



Original Article

# One Nation, One Election in India: Constitutional Viability, Federal Concerns, and Democratic Realities

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**Abstract**

*The One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposal has become an important electoral reform initiative in India to synchronize the election cycles of the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies in India. The proponents of the proposal highlight that it will help to reduce the amount of electoral expenditure, administrative burden, and ensure continuous governance by limiting the frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct. But it is not in these perceived benefits that the proposal raises such convoluted constitutional, structural, and democratic issues that should be carefully considered. This paper critically examines the tenability of ONOE in the context of the Constitution of India, with a specific focus on the principles of federalism, representative democracy and doctrine of basic structure. It examines whether the process of harmonizing elections would necessitate far-reaching constitutional amendments and evaluates the possible effect of such a step on the balance of power between the Union and the States. The paper also measures the consequences of fixed electoral cycles on democratic accountability, particularly when there is an early dissolution of legislatures. In addition, the paper takes into consideration institutional views, such as suggestions by expert institutions, and compares insights offered by other democratic systems. It contends that although ONOE can achieve administrative efficiency, it will jeopardize the flexibility of the constitutional design of the State governments and may overturn the autonomy of the State governments. The paper draws a conclusion that any such proposal towards simultaneous elections must be viewed with a certain degree of caution and accompanied with sound constitutional protection. The more moderate course of action, with efficiency not coming at the expense of the major pillars of the Indian system of democracy and federalism, may be offered by a phased or hybrid model, with wide political consensus and public consultation.*

**Keywords:** Simultaneous Elections, Federalism, Basic Structure, Electoral Reform, Indian Constitution.

**Introduction**

The electoral democracy in India is typified by periodic elections at different levels of administration. In contrast to centralized systems, India is a staggered election state, which is indicative of its federal structure and political heterogeneity.

The idea of ONOE suggests that there should be a common electoral calendar that will be used to hold elections at the same time. Although the concept may seem administratively appealing, its undertones go way beyond the logistics into the constitutional theory and the democratic practice.

**Historical Evolution of Electoral Cycles**

During the first decades of the independent State, the election to the Parliament and to the State Assemblies were conducted simultaneously. This arrangement lasted until the late 1960s when political instabilities resulted in premature dissolution of legislatures.

This caused the electoral cycles to become out of step and resulted in the current staggered elections system. Notably, this was not a coincidence but a result of democratic processes like loss of majority and coalitions.

**Constitutional Framework Governing Elections**

The proposal should be evaluated against the backdrop of some of the major provisions of the Constitution of India:

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**Article 83(2):** Duration of the House of the people.

**Article 172:** Length of State Legislatures.

**Article 85:** Toleration of Parliament.

**Article 356:** Imposition of President rule.

All of these will guarantee the flexibility of governance, where democratic institutions will be able to adapt to the political realities. ONOE, on the other hand, attempts to bring some inflexibility in this flexible system.

### **Reasons why One Nation, One Election is a good idea**

#### **1. Administrative Efficiency**

The concurrent elections would help simplify the allocation of resources like security staffs and electioneers, alleviating administrative burden.

#### **2. Financial Considerations**

Recurrence of elections means that the general exchequer is incurring a lot of costs. An integrated election cycle can decrease spending on logistics, campaigning, and governance disruptions.

#### **3. Policy Continuity**

The application of the Model Code of Conduct is applied frequently, and it usually delays governmental decisions. ONOE can reduce these disturbances, which will result in a better implementation of the policy.

### **Structural and Constitutional Problems**

#### **1. Federalism Under Strain**

The federal system in India is not just administrative but a constitutional one. States have their own political mandate. Coordinating elections would tend to belittle State autonomy in favor of nationwide electoral interests.

#### **2. War with Democratic Flexibility**

The Constitution also allows the dissolution of the legislatures prior to the end of their term. This provides responsibility and accountability. ONOE would necessitate: Or curtailing either the term of some of the legislatures, or Expanding others in areas where they have not been mandated. The two options present severe constitutional issues.

#### **3. Basic Structure Doctrine**

Any constitutional amendment enabling ONOE must comply with the doctrine laid down in: *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)* The basic structure includes federalism and democracy. Any reform which weakens these principles can be struck down.

#### **4. Practical Difficulties**

- Dealing with mid-term implosion of regimes.
- Conducting re-elections without disturbing the cycle
- Controlling voter action due to national discourses.

These issues point at the complications of implementation.

### **Institutional Perspectives**

Simultaneous elections have been discussed intensively by some of the most important constitutional organs, most notably the Law Commission of India and the Election Commission of India. Their investigations never dismiss reform, but they warn that total harmonisation of elections is not only immediately practicable, but also constitutionally easy without making considerable structural changes.

The Law Commission of India, especially in its 170th and 255th Reports, recognised the administrative benefits of lessening the frequency of elections. Nonetheless, it has highlighted that the current constitutional plan, particularly those provisions that address tenure, dissolution, and federal autonomy does not support strict synchronization. Instead, it proposed pragmatic and incremental alternatives.

Conduct of elections in stages is one of such recommendations, where the country could be divided into two broad election cycles as opposed to a single nationwide exercise of elections. This strategy aims at striking a balance between administrative efficiency and constitutional flexibility so that it can be adjusted without having to be amended drastically. A second important proposal is the proposal of a constructive vote of no-confidence, based on the comparative constitutional practice. In this system, the government is not allowed to be ousted unless there is a concurrent consensus on a new leader or government. This not only ensures political stability, but also significantly reduces the chances of untimely dissolution of legislatures, thus indirectly contributing to synchronization.

Moreover, the Commission suggested introducing the notion of election windows rather than dates. Instead of requiring all elections to take place on one day or at one time, a specific time frame might be created upon which elections would be held. This permits some leeway to adapt to unexpected political changes and yet maintain a relative coherence of electoral cycles.

Election Commission of India has also noted that logistical and operational challenges such as allocation of resources, deployment of security and management of voters are also significantly complex in a fully synchronized model.

Collectively, these institutional views suggest that although it is desirable to have electoral reform, full and strict synchronization might not be possible without changing the constitutional architecture itself. A phased, calibrated and constitutionally sensitive approach is thus deemed more suitable in the Indian context.

### **Comparative Constitutional Insights**

A comparative constitutional analysis has been used to justify that synchronized elections are possible; this kind of comparisons, however, should be approached with caution. Democracies such as Germany or South Africa do have relatively stable

patterns of electoral processes, but the institutional design of these democracies is different in material ways than the constitutional design of India.

In Germany, the Basic Law has a constructive vote of no-confidence which prevents sudden collapse of governments because the Bundestag has to elect a successor before ousting the incumbent Chancellor. This will ensure there is stability in the executive and the probability of premature elections is minimized. In addition, although Germany is a federal state, it has a political system in which the level of party discipline and predictability of a coalition is very high, contributing to regular electoral cycles that do not mandate that all Länder are in a predictable coalition.

On the same note, South Africa is based on a parliamentary system with a regular schedule of national and provincial elections. The Constitution permits few conditions of early dissolution, thus providing continuity and predictability. Notably, the features of federalism in South Africa are not as strong as in India, and the autonomy of political variability of its provinces does not reach the same level as in India.

However, in India, the constitutional design under the Constitution of India is more focused on flexibility and responsiveness. The inflexibility of synchronization is made much harder by provision of early dissolution of legislatures, functioning of coalition politics and the heterogeneity of regional party systems. There is no course of action, in existence, and no course of action, in existence, in India, which is what the country is doing. It is not doing what Germany is doing, or what South Africa is doing.

Thus, it is not that comparative models do not provide useful insights, but that they can be transplanted in the Indian context. The structural, political and constitutional variations suggest that any action towards simultaneous elections in India must be readied rather than borrowed, so that it leads to adjustment and not imitation to fit the unique federal and democratic aspects of India.

### **Critical Evaluation**

The ONOE proposal is indicative of a conflict between efficiency and constitutionalism. Although, administrative convenience is a justifiable objective, it should not prevail over the core values like:

- Federal balance
- Democratic accountability
- Political plurality

Further, concurrent elections can nationalize the political discourse leaving regional concerns that are of great importance in a federal polity such as India.

### **Recommendations**

With the constitutional, political, and practical intricacies involved in proposing simultaneous elections, a measured and systematic approach is imperative. The recommendations below will balance the administration efficiency with the principles of the Constitution of India:

#### **1. Phased Synchronization**

Instead of making a single step of simultaneous elections, gradual convergence of electoral cycles should be adopted. This can be in the form of clustering of States into two or more clusters and synchronizing their elections over time. A gradual model like this would cause minimal constitutional interference and would permit institutions to evolve gradually. It also does not lead to sudden termination or prolonging of the legislative tenure and as such helps preserve democratic legitimacy.

#### **2. Constructive Vote of No-Confidence**

By introducing a constructive vote of no-confidence, like in some parliamentary democracies, it is possible to increase the stability of the government. In this system, a government can not be ousted unless a viable alternative majority is formed at the same time. This would help to reduce the level of premature dissolution and help keep the electoral cycle relatively stable without inhibiting democratic accountability.

#### **3. Constitutional Safeguards for Federalism**

Any reform that aims at synchronization should incorporate clear guard subject to safeguard the freedom of States. The federal nature of India demands that the States should be left to control their political schedules and governance procedures. Proposed constitutional amendments should be strictly limited in the sense that they will not weaken the balance of power between the Union and the States, or will not violate the doctrine of constitutional amendments.

#### **4. Independent Review Mechanism**

It should have an independent constitutional or expert body to periodically check the operation and effects of synchronized elections. This kind of mechanism would be used to evaluate whether or not the reform is improving the governance process or will have the unwanted effect of interfering with the democratic process of participation, regional representation, or electoral fairness.

#### **5. Public Consultation and Consensus Building**

Since the consequences of ONOE are far-reaching, it is crucial to consult with the stakeholders, such as political parties, State governments, constitutional experts, and civil society. Particularly in a multi-ethnic democracy such as India, consensus-building is especially important, with electoral reform needs to reflect not only the efficiency considerations but also the common will of its federal units.

### **Conclusion**

One Nation, One Election proposal is an interesting administration vision subjected to complex constitutional issues. India has developed democratic system which is founded on flexibility, diversity and federal balance. The reform should not ignore

these principles which were set in the Constitution of India. It is important to adopt a careful, gradual approach in order to keep efficiency off the cost of constitutional integrity.

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**Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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