Issue

Brief

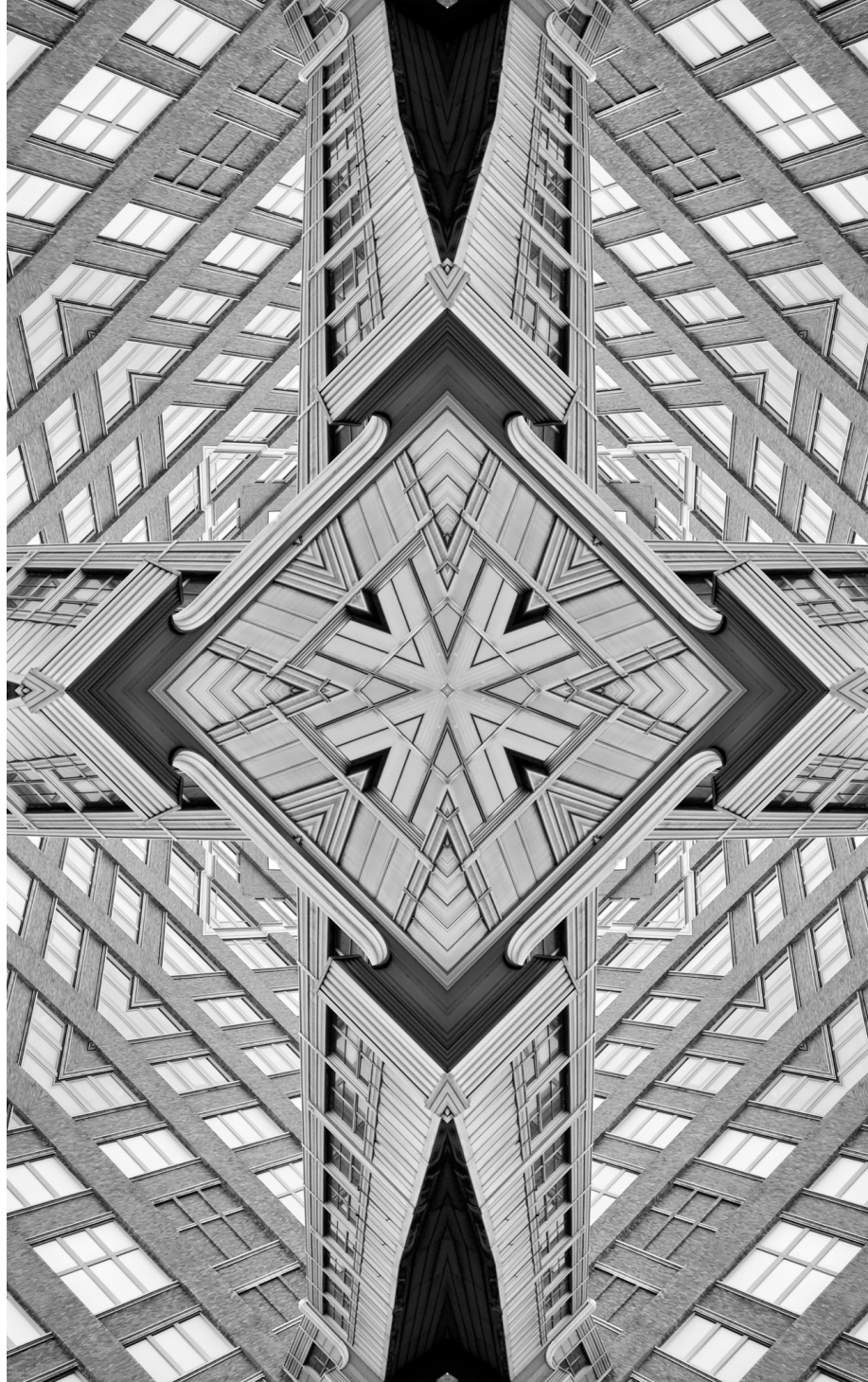**ISSUE NO. 535**
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Manifestos as a Tool for Accountability: A Content Analysis of the 2004-2019 UPA and NDA Poll Manifestos

Ovee Karwa, Yugank Goyal and Sahil Deo

Abstract

This brief analyses the manifestos of the Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party in the past four Lok Sabha elections. It introduces the concept of "falsifiability" to evaluate whether promises made in manifestos can be verified, to begin with; it then outlines the poll promises that are falsifiable across various sectors. The authors examine whether or not the promises were fulfilled, and if not, if they were carried again in the manifesto for the succeeding Lok Sabha election—the aim is to get a window into the accountability of the ruling party. The brief offers a novel view of manifesto designs in India.

Introduction

Manifestos can be a useful instrument in electoral politics. Outlining a political party's promises during an election season, manifestos offer an entry into understanding such party's intentions *ex ante*, based on which voters can make their decisions. Manifestos, therefore, can be considered a building block for electoral democracy.[1] In India, political parties have been issuing poll manifestos since before Independence. The provincial election manifestos of the Indian National Congress, for example, were invoked by Damodar Seth, an independence fighter and president of the Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee in 1946 to argue for public ownership of important means of production, communication, credit and exchange, and mineral resources. The same manifestos were also invoked during the Constituent Assembly Debates, specifically the sessions in November and December of 1948. Mahavir Tyagi, a prominent Indian independence fighter and parliamentarian, argued for alcohol prohibition, citing such a commitment in the manifestos of Congress.

One would imagine that a manifesto can serve as a "monitoring device": When an incumbent party fails to deliver a certain promise made in their manifesto, it should be easy to hold them accountable. This is not the case, however. Indeed, the question is how seriously election manifestos are taken. At best, this has been answered by studying the performance of governments against the promises they made before coming to power. Studies show that in advanced economies such as Sweden, for example, the rate of fulfilment of manifesto promises is as high as 82 percent over an average of four elections.[2] Similarly, Spain and the Netherlands have shown high rates of fulfilment of promises contained in poll manifestos.[3]

Political parties are not legally obligated to fulfil their manifesto promises. In India, a Public Interest Litigation on this matter in 2015 was dismissed by the Supreme Court, which ruled that current legal frameworks cannot hold a political party that reneges on its manifesto promises, accountable or liable.[4] To be sure, there are broad guidelines that the Election Commission rolled out in 2013 in the 'Manifesto' section of the Model Code of Conduct, as a result of the Supreme Court's direction in another case.[5] However, these guidelines focus not on establishing accountability, but on the nature of promises being made. For instance, the guidelines instruct political parties to ensure that Constitutional ideals are not violated in their manifestos, and to not make promises that

"vitiate the purity of the election process or exert undue influence on the voters in exercising their franchise."[6] Parties are required to indicate the rationale behind a commitment, as well as the capital needed to meet certain promises in the manifesto.

There is a need, therefore, to make voters more aware of manifestos. This should not be a difficult task, given that these are explicitly worded documents. Yet, so far, there is no rigorous discourse on manifestos in India. Scholars of governance, as well as civil society in general, have yet to tap into the potential of manifestos as a tool for strengthening democracy. This lack of interest could indicate a weakness in deliberative democracy in the country.

A step in the right direction are certain initiatives by entities such as the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) to monitor elections. They act as watchdogs, keeping a check on unscrupulous poll practices and helping the electorate make more informed choices. Such initiatives have resulted in greater transparency in those who contest elections, as well as in democratising the knowledge of election expenditure by political parties. However, overall, manifestos continue to be overlooked as a tool for promoting accountability.

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Review of Literature

During the height of the Cold War, political scientists in India studied parties' manifestos in the context of their focus on foreign affairs.[7] Professor Kousar Azam's work on India's sixth general elections[8] is one of the earliest of such analyses. In recent years, sectoral evaluations of manifestos have emerged—particularly in their responsiveness in the areas of health,[9] environment,[10] and the welfare of specific populations such as tribal communities[11] and the elderly.[12] There have also been comparative studies that evaluate a party's promises across two consecutive electoral cycles,[13] or that weigh manifesto promises against budgetary allocations.[14]

Existing research on manifestos mostly focus on the fulfilment of promises contained in these documents. For example, promises are studied on the scale of complete or partial fulfilment, or non-fulfilment.Fewer studies look at the objectivity of promises made to understand which promises the governments can clearly be held accountable for.[15] Though rare, semantic analysis is used as a tool used to spot this objectivity, and critically comment on how language is strategically deployed for commitment before elections.[16]

The latest, most comprehensive study yet on Indian political parties' manifestos is by Ramesh Tiwari, published in 2020.[17] Theoretical interventions continue to be few and far between.[18] Much of the scholarly interest in the subject has been largely descriptive, focusing on specific thematic or sectoral concerns to comment on whether certain promises were fulfilled. A conceptual framework to understand and problematise manifestos remains lacking. This present analysis employs the concept of "falsifiability" to read promises made in a manifesto. It is useful in creating an understanding of promises being made in an electoral contest.

Methodology and Limitations

This brief utilises a combination of the above-mentioned methods of analysing manifesto promises on the basis of falsifiability, fulfilment and semantics. The authors develop categories of "falsifiable" and "unfalsifiable" promises and assess the manifestos of Congress and the BJP during the Lok Sabha elections from 2004 to 2019 against this scale.[a,19] The brief then examines whether the falsifiable promises have been completely or partially fulfilled, or remain unfulfilled.

Categorising promises as falsifiable and non-falsifiable is done based on the language employed to make the promise and whether there can be objective proof to verify its fulfilment. This analysis is unique in that it builds a comparison of the two biggest political parties in the country for the previous four Lok Sabha elections. This can help the Indian electorate and diaspora see trends of the promises of two most powerful players in Indian electoral politics.

The brief also studies the various important sectors in the manifestos and examines if some of them carry more falsifiable promises than the others. The analysis investigates if the promises were fulfilled, partially fulfilled, or unfulfilled; and whether or not those unfulfilled were carried forward to that party's succeeding Lok Sabha manifesto.

While this study notes the trends in changes in promises made by each party in power, it has certain limitations. First, this study does not comment on the nature of promises made, but only sees if they have been accomplished or not. Second, incumbent parties often undertake projects that may not be mentioned in the manifestos but for which they must still be held accountable; these projects or actions are outside the purview of this analysis. Third, manifesto promises may sometimes be fulfilled in the second tenure and not the one for which they were made—this will also not be captured in this analysis. Fourth, governments may not publish the work they did online, especially during the early 2000s, and therefore the analysis was particularly difficult for those years.

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a   The 2004 Congress manifesto came from UPA, but for the purposes of this analysis, we will use Congress and UPA, and BJP and NDA interchangeably.

Methodology and Limitations

The promises were first analysed by using the mathematical principles of formal logic, whereby every statement or promise was categorised as having a truth value or not. A statement is said to have a truth value in classical logic if it can be categorised as a Boolean data type with only 1 or 0 as the response—i.e., a statement with a truth value can only be either *true* or *false*, and nothing else, and this does not depend on the observer.[b] Therefore, all semantic propositions can be divided into Boolean data type, and be "falsifiable" (which carry a truth value) or "unfalsifiable" (which cannot be contradicted). Falsifiable statements can be verified whether they are true or false, while unfalsifiable ones cannot. An unfalsifiable promise means that the one who makes the promise cannot be held against reneging on their promise because one cannot deduce if the promise was indeed reneged or not. That is why political statements, advertisements, and diplomatic statements often do not carry a truth value (i.e., they are unfalsifiable), and one cannot be held legally accountable for those statements.

The authors sifted through each promise made by both the parties in their manifestos across four Lok Sabha periods from 2004 to 2019 and evaluated which of their promises can be converted into a Boolean data type: whether they are falsifiable or not. In general, falsifiable promises are those that are accompanied by a specific plan of action, numeric targets, names of policy, or a specific duration required to accomplish them. The following, for example, is a falsifiable promise: "We will launch a new mission to achieve self-sufficiency in oil seeds and other agriproducts." Those in which the party cannot be held accountable were unfalsifiable. Promises which had both falsifiable and unfalsifiable propositional variables were treated as falsifiable, to give the party the benefit of doubt.

The unfalsifiable promises, on the other hand, are unaccompanied by a mention of any policy, plan of action or funding; they often contain phrases such as "ensure development", "promise to", and "take all possible steps". For instance, the following is an unfalsifiable statement: "A number of programmes have already been launched to combat the still widely-prevalent phenomenon of child malnutrition and these will be infused with an even greater sense of urgency." Table 1 summarises the nature of falsifiable and non-falsifiable statements.

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b   In constructive or intuitionist logic, this means only those statements that can be constructively proved, have a truth value. For instance, a statement like "It is 10.00 a.m. by my watch" can either be true or false (and nothing else), and this can be deduced irrespective of the agent; meanwhile, the statement, "It is not a nice watch" can be true, false, and/or both, because one cannot contradict it logically. This means that if a statement is false, one should be able to deduce a contradiction.

Methodology and Limitations

Table 1:
Falsifiable vs. Non-Falsifiable Promises

Characteristics	Falsifiable Promises	Non-Falsifiable Promises
Meaning	Promises which have a truth value can be objectively ascertained.	Promises which cannot be contradicted.
Significance	Such promises can be easily verified, and their progress tracked over the years. Objective proof can be used to understand the scale of their fulfilment, and power can be held accountable against their performance for such promises.	The one who makes the promise cannot be held against reneging their promise because one cannot deduce if the promise was indeed reneged or not. Thus, accountability of power cannot be easily established.
Common phrases used to signify	Each falsifiable promise is different. They are usually accompanied by a specific plan of action, numeric targets, names of policy, or a specific duration required to accomplish them.	Phrases like "ensure development", "promise to", "take all possible steps", "is a priority" are common flags of non-falsifiability.
Examples	"Congress promises to design and promote an NRI Invest Scheme to offer more opportunities and options to NRIs to invest in India." (INC, 2019); In continuation to our existing milestone of constructing roads at an unprecedented pace, we will construct 60,000 km of National Highways in the next five years. (BJP, 2019)	"The Indian National Congress now pledges to extend interest relief to all farmers who repay bank loans on schedule." (INC, 2009); "Technical and management services for those engaged in handicrafts, food-processing, handloom, garments, etc, will be strengthened." (BJP, 2009)

Source: Authors' own

There is hardly any doubt that a manifesto that contains more falsifiable promises is considered "superior", as it denotes a higher likelihood of "conviction" on the part of the political party. Note that this part does not check whether they fulfilled the promises, but only indicates if the parties made promises which could be verified, to begin with.

Methodology and Limitations

What if we were to verify whether or not the party—if it has come to power—has fulfilled its promises? The authors investigated every promise made by the incumbent party during its tenure to verify whether it had been fulfilled, partially fulfilled, or not fulfilled at all. The authors conducted an exhaustive, web-based research and narrowed down the search engine optimisation by using several combinations of relevant strings and time periods for which the party was in power. The analysis worked on the premise that if the government undertakes some action regarding a promise it had made, there would be an announcement on the archived portals of news agencies, the Press Information Bureau, or the specific department concerned.

This calls for a caveat: The data may not have been published at all, or the search engine did not pick it up. To corroborate the results, all promises was cross-checked with trackers of manifesto promises such as that of the magazine, *Caravan*[20] and the initiative called Vaada Raha.[21] While this exercise would not have been foolproof, the authors are working on the assumption that the aggregate level values were not likely to have been affected too significantly.

Finally, the authors examined the incumbent party's manifesto for the next Lok Sabha cycle to see if the promises made in the previous electoral cycle were carried into the next manifesto. Their continuation could signal underperformance, while conveying that the party is committed to the promise. If a promise was neither fulfilled not continued, it could indicate the party's frivolous attitude towards that promise. Another caveat is in order: This analysis has not accounted for the instances when the promise was dropped because the context had changed and therefore no longer calls for such an action.

Data and Results

All the manifestos studied in this analysis can be divided into three sections: the introduction—which also contains the ideological framework of the party; the work done in the previous tenure; and plans for the upcoming tenure. The focus of this brief is on the third section.

'Falsifiable' and 'unfalsifiable' promises

Figure 1 shows the share of falsifiable promises in the manifestos of the UPA and NDA across the four poll cycles. A significant and consistent rise in the share of falsifiable promises is seen in the UPA manifestos of 2014 and 2019 from 2009. This indicates that the UPA may be looking to establish more transparency and accountability in governance, and attracting voters to appreciate more specific policy-driven agendas rather than verbose, empty promises, amidst predictions of a rising powerful opposition. However, their defeat in both these elections could indicate that this has had little impact on the voters' minds. Second, for both parties, the share of falsifiable promises increased over the time period. However, there was a remarkable dip in the share of falsifiable promises in NDA's 2014 manifesto. Moreover, in 2019, 30-40 percent of the promises made by both parties were unfalsifiable. Analysts can use this metric to evaluate an important aspect of India's electoral democracy—i.e., how seriously political parties consider the promises they make during poll season.

Fig. 1:
## Share of Falsifiable Promises in the UPA and NDA Manifestos (2004-2019)

Source: Authors' own

Data and Results
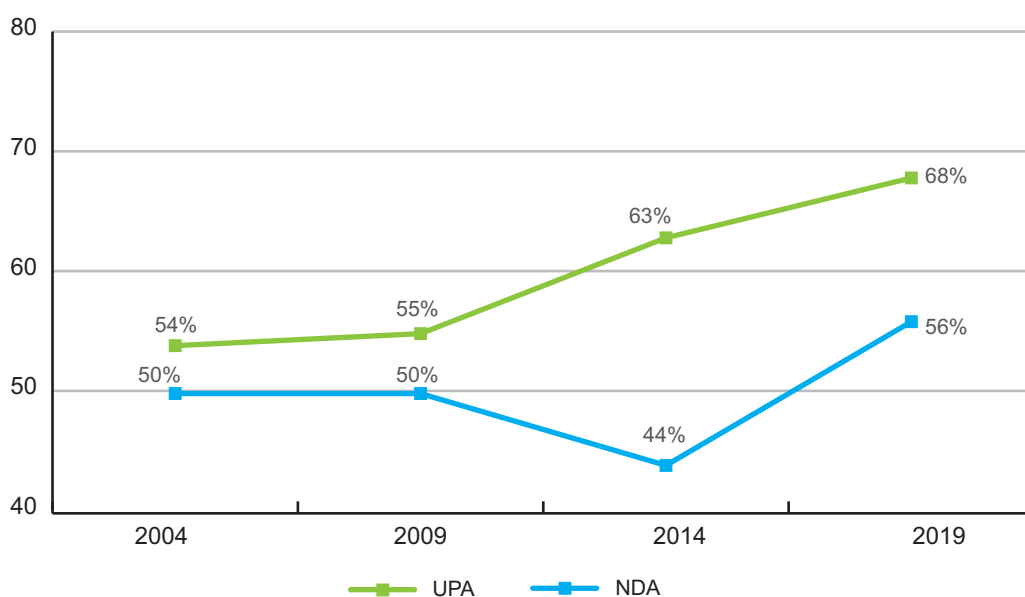
Tracking the falsifiable promises

In a democracy such as India, it is important to monitor the falsifiable promises that parties declare in the poll manifestos and determine whether or not they are being fulfilled—this is a pillar of accountability and a way to promote election ethics. Such promises can be either completely or partially fulfilled, or else remain unfulfilled throughout the tenure of the party in question. In the time period covered by this present analysis, the rate of unfulfilled manifesto promises for both coalitions is high.

Fig. 2: Promises Fulfilled, Unfulfilled, or Partially Fulfilled by the Incumbents (2004, 2009, and 2014)
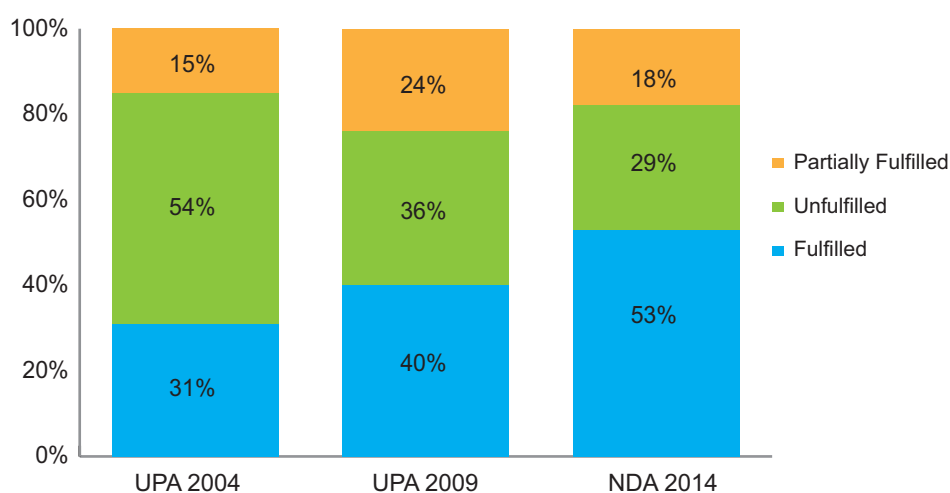
Source: Authors' calculations

Furthermore, a promise that was unfulfilled or partially fulfilled in a current term could be carried over to the next manifesto—this would indicate that the party is committed to going beyond rhetoric on such subject. If a party fails to include an unfulfilled promise in its next manifesto, it could mean that the party committed to it previously simply because of external pressure, or perhaps saw a potential vote bank in it. For the last three electoral cycles in which the tenures were completed, there is a noticeable trend: of all the falsifiable promises made by the parties in their respective terms, the proportion of unfulfilled promises not being carried to the succeeding manifesto is between 25 percent to over 45 percent (see Figure 3). The UPA showed huge improvement, reducing these figures from 2009 to 2014, which was also matched with the NDA in 2019.

Figure 3:
Promises Unfulfilled and Not Carried Forward to the Next Manifesto (Out of Total Falsifiable Promises)
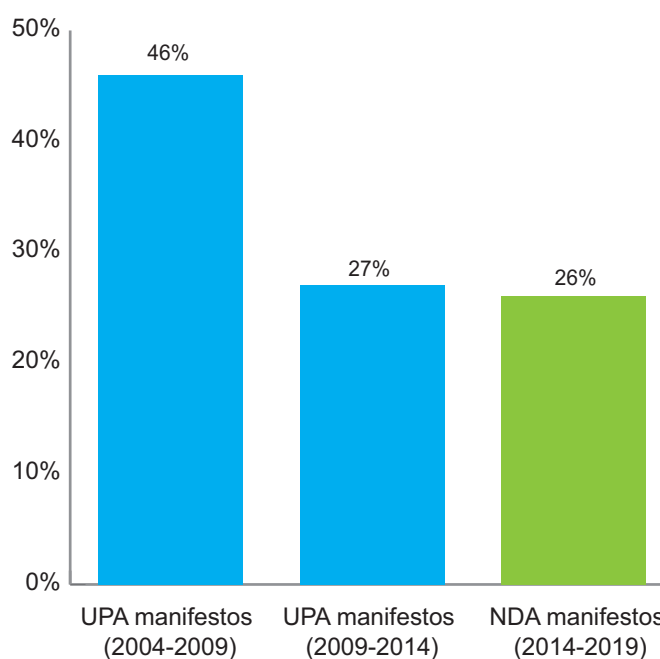
Note: Years under each bar represent manifestos being compared. For instance, the first bar indicates that more than 45% of falsifiable promises made in the 2004 UPA Manifesto were not fulfilled and not carried forward in the 2009 UPA Manifesto.

Source: Authors' own.

Data and Results

The figure does not capture promises unfulfilled and repeated in the next manifesto, as well as partially fulfilled promises. The share of the former, which indicate proactive accountability on the part of the political party, is dismally low, comprising only 1-3 percent of all falsifiable promises.

The incidence of accomplished promises not being continued to the next manifesto is seen as inconsequential to the health of electoral democracy in the country, on the premise that these were the commitments made by the parties and needed to be fulfilled. They, however, indicate the efficiency of the government in power. The NDA accomplished almost half of its falsifiable promises during its tenure from 2014-2019. It also has a substantially lower percentage of unfulfilled promises which are not carried over to the next manifesto, as compared to the UPA, in 2004 and 2009. However, the proportion of unfulfilled promises that were dropped in the succeeding manifesto have remained high for both the coalitions.

Sectoral Analysis

In general, the content of the manifestos used in this analysis can be divided into various thematic sections, which could indicate the policy priorities of the concerned party: Agriculture, Employment, Women, Minorities, and Industry. For the NDA, the coalition's foremost concerns in its last three terms are national security, foreign relations, and centre-state relations; meanwhile, the UPA has focused on employment generation and economic growth. In both elections of 2004 and 2009, the sections with the highest percentage of falsifiable promises for the coalition were health, and minorities.

For the NDA, it was the subject of sports, and that of youth in governance, which had the highest percentage of falsifiable promises in 2014. Eighty percent of the promises in 'youth in governance' were accomplished, whereas in sports, it was a lower 50 percent; the unfulfilled promises in sports were dropped in the next manifesto. Conversely, there are many sections which do not have any falsifiable promises in the manifesto: 30 percent of the thematic concerns listed by the UPA in 2004, and 20 percent in 2009 had no falsifiable promises at all; meanwhile, the NDA had only 8 percent in 2014.

Table 2 summarises the thematic concerns of both UPA and NDA that have more than 75 percent and 50 percent falsifiable promises. In all the government tenures since 2004, the UPA has had many more policy sectors with more than half or three-fourths of the promises within them as falsifiable. This would indicate that the UPA had stronger manifestos in those election cycles.

Table 2:
Share of Falsifiable Promises in Each Manifesto

Political Coalitions / Thematic Concerns	UPA				NDA			
	2004	2009	2014	2019	2004	2009	2014	2019
Agriculture	yellow	yellow	yellow	green	yellow	yellow	yellow	yellow
Women and Minorities *	yellow	green	green	yellow				
Education	green	yellow						
Health	green	green		green		yellow	yellow	
Infrastructure #	yellow		yellow	yellow		yellow		
Defence				yellow		yellow		yellow
Administrative, Judicial, Electoral and Police reforms @			yellow	green			yellow	
Industry		red	yellow	yellow		No	yellow	
Governance	No	red	No	green	No	No		
Employment	yellow	green	green	yellow		No	No	No

Table 2: Sectors with share of falsifiable promises in the respective manifestos. Green indicates greater than 75%, yellow indicates 50-75%. 'No' indicates there was no such section in the manifesto. Red signifies the absence of any falsifiable promises in the section. Source: Authors' own.

Notes:

* Women and Minorities comprise of empowerment of women, children, Muslims, and other religious minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Denotified Tribes, senior citizens, gender minorities, and the poor.

 # Infrastructure covers roads, railway, ports, airports, urban development, rural development, water and sanitation, information technology, power, and energy.

@ Administrative, Judicial, Electoral and Police reforms fall under 'Governance Reforms' in UPA 2009 and NDA 2004

Conclusion

This brief has introduced the concept of "falsifiability", applying it to the promises that political parties make in their election manifestos. The aim is to make a case for utilising party manifestos as a tool for policy discourse.

This analysis has found that the NDA performed better in keeping to the promises it made in its manifestos between 2004 and 2019. The UPA, for its part, recorded steady progress in delivering on their own promises—the proportion of unfulfilled promises declined, and those which were partially achieved were carried over in the next manifesto. For both coalitions, a significant share of their promises remain undelivered.

What this brief has offered is a view of deliberative democracy in India. It argues that manifestos must be leveraged effectively by political parties, civil society, and scholars to hold power to account. As it has become increasingly easier to access information, more research will not only encourage political parties to make promises more responsibly, but will also help voters become more aware of the importance of manifestos to a working democracy. ORF

Ovee Karwa *is a research associate at CPC Analytics.*
Yugank Goyal *is an Associate Professor and Founding Director, Centre for Knowledge Alternatives at FLAME University.*
Dr Sahil Deo *is the co-founder of CPC Analytics.*

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Endnotes

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