

EXPRESS VIEW ON ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION PANEL: FIRST, LISTEN

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

The official consultation process set in motion for gauging the viability of simultaneous elections is unfolding like a chronicle foretold. According to the Union Law Ministry, 81 per cent of the 20,000-plus responses received by the High Level Committee on One Nation, One Election have favoured the idea. The Committee headed by a former president, Ram Nath Kovind, issued a public notice asking for suggestions between January 5-15. Unfortunately, given its constitution, manner of functioning and the larger context of one-party dominance, the Kovind Committee gives the impression of being partisan at best and a rubber stamp at worst. The blame for the lack of robust debate on the proposal also lies with the Opposition, particularly Congress. On an issue with far-reaching consequences, it has refused to engage.

The eight members of the Committee have either openly expressed support for simultaneous polls — as president, Kovind did, in Parliament, in 2019 — or are seen to be close to the government and therefore broadly in agreement with its pet projects. Congress Leader in the Lok Sabha, [Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury](#), refused to be a part of the Committee arguing that it is imbalanced. The Committee's very terms of reference assume that One Nation, One Election is in "national interest". But despite this, an Opposition leader could have played an important role — by voicing concerns the government may not want heard and by pushing for greater transparency in the process. As things stand, the concerns of the Opposition and the states look scattered and are being voiced piecemeal: Congress has called it "undemocratic", AAP has said it will give an "unfair advantage" to the ruling party, the DMK has labelled it "dangerous", and the TMC described it as "against the federal structure".

Admittedly, a near-constant election cycle, and the short-termism this engenders, places a great burden on the exchequer. But while these issues are important, they cannot be used as an excuse to artificially keep governments that lose the support of the legislature and by extension, the people, in power. Certainly, such a fundamental change in the democratic structure and process must not be brought about without adequate engagement with the Opposition's concerns. The legitimacy of the electoral system does not flow only from the Treasury Benches or the corridors of power at Kartavya Path. It also emanates from those without executive office continuing to have a voice. The elected Opposition, all but silenced in the last session of Parliament with the expulsion of 146 MPs, must have a say, and not just a token one, in the consequential matter of the design of elections.

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