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## ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) proposes the simultaneous conduct of elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies. This idea, although currently debated as a reformative electoral policy, is not a new phenomenon in the Indian context. In fact, simultaneous elections were a reality during the initial decades following India’s transformation into a republic in 1950. However, due to premature dissolutions of state assemblies and the Lok Sabha, the synchronized electoral cycle was disrupted by the late 1960s. Since then, India has witnessed a continuous cycle of elections, with some part of the country almost always in election mode. This fragmented electoral timeline has given rise to various challenges, including frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), diversion of administrative resources, and short-term populist policy-making.

The rationale behind ONOE lies in its potential to improve governance efficiency, reduce fiscal expenditure, and enhance voter participation. By consolidating elections, the policy aims to minimize the repeated administrative burden, lower campaign costs for political parties, and reduce policy paralysis during the MCC period. However, implementing this reform also presents significant constitutional, logistical, and political challenges. India’s federal structure, the autonomy of state governments, and constitutional provisions such as Articles 83(2) and 172(1), which define the terms of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, pose hurdles to enforcement. The requirement of constitutional amendments, legal restructuring, and political consensus makes ONOE a complex policy reform.

Global examples offer a mixed picture. Countries like South Africa and Sweden have successfully adopted synchronized electoral systems, whereas others like Germany follow staggered models that preserve local autonomy and ensure continuous democratic engagement.

Stakeholders in India including political parties, constitutional experts and civil society organizations hold divergent views on ONOE. While some advocate it as a step toward democratic efficiency and electoral simplification, others caution against potential disruptions to democratic plurality and state autonomy.

The debate on One Nation, One Election reflects a broader tension between administrative efficiency and democratic inclusiveness. While the proposed reform holds potential benefits, its successful implementation demands careful calibration, extensive consultation, and robust institutional preparedness. Any move toward synchronized elections must respect the foundational principles of federalism and democracy as enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

### Introduction

India, widely regarded as the world’s most expansive democratic system, witnesses a constant cycle of elections at the national, state, and local levels. While this reflects the

vibrancy of Indian democracy, it also presents significant logistical, financial, and administrative challenges. Against this backdrop, the concept of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) has gained considerable

attention in recent years. This idea advocates for the synchronization of elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and State Legislative Assemblies to be held simultaneously, aiming to streamline the electoral process and optimize governance mechanisms.

Historically, the Indian Republic began its democratic journey with simultaneous elections. The first general elections held in 1951–52 for the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies were conducted concurrently. This practice continued in the subsequent elections of 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, this synchronization began to dissolve due to premature dissolutions of some state assemblies and the Lok Sabha itself, resulting in a staggered election calendar that persists to this day. The frequent electoral cycles have been argued to disrupt normal governance, delay policy implementation, and impose repeated financial and administrative burdens on the state machinery.

It promises several potential advantages, such as reducing the burden on administrative and security forces, minimizing policy paralysis during frequent enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), and encouraging long-term governance planning. Nevertheless, this ambitious proposal also raises significant constitutional, political, and logistical concerns. India's federal structure provides considerable autonomy to state governments, and imposing a uniform election timeline may be seen as encroaching on this autonomy. Moreover, the constitutional framework would require substantial amendments, and consensus among a wide range of political stakeholders is imperative.

The Law Commission of India, in its 170th report, has examined the feasibility of ONOE, highlighting both its potential and its challenges.<sup>1265</sup> More recently, in 2018, the Law Commission recommended a two-phase

synchronized election system as a more pragmatic alternative.<sup>1266</sup> In 2023, a High-Level Committee under the chairmanship of former President Ram Nath Kovind was constituted to further examine the legal and constitutional amendments required to implement One Nation, One Election.<sup>1267</sup> These developments underline the seriousness with which the proposal is being considered.

Furthermore, the constitutional amendments necessary for implementing One Nation, One Election are extensive. Articles pertaining to the duration of State Legislatures (Article 172), the dissolution of the Lok Sabha (Article 83), and various provisions relating to emergency powers and Presidential rule would need to be re-examined.<sup>1268</sup> The implementation of One nation, One Election would require the support of not only Parliament but also a significant number of state legislatures, making it a complex and politically sensitive endeavour.

### Historical Evolution of One Nation, One Election

#### First General Election (1951–52)

India's tryst with democracy formally began with the first general elections held in 1951–52. These elections were monumental, being the largest democratic exercise in the world at the time. During this period, the concept of simultaneous elections was inherently embedded in the electoral process. Elections to the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and the State Legislative Assemblies were conducted together. This synchronization was largely due to the alignment of the constitutional mandates that required all legislatures to complete their five-year term unless dissolved earlier. The simultaneity helped ensure administrative simplicity and minimized resource consumption.

The first general elections set a strong precedent for electoral synchronization. It was

<sup>1265</sup> Law Commission of India, 170<sup>th</sup> Report on Reform of Electoral Laws (May, 1999).

<sup>1266</sup> Law Commission of India, 180<sup>th</sup> Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections (August, 2018).

<sup>1267</sup> High-Level Committee, Report on Simultaneous Elections in India (March, 2024).

<sup>1268</sup> The Constitution of India, arts. 83, 172.

administratively efficient and fostered a spirit of democratic participation. The Indian National Congress, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, secured a landslide victory at both the central and state levels. This model of simultaneous elections became the de facto electoral mechanism and continued for the subsequent electoral cycles.

#### Second General Election (1957)

The second general elections, held in 1957, further solidified the practice of simultaneous elections. The constitutional mechanism continued to facilitate a synchronized electoral cycle, as both the central and state governments completed their full five-year terms. The Election Commission of India (ECI), having gained valuable experience from the previous election, was better equipped to handle the logistical demands. As a result, the process was smoother and more organized.

During this period, the Nehru-led Congress maintained its dominance across most states and the center. The continuity of synchronized elections ensured consistency in governance and minimized political disruptions. Administrative machinery could function without being frequently bogged down by electoral obligations. Moreover, public engagement was relatively uniform across the country, as citizens participated in a single electoral event for both levels of government.

However, subtle strains began to emerge. Political opposition started gaining ground in various regions, which led to increasing political fragmentation. This fragmentation would eventually contribute to the de-synchronization of elections in the subsequent decades.

#### Third General Election (1962)

The third general elections of 1962 were conducted in a similar synchronized manner. Elections to the Lok Sabha and most State Legislative Assemblies occurred simultaneously, maintaining the pattern established in the first two elections. This continuity was reflective of the political stability that prevailed under the Congress regime.

This election was particularly notable for being the last before the onset of major political instability. The administration and the Election Commission of India had sharpened the electoral process, reducing logistical hurdles and increasing voter awareness. Voter turnout improved, and the public became more familiar with the process of democratic participation. This period marked the apex of electoral synchronization in India.

However, the seeds of change had already been sown. Regional political parties started asserting their identity, and issues related to state autonomy, language, and regional development began influencing electoral outcomes. These developments hinted at the eventual divergence of electoral timelines, which would disrupt the synchronized pattern in the following years.

#### Fourth General Election (1967)

The fourth general elections marked a significant turning point in India's electoral history. While the central and state elections were still conducted together in many regions, the political landscape had transformed dramatically. The Congress party, although still dominant at the centre, faced considerable setbacks in several states.

The fourth general elections also witnessed a rise in political volatility. Several state governments fell before completing their full term, resulting in premature dissolutions of legislative assemblies. As a result, the electoral cycles began to diverge. While some states continued with synchronized elections, others deviated due to mid-term elections necessitated by political instability.

This de-synchronization disrupted the once-unified electoral calendar and increased the frequency of elections in the country. The era of frequent elections began, with varying electoral schedules for different states and the centre.

### The Law Commission of India (1999<sup>1269</sup> & 2018 Reports<sup>1270</sup>)

The Law Commission in its 170th Report (1999) recommended the revival of simultaneous elections to ensure administrative efficiency and reduce electoral fatigue. The Commission emphasized that frequent elections disrupt governance, result in repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, and escalate election-related expenditure.

In 2018, the Law Commission revisited the issue in its draft report and provided a detailed roadmap for implementation. The report suggested constitutional amendments and proposed fixed tenures for legislatures. It also recommended that simultaneous elections could be introduced in two phases to facilitate smoother implementation.

### The Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015)<sup>1271</sup>

The Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, in its 79th Report (2015), strongly supported the idea of simultaneous elections. It outlined that the current electoral cycle leads to perpetual campaigning, adversely impacting governance and development. The report recommended fixed tenure for legislatures and greater cooperation between the Election Commission of India and political parties to align electoral cycles.

### NITI Aayog (2017)<sup>1272</sup>

NITI Aayog, in its discussion paper, advocated simultaneous elections as a necessary electoral reform. The paper emphasized cost savings, improved governance, and increased voter participation. It proposed constitutional

amendments and synchronization of elections in two phases.

### High-Level Committee on One Nation, One Election (2023)<sup>1273</sup>

The most recent and significant initiative has been the formation of the High-Level Committee in 2023, chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind. This committee was tasked with exploring the legal, constitutional, and logistical aspects of implementing simultaneous elections. The committee engaged with various stakeholders, including political parties, constitutional experts, and the Election Commission.

The committee's interim findings highlighted widespread support for the idea in principle, while also acknowledging significant challenges. These include the need for constitutional amendments, consensus among political parties, and the development of robust electoral infrastructure.

### **Rationale of One Nation, One Election**

#### Enhancing Governance and Policy Continuity

Frequent elections tend to interrupt the continuity of governance due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The Model Code of Conduct, a set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI), prohibits the ruling party from announcing new schemes or projects once the election process begins. While the Model Code of Conduct ensures fairness during elections, its frequent enforcement hampers long-term policy formulation and implementation.

By synchronizing elections, One Nation, One Election aims to mitigate the recurring disruptions caused by Model Code of Conduct. Governments at both central and state levels would have uninterrupted tenures, allowing them to focus on development and governance rather than remaining in a perpetual state of electioneering.

<sup>1269</sup> Law Commission of India, 170th Report on Reform of Electoral Laws (May, 1999).

<sup>1270</sup> Law Commission of India, 180th Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections (August, 2018).

<sup>1271</sup> Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, 79th Report on Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Election to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies (December, 2015).

<sup>1272</sup> NITI Aayog, Discussion Paper on Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The What, Why and How (January, 2017).

<sup>1273</sup> High-Level Committee, Report on Simultaneous Elections in India (March, 2024).

### Financial Efficiency and Resource Optimization

The cost of conducting elections in India has witnessed a substantial increase over the years. The Election Commission, along with state agencies, spends massive amounts on security, logistics, electronic voting machines (EVMs), and manpower.

ONOE promises considerable savings in terms of financial and administrative resources. Synchronizing elections would eliminate the need for repeated deployment of security forces, reinstallation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs), and the recurring training of election personnel. This financial prudence would allow the government to reallocate funds towards developmental activities, thereby serving the public interest more effectively.

### Reducing Electoral Fatigue and Political Polarization

India's current electoral landscape fosters a state of continuous campaigning. Politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens are constantly engaged in one election or another. This results in electoral fatigue among voters and political overexposure.

ONOE could help alleviate this issue by limiting the duration and frequency of election campaigns. With elections occurring simultaneously every five years, political parties would be compelled to focus on long-term governance rather than short-term populist measures.

### **Challenges and Concerns of One Nation, One Election**

#### Federalism and Autonomy of States

India's Constitution envisages a quasi-federal structure where states enjoy considerable autonomy in governance. Imposing a uniform electoral calendar may undermine this federal spirit by diluting the powers of state governments. Critics argue that synchronized elections might compel states to dissolve their legislative assemblies prematurely or artificially

extend them beyond their natural tenure, thereby infringing on democratic principles and the electorate's will. Such adjustments may be perceived as a centralizing measure, diminishing the authority of state governments and possibly generating political discontent.

### Constitutional and Legal Hurdles

Conducting simultaneous elections would necessitate significant amendments to the Constitution, including Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356, which govern the duration and dissolution of the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies.<sup>1274</sup> Furthermore, alignment would require amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951<sup>1275</sup>, and other electoral laws. These constitutional revisions need the support of not just the Parliament but also a majority of the state legislatures, making the process politically sensitive and legally intricate. There is also a need to establish a legal framework for handling situations where governments fall mid-term due to a vote of no-confidence.

### Logistical and Administrative Challenges

India's sheer size and demographic diversity make it a logistical challenge to conduct simultaneous elections. The Election Commission would need to double or triple its current resources, including electronic voting machines (EVMs), voter verifiable paper audit trails (VVPATs), and polling personnel. Managing security forces across states simultaneously would also be a herculean task. Additionally, the task of updating and synchronizing electoral rolls for Lok Sabha and state elections at the same time could present administrative hurdles.

### Disproportionate Advantage to National Parties

Simultaneous elections may disproportionately benefit national parties with extensive organizational infrastructure and media outreach. Regional parties, often representing the voices of local communities and minority

<sup>1274</sup> The Constitution of India, arts. 83, 85, 172, 174, 356.

<sup>1275</sup> The Representation of the People Act, 1951 (No. 43 of 1951).

interests, may find themselves at a disadvantage in an environment dominated by national narratives. This could lead to homogenization of political discourse and erode the pluralistic character of Indian democracy.

### **Stakeholders' Perspectives on One Nation, One Election**

#### Political Parties

Political parties are perhaps the most influential stakeholders in the One Nation, One Election discourse. Their support or opposition significantly affects the viability of implementing this electoral reform. National parties, particularly those with a broad pan-India presence, tend to support the One nation, One Election proposal. They argue that synchronized elections will reduce the burden of continuous campaigning, lower election-related expenditure, and allow governments to focus more on governance rather than perpetual electioneering.

In contrast, many regional parties have expressed skepticism and resistance. Their primary concern revolves around the potential marginalization of regional issues and voices. Regional parties argue that ONOE might disproportionately benefit larger national parties by capitalizing on national narratives, which often overshadow state-specific concerns during joint campaigns.

#### General Public

The Indian electorate, as the ultimate stakeholder, holds a significant place in this discussion. A substantial portion of the population supports One Nation, One Election due to its promise of cost savings, reduced political instability, and better governance. People are often weary of continuous political campaigning, which disrupts normal life and diverts government attention from development agendas.

On the other hand, there is a notable segment of the population that remains indifferent or unaware of the deeper implications of such a

reform. This highlights the need for extensive public consultation, voter education, and transparent discourse before implementing One Nation, One Election.

#### Media

The media has played a vital role in shaping public discourse around One Nation, One Election. Media outlets have published extensive reports, editorials, and expert opinions on the feasibility and desirability of the initiative. While some media organizations endorse the idea as a reformative step toward electoral efficiency, others have criticized it for being politically motivated or lacking comprehensive groundwork.

### **Global Examples of Simultaneous Elections.**

#### South Africa

South Africa provides a notable example of simultaneous elections in a parliamentary democracy. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has consistently conducted its national and provincial elections together every five years. This synchronization ensures streamlined administrative processes, cost savings, and enhanced voter turnout. The system is backed by a strong electoral framework, including the Independent Electoral Commission, which ensures impartial conduct of elections.

#### Sweden

Sweden is another country where all major elections including those for the national legislature, county councils, and municipal councils are held on a single day every four years. This system promotes voter participation, reduces campaign expenditure, and provides a more cohesive political environment. Sweden's experience demonstrates that synchronized elections can function effectively in a decentralized unitary state, especially when electoral bodies and institutional mechanisms are strong and independent.

#### Indonesia

Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy, began implementing simultaneous elections as

part of its democratic reforms. In 2019, the country conducted elections for the President, national legislature, and local legislatures on a single day. While this was a monumental administrative achievement, it also exposed the logistical strain involved, with over 500 election workers reported dead due to overwork. This highlights the importance of ensuring adequate electoral infrastructure, training, and planning when implementing synchronized elections in large and diverse democracies.

### Germany

Germany follows a federal structure where elections are largely staggered. Federal elections for the Bundestag are held every four years, while state-level elections follow separate cycles. This system allows for greater representation of regional concerns and provides continuous feedback from the electorate. Although not synchronized, the model preserves federalism while maintaining high levels of political participation and administrative efficiency.

### **Conclusion**

The proposition of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) has captured the imagination of India’s democratic discourse, drawing attention from policymakers, constitutional experts, political leaders, and citizens alike. As the largest electoral democracy in the world, India stands at a crossroads, attempting to balance the foundational principles of democratic representation, federalism, and governance efficacy. The concept of One Nation, One Election, which advocates for synchronizing elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, is rooted in the idea of ensuring continuity in governance, reducing election-related expenditures, and mitigating the frequency of disruptions caused by the repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). However, it also raises significant constitutional, logistical, and political concerns that warrant careful and critical consideration.

At its core, the One Nation, One Election initiative is driven by the ambition to enhance administrative efficiency and ensure better resource utilization. When the Model Code of Conduct is in force, which it is frequently due to this fragmented electoral cycle, it restricts the incumbent government from announcing new welfare measures or policy initiatives. This hampers long-term planning and governance continuity. Synchronizing elections is therefore viewed as a solution to streamline governance processes and reduce the recurring governance slowdowns that accompany frequent polls.

Another vital aspect is the potential for enhancing voter turnout and political engagement. Holding simultaneous elections may simplify the electoral process for citizens and reduce voter fatigue, which often affects turnout in staggered state elections. By voting for both national and state representatives at the same time, citizens can engage more holistically with the political process and evaluate the overall performance of political parties across multiple levels of governance.

Moreover, critics argue that the implementation of One Nation, One Election might pose a threat to the spirit of federalism embedded in the Constitution. India’s diversity is not just cultural or linguistic but also political. Different states often have unique political mandates and regional issues that deserve specific attention. Conducting elections simultaneously might lead to national issues overshadowing local concerns, thereby undermining the electorate’s ability to vote based on state-specific governance. Regional parties, which play a crucial role in representing localized aspirations, fear marginalization in a synchronized electoral environment that could favour larger, national parties with greater visibility and resources.

That said, the idea of One Nation, One Election should not be dismissed outright. It reflects a legitimate desire for electoral reform in the world’s most populous democracy. However, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, a

phased or hybrid model could be explored. This may involve clustering state elections in phases aligned with the national cycle over a period of time, thereby gradually moving toward synchrony without abrupt disruption to the existing constitutional and federal balance.

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