Populism and Anti-Establishment Discourses in Dravidian Politics: Effects on Party System Stability in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Tamil Nadu Dravidian parties—Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—present an interesting case study of populism's contribution to regional party systems. Having originated out of anti-caste establishment movements and North cultural hegemony, Dravidian politics has institutionalized a unique populism tradition that combines welfare-based government, charismatic leadership, and mass mobilization. The populism, while guaranteeing regional party dominance, has also led to political instability, electoral polarization, and changes in voter behaviour. This article analyses the way Dravidian populism engages with larger trends shaping party systems in India, notably the challenge of politically stabilizing in the face of increasing populist pressure. Using my analysis on Dravidian party communication strategies, and voter behaviour surveys, the research delves into the mechanisms by which populist discourse strengthens party legitimacy at the same time that it creates political competition and instability. Some key themes are the individualization of leadership, mobilization by caste, welfare populism as a vote catch, and the effect of digitalization on populist communication. Placing Dravidian populism in the international discourse of anti-establishment movements, this research sheds light on the way regional parties respond to evolving socio-political conditions. The conclusions add to the overall conference theme by providing a comparative insight into party system development, populist durability, and the problems of democratic rule in transition political contexts.

Keywords: Dravidian Populism, Regional Party Systems, Political Stability, Anti-Establishment Movements, Electoral Mobilization.

1. Introduction

The regional political landscape has been distinctively configured by the persistent dominance of Dravidian parties—the DMK and the AIADMK. Tamil Nadu's developments out of the anti-Brahmin, and anti-Hindi agitations of the mid-20th century, these two parties have taken ideological strength from the Dravidian movement's fundamental values of social justice, rationalism, and linguistic nationalism. Over time, they moved from movement politics to structured electoral politics and government, inscribing populist tactics as core to their political rhetoric and policy delivery systems. At the core of Dravidian populism is a double commitment: the symbolic expression of Tamil cultural pride and pragmatic provision of welfare entitlements. These parties have introduced policies like free rice, laptops, bicycles, and marriage subsidies to assist the public.

While their rhetoric focuses on Tamil identity and resistance to Hindi imposition, they construct a political style that fuses emotional appeal with material redistribution towards marginalized groups. This populist governance model has not only consolidated the regional dominance of these parties but also remapped the contours of electoral behaviour and political mobilization in the state. Yet, the same dynamics that have supported their popularity have created new political tensions and paradoxes. Populist modes of governance—extensively dependent on strong leadership, identity mobilization, and short-term welfare programs—have only bred electoral polarization, personalization of politics, and occasional institutional weakness. Frequent shifts in voter preferences, intra-party fissures, and the expanding influence of digital media have significantly altered the political landscape, contributing to the erosion of traditional party–voter linkages. This study focuses exclusively on the populist strategies and anti-establishment discourses of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, without extending its scope to other regional or national political contexts.

1.1. Historical Background to Dravidian Politics

Dravidian politics can be traced to social and political mobilization against Brahminical hierarchies, cultural and power dominance. This opposition was initially institutionalized in the form of the Justice Party, which was established in 1916 and aimed to protect on-Brahmin interests under the colonial administrative order (Barnett, 1976). This party focused on communal representation, welfare through the state, and Tamil cultural revival paved the way for a uniquely regional political identity. E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar), upon quitting the Indian National Congress, initiated

the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 with the object of destroying the caste system and advocating rationalism, atheism, and equality of gender.

Periyar's criticism went beyond caste to resist religious orthodoxy and what he regarded as the Aryanization (imposition of North) of Dravidian society (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). The movement refigured Tamil identity in oppositional terms—secular, rationalist, and anti-Brahmin—and emerged as a powerful political force. The Anti-Hindi agitations of 1937 and 1965 became symbols of the wider resistance to perceived cultural imperialism. Hindi was not merely a language but a symbol of centralized power dominance against which the Tamil nationalist identity was articulated assertively (Ramaswamy, 1997; Subramanian, 1999).

Later, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was formed in 1949 by C.N. Annadurai, as a tactical move away from non-electoral participatory politics. Following the formation of the DMK, C.N. Annadurai maintained Periyarism's rationalist ethos as a guiding principle but broke with its anti-electoralism by accepting democratic engagement as a vehicle to further Dravidian objectives. The party successfully used popular culture—particularly Tamil film—as a formidable vehicle for political communication and mass mobilization.

Cinema industry became ideological tools, scripting the Dravidian populism's moral world (Pandian, 1992). DMK's 1967 electoral sweep, the first by a party other than the Congress in Tamil Nadu, marked a turning point. It created a political ethos of welfare populism, linguistic nationalism, and identity politics. Early measures entailed price regulation, housing plans, and raised caste-based reservations (Subramanian, 1999). In 1972, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) broke away from the DMK to form the AIADMK, importing cinematic charisma into the political arena. His Midday Meal Scheme, launched in the 1980s, was as much an intervention in diet as it was a metaphor for the state's moral obligation toward the poor (Dickey, 1993). Charismatic populism, the fusion of emotional appeal and social welfare, became the foundation of Tamil Nadu's political discourse.

The DMK had a tangible ideological link to Periyar's rationalism in the form of ongoing campaigns against superstition, defense of secularism, and advocacy of social reform. For example, under M. Karunanidhi, the party focused on erasing caste names from public records and promoted Tamil as an administrative and educational language (Pandian, 2007). Conversely, the AIADMK followed a pragmatic populism. Although they invoked Periyarist

values in rhetoric, politicians such as Jayalalithaa instead opted for symbolic maternalistic rule by means of initiatives such as Amma Canteens and free laptop distribution, as opposed to direct ideological engagement (Hardgrave, 1973). Both the parties nonetheless repeatedly expressed their populist politics in moral, inclusive, and deeply Tamil terms, invoking the discourse of justice and dignity in their appeals to historically marginalized populations. Tamil Nadu has experienced the institutionalization of populism as electoral tactic and logic of governance since the 1970s. Welfare programs like subsidized food, health insurance, and education schemes have become ordinary state functions, thus altering the citizen-state relationship.

Personality cults around figures like MGR and Jayalalithaa were not just media fabrications but were rooted in the daily lives of the poor, through the state's material presence in terms of rations, free commodities, and welfare benefits bearing the leader's image (Dickey, 1993; Hardgrave, 1973). This performance populism forged an emotional-political bargain, a relationship where emotional loyalty to leaders is exchanged for tangible welfare benefits. The emergence of digital media has further changed the landscape of populist communication, enabling both the DMK and AIADMK to personalize their messages, memes, and outreach programs through social media websites, YouTube channels, and WhatsApp campaigns—pursuing the tradition of media-led political mobilization.

Populist movements, though rooted in progressive ideals, often serve dual roles. They can promote democratic inclusion while simultaneously generating political tensions. Based on a systematic investigation of party manifestos, electoral strategies, and popular perceptions, the paper analyses how Dravidian parties disseminate, act out, and perpetuate populism, especially within the rapidly shifting socio-political landscape.

2. Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore the political communication dynamics and populist tactics used by Dravidian parties, namely the DMK and AIADMK, between 2001 and 2021. These are placed within evolving communication environments, specifically the emergence of new platforms such as social media, which have transformed the way parties reach voters, especially urban and younger voters.

To complement the empirical foundation, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with a variety of informants such as secondary-level political

leaders, party cadres, senior journalists, and public intellectuals who have knowledge of Tamil Nadu's political culture. But in this paper, I have focused on only the field based on interviews from voters.

The 210 survey respondents were selected using stratified purposive sampling. Interviewees were identified via snowball sampling from local informants, ensuring a diverse range of political perspectives. The aspect captures voter trends, beneficiary attitudes towards welfare programs, and individual identification with party ideologies or leadership personalities.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Global Theories of Populism

International literature on populism makes for engaging comparisons and contrasts with the Indian experience. Latin American populism, especially in Ernesto Laclau (2005), theorizes populism as a "logic of political articulation," whereby political identity is constructed by polarizing society into "the people" and "the elite." Examples of leaders such as Perón and Chávez illustrate this via mass mobilization, redistributive welfare, and affective leadership. European populism, particularly the right varieties, is more exclusionary—nationalist and anti-immigrant but also possess characteristics found in Tamil Nadu populism: anti-elitism, institution scepticism, and media leadership (Mudde, 2004). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) contend that populism is either inclusionary or exclusionary depending on the situation. Tamil Nadu manifests the inclusionary mode—activating marginalized groups and consolidating power in charismatic figures.

Populism's ability to fit into various socio-political environments—whether it is Catholic-nationalist Poland or indigenous-popular Bolivia—is testament to the usefulness of populism as an analytical framework (Roberts, 2015; Weyland, 2001). There is consensus among scholars that the power of populism comes from its flexibility and the ability to replace institutional power with symbolic representation.

3.2. Dravidian Populism: Historical and Cultural Dimensions

Lloyd Rudolph's "Urban Life and Populist Radicalism" (1961) is a classic text that explores how post-independence urban conditions shaped populist radicalism in Madras. The Justice Party and subsequently the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) formed the initial basis for anti-elitist Dravidian politics. Dravidian populism, according to Rudolph, is not just ideational but also profoundly performative, grounded in Tamil Nadu's everyday political culture. DMK and AIADMK established emotional appeal through anti-caste agitations, Tamil chauvinism, and social justice appeals.

M.S.S. Pandian's The Image Trap (1992, 2015) examines how the former movie star MGR translated his on-screen persona into a political figure. Employing the framework of "constructed biographies," Pandian illustrates how movie roles facilitated emotional identifications among subaltern voters. MGR's welfare measures were symbolic gestures of presence and not structural change. His combination of spectacle and substance defined Dravidian populism as an embodied cultural practice. These analyses stress that populism in Tamil Nadu is not only a political strategy but one culturally embedded.

3.3. Media, Leadership, and Political Symbolism

Tamil Nadu's political culture is strongly influenced by media and symbolism. Emotional identification with charismatic leaders such as MGR, Jayalalithaa, and Karunanidhi strengthened leader-oriented governance. Pandian (2007), Dickey (1993), and Hardgrave (1973) record the ways in which film and mass media produced quasi-sacred portraits of leaders, echoing the use of visual propaganda during Perónism in Argentina. This encouraged a politics of personalization, wherein symbolic gestures more often replaced institutional accountability.

3.4. Institutionalization and Party System in Tamil Nadu

Indian federalism provides room for regional populism to flourish. Anti-Brahminical identity, caste mobilization, and linguistic nationalism constructed a unique populist base in Tamil Nadu (Barnett, 1976; Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). Welfare policies institutionalized populism, Subramanian (1999) claims, incorporating redistribution within political identity. Pandian (2007) describes how welfare is performance and clientelism at the same time—inclusive and strategic.

Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) refer to this as the "Dravidian Model," which melds government and electoral strategy, collapsing state and party boundaries. Levitsky and Loxton (2013) find analogies in Latin America, where populist devotion is constructed through clientelism and charismatic leadership.

3.5. Comparative Reflections

Dickey (1993) and Pandian (1992) demonstrate that Tamil populism's theatricality is in keeping with global trends. However, Tamil Nadu's model preserves cross-party agreement on welfare, in contrast to the polarized tendency in populism elsewhere. The dilemma lies after charisma—when succession crises jeopardize coherence. The post-MGR and post-Jayalalithaa period's erosion of individual charisma illustrates the conflict between personalization and institutional continuity.

Wyatt (2013) highlights the point that Tamil Nadu populism, which is usually brushed aside as short-term electoral outlay, is also an ideology based on the concept of "the people" as an organic, moral force. Both AIADMK and DMK have remodelled their populist appeals to suit emerging challenges. Tamil populism can be placed in international trends through comparative literature while emphasizing its specific combination of identity, welfare, and leadership.

While the global literature explores populism extensively, few studies integrate field-level voter data with symbolic dimensions of populism. This research bridges that gap by synthesizing empirical insights and theoretical analysis within the Dravidian context.

This scholarship lays the groundwork for how Dravidian populism, based on emotional leadership, symbolic resistance, and welfare distribution, not only mirrors wider worldwide populist trends but also constructs the internal party system dynamics of Tamil Nadu. How anti-establishment talk, personalized leadership, and populist showmanship cross-pollinate has strong implications for political stability. Whereas such tactics unify mass popular and electoral support, they also undermine institutional convention, encourage intra-party factionalism, and promote unstable voting behaviour. This research draws upon these observations to examine in what ways populism—beyond being rhetorical or cultural—has structural consequences for the continuity, flexibility, and robustness of Tamil Nadu's regional party system.

3.6. Populism Dravidian Style in Practice

Dravidian populism in Tamil Nadu is a unique combination of cultural politics, charismatic leadership, caste mobilization, and welfarism, shaped over the ideological and political development of parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Dravidian style populism, although sharing a few characteristics with other worldwide trends in populism, is inextricably linked to South Indian socio-political history.

According to P. Ramajayam (2017), the populist communication strategies can be divided into three phases: Phase 1: Culturalism – The initial phase emphasized pride in Tamil, cultural identity, and welfare schemes for OBCs and Dalits. The leaders were literary and oratorial in nature and connected with the masses. Phase 2: Class Divides – There was dilution of the ideology of Dravidianism under the impact of Hindutva, class within OBC, and privatization policies of MGR. Regional and national level political complexities again came out under the form of AIADMK's LTTE support. Phase 3: Social Realignments – From 1991, this phase was characterized by the decline of Dravidian ideology and the ascendance of Hindutva, which compelled Dalits and minorities to re-evaluate their political identities. Both DMK and AIADMK increasingly resorted to populist rhetoric and welfare promises to maintain their voter base.

3.7. Leader-Centred Politics and Charismatic Leadership

While charismatic leadership exists outside populism, in Tamil Nadu it performs a populist function by merging leader-centric narratives with welfare outreach, anchoring legitimacy in symbolic and material terms. The leaders such as M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), J. Jayalalithaa, and M. Karunanidhi built affective bonds with their constituents, sometimes obscuring political leadership and personal reverence. As Pandian (2015) contends in The Image Trap, the on-screen image of MGR as a benevolent hero translated all too easily into his political persona, and he built his image as a saviour of subaltern poor. Pandian terms this the production of "constructed biographies," whereby the political stage and the screen became conflated to cement public opinion and rally support.

Jayalalithaa followed this tradition by positioning herself as the maternal figure "Amma," providing protection and care through far-reaching welfare programs. Her style of leadership was authoritarian and yet affectionate,

confirming the personalisation of political authority (Pandian, 2007). Karunanidhi, as a theatre and literature backgrounded politician, constructed political narratives that connected with Tamil identity, rationalism, and linguistic pride, gaining a cultural base for his charismatic authority (Ramaswamy, 1997; Subramanian, 1999). This individualization of power helped to stabilize political leadership as well as restrict intra-party democracy, making parties leader-oriented machines in which affect and authority coexisted (Hardgrave, 1973).

3.8. Caste-Based Mobilization and Subaltern Membership

Although Dravidian ideology was based upon anti-Brahminism and dreams of casteless society, the business of electioneering required tactical caste mobilization. Geetha and Rajadurai (1998) point out how the initial radicalism of the Dravidian movement had given way to coalitions with intermediate castes, the Thevars, Vanniyars, and Gounders, who were the determinants of party successes. Dalits were selectively brought into the Dravidian political fold, preponderantly through welfare measures and symbolical representation and not through structural change (Pandian, 2007). This selective incorporation illustrates how populism served as both a tool of empowerment and exclusion—providing visibility and welfare without deconstructing hierarchical caste hierarchies (Subramanian, 1999). Social justice rhetoric became an instrument of electoral consolidation instead of social revolution, cementing what Barnett (1976) called "cultural nationalism" remade for democratic populism. In a caste-stratified society, Dravidian populism constructs a symbolic unity of ‘the people’ while pragmatically mobilizing caste groups. This duality reveals a hybrid populism that blends inclusionary rhetoric with selective caste alliances.

3.9. Populism of Welfare as Vote Bank Politics

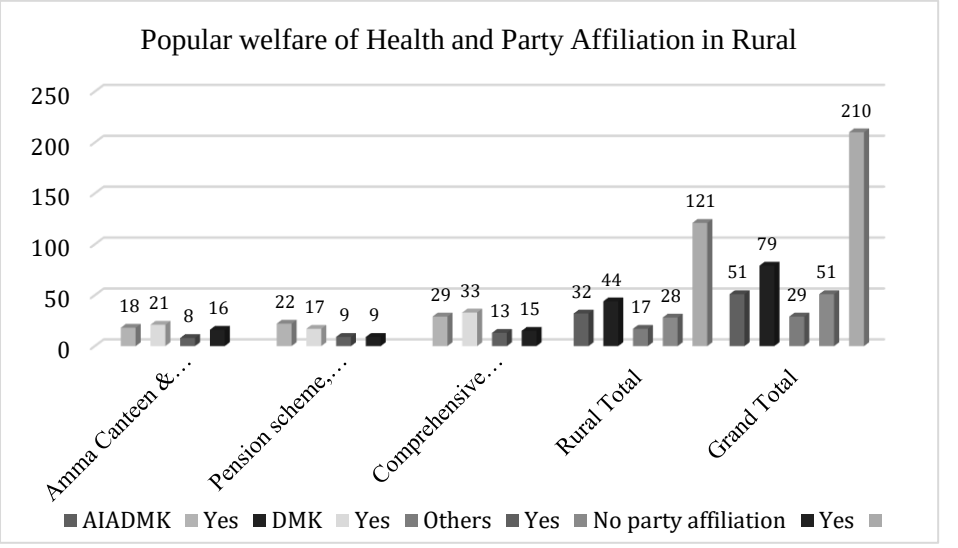
Arguably the most lasting legacy of Dravidian populism is its model of welfare-centric governance. The Tamil Nadu welfare model, with its universal subsidies, targeted support, and symbolic giveaway of goods (such as mixers, grinders, and TVs), became the focus of political legitimacy (Kalaiyarasan, 2014). Roy (2011) writes about how welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu turned into performative acts of state largesse, where the provision of services was also political theatre. These welfare programs have established a distinctive type of what Mooij (2007) refers to as "clientelistic democracy," in which citizens see the state as being responsive, not institutionally, but through immediate material rewards. Although this system has expanded

access to state resources for marginalized communities, it has also solidified a type of patronage politics that links entitlements to vote-buying.

Venkatesan (2021) proposes that this welfare populism system constitutes a "Dravidian model," wherein cultural pride, social mobility, and material gains come together to perpetuate a unique political culture in Tamil Nadu. But with this has come the criticism of fiscal prudence and the inability of such populism in overcoming structural inequalities.

The Dravidian variant of populism is a local expression of a worldwide phenomenon, influenced by Tamil identity, caste politics, and emotional politics. It synthesizes charismatic leadership, symbolic empowerment, and mass welfare delivery into a rational political methodology that has lasted for decades. While other populisms come and go in rapid cycles of formation and decline, Dravidian populism has institutionalized itself through structures of the state, cultural narrations, and affective relationships between leaders and the masses. In this way, it presents a nuanced and educational example of understanding the lived experience of democratic populism in the Global South.

Figure: 1. Populism of Welfare and Party Affiliation in Rural



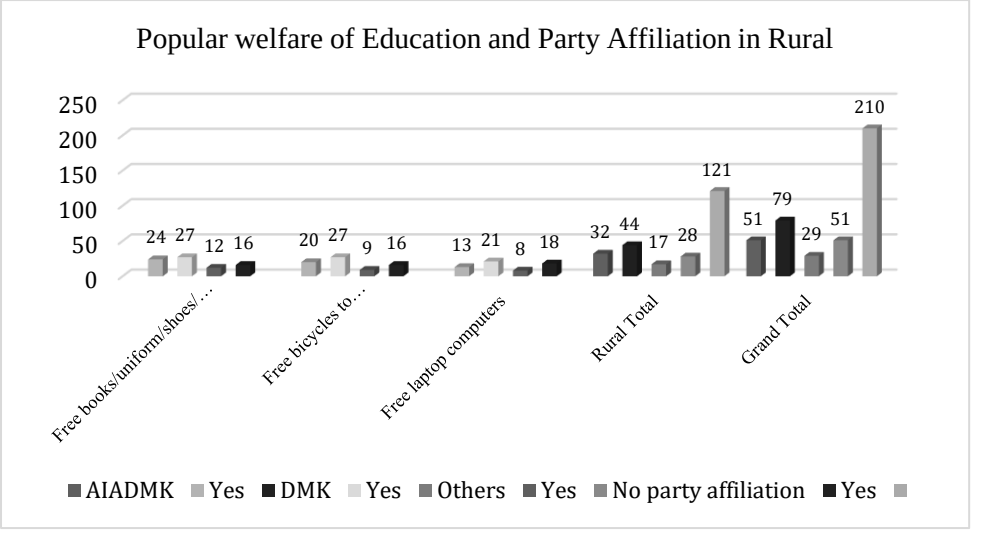
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The figure provides empirical evidence into the convergence of welfare perception and party affiliation among rural respondents in Tamil Nadu. It is centred on three high-profile welfare schemes—Amma Canteen & Other, Pension Schemes (old age, widow, disability), and Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme—to gauge their political appeal across parties, the AIADMK, DMK, Others, and the unaffiliated. The Amma Canteen, the flagship scheme of the AIADMK during Jayalalithaa's time in urban cities, remains symbolically powerful in rural Tamil Nadu. As the chart indicates, AIADMK-aligned respondents (n=18) and non-party-aligned respondents (n=16) overwhelmingly identify with this welfare scheme, demonstrating how state-provided welfare gets inscribed in the symbolic register of a leader-driven political discourse. The word "Amma" acts not just as branding but as populist tactic that combines affective politics with everyday survival. Pension schemes—addressing the aged, widowed, and disabled—are quite evenly split by party affiliation, with AIADMK (n=22) and DMK (n=17) being followed closely by Others (n=9) and those who have no party affiliation (n=9). This indicates wider acceptance of these schemes as part of the function of the welfare state, rather than specifically belonging to a party. It is consistent with contention that such schemes are seen as the "everyday state"—offering regular contact with citizens, especially marginalized groups.

Highest support for the Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme is found among party-unaffiliated respondents (n=33), indicating a depoliticized but highly valued welfare for health in rural areas. AIADMK (n=29) and DMK (n=13) have lower but significant support, and others (n=15) also exhibit moderate participation. This could reflect the institutionalization of welfare related to health, viewed as more a function of the state than as an act of party largesse, mirroring comment on Tamil Nadu's "universalistic welfare regime" forged by multiple regimes over time. The Rural Total (n=121) and Grand Total (n=210) evidently indicate that the larger chunk of the population is in favour of welfare schemes across categories, party lines apart. While there is variation among party-affiliated respondents with respect to preference for schemes, party non-affiliated ones consistently rank high in all welfare schemes. This indicates that welfare delivery cannot be solely explained by party identification but by a wider civic understanding of state legitimacy and service delivery expectation. Also " Popular welfare of Health and Party Affiliation in Urban" analyses the overlap between welfare programs related to public health and political allegiance of urban respondents. Schemes rated are the Amma Canteen scheme, different pension schemes (for aged, widows, and disabled individuals), and the Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme

offered by the government. Interestingly, party-unaffiliated respondents express overwhelmingly receiving benefits from each of the three services—29 in Amma Canteen, 26 in pension schemes, and 21 in the health insurance scheme—totalling a whopping 210 beneficiaries. Party-affiliated respondents express relatively greater welfare reception (Amma Canteen: 18; Pension: 17; Health: 21) consistent with the party's policy heritage in urban welfare delivery. DMK-aligned respondents show parallel trends but with modestly lower rates of recognition of the three schemes. The pension and insurance schemes receive uniform recognition across parties, demonstrating their widespread popular support and administrative stability. The rural aggregate, while small (35), contributes to the total comprehension of health and nutrition welfare as a foundation of urban administration. This dataset supports the finding that welfare schemes in urban Tamil Nadu, particularly health-centred schemes, command cross-party and mass public involvement. More crucially, disproportionate over-representation of unaffiliated respondents points to the possibility that political communication around health issues may transcend the arena of hard party loyalty, highlighting the technocratic and non-partisan face these policies aim to project in competitive electoral politics. The results highlight the centrality of welfare infrastructure to urban public life, where visibility and accessibility of schemes like Amma Canteens and health insurance serve as powerful tools of governance legitimacy and citizen trust.

Figure :2. Popular welfare of Education and Party Affiliation in Rural



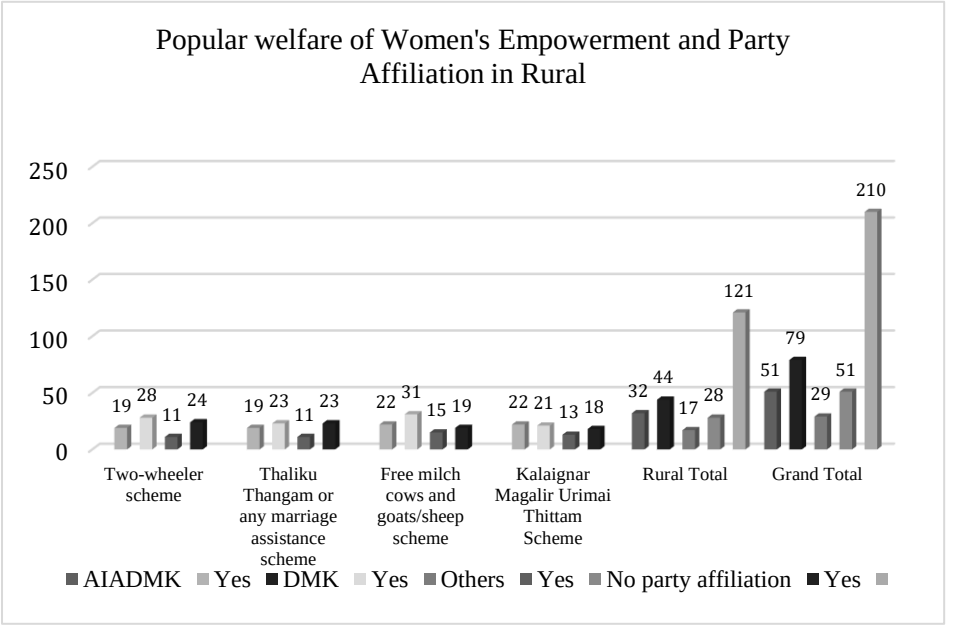
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The figure "Popular Welfare of Education and Party Affiliation in Rural" gives a visual representation of the distribution of beneficiaries of educational welfare schemes across various political party affiliations in rural Tamil Nadu. It classifies responses based on identification of particular welfare programmes—free books, uniforms, shoes; free bicycles for government school children; free laptop computers—along with mapping them onto party labels like AIADMK, DMK, other parties, and not belonging to any party. The analysis shows that welfare in education has had a prominent role in influencing the Dravidian parties' populist political alignments. Interestingly, free books and uniforms schemes are both commonly recognized by DMK-aligned (27) and non-aligned (27) samples, indicating cross-party acceptability. Similarly, the bicycle scheme, also one of the best-known welfare programs, enjoys high recognition among DMK (27) and unaffiliated (16) respondents, indicating how far it has penetrated rural areas. Interestingly, the scheme of laptop distribution, usually attributed to AIADMK during the tenure of Jayalalithaa, gains the maximum positive responses from the DMK-supporting people (21), emphasizing the way these welfare schemes override partisan allegiance and are internalized by the general rural population. The aggregate number under 'Rural Total' and 'Grand Total' supports this trend too, indicating that a large majority of the respondents identifying these schemes have no party allegiance (210 in total). This information supports academic readings Dravidian populism combines symbolic politics and material redistribution. Welfare here is not a transactional practice but rather a constitutive aspect of political legitimacy and social contract. Welfare aligns with welfare becomes a pedagogical instrument of the state, producing political subjectivities and promoting rural and subaltern participation in governance.

Another side of residence area "Popular Welfare of Education and Party Affiliation in Urban" chart points out the correlation between exposure to educational welfare programs and political party affiliation for urban households. The programs that were covered include free school basics (school bags, shoes, uniforms, books) distribution, free bicycles to government school-going children, and free laptop computers. The most reported gains are among the unaffiliated respondents, who reported 31 for school supplies, 16 for bicycles, and 33 for computers—adding up to the total unaffiliated tally of 210. AIADMK and DMK respondents register steady but modest levels of gain across the programs. AIADMK's dominance is seen in the free bicycles (16) and laptops (14) categories, matching their past

experience with educational incentives during previous stints. DMK's constituency shows greater advantage in school essentials (18) and laptops (14), tracing the party's increased focus on online education and school infrastructure over recent years. Notably, the vote of non-party-affiliated voters surpasses party-affiliated respondents in every category, and this could be an indication of a wide-based embrace of educational programs as non-partisan instruments of development. The education interventions under evaluation here are not only public goods but also important political communication instruments, whereby salient and regular entitlements act as symbolic assurances of state capability and interest in the poor. Just like in the healthcare sector, this chart highlights the extensive penetration of welfare-oriented political communication in city areas, and educational programs serve as a fundamental interface between the state and society, particularly youth and economically marginal sections.

Figure: 3. Popular welfare of Women's Empowerment and Party Affiliation in Rural



Source: Filed study

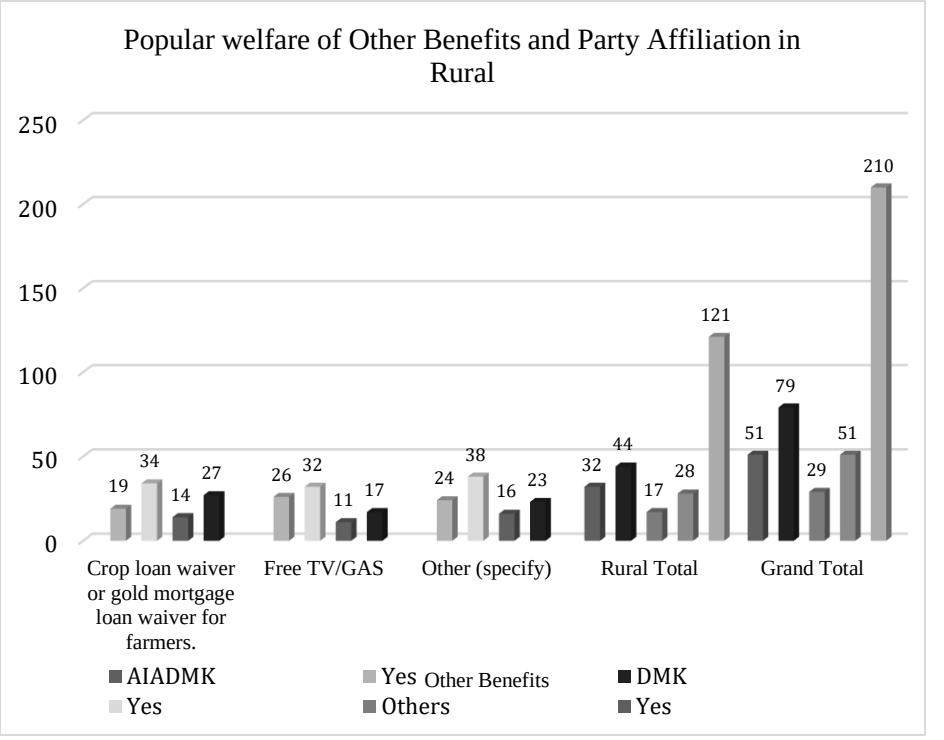
The figure labelled "Popular Welfare of Women's Empowerment and Party Affiliation in Rural" shows how the political party affiliations understand women-focused welfare schemes in rural Tamil Nadu. It assesses perceptions

of major welfare programs—namely, the two-wheeler scheme, Thaliku Thangam (marriage support), gratis milch cows and goats/sheep distribution, and the Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam—by classifying responses according to political affiliation (AIADMK, DMK, Others, and non-party). Of these, the two-wheeler scheme receives prominent recognition from respondents affiliated with the DMK (28) and those with no party affiliation (24), hinting at greater perception of reach. Equally, the Thaliku Thangam scheme witnesses almost identical rates of identification with DMK (23), AIADMK (19), and non-aligned (11), which testifies to cross-party appeal. The milch cow/goat distribution scheme and the Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam, both viewed as central instruments of economic empowerment, are most widely identified with DMK sympathizers (31 and 21, respectively), followed by AIADMK supporters and others. Notably, unaffiliated respondents still make up a considerable number in identifying all four schemes. The 'Rural Total' and 'Grand Total' figures also further support this inference since 210 party-unaffiliated respondents identify these schemes. This supports the proposition that Tamil Nadu's welfare programs are not just electoral weapons but institutionalized mechanisms of empowerment, particularly for women in rural settings. These findings posit that welfare programs in Tamil Nadu result in a gendered mode of political communication in which women's citizenship is intermediated by material gain and symbolic assertion of rights. This conforms to feminist criticism which points to the ways through which state welfare emerges as a field of negotiation, legitimacy, and identity-making in subaltern politics.

Another side "Popular Welfare of Women's Empowerment and Party Affiliation in Urban" shows access to gender-specific welfare schemes in urban Tamil Nadu. Schemes such as the Two-Wheeler Scheme, Marriage Assistance (Thaliku Thangam), Free Milch Cows and Goats/Sheep Scheme, and the Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam Scheme are the focal point of this dataset. Again, the maximum take-up is among the unaffiliated, with 14 under the Two-Wheeler Scheme, 22 for marriage support, 33 for livestock distribution, and 26 for the Kalaignar Urimai scheme. The uniform pattern (grand total: 210) reinforces that women's empowerment schemes are not disproportionately availed of by any single political party but are taken up by a broad range of urban citizens regardless of party affiliation. Interestingly, the Kalaignar scheme and cattle distribution—usually perceived as powerful populist symbols—have attracted greater notice from DMK-oriented and non-aligned beneficiaries, indicating DMK's strategic communication campaigns are resonating in urban welfare discourses. AIADMK-aligned urban dwellers demonstrate low participation in these schemes, supporting

the welfare association shift following 2016. These findings capture a shift in the urban welfare political economy—part-branded populism to an inclusive, wider delivery model, indicating how urban women voters are both receivers and interpreters of political messages through welfare access. The statistics point to a changing approach in Dravidian political communication—where gendered programs become not just instruments for empowerment but necessary pipelines of electoral participation in urban Tamil Nadu.

Figure: 4. Popular welfare of Other Benefits and Party Affiliation in Rural



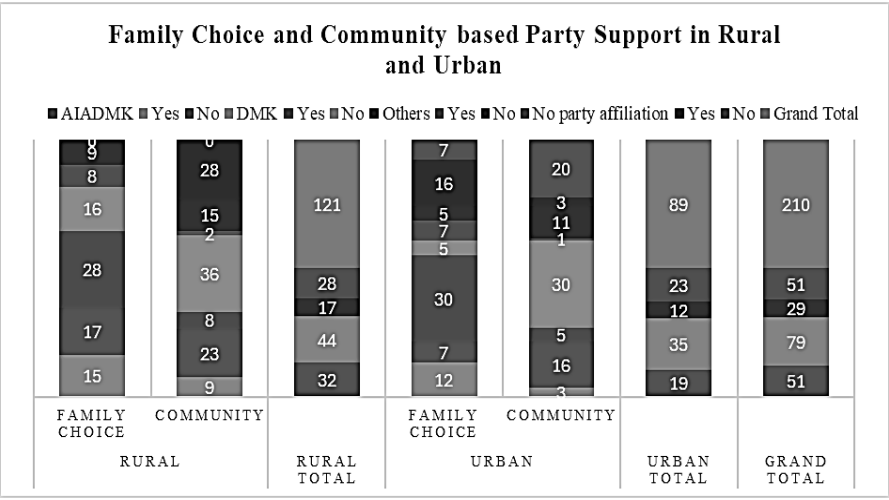
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The "Popular Welfare of Other Benefits and Party Affiliation in Rural" figure demarcates rural respondents' identification of other welfare programs—free TV/Gas distribution, crop loan or gold mortgage loan waiver, and others not specified—by political alignment. Party line patterns of recognition differ, with DMK-aligned respondents reporting the highest levels of recall for waivers on crops/gold loans (34), followed by non-aligned respondents (27)

and AIADMK-aligned respondents (19). In the case of free TV/Gas schemes, both DMK (32) and AIADMK (26) respondents report notable recall, in line with the past salience of such populist welfare in the political economy of Tamil Nadu (Wyatt, 2013). The same pattern continues in the 'Other (specify)' category as well, where DMK supporters (38) and independents (23) once again register significant recognition. The rural counts confirm that independent respondents (44) continue to dominate the story of welfare recognition, ahead of those identifying with AIADMK (32), DMK (17), and Others (28). Collectively, the overall tally highlights the overwhelming majority of non-affiliated voters (210) in identifying such schemes, indicating once again that welfare programs cross party lines in rural Tamil Nadu. This trend reinforces the enmeshment of populist redistribution within Dravidian political culture, wherein welfare policies have historically existed as tools for mass mobilization and legitimacy, particularly in agrarian and low-income settings. The results underscore the political communication diffusion by welfare as an affective and transactional state-citizenship relationship, where party identity is not the central decision factor of welfare accessibility and awareness.

The "Popular Welfare of Other Benefits and Party Affiliation in Urban" summarizes the breakdown of beneficiaries into three categories of welfare—crop loan or gold mortgage waiver, free TV/GAS, and miscellaneous benefits—in urban Tamil Nadu. Interestingly, the crop or gold mortgage loan waiver scheme had no beneficiaries among those who confirmed receipt across all political parties, suggesting either rural targeting or administrative exclusion in urban areas. The Free TV/GAS scheme, which is representative of Tamil Nadu's populist welfare tradition, was accessed most by DMK-aligned households (28), followed by non-party respondents (18) and AIADMK-aligned respondents (19), indicating its ongoing symbolic appeal across party lines. The 'Other' category, which presumably includes ad hoc or informal welfare benefits, had the same patterns: DMK (18), AIADMK (11), and no party affiliation (10) control the beneficiary pool, suggesting that even lesser schemes gain traction largely through the DMK's policy networks or neutral governance outreach. The overall urban beneficiaries for this group total 210, with the politically unaffiliated again having the largest representation (51), followed closely by DMK (79) and AIADMK (51). These numbers confirm a pattern: urban welfare participation is less a matter of party identification and more a reflection of administrative coverage and universal policy outreach. Therefore, the DMK seems to mobilize welfare effectively not only as a political communication strategy but as a tool of governance appealing to a large, frequently non-partisan urban electorate.

Figure: 5. Family Choice and Community Based Party Support in Rural and Urban



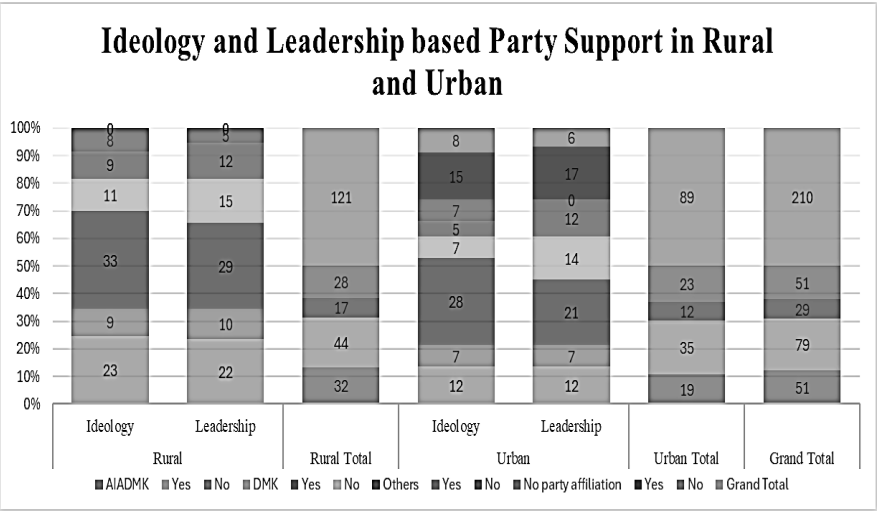
Source: Filed study

The information provides an interesting window on the way that political decisions in households are made, either on the basis of family influence or community pressure, with differences obviously apparent between the rural and the urban environment. In rural interviewees (n=121), party allegiance is still a determinant. The DMK is highlighted by a large support base: 28 indicated that their selection was influenced by family, with 36 stating that they had been swayed by community expectations. This is not only a reflection of party allegiance, but also of the DMK's long-term presence in local networks where community-based mobilization is a central factor.

AIADMK-identified households, while fewer in number, also indicate a significant divide—15 citing family and 23 pointing to community—indicating a strong collective voice in rural electoral behaviour. Intriguingly, partisans with no political affiliation relied solely on community pressure (28), further establishing the pattern that in rural Tamil Nadu, neighbourhood agreement and social membership tend to dominate individual or familial sympathies. Within cities (n=89), however, the pattern is slightly altered. In this context, DMK-aligned respondents are significantly more likely to be guided by family preference (30), suggesting that in cities, political values are perhaps more definitively transmitted within families. AIADMK urban

supporters exhibit a lesser divide (12 family vs. 3 community), which may reflect either declining hold or greater political rationality in cities. Of the unaffiliated, 16 urban respondents named family, and 3 named community—reversing the rural pattern. It may reflect increasing political independence or contact with larger concerns outside local social influence in cities. If we consider the broader picture—rural and urban combined—DMK), of course, still maintains the highest base (79), followed by AIADMK and non-affiliated respondents (51 each). One notable point is the extent to which voting behaviour, particularly in Tamil Nadu, is determined not only by personal ideology but by the mundane social world in which people live—whether it is home and family discussions or the wider voice of society around them. Political preference, in this case, is not a question of choice; it's an indication of who the voters trust, who they believe, and how they perceive themselves in their social environments.

Figure: 6. Ideology and Leadership Based Party Support in Rural and Urban



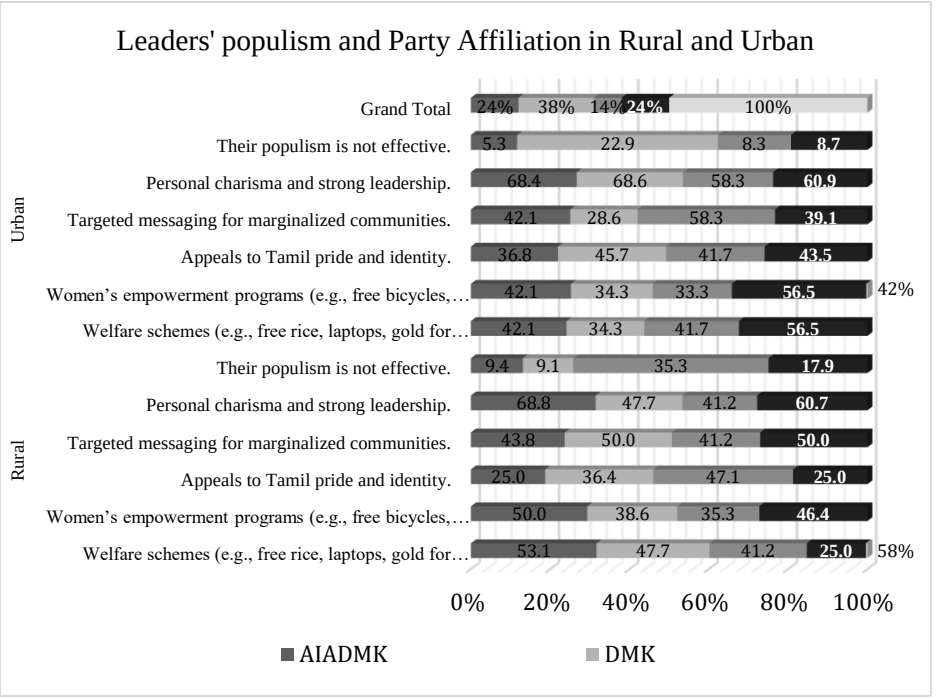
Source: Filed study

The information illuminates the perceptions of Tamil Nadu voters, rural and urban, of the popularity of political parties based on ideology and leadership. In rural localities (n=121), the DMK is far ahead, with 33 mentioning ideology and 29 mentioning leadership as the basis for their preference. This implies a deeply rooted ideological narrative and charismatic leadership that still resonates with voters at the grassroots level. AIADMK also has a

significant base: 23 rural respondents are in favour of the party because of its ideology and 22 because of its leadership. These numbers highlight the party's residual symbolic capital and its association with particular voter communities in the countryside. Notably, "Other" party identifiers also cite leadership as a slightly greater draw than ideology (12 vs. 9), possibly an indication of the rise of localized leaders who appeal beyond party boundaries. Urban trends (n=89) provide a slightly different picture. While ideology is still a strong influence for DMK voters (28 respondents), leadership falls to 21, which could mean that urban voters are more interested in the party's overall vision than in specific leaders. AIADMK, on the other hand, has an even split in urban areas, with 12 respondents each for ideology and leadership—meaning that its popularity may now be based more equally on both party identity and leadership memory. Other" city voters also vote more for leadership (12) than for ideology (5), reiterating the increasing importance of personal influence and personalized campaigns in city politics.

A dramatic difference is seen among the unaffiliated. In rural districts, not one respondent mentioned either ideology or leadership—possibly an indicator of political disaffection or indifference. Yet in urban districts, 15 respondents mentioned ideology and 17 mentioned leadership, indicating that even unaffiliated voters are motivated by fundamental values and leadership figures. This might suggest an incipient trend toward issue-based and leader-based voting outside the conventional party framework in urban Tamil Nadu. Overall, putting rural and urban together, DMK is the most ideologically grounded party with the biggest support base (79), followed by AIADMK (51) and non-affiliates (51). The results indicate that ideology and leadership still play a role—albeit an unequal one across geography and party. In rural parts, both are driving party identification, especially for DMK and AIADMK, whereas in cities, ideological adherence seems to marginally dominate. These patterns highlight the complex and dynamic nature of political communication and affiliation in Tamil Nadu's democracy.

Figure:7. Leaders' Populism and Party Affiliation in Rural and Urban



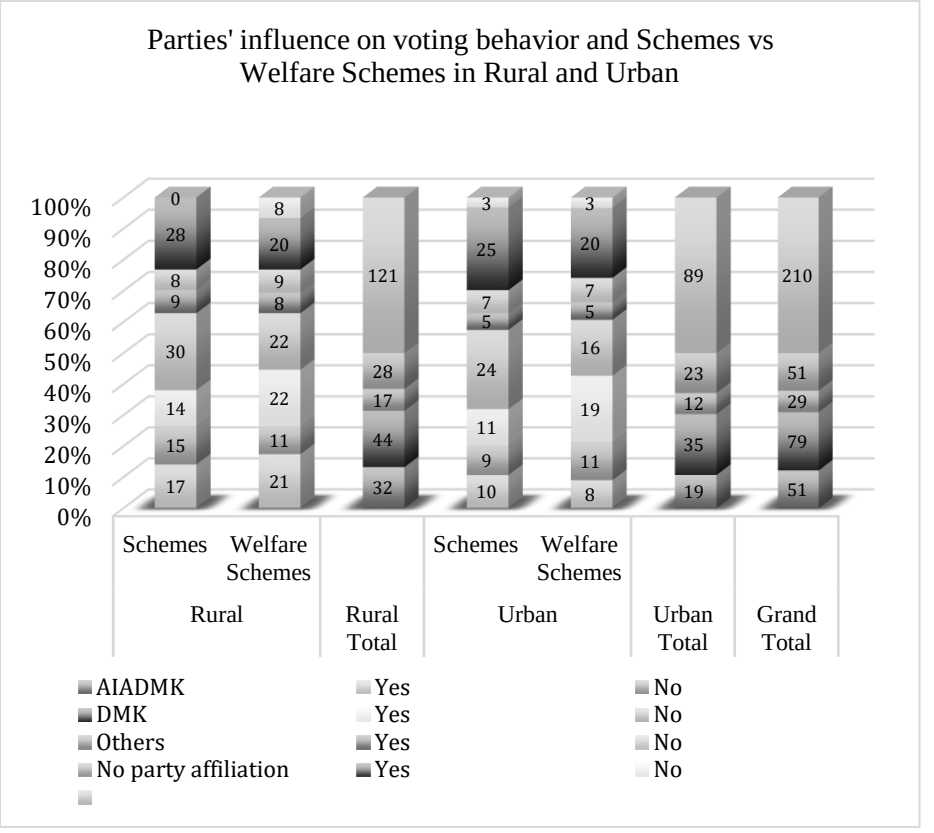
Source: Filed study

The results point to the long-term potency of populism, especially by way of welfare policies and the charisma of a leader, at the heart of party identification for both rural and urban Tamil Nadu. Among voters in rural constituencies, AIADMK impresses with especially high support for its welfare programmes (53.1%), empowerment of women programme (50%), and above all personal charisma and leadership (68.8%). This points towards Jayalalithaa's towering figure and legacy in rural voters' thinking. Likewise, messaging to marginal communities (43.8%) and appeals based on Tamil pride (25%) also dominate, suggesting a tiered communication approach based on welfare and identity. In contrast, DMK's rural base shows slightly broader ideological alignment, with 50% resonating with its targeted communication to marginalized groups and 47.7% emphasizing leadership. While welfare (47.7%) and women's schemes (38.6%) remain important, the DMK also draws relatively higher support through its cultural appeals to Tamil identity (36.4%)—a legacy of Karunanidhi's Dravidian ideologue image. Interestingly, DMK also sees minimal rejection of its populism, with

only 9.1% feeling it is ineffective. Other rural party backers evidence a more scattered reaction, 47.1% enjoying Tamil pride appeals and 41.2% recognizing welfare, women's schemes, and leadership. Yet, a greater proportion (35.3%) believe that such populism is ineffective—possibly an indication of disillusionment with mainstream Dravidian approaches. Among rural voters who are not affiliated with a party, the populist model continues to resonate: 60.7% prize strong leadership, 50% welcome outreach to the marginalized, and 46.4% favour women's programs. Yet a significant 17.9% feel that such populist initiatives are insufficient, indicating some doubt among those who do not participate in formal party membership.

In urban Tamil Nadu, populism's influence is slightly altered but still strong. AIADMK has a hold on personal charisma (68.4%), followed by welfare (42.1%) and women's empowerment schemes (42.1%). Tamil identity and messaging of marginal communities are still consistent (36.8% and 42.1%, respectively), though just 5.3% of AIADMK's urban constituency reject the role of populism, showing high correlation with its urban strategy. DMK is also successful in urban spaces, with strong enthusiasm for Tamil identity appeals (45.7%), welfare programs (34.3%), and leadership (68.6%). Nevertheless, 22.9% of its urban base questions the efficacy of its populism—implying a moderate gap or dashed expectations in spite of the party's ideological bent. Other party supporters in urban areas also give high importance to Tamil pride (41.7%) and leadership (58.3%), while 8.3% consider populism to be ineffective. Unaffiliated urban voters also maintain a positive attitude towards welfare (56.5%), women's schemes (56.5%), and leadership (60.9%), while 8.7% do not believe populist politics can work. Overall, the analysis shows that both Jayalalithaa’s and Karunanidhi’s populist legacies continue to anchor political support in Tamil Nadu. While AIADMK leverages charisma and welfare more strongly, DMK effectively blends ideology with cultural appeal. The data suggests that populism remains a persuasive force across party lines, especially when linked with targeted benefits and identity-based communication.

Figure: 8. Parties' influence on voting behaviour and Schemes vs Welfare Schemes in Rural and Urban



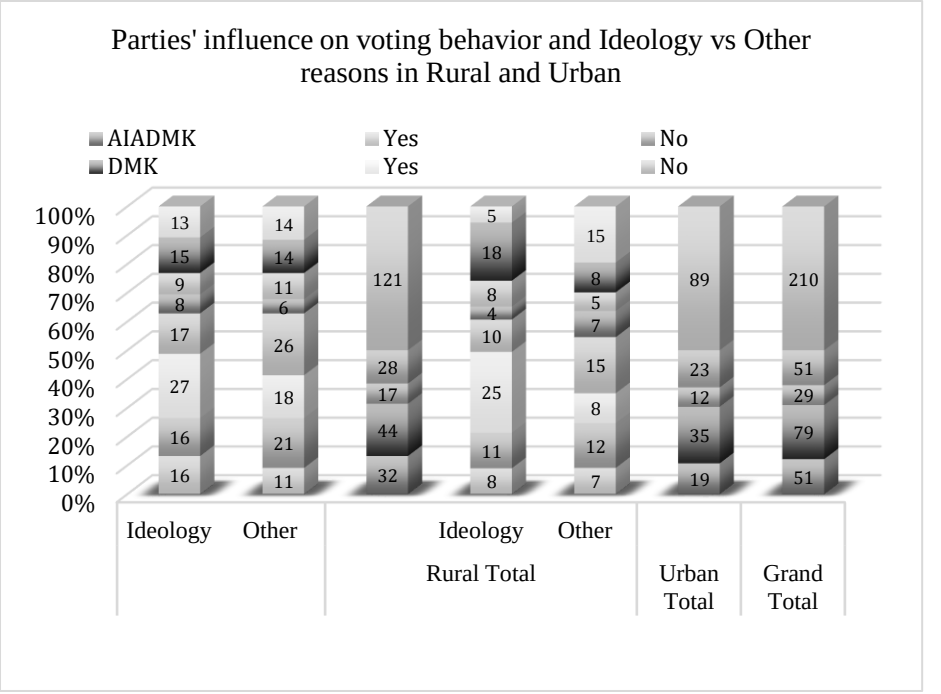
Source: Filed study

The information provides crucial insights into how political parties and welfare policies influence voting behaviour in rural and urban areas of Tamil Nadu. For AIADMK, 32 rural respondents identified an association, and 17 attributed this to development schemes while 21 acknowledged the role of welfare programs in deciding their votes. Of the 19 urban AIADMK voters, 10 attested schemes and 8 welfare benefits as influential factors. The party has general influence of only a moderate extent, but welfare-oriented strategy holds considerable sway among loyalists. The DMK commands a broader base of 44 rural and 35 urban respondents. Among rural voters supporting the DMK, 14 mentioned schemes of development and 22 schemes of welfare, which speaks for the sustained salience of Dravidian welfare politics. At the

urban level, welfare schemes are prioritized (19 respondents), and schemes affect 11. It is interesting to note, however, that a considerable number 30 rural and 24 urban voters who were supporters of the DMK—did not credit their vote to these schemes, indicating a mix of ideological allegiance and reflective thought.

Smaller parties and independents, classed under "Others," exhibit more limited but steady influence. Half of the 17 rural respondents within this category attribute both schemes and welfare programs to influencing their decisions. The same trend is observed within 12 urban respondents, indicating that even beyond the ruling parties, development narratives exercise influence. Remarkably, even the party-less also demonstrate very strong responsiveness to welfare politics. All 28 rural independent voters indicated they had been influenced by schemes (28) or welfare (20), demonstrating the compelling influence of benefits-based messaging even for independent voters. Urban respondents were 25 from this group who said schemes to them were important, and 20 referenced welfare programs. Just a few (3 urban, 0 rural) weren't influenced, highlighting just how widespread welfare-focused political messaging has become. In total, this information highlights that both AIADMK and DMK still rally voters on a combination of development programs and welfare outreach, albeit with different levels of success. Although party allegiance comes into play, most prominently highlighted is the fact that welfare politics still serves as a unifying denominator across affiliations, particularly among unaffiliated voters—indicating that the legacy of Dravidian populism remains politically strong and effective in framing Tamil Nadu's electorate.

Figure: 9. Parties' influence on voting behaviour and Ideology vs other reasons in Rural and Urban



Source: Filed study

This data explores how ideology and other less-specific factors (e.g., personal relationships, familiarity with a candidate, or media coverage) affect the voting habits of various party-aligned groups within rural and urban areas. Half of 32 rural AIADMK supporters were evenly divided when asked if ideology had an impact on their vote—16 responded yes, 16 responded no. In contrast, 11 gave "other" reasons like leadership popularity or family influence. In the urban areas, the trend continues: 8 voters attributed it to ideology, and 7 relied on other factors. Interestingly enough, a majority (11) of the AIADMK urban category also reported that ideology had nothing to do with their choice. This suggests that although ideology plays some role, contextual and individual considerations play a great role among AIADMK voters, particularly in urban constituencies.

In the DMK, the party seems to have a greater ideological base. In rural zones, 27 respondents mention ideology as a reason for their support compared to

the 17 who do not. Urban DMK supporters replicate this with 25 agreeing to ideological motives and just 10 disagreeing. Interestingly, "other" factors affect 18 rural and 8 urban DMK voters, indicating that although ideology is central, it's always used in combination with more expansive appeal—e.g., leadership or welfare commitments. This consolidates the DMK's tradition of being a party of ideological profundity as well as populist pragmatism. Voters who vote for other parties—while fewer in number—display a more mixed picture. Of 17 rural respondents, 8 acknowledged ideological influence, while 9 responded no. Likewise, urban answers split, with 4 responding yes to ideology and 8 not. The "other" category was significant, indicating that among supporters of smaller parties, local factors or individual candidate appeal may frequently trump strict ideology. Most notably, however, is how the party unaffiliated act. In rural districts, 15 unaffiliated respondents still based themselves on ideological grounds, indicating that even in the absence of formal party allegiance, ideological orientations—perhaps influenced by family ties or local identity—come into play. Likewise, 18 urban unaffiliated respondents mentioned ideology, whereas 13 rural and 5 urban respondents replied to no. The existence of "other" influences was practically on par with ideological ones, which suggests that this group is extremely sensitive to subtle or personal campaign narratives versus strict ideological stances.

Overall, the evidence indicates that ideology remains strong in influencing vote choice in Tamil Nadu, even among DMK supporters and, indeed, even among non-partisan voters, while AIADMK and others draw more equally on other methods like candidate popularity, welfare dispensation, or community connections. The contribution of "other" factors is continually significant across parties and locations and speaks to the complexity of voter choice in the state.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to situate Dravidian populism in the broader academic debates around populist politics and party system change. Based on both empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, it locates Dravidian party politics—particularly that of the DMK and AIADMK—in a distinct expression of regional populism that combines welfare-based governance with affective cultural appeals and robust leader-oriented mobilization. In contrast to populist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, where anti-establishment discourse has tended to lead to authoritarian consolidation and

institutional decay, the Dravidian experience indicates a paradox. On the one hand, such parties have intensified political participation, especially among traditionally oppressed groups like the Dalits, OBCs, and rural poor. Welfare programs, identity politics, and targeted propaganda have made sure that these communities are not only subjects of rule but also political actors. However, the same populist tactics—especially their emphasis on charismatic leadership and extremely centralized party organizations—are obstacles to intra-party democracy, long-term policy formulation, and institutional accountability. The evidence obtained from a rigorous study of election manifestos (2001-2021), political actors' interviews, and voting patterns discloses a recurring strategic rationality: populist appeal is rooted in symbolic gestures as well as material benefits. Free rice, laptops, marriage gold, housing schemes, and language pride are not only policy tools but also symbols of belonging, recognition, and inclusion. These projects, by enhancing livelihoods, also solidify the emotional relationship between the people and the leader, hence crafting a narrative of moral legitimacy and protector-leadership.

Further, the advent of digital communication platforms has substantially changed the dynamics of political messaging in Tamil Nadu. The growing utilization of social media and TV campaigns has allowed Dravidian parties to repackage classic populist discourse into modes appealing to youth, urban constituents, and online publics. Political charisma is now transmitted, staged, and received live, thus transforming the leader into not just a political leader but also a cultural celebrity. This media-facilitated populism has enabled politicians to circumvent institutional frameworks and address citizens directly, further fuelling the personalization of politics. However, this populist performance and personalization are not without a price. As political competition increasingly revolves around image and instantaneity rather than deliberative policy discussion, there is a danger of turning democratic participation into passive consumption instead of active engagement. Party structures stand the chance of becoming less democratic within, with decision-making authority increasingly falling into the hands of a minority. Additionally, although welfare populism can provide short-term political rewards, it tends to put on the backburner structural economic reforms, long-term growth, and bureaucratic transparency. To sum up, Dravidian populism is still a double-edged sword—useful in expanding democratic access and inclusion, but also potentially destabilizing if not tempered by institutional checks. The experience of Tamil Nadu thus provides a teachable case for how populist politics can at once be both a democratizing force and an origin of institutional vulnerability. It prompts scholars and policymakers to recast the

dualism of populism as both necessarily regressive or emancipatory, demanding instead a richer assessment based in regional histories, cultural narratives, and ordinary political practice.

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