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Simultaneous Elections

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Why is in news? 3 mn EVMs, massive security and funds: Challenges in holding simultaneous polls

The **logistics challenges of holding simultaneous elections** to Lok Sabha and state Assemblies — arranging around 30 lakh electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) machines, and deploying central forces around the country — will be immense, but not insurmountable, according to several former Chief Election Commissioners (CEC).

Simultaneous elections/'One Nation One Election' system:

The current electoral system of the country holds separate polls for the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies in a gap of five years, i.e. when the tenure of the Lower House or the state government concludes, or either of them is dissolved prematurely.

The **term of state assemblies may not necessarily be in sync** with one another or that of the Lok Sabha.

As a result, the mammoth task of conducting elections goes all round the year.

One Nation One Election proposes that simultaneous elections be held in all states and the Lok Sabha in a gap of five years.

This will **involve the restructuring of the Indian election cycle** in a manner that elections to the states and the centre synchronise.

This would mean that the voters will cast their vote for electing members of the LS and the state assemblies on a single day, at the same time (or in a phased manner as the case may be).

Background:

Simultaneous elections were held in the country during the first two decades after Independence **up to 1967**.

Dissolution of certain Assemblies in 1968 and 1969 followed by the dissolution of the Lok Sabha led to the disruption of the conduct of simultaneous elections.

Law Commission's draft report:

In **2018**, the Law Commission submitted a draft report endorsing the implementation of simultaneous polls, recommending changes to the electoral laws and Articles pertaining to the same.

It examined legal and constitutional constraints and solutions related to the conduct of simultaneous elections.

The Law Commission has suggested that simultaneous elections can **only be held through appropriate amendments to the Constitution**.

The Commission further **opined that at least 50% of the states must ratify** the constitutional amendments.

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The Commission recommended that appropriate **amendments be made to anti-defection laws** to ensure that all disqualification issues (arising from defection) are decided by the presiding officer within six months.

The Commission recommended three alternatives to synchronise elections in India. The Commission **recommended advancing or postponing election timings** in certain states.

The Commission noted that a no-confidence motion, if passed, may curtail the term of Lok Sabha/ state assembly. It recommended **replacing the 'no-confidence motion' with a 'constructive vote of no-confidence'**, through appropriate amendments.

In a constructive vote of no confidence, the **government may only be removed if there is confidence in an alternate government**. It further suggested the option of limiting the number of such motions during the term of the House/ Assembly.

If no party secures a majority to form the government, it may result in a **hung House/ Assembly**. In order to prevent this, the Commission recommended that the **President/ Governor should give an opportunity to the largest party along with their pre or post-poll alliance** to form the government.

If the government can still not be formed, an all-party meeting may be called to resolve the stalemate. If this fails, mid-term elections may be held.

Benefits of simultaneous elections:

Reduce Policy paralysis: Imposition of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) over the state for a longer period of time leads to stoppage of developmental programs.

Improved Governance: Simultaneous elections will allow elected governments and ruling parties to concentrate on governance rather than diverting their attention towards frequent election preparations in various regions.

Reduce huge expenditures on elections: Around Rs 55,000 crore (\$8 billion), was spent during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections (as per the report by the Centre for Media Studies).

SE can help reduce it by conducting the synchronized election for states and the Centre at the same time.

Reduce the disruption of public life: Regular elections impact the functioning of essential services such as regular transport, prices of essentials, etc.

Curbing black money: Frequent elections have been associated with the possibility of black money being turned into white money, leading to the emergence of a parallel economy. Holding one-time elections could help reduce such a possibility.

Fostering unity: Simultaneous polls promote a national perspective over regional ones, which is important for cultivating unity within the country.

Reduce the impact on social fabric: Elections are known to perpetuate religion, caste, corruption, and communal tensions.

Reduce the impact of populist measures: Populist measures are often not in sync with the economic principles and have a narrow vision of immediate electoral gains.

Increase voter turnout: Frequent election leads to voters' exhaustion and reduces their participation in the democratic process.

Issues in implementing simultaneous election:

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Confused voter: Not all voters are highly educated to know who to vote for. They may get confused and may not know whether they are voting for candidates contesting assembly or parliament elections.

Lack of manpower: There is a dearth of enough security and administrative officials to conduct simultaneous free and fair elections throughout the country in one go. Also it will require more manpower on a single day to ensure free and fair elections.

Against multi-party democracy: India is a multi-party democracy where elections are held for State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha separately. This distinction gets blurred somewhat when voters are made to vote for electing two types of government at the same time, at the same polling booth, and on the same day.

Anti-federal: Assembly elections are fought on local issues and, in the true spirit of federalism, parties and leaders are judged in the context of their work done in the state. Clubbing them with the general election could lead to a situation where the national narrative submerges the regional story.

Consensus among political parties: The biggest challenge to simultaneous polls lies in getting the party political consensus needed to bring an amendment in the law. Achieving an all party consensus is not easy.

Way Forward:

Any changes must **require both a constitutional amendment and judicial approval** that they do not violate the “basic structure” of the Constitution.

A focused group of constitutional experts, think tanks, government officials and representatives of political parties should be formed to work out appropriate implementation related details

Other alternatives should be explored to **reduce election related expenses** like State funding of elections, Decriminalisation of politics, Bringing in transparency in political funding, Setting up National Electoral Fund to which all donors can contribute, etc.