

Ballot Box Unification: The Issues and Challenges of “One Nation, One Election”

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Abstract

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) in India proposes conducting simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People), State Legislative Assemblies, and subsequently local bodies such as Panchayati Raj institutions and municipalities, all within a 100-day period across the country. Its primary objectives are to streamline the electoral process, reduce election-related expenditure, and minimize disruptions to developmental activities and governance. Proponents argue that this unified approach could lead to more efficient administration and a greater focus on development activities. However, the proposal has ignited significant and constructive debate regarding its feasibility, impact on federalism, democratic representation, the growth of the India economy, and the autonomy of the states. This article explores the complex history and dimensions of the “One Nation, One Election” proposal, analysing its legal, political, and administrative implications. It delves into the key issues and challenges that need to be addressed before such a sweeping electoral reform can be implemented in a diverse and quasi-federal country like India.

Keywords: One Nation One Election (ONOE), Federalism, Local Governance, Constitution of India, State Autonomy, Constitutional Amendment bill, Opposition Political party

Introduction

As stated by our Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji, “India, that is Bharat, is the mother of all democracies.” Indeed, India is not only the largest democracy in the world but also the cradle of democracy, having granted equal voting rights to all citizens without discrimination based on religion, caste, or sex. Since independence, India has witnessed several simultaneous elections for both the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

In liberal democratic states, periodic elections are a central theme, and the conduct of free, fair, and transparent elections is an inseparable feature. The Constitution of India was adopted on 26 November 1949, and provisions for elections were implemented thereafter. Since 1952, India has conducted numerous elections for both the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Initially, simultaneous elections were held in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, due to political instability and the premature dissolution of various State Legislative Assemblies by the Centre—for example, in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra—this practice was disrupted.

On 12 December, the Union Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji, approved the historic "One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2024" concerning "One Nation, One Election." Its primary objective is to conduct simultaneous

elections for both the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, followed by local bodies, within a 100-day period.

What is One Nation, One Election?

India, the world's largest democracy, holds elections at multiple levels—national, state, and local—at different times. Since Independence, Simultaneous elections of Lok Sabha & State legislative assemblies have been a defining feature of India democracy but it was broken down in the late 1960s. In recent years, the idea of “One Nation, One Election” has gained momentum to streamline this process. The proposal aims to conduct simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, Followed by Local & urban Governance within 100 days thereby reducing the frequency of multiple elections across the country.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the leadership of Shri Narendra Modi ji, introduced a proposal for simultaneous elections to end the cycle of frequent elections in India. This historic decision aims to mitigate various drawbacks of multiple elections, such as financial burdens, policy paralysis, inconsistency in governance, corruption, and stagnant growth.

On 2 September, the Modi government formed a high-level committee on “One Nation, One Election” under the chairmanship of former President of India, **Ram Nath Kovind**. Its primary aim & objective was to explore the feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and subsequently local and urban governance bodies within 100 days. The committee solicited extensive public and political feedback and consulted with experts to analyse the potential benefits, Issues and challenges associated with this proposed electoral reform. This report presents a detailed overview of the committee’s findings, its recommendations for constitutional amendments, and the anticipated impact of simultaneous elections on governance, resources, and public sentiment.

The proposal of “One Nation, One Election” also raises serious concerns and allegations from Opposition Political parties related to constitutional amendments, federalism, logistical feasibility, and the marginalization of regional parties and local issues & Governance.

Opposition political parties, such as the Indian National Congress (INC), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Communist Party of India (CPI), argue that ONOE could weaken India's federal structure by centralizing political power and undermining the autonomy of state governments. They contend that simultaneous elections exemplify the centralization of Power as well as democracy, potentially hijacking electoral processes for a specific period of time, where all levels of elections—Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies—might be contested on a single national issue, thereby overshadowing or disregarding regional issues.

Historical Background of “One Nation, One Election”

The concept of “One Nation, One Election,” also known as simultaneous elections, is not a new concept in India. Following the adoption of the Constitution on 26 November 1949, elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies were conducted simultaneously from 1951 to 1967. The first general elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were

held together in 1951–52, a practice that continued for three subsequent general elections in 1957, 1962, and 1967.

However, this cycle of simultaneous elections was disrupted in 1968 and 1969 due to the premature dissolution of some State Legislative Assemblies. The Fourth Lok Sabha was also dissolved prematurely in 1970, with fresh elections held in 1971. Unlike the First, Second, and Third Lok Sabha, which completed their full five-year terms, the Fifth Lok Sabha's term was extended until 1977 under Article 352 because of the declaration of Emergency. Since then, only a few Lok Sabha terms have lasted the full five years, such as the Eighth, Tenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth. Others, including the Sixth, Seventh, Ninth, Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth, were dissolved early.

State Assemblies have faced similar disruptions over the years. Premature dissolutions and term extensions have become recurring challenges. These developments have firmly disrupted the cycle of simultaneous elections, leading to the current pattern of staggered electoral schedules across the country.

Timelines of key milestones of various Lok Sabha:

Lok Sabha	Last date of poll	Date of constitution of Lok Sabha	Date of first sitting	Date of expiration of term (Article 83(2) of Constitution)	Date of dissolution of Lok Sabha	Overall Term (in days) (Col 6 - Col 4)	Overall Term (approx)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
First	21-Feb-52	2-Apr-52	13-May-52	12-May-57	4-Apr-57	1787	5 years
Second	15-Mar-57	5-Apr-57	10-May-57	9-May-62	31-Mar-62	1786	5 years
Third	25-Feb-62	2-Apr-62	16-Apr-62	15-Apr-67	3-Mar-67	1782	5 years
Fourth	21-Feb-67	4-Mar-67	16-Mar-67	15-Mar-72	27-Dec-70	1382*	3 years & 10 months
Fifth	10-Mar-71	15-Mar-71	19-Mar-71	18-Mar-77	18-Jan-77	2132**	5 years & 10 months
Sixth	20-Mar-77	23-Mar-77	25-Mar-77	24-Mar-82	22-Aug-79	880*	2 years & 5 months
Seventh	6-Jan-80	10-Jan-80	21-Jan-80	20-Jan-85	31-Dec-84	1806	5 years
Eighth	28-Dec-84	31-Dec-84	15-Jan-85	14-Jan-90	27-Nov-89	1777	5 years
Ninth	26-Nov-89	2-Dec-89	18-Dec-89	17-Dec-94	13-Mar-91	450*	1 year & 3 months
Tenth	15-Jun-91	20-Jun-91	9-Jul-91	8-Jul-96	10-May-96	1767	5 years
Eleventh	7-May-96	15-May-96	22-May-96	21-May-01	4-Dec-97	561*	1 year & 6 months
Twelfth	7-Mar-98	10-Mar-98	23-Mar-98	22-Mar-03	26-Apr-99	399*	1 year & 1 month
Thirteenth	4-Oct-99	10-Oct-99	20-Oct-99	19-Oct-04	6-Feb-04	1570*	4 years & 4 months

Potential Arguments in favour of “One Nation One election”

- **Cost efficiency and effectiveness**

As said by our Honourable Prime Minister shri Narendra Modi ji on “One Nation One elections” that frequent elections or multiple elections drain enormous financial

administrative resources that’s why it’s the need of the hour to implement “One Nation One Election” (ONOE) to deal with this crisis. According to N Bhaskara Rao, chairman of the Centre for Media Studies “2024 Lok Sabha elections was the world’s costliest elections, both political parties and candidates have spent around 1lakh cr.” To reduce the financial burden of

elections on govt as well on the candidates, The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the leadership of Narendra Modi, is mulling to implement “One Nation One Election” (ONOE) for betterment of Nation as well as for Vikshit India @2047.

After the enactment or implementation of the proposed bill on “One Nation, One Election,” the cost associated with conducting multiple or frequent elections at both the national and state levels is expected to decrease, thereby enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. According to the **Centre for Media Studies**, the expenditure during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was approximately ₹1.35 lakh crore, making it the most expensive election in the world. In comparison, the United States spent around \$16 billion on its combined presidential and congressional elections in 2024. Several electoral reform committees, such as the Indrajit Gupta Committee (1998) and the Law Commission of India (1999), have recommended the implementation of simultaneous elections as a means to reduce the financial burden on the exchequer.

- **Prevent policy paralysis**

The central focus of “One nation One election” (ONOE) is to prevent the nation from policy paralysis and to provide better governance to the republic of India. After announcing the date of elections by Election commission of India (ECI) and Model code of conduct (MCC) being implemented, the whole growth of the nation or state stops for a particular period. The Developmental activities and projects undergoing halt for a specific time and that’s the main reason we (India) are still a developing nation. Simultaneous election is not a political tool or propaganda, but it is need of the nation to become reliant, Atmanirbhar and vikshit India by @2047.

Former President Ram Nath Kovind, who led a nine-member and chairman of the committee recommended holding simultaneous elections called it a "game changer", citing economists who say it could boost India's GDP by up to 1.5%.

- **Reducing Communal and Polarization of caste**

"Democracy and caste are synonymous with each other and work in parallel." The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has often been accused of basing its politics on Hindu-Muslim propaganda. The Prime Minister has frequently been criticized for inciting communal sentiments, particularly targeting minority communities such as Muslims and Christians, for electoral gains.

India has witnessed several elections where various fundamentalist or extremist leaders have incited the public based on religion and caste. As **sociologist Louis Dumont** aptly remarked, **“People don’t cast their vote; they vote their caste.”** This highlights the deep entrenchment of caste identity in Indian electoral politics.

- **Preserves Regional Party Relevance**

Holding simultaneous elections does not undermine the role of regional parties. In fact, it encourages a more localized focus during elections, enabling regional parties to highlight their unique concerns and aspirations. This setup fosters a political environment where local issues

are not overshadowed by national election campaigns, thus preserving the relevance of regional voices

- **Administrative efficiency**

“One Nation One Election” also known as simultaneous elections will reduce Frequency of Election Deployment during frequent or Multiple elections in a year, The Election commission of India (ECI) must deploy state administrative machinery and various personnel again and again so that free and fair elections can be conducted because it’s a cardinal feature of liberal democracy. This not only stops the growth of the nation but also can weak our internal security.

To reduce frequent deployment of personnel & state administrative machinery and to increase administrative efficiency and effectiveness’ The ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has proposed the concept of “One nation One election” and reduced the burden of frequent elections in India.

- **Reduced Disruption to Governance**

Frequent elections in India divert political parties' focus from governance to campaigning, affecting policy implementation and development activities. The ruling party at both the Centre and State levels often prioritizes electoral strategies over addressing core governance issues.

Restricting elections to a single cycle every five years under the “One Nation One Election” proposal could help streamline governance, allowing leaders to dedicate more time and resources to developmental activities. This approach aims to reduce disruptions, improve administrative efficiency & effectiveness and ensure sustained policy execution.

Issues and Challenges of “One Nation one elections”

The "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) also known as simultaneous elections proposed “one hundred and twenty-nine constitutional amendment 2024 bill “which aims to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies. It has faced significant opposition and raises several concerns. There are following issues and challenges of ONOE:

Undermining the soul of Indian Federalism and Autonomy of state

There are several opposition political parties—such as the Indian National Congress (INC), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Samajwadi Party (SP), and others—have vehemently opposed the idea of “One Nation One Election”. These parties argue that the proposal violates the federal spirit and basic structure of the Indian Constitution, which envisions a delicate balance between national unity and regional diversity, with individual states maintaining their own electoral cycles and policy priorities. The ONOE proposal is perceived by many as an attempt to centralize power, thereby undermining the autonomy of states and potentially challenging the 'basic structure' doctrine of the Constitution. There are following statements from various national and regional opposition parties regarding the “One Nation One election” Proposal:

A) The President of the Indian National Congress (INC), Mallikarjun Kharge has stated that it believes the bill is “unconstitutional” and “goes against the basic structure” of the Constitution. It argues that the bill aims at “throttling democracy and Erosion of accountability” in the country.

b) Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan also voiced his dissent, stating: “The concept of ‘One Nation, One Election’ is a hidden agenda aimed at weakening India's federal structure and granting the central government absolute power.”

c) The President of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), Asaduddin Owaisi, stated: “I have consistently opposed ‘One Nation, One Election’ because it is a solution in search of a problem. It destroys federalism and compromises democracy—both of which are part of the basic structure of the Constitution.”

Aligning state elections with national elections could lead to national issues overshadowing local concerns, affecting state-level electoral outcomes and potentially marginalizing regional parties. Forcing states to synchronize their terms with the Lok Sabha might require prematurely dissolving some assemblies or extending others, which could be seen as central overreach and an infringement on state autonomy. There’s apprehension that ONOE could increasingly try to strip states and other government organs of their rights by passing laws in the Parliament.

Impact on Democratic Representation and Accountability

Opposition Political parties argued that ONOE could lead to voters being swayed by national trends and voting for the same party at both levels (Lok Sabha & State legislative Assemblies) potentially reducing accountability on state-specific issues. Regional parties with limited resources might struggle to compete with national parties in simultaneous elections, potentially leading to their marginalization and less representation of local issues.

The proposal to hold mid-term elections only for the remaining period of the original five-year term is criticized as potentially undermining democratic principles and fair representation. Some fear that ONOE could increasingly try to strip the states and other organs of the government of their rights by passing laws in the Parliament.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges

Implementing ONOE would necessitate amendments to multiple articles of the Constitution, which could be challenged based on the principles of federalism and the basic structure doctrine. Amendments related to the terms of state assemblies might face resistance from state governments and political parties.

The "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) proposed bill Will face several significant constitutional and legal challenges that need to be addressed for its implementation.

Implementing 'One Nation, One Election' requires careful consideration of constitutional and legal hurdles, along with building political consensus among all stakeholders, including the people of India, opposition political parties, and civil society.

Risk of one-party dominance

Opposition political parties such as Indian political party (INC), Communist party of India (CPI), Rastriya Janata dal (RJD), Azad samaj party (ASP), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) etc argued that wave of one political party could lead to impact on both level of elections whether it's about national or state level and this may Depredate their regional issues and challenges. It may lead to authoritarian tendencies of political party leader and can weak opposition parties & Democratic values of Indian society. For example: Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), India has experienced a notable decline in democratic norms, often referred to as "democratic backsliding".

Logistical issues

The “One Nation One Election” (ONOE) initiative aims to reduce overall election expenditure and potentially boost GDP by 1.5%. However, certain factors suggest it may lead to increased costs.

A NITI Aayog paper estimates that the central government would need to invest over ₹9,300 crore in additional Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) systems. The logistical requirements for large-scale simultaneous elections—such as extra security personnel, polling officials, and vehicles—could further escalate costs.

Currently, the same EVMs & VVPAT are used across different national & state elections. Implementing ONOE would necessitate procuring more EVMs, VVPAT which poses storage challenges due to limited warehousing facilities. Some states and Union Territories already store EVMs in private buildings and educational institutions due to space constraints. The increased number of machines would demand expanded storage capacity, additional polling materials, and extended deployment of government officials, raising concerns about operational feasibility.

Concerns related to the principal of free and fair elections& voting Behaviour

The “One Nation One Election” (ONOE) initiative proposes synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, allowing voters to cast their ballots for both on the same day. This approach could significantly influence electoral behaviour, as voters may conflate national and state issues when making their choices.

Studies suggest that when elections are held simultaneously, there is a 70% chance that voters will support the same party at both the state and national levels. This trend could benefit larger national parties while marginalizing regional parties, which often represent local social and economic interests. The reduction in political diversity could impact democratic representation and weaken the plurality of voices in governance.

Opposition Political party argue that ONOE may violate the basic structure of the Constitution by undermining free and fair elections, which rely on a diverse political landscape. Ensuring a balance between efficiency and democratic integrity remains a key challenge in implementing this reform.

Conclusion

The Idea of vikshit India @2047 emphasizes governance based on democratic principles and its constitutional Values. Democracy relies on the people's trust, which is reinforced through Periodic elections to assess the popular will. However, Multiple elections can disrupt governance, causing policy paralysis and slowing developmental progress.

To address these issues and challenges, the government has approved the One Nation one election proposal, which aims to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and local & urban governance bodies. This initiative promises to reduce financial burden, improve governance, and minimize administrative disruptions as well as corruption.

In conclusion, while the concept of “One Nation, One Election” appears attractive in theory due to its promises of cost efficiency and governance stability, its practical implementation is fraught with significant constitutional and democratic challenges. Any attempt to reform the electoral system must be rooted in broad political consensus, legal clarity, and respect for the federal framework enshrined in the Constitution of India. India’s electoral system must continue to reflect its diversity, accommodating both national and regional autonomy. Therefore, a cautious, consultative, and phased approach—grounded in constitutional values—is essential before considering the unification of Ballot Box.

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