



Reassessing simultaneous elections in India: Issues, challenges and prospects

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Abstract

Elections are a crucial part of any democratic political system. It allows citizens to exercise their political rights and hold responsible government. For sustaining democracy and fair exercise of voting rights, a transparent and fair electoral system must be maintained. Articles 324 to 329 of the Indian Constitution lays down a system which ensures conducting elections in a fair, independent, and credible way^[1]. India has periodically introduced electoral reforms in the past but the most recent electoral reform, under debate in contemporary times is “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE), or simultaneous elections, which would involve holding elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies together. Though India also practiced this system until 1967 but soon the cycle was disrupted by premature dissolutions of assemblies, resulting in asynchronous voting (HCL, 2024). The paper involves understanding the evolution of simultaneous election in India. Synchronised is practised in other countries like South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom, Philippines etc (kumar, 2025). Since these countries vary in institutional and political structure they have significant variation in its outcomes as well. Therefore the paper examines the 'One Nation, One Election' proposal in the context of India's constitutional and federal framework. The proposal puts several constitutional amendments therefore it would analyse the constitutional and legislative challenges involved in its implementation. Due to its several implications and feasibility, the proposal had triggered nationwide debate which, it has attracted both support. The paper analyses the constitutional, democratic and federal implications and how simultaneous elections affect centre state relations and autonomy of states. Political scientists and policy experts believe that simultaneous elections could reduce election expenditure, increase voter turnout, ease the burden of frequent polls, and allow governments to focus on long-term policymaking rather than continuous campaigning for political gains therefore the paper also involves examining these claims regarding the administrative efficiency and governance outcomes associated with simultaneous elections. The paper is based on secondary data including books, journal articles etc

Keywords: Federalism, simultaneous elections, electoral reforms, one nation one election, governance

Introduction

Historical Background

The idea of one nation one election (ONOE) is not new to the country. India has already practised the model of simultaneous elections before, at the time of independence. At present elections are held separately for all the tiers but in the first general election in 1951-1952 Lok Sabha and state assemblies were held together and it continued for some subsequent years in 1952, 1962 and 1967. However soon the early dissolution of certain State Assemblies in 1968, 1969 broke the cycle of synchrony. Further in 1970, the Fourth Lok Sabha dissolved naturally and fresh election held in 1971^[2]. By the 1970s, frequent use of Article 356 (President's Rule) and changing political dynamics further widened the gap between state and national election cycles. Historically, the simultaneous elections of the 1950s and 1960s had functioned under a political context of single-party dominance, with relatively limited federal fragmentation. But with the rise in coalition politics from the late 1960s onwards, the capacity to maintain synchrony was weakened subsequently. In the last decade, the idea has been revisited by multiple official bodies. Such as the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on law and justice (79th report, 2015)^[3], NITI Ayog analysis paper simultaneous elections (2017). The Law Commission on India draft report 2018 and most recent is the high level committee (Kovind committee, 2024), headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, to study and analyze the implementation and feasibility of one nation one election in India. Several recommendations of Kovind committee were

later incorporated in the proposed amendment bill and cited multiple rationale behind its adoption from administrative efficiency, governance consistency to economic development of the nation. The committee also cited the international motivation behind the reform and learning through global experience of countries with similar electoral systems and enhancing efficiency and transparency in the elections. It recommended conducting simultaneous elections in two phases. Firstly elections to Lok Sabha and state legislature would be synchronised and in the second phase the election to municipalities and panchayats would be synchronised with Lok Sabha and state legislature within 100 days (press information bureau, 2024). It was believed that building consensus over the proposal would be the biggest challenge though the one nation one election amendment bill could not be passed in the parliament but Recommendation of Kovind committee has received positive response. As per government data released by press information bureau (PIB, 2024), Around 80% public response from all corners of the country favoured the proposed reform. out of 47 political parties which submitted its response, 32 parties were in its favour citing the reason of resource usefulness and increase of social harmony and government benefits specially by BJP and allies while remaining 15 parties from opposition majorly INC argued for its undemocratic aspects, impact on the federal diversity. Erosion of the basic structure of the constitution and marginalization of regional interests and remaining 15 parties did not respond. (PIB, 2024).

One Nation One Election: Balancing Efficiency and Autonomy

One nation one election or simultaneous election can be defined as elections to Lok Sabha and State assembly to be held together in synchronised manner. According to Niti Ayog, simultaneous elections means “Structuring the Indian election Cycle in a manner that elections to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are synchronized together [4].” The idea was introduced to achieve administrative efficiency with a transparent electoral mechanism. However in any Political system reforms don't happen in isolation and have wider social, political and institutional consequences. In this context the two constitutional amendment Bills namely one nation one election- ‘129th constitutional amendment bill’ and ‘The union territories laws amendment bill’ (2024). which was introduced in the parliament intensified nationwide debate over its pros and cons along with impact on democratic and Federal principles [5]. The first bill proposed to insert 82A (1-7) to the constitution to align the terms of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha. as recommended by Kovind committee but If we analyse closely, the Kovind Committee itself is underrepresented because it has no representatives from states or regional parties (Mahajan,2025) [6]. So the question arises that when the body itself doesn't have adequate representation then to what extent the interest and issues of states would be highlighted and prioritised. The bill also amends article 83,172 where an election would be held only for unexpired term (the period between dissolution date and five years from date of meeting) for Lok Sabha and state assemblies respectively. While the second bill proposes to align tenure of union territories' legislative Assemblies with Lok Sabha and state assemblies it also necessitates amendment to some parts of the government of union territories act,1962,, national capital territory of Delhi act, 1991, and Jammu. Kashmir reorganization act 2019. Which means a series of amendments has to be made for facilitating the idea of ONOE. It also proposes amendment in article 327 to include conduct of synchronised election after delimitation of constituencies certainly expands parliament power over state legislature election. These following amendments though introduced with a purpose of administrative convenience. stability and efficiency however raises questions of shifting from the original vision of Indian constitution which quarantess central governance while maintaining maximum regional autonomy. Election and term of state assembly falls independently under the jurisdiction of state but the proposed amendment imbalances the constitutionally designed power structure. It promotes a centralised political system which gives extended powers to union over regional interests that would comprise States rights and autonomy. Further to reduce jurisdictional and administrative tension between union and centre seventh schedule has already been inserted in the Indian constitution which clearly demarcates legislative powers between the level of government.it ensures less political and legal dissent, balanced allocation of authority and preventing encroachment of one level of government into the jurisdiction of the other. Professor Dicey also argues that “federal State is a political contrivance Intended to reconcile

national unity and power with the maintenance of ‘state rights’ [7]. In a diverse and culturally complex society of India, any legislative decision which impacts the states must involve consultation of states because it directly impacts their autonomy.also when states perform independently within their jurisdiction rather than overlapping jurisdictional situation, it promotes better governance and fulfilment of regional interests. Moreover for maintaining political stability and efficiency adhering to basic and decentralised vision of the constitution is essential.

Why Simultaneous election?

Governance stability and policy continuity

Political stability and uninterrupted governance are necessary for overall growth and development of any country. One of the strongest rationale behind adoption of ONOE is enhancing stability and consistency in governance. Frequent election imposes model code of conduct (MCC) a guideline issued by election commission during elections which often halts new initiative. appointment, restrict developmental and welfare project, hampers decision making and policy implementation and thus, making states in constant “campaigning mode” that drives institutions away from governance and less in executive model. All such issues influence voters and encumber functions of government resulting in delayed policy and slow development. According to election commission data MCC was in force for around 676 days between 2019 -2024 Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections. This means governance is largely hampered for roughly 113 days every year due to MCC imposition [8]. Holding elections together would address this problem and help in, preventing policy paralysis by allowing governments to focus on long-term development, policies continuation and welfare goals rather than short-term electoral gains. Moreover the areas with less resources and amenities such as hilly regions and some northeast parts are often more disadvantaged in governance when MCC is implemented. Concurrent election would not only eliminate frequent imposition of MCC but also reduce costs incurred in frequent election by 30-35% which can be diverted to other development causes such as health, education and infrastructure development etc [9]. ONOE could foster greater cooperation between the Union and the States by aligning political calendars and from federal perspective When governments at both levels share a common timeline, they may find it easier to coordinate on national missions like health, education, or infrastructure. This reduces policy obstruction and promotes cooperative development, and allows govt to effectively utilise federal institutions like Niti Ayog, interstate councils and forums, gst councils particularly in those sectors which requires Centre-State collaboration. NITI Aayog 2017 paper [10]. ONOE would reduce interruptions, creating a more stable environment for long-term economic Planning. Business groups and economists have argued that frequently conducting elections could hamper investment policies while synchronized elections would allow states to pursue reforms without fear of sudden electoral shifts. It would build cooperative inter-state relations which could result in better economic outcomes.

Enforcement of Model Code of Conduct Each Year in India									
2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
Bihar	42 days	Assam	64 days	Goa	51 days	Meghalaya	43 days	Lok Sabha	82 days
NCT of Delhi	30 days	Kerala		Manipur		Nagaland		Andhra Pradesh	
		Puducherry		Punjab		Tripura		Arunachal Pradesh	
		Tamil Nadu		Uttarakhand		Chhattisgarh		Odisha	
		West Bengal		Uttar Pradesh		Madhya Pradesh		Sikkim	
			Gujarat	36 days	Mizoram	54 days	Jammu & Kashmir	52 days	
			Himachal Pradesh	62 days	Rajasthan		Haryana		
					Telangana				
Total	72 days	Total	64 days	Total	149 days	Total	97 days	Total	134 days

Note. Source: reprinted from Theme paper on “One Nation, One Election” by S. Chadah, 2024, Indian Institute of Public Administration (https://iipa.org.in/upload/Theme_Paper_2024)

Fig 1: showing imposition of model code of conduct every year in india

Rationale of elections expenditure and administrative streamlining

Holding elections in the world’s largest democracy in terms of population is a challenge in itself. It not only necessitates deployment of wide personnel, resource mobilization and utilisation but also necessitates availability of massive funds. Since elections in India are held every five years political parties both in Lok Sabha and vidhan Sabha election invests funds frequently in election campaigning, virtual publicity through social media platforms and applications, travel expenses etc. which may be or may not be massive but still can be utilised if elections are held simultaneously.. Moreover, conducting frequent elections also worries the parties to maintain the availability of funds and other financial contributions and investments. According to estimates by the Election Commission of India, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections alone cost over ₹60,000 crore, which is almost two times more than the expenditure incurred in 2014 election, while excluding all other indirect costs borne by the government in terms of deployment of police, teachers, and administrative machinery [11]. (Desai, 2020). Moreover election expenditure keeps on rising with very elections in country. Simultaneous elections would help in reducing the financial expenses incurred in election because it would minimize multiple reasons for spending money from deployment of manpower equipment to security of members and so on. Proponent also claim that separate state election expenses would also be reduced and approx. 35% budget of political parties which are funded in election publicity and campaign would be possibly reduced if Lok Sabha and vidhan Sabha election are held in line [12]. Some states are financially dependent on the Centre and huge amounts of funds invested in elections frequently could cost the welfare and development of people of a particular state because the state parties tries to compete with national parties. Reduction in election expenditure would aid in managing fiscal arrangement between union and states from increasing financial and resources allocation to states in terms of grants in aid, tax sharing and other financial incentives and assistance in collaborative projects like central sponsored schemes etc. Thus fostering economic growth of the country and strengthening fiscal federalism at both levels. Another merit of simultaneous elections is less engagement of security personnel, equipment and administrative staff. A huge number of institutions, mostly govt and private schools from across the nation are occupied as polling booths and government officials from teachers to

armed forces (CAPF, state police etc.) are deployed for prolonged periods of time. Evidence shows that employment of military officials have resulted in increased crime rates in post synchronised election while Employing teachers in large numbers results in their absenteeism in school, ultimately reducing the quality of educational institutions (HCL report, 2024, p.170). Estimates suggest that Lok Sabha election in 2019 which took nearly 75 days where approx. a crore of government official were engaged performing multiple task in election [13]. Such massive employment of officials frequently in elections rather than their own duty reduces governance consistency, something which is definitely unwanted and not suggested for the growth of the nation.And adopting ONOE reform would therefore allow govt officials to focus more on their primary roles rather than being busy in election related tasks.

Reducing Voter Fatigue and Enhancing Participation

Elections are celebrated as festivals in India where massive preparations are being made and frequent elections come with frequent political rallies which often disturbs citizens' daily routine and causes inconvenience from blocked roads during election campaigns, heavy noise pollution, and slow delivery of essential services and so on. Apart from these it also impacts the voters in many ways such as increased chances of voter confusion and voter fatigue which makes voters disinterested and lowers their enthusiasm by participating in elections frequently resulting in lower voter turnout and citizens' disengagement from the political process. Simultaneous elections would reduce such issues and enhance participation and political awareness of citizens as they would get the opportunity once in every five years. It would also promote the sense of collective decision making among the citizens. Moreover it ease the workload of government by preparing single electoral roll and single photo identity for consolidating voters information and reducing possibility of duplicate identities [13] higher voter turnout and engagement will strengthen democracy by enhancing voter quality and accurately representing the will of the people [14].The higher participation ensures the higher possibility of reflecting diverse voices from smaller states and marginalized groups which are included more consistently in the democratic process.It has also been postulated that ONOE would not undermine democratic and federal structure instead it could increase participation, strengthen social cohesion and national unity as it would Unite nation into a shared electoral process which aligns

leaders from state and centre. It would also reduce the occurrence of hatred speeches and false allegations and eliminate caste, religion and communal issues which is common during elections thus promoting cooperation and harmony in the society. (Niti Ayog report, 2017, p.15)

Implications and Challenges

Simultaneous elections may have certain advantages however wide range of experts have opposed the idea for many reasons for various reasons. Some of these drawbacks are indirect which influences voters, political parties, elections, and its hidden effects cannot be fixed directly through legal or constitutional methods and could be used as a strategy for securing political gains. As many leaders believed it as a politically motivated action aimed at benefitting the national parties over the regional parties. (Desai, 2020). While some of the electoral reforms in the past such as 73th 74th amendment has strengthened local representation and allowed states to have their distinct political identities within federal framework meanwhile the simultaneous election reform can threaten the interference in states autonomy. Impact of simultaneous elections on democratic and Federal structure are discussed below.

Constitutional perspective and the question of State Autonomy

Implementing ONOE poses procedural challenges especially in a democratic set up of India, where the first past the post system, supporting 50% majority rule in state and central election is practiced. If simultaneous election happens and if not all the states and central govt forms with full majority there is possibility of some parties make alliance government which can fall any time before^[15] thus, increasing chances of re-election for the entire nation.. moreover recognising diversity. not just between states, but also among regions, languages, cultures, and communities lies at the heart of Federalism. Political scientist and constitutional expert K.C. Wheare's classic theory of federalism emphasizes that federations thrive only when constituent units enjoy substantial autonomy in shaping their own political future. Indian constitution doesn't completely separate powers between union and State however state govt enjoys certain limits of autonomy and authority. Implementation of ONOE necessitates a series of constitutional amendments which is complex and challenging in practical. These amendments not only require the two-third-majority support of both Houses of Parliament but also ratification by at least half of the State Legislatures under Article 368^[16]. In terms of elections, article 324 (powers of election commission) needs to be expanded in its jurisdiction for smooth conduct of synchronised elections. Further, Article 327 read in conjunction with entry 72 in union list authorizes parliament to make laws in terms of union legislature, and article 328 read in conjunction with entry 37 authorities state to make laws for state legislature^[17], conducting elections for panchayats and municipalities is a state subject under 243K. 243ZA of the constitution. The simultaneous model would interfere in the jurisdiction of the state and would reduce state power and autonomy to enact laws regarding election to their respective assemblies. (Kumar, 2025). 83(2) and Article 172(1) describes, 5 year tenure of parliament and State Legislative Assemblies respectively. These can be dissolved only through procedure established by the constitution, and the extension of duration

of Lok Sabha and state assemblies can be made by parliament through a law but only in emergency cases. in case of simultaneous election any act of union govt to extend or curtail the tenure of assemblies would itself be an interference in jurisdiction of state autonomy, and would be considered as a misuse of power and undermining states governance. Some major opposition political parties have criticized the recommendations of the Kovind Committee on various points like imposing a curb on the 'no-Confidence motion' and acknowledging it as the threat to limited and democratic government. Moreover, representation of people act 1951 dealing with stability of tenure of parliament and assemblies would also need modification. Article 85(2) (b) of the Indian Constitution grants the power to legislative assemblies by the governor as mentioned under Article 174 (2) (b). In the continuation of existing provisions in the constitution, it is not possible to conduct simultaneous elections. As Karthikeyan, (2018) has argued that the exercise of simultaneous election will require extensive amendments to articles 83, 174 and 356 of the constitution^[18].

Socio-Political Factors Shaping voting behaviour

India is a diverse country with multiple cultural, political, and social identities. All these differences shape electoral behaviour, because voters often decide their preferences based on the issues that matter most to them. Their preferences in elections though not always but are shaped gradually through a psychological process, which often has deeper and long-lasting effects. At the national level or general election, voters are frequently influenced by the personality and charisma of the great leaders. The popularity of a central leader influences voting behaviour in both parliamentary and state assembly contests. History shows how the strong public image of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and JP Narayan had shaped voter choices. For example the "garibi hatao" slogan gave an edge to Indira ruled congress party in the 1971 election, the personality of Rajiv Gandhi during the 1984 election, the influence of JP Narayan in the 1977 election or the Modi wave in 2019 and so on^[19]. If simultaneous elections were to take place, there is a strong possibility that electoral debates and campaigning would be dominated by the heroism of such personalities. This not only increases the chances of vote polarization but also interferes with the free and fair exercise of voting rights. Beyond individual charisma, issues of national importance such as national security, foreign policy, economic performance, welfare schemes, and broad ideological narratives of development and nationalism often favour the stronger parties as these parties utilises various means and gets benefit of, greater access to social media and television advertisement, financial resources, and organizational muscle power, something which state small regional parties have limited access. These issues can be strategically used as a tool to secure electoral advantages, diverting public attention, sometimes overshadowing real development or governance concerns and manipulate voter perceptions. As per study by observer Research foundation (ORF, 2019), 77 % voters cast their vote for the same party at both national and state level, significantly favouring national parties and weakening regional voices and thus also influencing voting patterns at local level^[20].

In this digital era, the popular issues which dominate public discourse are widespread easily while less discussed topics are marginalized and ignored. In India general or national level election campaigning are far more extravagant and lavish than the state campaign. Due to this financial gap, limited resources state are not able to compete with national parties in election which not only lowers state capacity to attract voters but also reduces the possibilities of appearance of local policies and issues. Consequently, state-level priorities have the risk of being side lined, directly shaping voter preferences in favour of central narratives. The Law Commission's 2018 draft report also echoed these fears, noting that simultaneous elections could blur voter priorities and allow national issues to dominate, turning states into extensions of central political moods rather than autonomous political space.

The challenge becomes worse further with widespread political illiteracy^[21]. As per census of India 2011 Nearly 65–70% of India's population lives in rural areas and it is generally believed that voters in these regions have passive political awareness and often rely merely on party symbols, campaign slogans, prejudiced and stereotyped arguments and intuitions. Neither they cast their votes on the basis of policies nor have they detailed understanding of institutions. For many, even terms such as Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha remain unfamiliar and are difficult for them to comprehend. And if the citizens are asked to vote for multiple positions on the same day in their constituencies, they may get confused easily, this reduces the quality of their choices and also impedes their right of right to vote. This trend risks turning India's twolevel system of accountability(national and state) into a single decision dominated by central narratives, thereby weakening the federal spirit and leaving very little space for state-specific voices.

Undermining regional parties and region priorities

Though the High level committee (2024), stated, simultaneous election is beneficial for highlighting regional issues to the national arena, but this is not supported by many studies. Regional parties focus on regional and local issues such as agricultural policies in agrarian states like Punjab, industrial autonomy in Gujarat or regional autonomy in states like Assam and Jammu and Kashmir^[22], would be relegated background, at the same time the right to protect regional and cultural distinctiveness, pluralism under the model of asymmetrical Federalism such as article 371A for Nagaland (protecting customary law and ownership of land and resources), Article 371F for Sikkim (preserving its old laws and rights), and the Sixth Schedule for tribal areas of the Northeast (granting autonomous councils). Would be severely impacted in the long run if Lok Sabha and vidhan Sabha elections are held alongside. ONOE would not only overshadow local issues but also benefit national parties in terms of securing votes. Much evidence shows that the majority of voters tend to vote for the same party when elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha are held simultaneously or within a gap within six months of holding the latter election. Voters tend to vote for the same party in the Assembly election for which they had voted during the Lok Sabha election. In some exceptions, national parties are in an advantageous position and the dominant regional parties also enjoy this advantage but smaller regional parties are impacted. If simultaneous elections are held, Indian politics will come to be dominated by the national parties. A

few regional parties and many smaller regional parties will disappear, as the people's voting choices would largely be influenced by how parties are likely to play a role in national politics. Holding simultaneous elections would expand the dominance of national parties along with slow and gradual shrinking of the political space for regional parties^[23], and if the idea of "One Nation, One Election" had truly ensured smooth governance and met the diverse regional needs of India, the Congress Party which ruled in both at the Centre and in many states during the 1960s neither would have witnessed the dramatic setbacks of 1967 nor the phase of regional parties would have begun which gave the voice to state specific needs thus. Simultaneous polls in the past have shown that a uniform electoral structure of reform cannot resolve the complexities of India's federal structure, where regional diversity ú local needs remain equally important.

Regional parties act as a check and balance against the concentration of power into a single party or unit and increase accountability. When elections are held frequently citizens get more chances for holding the government accountable. To one extent regionalism can threaten the federal principle of nation by challenging unity and harmony across nations but looking another way it also provides vital platforms for regional parties to articulate state specific concerns. For instance Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Telugu Desam party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh originated from Dravidian movement therefore is known for securing cultural linguistic identities of South Indian people, setting an example of a nation with unity in diversity.. State level parties safeguard regional interest and exert influence on national politics by forming coalitions with national parties.. United progressive Alliance (UPA), and National democratic alliance (NDA) are significant examples showing the importance of regional parties in shaping national politics^[24]. The nuisances of local issues are more known to regional parties than the national parties. Holding simultaneous elections might ignore these elementary issues which are necessary for state development and preservation of pluralism. It could also reduce States bargaining power as the powerful party at the state would not be able to influence in the coalition politics and when a powerful state party cannot influence in coalition govt. it automatically weakens the possibility of electoral federalism and impedes the state from pushing forward their local concerns. Many states and Union Territories today lack strong financial resources and therefore depend on the Centre for welfare and development. Jointly sponsored schemes between the Union and the states, especially in the North East region, have helped highlight local concerns and ensure more inclusive growth. However, if state governance is influenced and state autonomy is curtailed and regional issues are consistently side lined, it could also weaken the cooperative spirit of federalism. it not only risks creating friction between the Centre and the states but also undermines the principle of balanced development.

Conclusion

From time to time reform in rules and laws are natural and is expected to address the challenges in the society. Remembering India's vision to be developed economy by 2047 it is crucial to bring institutional and structural reforms which triggers countries development and maintain political stability.if one Look at the overall proposal of one nation

one election, it is found that there are many compelling reasons for its adoption, such as misinterpretation of MCC, obstruction in policies implementation, election expenses. resource mobilising and so on however, arguments against its adoption cannot be undermined. Among all the challenges the most significant highlighted by many are its anti-federal and anti-democratic elements which can directly and indirectly impact the overall constitutional based federal and democratic structure of nation. Restricting state jurisdiction and autonomy through constitutional amendment to manipulating regional agendas over national issues could have unprecedented results which is not favourable for centre state relations in the long run. Some structural transformation can make the proposal of ONOE better for implementing within India's political landscape and also for keeping federal principles into consideration. As the proposal needs wider support and acceptance from the majority of states and considering the Indian framework, a more close analysis for its pros and cons would be needed along with some space for other alternatives such as phased election or staggered elections because at the end the top most priority for all the stakeholders in the country is to preserve the constitutional and democratic values.

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