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THE IMPACT OF "ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION" ON POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT IN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

AUTHORED BY - PRIYANSHI MANYURA

Abstract

India's stated idea of holding "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) therefore seeks to align Indian elections to General, or Lok Sabha polls for the lower house of the federal parliament and all the State Legislative Assemblies, possibly the local bodies as well. It is argued that ONOE can democratise governance, cut costs of elections, and enhance administration. But the advancement of the technique is currently under criticism due to its impact on political responsibility, voter participation and federalism. This research paper evaluates the implications of ONOE on political accountability and voter turnout in India and relates this to other countries, which conduct synchronized elections, for instance, South Africa, Sweden, and Germany. In this context, the paper analyses how ONOE may transform democratic systems of India through this comparative lens¹.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, political accountability, voter engagement, simultaneous elections, staggered elections, federalism, regional interests, comparative analysis, voter turnout, electoral reforms, political participation, democratic processes, governance stability, political discourse, regional parties, election fatigue, administrative efficiency.

Introduction

The ONOE concept is back in the political discussions of India and extended the concept by a committee headed by the former President Ram Nath Kovind. The proposal has received many commendations and criticism due to the argument that co-ordinate voting is effective while other people have speculated some risky effects on the federal framework, assorted culture, and voter apathy and motivation. This research paper seeks to analyze ONOE's potential impact on two critical aspects of democracy: political accountability and voters turnout.

¹ The concept of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) aims to synchronize elections across India to enhance governance efficiency and reduce electoral costs. This proposal has been widely discussed in political forums and is analyzed in various studies, including Kumar, A. (2021). "The Viability of One Nation, One Election: A Comparative Study." Journal of South Asian Studies.

Political accountability may therefore be described as the processes by which people that are entrusted to represent others in governance are answerable to the people for the actions and policies they undertake. Voter mobilization relates to the extent and intensity of the public participation in the voting business, which is typically expressed in terms of voters' turnout, political awareness as well as the capability of the voters in making the right decisions. Hence, by comparing it with countries carrying out synchronized elections this paper seeks to understand how ONOE could impact these two facets of democracy in India.²

Recent Developments

The One Nation, One Election or ONOE idea was cleared by the Union Cabinet in September 2024 as per suggestions given by the high-powered committee presided over by former president Ram Nath Kovind. The committee's document runs to 18, 626 pages and plumbs for holding Lok Sabha and state assemblies' elections together as part of the first step. The high level committee received over 20000 feedbacks out of which 81 per cent have supported the above proposition. The 2019 elections reportedly cost approximately Rs 60,000 crore, highlighting the financial implications of staggered elections.

Recent political discourse reveals significant concerns from opposition parties regarding:

- Possible elimination of regional parties as well as the federal system
- Democratic challenges that empower the constitution
- Effects on state sovereignty as well as local government

These changes would involve amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174; and article 356 dealing with President's Rule. More importantly, the first phase that would cover the implementation of the reform in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies does not necessarily need state amendment of the Constitution.³

² The impact of ONOE on federalism raises concerns about the potential marginalization of regional parties and local issues in favor of national narratives Raghavan, S. (2022). "One Nation, One Election: Implications for Indian Democracy." *International Journal of Law and Politics* discusses these implications in detail.

³ Recent Developments

The Union Cabinet approved the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposal in September 2024, following recommendations from a high-level committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind. The committee's report outlines the potential benefits and challenges of implementing ONOE. For further details, see the Lok Sabha Secretariat (2024). *Report on One Nation, One Election*.

The financial implications of staggered elections have been significant, with estimates suggesting that conducting elections in India costs approximately Rs 60,000 crore. This figure highlights the need for electoral reforms aimed at reducing costs. See *Election Commission of India (2019)*. Expenditure Management in Elections: A Comprehensive Review.

STATE SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

State Support Status

As of September 2024, the support for ONOE among states and political parties includes:

- Supporting Parties: 32 parties having 271 members in the Lok Sabha (including 240 from BJP), such as BJP, NPP, AJSU, JD(U), etc.
- Opposing Parties: Congress, AAP, DMK, TMC and fifteen other parties.

Implementation Requirements

To implement ONOE:

- Demands approval of 362 vote in the Lok Sabha where 50 percent require support from two-thirds majority.
- Current NDA strength: 293 Members of Parliament (52 votes short in Rajya Sabha and 72 in Lok Sabha).

Impact on State Assemblies

If implemented by 2029:

- There will be 17 states with assemblies for less than 3 years.
- Ten states with new governments in the next fiscal year, that is in 2028, will have one year terms.
- Only half of the states can sustain full five-year terms.

Of course, this will mean a challenging process of tapering between liberal-democratic principles in order to avoid clashes of electoral cycles.⁴

Historical Context of Elections in India

Democracy in India can be traced from the time of India's gaining of independence in 1947. For seventeen years between 1951 and 1967, India had synchronized its general elections for the Lok Sabha and for the State Assemblies. However, due to the political instability leading to defections and the frequent premature dissolution of the state assemblies in the 1960s, this

⁴ Implementation Timeline

If implemented by 2029, ONOE would significantly affect the terms of state assemblies, with many states facing truncated terms. This transition poses challenges for maintaining democratic principles at the state level. For insights into these implications, see Kumar, A. (2021). "The Viability of One Nation, One Election: A Comparative Study." *Journal of South Asian Studies*.

The implementation of ONOE requires constitutional amendments to several articles related to elections and governance in India. For more information on these amendments, refer to the Law Commission of India (2018). *One Nation, One Election: Draft Report*.

practice started diluting and such current form is with the staggered election cycles.

With regard to recent developments, the periodicity of elections have been pinned as the cause of the interrim government's lack of focus on delivering on its term-long agenda in favor of immediate electoral gain. The introduction of ONOE is intended for preventing these disruptions by synchronizing electoral cycles, though the main subject of discussion lies in the question of how this shift might affect political responsibility and citizens' voting behaviors.

Political Accountability and ONOE

1. Theoretical Framework of Political Accountability

Political accountability smoothes the dynamics of governance by ensuring that representatives of the people keep close touch with their voters / principals. It is supported by regular polls because people can change their representatives based on work accomplishment or owe, fraud cases, etc. Other scholars including Robert Dahl has noted that a key characteristic of democracy is the holding of election from which citizens can be able to vote in, or vote out representatives that will shape governments' actions.

As the system operative in the current context of India, staggered elections afford multiple check points across the layers of governance so that voters can judge their leaders consistently. The ONOE model though more efficient and effective in enabling policy implementation by removing policy issues from the politics of polarized elected representatives would decrease the frequency of such check-points and therefore reduce the chances of voters holding their representatives to account on these policies.

2. Impact of Simultaneous Elections on Accountability

In case of ONOE system voting it is a possibility that the people's vote events for national and state level representatives will shift together, possibly minimizing voters' chance to differentiate between national and state arenas. They suggest that national parties can control the electoral conversation while side-lining local issues that regional parties often champion adequately. Thus, state level of accountability can get diminished for the simple reason that people are more likely to care is national rather than state-oriented stories.

In the same way, it is possible that synchronized elections might reduce the frequency with which representatives should interact with their electorate through advertising and

campaigns, which might prompt lethargy. Frequent election currently makes politician to be sensitive with their electorates because any signal of an early election, politicians would have to deal with local hearts. ONOE could alleviate this pressure resulting in minimization of accountability processes and structures.

3. International Comparisons of Accountability

South Africa, Germany and Sweden are some of the countries that exercise synchronized election. These countries provide valuable insights into how simultaneous elections can affect political accountability:

In **South Africa**, elections to the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures take place concurrently after every five years. On the one hand, this system guarantees stability; however, others opine that it cuts the possibility of the provincial governments' responsibilities, as national concerns prevail on the electoral list.

Germany holds its Bundestag and state legislature at different intervals but the Chancellor in Germany is elected at the same time as the Bundestag. Here legal responsibilities are retained at a very high level owing to the distinct federalism and the coalition politics, where every state has representation.

Elections in **Sweden** are scheduled to be centralized and decentralized at the same time after every four years. While the practice has enhanced efficiency in governance there are several arguments than point to the fact that the monarchy diminishes local representation since the voters mainly focus on the national results.

These developments indicate that co-ordinated election periods can improve governance stability at the national level although increases the tendencies of lowering local responsibility and accountability to the people⁵.

4. ONOE and Accountability in India's Federal Context

The governmental system of India is highly centralized and emphasis a lot on the independence of individual states. There is no doubt that regional parties serve a vital purpose of speaking for regional concerns especially where there is regional ethnic,

⁵ The comparison of electoral accountability in Germany, Sweden, and South Africa reveals diverse impacts of synchronized elections. Germany's federal system allows for separate elections for the Bundestag and state legislatures, enhancing local accountability (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2020). Sweden conducts simultaneous elections every four years, which can overshadow local issues despite promoting transparency (Raghavan, 2022). In South Africa, concurrent elections for the National Assembly and provincial legislatures raise concerns about the accountability of provincial governments (Iyer, 2020). These cases illustrate that while synchronized elections may improve governance stability, they can also diminish local representation.

linguistic, and/or economic endowment. According to ONOE, it can be predicted that potential national parties can dominate regional calls and reduce the state's power in politics and responsibilities.

Additionally, the potential of having long term presidential rule in states when governments collapse mid term under ONOE opens a dangerous can of governance deficit. Such periods could still weaken accountability slightly, as appointed officials might sit in for elected members during such periods as administrators.

VOTER ENGAGEMENT AND ONOE

1. Understanding Voter Engagement

This is a system of features characterising the citizens' activity in a voting process, including voter turnout, political consciousness and participation in electoral campaigns. Voter turnout is another test to the population's democracy since it shows the level of encouragement voters have towards leadership choices.

The usefulness is situated in the fact that working with different Election Commission and political parties voter engagement is influenced by frequency of election, the importance of electoral issues and political competition. Staggered elections at the moment present the people with several chances to vote in different degree of government, which should increase overall turnout.

2. Possible Impacts of ONOE on the Voting Public

Supporters of ONOE postulated that the proposed system has the potentiality of eliminating what may be termed election exhaustion which might un-favourably affect the voters' turnout. ONOE could bring electoral campaigns which are normally held at different times into one period and hence increase public awareness of the electoral process and also work to bring down electoral costs for the aspiring politicians.

On the other hand, opponents have argued that simultaneous elections could indeed have the worst impact. Voters in context of synchronous election can end up being overawed by a plethora of candidates or issues that may be up for a poll, and therefore end up not voting or voting inappropriately, especially the less informed or lower order voters. The simple apprehension that one is being confronted with the task of having to vote for representatives for multiple levels of government in a go means that the possibility of having a higher percentage of invalid votes and less informed votes is

very high.

3. Comparative Analysis of Voter Engagement in Countries with Simultaneous Elections

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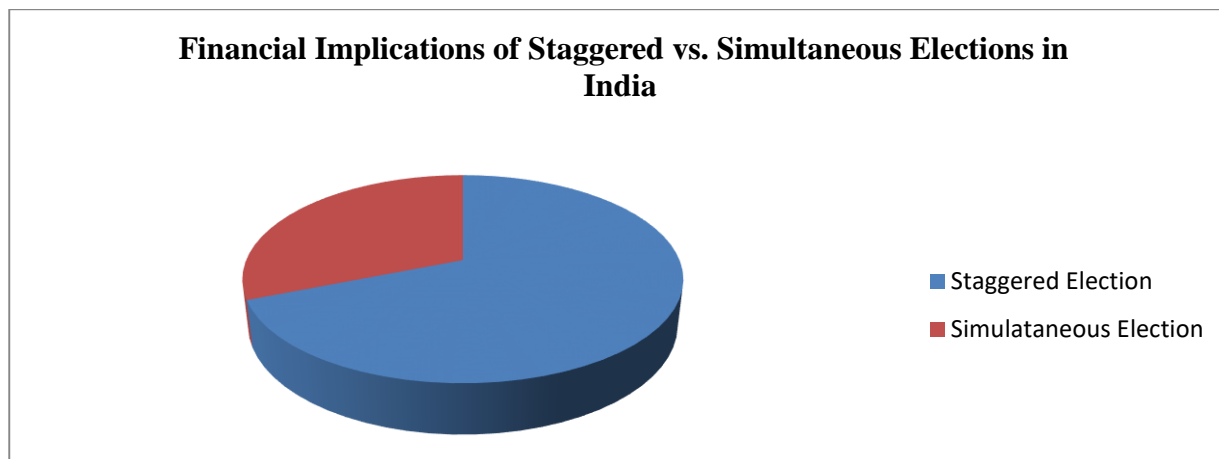
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Financial Implications of Elections

Financial Burden of Staggered Elections

The financial burden of conducting elections in India is significant, with estimates suggesting that the country spends thousands of crores on electoral processes every few years. The frequent need for electoral management and campaigning can strain governmental resources, diverting funds from essential services and development programs.

Table 1: Financial Implications of Staggered vs. Simultaneous Elections in India

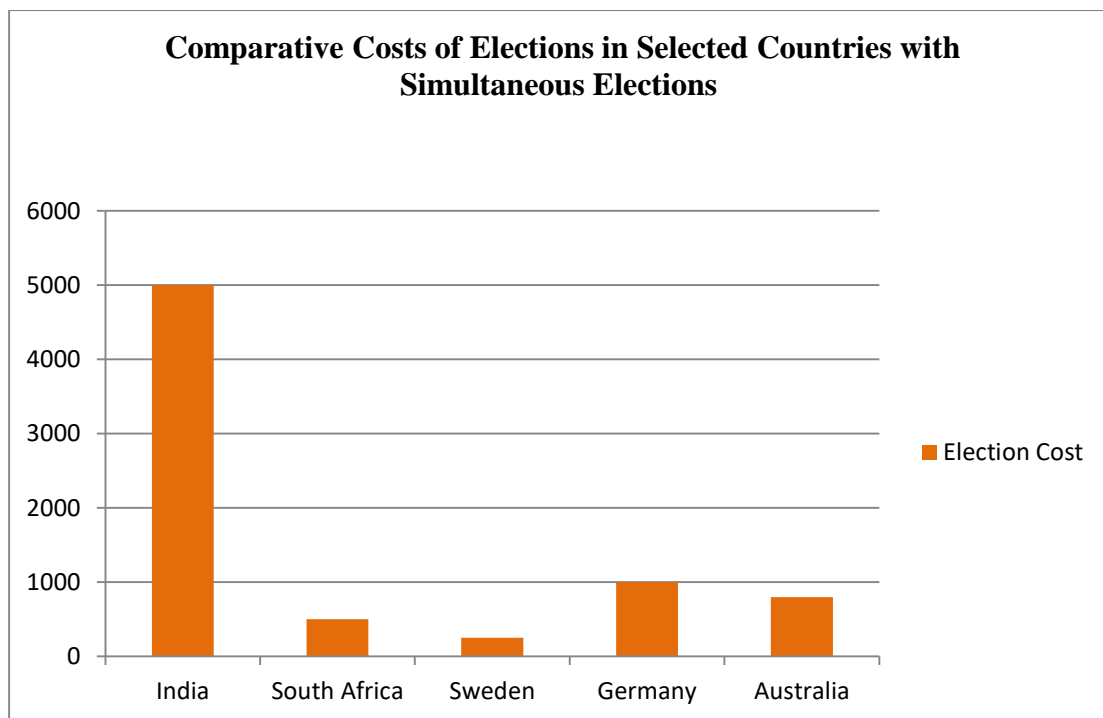
Financial Benefits of ONOE

It is believed that holding elections at the same time would cut down election expenses, and help save a lot of money. The primary benefits of adopting ONOE include:

- 1. Reduced Election Management Costs:** Since elections occur after a long period, most of the basic expenses like recruitment and training of polling officers, logistics among would be greatly reduced. There could be some synergies which could be realized through the consolidation of the electoral process in terms of administrative structures.
- 2. Streamlined Campaigning:** Politicians and the participating political parties would also be in a better position to manage their available resources better. Thus, having multiple campaigns within a short time, opportunities for a focused campaign on a single election cycle are likely to decrease the costs of campaigns.
- 3. Economic Stability:** The electoral systems, especially the frequent ones will stagnate governance and policy execution thus causing an upset in the macroeconomic situation. Through on-going Non party elections, which means holding less often than the present parliamentary elections, ONOE could result in a stable political climate financially suitable for economic development.
- 4. Savings on Security Arrangements:** Security costs that are used during several elections are likely to be high. The aggregation point here is that during multiple elections, the security personnel and the security facilities needed are fewer in number hence less expensive.
- 5. Administrative Efficiency:** The bureaucracy associated with holding elections in several phases, as often done during this crisis period, may be reduced as could the

administrative bottlenecks. This efficiency may help to releases government funds for other social and welfare spending and for development projects.⁶

Table 2: Comparative Costs of Elections in Selected Countries with Simultaneous Elections⁷



Key challenges of the "One Nation, One Election" proposal, along with some official data:

This of course, brings the challenges of One Nation, One Election into perspective and as such should not be seen as indispensable goals of press freedom.

1. **Violation of Constitutional Structure:** Co-terminus elections may also call for infringement of the federal nature of the Constitution of India which envisages different electoral terms for the Union and the State.

⁶ The implementation of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) is projected to save approximately ₹20,000 crore annually by reducing the frequency of elections and associated administrative costs. This financial efficiency could significantly alleviate the burden on government resources and political parties. See Lok Sabha Secretariat (2024). Report on One Nation, One Election.

⁷ Comparative studies on election costs reveal significant variations among countries with simultaneous elections. While precise data for all countries is not uniformly available, estimates suggest that India's election expenses are considerably higher due to its large scale. The 2019 Indian general elections cost approximately ₹55,000 crore (\$7.2 billion), whereas South Africa's 2019 elections cost about \$180 million. Sweden and Germany, with their smaller populations, have relatively lower costs. Australia, despite compulsory voting, spends less per capita on elections compared to India. These differences highlight the unique challenges and scale of Indian elections. For detailed analysis, see Lok Sabha Secretariat (2020), "Report on Simultaneous Elections" and International IDEA's "Cost of Registration and Elections" (CORE) Project

2. **Infringement on Election Commission's Authority:** The proposal may virtually put the Election Commission of India as the organisation tasked with the duty of overseeing free and fair elections in India in peril.
3. **Basic Structure Doctrine:** Free and fair elections is also guarded by the Supreme Court through its Basic Structure Doctrine, which is obviously vulnerable to simultaneous elections.
4. **Logistical Challenges:** The coordination of running another general election across a big chunk of the country also come with many challenges such as mobilization of resources and security matters.
5. **Impact on Federalism:** Synchronization of state electoral cycles with national ones may decrease the state's independence and allow the federal structure itself to contradict federalism.
6. **Dissolution Complications:** Interference with mid-term dissolution of assemblies could in a way cause synchronization with the election cycle, thereby leading to governance problems.
7. **Voter Confusion:** In some cases, it may complicate for voters to distinguish national from state matters, and this can lead to the making of wrong voting decision.
8. **Potential Legal Challenges:** A major public law issue that may arise as a challenge to ONOE is with reference to its legal possibility in most courts as pertains federalism and representative democracy.
9. **Risk of Single-Party Dominance:** The problems of co-ordination and of putting forward candidates may be more easily solved by large national parties than by smaller parties or regional parties and this could lead to a reduction in the political pluralism of the country.

Official Data

1. **Economic Impact:** The Kovind Committee has recommended the implementation of the policy of holding simultaneous elections and predicted that the measure would increase the country's Gross Domestic Product by 1.5 percent in the year of the implementation, which is equal to ₹4.5 lakh crore in financial year 2024.
2. **Election Costs:** The expenditure incurred in Lok Sabha elections has risen to possibly as high as ₹60,000 crore in 2019. If ONOE were to be adopted, these costs could be minimized because resources utilized in the various processes of an election may be obtained and reused.

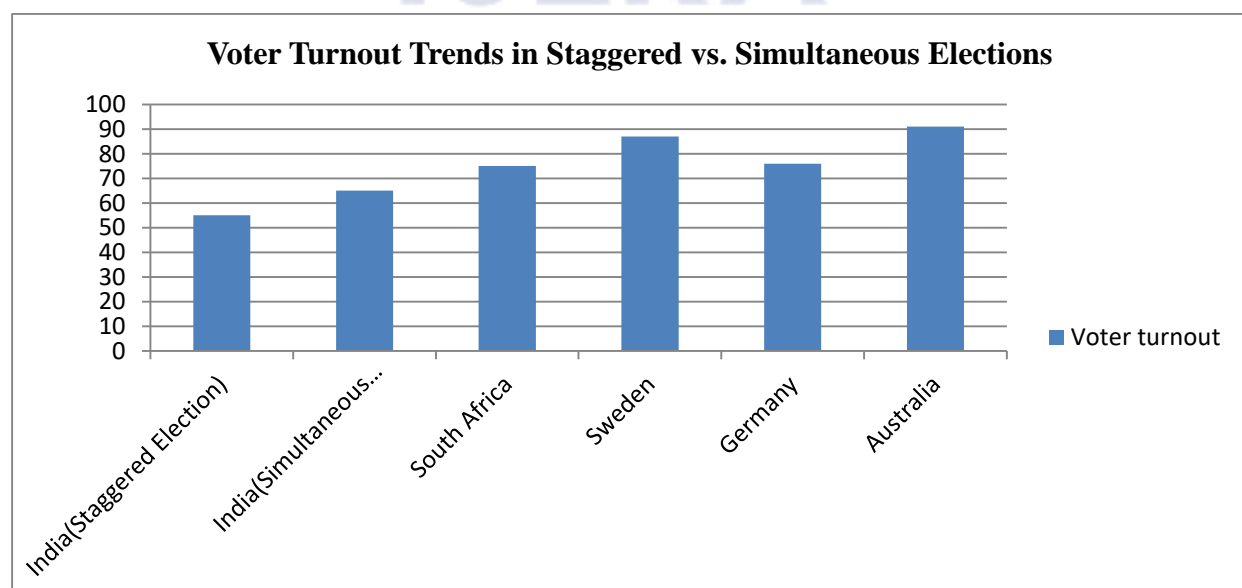
3. **Public Spending Increase:** According to the report, there are likelihoods of higher increase in public spending of 17.67% subsequent to simultaneous election episodes underlined by higher growth rates tied to electoral synchronizations.
4. **Fiscal Deficit:** There is expectation that the fiscal deficit could rise by 1.28 percent in the two years surrounding concurrent elections owing to growing public spending.
5. The following challenges as well as data points show the difficulties in application of the “One Nation, One Election” idea and show some possible advantages with several major concerns.

Analysis Of Voters Turnout And Engagement

However, the use of ONOE brings concerns of voters’ turnout/ participation into more examination by the governing body. It is hereby anomalous to observe that election frequency shares an interesting correlation with the participation of voters. Scientific studies indicate that more frequent holding of elections tips the scale towards more populace turn out. If the care taken by ONOE is to eliminate as many general elections as possible, there is likelihood that citizens’ participation will be greatly reduced due to likely disassociation from local affairs.

Moreover, opinion givers opined that it is inconvenient to hold the elections at the same time because some categories of voters, like first-time and voters from the outcast groups, might be wiped out. If issues that would affect their own LECs are drowned by nationalistic feel, then voters might not engage themselves in electoral processes.

Table 3: Voter Turnout Trends in Staggered vs. Simultaneous Elections



Conclusion

The idea of India says that “One Nation, One Election” is also beneficial as well as risky for the India’s democratic system. Pros being; eliminating chances of wastage, expense reduction, the simplification of the governmental structure, improved and efficient administrative services, the cons are; political responsibility, and voter turnout.

Looking at the case of other countries that tried having synchronized elections, what can be deduced is that while, having ONOE can help foster stability in Governance, it may also water down local accountability and decrease voter turnout if not well done. The historical factor shows that Indian elections need to have a proper mixture of national and state interests in order to sustain a healthy democratic structure.

To ensure that ONOE does not adversely impact political accountability or voter engagement, it is essential to implement complementary measures, such as:

- **Strengthening Local Governance:** Disseminating voter awareness aimed at keeping local matters as important within electoral agenda.
- **Enhancing Voter Education:** Empowering voters with comprehensive political education to support them in participating in multiple elections at once, and making an informed choice.
- **Maintaining Federal Balance:** Protecting the regional-self and concerns so that the unity in Indian democracy is harmony accompanied by respecting the uniqueness.

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