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One Nation, One Election: Supreme Court Declines JPC Interaction as India Debates Simultaneous Elections, Federalism and Accountability

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Recent Developments:

- The **Supreme Court** declined a proposed October 6, 2026 interaction between the Chief Justice of India, other sitting judges and the Joint Parliamentary Committee examining the **Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024**, which seeks to facilitate simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.
- The Court indicated that since the proposed constitutional amendments could subsequently become subject to **judicial review**, an administrative-side discussion with sitting judges would not be expedient or desirable. The development highlights the importance of maintaining institutional boundaries between Parliament and the judiciary.
- The **Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024** and the **Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024** were introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17, 2024, and referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for examination.
- The present debate concerns whether elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies should be conducted simultaneously, while preserving the constitutional principles of **parliamentary government, federalism, democratic accountability and free and fair elections**.

Concept of Simultaneous Elections:

Meaning and Scope:

- **Simultaneous elections**, commonly described as **One Nation, One Election**, seek to synchronise the electoral cycles of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.
- Under the proposed framework, voters would elect representatives to the Union and State legislatures during the same electoral cycle, although polling could continue to take place in multiple phases across the country.
- The objective is to reduce repeated election expenditure, minimise prolonged election-related mobilisation and improve administrative continuity.
- Simultaneous elections do not necessarily mean that polling would take place across the entire country on a single day; the central concept is **synchronisation of electoral cycles**.

Historical Background in India:

Pre-1967 Synchronisation:

- India conducted elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies simultaneously during the first four general election cycles in **1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967**.
- The synchronised cycle was subsequently disrupted because the Lok Sabha and several State Assemblies were dissolved before completing their normal terms, resulting in elections being held at different times.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477** / Whatsapp : **09710729833**

- By 2019, only four States conducted Assembly elections simultaneously with the Lok Sabha election, demonstrating the gradual fragmentation of the original electoral cycle.

Earlier Institutional Proposals:

- The **Election Commission of India** examined the possibility of simultaneous elections in 1982.
- The **Law Commission of India** examined the issue in 1999 and subsequently discussed implementation options in its 2018 draft report.
- The **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice** also examined the feasibility of simultaneous elections in its 79th Report in 2015. The official One Nation, One Election repository lists these reports among the major institutional studies on the subject.

Constitutional and Legislative Framework:

Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024:

- The proposed constitutional amendment seeks to create a framework for conducting elections to the **Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies together**.
- The Bill proposes that the President may issue a notification after a general election to bring the simultaneous-election framework into operation.
- State Assemblies constituted after the specified date would have their terms aligned with the remaining term of the Lok Sabha, thereby establishing a common electoral cycle.

Premature Dissolution:

- The proposed framework addresses premature dissolution by providing that a fresh election would be held for the **remaining period of the original five-year cycle**, rather than creating a completely new five-year electoral cycle.
- This mechanism is intended to prevent premature dissolution of one House from permanently disrupting the common election cycle.

Deferral of State Elections:

- The proposed legislation provides that where the **Election Commission of India** considers that an election to a particular State Assembly cannot be conducted as part of the simultaneous elections, it may recommend deferral to the President.
- Even where an election is deferred, the subsequent Assembly's term would remain linked to the common electoral cycle.

Relevant Constitutional Provisions:

- The present constitutional framework provides normal five-year terms for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies under **Articles 83 and 172**, subject to earlier dissolution.
- **Articles 85 and 174** deal with the summoning and prorogation of Parliament and State Legislatures respectively.
- **Article 356** provides for President's Rule when the constitutional machinery in a State cannot be carried on in accordance with the Constitution.
- Synchronising elections therefore requires addressing the constitutional consequences of **premature dissolution, loss of majority, President's Rule and changes in legislative tenure**.

Arguments in Favour of Simultaneous Elections:

Reduction in Election Expenditure:

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- Repeated elections require recurring expenditure by governments, political parties and candidates, while also requiring repeated deployment of security and administrative personnel.
- Simultaneous elections could reduce the frequency of these recurring expenditures by combining major electoral operations within a common cycle.
- The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections identified **reduction in election expenditure** as one of the principal arguments supporting synchronisation.

Policy Continuity:

- Frequent elections can result in repeated imposition of the **Model Code of Conduct**, which restricts certain government announcements and activities during election periods.
- Supporters argue that fewer election cycles could reduce interruptions in governance and allow governments greater continuity in implementing policies and programmes.
- The High-Level Committee also associated simultaneous elections with greater **stability and predictability in governance** and reduced policy disruption.

Administrative Efficiency:

- Election duties require substantial deployment of district-level officials, teachers, security personnel and other government machinery.
- Frequent elections therefore create recurring administrative demands that can temporarily divert personnel from their regular responsibilities.
- A common electoral cycle could allow election-related administrative mobilisation to be concentrated into fewer periods.

Security Resource Management:

- Large-scale elections require deployment of **Central Armed Police Forces** and other security personnel across States.
- Simultaneous elections could potentially reduce the frequency with which security resources have to be moved repeatedly between different States for electoral duties.

Voter Participation and Convenience:

- Supporters also argue that a common electoral cycle could make the electoral calendar more predictable and reduce repeated mobilisation of voters.
- The High-Level Committee identified **increased voter participation** among the potential benefits of simultaneous elections.

Constitutional and Democratic Concerns:

Federalism and State-Specific Issues:

- India follows a **federal system with a strong Union dimension**, while State governments possess constitutionally recognised legislative and executive responsibilities.
- State elections frequently revolve around issues such as agriculture, public health, education, law and order, local infrastructure and State-specific economic conditions.
- Critics of simultaneous elections argue that combining State and national elections could increase the salience of national issues and reduce the electoral visibility of State-specific concerns.
- This could have implications for **regional parties**, particularly those whose political support is concentrated within individual States.

Democratic Accountability:

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- Elections serve not only to select governments but also to provide citizens with an institutional mechanism for evaluating government performance.
- Frequent elections can therefore function as recurring opportunities for political accountability.
- A synchronised five-year electoral cycle could reduce the frequency of direct electoral feedback available to voters between general elections.
- The counterargument is that accountability would continue through legislative mechanisms, parliamentary opposition, local elections, judicial review and other democratic institutions.

Premature Loss of Majority:

- India's parliamentary system is based on the principle of **collective responsibility**, under which the Council of Ministers must retain the confidence of the lower House.
- A government can lose its majority before completing its normal tenure, creating a constitutional question for any synchronised electoral system.
- If no alternative government can be formed, an early election may become necessary, potentially disrupting the common cycle.
- The proposed framework therefore attempts to ensure that an election held after premature dissolution would cover only the **remainder of the existing electoral cycle**, rather than beginning a fresh five-year term.

Impact on Political Competition and Voter Choice:

National and Regional Issues:

- Simultaneous elections would place multiple electoral contests within the same political environment.
- Critics argue that national issues could receive greater attention when Lok Sabha and Assembly elections occur together, potentially affecting the visibility of State-level policy questions.
- Supporters argue that voters are capable of distinguishing between different levels of government and that simultaneous voting does not necessarily eliminate State-specific electoral preferences.
- The central issue is therefore the interaction between **electoral synchronisation and the federal character of political competition**, rather than a predetermined effect on any particular party.

International Experience:

South Africa:

- South Africa conducts elections to its **National Assembly and provincial legislatures simultaneously** on a five-year cycle.
- The President is elected by the National Assembly rather than directly by voters.

Sweden:

- Sweden conducts elections to its national legislature and regional and municipal councils together every four years.

Germany:

- Germany has a four-year federal parliamentary term, while State elections operate according to individual State constitutional arrangements.
- Germany's constitutional framework also uses a form of **constructive vote of no confidence**, under which the Bundestag can remove the Federal Chancellor only by simultaneously electing a successor.
- International examples therefore demonstrate that synchronised elections operate within different constitutional structures and cannot be transplanted directly into India's parliamentary-federal framework.

Law Commission and Committee Recommendations:

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Phased Synchronisation:

- Earlier institutional proposals have explored a **two-cycle model**, under which Lok Sabha and approximately half of the State Assemblies could be aligned in one electoral cycle and the remaining Assemblies in another cycle approximately two-and-a-half years later.
- Such a model would require adjustments to existing legislative terms and amendments to relevant constitutional and electoral laws.

Constructive No-Confidence Mechanism:

- Earlier proposals have examined whether a **no-confidence motion** should be accompanied by a confidence motion identifying an alternative government.
- The objective would be to reduce premature dissolution and preserve legislative continuity.

Remaining-Term Elections:

- Earlier proposals have also considered limiting a House formed after premature dissolution to the **remaining term of the original House**.
- This approach would prevent every premature election from creating a new five-year electoral cycle.

Clubbing of By-Elections:

- Another proposal has been to hold by-elections collectively at a designated time during the year, thereby reducing the frequency of separate electoral operations.

Supreme Court and Separation of Powers:

Recent Judicial Development:

- The Supreme Court's refusal to hold the proposed interaction with the Joint Parliamentary Committee is significant because the proposed constitutional amendments could eventually be challenged before the Court.
- The Court's position reflects the institutional distinction between **legislative consideration of a Bill** and **judicial adjudication of its constitutional validity**.
- The development is relevant to UPSC because it illustrates the constitutional principle of **separation of powers**, judicial independence and the importance of avoiding situations that could create an appearance of prejudgment in matters potentially subject to judicial review.

Key Constitutional Issues for UPSC:

Basic Structure Doctrine:

- The proposed reform would require constitutional amendments affecting the functioning and tenure of elected legislatures.
- The **basic structure doctrine** limits Parliament's amending power by preventing amendments that damage the Constitution's basic features.
- Parliamentary democracy, federalism, rule of law and free and fair elections have been recognised as important constitutional principles in Supreme Court jurisprudence.
- Therefore, any challenge to the reform could potentially involve examination of whether its specific constitutional provisions are compatible with the **basic structure of the Constitution**.

Federal Balance:

- Simultaneous elections would require alignment of legislative terms across the Union and States.

- Any mechanism that extends or curtails the tenure of existing State Assemblies therefore raises questions concerning **State autonomy and federal balance**.
- The constitutional design must reconcile electoral synchronisation with the independent democratic mandate of State legislatures.

Way Forward:

Institutional and Constitutional Safeguards:

- Any simultaneous-election framework should clearly address **premature dissolution, hung Houses, no-confidence motions, President's Rule, deferred elections and caretaker governments**.
- The reform should preserve the constitutional principle of **collective responsibility** while preventing repeated disruption of the common electoral cycle.
- Parliament and State legislatures should be given adequate opportunity to deliberate on the federal and administrative consequences of the proposed framework.
- Electoral reforms should maintain the independence and constitutional role of the **Election Commission of India** while ensuring clear institutional accountability.
- Any transition mechanism should minimise arbitrary extension or curtailment of elected legislative terms and provide constitutionally defensible rules for synchronisation.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Facts:

- **1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967:** India conducted Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections simultaneously.
- **1982:** Election Commission examined the issue of simultaneous elections.
- **1999:** Law Commission examined the feasibility of simultaneous elections.
- **2015:** Parliamentary Standing Committee submitted its report on the feasibility of simultaneous elections.
- **2023:** High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections was constituted under the chairmanship of former President **Ram Nath Kovind**.
- **2024:** Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill and Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill were introduced in the Lok Sabha.
- **December 2024:** The Bills were referred to a **Joint Parliamentary Committee**.