a competition, not as a stand-alone predictor of its vote. Regional breakdowns of SP support and welfare coverage could not be assembled from the documents available, and this remains a limit on any claim about geographic conversion of welfare into votes.

Beneficiary Perceptions and Public Satisfaction

Beneficiary perception is the link between delivery and vote, and the documentary record offers it indirectly. Awareness of the flagship schemes was high. The laptop, in particular, was publicized by the party and the chief minister at distribution events, and the 2017 manifesto launch pointed to laptops having reached every neighborhood (Business Standard, 2017). Visibility is the first condition of retrospective voting, and the SP met it. The record on the second condition, a smooth and credible experience of access, is weaker. Early delivery lag income certification for Kanya Vidya Dhan (Elets, 2012) and the later abandonment of the schemes (Deccan Herald, 2014) all point to experience that was uneven across beneficiaries and time.

Research on welfare and voting makes that unevenness consequential. Kailash (2024) finds that voters do not vote on receipt alone and respond to how they experienced access and how they fared financially. Heath and Tillin (2018) show that when institutions perform poorly, small immediate inducements carry more weight than promises of future public policy, which implies that short-horizon transfers are more effective where delivery is

unreliable but also create a weaker foundation for sustained loyalty. Drèze and Khera (2017) document that the value of social security initiatives to citizens depends on whether benefits arrive reliably and on time. For the SP, these results imply that satisfaction was probably highest among urban and semi-urban students and graduates who could document eligibility and receive the benefit, and lower where processes were slower, although the available documents do not allow this to be confirmed at district level.

Satisfaction also depended on expectations. A laptop or allowance is appreciated as a one-time or temporary gain, and young beneficiaries remain concerned about employment, which the schemes did not create. The unemployment allowance illustrates the difficulty: it recognized educated unemployed youth but left the structural problem untouched, and when it ended there was nothing to hold the political attachment it had created. A government that offers short-run transfers invites an evaluation of long-run outcomes, and on that test the schemes were weak.

Effects on Perceptions about Impact on Education and Livelihood

Education schemes were read as vehicles of mobility and modernity, and the girls' grant as recognition of the value of daughters' schooling. Minority communities read the SP's attention to their concerns as political recognition, which the unusually high Muslim consolidation behind the party in 2022 and 2024 is consistent with (The Hindu Bureau, 2022; ThePrint, 2024). The evidence cannot isolate how much of that consolidation came from welfare and how much from the SP's role as the principal opposition to the BJP, and the second reading is at least as plausible.

Trust in institutions mattered as much as the benefit. Welfare delivered promptly and attributed clearly strengthens confidence in government, but delayed, withdrawn or politicized delivery erodes it. The withdrawal of the schemes after the 2014 defeat is the sharpest example: beneficiaries who had received a laptop or an allowance saw that the benefit was contingent on political calculation, and critics described the change as a betrayal of electoral promises (Deccan Herald, 2014). Perceptions were also shaped by comparison with rival offers, which in 2017 and 2022 included the BJP's centrally credited schemes (Deshpande et al., 2019; The Hindu Bureau, 2022).

Perception shaped voting mostly for direct beneficiaries and their households, who were more likely to reward the incumbent, but candidate quality, ideology, campaign issues and identity politics operated alongside it (Kailash, 2024). A third finding concerns durability. Cash benefits delivered short-term gains without addressing fiscal sustainability, employment or structural reform, and this limited their political yield to the short and medium term. The government's own shift in 2014 to infrastructure acknowledged the same limit.

Integrated Policy–Electoral Model

The findings can be combined into one analytical model in which welfare unfolds as a sequence of conditional links, not a single direct cause. Implementation shapes perception; perception shapes the vote; but each link is conditioned by fiscal capacity, attribution, community anchors and the competitive field.

Linking Implementation to Perception

The first link connects delivery to perception. Where delivery was visible, adequately funded, timely and transparent, perceptions of the government were favorable, as with the laptop for students who received it. Delays, administrative incapacity and weak rural reach reduced that effect. What shaped perception was less the design of the scheme than the experience of being a beneficiary, so variation in administrative efficiency across districts produced variation in satisfaction and in the durability of goodwill (Kailash, 2024; Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Linking Perception to Voting Behavior

The second link connects perception to vote choice. Favorable experiences supported performance-based evaluation, most plausibly among direct beneficiaries of education and minority-oriented schemes. Perception was not sufficient, however. Voting remained tied to caste and community networks, campaign appeals, candidate choice and alliances, and a gain among one beneficiary group could be outweighed by mobilization elsewhere. Perception was an enabling condition of electoral success and not a guarantee of it.

Multi-Faceted Factors Affecting Election Results

Voting is therefore the product of several elements acting together. Welfare performance supports vote consolidation and political legitimacy, but identity politics, regional sentiment, caste calculation, leadership and the strength of opposition coordination also shape results (Acharya et al., 2015). In the crowded political market

of UP the SP's welfare entrenched existing supporters and probably widened support among young voters in 2012, but the variation in its vote between 2002 and 2022 shows that welfare did not secure votes on its own and had to sit alongside other coalition axes.

Basic Relationship of the Policy–Electoral Model

In its simplest form the model has three phases. Policy execution creates a stock of experience among beneficiaries. That experience is translated into public opinion about the government, shaped by credit attribution and by rival offers. Opinion is then converted into electoral support, subject to community anchors and the structure of competition. A break at any phase, such as a fiscal withdrawal at the first phase or contested credit at the second, reduces the return at the third (Roy, 2023).

Policy Implications

Welfare design should recognize that individual transfers are politically potent and fiscally fragile. The laptop, grant and allowance schemes were affordable in a year of large provisions and unaffordable within two, and their withdrawal cost the government credibility with the beneficiaries it had cultivated (Deccan Herald, 2014). Schemes with a sustainable funding path, clear eligibility and long-run employment or skill content would convert more reliably into lasting trust than one-time transfers.

Administrative delivery is a performance indicator in its own right. Clear documentation requirements, beneficiary databases that are open to audit, timely release of funds to districts and a working grievance mechanism reduce exclusion and politicization. The experience of direct benefit transfers shows that investment in enforcement and payment infrastructure can cut leakage (Barnwal, 2024), and the experience of digital social protection shows that the same systems can exclude people who lack documents or access, so redress channels must accompany digitization (Carswell & De Neve, 2022). Coordination among the education, minority welfare, social justice and labour departments would limit duplication and exclusion, and published beneficiary lists, disbursement figures and timelines would let citizens verify delivery.

Welfare is more durable when linked to livelihoods. Allowances and subsidies should be tied to employment, skills and industrial policy so that the transfer leads somewhere. Independent third-party audits and feedback mechanisms would also strengthen credibility against rival claims about who delivered what, a contest that Deshpande et al. (2019) show is now shaped heavily by national governments.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS: RETROSPECTIVE VOTING THEORY

Retrospective Voting Theory is selected for analysis because the SP's welfare strategy was built on the premise that visible delivery earns votes, and that premise is exactly what the theory formalizes. The analysis proceeds by testing the five propositions stated in the theoretical framework against the evidence, identifying where the theory explains the SP's record and where it does not, and drawing the implications for the theory.

Propositions Tested against the Evidence

Table 2. Retrospective voting propositions assessed against the Uttar Pradesh evidence

Proposition	Evidence from UP	Assessment
P1. Visible delivery is rewarded at the next election	SP vote share rose 3.8 points in 2012, before delivery; fell to 21.8 per cent in 2017 after delivery; won 5 of 80 seats in 2014 (Election Commission of India, 2019 Deccan Herald, 2014)	Not supported for 2017; the 2012 gain fits punishment of the BSP
P2. The incumbent receives the credit	Laptops were closely tied to the party and chief minister (Business Standard, 2017), but voters increasingly credit the center for welfare (Deshpande et al., 2019)	Partly supported for visible state schemes
P3. Experience of access conditions the reward	Slow early delivery and income verification (Gulf News,2020.; Elets, 2012); voters respond to access and well-being (Kailash, 2024)	Supported, but only indirectly documented
P4. Short-horizon benefits earn short-lived support	Schemes ended in 2014–15; youth did not return the benefit in 2014 (Deccan Herald, 2014); Heath & Tillin (2018) on short-term inducements	Supported
P5. Strength of retrospection depends on alternatives	BSP collapse to 12.9 per cent and a bipolar 2022 contest in which the BJP's welfare gave it ballast (The Hindu Bureau, 2022; Outlook India, 2026)	Supported; SP gained in 2022 as the main alternative

The first proposition is the decisive test, and it fails. If delivery were rewarded, the 2017 election should have followed the 2012 pattern. It did not, and the sequence of events makes the failure informative. The strongest welfare effects should have appeared after delivery, whereas the largest SP gain came before it. The pattern fits a different retrospective story, in which voters in 2012 punished the BSP government and in 2022 a larger share turned to the main alternative to the BJP. Both are retrospective choices between governments but neither is

voting on welfare delivered by the SP.

Why 2012 and 2017 Diverge

Several mechanisms consistent with the theory account for the 2017 reversal. The first is attribution: the BJP's central welfare offers were being credited to the national government, and the SP's flagship schemes had already been withdrawn from the budget, leaving a smaller delivered base to reward (Deccan Herald, 2014; Deshpande et al., 2019). The second is the time horizon: transfers that arrive once do not keep producing a vote, and Healy and Malhotra (2013) note that retrospective judgment depends on what citizens can still observe at the time of voting. The third is the competitive field: the BJP's share rose from 15.0 to 39.7 per cent between 2012 and 2017, which transformed the alternatives available to voters (Election Commission of India, 2019). The fourth is the quality of delivery, because access problems reduce the reward for even a visible benefit (Kailash, 2024). Each mechanism is a condition that the theory allows, but together they show that the simple version of retrospection, in which delivery produces votes, is too thin for UP.

Limits of the Theory in Uttar Pradesh

The theory has three limits in this setting. First, it treats the voter as an individual who evaluates the government, whereas SP support is highly community-anchored. A Muslim vote of 79 per cent in 2022 and a Yadav vote of 83 per cent (The Hindu Bureau, 2022) are group alignments that welfare delivery cannot explain and that persisted when the schemes did not. Caste and political competition shape accountability in India in ways that a purely performance-based model does not capture (Acharya et al., 2015). Second, the theory is silent on the fiscal supply side. The SP's schemes were abandoned because the state could not afford them, so the voter's judgment depended on a decision the government itself reversed. Third, the theory presumes that voters can tell which level of government delivered what, and the shared architecture of Indian federalism means that credit is often misdirected (Deshpande et al., 2019).

Theoretical Contribution

The analysis supports a conditional version of the theory, which this paper terms bounded retrospection. Voters in UP do evaluate performance, but the evaluation is bounded by four conditions: the visibility and attributability of the benefit, the experience of access, the durability of the benefit, and the identity anchor and competitive field in which the choice is made. Welfare is a necessary condition of retrospective reward, since without delivery there is nothing to judge, but it is not sufficient. This reading refines Welfare State Theory too. Programmatic welfare in the Marshallian sense requires rules-based, durable entitlements, and the SP's discretionary and reversible schemes did not create the stable expectations on which long-run accountability depends. The two theories converge on the same conclusion from different directions: electoral returns to welfare depend on the institutional quality of delivery as much as on its generosity.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how the welfare governance of Samajwadi Party governments in Uttar Pradesh related to the party's electoral fortunes between 2002 and 2024. The SP governed only in 2003–2007 and 2012–2017, and its welfare record is concentrated in the second period. The flagship schemes, namely free laptops, Kanya Vidya Dhan and the unemployment allowance, were visible, individual and costly, with provisions of about Rs 4,267 crore in 2012–13. Delivery was uneven and late, and almost all were left unfunded in 2014–15 after the party won five of 80 Lok Sabha seats.

The electoral evidence does not support a simple reward story. The SP's gain in 2012 came before delivery, its loss in 2017 came after it, and its record 2022 vote share was built on Muslim and Yadav consolidation in a bipolar contest against a BJP with its own credited welfare. Beneficiary perception, as far as secondary evidence reveals it, was an intervening variable: favorable experiences strengthened confidence in government, but uneven access, contested credit and the temporary nature of the benefits limited the effect.

Retrospective Voting Theory, applied critically, explains why visible delivery matters and why it is not enough. Voters in UP practice bounded retrospection, in which attribution, access, durability, identity and the competitive field condition the judgment. Welfare can contribute to popularity and votes when delivery is effective, but sustained return requires rules-based, fiscally sustainable programmes linked to livelihoods and a durable coalition. The study's limits are those of its method: it used secondary evidence, lacked beneficiary-level and

district-level data, and relied on press figures for scheme scale. Future research should combine administrative data on coverage with constituency-level results and beneficiary surveys to test the propositions advanced here.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This study uses a qualitative research approach based on document analysis and an interpretative approach. It relies exclusively on publicly accessible secondary sources, including election statistics, government orders and budget provisions reported in the press, survey findings and peer-reviewed scholarship. No primary data were collected, and the study involved no human participants, interviews, surveys or experiments. No personal or confidential data were accessed, so university ethics approval was not required. The interpretations and arguments are those of the authors. AI tools were used for language editing and for checking structure, and all material was reviewed, verified and approved by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The study draws on publicly available secondary sources, including election statistics, budget reports, press coverage of government orders, survey findings and peer-reviewed literature on welfare governance in Uttar Pradesh. All sources are acknowledged through in-text citations and listed in the references. The study did not generate an original empirical dataset, so no separate dataset is available for deposit.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation or presentation of the findings.

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