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Implications of simultaneous elections in India

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Abstract

Proposals for reintroducing simultaneous elections in India necessitate assessing their potential advantages, challenges, and constitutional viability. Advocates argue that synchronised elections would enhance governance efficiency, reduce electoral expenditure, and minimise administrative disruptions. However, concerns persist regarding their impact on federalism, political representation, and voter behaviour. Drawing on historical precedents from India's post-independence electoral framework (1951-1967) and comparative insights from international models, this analysis explores the feasibility of electoral synchronisation within India's multi-level democracy. Key obstacles include legislative term alignment, the risk of national political narratives overshadowing regional issues, and the extensive legal and logistical restructuring required. The implications suggest that while simultaneous elections could yield governance benefits, their implementation must be carefully calibrated to preserve democratic pluralism, regional autonomy, and electoral fairness.

Keywords: Simultaneous elections, constitutional viability, feasibility, implications, lok sabha, legislative assembly

Introduction

Simultaneous elections, also known as concurrent elections, refer to aligning electoral cycles for multiple levels of government to be held at the same time. In India, this primarily concerns synchronising Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections^[1, 2]. The idea has been debated as a reform to improve governance and electoral efficiency, with historical precedents and varied perspectives on its implications. Beyond cost efficiency, simultaneous elections raise broader questions about political representation, governance stability, and accountability. The impact on voter behaviour, party competition, and the federal structure will be key considerations in assessing its feasibility^[2, 3, 4].

The frequency of separate elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies has led to concerns about governance disruptions and administrative inefficiency. This has renewed discussions around synchronising electoral cycles under the 'One Nation, One Election' proposal as a possible electoral reform. In response to the concerns about governance efficiency and administrative costs, the Government of India has examined its feasibility, with recent proposals contributing to the ongoing policy discussion^[1-3].

This study analyses the implications of reintroducing simultaneous elections in India, evaluating its potential benefits, challenges, and constitutional feasibility. The assessment considers its impact on federalism, electoral representation, governance stability, and voter behaviour, while also addressing the logistical and administrative restructuring required for implementation. The study further draws on comparative electoral models to explore the broader political consequences of synchronised elections in a multi-tiered democracy.

Background

After the adoption of the Constitution, India held general elections for both the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies on a synchronised schedule between 1951 and 1967. The first such elections took place in 1951-52, with the pattern continuing in 1957, 1962, and 1967. The practice of holding simultaneous elections was not an explicitly planned reform but rather an outcome of the electoral schedule established post-independence, when newly constituted legislatures at both the national and state levels were elected together. The pattern was disrupted in 1968 and 1969 due to the premature dissolution of multiple State Assemblies, leading to an electoral cycle that no longer aligned.

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The Fourth Lok Sabha was also dissolved ahead of schedule in 1970, necessitating fresh elections in 1971^[2].

The shift away from synchronised elections was influenced by political and legislative developments that altered the uniformity of electoral terms. Premature dissolutions and term extensions, particularly at both the national and state levels, have contributed to the staggered electoral schedule now in place. The Fifth Lok Sabha, for example, had its term extended until 1977 under Article 352 following the declaration of Emergency, unlike its predecessors, which completed their five-year terms. Since then, while some Lok Sabha terms - such as the Eighth, Tenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—have lasted their full tenure, others have been dissolved before completing five years. This transition from simultaneous to staggered elections resulted in frequent elections at different levels of government, leading to repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), disruptions to governance, and increased administrative costs - issues that later became central to the debate on reviving simultaneous elections^[2, 3].

These historical developments and legal provisions continue to define India's electoral cycle and are central to evaluating whether simultaneous elections could be reintroduced within the existing constitutional and political framework.

The proposed reintroduction of simultaneous elections aims to restore synchronisation between the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly electoral cycles. However, this does not require a single nationwide polling day. India's existing phased election model could still be retained, ensuring that voters in each constituency cast their ballots for both tiers of government simultaneously while maintaining logistical feasibility^[2].

A significant structural reform associated with this proposal is the introduction of a single electoral roll, aimed at eliminating redundancies in electoral administration. Currently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) oversees separate rolls for parliamentary and assembly elections, while State Election Commissions manage local body rolls. Consolidating these into a unified roll under ECI oversight would require constitutional amendments and ratification by at least half of the states^[2].

To facilitate a transition towards synchronised elections, two-phase implementation models have been proposed for minimising disruption to existing legislative terms. A phased transition is considered necessary due to the difficulty of aligning all electoral cycles at once without extending or curtailing multiple legislative terms, which would require substantial constitutional amendments^[1, 3, 5].

However, the feasibility of any such transition depends on the extent of legal amendments required, the political consensus among stakeholders, and the administrative capacity to manage large-scale electoral coordination^[3]. The success of these proposals ultimately rests on their ability to balance electoral efficiency with democratic representation at both national and regional levels.

Benefits and challenges

A synchronised electoral schedule is expected to bring three primary benefits: cost efficiency, improved governance stability, and reduced electoral disruptions. Reducing the frequency of elections would lower government expenditure, decrease the costs associated with security deployment, and streamline the use of electoral resources such as EVMs and polling personnel. Since elections require

large-scale logistical coordination, synchronisation would enable better resource planning, minimising administrative redundancies and optimising security personnel deployment^[2, 3, 5].

Frequent elections trigger repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which places restrictions on government decision-making, delaying crucial policy implementations. This often leads to governance paralysis, as elected officials focus on election campaigns rather than long-term planning. Synchronising elections would mitigate these disruptions by ensuring that policies are implemented without interruptions caused by recurring election cycles^[1-3]. Another major benefit of simultaneous elections is the reduction of disruptions to public life and governance. The current system of staggered elections necessitates the repeated deployment of security forces and election officials, diverting resources away from regular administrative functions^[5]. Frequent elections also affect public service delivery, economic activity, and law enforcement priorities. By consolidating elections into a single cycle, disruptions would be limited to a pre-determined period, allowing governance and public services to function more smoothly^[2].

Empirical studies indicate that voter turnout tends to increase in concurrent elections, as the logistical burden of voting multiple times is reduced. This effect has been observed in various democracies with synchronised electoral cycles^[4]. In India, state elections generally see lower turnout compared to Lok Sabha elections, suggesting that synchronisation could increase aggregate voter engagement, particularly among peripheral voters^[2, 6].

While the administrative and financial benefits of simultaneous elections are evident, concerns remain about their potential impact on democratic representation, voter decision-making, and regional political dynamics. The coattail effect^[6] may lead to national political narratives overshadowing state-level issues, giving larger parties an advantage over regional actors. Electoral mechanisms such as differentiated ballot structures^[7], distinct campaign financing regulations^[8], and voter education initiatives could mitigate these risks^[9].

A major challenge in synchronising elections is managing legislative term adjustments. The current system does not allow seamless synchronisation without either extending or curtailing the terms of multiple legislatures, which raises legal and governance concerns^[3]. Mid-term dissolutions of the Lok Sabha or State Assemblies further complicate this issue, as they create governance instability. Any transition to simultaneous elections would require a one-time adjustment to bring all electoral cycles in alignment, a process that would necessitate careful constitutional and political negotiations.

One approach to mitigating the challenge of term adjustments is the introduction of fixed terms for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, similar to the now repealed Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, 2011 in the United Kingdom^[10]. Fixed terms can enhance political stability by ensuring that elections occur at predictable intervals. However, they also reduce the flexibility of dissolving legislatures when political deadlock occurs, requiring safeguards such as no-confidence motion mechanisms. Given the inherent complexities, synchronising electoral cycles in India would necessitate a carefully planned transition that balances constitutional requirements, administrative feasibility, and democratic representation.

Discussion

Constitutional and legal considerations

The implementation of simultaneous elections in India would necessitate constitutional amendments and legislative changes to align the electoral cycles of the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies. Proposals have been made to amend Articles 82A and 324A of the Constitution to provide the legal foundation for conducting elections concurrently across different levels of government. Additionally, a single electoral roll, which would streamline voter registration and reduce redundancy, would require constitutional amendments, particularly in relation to local body elections. Since local governance falls within the jurisdiction of state governments, such amendments would need ratification by at least half of the states to come into effect, as per Article 368(2), which governs constitutional amendments affecting the distribution of power between the Centre and the states^[2, 3].

The terms of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, governed by Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution, may require modifications to facilitate the synchronisation of election cycles. Additionally, Article 356, which allows for the imposition of President's Rule in a state, could influence the feasibility of synchronised elections if it is used to dissolve state governments before their fixed tenure. The Supreme Court, through cases like *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, has set strict guidelines on its application to prevent misuse and to protect the federal balance of power^[2, 3].

Beyond constitutional amendments, legislative changes to key statutes such as the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951, would also be necessary to accommodate a unified electoral framework. These changes would need to empower the Election Commission of India (ECI) to oversee synchronised election schedules while ensuring that procedural guidelines for candidate nominations, campaign financing, and voter registration are aligned with the new electoral cycle^[3].

The feasibility of implementing simultaneous elections in India extends beyond legal and logistical considerations to the broader question of political consensus. Regional parties have strongly opposed the move, arguing that a synchronised election cycle could disproportionately benefit national parties by shifting voter attention to central leadership, thereby weakening the salience of state-specific issues. This, they contend, could undermine federalism by consolidating electoral power at the national level and reducing the competitive space for regional political representation^[1, 5].

Bureaucratic institutions, including the Election Commission of India (ECI), have also raised concerns about the large-scale administrative overhaul required, particularly in coordinating security, voter rolls, and phased voting processes. The transition to synchronised elections would require significant restructuring of electoral operations, posing challenges in terms of logistical capacity and policy execution^[1, 3].

Moreover, the positive public reception of simultaneous elections is a crucial factor^[1]. While administrative efficiency and cost savings are commonly cited benefits, voter perspectives on the impact of electoral synchronisation on democratic representation and local governance require deeper engagement. Public discourse and political negotiations will ultimately determine whether simultaneous elections are implemented in practice, making political

strategy as critical as constitutional and logistical considerations.

Comparative models

Several democracies with multi-tiered governance structures provide insights into the dynamics of simultaneous elections. Italy provides a relevant case study in concurrent elections, where provincial elections held alongside higher-stakes municipal contests have led to a noticeable increase in voter turnout. However, this turnout surge is often accompanied by a shift in voter behaviour, as national parties and broader political narratives gain prominence over region-specific concerns. This suggests that simultaneous elections may alter electoral dynamics by amplifying issues that dominate higher-profile elections^[4]. Germany's staggered electoral system ensures that national and state elections do not always coincide, thereby preserving the distinct focus of regional governance. However, at the municipal level, variations in the timing of local council and mayoral elections in Lower Saxony suggest that concurrent elections tend to favour centrist and incumbent parties. This contrast highlights how electoral scheduling can impact party advantage differently at national and subnational levels^[6].

Spain provides further evidence of national issues influencing lower-level elections. Studies on concurrent local, regional, and European elections suggest that voters often frame their decisions based on national-level concerns rather than the immediate issues of subnational governance. This reinforces the argument that simultaneous elections may blur distinctions between different levels of policymaking, affecting the autonomy of regional governance^[11].

Sweden has operated a fully synchronised electoral system since 1970, demonstrating that a fixed election cycle can enhance political stability. However, it is suggested that this stability comes at a cost: simultaneous elections tend to reinforce incumbency advantages by limiting the frequency of political challenges and reducing voter exposure to alternative governance models between election cycles^[12].

While Germany, Sweden, and Italy provide insights into synchronised elections, the UK and US represent alternative approaches that prioritise either stability or governance continuity. The UK operates under a fixed-term parliamentary system, where elections occur every five years unless disrupted by exceptional circumstances, such as a no-confidence motion. In contrast, the US follows a staggered electoral model, with federal and state elections occurring at different intervals^[13, 14]. This decentralised approach ensures continuous governance but results in a near-perpetual election cycle, requiring sustained political engagement from both voters and institutions.

For India, transitioning to simultaneous elections requires balancing stability with the need for mid-term flexibility. While fixed election cycles can enhance administrative efficiency and reduce election-related expenditure, the system must incorporate safeguards to prevent governance paralysis in cases of mid-term dissolutions or political instability^[5].

Voter behaviour

The impact of simultaneous elections on voter behaviour is an important consideration, particularly in how it influences turnout, issue prioritisation, and electoral decision-making^[4].

Concurrent elections often lead to higher voter participation, primarily due to the reduced logistical burden on voters. A synchronised cycle could increase overall voter participation; however, this does not automatically translate to greater political engagement or informed decision-making, as convenience rather than issue awareness may be the primary driver^[6].

However, concerns remain regarding the ‘coattail effect,’ where the popularity of national parties influences state-level electoral choices. This effect has been observed in other countries with concurrent elections, where national electoral trends disproportionately shape subnational outcomes^[6].

Voter decision-making in simultaneous elections is also shaped by cognitive overload the difficulty of processing multiple electoral choices simultaneously. When multiple elections are held together, state and local issues risk receiving less scrutiny as voters tend to focus on high-profile national leadership contests^[11].

The complexity of voting in India is influenced by a wide range of factors, including party organisation, leadership perceptions, and social dynamics such as caste and religion. While simultaneous elections present challenges in terms of voter awareness and the potential dominance of national narratives, the Indian electorate has demonstrated the capacity to assess political choices independently^[1-3]. Ensuring that voters continue to make informed decisions requires targeted policies that promote voter education and maintain electoral competition at all levels of government. While the efficiency gains of concurrent elections are evident, the broader democratic implications must be carefully assessed to prevent the marginalisation of regional voices and ensure that political representation remains reflective of India’s diverse electorate.

Conclusion

The question of simultaneous elections in India is as much a constitutional and administrative challenge as it is a political one. While the prospect of reducing electoral costs, ensuring governance continuity, and mitigating policy disruptions is attractive, significant concerns remain regarding its implications for democratic representation and federal balance. Comparative models from Germany, Sweden, and the UK highlight the trade-offs involved in electoral synchronisation, including the reinforcement of incumbency and the dilution of regional political discourse.

A shift to a harmonised electoral cycle would necessitate constitutional amendments, broad political consensus, and a governance framework capable of accommodating mid-term disruptions without undermining democratic principles. Fixed-term legislatures, tailored electoral regulations, and enhanced voter education could mitigate some risks, but without sufficient safeguards, the move risks centralising power and marginalising regional political agency. The feasibility of simultaneous elections, therefore, depends not only on logistical and constitutional considerations but also on their capacity to uphold electoral competition, political diversity, and democratic accountability.

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