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# **The Forgotten Voter in the Simultaneous Elections Discourse**

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## **Beyond Logistical Challenges**

*“Our Constitution does not provide for a fixed four-year cycle like the one in the United States of America. The elections will probably be almost always going on in some province or the other.”* This prophetic assertion was made by Shibbon Saxena in the Constituent Assembly while expounding the arduous responsibilities of the Election Commission (Sahu, 2024). The Ram Nath Kovind-led High-Level Committee submitted its report on ‘One Nation, One Election’ on 15th September 2024. The committee echoed the recommendations to synchronise elections made by the Law Commission, in 1999 and Venkatchaliah Commission, in 2000. Sweden, Belgium, South Africa and Germany have been used as models to underscore the workability of the proposed electoral reform. These case studies, though instructive, operate on a different scale and in distinct electoral environments. The enormity of the Indian electoral exercise can be inferred from the fact that the total population of the aforementioned countries is 3 Crore less than that of Uttar Pradesh alone.

The public discourse on the proposed electoral reform has revolved around two themes: the logistical workability of the scheme and its impact on the spirit of democracy. The impact of the proposed scheme on voting behaviour has not caught the eyeballs of the people and experts alike. Discourse on both subjects is necessary but considerable attention should be given to the latter theme because of the fundamentality of the voter and electoral choice in any representative democracy. The proposed policy appears alluring in the short run because it does away with the routine disruptions caused by multiple cycles of elections. Despite clientelist exchanges between political actors, viewing elections only as an impediment to governance is a myopic view of elections. There is a need to disassociate elections with its pejorative charge. For the marginalised and discriminated communities in India, election lines are the only queues in which they can stand in front of those who routinely exploit them. Alternatively, routine elections are vibrant manifestations of the vision of political equality.

The oft-repeated argument for the reduction of the unwarranted administrative and fiscal burden of the government does have merit, given that the Election Commission has to avail

services of government teachers to meet its personnel requirement for elections. But to what extent can we justify simultaneous elections based on its procedural benefits? Conducting simultaneous polls would require nearly 30 lakh control units, 43 lakh ballot units and 32 lakh Verifiable Voter Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs). This is more than two times the requirement we have in status quo (India Today, 2023) This would increase the government's expenditure as they have to shell out nearly 10,000 Crore to procure additional Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). This is a recurring expense because the EVMs have a shelf life of only 15 years. The utility of each EVM will decline as it will only be used for three election cycles. This is in contrast to the multiple times it can be reused in case of sequential elections.

An analysis done by CMS Research House (2019) revealed that in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the contribution of official Election Commission funds was merely 15-20% (10,000 crores) of the total expenditure of a whopping 55,000 crore. The other election expenditures are slated to reduce marginally because the whole election process remains unchanged, the only difference is that of temporality. The only major reduction might be in that of administrative costs (India Today, 2023). However, the administrative budget of the Election Commission was 340 crores which comes to only 3% of the ECI's total spending on elections in 2019 (Das, 2023).

The High-Level Committee mandates that local body elections be held 100 days after the elections for the Parliament and State Assemblies. This means that the Election Commission will have to conduct two elections on a national scale with approximately 15 million personnel within three months (Quraishi, 2024). The impossibility of holding elections at a national level within a month due to obvious administrative limitations implies that there will be more than two months of intensive elections with a hiatus of 100 days in between. The trade-off made by the reform stands on shaky ground, a highly intensive two-month cycle is acceptable insofar as the next 5 years will not see any elections (which is a brave assumption to make). The upshot of this analysis is that logistical costs and benefits are likely to remain symmetrical when we compare the status quo to a scenario where elections are conducted simultaneously. Even if costs are lower in the paradigm of the proposed reform, the argument does not provide a case persuasive enough to disrupt the status quo.

Profound Impacts on Democratic Structure and Voter Behaviour

The most fundamental question concerning the implementation of the proposed electoral reform is the what-if scenario in case of a no-confidence motion. Putting the state under President's rule or holding re-elections seems to be the plausible options. Holding re-elections is the lesser evil because an elected government enjoys greater legitimacy than the imposition of de facto union rule. However, the High-Level Committee's suggestion of limiting the tenure of the newly elected government so that it could synchronise with the next election cycle is patently violative of the constitutional framework (Yadav, 2024). The failure of the United Kingdom's Fixed Term Act provides insight into the practical challenges of earmarking a fixed tenure for any government. The law, which fixed dates for subsequent election cycles, was trespassed through another simple legislation that called for early elections. The larger message is that political incentive outweighs legal imperative in deciding when to hold elections (Bull, 2019). The drawback of this approach is that no-confidence motions are seen as aberrations. While empirical data does support the argument, it does not factor in political conditions that lead to the dislodging of state governments before the completion of tenure. In the late 1960s, state assemblies were frequently dissolved in an environment marked by political liquidity. Between 1967 and 1980, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu assemblies were dissolved twice. This is not to say that dissolution is a regular political event but the fickle nature of coalition politics in India makes it a real possibility (Achary, 2024).

The impact of simultaneous elections on voting behaviour is a largely uncharted territory. The tendency of people to split their tickets decreases significantly when polls are held simultaneously. While popular narrative reveals that post-1990s, regional parties have started to occupy pole position in national politics. Vaishnav argues that despite the increasing fragmentation of the parties, their aggregate vote share has remained stagnant. In fact there was a marginal decline in the vote share of regional parties from 50.9 in 1996 to 48.6 in 2014 (Vaishnav, 2014). A fundamental impact of simultaneous elections will be on the future electoral prospects of regional parties. This can be extrapolated from the fact that there will be a unified campaign for national and local elections. Due to the superior economic and human capital available to the national parties, national issues are likely to rule the roost. Negatively, local issues might become *less* important in the cacophony of national discourse (Balasubramaniam et al., 2020).

Simultaneous elections are the perfect breeding ground for the coattail effect. This phenomenon refers to the tendency of a popular candidate to attract votes to candidates from the same party for other levels of government. A good performance record of an incumbent also bolsters the

winning chances of a non-performing incumbent belonging to the same party but at a different level (Galina, 2010). Parties stand to gain from the problem of attribution wherein the voters are unable to distinguish between a good-quality candidate and a free rider.

Regular elections allow the electorate to vote based on the performance of either level of government. If Assembly elections are followed by Lok Sabha elections, voters use the governance record of the Union to reward or penalise them in the Assembly elections. This is known as the cross effect of ruling and can only be possible if the two elections are temporally separated. Conversely, if the Lok Sabha election closely follows the Assembly elections, the incumbent party at the state level picks up more votes due to the honeymoon effect (Ravishankar, 2009). Voters of Delhi choosing the Aam Aadmi Party in the Assembly elections shortly after giving the Bharatiya Janata Party a walkover in the Lok Sabha elections is an archetype of differential voting in India. The desirability and rationality of cross effects of ruling is questionable. But the debate is not about desirability, it is about providing the electorate to make a political decision based on their evaluation of the government's performance even without completing its tenure. Sequential elections are not inevitable but they are also desirable.

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