Simultaneous Elections – A Flawed Concoction

What is the issue?

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- The demand for simultaneous elections for states assemblies and the parliament has grown louder in recent times.
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- But the initiative is inherently flawed and could spell doom for our current stable political framework, which has withstood adversities.
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What are the stated arguments in favour of simultaneous elections?

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- Simultaneous elections will help in removing frequent electoral distractions that nudge policy makers towards populism.
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- Cost saving measures is another ground on which simultaneous elections are being advanced as the net logistical expense for elections comes down.
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- Political stability is also being forwarded as key reason on why we should embrace simultaneous elections.
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- The argument is that such stability will help in reducing the fatigue of electioneering and aid in providing a stable 5 years of governance.
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- Implicit in this, is the assumption is that continuous and spread out elections across states are barriers for business environment and economic growth.
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- **Flaws -** Track record of synchronised elections (1951-67) paints a very different picture as India’s growth had accelerated only in the later decades.
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- At the national level too, the late 1990s saw tremendous political churning and instability – but economic growth seemed largely on track nevertheless.
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What are the divergent views on the political implications?

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- **Hawks -** Some argue that simultaneous elections to the national parliament and state assemblies will provide an advantage to the national parties.
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- The logic is that pan Indian parties are better off due to something like “Economics of Scale” – where bigger firms manage to produce cheaper goods.
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- The non-electoral gains of an electoral victory in Parliament are also infinitely more than at the state level, which would be a serious consideration for voters.
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- **Supporters –** Although there is no clear evidence, some proponents of simultaneous elections too agree that national parties will be at an advantage.
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- In their worldview, the rise of national parties (as against regional parties) is necessarily for better coordinating developmental policies.
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- Thus, they portray that advantage for national parties is inherently good for the country as policies will freely percolate across the nation.
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- An unstated assumption that goes along with such thinking is that national parties have better governance capabilities that regionally restricted ones.
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- **Nuanced Analysis -** Empirical evidences of the performance of various state governments (of both national and regional parties) need to be studied.
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- Data since Independence clearly shows that growth and fiscal performance of regional party governments have been better than national parties.
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- Many innovative programmes like - food security and employment guarantee were first conceived and implemented by different state governments.
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- In no little terms, the diversity in policy has contributed to development – which is not possible without the existence of strong regional parties.

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- Hence, simultaneous polls will have major implications for party politics, and federalism, and hence is a key ingredient of constitution’s basic structure.
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What are the constitutional implications?

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- **The Spread -** Dr. Ambedkar had noted in the constitutional debates that there will be a spread in elections across states over time.
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- This, he said was desirable as he perceived that a spread out election cycle was a key mechanism for ensuring accountability – in addition to other checks.
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- Hence, our parliamentary setup has been clearly intended to prioritise responsible and accountable governance than stable governance.
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- **Federal Polity -** “Separate state and central citizenship” was avoided due to possible fissiparous tendencies of the early years.
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- But our constitution is considerably federal and provides for a clear power separation between centre and states, thereby providing autonomy to states.
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- It is politically risky to tamper this structure, which has ensured peace and managed to hold extremely diverse cultural groups together.
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- The proposal for simultaneous polls cuts at the root of this grand design of the Constitution based on dual polity – which hence needs to be given up.
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Source: Business Standard

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