



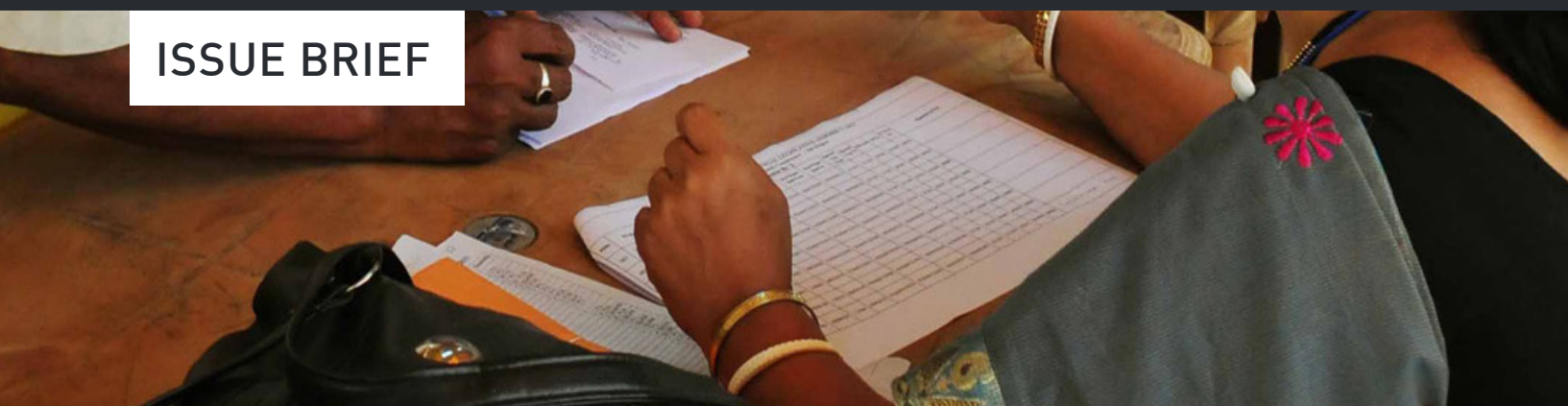
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# ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: WHAT IT COULD MEAN FOR INDIA

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ISSUE BRIEF



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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'One Nation, One Election' suggests the conduction of simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies once in five years. Currently, there are about 5-7 elections to the State Assemblies every year, a situation which ends up adversely impacting the processes of development and governance. Continual elections and the lack of a legislative calendar also cause a disparity in the parliamentary proceedings. In this issue brief, Arunav Chetia explores the advantages of having simultaneous elections country-wide, as well as criticisms and potential problems. Finally, the brief suggests a possible arrangement for elections that can decrease the current frequency of elections in the country in the near term, thereby reducing the routine interruptions in the delivery of various welfare programmes.

## INTRODUCTION

The impact of frequent elections on governance and policymaking has been the subject of much debate for quite a few years now, with the proposal to reform the electoral process also being floated. The past few months have seen state elections taking place in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand within a short period after the Lok Sabha elections of 2019, while the Delhi Legislative Elections is slated to take place on 8th February, 2020. Considering the situation, addressing the fundamental problem of frequent elections and lack of a legislative calendar in the country has been one of the top priorities for the current government. As a potential solution the Central Government under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi has proposed to implement 'One Nation, One Election' in the country.

## THE IDEA OF 'ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION'

The idea of 'One Nation, One Election' deals with conducting simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies once in five years. This will involve the restructuring of the Indian election cycle in a manner that the state and central elections synchronize.

The idea of simultaneous elections is not new to the country. The general elections of 1951-52, 1957, 1962, and 1967 were held simultaneously for both the Parliament and the state assemblies. However, the cycle was disrupted by political upheavals which led to midterm elections for Kerala and Odisha in 1960 and 1961 respectively (Panda 2016). This was followed by several disruptions caused partly due to lack of a clear mandate or the mid-term collapse of a government and by the frequent use of Article 356 and Article 352, which extended the elections. Over the years, several Lok Sabhas and State Assemblies have been prematurely dissolved. As a result, the cycle of simultaneous elections has been disrupted (Debroy and Desai 2017).

Figure 1: Timelines of Various Lok Sabhas

<b>Lok Sabha</b>	<b>Date of First sitting</b>	<b>Date of dissolution of Lok Sabha</b>	<b>Overall Term</b>
First Lok Sabha	13th May 1952	4th April 1957	5 years
Second Lok Sabha	10th May 1957	31st March 1962	5 years
Third Lok Sabha	16th April 1962	3rd March 1967	5 years
Fourth Lok Sabha	16th March 1967	27th December 1970	3 years 10 months
Fifth Lok Sabha	19th March 1971	18th January 1977	5 years 10 months
Sixth Lok Sabha	25th March 1977	22nd August 1979	2 years 5 months
Seventh Lok Sabha	21st January 1980	31st December 1985	5 years
Eighth Lok Sabha	15th January 1985	27th November 1989	5 years
Ninth Lok Sabha	18th January 1989	13th March 1991	1 year 3 month
Tenth Lok Sabha	9th July 1991	10th May 1996	5 years
Eleventh Lok Sabha	22nd May 1996	4th December 1997	1 year 6 months
Twelfth Lok Sabha	23rd March 1998	26th April 1999	1 year 1 months
Thirteenth Lok Sabha	20th October 1999	6th February 2004	4 years 4 months
Fourteenth Lok Sabha	2nd June 2004	18th May 2009	5 years
Fifteenth Lok Sabha	1st June 2009	18th May 2014	5 years
Sixteenth Lok Sabha	4th June 2014	24th May 2019	5 years

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India

The practice of conducting simultaneous elections, in one way or the other, exists in various parts of the world. However, many of those countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Philippines, and so on follow the Presidential form of government, where the elections at the Presidential and the Legislative levels are held together (Laksono and Augustine 2016). On the other hand, there are several countries like South Africa and Sweden where both the national and provincial elections are held simultaneously (Law Commission of India 2013). Indonesia, the third largest democracy after India and the United States, recently conducted simultaneous elections for the first time (Unnamed Author 2019). These global experiences have also encouraged India to push for conducting simultaneous elections.

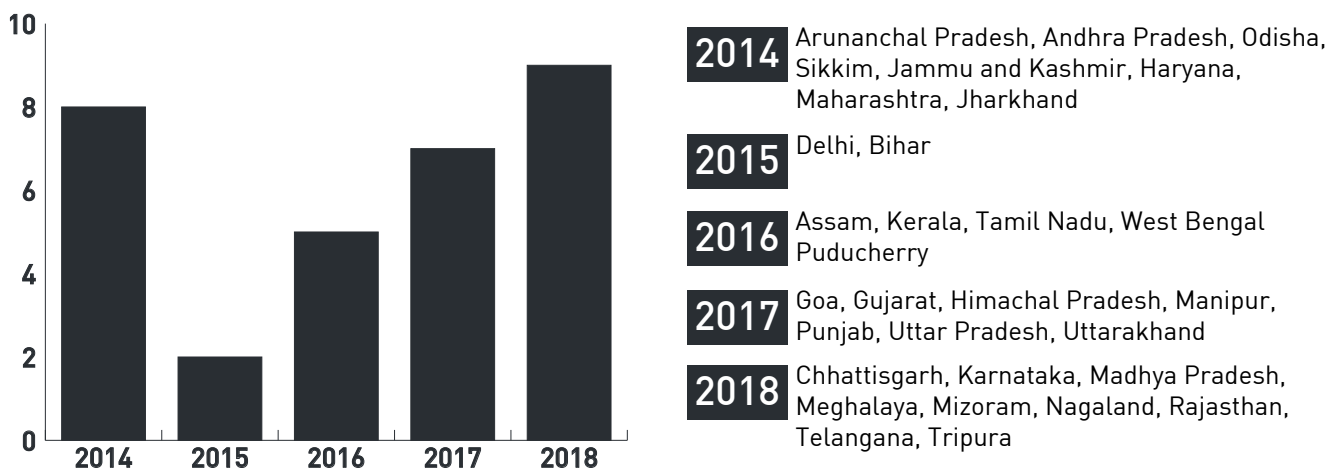
As a remedial solution to streamline the election process in the country simultaneous polling was first suggested by the Election Commission way back in 1983 (Election Commission of India 1984). The Law Commission of India headed by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy in its 170th Report on "Reform of Electoral Laws" (1999) also recommended holding simultaneous elections as a part of electoral reforms (Law Commission of India 2013). But the idea could not come to fruition due to several hindrances. Post the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the NDA government once again tried to float the idea of conducting simultaneous elections but it did not materialise.

In 2015, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice in its 79th Report suggested holding simultaneous elections for long term good governance and also examined its feasibility (Rao 2016). Another report released by the Law Commission examined legal and constitutional questions related to the conduct of simultaneous elections and suggested amendment in Article 172<sup>1</sup> of the constitution and other possible options to synchronise elections of state assemblies with Lok Sabha (Sinha 2018). After returning to power in 2019, PM Narendra Modi called for a meeting to discuss this issue and take early action, taking a step towards fulfilling one of BJP's key poll promises.

## WHAT SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS COULD MEAN FOR THE COUNTRY

Currently, there are about 5-7 elections to the State Assemblies every year (Debroy and Desai 2017). Such a situation ends up adversely impacting the processes of development and governance, with political parties driven by short term populist measures to win elections instead of structural reforms which may be more beneficial for the public from a longer term perspective. Similarly, continual elections and the lack of a legislative calendar also cause a disparity in the parliamentary proceedings.

Figure 2: The Cycle of State Elections in India (2014-2018)



Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports of State Legislative Elections

According to Article 85, there should not be a gap of more than 6 months between any two Parliamentary sessions<sup>2</sup>. Every year the Winter Sessions usually begin in the month of November and are held till December. But the session got delayed most recently in 2018 and could not begin in November due to elections in the states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, and Telangana<sup>3</sup>. The lack of a fixed legislative calendar in India, unlike other countries such as Canada,

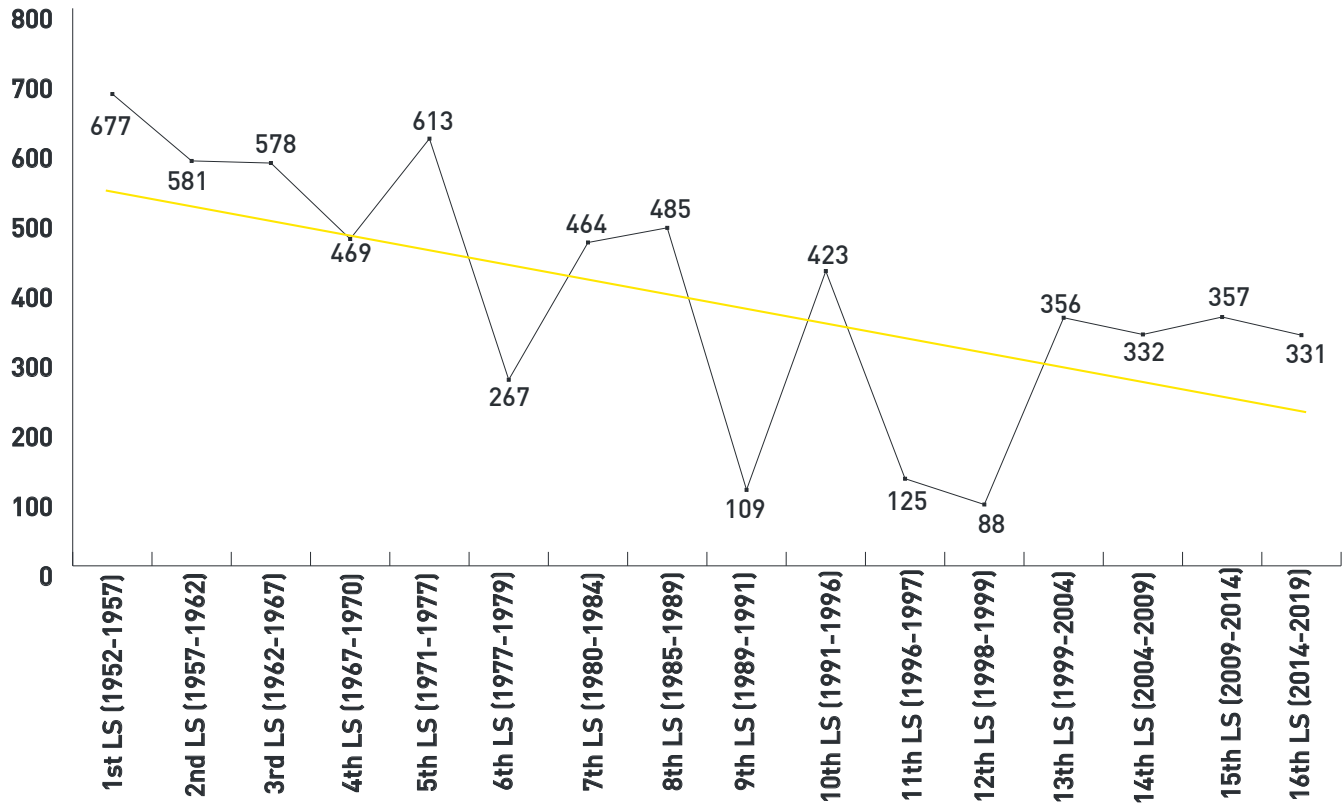
<sup>1</sup> Article 172 is related to the duration of the state legislatures. Every Legislative Assembly of every state, unless sooner dissolved, shall continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting and no longer and the expiration of the said period of five years shall operate as a dissolution of the Assembly.

<sup>2</sup> Indian Parliament holds three sessions every year - Budget Session (Feb-May), Monsoon Session (July-Aug) and Winter Session (Nov-Dec).

<sup>3</sup> The Telangana state assembly election in 2018 was preponed and was held on 7 December 2018 after the Governor dissolved the assembly early on the advice of the CM K Chandrashekar Rao.

the United Kingdom and the United States, has led to several disruptions in the Parliamentary proceedings over the years, thus leading to delays in matters of urgency (Roy and Kakkar 2017).

Figure 3: Total Number of Sittings in Lok Sabha



Source: Statistical Handbook, Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs 2019 (pp 42-43)

Another argument in favour of having simultaneous elections is the implementation of a Model Code of Conduct (MCC) prior to the elections which impacts governance. The MCC is a set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission to regulate political parties and candidates prior to elections, to ensure free and fair elections. The MCC is operational from the date that the election schedule is announced till the date that results are announced (Sinha 2019). Except for routine administrative activities, all the other development programs, welfare schemes, capital projects etc. remain largely suspended till the time the Model Code of Conduct is applicable (Debroy and Desai 2017). Simultaneous elections would avoid these interruptions in the process of delivery of essential services.

Figure 4: Elections and Model Code of Conduct

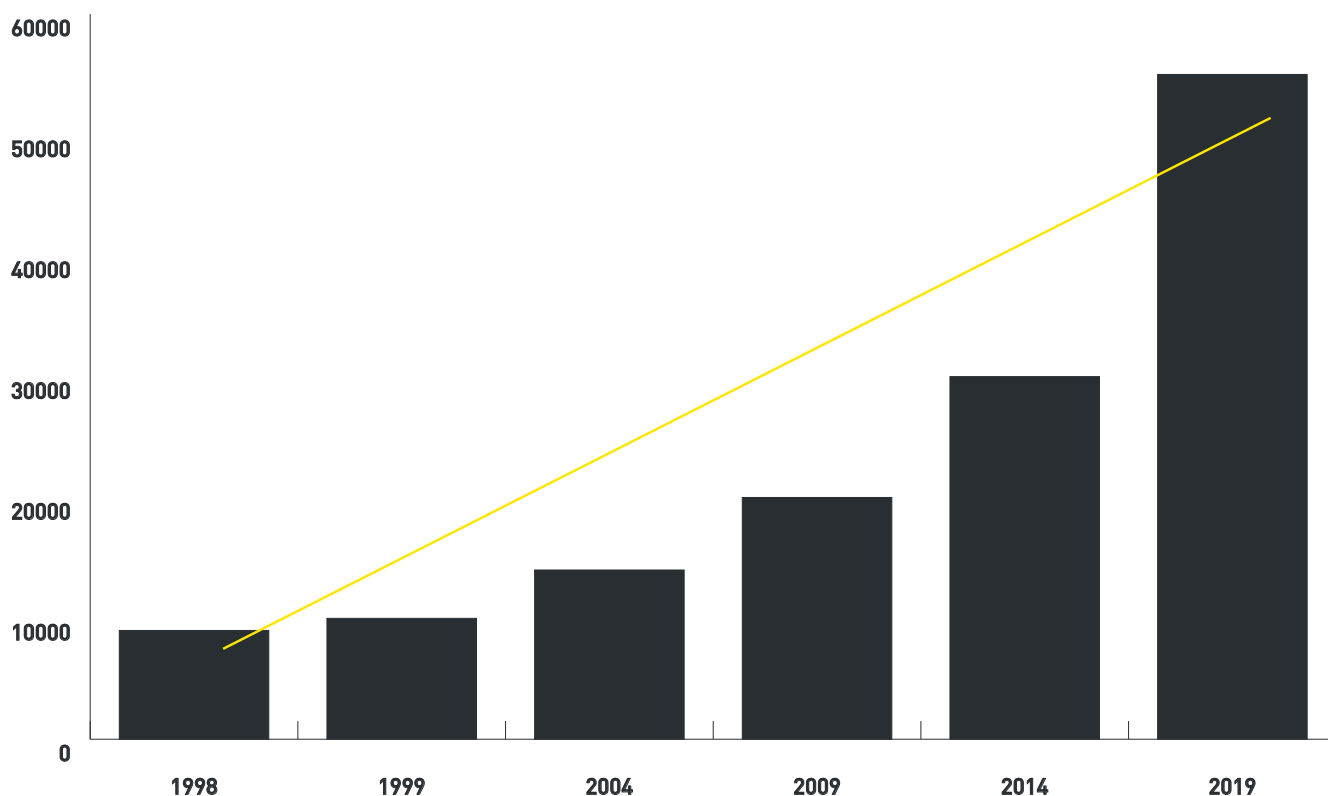
Year	States/UT Elections**	Approximate Timeline of Model Code of Conduct	Approximate Period of Model Code of Conduct
2015	Delhi	January - February	More than 1 Month
	Bihar	September - November	2 Months
2016	Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal	March - May	2 Months
2017	Punjab, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur	January - March	2 Months
	Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat	October - December	2 Months
2018	Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura	January - March	2 Months
	Karnataka	March - June	3 Months
	Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Mizoram, Rajasthan	October - December	2 Months
2019	Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim (along with Lok Sabha)	March - May	2 Months
	Haryana, Maharashtra	September - October	More than 1 Month
	Jharkhand	November - December	More than 1 Month

Source: Election Commission of India

Elections in India are a costly affair. The central government along with the respective state governments bear huge expenditures in conducting and supervising elections every year. There is also massive spending by political parties during the election campaigning. According to a report ('Poll Expenditure: The 2019 Elections') by the Centre for Media Studies, the 2019 Lok Sabha election in India emerged to be the most expensive election anywhere ever. The report estimated that around INR 55,000 crores (8 billion USD) was spent during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections itself (CMS 2019). This is

just an indication of the significant outflow of money every year during elections in India. Thus, it is argued that holding one election would help create a situation in which political parties would not require recurrent funding for elections and this, in turn, would reduce manipulative practices attached to raising money by political parties (Kapoor 2019). Moreover, simultaneous elections would be cost-effective for the government to save taxpayers' money and enhance fiscal balance which could be utilized in other development projects.

Figure 5: Expenditure in Lok Sabha Elections (1998-2019)



Source: CMS Analysis and Estimation (Pp. 9)

Apart from being costly and time-consuming, elections also involve a huge number of polling officials and security forces for their smooth functioning. While the deployment of polling officials is still for a smaller duration (typically a few days before and after the day of voting and few days before and after the day of counting), the deployment of security forces, particularly the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF)<sup>4</sup>, is normally throughout the elections and they remain mobile from one place to another (Debroy and Desai 2017). The recent Lok Sabha had over 2.7 lakh paramilitary personnel along with more than 20 lakh state police personnel and home guards (PTI 2019). Considering there has not been even a single year without elections in India in recent times, there is an engagement of security forces and state police forces for a prolonged period of time, that could have been deployed for other internal security concerns.

<sup>4</sup> Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) refer to uniform nomenclature of security forces in India under the authority of Ministry of Home Affairs such as the Border Security Force, Central Industrial Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Assam Rifles and the Sashastra Seema Bal etc.



## CRITICISM FOR SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS

Even though simultaneous polls have their benefits, they have their own sets of problems. Critics have argued that holding simultaneous elections dramatically shrinks the choices of the electorate (Kumar 2019). This could lead to ‘national issues’ getting importance over local ones, which would benefit the national parties over regional or local parties. Thus simultaneous elections would benefit larger national parties at the cost of regional parties in what would be a “national wave in favour of large national parties” (Debroy and Desai 2017: 20). This would weaken the federal democratic structure of the country and undermine the depth and breadth of Indian democracy.

The main counter argument of conducting simultaneous elections is the question of feasibility. Simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is difficult to implement due to the Constitutional arrangement. Neither the Lok Sabha nor the State Legislative Assemblies could be prematurely dissolved to synchronize General Elections to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies (Parliament of India 2015). In such a case, the only possible option is to adjust the terms of many state assemblies, with either extension or curtailment of existing tenures, which is clearly undesirable. There is also a major operational challenge, considering logistics, security and manpower resource requirements, which makes it practically difficult to conduct elections at such a massive scale.

Another argument against the idea of simultaneous elections is that it could influence the voters’ behaviour with many cases where voters have voted for the same parties to the State Assemblies and Lok Sabha when such elections did take place simultaneously. Such situations could lead to national issues influencing voting behaviour even in State Assembly elections. An analysis by IDFC Institute<sup>5</sup> shows that on average, there is a 77% chance that the Indian voter will vote for the same party for both the State and Centre when elections are held simultaneously. On the other hand, frequent election cycles offer a measure of accountability as various local and state-level issues influence the elections from time to time.

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<sup>5</sup> The authors of this study analyzed electoral data for four rounds of Lok Sabha elections – 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. They chose states whose elections coincided with the Lok Sabha elections. (Chakravarty 2016).

## THE WAY FORWARD

Although the idea of simultaneous polls has the potential to have significant change in the Indian electoral system, it has its share of drawbacks. There are several serious statutory and constitutional amendments that need to be debated and discussed in this context. Any policy move in this regard would also require general consensus among stakeholders across the political spectrum, from political parties to the general public.

Moreover, there is also the question of long-term sustainability in case the ruling party or coalition government loses the majority in between terms, either in the Lok Sabha or state elections. In such a scenario, a two-cycle election process as suggested by the Parliamentary Standing Committee<sup>6</sup> would serve a better purpose, where one phase could be in sync with that of the Lok Sabha elections and the other phase exactly 30 months after the first phase. Such an arrangement would definitely decrease the current frequency of elections in the country in the near term, thereby reducing the routine interruptions in the delivery of various welfare programmes.

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<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, Report No 79 (December 17, 2015). Feasibility of holding simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

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