

One Nation, One Election: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

The concept of "One Nation, One Election" seeks to synchronize the electoral processes for the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies in India. Advocates of this proposal argue that unifying elections could significantly reduce the overall costs associated with campaigning and administrative efforts, making the electoral process more efficient. They believe that simultaneous elections could also alleviate the issue of policy stagnation, ensuring more stable and continuous governance by allowing elected representatives to focus on long-term policies rather than being preoccupied with frequent elections. Conversely, critics warn that this approach might pose threats to the fundamental principles of federalism by diluting the distinction between state and national issues. They highlight concerns regarding the complexities involved in managing electoral logistics and potential negative impacts on democratic representation, as regional issues might be overshadowed by national narratives. This article delves deeply into the feasibility, advantages, and obstacles associated with the implementation of synchronized elections in India, while reflecting on its broader social, political, and constitutional implications.

Keywords: One Nation, One Election, ONOE, Logistical Challenges, Simultaneous Elections, Federalism, Constitutional Amendments, Economic Implications.

1. Introduction:

India boasts one of the most dynamic and comprehensive electoral systems globally, characterized by regular elections across various tiers of governance. These frequent elections ensure robust democratic participation and engagement among the populace. However, the overlapping schedules can often lead to electoral fatigue, disrupt governance, and incur substantial costs. The notion of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) aims to synchronize these elections, potentially creating a more streamlined process while minimizing interruptions to governance and daily life.

Since its inception, the ONOE proposal has sparked intense discussions, gaining traction from political leaders and citizens alike. Although the idea has been on the table since the 1980s, recent advancements in political dialogue have revitalized interest in its feasibility and implementation. Proponents argue that aligning election cycles could enhance administrative efficiency and reduce resource wastage, while critics caution against potential ramifications on regional representation and democratic engagement. Ultimately, the debate continues to evolve as stakeholders debate the merits and challenges of this significant electoral reform.

2. Endorsement of Union Cabinet:

Nearly three months after the Union Cabinet endorsed the high-level committee's recommendations, led by former President Ram Nath Kovind, for simultaneous elections, two bills were passed on Thursday, December 12, 2024. One of these is a constitutional amendment bill designed to facilitate concurrent

elections for the Lok Sabha and all state assemblies, while the other is an ordinary bill focused on synchronizing elections in Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu and Kashmir.

The Union Cabinet opted not to consider any draft legislation aimed at aligning local panchayat and municipal elections with Lok Sabha and assembly elections. This decision indicates that the government is taking a cautious approach to implementing simultaneous elections.

Parliament has the authority to legislate for holding simultaneous elections for all state and union territory assemblies alongside parliamentary elections without requiring consultation with state governments or approval from state assemblies. However, if the government intends to propose a bill that synchronizes local body elections or establishes a Single Electoral Roll through the Election Commission of India (ECI), it will need to secure the approval of at least half of the state legislatures before implementation can occur. The central government is anticipated to introduce The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, which seeks amendments to Articles 82, 83, 172, and 327, along with The Union Territories (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in Parliament at the start of the following week. These bills may be reviewed by a Joint Committee of Parliament. The Union Territories (Amendment) Bill, 2024 includes regulations concerning Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, and Puducherry.

This legislation introduces a new Article 82(A), which pertains to simultaneous elections for the House of the People and all Legislative Assemblies, while also amending Article 83 (Duration of Houses of Parliament), Article 172 (Duration of State Legislatures), and Article 327 (Authority of Parliament to establish election provisions for Legislatures).

The two legislative proposals aimed at enabling simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies include provisions for conducting "mid-term" elections in the event of a government dissolution. However, these mid-term elections would cover only the "unexpired" portion of the remaining five-year term.

According to the Statement of Objects and Reasons for The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, there is a pressing need for simultaneous elections due to escalating costs and prolonged processes associated with elections. The enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct during election periods significantly impedes ongoing development programs, disrupts normal public life, affects the functioning of public services, and channels manpower away from essential duties to manage election-related tasks. The proposed constitutional amendment indicates that the President will implement the 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) legislation on the first day of the Lok Sabha session following the next general elections, referred to as "the appointed date." This timeline suggests that the first simultaneous elections could occur in 2034, unless the central government chooses to conduct mid-term elections before the conclusion of its current five-year term.

Additionally, the Bill specifies that the terms of all Assemblies formed after the appointed date will be aligned with the five-year duration of the Lok Sabha, at which point simultaneous elections could be initiated. It also introduces the notion of an "unexpired" term, defined as the period between the dissolution of the House and the five years following the date of its first meeting, applicable in situations where the Lok Sabha or an Assembly is dissolved before serving its full term.

3. Historical Context:

The concept of conducting simultaneous elections is not a recent development in India. Between 1952 and 1967, the country observed a practice where the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections were held concurrently. This approach was aimed at streamlining electoral processes and reducing the frequency of

elections, allowing for more efficient governance. However, this synchronization was disrupted as a result of premature dissolutions of both state assemblies and the Lok Sabha, resulting in a fragmented electoral landscape.

Despite the challenges faced in maintaining simultaneous elections, there have been intermittent efforts to reintroduce this practice in the Indian electoral system. Various stakeholders, including the Election Commission of India (ECI) and several think tanks, have periodically revisited the idea. They have engaged in comprehensive discussions and analyses to evaluate the feasibility and potential benefits of syncing elections, given that the Indian political landscape has evolved significantly over the decades.

The revival of simultaneous elections could potentially lead to reduced political campaigning, decreased expenditures for both the government and candidates, and more stable governance. Advocates argue that aligning Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections may minimize electoral fatigue among voters and promote higher turnout rates. As the conversation around election reforms continues, it remains to be seen whether India will once again embrace this approach and the implications it may have for the democratic process.

4. Literature Review: One Nation, One Election:

- **Historical Development of Simultaneous Elections:** India's experience with simultaneous elections began with its inaugural general elections in 1952, 1957, and 1962, when elections for both the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were held at the same time. Mishra (2018) notes that this alignment was disrupted in 1968-69 due to the premature dissolution of various state assemblies. This interruption led to the creation of distinct electoral cycles, which have influenced the present electoral system in India.
- **Justification for Concurrent Elections:** Advocates, including the NITI Aayog (2017), argue that conducting simultaneous elections could alleviate financial pressures, reduce policy stagnation, and lessen administrative interruptions. Bhalla (2019) underscores the considerable demands that frequent elections impose on state resources, particularly concerning the use of security personnel and the operational capabilities of the Election Commission.
- **Legal Challenges:** Kumar (2020) investigates the constitutional amendments needed to implement One Nation, One Election (ONOE), specifically addressing Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174. Enacting these amendments necessitates the synchronization of the terms for both the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, presenting both legal and logistical obstacles. The author also emphasizes the necessity of obtaining broad political agreement for such a substantial constitutional alteration.
- **Effects on Federalism:** Critics, including Yadav (2021), warn that ONOE could threaten India's federal structure by concentrating political focus and sidelining regional issues. The article raises concerns about national narratives overshadowing the electoral landscape, potentially neglecting local governance requirements, especially in states with unique socio-economic conditions.
- **Global Comparisons:** Chakraborty (2022) draws comparisons between ONOE and the electoral systems in countries like South Africa and Sweden, where simultaneous elections are common. While these cases illustrate cost efficiency and governance continuity, the author points out that their smaller geographical size and less diverse political environments sharply contrast with the complexities of India's political landscape.
- **Economic Consequences:** A research study conducted by Rao and Singh (2019) emphasizes that holding separate elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies incurs significant expenses. Their

analysis suggests that organizing synchronized elections could lead to savings amounting to billions, which could be redirected towards developmental projects. Nonetheless, the authors caution against prioritizing economic efficiency over the crucial aspect of democratic representation.

- **Democratic Representation and Accountability:** Sharma (2023) argues that synchronized elections may create extended periods of non-representation in the event of mid-term dissolutions. The findings highlight that such lapses in representation could weaken democratic accountability, particularly in states grappling with political instability or governance challenges.
- **Logistical Viability:** The Election Commission of India (2018) raised alarms about the logistical challenges associated with the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) initiative, particularly in overseeing an electorate of over 900 million across 28 states and eight Union Territories. The report emphasizes the urgent need for enhanced electoral infrastructure, including improved electronic voting machines and updated voter rolls.
- **Public and Political Response:** A study by Joshi and Banerjee (2020) indicates that public opinion regarding ONOE is divided. While a substantial segment of the population supports the idea due to its potential economic advantages, there are persistent concerns about the risk of diminishing regional autonomy. Political parties, particularly those at the regional level, display varying opinions, with many expressing fears over the loss of their influence in a synchronized electoral framework.
- **Implementation Suggestions:** The Law Commission of India (2018) has recommended a phased approach for implementing synchronized elections, advocating for initial synchronization in a select number of states to evaluate its feasibility. This strategy, backed by Basu (2023), involves modifying electoral schedules over several cycles to align terms while maintaining the integrity of the democratic process.

5. Benefits of One Nation, One Election:

- **Cost Efficiency:** Conducting separate elections demands considerable resources, including finances and manpower. Implementing One Nation, One Election (ONOE) can significantly reduce the expenses tied to election logistics and security measures, leading to optimal resource allocation. By consolidating elections, governments can save money and improve efficiency in managing the entire electoral process, making it more sustainable in the long run.
- **Governance Continuity:** Frequent elections can create a scenario where governments become hesitant to enact bold policies due to the fear of voter backlash. By synchronizing elections, ONOE fosters a stable political environment that encourages steady governance and informed decision-making. This continuity allows governments to implement long-term strategies effectively, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the administration.
- **Reduced Electoral Fatigue:** The relentless cycle of elections often leads to fatigue among voters and political parties alike. ONOE aims to alleviate this weariness by streamlining the electoral process, allowing greater focus on actual governance rather than constant campaigning. With fewer elections to contend with, stakeholders can engage more meaningfully in policy discussions and civic responsibilities, ultimately enriching the democratic experience.
- **Enhanced Security Management:** Managing security for multiple elections across various states can pose significant logistical challenges. ONOE simplifies this task by consolidating the electoral process, allowing for more effective planning and deployment of security resources. With a unified approach,

authorities can ensure a safer and more controlled electoral environment, thereby enhancing the overall integrity of the elections and public confidence in the process.

6. Challenges and Criticisms:

- **Impact on Federalism:** The Indian Constitution grants states the autonomy to determine their electoral timelines. By synchronizing elections, this federal principle may be jeopardized, leading to a concentration of power within the central government and diminishing the authority of individual states to govern their own electoral processes.
- **Logistical Complexity:** Coordinating simultaneous elections for over a billion voters across varied regions presents immense challenges. It necessitates exceptional levels of organization and the implementation of advanced technologies to manage the diverse electoral landscapes effectively.
- **Disruption of Democratic Cycles:** In instances of mid-term dissolution or unexpected events, holding synchronized elections may result in certain states or constituencies lacking representation for prolonged durations. This could lead to gaps in political accountability and diminish the responsiveness of governance to local needs.
- **Political Dominance:** Conducting simultaneous elections may disproportionately benefit national parties, resulting in regional issues and smaller candidates being overlooked. This scenario could marginalize local perspectives and undermine the representation of community-specific interests in the broader political discourse.
- **Overburdening the Election Commission:** The Election Commission may find it challenging to manage the complexities associated with a single large-scale electoral event. This increased workload could strain its resources and capabilities, potentially leading to inefficiencies in conducting free and fair elections across various constituencies within the country.
- **Mid-term Representation Gaps:** In instances of mid-term dissolution, constituencies can be left without representation for extended periods. This lack of elected officials during crucial times can weaken the voice of citizens, hamper effective governance, and limit the responsiveness of government services, ultimately affecting the well-being of the constituents.
- **Marginalization of Regional Issues:** A focus on national narratives during elections could overshadow important state-specific issues and concerns. This dominance may result in policies that do not adequately reflect the unique needs and priorities of different regions, creating a disconnect between the government and the local populace.
- **Electoral Dominance of National Parties:** The influence of regional parties may diminish, leading to a reduction in diversity in political representation. National parties could overpower local voices, resulting in a homogenization of political perspectives that fails to address the unique interests and challenges faced by various communities across the nation.
- **Policy and Governance Stalemates:** Aligning election cycles may necessitate adjustments to the terms of currently serving legislatures, either by extending or shortening them. Such changes could create instability and confusion, affecting governance and the smooth functioning of political institutions as they adapt to new electoral timelines.
- **Legal and Constitutional Hurdles:** Implementing significant constitutional amendments would be essential, requiring widespread consensus among political stakeholders. Achieving such agreement poses challenges, as differing political interests and ideologies may complicate discussions, potentially delaying the introduction of synchronized election cycles and impacting the overall electoral process.

- **Increased Risks of Political Polarization:** Synchronizing elections could exacerbate political tensions and polarization among parties. The competitive nature of campaigns might intensify, fostering an environment where dissent and conflict overshadow collaboration, ultimately damaging the quality of democratic discourse and governance within the political landscape.
- **Strain on Security Forces:** Coordinating security for a nationwide election could impose extraordinary stress on law enforcement agencies. They would need to manage a vast array of duties and responsibilities to ensure voter safety and prevent disruptions, which may stretch their resources and capabilities thinner than ever before.
- **Risk of Voter Fatigue:** Organizing a single, large-scale election might inundate voters with an excessive number of options, leading to confusion and fatigue. When faced with numerous choices simultaneously, individuals may find it challenging to make informed decisions, ultimately undermining the election process and impacting voter turnout.
- **Technology Reliance:** Relying heavily on electronic voting systems and advanced logistical technologies introduces potential weaknesses. Technical malfunctions, cyberattacks, or outages could disrupt the electoral process, eroding public confidence. Additionally, over-dependence on technology might compromise the integrity of the election if systems fail or are manipulated.
- **Delayed Emergency Governance:** In emergencies, such as natural disasters, the inability to conduct elections during ongoing crises can impede effective governance. When elections cannot be held as scheduled, decision-makers may struggle to respond adequately, creating gaps in leadership and swift resource allocation during critical times.
- **Potential for Higher Electoral Violence:** The scale and complexity of one large nationwide election could heighten the risk of electoral violence, especially in sensitive areas with existing tensions. Increased political passions might ignite conflicts, potentially leading to violent confrontations among rival factions and escalating grievances within affected communities.
- **Economic Disruptions:** Hosting a nationwide election could significantly impact the usual economic activities across the country. Businesses may close, supply chains could be interrupted, and labour forces redirected, leading to temporary economic slowdowns or complications in trade, especially surrounding election periods, thereby straining local economies.
- **Undermines Local Leadership:** The prominence of national leaders and overarching issues in a nationwide election might overshadow local governance and its importance. Local concerns may be neglected, diminishing the significance of regional representation as citizens increasingly focus on national agendas, potentially creating disconnects between communities and their leaders.
- **Complicates Coalition Dynamics:** Large-scale elections may create tensions within regional political coalitions, as smaller parties may feel marginalized. When national narratives dominate the discourse, it may strain existing alliances, leading to fragmentation or even conflicts among regional parties who might feel their interests are overlooked.
- **Challenging Voter Education:** Teaching voters about the mechanics of multiple simultaneous elections can be a daunting task. Communicating complex information regarding various ballots and candidates within a condensed time frame may overwhelm citizens, ultimately complicating efforts to ensure that they are adequately informed, engaged, and ready to participate.
- **Resistance from Regional Parties:** A lack of backing from state and regional political entities could impede efforts to forge consensus around a nationwide election. This resistance may stem from

concerns about representation and resources, hampering collaboration and trust necessary for successfully navigating the electoral landscape, thus threatening unity.

7. Legal and Constitutional Hurdles:

Legal and constitutional challenges present significant obstacles to the implementation of ONOE. Major amendments to the constitution are essential, specifically regarding Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 327, to ensure that the terms of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are synchronized. Moreover, reaching a political agreement among various parties and regions adds another layer of complexity to this process. The diverse political landscape complicates efforts to establish a unified approach, making it difficult to garner the necessary support for such constitutional changes. Without a clear consensus, the pathway to implementing ONOE remains fraught with difficulties, potentially hindering progress and delaying important reforms needed in the governance structure. Forcefully pushing through legislation based solely on a dominant majority in both houses of parliament could have detrimental consequences for the federal and diverse nature of India's political system in the long term.

8. Global Perspective:

Countries such as South Africa and Sweden hold concurrent elections, presenting possible advantages. Nevertheless, their governance frameworks and political environments contrast sharply with India's multi-tiered and varied democratic system. Analysing these different electoral models offers important perspectives, while also emphasizing the distinct challenges that India may encounter. For instance, the efficiency and cost-effectiveness observed in these nations can be appealing, yet India's complexity in managing its diverse electorate requires careful consideration. Each country's unique history, culture, and political dynamics play a crucial role in shaping its electoral processes. Thus, while there are lessons to be learned from them, India's democratic fabric necessitates tailored solutions to address its specific issues and ensure effective governance.

9. Potential Solutions and Way Forward:

- **Phased Implementation:** To evaluate the feasibility of the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) initiative without causing widespread disruption, a gradual rollout can be introduced. This approach would involve conducting synchronized elections in selected states initially, allowing for adjustments and improvements based on these early implementations before expanding to other areas. The phased method can help identify potential issues and refine the process for a smoother implementation across the country.
- **Strengthening Institutions:** Improving the capabilities of the Election Commission and judicial systems is crucial for effectively managing the complexities associated with One Nation, One Election (ONOE). This includes providing additional training, resources, and support to these institutions, enabling them to handle the increased demand for oversight and transparency. By bolstering these organizations, we can ensure that they are well-equipped to address challenges and uphold the integrity of the electoral process during the ONOE transition.
- **Public Awareness:** To foster acceptance of the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) policy, it is vital to promote public awareness and engagement through open discussions and consultations with various stakeholders. Establishing a platform for dialogue allows citizens to voice their opinions, ask questions, and express concerns. This participatory approach can lead to greater consensus, alleviate

misunderstandings, and minimize opposition, ultimately creating a supportive environment for the successful implementation of ONOE.

- **Technological Integration:** Utilizing advanced technology for voter registration, electronic voting, and timely result dissemination is key to overcoming logistical challenges associated with One Nation, One Election (ONOE). By integrating digital solutions, we can streamline the electoral process, enhance accuracy, and ensure quick, reliable access to election data. Implementing such technologies not only improves efficiency but also instils confidence in the electoral system, helping to facilitate a smoother transition to ONOE across various regions.

10. Conclusion:

The "One Nation, One Election" initiative presents potential advantages while also posing notable constitutional, logistical, and political hurdles. Its successful execution requires meticulous planning, broad agreement among stakeholders, and a gradual approach to ensure that India's democratic values and federal framework are upheld. The discussion around ONOE highlights the necessity of finding a balance between enhancing administrative efficiency and maintaining the fundamental principles of representation and federal governance. Achieving this balance is crucial to ensure that the initiative does not compromise the democratic fabric of the nation while striving for improved electoral coordination. Ultimately, careful consideration of these factors is essential for fostering a harmonious and effective electoral system in India.

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