

Simultaneous Elections in India: Need, Feasibility and Sustainability

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Abstract: *The frequent elections in India involve huge costs in terms of money, deployment of security forces, and teachers, and adversely impact development works and governance due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct by the Election Commission of India (ECI). As a result, the need for simultaneous elections is expressed and discussed by various stakeholders as an alternative to ending the frequent election cycle. While giving supportive arguments to make a case for simultaneous elections¹, we will also investigate the likely criticism of the idea and provide counterarguments against them.*

Keywords: simultaneous elections, election costs, Model Code of Conduct, development impact, Election Commission

1. Introduction

Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, while addressing the concluding session of the 80th All India Presiding Officers Conference, made a strong pitch for simultaneous elections in India. He argued that elections taking place every few months impact development works and spoke for common voter lists to prevent wastage of resources. The Law Commission of India, in its 170th Report on “Reform of Electoral Laws²” (1999), also recommended holding simultaneous elections as a part of electoral reforms. In 2015, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice³, in its 79th Report, suggested holding simultaneous elections for long-term good governance.

Simultaneous elections are not a new idea. The very first elections for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were conducted simultaneously in 1951-52. For the first time, the synchronised election cycle was disturbed due to the dismissal of the Kerala state government by imposition of the President's rule under Article 356 of the Constitution of India in 1959. The election cycle was further disturbed from 1967 to 1999, which was a phase of unstable coalition governments facing difficulties in completing a full term in office. The country also saw rampant misuse of Article 356 of the Constitution of India leading to premature dissolution of State Assemblies. In 1977 alone, Morarji Desai's government dissolved 9 State Assemblies and imposed President's rule using Article 356 of the Constitution of India.

Since then, the elections in India have become a very complex, frequent and costly exercise. Along with the election to constitute the 18th Lok Sabha from April to May 2024, elections were held for constituting the 4 State Assemblies (Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha,

and Sikkim). This was followed by the State Assembly elections in Jammu & Kashmir (Sept 2024) and Haryana (Oct 2024). Assembly elections are also lined up for the states of Maharashtra (Nov 2024), Jharkhand (Nov 2024), Delhi (Feb 2025), and Bihar (Nov 2025)⁴. It won't be unreasonable to state that Indian politics is perennially in an election mode. Barring a few exceptional years within a normal 5-year tenure of the Lok Sabha, the country witnesses, on average, elections to about 5-7 State Assemblies every year (NITI Aayog discussion paper, 2014)⁵.

The rest of this article is in five sections. Section 2 argues the need for simultaneous elections in India by highlighting huge election spending, persistent deployment of security forces and politically motivated decision-making during frequent elections. Section 3 presents likely criticism of the idea and provides counterarguments against it. Section 4 discusses the operational and constitutional feasibility of simultaneous elections in India. Section 5 provides suggestions to sustain simultaneous elections over the longer term and Section 6 concludes.

2. Need for Simultaneous Elections

Frequent elections adversely impact various stakeholders - Union Government, State Governments, voters, political parties, candidates, paramilitary forces, teachers and other staff on election duty. The government spends on purchasing EVMs, VVPAT machines, preparation and printing of electoral rolls and voter identity cards etc. Political parties and candidates also spend huge amounts while campaigning for their candidature. While there is a limit on the expenditure that a particular candidate can incur, no such limit is prescribed for political parties.

¹ In this article, Simultaneous elections mean elections of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies and does not include elections for panchayats and municipalities.

² Reform of Electoral Laws, 1999, 170th Report by Law Commission of India.

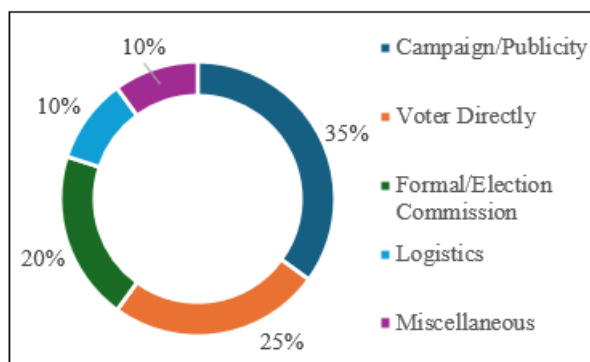
³ 79th Report by Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, 2015.

⁴ Source: Election Commission of India website.

⁵ NITI Aayog discussion paper, 2014, “Analysis of Simultaneous Elections, The ‘What’, ‘Why’ and ‘How’”

Overall, expenditure in the last seven Lok Sabha elections between 1998 and 2024 has seen a near six-fold jump from Rs 9,000 crore in 1998 to over Rs 55,000 crore in 2019 (CMS Report, 2019)⁶ to an estimated Rs 135,000 Crore in 2024⁷. With frequent elections every year, political parties (especially national parties) persistently worry about ensuring a continuous inflow of funds to fund the election campaign. The frequent expenditure on campaign funding, which happens to be the major component, can be reduced if the election cycle is synchronised. The change in other expenditure components can go in either direction and require further analysis.

Estimates of the various expenditure heads in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections⁸



Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), State Armed Police, Home Guards and District Police, etc., are also deployed to ensure proper security arrangements during elections. While conducting elections to the 16th Lok Sabha, the ECI took the help of approximately 10 million personnel as polling officials to run and supervise the election process across 9,30,000 Polling Stations in the country⁹. Although less in magnitude, similar arrangements are also required when elections for state assemblies are conducted separately. Frequent elections every year led to the persistent deployment of security forces from one place to another. This duplication of expenditure and persistent deployment of security forces due to frequent elections can be avoided if elections are held simultaneously, and such forces can be better deployed for other internal security purposes – the basic responsibilities for which these forces were developed.

Frequent elections keep the caste, religion, and communal issues across the country alive. In an article¹⁰ published in Bloomberg Quint, Dr. S. Y. Quarishi (former Chief Election Commissioner) noted that “elections are polarising events which have accentuated casteism, communalism, corruption and crony capitalism. If the country is perpetually in election mode, there is no respite from these evils. Holding simultaneous elections would certainly help in this context”.

⁶ Centre for Media Studies (CMS) report, 2019, “Poll Expenditure, The 2019 Elections”.

⁷ <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha/story/lok-sabha-election-2024-expenditure-election-commission-2546455-2024-05-31>

⁸ Source: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/elections/india-election-expenditure-2019-lok-sabha-elections-was-the-worlds-costliest>

⁹ Source: Election Commission of India website.

Additionally, frequent elections also disrupt normal life, leading to traffic jams and noise pollution due to rallies and road shows by political parties. Frequent elections also hinder or delay the government from taking tough structural reforms and policy decisions, which might adversely impact its winning odds. In an article¹¹, the Hon’ble Vice President Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu noted that “the cycle of continuous elections was not only affecting the developmental process and good governance but also forcing the political class to typically think in terms of immediate electoral gains rather than focus on long-term programmes and policies for the overall progress of the nation and its people”. These aspects together make a case for simultaneous elections being an alternative to open the possibilities to address the above systematic problems and reduce the associated costs.

Criticism and Counter Arguments

A study¹² published by IDFC institute concludes - “on average, there is a 77 per cent chance that the Indian voter will vote for the same party for both the State and Centre when elections are held simultaneously”. Critics often state that such behaviour among voters, if elections are held simultaneously, will benefit large national parties at the cost of regional parties, harm the federal structure of the Indian polity and move the country a step forward towards a presidential form of government from the current parliamentary form. However, such a hypothesis strongly undermines the maturity and rationality of voters in India and assumes that they aren't in a position to differentiate between local and national issues if elections are held simultaneously.

Voting choice in India is a complex phenomenon involving a number of factors such as caste, gender, religion, community, language, ideology, organisational strength of political parties, popularity of candidates among voters and their stand on national vs local issues and not mere voting time. The study by IDFC Institute, which shows a correlation between simultaneous elections and voting behaviour, does not rigorously establish a causal relationship, and a mere correlation between the two does not imply causation.

Also, the elections during 1952-1967 were conducted simultaneously, and no federal structure of the government, local issues and the role of regional parties were undermined. Critics also argue that frequent elections enhance the accountability of politicians towards the public, and conducting simultaneous elections will have a negative impact. Dr. S. Y. Quraishi, in article¹³, writes, “Frequent elections ensure that the politicians have to show their faces to voters regularly”.

However, the inherent democratic structure of Indian polity ensures accountability because no single election makes

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/holding-ls-assembly-polls-together-is-desirable-but-not-feasible>

¹¹ Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Breaking-out-of-election-mode/article15422727.ece>

¹² Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/state-assembly-elections-nudging-the-voter-in-one-direction/article8438114.ece>

¹³ Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/an-idea-whose-time-may-not-have-come/article28067285.ece>

anyone a permanent ruler, and they will have to go back to the public again to seek their support once the tenure of the government is over.

Feasibility of Simultaneous Elections in India

Critics point out that conducting simultaneous elections is not operationally feasible in a large country like India as it will require a significant increase in the mobilisation of resources because of the large number of voters, and there are many constitutional hindrances to the process. Currently, the election commission conducts elections for a group of State Assemblies or for Lok Sabha with a group of States together. If all the State Assemblies' elections are to be clubbed with that of Lok Sabha elections, it will require a greater number of polling officials, security forces, EVMs, VVPAT machines, and transportation and storage requirements for the poll-related materials. Quantum of such requirements will be driven by the total number of eligible voters, which determines the number of Polling Stations, security personnel and EVMs, etc.

According to the ECI, 900 million people were eligible to vote, with an increase of 84.3 million voters since the last election, making it the largest-ever election in the world. The ECI deployed a total of 1.74 million voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) units and 3.96 million electronic voting machines (EVM) in 1,035,918 polling stations. Approximately 270,000 paramilitary and 2 million state police personnel provided organisational support and security at various polling booths¹⁴. Considering the large-scale management of elections in 2019 and in earlier Lok Sabha elections by ECI, the operational infeasibility argument does not hold. The operational feasibility of the simultaneous elections has also been supported by ECI. Speaking exclusively to News18 India, the former Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said, "After all broad amendments (in laws) by the legislature, Election Commission of India (ECI) is ready for the One Nation One Poll"¹⁵.

Simultaneous elections will open up the possibilities of resource optimization using economies of scale. Since separate EVMs will be required for State Assembly and Lok Sabha votes, the requirement for EVMs and VVPAT machines will increase, and so will the transportation and storage requirements. However, the requirement for security personnel and polling officials will not increase by a similar proportion as for EVMs since the number of voters and polling stations will not increase significantly. Simultaneous elections also ensure that electoral rolls are prepared for the entire nation at the same time, and the resource duplication in their preparation due to frequent elections will be reduced.

The synchronisation of Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections in the first place is not possible without a one-time extension or curtailment of tenure of either most State Assemblies or the Lok Sabha per se. Since Lok Sabha covers the entire nation, it would be an obvious choice to synchronise the election cycle as per the timing of Lok Sabha elections by

doing extension or curtailment in the tenure of State Assemblies.

The synchronisation of the election cycle will require necessary amendments in the constitution of India, which are mentioned below:

- 1) Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution prescribe a maximum duration of five years for the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, respectively. These articles will need an amendment for a one-time extension/ curtailment of the term of State Assemblies.
- 2) Articles 85(1) and 174(1) deal with sessions, prorogation and dissolution of Parliament and State Assemblies. They stipulate that the intervening period between the last session of the House of the People / State Legislative Assemblies and the first session of the subsequent House / Assemblies shall not exceed six months. Since the one-time adjustment of tenure of State Assemblies may exceed the prescription limit of 6 months, hence these articles also require an amendment.
- 3) Sections 14 and 15 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which deal with notification for a general election to Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, will also require an amendment.

Having discussed the constitutional aspects of the synchronisation of elections, the next question is how exactly the synchronisation should take place. The department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee, in its 79th report, recommended a two-phase practicable approach for holding simultaneous elections. Paragraph 17.2 of the Committee report recommends that the Committee has envisaged holding elections of some Legislative Assemblies at the midterm of Lok Sabha and remaining with the end of the tenure of Lok Sabha.

Sustainability of Simultaneous Elections in India

With the above-suggested proposal of the synchronised election cycle, it can start the process at first place by making the appropriate adjustments but in a parliamentary form of government in which the head of government is accountable to Parliament (in the case of the Union Government) or the State Assembly (in case of State Government), the synchronised election cycle can get disturbed again as it was disrupted during 1967-1999 because of the reasons such as:

- 1) If the Union /State government loses the majority in the Lok Sabha/ State Assembly.
- 2) If President Rule is imposed in any of the states by using Article 356 of the Constitution of India.
- 3) By deliberate choice of the Prime Minister or Chief Minister if they wish to dissolve the Lok Sabha or State Assembly earlier than its normal terms.

Therefore, the above proposal is incomplete without addressing the problem of making simultaneous elections sustainable over the longer term.

¹⁴ Source: Election Commission of India, website.

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/election-commission-ready-for-one-nation-one-election-says-cec-sunil-arora-after-pms-pitch-3197663.html>

The Election Commission of India has recommended specific ideas to address this problem. To avoid the premature dissolution of Lok Sabha/ State Assembly on account of a no-confidence motion ("NCM"), ECI recommended¹⁶, "any 'no-confidence motion' moved against the government in office should also necessarily include a further 'confidence motion' in favour of a government to be headed by a named individual as the future Head of the Government and voting should take place for the two motions together".

To add further, provisions of the Anti-Defection Act 1985 and the Supreme Court judgment in the case of S. R. Bommai vs Union of India (AIR 1994 SC 1918) on account of misuse of article 356 of the Constitution of India also make the premature dissolution of legislatures significantly difficult (NITI Aayog discussion paper, 2014).

The election cycle can also get disturbed due to the deliberate choice of the Prime Minister/ Chief Minister to dissolve the

Lok Sabha/State Assembly if they postulate that conducting elections before the normal term of the government can have substantial political gains. To tackle this issue, the term of the legislature can be fixed, and deliberate dissolution can be avoided, as done by the United Kingdom in 2011 by passing the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011¹⁷.

However, there can arise a situation in which dissolution of Lok Sabha / State Assembly is inevitable. The Law Commission of India in its 170th report, Para 7.1.3 notes this concern as "In a parliamentary form of government, the government has no fixed term. Though its term is co-terminus with the life of the House, it can be defeated or it may fall, on many counts." To provide an appropriate framework to address this issue using two phased election cycle cited above, the following recommendation of the NITI Aayog provide a possible solution in this regard.

Table 1: Conceptual solution in case Assembly of a State gets pre-maturely dissolved

Case	Description of Case	Indicative solutions	Resultant approx. term of the new Government
Case 1	Assembly gets dissolved within 15 months of Phase I elections	Immediate Elections with term of the new Assembly lasting till the next round of Phase I elections	More than 45 months
Case 2	Assembly gets dissolved between 15 – 30 months of Phase I elections	President's rule or other temporary arrangements for Government till Phase II. Fresh elections to be synchronized with Phase II thereafter.	60 months post fresh elections
Case 3	Assembly gets dissolved between 30 – 45 months of Phase I elections	Immediate Elections with term lasting of the new Assembly till the next round of Phase II elections	More than 45 months
Case 4	Assembly gets dissolved between 45 – 60 months	President's rule or other temporary arrangements for	60 months post fresh elections

Source: NITI Aayog discussion paper, 2014

All the above measures, when implemented together, will comprehensively ensure the sustainability of simultaneous election over the longer term.

3. Conclusion

The persistent socio-economic issues caused by frequent election cycles across the country collectively point towards Simultaneous elections as a potential solution. As Simultaneous elections are not a new concept in India, it adds more value for the people and the government to look forward to this approach. The analysis showed us that restoring the old order of elections would require certain constitutional changes with additional logistics arrangements. Through our tri-pronged evaluation covering the potential solution's need, feasibility and sustainability aspects, we feel holding elections simultaneously reduces the burden on the cumulative government resources, streamlines the use of

security forces, and decreases the strain on administrative personnel. Additionally, through this approach, we will be lessening the frequency of politically motivated decision-making by the government, resulting in a better focus on long-term development initiatives.

However, the counterarguments put forward valid concerns about the voters' behaviour, federalism and operational feasibility, which are to be addressed strategically and by building broad public consensus. After all, democracy is "of the people, for the people, by the people". Though the arguments of voters have a change in political perspective about different parties during simultaneous elections, evidence suggests that voters have sufficient political nuances to differentiate between national and state-level issues to cast the vote. Moreover, the Election Commission of India is confident about its operational capacity to conduct elections simultaneously across India, which has been a widespread concern with this reform.

¹⁶ Paragraph 7.0, 79th Report by Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, 2015.

¹⁷ The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom that for the first time sets in legislation a

default fixed election date for a general election to the Westminster parliament.

The combined efforts of constitutional amendments, legal frameworks, and structural arrangements are required to conduct sustainable simultaneous elections across the country to foster good governance, improve economic stability and give scope for governments formed to focus on actual continuous national development.