

The one-election idea is a farce

In his address on National Law Day 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi once again sounded the bugle for simultaneous elections to Parliament and all State Assemblies, under the banner of “one nation one election”. Mr. Modi also cited four reasons: massive expenditure; diversion of security and civil staff from primary duties; impact on governance due to the model code of conduct, and disruption to normal public life. The case is weak and the reasons are a mere alibi.

The Election Commission incurs a total cost of roughly 8,000 crore to conduct all State and federal elections in a span of five years, or roughly 1,500 crore every year. Nearly 600 million Indians vote in India's elections, which means, it costs 27 per voter per year to keep India an electoral democracy. Is this a “massive” expense? To put this in context, all the States and the Centre combined incurred an expenditure of nearly 30 lakh crore in FY2014. Surely, 0.05% of India's total annual expenditure is not a large price to pay for the pride of being the world's largest and most vibrant electoral democracy. The notion that elections are prohibitively expensive is false and misleading.

The model code of conduct for elections was agreed to by political parties in 1979, and prohibits the ruling party from incurring capital expenditure for certain projects after elections are announced. If India is indeed embarking on a path of “cooperative federalism” as the Prime Minister also claims, then more such projects will be undertaken by each State and not by the Centre. So, why should elections in one State hinder governance in the rest of the States? And if all political parties still feel the need to reform the code, they are free to do so. The solution is to reform the code and not the electoral cycle.

Governance paralysis due to State elections is a mere alibi. The real reason is that the two national parties are excessively dependent on their national leaders' campaigns in State elections, as seen in Gujarat. This is certainly a drain on the Prime Minister's time and a distraction from governance. Depending on their national leaders is the problem and the prerogative of the national parties. It is not the fault of the electoral system. In the elections in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, in 2016, and where the two national parties and their leaders had a minimal role, nothing stopped the Union government from continuing its governance for the rest of India. Thus it is wrong to conflate the interests of the national parties with those of the “flaws” of the electoral system.

Diversion of civil staff and disruption of public life were the two other reasons cited, but these sound more like reasons against holding elections in general. Surely, a disruption to public life twice in five years is not a binding constraint in the larger interests of interim accountability. The right of a voter to exercise her choice twice in a span of five years and hold governments accountable is much more important than just casting her vote once and having no option to express her opinion for the next five years. These two reasons are very weak when measured against the costs of limiting electoral opportunities for citizens.

My research on all simultaneous elections to State Assemblies and Parliament between 1999 and 2014 shows that simultaneous elections do have an impact on voter behaviour. These elections comprised 513 million voter choices. In 77% of these constituencies, voters chose the same political party for both State and Centre. When elections were held even six months apart, only 61% chose the same political party. When elections became disparate, there was no evidence of the voter choosing the same party. This analysis is not based on mere headline victory in a State but on vote shares and the winners in each constituency. There is clear empirical evidence that most Indian voters tend to choose the same party when elections are held simultaneously to both

Centre and State, with the relationship diminishing as elections are held farther away.

Further, simultaneous elections impinge on the political autonomy of States. Today, any elected State government can choose to dissolve its Assembly and call for fresh elections. If elections are to be held simultaneously, States will have to give up this power and wait for a national election schedule. There can be legitimate reasons for State governments to dissolve their Assemblies and call for fresh elections, as should be the case in Tamil Nadu. Under a simultaneous elections regime, the State will be beholden to the Union government for elections to its State, which goes against the very grain of political autonomy under our federal structure.

There is still much that is wrong with our nation in its governance and elections. But disparate elections to States and Parliament are not one of them. There is much to improve in terms of efficiency of our governance. But “oneness” is not the desired path to efficiency in a diverse polity such as India.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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