

REALITY CHECK: ON SIMULTANEOUS POLLS

Relevant for: Indian Polity & Constitution | Topic: Electoral Reforms in India

Chief Election Commissioner O.P. Rawat's view that it is not possible to hold simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies soon is a realistic assessment of the humongous task ahead of the Election Commission before it can embark on such an ambitious venture. Mr. Rawat has, in particular, ruled out the possibility of holding elections to the Lok Sabha this December along with polls to the Assemblies of four States. In addition to the basic requirement of a legal framework under which the extension or curtailment of the term of any Assembly is constitutionally permissible, simultaneous elections would demand a massive increase in the number of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) units. Mr. Rawat has pointed out that altering the term of an Assembly needs an amendment to the Constitution. Moreover, ensuring the availability of VVPATs everywhere poses a logistical challenge. Mizoram is due for elections in December, as the term of the Assembly ends on December 15. This will be followed by Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, with the terms of their Assemblies ending on January 5, 7 and 20, respectively. A new batch of VVPAT units is expected only by the end of November, and it takes a month for first-level checking, rendering the possibility of using them in the next round of elections remote. The logistics are bracing, too. Simultaneous elections will require the use of 24 lakh EVMs, needing the procurement of 12 lakh EVMs and an equal number of VVPAT units, according to its estimate. These figures ought to give pause to the clamour to hold simultaneous Assembly elections with the next Lok Sabha polls.

It goes without saying that a wide political consensus, as well as legislative cooperation from various parties at the Centre and in the States, is required for holding simultaneous elections. It is natural that parties that control legislatures constituted in recent months or years would resist any curtailment of their tenures, while those in the Opposition may prefer simultaneous polls if it means Assembly elections being advanced. Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah has written to the Law Commission favouring simultaneous polls, giving a fillip to the idea. The crux of the argument in favour of the concept is that the country is perpetually in election mode, resulting in a lack of adequate focus on governance. The second contention is that scattered polling results in extra expenditure. The question before India is, in order to address these two issues, can legislature terms be curtailed without undermining representative democracy and federalism? Given the procedural and logistical challenges that holding of simultaneous elections pose, it would be far more productive for political parties to focus on basic electoral reforms and find ways to curb excessive election expenditure.

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