

One Nation, One Election in India Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has re-emerged as a key electoral reform debate in India, aiming to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Rooted in India's early post-independence practice from 1951 to 1967, this concept seeks to streamline the democratic process by reducing the frequency of elections, lowering electoral expenditure, and minimizing disruption to governance. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the ONOE proposal, examining its historical background, practical justifications, constitutional requirements, and federal implications. It highlights rising election costs, governance paralysis due to the Model Code of Conduct, voter fatigue, and resource inefficiencies as core motivations behind the reform. At the same time, it addresses major challenges such as the need for constitutional amendments, concerns over federal autonomy, logistical limitations, and political resistance. Comparative global experiences from countries like South Africa and Indonesia are also explored to provide context. The paper argues for a phased and consultative approach involving legal preparedness, political consensus, public engagement, and institutional strengthening. By combining legal analysis with administrative and political considerations, the study concludes that while ONOE has the potential to enhance India's electoral integrity and governance stability, it must be implemented with caution and broad-based consensus to preserve the federal spirit and democratic values enshrined in the Constitution.

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections, Electoral Reform, Indian Federalism, Constitutional Amendments, Voter Turnout

INTRODUCTION

India's political framework is founded upon a federal system, where the distribution of powers between the Union and the State governments is meticulously outlined in the Constitution. This dual structure is not only a defining characteristic of India's democracy but also a practical necessity given the country's vast geographic expanse, socio-cultural diversity, and complex administrative landscape. The electoral system, which operationalizes democratic governance across multiple levels of government, has long been considered one of the largest and most intricate democratic exercises in the world.

Since the first general elections in 1951–52, the Indian electoral machinery has evolved remarkably. Initially, simultaneous elections were the norm, with both Lok Sabha (House of the People) and State Legislative Assemblies going to the polls together. However, this synchrony was disrupted due to premature dissolution of legislatures and shifts in political dynamics, leading to the current scenario where

elections are held almost every year in some part of the country. As a result, the country remains in a continuous state of electoral mobilization, with political parties, bureaucratic machinery, and security forces perpetually engaged in election-related activities.

In recent years, especially in the 21st century, the idea of ‘One Nation, One Election’ (ONOE) has emerged as a significant subject of public policy discourse. This concept proposes the synchronization of elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, so that the entire country votes during a single election cycle. The primary rationale behind this proposal includes reducing the enormous financial burden on the exchequer, minimizing administrative disruptions caused by repeated elections, and enabling governments to focus on long-term governance rather than short-term electoral gains. According to estimates by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), election expenditures have skyrocketed from ₹9,000 crores in 1998 to ₹55,000 crores in 2019, with projections suggesting over ₹1.20 lakh crore expenditure during the 2024 general elections. These figures highlight the urgent need to reassess the economic sustainability of frequent elections. Moreover, repeated elections divert significant manpower and resources, including the deployment of lakhs of security personnel and bureaucrats, disrupting essential services and delaying developmental projects. Frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct also hampers policy continuity and administrative efficiency, as elected governments enter a state of temporary paralysis during election periods.

Proponents of ONOE argue that it could address these issues by fostering political stability, improving policy planning and implementation, and increasing voter participation by reducing "electoral fatigue." On the other hand, critics caution that such a proposal may pose serious constitutional, federal, and logistical challenges. It may undermine the autonomy of state governments, distort political accountability, and require significant constitutional amendments for implementation. Given these complexities, the issue of ‘One Nation, One Election’ demands a rigorous and multi-dimensional analysis. This research paper aims to study the feasibility, implications, and challenges of implementing ONOE within the Indian federal structure. It will explore historical precedents, constitutional frameworks, global experiences, economic data, and political concerns to provide a comprehensive understanding of this transformative electoral proposition.

Historical Background and Law Commission's Recommendations

The concept is not new to India. From 1951 to 1967, simultaneous elections were conducted for both Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. However, the trend was disrupted due to premature dissolution of various State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha, leading to an unsynchronized electoral calendar. The 170th Report of the Law Commission of India (1999) recommended ending the cycle of frequent elections by revisiting the earlier system where elections to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were held together. The Commission stated that “the cycle of elections every year without sufficient interval should end. We must restore the situation where elections are held simultaneously.” In 2015, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice for Public Grievances examined the feasibility of simultaneous elections and highlighted constitutional challenges, the need for extensive resources including EVMs and VVPATs, and the broader implications for governance and democratic accountability.

Relevance of the Study

Several countries around the world have adopted synchronized elections to streamline democratic processes and reduce the burden of recurring polls. In presidential systems like Brazil, Colombia, and the

Philippines, elections for the executive and legislature are held concurrently. Parliamentary democracies such as South Africa and Sweden also conduct national and provincial elections together. Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy, conducted nationwide simultaneous elections in 2019, setting a precedent for large-scale electoral synchronization. India, inspired by these international practices, has been revisiting the idea of One Nation, One Election. The Election Commission of India first proposed synchronized elections in 1983, citing concerns over administrative disruption and governance delays due to frequent polls. However, political and constitutional complexities hindered its implementation. Since 2014, the proposal has gained renewed momentum, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government consistently advocating for its adoption. A high-level committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind was formed to examine the feasibility of ONOE. This renewed institutional focus underscores the urgent need to evaluate the model's implications for India's federal structure, electoral integrity, and democratic continuity.

Justifications for Simultaneous Elections

The demand for simultaneous elections, or One Nation, One Election (ONOE), has gained considerable traction in contemporary Indian political discourse. While the idea has both advocates and detractors, a growing body of data and policy analysis supports the proposition on practical, economic, and democratic grounds.

1. Escalating Election Expenditure

One of the most compelling arguments in favor of ONOE is the unsustainable rise in election-related expenditure. The financial burden of conducting elections has grown exponentially in recent decades. According to data from the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), the cost of conducting the 1998 general elections stood at approximately ₹9,000 crore. This figure surged to ₹55,000 crore in 2019 and exceeded ₹1.20 lakh crore in the 2024 general elections. These figures indicate a substantial economic strain on both the public exchequer and private political finances. More concerning is the lack of transparency in campaign financing, which raises questions about the influence of money in elections and the rise of quid-pro-quo political donations. Moreover, the costs are not limited to financial outlays. The administrative burden—deployment of millions of government officials, security personnel, and logistical infrastructure like Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)—adds to the systemic stress of repeated electoral cycles. Holding simultaneous elections would not only reduce duplication of expenses but also streamline electoral logistics, thereby optimizing resource utilization.

2. Governance Paralysis Due to Frequent Elections

The repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) during staggered elections often paralyzes governance. The MCC restricts incumbent governments from announcing new policies, launching welfare schemes, or making significant administrative appointments during election periods. While the MCC is essential to ensure free and fair elections, its frequent application across different states and levels of government severely impacts developmental governance. In a country like India, where multi-tier governance is the norm, elections are held in some part of the country almost every year. As a result, the federal and state governments are forced into a perpetual state of caution and temporary inaction. This hampers not only the execution of ongoing projects but also long-term policy planning and implementation. The ONOE framework seeks to address this by aligning election cycles in a manner that minimizes MCC disruptions, thereby allowing governments to focus more consistently on governance and development without the constant shadow of electoral compulsions.

3. Voter Fatigue and Declining Participation

Multiple elections at frequent intervals often lead to voter fatigue, a phenomenon where repeated mobilization efforts diminish voter interest and turnout. This is particularly visible in urban areas and among youth, where voter apathy tends to be higher in off-cycle elections. Evidence from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) reveals that when Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections were held concurrently, voter turnout increased by approximately 5–6% compared to when they were held separately. This indicates that consolidated elections may enhance civic engagement, reduce electoral fatigue, and improve the overall democratic participation rate. Simultaneous elections would also lead to more coherent and consistent voter behavior, as citizens would have the opportunity to consider national and state issues in a single electoral context. This may, in turn, lead to more informed and stable voting patterns.

4. Optimal Utilization of Institutional and Human Resources

Conducting separate elections at multiple levels and across different states requires vast amounts of human and institutional resources. During national elections, the Election Commission deploys over 11 million personnel, including civil servants, police forces, and paramilitary units. The repeated diversion of these personnel from their core responsibilities—education, healthcare, policing, and public administration—leads to disruptions in routine governance. Simultaneous elections would allow the Election Commission and other state agencies to concentrate their planning and execution resources within a single, time-bound framework. This would not only enhance efficiency and reduce duplication of efforts but also allow institutional bodies to focus on their primary duties for the rest of the term without the cyclical disturbance of electoral deployment.

Literature Review

1. **Anup Barnwal, “One Nation-One Election: A Possibility of Political Reform in India”** – This work offers an in-depth analysis of the feasibility of ONOE, evaluating constitutional limitations and policy implications.
2. **Narendra Modi and Dr. Girish Mittal, “One Nation One Election: A Pathway to India's Development”** – A strongly pro-ONOE argument, this book emphasizes the economic, administrative, and governance benefits of simultaneous polls.
3. **S.Y. Quraishi (Former CEC)** – He has expressed concerns that ONOE may weaken accountability of elected representatives towards their constituents. He emphasizes the need for political consensus and a phased roadmap.
4. **Bibek Debroy & Kishore Desai, “Analysis of Simultaneous Elections : The “What”, “Why”, “How”** – This report outlines the history, advantages, challenges, and operational strategies for ONOE. It stresses on the need for constitutional amendments, broad political consensus, and institutional preparedness.

Objectives

1. To analyze the challenges in educating voters about the new system.
2. To assess the impact of ONOE on political socialization and voter behavior.
3. To examine the concerns of regional parties and their relevance.
4. To evaluate the challenges in altering the tenure of state assemblies.
5. To explore the potential impact on the federal structure and parliamentary democracy.

6. To study changes in political accountability.
7. To understand ONOE's effect on India's democratic federalism.

Challenges to the Implementation of Simultaneous Elections

While the vision of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) holds promise for streamlining India's democratic processes, its practical execution is fraught with considerable challenges—legal, political, logistical, and constitutional. These issues require careful analysis and policy planning. A primary obstacle to implementing ONOE is the requirement for constitutional amendments. Several key provisions of the Constitution would need modification, including Article 83, which defines the tenure of the Lok Sabha; Article 172, relating to the tenure of State Legislative Assemblies; Articles 85 and 174, which govern the summoning and dissolution of the Houses; and Article 356, which deals with the imposition of President's Rule. Amending these provisions demands a special majority in both Houses of Parliament—two-thirds of members present and voting—and ratification by at least half of the state legislatures. Given India's highly diverse and politically fragmented federal structure, achieving such widespread legislative consensus is both complex and politically sensitive.

In addition to legal hurdles, federal concerns present a formidable challenge. States, particularly those ruled by regional parties, may resist synchronizing their electoral cycles with national timelines. Many fear that centralizing election schedules could dilute their autonomy and erode the federal character of the Indian polity. Regional political parties, which rely heavily on state-specific agendas and localized campaigning, are apprehensive that simultaneous elections may lead to their marginalization amidst the overpowering narrative of national-level campaigns dominated by larger national parties. This could weaken the diversity and pluralism that are hallmarks of Indian democracy. Logistical challenges also loom large. Currently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) does not possess the required inventory of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) necessary to conduct simultaneous elections at both the national and state levels. An election of such magnitude would necessitate the deployment of double or triple the current stock of EVMs and VVPATs, along with significant enhancements in storage, transportation, and security logistics. Furthermore, managing such a vast electoral exercise would require intensive training and upskilling of polling personnel, as well as an overhaul of existing infrastructure and real-time coordination systems.

Political resistance also poses a significant hurdle. Opposition parties contend that ONOE could unfairly benefit the party in power at the Centre, given the likelihood of a "national wave" influencing voter behavior across states. They argue that local issues and regional concerns may be overshadowed during joint campaigns dominated by national narratives. This could distort electoral choices, as voters may cast their ballots based more on central leadership or national-level performance rather than state-specific governance and development concerns. The fear is that this could tilt the democratic playing field in favor of a single party, undermining the spirit of competitive federalism.

Lastly, the issue of premature dissolution and mid-term instability complicates the implementation of ONOE. One of the foundational assumptions of synchronized elections is the stability of both Union and State legislatures for a full five-year term. However, Indian political history is replete with instances of premature dissolution of governments which was either due to a breakdown of coalition arrangements, no-confidence motions, or political defections. In such scenarios, the question arises: What mechanism will replace the government without disrupting the synchronized electoral cycle? Options like imposing President's Rule, appointing caretaker governments, or conducting staggered elections reintroduce the

very fragmentation that ONOE seeks to eliminate. Moreover, these mechanisms themselves have serious constitutional and democratic implications, potentially undermining the principle of periodic electoral accountability. In summary, while ONOE is a well-intentioned electoral reform, it faces significant constitutional, political, administrative, and federal roadblocks. Each challenge underscores the need for a cautious, consultative, and phased approach that respects the spirit of federalism and democratic plurality embedded in India's constitutional ethos.

Comparative Global Experiences and Strategic Recommendations

To appreciate the feasibility and potential impact of simultaneous elections in India, it is helpful to examine comparative experiences from other large democracies. A closer look at nations like South Africa and Indonesia offers valuable lessons, along with cautionary insights, for India's ONOE project. South Africa, for instance, holds its national and provincial elections simultaneously every five years. This model has helped promote synchronized governance and policy alignment between central and provincial governments. The electoral commission of South Africa has established robust institutional mechanisms, including advanced voter registration systems and efficient polling infrastructure, which allow for smooth administration. The success of this model, however, rests heavily on the unitary political structure and comparatively smaller administrative scale than India.

Indonesia's 2019 general elections present a more nuanced case. That year, the country conducted parliamentary and presidential elections simultaneously for the first time. The intention was to reduce election costs and administrative redundancies. While the consolidation led to certain efficiencies, it also generated significant challenges, such as voter fatigue, confusion due to a large number of ballots, and even incidents of electoral violence. Notably, over 500 election workers died due to physical exhaustion from prolonged counting procedures. Indonesia's experience underscores that while synchronizing elections may offer theoretical benefits, the practical implementation must be supported by institutional capacity, voter education, and electoral safeguards.

India, with its vast population, diversity, and layered federal structure, must therefore adopt a calibrated strategy if it chooses to move toward ONOE. A number of pragmatic recommendations can help steer this reform in the right direction. Firstly, phased implementation appears to be the most realistic approach. Instead of forcing all states into a single electoral calendar, the government could begin by clubbing the elections of states whose assemblies are due within a six-month window of the Lok Sabha elections. Over successive cycles, the electoral calendar of other states could be gradually aligned. This would reduce administrative shocks and allow for smoother coordination. Secondly, legal preparedness is critical. Even with parliamentary support, achieving public legitimacy is essential. A national referendum or structured public consultation post-legislative clearance could help in building moral and democratic consensus. Legal experts and constitutional scholars must also be engaged to draft amendments that are watertight, future-proof, and respectful of federal principles.

Thirdly, public engagement is vital to ensure success. Extensive awareness campaigns through print, electronic, and digital media must be launched to educate voters about the rationale, mechanisms, and benefits of simultaneous elections. Public support can help reduce resistance and misunderstandings, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Further, political consensus must be built through inclusive dialogue. The government must convene a non-partisan platform where national parties, regional outfits, state governments, civil society organizations, and academic institutions can discuss the implications of ONOE. A sustained process of trust-building is necessary to ensure that electoral reforms are not perceived

as partisan maneuvers. Finally, institutional strengthening of the Election Commission of India is indispensable. The ECI must be empowered with enhanced technology, greater manpower, and more funding. The creation of a centralized electoral logistics management system, real-time voter monitoring, and advanced polling booths would be essential to manage the scale and complexity of a simultaneous national election.

Conclusion

The idea of One Nation, One Election has both promise and complexity. It could transform India's democratic architecture by streamlining the electoral process, cutting costs, and improving governance. However, the path is fraught with constitutional, political, and administrative challenges. The need of the hour is a robust dialogue, gradual implementation, and a non-partisan, constitutionally sound framework that respects India's federal spirit. If successfully implemented with broad-based consensus, ONOE could be a landmark electoral reform in the world's largest democracy by aligning democratic participation with developmental governance.

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