



## Towards electoral efficiency: Constitutional, political, and logistical dimensions of One Nation, One Election in India

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### Abstract

The "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) proposal is emerging as a comprehensive and transformative reform of India's electoral structure, aiming to transform the fragmented electoral schedule into a coordinated, efficient, and resource-intensive model. This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the constitutional, political, and logistical dimensions of ONOE. At the constitutional level, the proposal requires significant amendments to the terms of legislatures and Parliament, union-state relations, and emergency provisions, raising serious concerns about the federal structure and the balance of power. Politically, this reform could have profound impacts on party competition, the autonomy of regional parties, voter behavior, the quality of representation, and democratic pluralism. Its operational implementation requires extensive administrative preparation, expansion of electoral infrastructure, strengthening of security management, and enhancement of the institutional capacities of the Election Commission of India. Based on international examples and empirical data on electoral expenditure and governance disruption, the study concludes that while ONOE can achieve cost savings, policy continuity, and administrative efficiency, it also carries profound constitutional challenges and federal sensitivities. Ultimately, this research suggests that a phased, interactive, and institutionally sound approach is essential to balance efficiency and democratic pluralism in India's electoral structure.

**Keywords:** One Nation, One Election (ONOE), political party, Indian, electoral, democracy

### Introduction

#### Background

In a democracy, elections allow citizens to choose their representatives for a set period of time. Electoral mechanisms are essential to a democratic political system. Democracy is widely regarded as the best form of government, despite its flaws. The system allows citizens to elect leaders based on their skills and abilities. Democracy allows citizens to hold officials accountable for their actions, including omissions and commissions. In the past few years' political uproar over Simultaneous Elections in India has given impetus to discourse on for and against the concept of re-structuring the electoral calendar by synchronizing and aligning elections across the nation. The phrase 'Simultaneous Election' (better known as One Nation, One Election) intends that there shall be synchronised and simultaneous elections to all the three tiers of government: The House of the People (Lok Sabha) and all the State Legislative Assemblies (Vidhan Sabha) including Local Governments: Municipalities and the Panchayats. Nevertheless, simultaneous elections don't imply electorates voting on the single day across the nation for all three tiers of government.

Rejectionists of the idea contends operational viability, legal impediments due to constitutional amendments, over-centralization of powers by central government, loss of political autonomy & power imbalances to state governments and overshadowing of regional political parties as complexities involved and drawbacks correlated with conducting simultaneous elections in India. However, exponents assert rejectionists' accounts as fallacious and electoral manipulation. Taking into account the views of critics, it is the subject of contentious debate of exigency: why should India adopt the Simultaneous Elections model: One Nation, One Election policy?

#### Institutional Endorsements: Insights from Committee Reports on Simultaneous Elections

Several committee reports including First Annual Report of the Election Commission of India (ECI, 1983); 170<sup>th</sup> & 255<sup>th</sup> Report of Law Commission; 79<sup>th</sup> report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law, and Justice Committee (2015); Working Paper of NITI AAYOG (2017); Law Commission of India Draft Report (2018) and latest High Level Committee (HLC) Report on Simultaneous Elections (March, 2024) have adjudged One Nation, One Election model as panacea for corruption free Indian electoral reforms. Consequently, policy of Simultaneous Election holds multitude of positive aspects to strengthen socio-politico-economic factors needed in vibrant democracy like India. Reduced expenditure and cost savings on electoral logistics and administration; resource optimization of security and law enforcement deployment; political stability, and sustained-uninterrupted implementation of public policies; enhanced public service delivery mechanism; *inter alia* increased focus on governance leading to optimum administrative efficiency are few pertinent advantages associated with simultaneous election model.

The simultaneous election cycle ended with the premature dissolution of the Fourth Lok Sabha. Article 352 of the Indian Constitution prolonged the duration of the Fifth Lok Sabha till 1977. Subsequently, the Eighth, Tenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Lok Sabhas successfully completed their five-year tenure. The Sixth, Seventh, Ninth, Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Lok Sabhas were dissolved before the end of their tenure. Similar disturbances have been observed in numerous State Assemblies over time. Premature dissolutions and tenure extensions have greatly disturbed India's simultaneous

elections. Conducting elections in India is a mammoth exercise both logistically and economically. As per ECI reports there are numerous expenses incurred on smooth conduct of election: - logistics (EVM procurement, electoral roll, polling booths, transportation); cost incurred on daily allowances, honorarium of public personnel, officials and deployment of security forces; public awareness and outreach programmes etc. which makes Indian General Elections as costliest globally. Accordingly, ECI, Government of India and State Government bears the burden of expenditure incurred on elections as per cost sharing formula of 100% expenditure by GOI for Lok Sabha Election and for State Legislative Elections (if held independently) State Government have to bear the entire cost. In case of concurrent election to State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha then total expenditure is equally shared between GOI and respective State Governments on 50:50 formula. However, it is the respective State Government which sustains the entire law & order management expenditure regardless of any elections.

### Why do we need One Nation One Election Ecosystem?

During the latest held 2024 General Election in India (World's Largest Democracy), there were 970 million (97 crore) eligible voters. In recent years total costs of conducting election for such a huge electorate have skyrocketed by huge margins. A meagre amount of ₹ 11 crore was spent by GOI on first Indian general election in 1951-52 compared to the total cost incurred for conducting 2009 General Elections at about ₹ 1115 crores; ₹ 3870 crores for the year 2014 (triple to amount spent 2009 elections) staggering amount of ₹ 60,000 crore was spent for 2019 general elections. According to the New Delhi-based Centre for Media Studies (CMS) an estimated ₹ 9,000 crore in 1998 to ₹55,000 in 2019 was spend on General Elections while total cost incurred on conducting 2024 Lok Sabha elections is estimated to be about 1.2 trillion Rupees (₹12bn) making it the costliest election ever conducted globally. Nevertheless, these sums also included total disclosed and undisclosed expenditure incurred by various candidates and political parties. Resultant to that, as per electoral expenditure analysis the cost of one vote in India has increased from 6 paise per elector in 1951 to ₹ 46 in 2014, ₹ 700 in 2019 and about ₹ 1400 in 2019. Besides this, to conduct a State Assembly Elections an average expenditure ranges between ₹ 300-1000 crore which depends upon the size of specific state. In any year on an average total 5 to 7 State Legislative elections are conducted each year.

A report published by Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) asserts that for different State Assembly elections held between years 2004–2015, the total collection disclosed by political parties was about ₹ 3368.06 crores. This ultimately results in duplication of electoral expenses in election bound states. Overall, scattered election cycle has long term economic impacts including adverse public-private investments, rates of economic growth, fiscal deficit targets and the quality of public expenditure (capital vs. revenue) by governments.

As per 79th report of the Parliamentary Standing committee the total cost of conducting simultaneous elections in country would cost Rs. 4500 which in contrast to above figures validates the assertion of severe cost savings on electoral expenditure by government. Several reports and

analyst estimate reduction in election expenditures by 25-40% due to simultaneous elections, resulting to potential savings of about ₹7,500 - ₹12,000 crore per Lok Sabha cycle. Ultimately this reduced expenditure would not only strengthen the exchequer but it will emphatically augment fiscal space for both the State and Union Government. With economic efficiency and enhanced fiscal capacity more spending and public investment can be made possible by prioritizing expenditure upon welfare programs, public infrastructure and national development.

With the announcement of election schedule by ECI, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) becomes operational and remains in application till the process of election is completed. During the Lok Sabha election, MCC remain operational throughout the country. In contrast, at the time of the State Legislative Assembly elections, the code applies to the poll-bound entire State. Imposition of MCC suspends all development and welfare schemes, deferral of public policy decisions and hiatus to normal governance. Incessant election cycle around the year leads to everlasting imposition of MCC which culminates into “policy paralysis and governance deficit” affirmed 79th Parliamentary Standing Committee report.

According to ECI, nation went through one General Election (2019) and total 33 State Legislative Assemblies during five-year span of 2019-2023 and reportedly it will continue till 2028 with about 30 Legislative Assemblies and the scheduled Lok Sabha Election in 2029. Eventually on average 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of time in every poll bound States & UTs will be on policy hiatus and have zero governance measures. Also due to electoral compulsions political parties perpetually remains on campaign mode to persuade electorates resulting into politically unviable short-sighted populist policy measures. All these lead to sub-optimal governance efficiency in the longer term. In these conditions the state of affairs seems non-acceptable when the nation is going through Amrit-Kaal with the goal: to be developed nation by 2047. In broader sense simultaneous election model would result in sustained and stable regulatory policy measures, relatively higher economic growth, lower inflation and increased investments (towards capital compared to revenue). Simultaneous Election will provide consistency and stability in governance with all administrative machinery and political executive purely focused on long term public service delivery approach.

Desynchronized elections warrant consistent deployment & mobilization of security forces and police personnel, prolonged engagement of polling officials (involving government employees & school teachers) to serve and supervise the electoral processes on polling booths. This results into absenteeism among teachers in schools, decreased work efficiency among public personnel and major security concerns around the nation. However, simultaneous election would involve only once in a 5-year event necessitating utmost and efficient utilisation of human resources and avoid hardships and duplication of processes. Staggered elections create voter fatigues, selective voting behaviour among electorates which considerably affects the overall voting percentage and voters' turnout. Studies suggest that simultaneous elections would emphatically rejuvenate voter turnout, enhance their maximum engagement in electoral process and strengthen democratic environment of nation.

### Concluding Observation

Effective synchronization requires strong legislative frameworks, an understanding of local differences, and adaptable administrative capabilities. Nonetheless, the challenges remain daunting. Proactively address political misgivings, particularly those of regional parties, to ensure no sector of the federation feels disenfranchised or overpowered. Effective administrative adaptation requires progressive experimentation, learning from pilots, and transparent evaluation, rather than coercive methods. There are opportunities to combine cost reductions with increased voter engagement, reduce election corruption, and promote pluralism. With proper use of technology, India's reforms could serve as a model for other large democracies worldwide. The confluence of numerous regional and linguistic identities that impact electoral dynamics characterizes India's intrinsically diversified political culture. These sub-national identities may first be subdued by the introduction of uniform electoral schedule. In fact, this has already resulted in an electoral landscape that prioritizes national concerns over regional ones. Although the concept encourages stability and a cohesive national approach to government, by coordinating state electoral cycles with federal elections, it also runs the risk of weakening state political independence. Synchronization may prioritize national storylines above state-specific issues, affecting the representation of regional interests in democratic discourse. The implementation of ONOE presents considerable constitutional and legal issues, including potential constitutional amendments related to articles commanding legislative term and dissolution of the Lower House.

Taking into account above factors, it is pertinent to aptly embrace Simultaneous Elections model in order to promote good governance. Accordingly, the Constitution of India does provide ample scope to initiate amendments and necessary structural change consistent with the shifting demands of time. It is imperative to engage all stakeholders to create a consensus to do away with regressive policy and expeditiously move forward to provide the best possible governance mechanism to serve the aspirations of billions of Indians.

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