

MISPLACED PRIORITIES: ON SIMULTANEOUS POLLS

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

The decision to form a [committee to examine the issue of holding simultaneous elections](#) to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies is a significant step towards achieving Prime Minister Narendra Modi's objective of synchronising elections across the country. The fact that he took the initiative to convene a meeting of leaders of all political parties so early in his second stint in office shows that he attaches considerable importance to it. Advocates of such elections point to potential benefits. There is the obvious advantage of curbing the huge expenditure involved and reducing the burden on the manpower deployed. The second point in its favour is that ruling parties can focus more on governance and less on campaigning. The idea that some part of the country is in election mode every year, resulting in impediments to development work due to the model code of conduct being in force, is cited in favour of reducing election frequency. But there are challenging questions of feasibility that the political system must contend with. First, it may require the curtailment or extension of the tenure of State legislatures to bring their elections in line with the Lok Sabha poll dates. Should State governments bear this burden just to fulfil the ideal of simultaneous elections? There is an obvious lack of political consensus on this. Another question is: what happens if the government at the Centre falls?

The Law Commission, in its working paper on the subject, has mooted the idea of a 'constructive vote of confidence'. That is, while expressing loss of trust in one government, members should repose confidence in an alternative regime. Another idea is that whenever mid-term polls are held due to loss of majority, the subsequent legislature should serve out only the remainder of the term. These measures would involve far-reaching changes to the law, including amendments to the Constitution to alter the tenure of legislatures and the provision for disqualification of members for supporting an alternative regime. In terms of principle, the main issue is whether getting all elections to coincide undermines representative democracy and federalism. In a parliamentary democracy, the executive is responsible to the legislature; and its legitimacy would be undermined by taking away the legislature's power to bring down a minority regime by mandating a fixed tenure just to have simultaneous elections. The interests of regional parties may take a beating, as regional issues may be subsumed by national themes in a common election. Given these challenges, there is simply no case for hastening the introduction of simultaneous elections. The government must accord priority to other electoral reforms. For instance, it should seek ways to curb spending by candidates and parties, which has reached alarmingly high levels and poses a threat to free and fair elections.

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As Prime Minister Modi returns to power, he must swear by the Indian civilisational ethos

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