

**Article Title:” One nation, two elections: How to stop parties from always being in campaign mode and get them to govern”**

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There is much to be proud of in the democracy that India has become, not only the world’s largest but also its most diverse. Over the decades, we have disproved the many critics who doubted India could remain democratic. But despite this success, our republic suffers from a worrisome shortcoming: too much campaigning, too little governance.

The continual cycle of elections, with several at the state level every year, inevitably impacts governance at the national level. Every such election is a significant distraction for the Union government, since it is inevitably seen as at least a partial referendum on the government’s policies and functioning.

That often leads to policy announcements being held up, lest they impact the outcome. And in frequently requiring senior members of the government to be off campaigning, it also acts as a drag on the bandwidth available for governance. Frequent elections impact opposition parties as well, for similar reasons, thus repeatedly polarising political discourse and reducing the room available for compromise.

For India to adequately grapple with its many challenges, the ratio between governing and campaigning must improve at both its national as well as state levels. Certainly, no other democracy has anything quite like this in terms of continual elections.

The first four general elections, held in 1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967 saw largely simultaneous nationwide exercises for both Parliament and state assemblies. The only two exceptions were Kerala and Odisha, which had midterm elections in 1960 and 1961 respectively.

Thereafter, this broad alignment got further disrupted due to frequent use of Article 356 of the Constitution (President’s Rule of a state), and also a use of Article 352 (Emergency and extension of Lok Sabha’s term by a year).

While Supreme Court judgments have narrowed the scope for application of Article 356, there still continue to be examples of its use, such as in Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh in recent months. Moreover, the lack of a clear mandate, or a midterm collapse, of both Union and state governments have happened often enough to be another major cause of disrupting an aligned election cycle.

The disadvantages of misaligned, continual elections have been long understood, with many proposed solutions mooted over the years by credible individuals and institutions. These have included the Law Commission’s recommendations from as far back as 1999, to more recent ones by a parliamentary standing committee, a white paper by the Election Commission, not to mention exhortations by both the prime minister and president.

Some of these proposals largely focus on a one-time reset. With this aim, they include detailed consideration of how to overcome constitutional hurdles, such as extending or curtailing the ongoing terms of various state assemblies in order to synchronise all elections.

While that would indeed serve the immediate purpose, it would only buy time, due to the likely resurgence of misaligned elections. Even if, say, the use of Article 356 becomes passé, the odds are high that over time several state and national elections would yield fractured mandates and mid-term elections.

However, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice in its report a year ago has suggested a two-cycle election process. Though all would have the usual five-year terms, one election cycle would include polls for the Lok Sabha and about half the states, and the other cycle would be two and a half years later for the rest of the states.

This elegant alignment would serve multiple objectives. First, it would do a better job of overcoming hurdles. For example, the EC's earlier idea of a one-cycle election, where a state with a fractured mandate would have a re-election only for the balance of its original five-year term, would likely generate resentment and objections. It would also be less cost-effective.

A two-cycle system would simply align such a state's election to the next cycle, getting it closer to a full five-year term. And that would work just as well for the Lok Sabha, if needed.

Second, a two-cycle alignment of all state and national elections would serve a fundamental democratic purpose, that of rendering broad public opinion to the Union government of the day. As mentioned above, this happens inefficiently today, with its continual distraction and even small, one-state elections creating disproportionate drag on governance.

The proposed alternative of a second election cycle would have voters of about half the country voicing their opinion at the mid-point of the Union government's term. This would serve as an appropriately sized referendum, congealed together rather than in distracting dribs and drabs.

The US has a somewhat similar system – though their mid-term cycle includes elections for some senators and states, and all Congressmen – and it often serves as a wake up call to the federal government.

Finally, a two-cycle election system would serve yet another aim of democracy, that of furthering check and balance in the polity. That too happens inefficiently today, stretched out over many individual elections.

Following the parliamentary standing committee report, the Niti Aayog has done a creditable job of going into the nitty-gritty of how such two-cycle elections could work. It is worth taking that forward.

The catchphrase "One India, one election" has been gaining traction. In fact, India would be better served by "One nation, two elections"