

## **Simultaneous Elections on the Agenda in India**

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### **Summary**

*The holding of simultaneous elections to parliament, state assemblies and local bodies has been featured in the Bharatiya Janata Party's manifesto. The government has now constituted a committee to recommend the conduct of these simultaneous elections. The committee is to make specific recommendations on amendments to the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act and if these amendments would require ratification by the states. This announcement has fuelled a debate among the political parties.*

The Indian government has announced the formation of a committee to examine the possibility of a system of 'One Nation, One Election', under which simultaneous elections would be held for the Lok Sabha, state assemblies and local bodies. The idea is about structuring the election cycle in a manner in which the elections to all three tiers are synchronised to be held within a given span of time. Till 1967, general elections were held simultaneously with the state legislative assembly elections. However, in 1967, due to the premature dissolution of some state assemblies in 1968 and 1969, the system of simultaneous elections was rendered infeasible.

The fact that the country is perennially in election mode in one state or another has indeed evoked the need to consider simultaneous polls. Every year, the Indian government and respective state governments bear expenditures on account of the conduct of elections. The candidates and political parties end up spending significantly more than the prescribed expenditure limits. Spending more than the prescribed limits to win elections, is consequently blamed as one of the key drivers for corruption and black money in the country.

The need to conduct simultaneous polls has figured in the election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The present committee will be the fourth to examine the possibility of simultaneous elections. The Law Commission, NITI Aayog and a Parliamentary Standing Committee have deliberated on it earlier.

In its draft report in August 2018, the Law Commission indicated that appropriate amendments would have to be made to the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and at least 50 per cent of the states would have to ratify the constitutional amendments. The Department of Personnel and Law-related Parliamentary Standing Committee recommended holding simultaneous elections in two phases, with elections of some assemblies at the mid-term of the Lok Sabha and the remaining at the end of the tenure of the Lok Sabha. It also recommended that early elections to the Lok Sabha or state assemblies can take place only if either of two conditions is met: i) a motion for an early general election is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the whole House; or ii) if a

no-confidence motion is passed and no alternative government is confirmed by the Lok Sabha or state legislative assemblies.

In a paper prepared by the NITI Aayog, it was recommended to hold simultaneous elections to the assemblies of about one-half of the states, along with the Lok Sabha general election due in April-May 2019 and the rest of the states in the mid-way, from October to November 2021, entailing extension or curtailment of the duration of the assemblies wherever required.

### **The Present Committee and its Mandate**

The present committee has been mandated to make recommendations on holding simultaneous elections and recommend specific amendments to the Constitution and Representation of People Act and whether these amendments would require ratification by the states. The committee is to suggest a framework for the synchronisation of elections and specifically suggest the timeframe within which simultaneous elections may be held if they cannot be held in one go. It has also to examine the logistics and manpower required including the electronic voting machines (EVM) for holding such simultaneous elections. Another important feature is the modalities of use of a single electoral roll and electoral identity cards for identification of voters in parliament, state legislative assembly, municipalities and *panchayats* (village councils).

The debate around simultaneous elections has brought out the advantages that they would result in huge savings to the exchequer and political parties, besides reducing the burden on the administrative set-up and security forces. This is a significant factor as normal activities of the government come to a standstill, causing a serious impact on governance because the moral code of conduct kicks in. The annual cycle of elections, besides affecting the developmental process and good governance, instigates the political class to think in terms of short-term electoral gains rather than focusing on long-term policies for sustainable development and welfare of the people. Since the 'winnability' factor is predominant, short-term political imperatives become an immediate priority and long-term economic planning often takes a back seat. Quite often, governments have preferred to defer the implementation of much-needed structural reforms due to impending elections. The compelling reasons for simultaneous elections include the suspension of development programmes and welfare activities due to the frequent imposition of Model Code of Conduct, massive expenditures by the government and various stakeholders on frequent elections, black money, engagement of government personnel and security forces for a prolonged period, and perpetuation of caste, religion and communal issues, among others.

The massive deployment for general elections can be gauged from the fact that to conduct elections to the 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha in 2019, the Election Commission took the help of about five million personnel as polling officials to supervise the election process across 1,035,918 polling stations in the country. To provide security arrangements, 270,000 Central Armed Police Forces were deployed, along with two million state police personnel. A total of 1.74 million voter-verified paper audit trail machines and 3.96 million EVMs were also used.

The government's proposal to conduct simultaneous elections has not gone entirely uncontested. Critics have argued that such a step may undermine the depth and breadth of Indian democracy and that its operational feasibility is also a challenge. There has been a great deal of speculation that the fear of adverse results in the upcoming state elections has compelled the BJP to attempt simultaneous elections. It is true that not having dominance in states has been a disadvantage to the BJP, as it gives it a lack of majority in the Rajya Sabha. On the other hand, the experiences of some states such as Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have shown split-ticket results, even when elections are held simultaneously. Considering the penchant of the present government to push through its stated initiatives, it appears that the 'One Nation, One Election' system would become a reality. The timeline of its implementation remains to be seen.

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