

CAN ONE NATION, ONE POLL WORK?

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

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in one of his first political initiatives after winning a spectacular mandate, convened an all party meeting on Wednesday to deliberate on a pet theme: one nation; one poll. This was an idea that the PM had floated soon after taking over in 2014. But the lack of adequate political strength to engineer the required constitutional changes, the divisions on the issue across the Indian political spectrum, and other priorities meant that the matter receded to the background. Yet, the push was strong enough for three important bodies — a parliamentary committee, the Niti Aayog and the Law Commission — to deliberate on it. He has returned to the idea less than a month after the 2019 election results.

The underlying logic, instinctively, sounds appealing to many. India has too many elections: a Lok Sabha poll every five years; a few state assembly polls every year. This distracts from the core task of governance and forces parties to think about short term political considerations rather than long term challenges of administration and reforms. It is also expensive business, both for the state which incurs expenditure in organising polls as well as for political parties which spend massively during campaigning. It also keeps society perpetually divided, for elections often rely on sharp polarisation. So why not change the system? Have one election for both the Centre and all assemblies once every five years. And spend the rest of the time on governance. This is broadly the case of political advocates of the cause, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

But the Indian Constitution, Indian democracy, and the Indian federal scheme cannot be reduced to such a simplistic assessment. Yes, elections are expensive (and there needs to be a far more focused debate on political finance). Yes, elections distract from governance. But regular elections serve an altogether different, and perhaps far more important, function. They keep a check on the political executive. They serve as a regular democratic feedback mechanism. Just take the three state assembly polls at the end of last year. It was perhaps a turning point for 2019 because it made the BJP realise that it needed a course correction. Some states have polls aligned with the Centre; many do not. And that is just fine because the diversity within the Indian political system should allow states to follow their own political calendar. It is not just a question of desirability. It is also a question of feasibility. Having one poll would require major changes in the Indian Constitution; it leaves open questions about what happens if a government at the Centre or any state falls mid-term. Constructive ideas to reform Indian elections and a healthy debate around it are essential. The one nation, one poll idea may not serve that purpose.

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