



Probabilities of 'One Nation - One Election' in India

Dr. Satish Karad

Dept. of Political Science

Indraraj Arts, Commerce and Science College,
Sillod, Dist. Aurangabad (MS)

Abstract:

The 'One Nation, One Election' concept proposes the simultaneous conduct of elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies every five years. Presently, approximately 5-7 elections for State Assemblies occur annually, a circumstance that negatively affects development and governance processes. The incessant elections and absence of a legislative calendar contribute to a disparity in parliamentary proceedings. In this issue brief, Author examines the benefits of conducting simultaneous elections nationwide, along with the criticisms and potential challenges associated with this approach. The brief proposes a potential electoral arrangement that may diminish the current frequency of elections in the country in the short term, consequently alleviating routine disruptions in the provision of various welfare programs.

Introduction:

The influence of frequent elections on governance and policymaking has been extensively debated for several years, alongside proposals for electoral reform. In recent months, state elections have occurred in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand shortly after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, while the Delhi Legislative Elections are scheduled for February 8, 2020. In light of the circumstances, tackling the core issue of recurrent elections and the absence of a legislative calendar has become a primary focus for the current administration. The Central Government, led by PM Narendra Modi, has proposed the implementation of 'One Nation, One Election' as a potential solution.

Theme of Unified National Elections

The concept of 'One Nation, One Election' pertains to the simultaneous conduct of elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies every five years. This will entail the reorganisation of the Indian electoral cycle to ensure synchronisation between state and central elections. The concept of concurrent elections is not novel to the nation. The general elections of 1951-52, 1957, 1962, and 1967 occurred concurrently for both Parliament and the state assemblies. The cycle was interrupted by political turmoil, resulting in midterm elections for Kerala and Odisha in 1960 and 1961, respectively (Panda 2016). This was succeeded by numerous disruptions, partly attributable to the absence of a definitive mandate or the mid-term dissolution of a government, as well as the recurrent invocation of Article 356 and Article 352, which postponed the elections. Throughout the years, numerous Lok Sabhas and State Assemblies have been dissolved prematurely. The cycle of concurrent elections has been interrupted (Debroy and Desai 2017).

**Table 1: Timelines of Various Lok Sabhas**

Lok Sabha	Date of First Sitting	Date of Dissolution of Lok Sabha	Overall Term
First Lok Sabha	13th May 1952	4th April 1957	5 years
Second Lok Sabha	10th May 1957	31st March 1962	5 years
Third Lok Sabha	16th April 1962	3rd March 1967	5 years
Fourth Lok Sabha	16th March 1967	27th December 1970	3 years 10 months
Fifth Lok Sabha	19th March 1971	18th January 1977	5 years 10 months
Sixth Lok Sabha	25th March 1977	22nd August 1979	2 years 5 months
Seventh Lok Sabha	21st January 1980	31st December 1985	5 years
Eighth Lok Sabha	15th January 1985	27th November 1989	5 years
Ninth Lok Sabha	18th January 1989	13th March 1991	1 year 3 month
Tenth Lok Sabha	9th July 1991	10th May 1996	5 years
Eleventh Lok Sabha	22nd May 1996	4th December 1997	1 year 6 months
Twelfth Lok Sabha	23rd March 1998	26th April 1999	1 year 1 months
Thirteenth Lok Sabha	20th October 1999	6th February 2004	4 years 4 months
Fourteenth Lok Sabha	2nd June 2004	18th May 2009	5 years
Fifteenth Lok Sabha	1st June 2009	18th May 2014	5 years
Sixteenth Lok Sabha	4th June 2014	24th May 2019	5 years

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India

The practice of holding simultaneous elections exists in various regions globally. Nevertheless, numerous countries, such as Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines, are adopting the Presidential system of governance, wherein elections for both the Presidential and Legislative branches occur concurrently (Laksono and Agustine 2016). Conversely, several nations, including South Africa and Sweden, conduct national and provincial elections concurrently (Law Commission of India 2013). Indonesia, the third largest democracy following India and the United States, recently held simultaneous elections for the first time (Unnamed Author 2019). These international experiences have prompted India to advocate for the implementation of simultaneous elections. The Election Commission first proposed simultaneous polling as a remedial measure to streamline the election process in the country in 1983 (Election Commission of India 1984).

The Law Commission of India, led by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy, recommended simultaneous elections in its 170th Report on "Reform of Electoral Laws" (1999) as part of electoral reforms (Law Commission of India 2013). However, the concept could not be realised due to various obstacles. Subsequent to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the NDA government attempted to propose the concept of simultaneous elections; however, it did not come to fruition. In 2015, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, in its 79th Report, advocated for simultaneous elections to enhance long-term governance and assessed its feasibility (Rao 2016). A report issued by the Law Commission analysed legal and constitutional issues concerning the implementation of simultaneous elections and proposed an amendment to Article 172 of the constitution, along with other potential measures to align state assembly elections with Lok Sabha elections (Sinha 2018). Upon regaining power in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened a meeting to address this matter and initiate prompt action, thereby advancing one of the BJP's principal electoral commitments.

**Concurrent Election:**

Presently, there are approximately 5 to 7 elections for the State Assemblies annually (Debroy and Desai 2017). This situation negatively affects development and governance, as political parties prioritise short-term populist strategies to secure electoral victories rather than pursuing structural reforms that could be more advantageous for the public in the long run. Likewise, incessant elections and the absence of a legislative calendar contribute to a disparity in parliamentary proceedings. Article 85 stipulates that the interval between any two Parliamentary sessions must not exceed six months. The Winter Sessions typically commence in November and continue until December each year. The session was postponed most recently in 2018 and could not commence in November due to elections in the states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, and Telangana. The absence of a fixed legislative calendar in India, in contrast to countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has resulted in numerous disruptions in Parliamentary proceedings over the years, consequently causing delays in urgent matters (Roy and Kakkar 2017).

Indian Parliament holds three sessions every year - Budget Session (Feb-May), Monsoon Session (July-Aug) and Winter Session (Nov-Dec). The Telangana state assembly election in 2018 was preponed and was held on 7 December 2018 after the Governor dissolved the assembly early on the advice of the CM K Chandrashekar Rao. Another rationale for conducting simultaneous elections is the enforcement of a Model Code of Conduct (MCC) preceding the elections, which influences governance. The MCC comprises guidelines promulgated by the Election Commission to govern political parties and candidates before elections, ensuring electoral integrity and fairness. The MCC is active from the announcement of the election schedule until the declaration of results (Sinha 2019). All development programs, welfare schemes, capital projects, and similar initiatives are predominantly suspended, with the exception of routine administrative activities, during the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (Debroy and Desai 2017). Concurrent elections would prevent disruptions in the provision of essential services.

Table 2: Elections and Model Code of Conduct

Year	States/UT Elections**	Approximate Timeline of Model Code of Conduct	Approximate Period of Model Code of Conduct
2015	Delhi	January - February	More than 1 Month
	Bihar	September - November	2 Months
2016	Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal	March - May	2 Months
2017	Punjab, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur	January - March	2 Months
	Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat	October - December	2 Months
2018	Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura	January - March	2 Months
	Karnataka	March - June	3 Months
	Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Mizoram, Rajasthan	October - December	2 Months
2019	Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim (along with Lok Sabha)	March - May	2 Months
	Haryana, Maharashtra	September - October	More than 1 Month
	Jharkhand	November - December	More than 1 Month

Source: Election Commission of India



The electoral process in India incurs significant expenses. The central government and state governments incur significant expenditures in the conduct and supervision of elections annually. Political parties engage in substantial expenditure during election campaigns. A report by the Centre for Media Studies titled 'Poll Expenditure: The 2019 Elections' indicates that the 2019 Lok Sabha election in India was the most expensive election in history. The report estimated that approximately INR 55,000 crores (8 billion USD) was expended during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections (CMS 2019). This indicates the substantial financial outflow that occurs annually during elections in India. It is posited that conducting a single election would establish a scenario in which political parties would not need continuous funding for elections, thereby diminishing the manipulative practices associated with fundraising by these parties (Kapoor 2019). Furthermore, conducting simultaneous elections would be financially advantageous for the government, allowing for savings in taxpayer funds and improving fiscal balance, which could be allocated to other development initiatives. Elections are not only expensive and time-intensive but also require a significant number of polling officials and security personnel to ensure their effective operation. The deployment of polling officials occurs over a limited timeframe, generally a few days before and after the voting and counting days. In contrast, the deployment of security forces, especially the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), typically spans the entire election period, with their mobility allowing them to move between locations (Debroy and Desai 2017). The recent Lok Sabha included over 270,000 paramilitary personnel, in addition to more than 2 million state police personnel and home guards (PTI 2019). The continuous occurrence of elections in India has necessitated the prolonged engagement of security forces and state police, which could otherwise be allocated to address other internal security issues.

Criticizing Arguments

While simultaneous polls offer advantages, they also present distinct challenges. Critics contend that conducting simultaneous elections significantly reduces the options available to voters (Kumar 2019). This may result in national issues receiving precedence over local concerns, thereby favouring national parties at the expense of regional or local parties. Simultaneous elections would advantage larger national parties, disadvantaging regional parties, resulting in a "national wave in favour of large national parties" (Debroy and Desai 2017: 20). This would compromise the federal democratic framework of the nation and diminish the integrity of Indian democracy. The primary counterargument regarding the implementation of simultaneous elections pertains to the issue of feasibility. The implementation of simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is challenging due to existing Constitutional provisions. Neither the Lok Sabha nor the State Legislative Assemblies can be prematurely dissolved to align General Elections for the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies (Parliament of India 2015). In this scenario, the sole viable option is to modify the terms of numerous state assemblies, either by extending or reducing existing tenures, which is evidently unfavourable. Significant operational challenges arise from logistics, security, and manpower resource requirements, rendering the conduct of elections at such a large scale practically difficult. One argument against the concept of simultaneous elections is that it may affect voter behaviour, as evidenced by instances where voters have consistently supported the same parties in both State Assemblies and Lok Sabha during periods of concurrent elections. National issues may impact voting behaviour in State Assembly elections. An analysis conducted by IDFC Institute indicates that, on average, there exists a 77% probability that Indian voters will support the same party in both State and Central elections when held concurrently. Conversely, regular election cycles provide a mechanism for accountability, as diverse local and state-level issues periodically impact the elections.



Conclusion:

The concept of simultaneous polls could significantly alter the Indian electoral system; however, it also presents several drawbacks. Several significant statutory and constitutional amendments require debate and discussion in this context. Any policy action in this context necessitates broad consensus among stakeholders across the political spectrum, including political parties and the general public. Additionally, the issue of long-term sustainability arises if the ruling party or coalition government loses its majority during the interim, whether in the Lok Sabha or state elections. In this context, a two-cycle election process, as proposed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee, would be more effective, with one phase aligning with the Lok Sabha elections and the subsequent phase occurring precisely 30 months later. This arrangement would likely reduce the frequency of elections in the short term, consequently minimising routine disruptions in the implementation of various welfare programs.

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