



One Nation, One Election: Promise, Pitfalls, and the Path Forward in Indian Federalism

Abhishek Kumar, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow
Email ID: abhishekkunwarabhi@gmail.com

Abstract

The proposal of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) seeks to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies to streamline the electoral process, reduce costs, and minimize disruptions caused by frequent polls. While the initiative promises administrative efficiency and governance stability, it raises significant concerns about its impact on India's federal structure. This research paper critically examines the ONOE proposition within the framework of Indian federalism. It explores its historical background, constitutional challenges, practical feasibility, and political implications. Drawing on parliamentary reports, expert committee findings, and legal analyses, the paper argues that while ONOE could yield benefits in terms of reducing election fatigue and improving policy continuity, it poses potential threats to the autonomy of states and the democratic ethos of staggered elections. The article concludes by proposing a balanced approach that respects federal principles while addressing the need for electoral reform.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, Federalism, Indian Constitution, Electoral Reforms, Simultaneous Elections, State Autonomy, Democratic Governance, Election Commission of India

Introduction

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) has gained considerable traction in Indian political discourse, especially under the current central government. It envisions synchronizing elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, thereby reducing the frequency of elections and ensuring a more stable governance structure. While proponents argue that it would lead to cost savings, better governance, and enhanced voter participation, critics raise alarms over its implications for federalism and democratic representation (Singh, 2020). India's unique federal structure, enshrined in the Constitution, is characterized by political decentralization, where states enjoy considerable autonomy in their governance and legislative affairs. The ONOE proposal challenges this fabric by centralizing electoral timelines, potentially undermining the state's prerogative to function independently. This paper explores the

genesis, rationale, benefits, and pitfalls of ONOE, with a particular focus on its impact on federalism.

Historical Background of Simultaneous Elections

Simultaneous elections are not a novel idea in India. The first three general elections (1952, 1957, and 1962) were conducted simultaneously for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. However, due to political instability and the premature dissolution of several assemblies and the Lok Sabha itself, this synchronization was disrupted in the late 1960s (Election Commission of India, 2016). The Law Commission of India (2018) and the NITI Aayog (2017) have both proposed reintroducing simultaneous elections as a means to reduce election costs and improve governance. These recommendations form the intellectual and policy foundation of the ONOE initiative.

The Case for One Nation, One Election

Economic and Administrative Efficiency

A primary argument for ONOE is the enormous financial burden that frequent elections impose on the exchequer. According to the Law Commission (2018),



the 2014 Lok Sabha elections cost ₹3,870 crore, and with multiple states conducting their own elections periodically, the cumulative expense becomes staggering. Synchronizing elections could save billions in public funds and reduce the logistical strain on the Election Commission of India (ECI), paramilitary forces, and administrative machinery.

Policy Continuity and Governance

Frequent elections often result in the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which restricts government policy decisions during the electoral process. This disrupts policy continuity and delays development work. A unified electoral cycle would minimize such interruptions, enabling smoother policy implementation (NITI Aayog, 2017).

Reducing Electoral Fatigue

From a democratic participation perspective, repeated elections may result in voter fatigue, declining turnout, and inconsistent political engagement. A unified election schedule could revitalize electoral participation by making the process more streamlined and predictable.

Federalism in India: The Constitutional Framework

India follows a quasi-federal system as defined in the Constitution. While there is a strong centralizing bias, the Constitution grants significant autonomy to the states in terms of governance, taxation, and legislative competence (Austin, 1999). The federal structure is also political, with state parties playing a vital role in national governance. The Election Commission conducts elections independently for both Parliament and State Assemblies. The timing of these elections depends on the dissolution or completion of each legislature's term. Thus, imposing a fixed, synchronized schedule interferes with the current constitutional and political design.

ONOE and the Threat to Federalism

Undermining State Autonomy

One of the most significant criticisms of ONOE is its potential to erode state autonomy. If elections are to be held simultaneously, it would necessitate curtailing or extending the term of elected State Assemblies or the Parliament, undermining the democratic will of the people (Chandrachud, 2023). This not only conflicts with Article 172(1) of the Constitution—which fixes the term of state legislatures at five years—but also violates the federal spirit by imposing a centralized electoral schedule on all states, regardless of local political dynamics.

Politicization of National Issues

Simultaneous elections may lead to the nationalization of state-level electoral discourse. Voters may conflate national and regional issues, diminishing the visibility of state-specific concerns. This could be particularly disadvantageous to regional parties and dilute the essence of local democracy (Yadav, 2019).

Legal and Logistical Challenges

The implementation of ONOE would require significant constitutional amendments—particularly to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174. Additionally, the Representation of the People Act (1951) would need to be modified to allow for synchronizing terms of legislatures through curtailment or extension, raising concerns about judicial scrutiny and political feasibility (Law Commission, 2018).

Practical and Operational Concerns

Even if ONOE is legislatively feasible, several logistical issues remain. For instance, simultaneous elections would require the ECI to manage a massive, single-window election across the country. This demands an enormous deployment of security forces, electronic voting machines (EVMs), and personnel. Moreover, unforeseen events—such as the premature fall of a government due to a no-confidence motion or internal



rebellion—would disrupt the synchronized cycle, leading to constitutional dilemmas (Subramanian, 2022).

Pitfalls and Constitutional Concerns

However, these administrative advantages must be weighed against the significant risks the reform poses to India's federal structure. The Indian Constitution, though unitary in some aspects, is fundamentally federal with a clear demarcation of powers between the Union and the states. Simultaneous elections would require either aligning all state assemblies' terms or curtailing/extending their tenures—both of which may be perceived as intrusions into the autonomy of states. This could trigger not just political resistance but constitutional challenges as well.

The potential for “nationalization” of electoral discourse is another major concern. When national and state elections are held together, voters tend to focus more on national issues and personalities, often at the expense of regional considerations. This may marginalize regional parties and voices, leading to a homogenized political narrative that undermines the pluralistic spirit of Indian democracy. Furthermore, simultaneous elections may create logistical and operational bottlenecks, especially in the initial years of implementation, where the synchronization of terms will likely require controversial political and legal interventions.

Recommendations and Alternatives

Rather than enforcing strict simultaneity, several scholars and institutions suggest a phased approach. The Law Commission (2018) recommends conducting two rounds of elections every 2.5 years—grouping half the states with the Lok Sabha in the first round and the rest in the second. This reduces election frequency without compromising federalism.

Further, to manage premature dissolution, the German model of a “constructive vote of no-

confidence” could be adopted, wherein a government cannot be dismissed unless a replacement is simultaneously proposed, ensuring stability (Gupta, 2020)

In 2023, the Government of India constituted a High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind to explore the feasibility of ONOE. While the committee is yet to submit its final report, preliminary insights suggest the need for extensive constitutional reforms and political consensus. The inclusion of legal experts, former bureaucrats, and election commissioners reflects the gravity and complexity of the issue (Press Information Bureau, 2023).

Given these complexities, a middle path rooted in consultation, constitutionalism, and federal consensus appears most viable. Rather than attempting a radical, all-at-once implementation, India could explore *phased synchronization*. For example, elections could be held in two or three clusters every 2.5 years—grouping states whose legislative terms end within a close window. This would still reduce the frequency of elections without compromising the federal structure or the autonomy of state governments. The reform must also be underpinned by a strong constitutional foundation. This implies not just amending Article 83 and 172 of the Constitution (which deal with the duration of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies) but also evolving a clear legal and procedural framework for handling premature dissolutions and no-confidence motions. Without this, any attempt at synchrony may be both legally untenable and politically volatile.

Consensus-building is essential. Reforms of such magnitude cannot be perceived as top-down impositions. They require widespread deliberation involving state governments, opposition parties, the judiciary, civil society, and constitutional experts. A time-bound parliamentary committee or a constitutional review commission with representation from all



political stakeholders could be constituted to examine the feasibility, modalities, and impact of the reform.

Lastly, any electoral reform must be judged not solely by its administrative merit but by its democratic character. India's electoral system is not merely a procedural exercise—it is the backbone of its federal, plural, and participatory ethos. While efficiency is desirable, it must not come at the cost of representation and diversity.

Comparative Global Experience

Countries like South Africa and Sweden conduct national and provincial elections simultaneously, but they follow a federal structure with rigid election dates and mechanisms to handle early dissolution. India's political diversity and volatile coalition politics make such rigidity challenging (Rao, 2021). Hence, blindly replicating foreign models without contextual adaptation may not serve India's democratic and federal interests.

Conclusion

The idea of *One Nation, One Election* has emerged as one of the most ambitious electoral reform proposals in contemporary India. Proponents of simultaneous elections argue that it promises administrative efficiency, cost reduction, and a more stable and focused governance environment. Critics, however, caution that it risks undermining India's federal structure, diluting regional representation, and disturbing the constitutional balance between the Union and the states. As this paper has explored, the proposal lies at the intersection of electoral pragmatism and constitutional idealism, demanding a nuanced evaluation of its potential impact on Indian democracy. At the heart of the promise lies the aspiration for efficiency and cohesion. By synchronizing elections at the national and state levels, the government could significantly reduce the costs—both financial and human—associated with frequent elections. The Election Commission of India (ECI), security forces, schools, and bureaucratic machinery often get diverted from their primary responsibilities during electoral cycles. In a country as large and diverse as India, such repeated disruptions affect developmental work, weaken governance, and

foster a near-permanent campaign mode. By instituting a common electoral calendar, India could theoretically reallocate those resources more effectively toward long-term policy implementation and economic development. Moreover, the repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) often stalls critical governance decisions. Simultaneous elections would reduce the frequency of such stalls, thereby creating a more continuous and responsive administrative framework. Voter behavior could also become more issue-based rather than being swayed by electoral populism, if elections are held less frequently but with greater deliberation.

References

1. Austin, G. (1999). *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press.
2. Chandrachud, A. (2023). *Republic of Rhetoric: Free Speech and the Constitution of India*. Penguin Random House.
3. Election Commission of India. (2016). *Report on Simultaneous Elections*. ECI Publications.
4. Gupta, D. (2020). The Constructive Vote of No Confidence: Lessons from Germany. *Journal of Parliamentary Studies*, 35(2), 124–140.
5. Law Commission of India. (2018). *170th Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws*. Government of India.
6. NITI Aayog. (2017). *Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections: A Reform Worth Considering*. Government of India.
7. Press Information Bureau. (2023). *High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
8. Rao, S. (2021). Comparative Electoral Systems: Lessons for India. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 82(3), 411–428.
9. Singh, M. (2020). One Nation, One Election: Constitutional and Practical Challenges. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 55(14), 10–12.
10. Yadav, Y. (2019). Why Simultaneous Elections May Undermine Indian Federalism. *Seminar*, 715, 21–25.