

The One Nation, One Election Proposal: Constitutional and Political Perspectives

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Abstract

The simultaneous elections of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies under the concept One Nation One Election (ONOE) is a key electoral reform proposal in India. The proposal aims to rectify the issues of frequent electoral cycle, increasing election expenditure, administrative burden, and the lapse in governance. This study looks at the concept of synchronized elections on a comparative and analytical framework with the specific focus of the Indian context and taking lessons from the global experience. It looks at the election system in countries that conduct simultaneous and/or partially synchronized elections and evaluates its impact on India's democratic and federal system. The study pinpoints a number of possible benefits of ONOE, such as, lower election costs, better administrative efficiency, more policy continuity, and less voter fatigue. In parallel, it identifies key issues like constitutional changes, federal issues, logistical problems and potential marginalisation of regional issues. International experience shows that synchronizing elections can enhance the electoral efficiency but it is essential to have institutional preparedness and political consensus for the successful conduct of these elections.

Keywords: *Lok Sabha; ONOE; elections; administrative efficiency; constitutional changes; federal issues; political consensus etc.*

Introduction

Elections play a crucial role in representative democracy as it is a way for citizens to exercise their voice in electing leaders. Regular elections help to make the government accountable and legitimate in a parliamentary democracy. However, the predictability of elections has been criticised for leading to high costs for government and a lack of government and the unbroken control of political machines. It has led to debates on electoral reforms, particularly in India, where the elections are conducted at different times in different parts of the country (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2023).

The concept of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) has been expanding as a key theme in electoral reforms in this context. A single electoral cycle is all the Lok Sabha and all the State Legislative Assemblies are held simultaneously and known as the ONE. The supporters think that this would result in decreased expenditure on elections, increased efficiency in administration and continuity of policies, while others cite problems of federalism, constitutional amendments and representation of concerns at the regional level (Law Commission of India, 2018).

It's not a new concept in India. The election for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies was held simultaneously till 1967 but some of the State Assemblies and Lok Sabha were dissolved prematurely and hence two electoral schedules were issued (NITI Aayog, 2017). The study in this paper takes a comparative and analytical approach to the issue of ONE in this context, and examines its benefits, challenges and experiences abroad. It also assesses the

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possibility of the implementation of ONOE in India without compromising a democratic accountability and federal balance.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is based on the principles of representative democracy and electoral governance. One of the means of achieving political legitimacy and accountabilities is by voting; in representative democracy citizens elect representatives to act on their behalf in making decisions. Citizen participation, political equality, and opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision-making are essential to democratic governance as Dahl (1998) argues. Electoral accountability enables voters to assess the performance of governments, as well as to hold them accountable. As a result, any plans to change the electoral timetables, even ONOE, have consequences for democratic representation and citizen participation. The first issue that needs to be debated is whether elections should be simultaneous or staggered. Electoral cycle year refers to simultaneous elections, which are elections at the national and state levels that occur during the same year; the elections are staggered when they occur at different times at the end of the legislative term. The supporters of synchronized elections say that they reduce administrative costs, electoral fatigue, and increase citizens' participation, while the critics say that staggered elections provide more opportunities for citizens to appraise and respond to the government through democratic means (Lijphart, 2012).

The democratic efficiency theory emphasizes the importance of low administrative and financial expenses and effective government. In this way, simultaneous elections may result in better continuity of policies and less resources spent on electoral activities which are replicated over time (Norris 2014). Similarly, the theory of political stability says that frequent elections can help promote government stability and effective policymaking. However, the theory of federalism is not a desirable one for the impact of ONOE on the Indian federalism. According to Riker (1964), the main advantage of a federal system is that it serves as a protection for regional autonomy through the sharing of power between the national and subnational levels. Some critics feel that parallel elections will weaken regional political problems, and reinforce national parties in favour of regional parties.

The theory of electoral behaviour also takes into account the timing of the elections in voters' decisions. Because of the different political issues involved, voters may have different attitudes toward national and regional elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). If there are simultaneous elections, national issues and party leadership can have a greater impact on voting and can dwarf local issues. The four concepts on democratic efficiency, political stability, federalism and electoral behaviour theories presented the overall framework for ONOE. There are perspectives that emphasize on administrative efficiency and governance benefits and there are perspectives that emphasize on representation at the regional level, autonomy of the voter and democratic accountability in determining the feasibility of synchronized elections in India.

'One Nation One Election: Global Perspective'.

Synchronized elections have been seen in a number of democratic countries across the globe and there are valuable lessons that can be taken while considering the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) in India. Other nations, such as South Africa, Sweden, Indonesia and Belgium, have a co-ordinated electoral schedule for elections at various levels of government. The elections in South Africa are held every 5 years and the benefit is that the elections are less costly and more effective but it is observed that issues of national elections are more noticeable than those of provinces (Reynolds, 1999). Similarly, the Swedish national elections, regional elections, and municipal elections are held simultaneously every four years, enhancing voter turnout and administration efficiency (Lijphart, 2012). Indonesia has also adopted parallel elections to reduce election fatigue and boost democratic engagement, elections for the president and the legislature are conducted at the same time. Its experience indicates however that the logistical challenges that arise when attempting to run large scale elections in a geographically dispersed country exist (Mietzner, 2020). Belgium also has a coordinated electoral system, however, it is not yet clear how the various (national and regional) government levels can balance each other out (Deschouwer, 2020).

Other countries, like Germany, the U.S. and Australia, have systems of partial synchronization instead. The elections in Germany are federal and state elections, so the state politics are separated from one another, and the federal politics are kept stable (Patzelt, 2018). Unlike national elections, state and local elections are not as standard,

and they are more difficult to administer (Wattenberg 2015). Most elections in Australia are at the federal and state level, and have become more common in line with the federal nature of the government; there is also the objective of providing representation at the regional level which comes at a higher administrative cost and more frequent elections (Galligan, 2017).

The experiences indicate that the synchronization of elections may be cost efficient, convenient for administration, continuity of policy and voter fatigue. At the same time, they must possess a strong institutional ability and efficient logistical management. Examples of the need for the protection of regional autonomy and political diversity are also provided by federal countries. From these examples several lessons can be drawn, clarity of the Constitution, administrative readiness, good electoral institutions, and political consensus are crucial for the implementation of simultaneous elections. The experiences of the countries indicate that synchronized elections potentially can improve the efficiency of governance, but that depends on the country's constitutional structure, institutional development, and political acceptance. The lessons are especially pertinent for Indian context to determine feasibility of enacting the policies of One Nation, One Election.

Reforms in Elections in India over the Years

The journey of the concept of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) goes back to early days of Indian elections. The first four general elections (1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967) to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were held on the same day since the day of the Constitution's adoption. Synchronisation of the electoral cycle helped promote political stability, efficiency of election administration and the decrease in election expenditure. Elections can be held concurrently, as Parliament and most State legislatures are to expire, that means that governments have more time to get their job of government and development done without too many interruptions (NITI Aayog, 2017; Election Commission of India, 1983).

From 1967, however, the synchronized system started to be brought to an end by political turmoil and early dissolution of some State Assemblies in 1968 and 1969. There was a gap in the normal electoral cycle because of the dissolving of the 4th Lok Sabha in 1970. Coalition politics, formation of regional parties, frequent occurrence of President's Rule under Article 356 led to a fragmentation of the election schedules. This paved the way for a gradual electoral system which was adopted in India and included holding elections at various levels and at various times in various States (Law Commission of India, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2017).

The concept of simultaneous elections got a boost from the recommendations of the Election Commission of India, the Law Commission of India, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution and the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog). These bodies have stated that regular elections are costly and have an impact on governance. It further gained momentum when the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections was set up in 2023 with the former President Ram Nath Kovind as the Chairman. The committee's 2024 report suggested a gradual process, and recommended constitutional changes to enable simultaneous elections. While supporters see ONOE as a way of improving the efficiency of governance and lower costs, issues of federalism, constitutional changes and political consensus still play a role in discussions about the implementation of ONOE in India.

The One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is one of the arguments that have been put forward for a decrease in expenditure during elections. The two rounds of separate polling for Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies lead to high expenditures in recruiting polling personnel, electronic voting machine (EVM), transportation, security, election management etc. multiple rounds of polling also cost political parties a lot of money. The supporters say that the duplicated elections would be costly and that the public resources could be used more efficiently with sync'd elections. The NITI Aayog report (2017) and the Law Commission of India report (2018) imply that simultaneous elections would help save the government money and cut down on the deployment of security forces multiples times. ONOE will also be expected to increase the efficiency of administration, by eliminating the recurrent government officials' manpower at election related tasks, including teachers and security personnel. This would help the administrative institutions and government to focus more on governance, public service and developmental activity.

Another significant advantage can be associated with ONOE that refers to promoting governance continuity and political stability. At the present scenario it can create a lull in policy making and development projects during the election period, when the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) takes place. In case simultaneous elections were to be held, the disruptions will be minimal and the governments can concentrate on long-term planning and execution of long-term policies (Law Commission of India, 2018). One other gain that supporters can connect with a synchronised election system is that it will eradicate the tradition of endless marketing of the election and election politics, which will allow governments to take more durable positions on policy and improve stability. A timeline for elections can help in providing continuity in governance and good economic planning (NITI Aayog, 2017).

One more significant benefit for ONOE, said supporters, is that it will alleviate "voter fatigue" and voting will be more convenient. The frequent elections allow for national, state and local elections where people have to go to polling stations again and again, which can lead to a decrease in enthusiasm and participation over time. The electoral process would be more convenient and efficient if there were a set of elections at the same time so that the voters could vote for more levels of government at the same time. Thus, issues of cost saving, administrative efficiency, continuity in governance, peacefulness in politics and people's convenience are few of the most talked-about electoral reforms in India today, which are the core aspects of ONOE.

One Nation One Election (ONOE), however, has a number of concerns under the constitution and federal law, but it also has a number of benefits. According to article 83 of the Indian Constitution, Lok Sabha's term is defined and according to article 172 of the Indian Constitution, the term of the State Legislative Assemblies is defined, both can be dissolved prior to the end of their term as per articles 85 and 174 respectively. Thus, implementation of ONOE would demand significant constitutional changes and a wide political acceptance (Law Commission of India, 2018). Those changes could have an impact on the flexibility of the parliamentary system, critics say. Also, there are questions around the federalism issue because the chances of synchronized elections could allow the emphasis on the stories of the national political scene to become more prominent and regional issues become less important. State elections tend to be more local and ONOE can potentially tip the balance of power between the Centre and the states, and make regional parties less influential in a diverse Federal democracy like India (Riker, 1964).

Another significant criticism is about democratic accountability, and the nationalisation of state concerns. There are periodic elections in which people can evaluate governments and make their political decision. Elections are important mechanisms for accountability and they are held staggered, thus ensuring continuous democratic participation (Dahl, 1998). Some critics have said that simultaneous elections would strip the voters of an opportunity to give feedback on elections and would result in an increased influence of the national leaders and party images on the state elections. Research also has found a "coattail effect," in which national political trends can be so influential that they mask local issues and concerns, and affect the quality of democratic representation (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

In addition, there are logistical and political obstacles for ONOE. This would make the elections a one of the more complicated electoral processes in the world because of the need for a large number of EVMs, VVPATs, polling officials and security guards, (Election Commission of India, 2023). Coordinating measures need to be put in place to ensure smooth implementation of Electoral Institutions and Government Agencies. First the proposal must be approved by the national party and the regional party, with some regional parties having conflicting ideas on the reform. Furthermore, there are still unanswered questions on how the government collapse and early elections of Parliament will be managed. In the meantime, ONOE offers the prospect of administrative efficiency and lower costs, but has a variety of constitutional, democratic, logistical and political challenges.

The Constitution and the Law in India

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is intricately linked with the Indian Constitution. Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly are to be elected for five years as per Article 83 and 172 respectively, but can be dissolved before the tenure even ends as per Article 85 and 174 respectively. The President's Rule can also be invoked in the states under exceptional circumstances as provided in Article 356. Independent electoral cycles and premature dissolution of legislatures are allowed under these provisions, thus making it impossible to put in place synchronized elections without major constitutional amendments (Law Commission of India, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2017). The

existing parliamentary set-up is intended to deal with political changes and shifts in majority, which poses a constitutional challenge with regard to electoral synchronization.

To this end, a few recommendations have been made for various reforms including a constructive vote of no-confidence, the adoption of a fixed tenure system for the Parliament and State Assemblies and the strong amendments in the law to prevent premature dissolution of legislatures for the sake of ONOE. A positive vote of no confidence would make it possible to remove a government only when a new government is in place with a majority of its members, thus ensuring political stability. The Law Commission of India (2018) has pointed out that such modifications would require alterations in the Constitution, as well as in some cases the constitutional amendments in the states, because of the effect that this would have on the federal system.

Judicial examination is another significant factor to be taken into account in the ONOE case. Now, with the introduction of simultaneous elections, the Supreme Court would be called upon to examine the case in light of the Basic Structure Doctrine of the *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973) case. Federalism and democracy have been recognised as being part of the fundamental structure of the Constitution and any reform needs to ensure that the features of federalism and democracy are maintained. The weight of the state and federal government can be preserved with the right safeguards for democratic accountability and autonomy, according to the supporters of ONOE, but critics argue that ONOE would hurt state powers and the federal system. Therefore, constitutional amendments alone would not suffice to make ONOE viable; it has to be in tune with the constitutional values and federal system of India.

Feasibility Model

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) will be the primary step towards synchronisation of Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections. The full simultaneous election model is for simultaneous elections of all national and state elections in the same electoral cycle. This is the approach that will provide maximum benefits in terms of cost savings, administrative efficiency, less deployment of security forces and less disruption due to the Model Code of Conduct. This, however, is the most difficult one as it will necessitate the amendment of the Constitution and a regulatory mechanism to deal with premature dissolution of government in addition to changing legislative terms (NITI Aayog, 2017; Law Commission of India, 2018).

One alternative is the bi-phasic electoral system, where elections take place following a split into two sets of polls, one every two and a half years. This is seen as more practical as it decreases the number of elections, but also offers flexibility of implementation. It does offer some benefits though as costs will remain, administrative deployment and disruption of the electoral process will take place, but in a lower order in the absence of this (NITI Aayog, 2017).

The third one is a synthesis or transition synchronisation model that aims at reaching the synchronisation over time via a transitional process. This could include the extension or reduction of the term of office of some State Assemblies and the creation of ways to prevent them from being out of sync if some are dissolved early. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (2024) has suggested a phased way of implementation. With the political landscape of India where gradual synchronization is likely to be the most feasible step to achieving ONOE, many feel that this is the way forward, given its political developments, federalism and constitutional structure.

Impact Assessment

One Nation One Election (ONOE) will impact the economy and politics with far reaching consequences. The proponents feel that the government, political parties and public institutions would have to make only one time investment in all the arrangements, security personnel, transportation, election management, etc. which would lead to reduction in expenditure on elections (NITI Aayog, 2017; Law Commission of India, 2018). Less frequent elections can also help in enhancing the productivity by minimizing disruptions due to election obligations and the frequent implementation of the Model Code of Conduct. At the political level, ONOE can contribute to shaping political strategies: through unified campaigns and strengthening political stability. There were also arguments that simultaneous elections can strengthen national level parties and affect the workings of regional level parties and in the Indian political system of federalism, coalition formation (Lijphart, 2012).

In terms of society, ONEEs can facilitate citizens' convenience in casting their votes in multiple elections during a single election period. This can help to reduce fatigue among voters and increase voter participation. But the evidence suggests that voters might be more inclined toward national than regional issues, which might affect democratic representation (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). On an administrative level, simultaneous elections would also help to save the time and strain of the Election Commission of India and government officials in having to send officials, teachers and security personnel repeatedly. The implementation of ONOE would require huge investments in infrastructure, EVMs, VVPATs, and logistics coordination (Election Commission of India, 2023).

Beyond electoral scheduling at large, the influence of ONOE is seen. While the idea has been promoted for its cost savings, its efficiency in fulfilling governance tasks, and its convenience to the voters, its long-term effects on political representation and democratic participation and on federal balance remain uncertain. For the ultimate success of ONOE it will be important to see how it is designed and implemented in the democratic and constitutional set-up of India.

It is also possible to hold co-ordinated elections, as in Sweden, South Africa and Indonesia, where co-ordinated electoral schedules have facilitated the administrative efficiency of elections and reduced the electoral cost (Lijphart, 2012; Mietzner, 2020). The administrative advantages that One Nation, One Election (ONOE) would provide, like reducing election costs, the involvement of the government machinery and security forces in the process of elections, and the disruptions to governance through repeated elections, also appear to be a set of key advantages (NITI Aayog, 2017; Law Commission of India, 2018). But unlike various other nations conducting synchronized elections, India has some unique constitutional and Federal problems stemming from the independent electoral cycles, premature dissolution of legislatures and protection of federal autonomy.

Amongst the other significant results is that political consensus continues to be the biggest impediment to ONE. There has never been a political consensus about the need for reform, and there are varying proposals from the government for synchronisation. Especially regional parties are still concerned about the risk of the marginalisation of the regional interest and issues at the state level. The study also indicates that the constitutional changes and administrative preparations for the changes will not be sufficient to implement the reform without the participation of political actors and the attitude of the population towards the reform.

There is a strong emphasis on efficiency, but not to the detriment of democracy. Further, the accountability and political pluralism and representation of the regions (Dahl 1998) and governance continuity are to be preserved in addition to the cost saving. The experiences of elections across the world also show that the use of clear electoral laws, robust institutions and processes and tools to manage political disturbances are key to facilitating the effective coordination of electoral events. Their pragmatic approach appears to be more suited to India than the instant synchronisation throughout the country as this can be achieved slowly, and in a consensual and constitutional manner. Therefore, to keep ONEO running will take an optimum mix of efficiency, federalism and democratic accountability and political consensus.

Conclusion

This study not only confirms that the idea of One Nation One Election (ONOE) is not novel but the practice of elections is also not untouched. In the early days after independence India was able to conduct simultaneous elections, others such as Sweden, South Africa and Indonesia are also able to do that. In the years that have come and gone, simultaneous elections have proven to be efficient in administration, cost-effective in electoral spending, continuity of government and decrease of voter fatigue if accompanied by robust institutions and constitutional frameworks (Lijphart, 2012; Mietzner, 2020) worldwide. In the Indian context, the federal nature of India, the staggered electoral cycles, political diversity at regional level and the potential of early restructuring and change in the government pose challenge (Law Commission of India, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2017).

The study also shows that electoral synchronisation is not enough for the successful implementation of ONOE. A number of preconditions must exist such as broad political acceptance and good administrative prearrangements and extensive constitutional protection. Any reform must provide for the accountability of government in a democratic manner and for federalism, as well as for practical issues such as the length of legislative

terms and political instability. A lack of cooperation between political parties, state governments and electoral institutions means that ONOE cannot be implemented.

If implemented and executed step-by-step and well-designed, ONOE can be beneficial in terms of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the governance in the use of public resources as a long-term prospect. But long-term success will depend on a balance between efficiency and democracy. Therefore, the discussion on ONOE should not just be about electoral reform but an addition to the discussion of the improvement of the democratic system in the constitutional and federal framework of the Indian state.

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