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ONE NATION ONE ELECTION: CHALLENGES AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC INDIA

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Abstract

The proposal of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) seeks to hold simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies across India to streamline the electoral process and ensure governance continuity. Advocates claim that synchronized elections would reduce the financial burden on the exchequer, minimize policy paralysis caused by frequent implementation of the Model Code of Conduct, and enhance administrative efficiency. However, achieving this goal poses formidable constitutional, logistical, and political challenges. Implementing ONOE necessitates amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 of the Indian Constitution, requiring broad bipartisan consensus and coordination among central and state governments. Ensuring adequate security, managing vast electoral resources such as Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and personnel, and updating electoral rolls uniformly across states are key logistical hurdles. Politically, critics argue that the reform could dilute the federal spirit, marginalize regional parties, and overshadow local governance issues under dominant national narratives. Moreover, the differing tenure cycles of state assemblies challenge the synchronization feasibility without compromising democratic representation. While the model could promote stability and long-term policy planning, it risks reducing democratic dynamism by centralizing electoral discourse. This paper explores the constitutional complexities, administrative feasibility, and democratic implications of ONOE, presenting a holistic analysis of its potential benefits and challenges. The study concludes that while the idea of synchronized elections holds promise for efficiency, careful deliberation is essential to preserve India's pluralistic and federal democratic framework.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, Simultaneous Elections, Democracy, Constitutional Challenges, Federalism, Governance, Electoral Reforms, Political Representation.

Introduction

The Indian government recently approved a proposal for "One Nation, One Election," which aims to hold national and state elections at the same time. This idea, first proposed in 2017, is now moving forward after a committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind made recommendations. The proposal suggests a two-stage process: first, holding national and state elections together, then local elections within 100 days. This change could significantly impact how democracy works in India.

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) proposes synchronized elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and all State Legislative Assemblies in India. The rationale is to enhance governance, reduce election costs, and ensure continuity in policy-making. However, this ambitious idea has sparked widespread debate on its feasibility, constitutional implications, and democratic integrity. This paper examines the historical background, legislative progress, comparative global practices, implementation challenges, and the potential impact of ONOE on India's democratic framework.

2. History of the Bill

India initially practiced simultaneous elections post-independence, with the first four general elections (1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967) held concurrently for both the Centre and States. However, due to the premature



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dissolution of some state assemblies and the Lok Sabha, this cycle was disrupted. Since then, elections have been conducted at different times across the country, causing a continuous cycle of electoral activity.

The concept resurfaced in public discourse through recommendations by the Law Commission and NITI Aayog. The 170th Report of the Law Commission (1999) and the 79th Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (2015) endorsed ONE. Subsequently, the idea was supported by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and deliberated in national forums, but it is yet to become binding law.

3. Review of the Bill

Although no official "One Nation, One Election" Bill has been passed, the Law Commission and other bodies have proposed drafts and working papers suggesting constitutional amendments and legal provisions. These include:

- Fixed tenure for legislatures to avoid premature dissolution.
- Synchronization through constitutional amendments.
- Provision for President's Rule or caretaker governments in case of dissolution.
- Consolidated voter rolls and election machinery.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has expressed willingness to implement simultaneous elections if legal and constitutional changes are made.

4. Amendments to the Bill

For One Nation One election to be implemented, several constitutional amendments are required:

- Articles 83 and 172 (terms of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies).
- Article 85 and Article 174 (dissolution of legislatures).
- Article 356 (President's Rule).
- Schedule for elections under the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

The process would require ratification by at least half of the states after passing in both Houses of Parliament by a two-thirds majority. Legal safeguards must also be instituted to avoid undermining federalism and democratic norms.

5. Other Countries Implemented It

Several countries conduct synchronized elections:

- **South Africa:** Holds national and provincial elections together every five years.
- **Sweden:** National and municipal elections are held on the same day.
- **Indonesia:** Reformed its system to hold simultaneous legislative and presidential elections.

These countries have relatively stable political systems and less complexity in federal arrangements compared to India. They also maintain strict electoral calendars and allow limited scope for midterm changes.



6. Comparison with India's Structure

India's federal polity, with significant autonomy for states, makes synchronization difficult. State-specific issues, coalition governments, and the role of regional parties further complicate a uniform election calendar. Unlike in other countries, political fragmentation and frequent dissolutions pose real challenges.

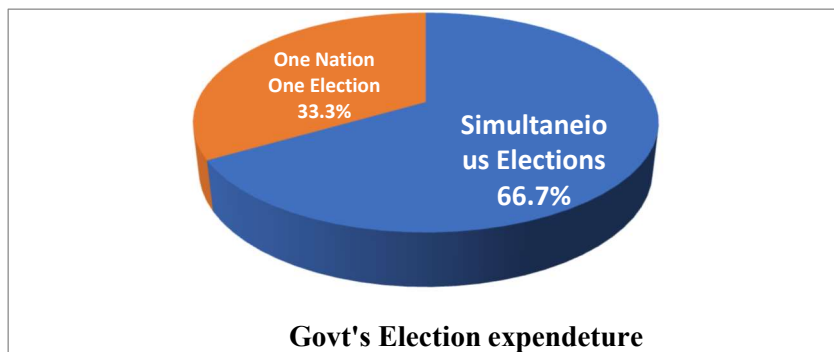
Moreover, the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and Anti-Defection Law create legal pathways for political realignment, which may conflict with fixed-term elections.

7. Challenges and Implementation

➤ Constitutional Barriers

- **Amendments Required:** Synchronizing elections necessitates amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Indian Constitution, which govern the terms and dissolution of legislatures. Additionally, modifications to the Representation of People's Act, 1951, are essential. Achieving consensus for these changes, including approval from at least half of India's states, is a complex process.
- **Federalism Concerns:** States may resist loss of autonomy. Simultaneous elections may undermine India's federal structure by centralizing power, potentially marginalizing regional issues and parties.
- **Mid-Term Dissolutions:** Addressing scenarios where a government (state or central) dissolves before its term ends remains a challenge. The proposal suggests that newly elected assemblies or parliaments serve only the remaining term of the original tenure, but implementing this fairly could be contentious.
- **Logistics:** Conducting simultaneous elections would require deploying security personnel, polling staff, and election materials across approximately 700,000 polling stations nationwide. This logistical feat is particularly daunting in remote or diverse areas where access and infrastructure may be limited. Massive administrative and security arrangements.
- **Financial Implications:** Estimates suggest that conducting simultaneous elections could cost upwards of ₹9,284 crore just for EVM procurement alone, not including additional expenses related to logistics and personnel deployment.

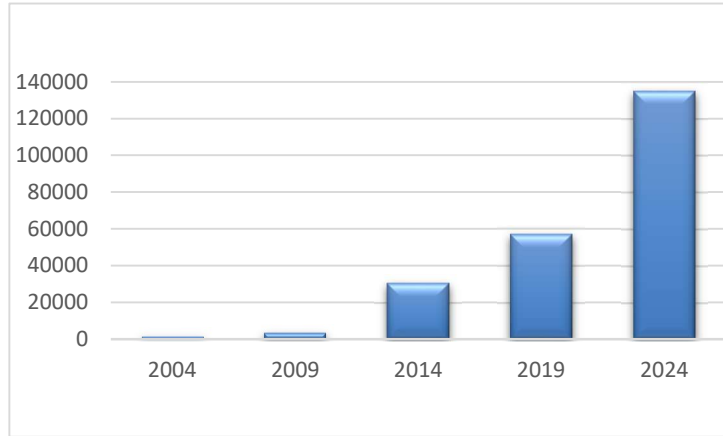
Government Election Expenditure
General election (Current - 66.7%)
One Nation One Election - 33.3%



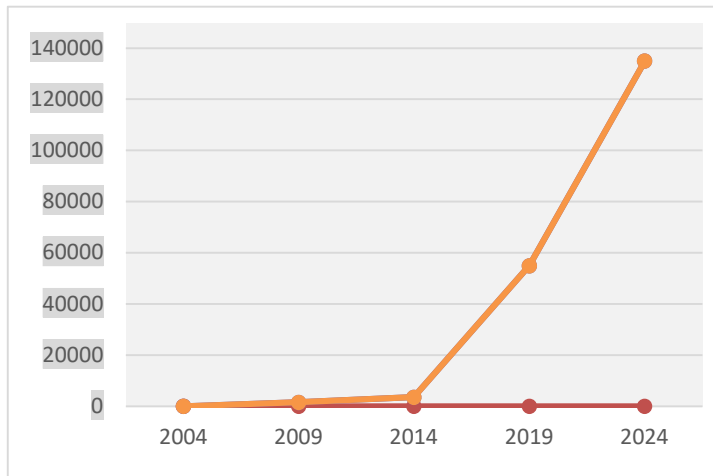
The diagram shows that **current election spending is roughly twice as high as the ONOE model**, indicating **significant cost savings** if elections are synchronized. May be reduced election expenditure 66.7% to 33.3% in case of one nation one election.



Simultaneous Elections Expenditure



Simultaneous Elections Expenditure



- For the 2024 electoral cycle—which includes the Indian general election along with several concurrent state assembly polls—the combined spending associated with elections (by the government, political parties, and candidates) is estimated at around ₹1.35 lakh crore. This makes it the costliest election exercise in India's history.
- This figure represents more than a twofold increase compared to the 2019 general election, where total spending was estimated to be in the range of ₹55,000–60,000 crore.
- Only a relatively small share of the overall expenditure is funded directly by the government. Costs incurred by the Election Commission of India—such as election administration, deployment of security personnel, logistics, EVM management, and polling infrastructure—have historically been estimated at approximately ₹10,000–15,000 crore per election cycle.
- By way of comparison, the reported burden on the public exchequer was ₹1,483 crore for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and ₹3,426 crore for the 2014 elections.



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- The sharp rise to an estimated ₹1.35 lakh crore is therefore largely driven by non-government spending, including political party and candidate campaigns, advertising, voter mobilization, campaign staffing, grassroots activities, security arrangements, and other indirect election-related costs that collectively form India's broader electoral spending landscape.
- **Infrastructure Strain:** The Election Commission estimates a recurring cost of approximately ₹10,000 crore every 15 years for the procurement and maintenance of EVMs and VVPATs for synchronized elections
- **Political and Societal Implications:** Conducting simultaneous elections would require deploying security personnel, polling staff, and election materials across approximately 700,000 polling stations nationwide. This logistical feat is particularly daunting in remote or diverse areas where access and infrastructure may be limited
- **Voter Behavior:** Organizing a single, large-scale election might inundate voters with an excessive number of options, leading to confusion and fatigue. This could undermine the election process and impact voter turnout Risk of national issues overshadowing local ones.
- **Impact on Local Issues:** Critics argue that state-level issues could be overshadowed by national narratives during simultaneous elections, leading to voter disconnect and centralization of power.
- **Administrative and Governance Challenges: Coordination Complexity:** Coordinating elections across the vast and diverse landscape of India poses logistical challenges, including voter registration, polling booth setup, and security arrangements. Addressing these hurdles would require meticulous planning and resources.
- **Administrative Burden:** One Nation One election would put a tremendous burden on the administrative machinery. Conducting elections across the country simultaneously would require an enormous workforce, including election officials, security personnel, and support staff.
- **Judicial Scrutiny:** Potential legal challenges regarding democratic rights.

8. Drawbacks of Simultaneous Elections

1. **Violation of Constitutional Structure:** **A.** Simultaneous elections may violate the basic federal structure of the Indian Constitution. **B.** The Constitution envisages separate and independent electoral cycles for the Union and States, respecting their autonomy within the federal framework.
2. **Infringement on Election Commission's Authority:** **A.** The proposal appears to sideline the Election Commission of India (ECI), a constitutional body entrusted with conducting free and fair elections. Article 324 of the Constitution vests the superintendence, direction, and control of elections in the ECI. **B.** Having a government-appointed committee decide on fundamental changes to the electoral process may infringe upon the ECI's constitutional mandate.
3. **Potential Violation of Basic Structure Doctrine:** **A.** The Supreme Court's "Basic Structure Doctrine" holds that certain features of the Constitution cannot be altered even by constitutional amendment. **B.** Free and fair elections are considered part of this basic structure. **C.** Simultaneous elections might be seen as altering this fundamental aspect of Indian democracy.
4. **Issues with Article 172 Amendments:** **A.** The proposal suggests that amendments to Article 172 (concerning the term of state legislative assemblies) can be made without state ratification. **B.** This could be challenged as violating the principle of federalism and the procedure for constitutional amendments under Article 368.
5. **Conflict with Anti-Defection Law:** **A.** The anti-defection provisions under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution may be compromised if governments are formed for "unexpired periods" as suggested in the proposal. **B.** This could lead to increased political instability and horse-trading.
6. **Curtailment of President's Powers:** **A.** The proposal may limit the President's power to dissolve the Lok Sabha on the advice of the Prime Minister under Article 85, potentially altering the balance of power between executive and legislature.



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7. **Impact on State Autonomy:** A. Forcing states to align their electoral cycles with the national elections could be seen as an encroachment on state autonomy, a key feature of India's federal structure protected under various provisions of the Constitution.
8. **Conflict with Article 83 and 172:** A. The proposal may require significant amendments to Articles 83 and 172, which define the duration of the Houses of Parliament and State Legislatures respectively. B. Such amendments could fundamentally alter the constitutional design of separate electoral cycles.
9. **Potential Violation of Article 14:** A. The proposal for mid-term elections only for "unexpired periods" might be challenged under Article 14 (Right to Equality) as it creates different categories of elected governments with varying tenures.
10. **Challenges to Local Body Elections:** A. The suggestion to hold local body elections within 100 days of national and state elections may conflict with state laws governing local bodies and could be seen as centralizing power, contrary to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments which empower local self-governance.

9. Constitution Articles are Being Amended for One Nation One Election

- **Article 83(2):** Requires amendment to modify the duration of the Houses of Parliament, particularly the Lok Sabha, to facilitate synchronization of election cycles.
- **Article 172(1):** Necessitates amendment to alter the duration of State Legislatures, allowing for alignment with the national election schedule.
- **Article 85:** Amendment to restrict the President's power to dissolve the Lok Sabha, ensuring fixed terms necessary for simultaneous elections.
- **Article 174:** Modification to limit the Governor's power to dissolve State Legislative Assemblies, maintaining synchronized election cycles.
- **Article 356:** Requires amendment to prevent the premature dissolution of State Assemblies through the imposition of President's Rule, thereby preserving the simultaneous election schedule.
- **Article 324:** Amendment to accommodate the logistics and implementation of simultaneous elections for both national and state legislatures.
- **Article 325:** Requires amendment to establish a Single Electoral Roll and Single Elector's Photo Identity Card, centralizing the voter registration process under the Election Commission of India.
- **Article 243K and 243ZA:** May be affected by the amendment to Article 325, potentially altering the role of State Election Commissions in preparing electoral rolls for local body elections.
- **Proposed Article 324A:** A new article to be introduced to facilitate simultaneous elections for Panchayats and Municipalities alongside general elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

10. Key Recommends on One Nation One Election

- **Constitutional Amendments:** 1. Amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Constitution are required to establish fixed tenures for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, and to modify provisions for their dissolution.
- **Synchronized Election Cycles:** 1. Conduct elections to the Lok Sabha and approximately half of the State Assemblies in one cycle. 2. Hold elections for the remaining State Assemblies in a second cycle, approximately two and a half years later.
- **Modification of No-Confidence Motion Procedures:** 1. Mandate that any no-confidence motion in the Lok Sabha or Legislative Assembly must be accompanied by a confidence motion for the formation of an alternative government. 2. This requires amendments to relevant parliamentary procedures and potentially the Constitution.
- **Limited Term for Prematurely Dissolved Houses:** 1. In case of unavoidable premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha or a State Assembly, the newly constituted House shall only serve for the remainder of the original



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House's term. 2.This necessitates amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and potentially the Constitution.

- **Bye-Election Consolidation:** 1. Consolidate bye-elections necessitated by death, resignation, or disqualification of members.2. Conduct these consolidated bye-elections once annually.3. This requires amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and relevant election rules.
- **Transitional Provisions:**1. Implement provisions for curtailing or extending the tenures of existing assemblies to align with the new simultaneous election cycles. 2. This requires specific constitutional amendments and transitional clauses in the implementing legislation.
- **Amendment of the Representation of the People Act, 1951:** Modify the Act to accommodate the new election schedule, altered terms of houses, and revised procedures for bye-elections.

11. Implementation would need

- A phased approach (e.g., grouping elections).
- Consensus through all-party meetings.
- Adequate resources and ECI preparation.

12. Advantages of Implementing One Nation, One Election

- **Cost Efficiency:** Reduces election expenditure.
- **Governance Continuity:** Avoids policy paralysis.
- **Time Efficiency:** Frees up administrative and security forces.
- **Focused Development:** Prevents frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct.
- **Increased Voter Turnout:** Voter participation may rise due to single-time polling.

13. Disadvantages of Implementing One Nation, One Election

- **Threat to Federalism:** May centralize power.
- **Complex Execution:** Voter and logistics management challenges.
- **Political Dominance:** Regional issues may be marginalized.
- **Judicial Hurdles:** Risk of litigation.
- **Democratic Disruption:** Natural legislative dissolutions and emergency situations can disrupt the cycle.

10. Conclusion

"One Nation, One Election" is an innovative but complex electoral reform. While it offers economic and governance advantages, it poses significant constitutional, political, and logistical challenges. The success of ONOE depends on broad political consensus, legal safeguards, and institutional preparedness. Rather than an abrupt shift, a phased implementation with pilot projects and regular review mechanisms may provide a balanced approach. Ultimately, any reform must uphold the spirit of Indian democracy and the principles of federalism.

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