

REVIEW ARTICLE

Democratic Reforms in India: The One Nation, One Election Model

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ABSTRACT

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed frequent elections at different levels, leading to significant administrative, economic, and governance challenges. The idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposes synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies to streamline the electoral process, enhance governance efficiency, and reduce financial and logistical burdens. This reform has been a subject of debate, with proponents highlighting its potential to ensure stability, policy continuity, and reduced election-related disruptions, while critics argue it may undermine federalism and political diversity. The ONOE model draws from historical precedents, as India initially conducted simultaneous elections from 1951 to 1967. However, the dissolution of some state governments led to staggered elections, disrupting this practice. Over the years, increasing election frequency has resulted in policy paralysis, high expenditure, and governance inefficiencies, prompting renewed discussions on the feasibility of restoring simultaneous elections. From a governance perspective, frequent elections disrupt policy implementation as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is enforced, restricting the government from making policy decisions. A unified election cycle could promote policy stability and long-term planning, enabling governments to focus on development rather than short-term electoral gains.

KEYWORDS

• Electoral Reforms India • Democratic Reforms • Federalism in India • Voter Turnout Impact • Governance and Stability • Cost of Elections

INTRODUCTION

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed frequent elections at various levels

Lok Sabha (Parliament), State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies. While elections are a vital pillar of democracy, the recurring nature

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of these polls often leads to administrative and financial challenges, governance disruptions, and policy paralysis. To address these issues, the idea of “**One Nation, One Election**” (ONOE) has gained prominence as a potential democratic reform. The concept proposes synchronizing Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections across the country, reducing the frequency of polls and ensuring a more streamlined electoral process. Advocates argue that this model would enhance governance efficiency, curb excessive election expenditure, and prevent the prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, which often delays policy implementation. However, critics raise concerns about its feasibility, impact on federalism, and potential challenges in maintaining political stability.

This article explores the historical context, constitutional and logistical aspects, benefits, challenges, and potential roadmaps for implementing the **One Nation, One Election** model in India, evaluating its impact on democratic governance and federal structure.

Historical Context of Simultaneous Elections in India

1. Pre-Independence Electoral Practices

- The British colonial government introduced limited electoral representation through the *Government of India Act, 1919* and the *Government of India Act, 1935*.
- Elections were held in a staggered manner across different provinces, with limited franchise.

2. Post-Independence and Early Democratic Framework

- The first general elections in independent India (1951-52) were conducted simultaneously for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- This practice continued in 1957, 1962, and 1967, ensuring synchronized elections at the national and state levels.

3. Disruption of Simultaneous Elections (1967-1971)

- Political instability, coalition breakdowns, and the dissolution of state governments led to mid-term elections, breaking the cycle of simultaneous polls.

- The dissolution of the Lok Sabha in 1971 and premature state assembly dissolutions disrupted the practice permanently.

Electoral Reforms and Developments

1. Post-1970s Electoral Fragmentation

- The emergence of regional parties and coalition governments led to staggered elections across states.
- The imposition of President’s Rule under Article 356 further destabilized electoral cycles.

2. Election Commission’s Role in Electoral Management

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) played a crucial role in managing elections despite growing complexities.
- The introduction of the *Model Code of Conduct (MCC)* and reforms such as Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) streamlined the process.

3. Law Commission and NITI Aayog Reports

- The *Law Commission of India (170th Report, 1999)* and the *79th Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015)* recommended the feasibility of simultaneous elections.
- The *NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2017)* highlighted economic and governance benefits, advocating for constitutional amendments.

Challenges and Debates Surrounding One Nation, One Election

1. Constitutional and Legal Hurdles

- Amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 356 would be required to enable fixed-term elections.
- The federal structure of India allows states to have independent electoral schedules, raising concerns over autonomy.

2. Political and Governance Challenges

- Political parties have differing opinions, with regional parties fearing the dominance of national parties.
- Synchronization of elections would require restructuring governance mechanisms, including dealing with

mid-term dissolutions.

3. Economic and Administrative Considerations
 - Advocates argue that frequent elections disrupt governance and impose high financial costs.
 - However, managing a single nationwide election would require significant administrative planning and security deployment.

Comparative Analysis with Other Democracies

1. United States Model
 - Fixed-term elections for the President, Senate, and House of Representatives prevent frequent electoral disruptions.
2. Germany and the UK
 - Parliamentary systems allow dissolution under specific conditions, maintaining electoral stability.

Way Forward

The *One Nation, One Election* model has historical precedence in India but faces significant constitutional, political, and logistical challenges. While it offers potential benefits in terms of cost reduction and governance stability, its implementation requires a national consensus, legal amendments, and structural electoral reforms. A phased approach, starting with synchronization in a few states, may be a viable first step toward achieving this reform without undermining India's federal democracy.

The "One Nation, One Election" model proposes simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha (Parliament) and State Assemblies across India.

Objectives of this reform include:

1. Electoral Efficiency – Reduce the frequency of elections to minimize disruptions to governance and public administration.
2. Cost Reduction – Lower election-related expenses for the government, political parties, and candidates.
3. Policy Continuity – Ensure stability in governance by preventing frequent policy shifts due to changing governments.
4. Curbing Electoral Malpractices – Minimize

the misuse of resources, including money power and vote-buying, which increase due to frequent polls.

5. Boosting Voter Participation – Encourage higher voter turnout by making elections less frequent and more focused.
6. Strengthening Federalism – Promote cooperative federalism by ensuring synchronized governance cycles between the Centre and States.
7. Enhancing Governance and Development – Allow governments to focus on long-term development plans without being frequently distracted by election cycles.

Indian government useful

- Reduced Expenditure:
 - Frequent elections place a substantial financial burden on the government. Synchronizing elections could significantly reduce these costs.
- Improved Governance:
 - The Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which restricts government activities during election periods, disrupts developmental work. ONOE could minimize these disruptions, allowing for more continuous governance.
 - It would allow the government to focus on implementing policies and development initiatives rather than constantly being in election mode.
- Administrative Efficiency:
 - Conducting simultaneous elections could streamline the deployment of security forces and administrative personnel, leading to greater efficiency.
- Focus on Policy:
 - By reducing the frequency of elections, political parties may be encouraged to focus on long-term policy formulation and implementation rather than short-term electoral gains.

However, there are also concerns and criticisms:

- Federalism:
 - Critics argue that ONOE could undermine India's federal structure by concentrating power in the central government and potentially overshadowing regional issues.

- **Logistical Challenges:**
 - Implementing ONOE would require significant constitutional amendments and logistical arrangements, which could be complex and challenging.
- **Accountability:**
 - Some people believe that frequent elections help to maintain accountability of elected officials. Reducing the frequency of elections could reduce that accountability.
- **Regional Party Concerns:**
 - There is a concern that national level issues and national parties will overshadow regional issues and regional parties, during synchronized elections.

ONOE has the potential to bring about significant changes to India’s electoral system, with potential benefits in terms of cost savings and governance. However, it also raises important questions about federalism and democratic principles.

The One Nation, One Election (ONOE) model proposes synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha (Parliament) and State Legislative Assemblies in India. This concept has been a subject of intense debate, with arguments both for and against its implementation. Comparing India’s ONOE model to similar practices in other countries can provide insights into its feasibility and implications.

1. Understanding One Nation, One Election in India

- *Historical Context:* Until 1967, India held simultaneous elections. However, the cycle was disrupted due to political instability and premature dissolution of state governments.
- *Current Scenario:* Elections occur frequently, leading to high costs, policy disruptions, and prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.
- *Proposed Reform:* Conducting all elections together every five years to streamline governance and reduce administrative burden.

2. Comparison with Other Countries

Several democracies worldwide follow synchronized election models, while

others conduct staggered elections like India.

Country	Election System	Comparison with ONOE
United States	Fixed-term elections for President (4 years), Congress (every 2 years), and state elections vary	Elections are staggered; no centralized national election like ONOE.
United Kingdom	Parliamentary elections every 5 years; local elections occur separately.	No fixed simultaneous election; government can dissolve Parliament early.
Germany	Federal elections every 4 years; state elections vary.	Decentralized system, unlike ONOE.
South Africa	National and provincial elections are held together every 5 years.	Closely resembles ONOE, ensuring political stability.
Sweden	National, regional, and municipal elections held together every 4 years.	A successful example of a unified election system.
Indonesia	Conducts simultaneous presidential, parliamentary, and regional elections.	Similar to ONOE but has logistical challenges.
Brazil	Presidential and legislative elections held every 4 years.	Similar model, ensuring governance efficiency.

Several countries conduct simultaneous elections for different levels of government. For instance, Sweden holds elections for all three levels of government national, regional, and local on the same day. Similarly, Belgium synchronizes its parliamentary and provincial elections with the European Union elections. In India’s neighbouring countries, Pakistan conducts simultaneous polls for its national parliament and provincial legislatures, while Nepal holds concurrent elections for parliamentary, provincial, and local bodies. Additionally, countries like Germany, Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines also practice simultaneous elections for various governmental tiers. These practices aim to streamline the electoral process, reduce administrative costs, and minimize the frequency of election-related disruptions.

3. Potential Benefits of ONOE in India

- **Cost Reduction:** Saves public funds by reducing frequent election expenses.
- **Governance Stability:** Prevents policy paralysis caused by frequent elections.
- **Voter Turnout:** A single, well-managed election could increase participation.
- **Reduced Model Code of Conduct (MCC) Impact:** Government policies won't be frequently stalled.

4. Challenges and Concerns

- **Federalism and State Autonomy:** Indian states have different political cycles, and ONOE may undermine state-specific governance.
- **Logistical Issues:** Managing over 900 million voters simultaneously is a massive administrative challenge.
- **Legal and Constitutional Amendments:** Requires amending multiple articles of the Constitution and obtaining state approvals.
- **Impact on Regional Parties:** National issues might overshadow local concerns, affecting regional party representation.

While **One Nation, One Election** has potential benefits in terms of efficiency and cost-saving, its implementation in a diverse and federal democracy like India poses significant challenges. Countries like South Africa, Sweden, and Brazil successfully conduct simultaneous elections, but they have different political structures. India would need major constitutional, administrative, and logistical reforms to adopt a similar system effectively.

High-Level Committee Formation

To explore the feasibility of reinstating simultaneous elections, the Government of India constituted a High-Level Committee on September 2, 2023. This committee was chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind and included members such as Union Home Minister Amit Shah, former Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad, former Finance Commission Chairman N.K. Singh, former Lok Sabha Secretary General Subhash Kashyap, and senior advocate Harish Salve.

Committee's Mandate and Recommendations

The committee's primary objective was to assess the practicality of conducting simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. After extensive consultations and analysis, the committee submitted its report in March 2024, recommending:

1. **Phased Implementation:** Initiating simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, followed by synchronization of local body elections within 100 days.
2. **Constitutional Amendments:** Proposing amendments to Articles 82A and 324A of the Indian Constitution to facilitate simultaneous elections across all tiers of government.
3. **Logistical Preparations:** Emphasizing the need for the Election Commission to prepare a comprehensive plan for the procurement of equipment, deployment of personnel, and other necessary arrangements to ensure the smooth conduct of simultaneous elections.

Government's Response

On September 18, 2024, the Union Cabinet accepted the committee's recommendations, marking a significant step toward implementing the "One Nation, One Election" model. This decision underscores the government's commitment to streamlining the electoral process and enhancing governance efficiency. While the proposal has garnered support for its potential to reduce election-related expenditures and administrative burdens, it has also faced criticism. Opponents argue that simultaneous elections could undermine India's federal structure and disproportionately benefit national parties at the expense of regional issues. Implementing this model would require substantial constitutional amendments and consensus-building among various political stakeholders. As of February 2025, the "One Nation, One Election" proposal remains a topic of active debate, reflecting the complexities inherent in overhauling India's extensive electoral framework.

As per the draft, the legislation if approved as a law can be put into action in "the first sitting" of the lower house of the parliament after a national election which implies it can't be implemented until 2029 when the current

government's term ends. Modi's government has long advocated for the proposed system and appointed a nine-member panel last year to look into whether it was feasible. The panel recommended the plan in March, saying it would help reduce wasting public funds and increase voter turnout. The legislation must be approved by both houses of the parliament by a two-thirds majority in each before it becomes law. The new system, if approved, would also require amendments to India's Constitution and approval from all states and federal territories.

The One Nation, One Election – Challenges

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) aims to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies to streamline governance and reduce electoral costs. While the idea promises efficiency, it also presents significant challenges.

1. Constitutional and Legal Hurdles

- The current structure of elections is governed by Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 of the Indian Constitution, which allow for different tenure periods for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- A constitutional amendment is required to implement ONOE, needing ratification from at least half the states, making it politically complex.

2. Federalism and State Autonomy

- India follows a federal structure where states have independent governance. A simultaneous election system may undermine state autonomy, as early dissolution of a state assembly would mean elections cannot be held separately.
- If a government falls before its tenure, should the state be governed by the President's Rule or by an interim arrangement?

3. Logistical and Implementation Challenges

- Conducting nationwide elections in a single phase would require a massive deployment of security forces and election staff.
- The Election Commission of India (ECI) would need to procure and manage millions of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs).

4. Impact on Voter Behavior and Regional

Issues

- National issues could overshadow local governance concerns, affecting the representation of regional parties.
- A uniform election cycle might reduce the accountability of governments between elections, as there would be fewer mid-term electoral checks.

5. Financial and Economic Considerations

- While ONOE is expected to reduce frequent election-related expenses, the financial implications of organizing a massive election at once need further study.
- Government decision-making could be affected, as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) would be in force nationwide, halting policymaking for an extended period.

The *One Nation, One Election* reform is a significant electoral change that requires careful deliberation. While it aims to reduce electoral expenditure and improve governance stability, it faces constitutional, logistical, and political challenges. Any move toward implementing ONOE must be preceded by comprehensive debates, legal clarity, and consensus-building among stakeholders.

Recommendations

The concept of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) proposes synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies to enhance governance efficiency and reduce the frequency of elections. Here are key recommendations to ensure its smooth implementation:

1. Constitutional and Legal Amendments

- Amend Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Constitution to facilitate simultaneous elections.
- Modify the Representation of the People Act, 1951 to accommodate uniform election procedures.
- Ensure a fixed tenure for legislative bodies, preventing mid-term dissolution.

2. Electoral Process Reforms

- Implement uniform voter rolls for Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local bodies to enhance transparency.
- Strengthen the Election Commission

of India (ECI) with resources and autonomy to manage large-scale elections.

- Introduce a common electoral framework, including electronic voting machines (EVMs) with VVPAT verification.
3. Political and Administrative Framework
 - Establish a consensus among political parties to support the transition.
 - Define a structured approach for handling mid-term dissolutions, such as a caretaker government or by-elections in exceptional cases.
 - Improve governance efficiency by reducing the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) disruptions.
 4. Financial and Logistical Considerations
 - Create a dedicated fund for simultaneous elections to streamline expenditures.
 - Optimize security and human resource deployment to manage elections effectively.
 - Strengthen voter awareness campaigns to ensure smooth participation.
 5. Federalism and Representation
 - Maintain state autonomy in governance while ensuring national-level election synchronization.
 - Develop inclusive policies to address regional concerns regarding electoral uniformity.
 6. Implementation Roadmap
 - Conduct pilot projects in selected states before nationwide implementation.
 - Establish a parliamentary committee to oversee execution.
 - Set a gradual transition timeline, ensuring minimal disruption to governance.

While ONOE offers advantages like cost reduction, administrative efficiency, and governance stability, it requires comprehensive electoral, legal, and political reforms. A **collaborative approach** among stakeholders is crucial for its success.

Estimated Savings in Financial Terms:

1. Cost of Elections:

- The 2019 Lok Sabha elections cost around ₹ 60,000 crore (₹ 6 lakh crore) including the government and political party expenditure.
- State assembly elections also incur significant costs.
- Conducting simultaneous elections is projected to reduce these costs by at least ₹ 8,000 crore to ₹ 10,000 crore every five years.
- 2024, ₹ 1,35,000 crore

2. Administrative and Security Costs:

- Repeated elections require deploying security forces, administrative machinery, and additional manpower.
- Estimates suggest that administrative and security-related savings could amount to ₹ 20,000 crore to ₹ 30,000 crore over a five-year period.

Impact on GDP:

1. Economic Disruptions:

- Frequent elections disrupt economic activity due to the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which restricts new projects and policy decisions.
- Reducing the number of elections could minimize these disruptions, potentially adding 1% to 1.5% to India's GDP growth over a five-year period.

2. Productivity Gains:

- Continuous elections divert attention and resources away from governance and economic reforms.
- With fewer disruptions, governments can focus more on policy implementation and long-term developmental projects, positively impacting economic productivity.

Takeaways:

- **Direct Cost Savings:** Estimated between ₹ 30,000 crore to ₹ 40,000 crore over a five-year cycle.
- **GDP Impact:** Potential boost of around 1% to 1.5% due to reduced disruptions and better governance efficiency.

The actual savings and GDP impact depend on

the **implementation** and **logistical efficiency** of the *One Nation, One Election* policy.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *One Nation, One Election* represents a significant electoral reform aimed at synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Advocates argue that it can enhance governance efficiency, reduce election-related expenses, and minimize policy paralysis caused by frequent polls. However, challenges such as constitutional amendments, federalism concerns, and logistical complexities need to be addressed before its implementation. While the reform has the potential to streamline India's democratic processes, its success depends on political consensus, legal scrutiny, and administrative preparedness. A well-structured roadmap, incorporating feedback from stakeholders, is essential to balance democratic principles with governance efficiency. Ultimately, *One Nation, One Election* could be a transformative step in India's electoral landscape if implemented with inclusivity, transparency, and constitutional integrity.

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