

# Issue of ‘One Nation, One Election’ in Indian Perspective

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## **Abstract:**

This research examines the potential impacts—both positive and negative—of introducing simultaneous elections across India, known as "One Nation, One Election." This proposed change aims to synchronise national, state, and local election timings to reduce frequent election cycles. The analysis shows that synchronised elections could save significant costs for state and central governments by reducing expenses related to election administration, security, and disruptions in governance. Estimated annual savings could exceed ₹45 billion. The effect on state governments varies; while national issues might overshadow local concerns, state administrations could benefit from more governance-focused time rather than electioneering. This might decrease voter fatigue but could limit expressing dissatisfaction with state governments at different times. From an industry standpoint, synchronised elections offer more stable policies and less political uncertainty. Overall, simultaneous elections promote better governance focus and enhance political and economic stability. The paper provides a comprehensive evaluation based on evidence of the expected pros, cons, costs, and benefits.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Federal Structure, Voting, Feasible, Election Commission, Simultaneous Voting.

## **Introduction:**

The debate surrounding the idea of aligning and synchronising elections across India, famously termed 'One Nation One Election,' has been a focal point in recent discussions. This concept envisions consolidating the electoral timelines for Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local government bodies, either by simultaneous elections or within a set cycle. Advocates argue that this reform would yield cost efficiencies, streamline governance, alleviate pressure on political entities, curb populist tendencies, and encourage a more unified approach to national issues. It's seen as a shift away from a constant election cycle, allowing governments to prioritise long-term policymaking over short-term electoral concerns, thus improving administrative effectiveness.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) supports this proposal, pointing to the significant logistical burden posed by managing multiple election cycles. This includes the strain on resources like staffing, equipment, and security forces. The prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) due to staggered state elections is cited as a disruption to governance and policy implementation by the ECI. However, critics fear that synchronised elections might sideline regional matters, weaken the federal structure, and reduce the accountability of state governments. Achieving consensus on this reform requires substantial political agreement and extensive constitutional amendments, presenting challenges as regional parties are concerned about potential biases in favour of national parties.

The Law Commission of India has explored several approaches to realise 'One Nation One Election.' The most radical option involves amending the Constitution to synchronise state assemblies and Lok Sabha elections for fixed five-year terms. However, this ambitious move faces obstacles concerning managing scenarios like no-confidence motions, hung assemblies, and house dissolution. Another approach suggests holding national and state elections simultaneously, with some leeway for states to vary their schedules by a few months. Nonetheless, this model brings challenges in terms of security, enforcing the MCC, and practicality. A third option proposes a two-phase election process for Lok Sabha and state assemblies, but it compromises the intended benefits of synchronisation.

Finding consensus on 'One Nation One Election' remains a challenge due to the need for multi-party deliberation and the historical difficulties in maintaining synchronised election cycles. Constitutional amendments present a significant barrier in the current political landscape, and disruptions like dissolutions or no-confidence motions can derail synchronisation efforts. While the idea of simultaneous elections appears promising, the practical challenges loom large. Aligning elections for a diverse, federal country like India raises concerns about regional representation, accountability, campaign focus, and the distribution of power between the central and state governments. While offering substantial benefits, this reform also poses governance risks that warrant comprehensive evaluation. The primary challenge remains reaching a feasible consensus as the debate continues.

### **Origin of the Issue of One Nation-One Election:**

In South Africa, national and provincial legislature elections occur every five years, with municipal elections following two years later. In Sweden, elections for the National Legislature (Riksdag), provincial legislature/county council (Landsting), and local bodies/municipal Assemblies (Kommunfullmaktige) are set for a specific date—the second Sunday in September—every four years. For instance, the last election took place on September 14, 2014, and the upcoming one is slated for September 9, 2018. Meanwhile, in the U.K., Parliament's term length is determined by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011.

Following independence, early general elections coincided with state legislative assembly elections. This continued until 1967, but disruptions arose due to premature dissolution of certain state assemblies in 1968 and 1969. In 2014, Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, championed simultaneous elections, citing their potential to curb wasteful spending of public funds and ensure uninterrupted progress in developmental work often hindered by the model code of conduct.

In August 2018, the Law Commission of India issued a preliminary report advocating for simultaneous elections. It proposed amendments to the constitution, the Representation of the People Act 1951, and the Rules of Procedure of Lok Sabha and state Assemblies to enable this synchronisation. The commission stressed the need for approval from at least 50% of the States for these amendments. Highlighting the advantages of simultaneous polls, it emphasised savings in public funds, reduced strain on administrative and security forces, timely execution of government policies, and a shift in administrative focus towards developmental activities instead of electioneering.

### **The Need for One Nation, One Election:**

An estimated discussion within a parliamentary panel revealed that the Elections Commission of India spends more than Rs 4,500 crore on organising elections for the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies. This substantial sum doesn't encompass the disclosed and undisclosed expenses incurred by candidates and political parties. In the 79th report titled "Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House

of People (Lok Sabha) and State Assemblies, 2015," the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law, and Justice recommended a practical two-phase election approach. Presented the previous year, the report proposed initiating the first phase in November 2016. It suggested consolidating elections for all state legislatures whose terms conclude within six months to one year before or after the proposed election date. To enable simultaneous elections, the panel suggested adjusting the terms of certain assemblies—shortening some while extending others.

### **Feasibility of One Nation, One Election:**

Historical records show that elections occurred simultaneously in 1952, 57, 62, and 67. Given the advantages of this approach, here are potential actions to consider:

- Align Parliament and State assembly elections across 2 or 3 cycles by dissolving assemblies or extending terms once for up to 6 months.
- Once synchronised, establish a fixed 5-year tenure regardless of party standings. However, allow for dissolution/extension only in exceptional circumstances, ensuring a balanced tenure for the new parliament/assembly.
- In the case of a hung parliament/assembly, invite the largest single party to form a minority government. Post-election coalitions are encouraged but not obligatory. This minority government won't face a vote of confidence as a special case. Bills must undergo discussion and clearance by a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) encompassing all parties, to be tabled in parliament/assembly for approval. The responsibility of governance will be jointly shared.
- Bye-elections resulting from the death of a sitting member or their resignation are to be avoided. The respective party shall provide three candidates (excluding the deceased member's family), and following thorough evaluation, the President of India will nominate one candidate to serve in the House of People for the remaining term.
- To curtail the presence of independent candidates in state assemblies or local bodies, the security deposit for contesting elections should be increased to ₹2 lakhs for state assemblies and ₹1 lakh for local bodies. Candidates failing to secure at least 10% of the valid votes will forfeit their deposit and face a ban on contesting any election for the subsequent 6 years.
- In the event of the demise or resignation of an independent candidate, the vacant seat should be filled by nominating a person from the same constituency. Consideration for this nomination could extend to individuals from similar fields as the independent candidate, those involved with compliant NGOs, contributors to various media platforms discussing pertinent issues, or individuals adhering to relevant laws and regulations.

### **Challenges Ahead:**

- Simultaneous elections might cut down on election expenses, yet they come with their own financial and administrative obstacles. Making this happen would need substantial financial and administrative resources. To effectively execute such a change, a strong legal framework for budget allocation and resource coordination becomes imperative.
- The complexity of India's political and constitutional framework poses a formidable challenge to the implementation of One Nation, One Election. Achieving this goal requires substantial changes to the Indian Constitution, particularly in key areas governing the terms of elected bodies like the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and local bodies. Amendments to at least five Articles of the Constitution—83, 85,

172, 174, and 356—along with adjustments to several statutory laws, are crucial prerequisites for this proposal.

- Additionally, establishing fixed tenures for both Union and state assemblies is essential. This ensures that the House's term remains unchanged, except in cases of declared emergencies, while also allowing for the House to dissolve before its designated tenure ends. Amending the Constitution is a lengthy and politically sensitive process, demanding a two-thirds majority in both Houses of Parliament and the consent of states.
- Aligning the election schedules across different tiers of government—central, state, and local—presents a legal complexity due to their distinct terms. The varied terms of state governments, some benefiting from special provisions under Article 371 of the Constitution, grant them significant autonomy. Any effort to synchronise these elections might be viewed as an infringement on this autonomy, potentially impacting their constitutionally protected independent operations.
- Similarly, local governance operates on a decentralised model, affording considerable autonomy to local bodies. Achieving simultaneous elections would demand revisions to the laws governing local body elections, ensuring alignment with the revised election timeline.

### Concluding Remarks:

The notion of One India, One election stands as an admirable concept, yet its potential to alleviate issues requires in-depth discussion. Despite the announcement of the 2019 General election, this idea remained unimplemented. However, if executed with precision, it holds promise to transform India's electoral system, addressing the urgent need for capable administrative personnel and robust security measures. Highlighted by the standing committee, there's a call to reduce election frequency to grant both the government machinery and the election commission time for other crucial administrative tasks. While an immediate shift may not be feasible, it's vital to deliberate and seek pathways for its eventual adoption. In today's political sphere, every action often gets interpreted as a strategic move to secure votes or undermine opponents. The crucial question persists: Is democratic India prepared to depart from the traditional election model and embrace One India, One Election?

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