One Nation One Election: Challenges and Opportunities for Indian Democracy and Electoral Reform

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ABSTRACT

The proposal of "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) — the synchronization of elections to the LokSabha and all State Legislative Assemblies — has re-emerged as a focal point in India's electoral reform discourse. Proponents argue that simultaneous elections can lead to administrative efficiency, significant cost reduction, and minimization of the policy paralysis often induced by the Model Code of Conduct during staggered elections. Additionally, the model promises to foster political stability, increase voter participation, and reduce the burden on the election machinery and security forces. However, the implementation of this concept poses formidable constitutional, logistical, and political challenges.

This paper explores the dual nature of ONOE by evaluating its potential benefits alongside the structural barriers that must be addressed. It examines historical precedents, notably the simultaneous elections held in India between 1951 and 1967, and analyses why the system unraveled. The paper discusses the constitutional amendments that would be required to operationalize ONOE, particularly in relation to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 of the Indian Constitution, and the need for political consensus across diverse federal units. Furthermore, the study interrogates concerns related to the undermining of federalism, regional autonomy, and the vibrancy of democratic representation. Critics fear that simultaneous elections may marginalize regional parties, disproportionately favor national narratives, and reduce the electorate's ability to hold governments accountable at different levels.

The analysis also incorporates perspectives from the Law Commission, Election Commission of India, and NITI Aayog reports on ONOE, drawing insights from expert recommendations and pilot proposals. In conclusion, while ONOE offers compelling administrative and economic advantages, its adoption requires nuanced electoral engineering, constitutional safeguards, and robust democratic dialogue. A hybrid model with phased synchronization or pilot implementation may serve as a pragmatic intermediary step. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on electoral reform by offering a balanced view of ONOE's feasibility and implications for democratic governance in India.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, Indian Electoral Reform, Democratic Governance, Simultaneous Polls, Constitutional Challenges

INTRODUCTION

India, the world's largest democracy, conducts elections at multiple levels—national, state, and local—resulting in a near-constant electoral cycle. This frequent election schedule imposes significant administrative burdens, financial costs, and governance challenges. The concept of "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) proposes synchronizing elections for the LokSabha (House of the People) and all State Legislative Assemblies to streamline the electoral process.

Historically, India held simultaneous elections until 1967. The practice ceased due to premature dissolutions of some state assemblies and the LokSabha, leading to desynchronized electoral cycles.

The ONOE proposal has garnered support and criticism. Proponents argue it would reduce election-related expenditures, minimize governance disruptions caused by the Model Code of Conduct, and enhance policy continuity. Critics contend it could undermine federalism, marginalize regional parties, and pose logistical challenges.

Given the complexity and significance of this proposal, a comprehensive analysis is essential to understand its potential impact on Indian democracy and electoral reforms.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Examine the historical context and evolution of the ONOE concept.
2. Analyze the potential benefits and challenges associated with implementing ONOE.
3. Assess the constitutional, administrative, and political implications of synchronizing elections.
4. Explore comparative perspectives from other federal democracies.
5. Provide recommendations for policymakers considering electoral reforms.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing:

- Literature review of academic articles, government reports, and policy papers.
- Analysis of constitutional provisions and proposed amendments.
- Examination of case studies from other federal democracies.
- Interviews and opinions from political analysts, legal experts, and stakeholders.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The idea of simultaneous elections in India, popularly referred to as "One Nation One Election" (ONOE), has been a subject of considerable academic, political, and institutional discourse in recent years. Scholars, think tanks, and government bodies have analyzed its implications from constitutional, administrative, economic, and democratic perspectives.

Historical Background and Breakdown

India conducted simultaneous elections for both the LokSabha and state assemblies during the initial years of the Republic, specifically in 1951–52, 1957, 1962, and 1967 (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2016). However, the cycle was disrupted due to the premature dissolution of certain state legislative assemblies and the LokSabha in the late 1960s and 1970s. Since then, the Indian polity has moved into an era of frequent elections, creating a virtually continuous electoral cycle (Palshikar, 2018).

Administrative and Financial Implications

Several studies have focused on the logistical and economic burdens of frequent elections. According to the Law Commission of India (2018), the costs of conducting elections in India have risen exponentially. The Election Commission's 2019 report cited expenses crossing ₹60,000 crore in that general election alone (ECI, 2019). Frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is said to hamper governance and delay decision-making (Kumar, 2020). Proponents of ONOE argue that synchronizing elections would reduce financial and manpower costs while improving administrative efficiency (NITI Aayog, 2017).

Political Stability and Governance

The NITI Aayog's discussion paper (2017) emphasized that frequent elections destabilize the political environment and shift the focus of governance toward electoral gains rather than policy continuity. Malhotra (2019) observes that synchronized elections would minimize populist schemes that governments typically announce before each election, thereby encouraging long-term planning and reform-based governance.

Constitutional and Federal Challenges

One of the most contentious aspects of ONOE is its alignment with India's federal structure. Critics, including Austin (2003) and Bhushan (2021), argue that synchronizing elections could diminish the autonomy of state governments by indirectly forcing their political timelines to be dictated by central priorities. The need to amend key provisions of the Constitution—particularly Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174—raises significant legal hurdles (Law Commission of India, 2018).

Impact on Voter Behavior and Regional Representation

Yadav (2016) and Vaishnav (2017) suggest that simultaneous elections may skew voter behavior, encouraging them to vote for the same party at both state and central levels—a phenomenon referred to as "coattail voting." This could dilute the focus on state-specific issues, reducing the representational diversity essential to India's pluralistic democracy.

Comparative Global Perspectives

Globally, countries like South Africa, Sweden, and Indonesia conduct synchronized elections for efficiency. However, most federal democracies allow state and national elections to remain separate to preserve federal autonomy (IDEA, 2020). Thus, while synchronization is not unprecedented, its implementation requires tailoring to India's unique socio-political fabric (Chakrabarty, 2022).

Policy and Legal Discourse

The Law Commission's Draft Working Paper (2018) proposed a two-phase election schedule as a transitional model. This would involve clubbing elections in such a way that half of the states vote alongside LokSabha elections in one cycle, and the remaining states in another. The Election Commission has expressed conditional support, emphasizing the need for political consensus and constitutional amendments (ECI, 2019).

Dissenting Views and Civil Society Concerns

Civil society groups and constitutional scholars have raised alarms about democratic centralization. Roy (2020) argues that the dominance of national issues during simultaneous elections could marginalize regional narratives and reduce electoral accountability at the state level. Others caution against the use of ONOE as a political tool to entrench majoritarianism under the guise of reform (Chatterjee, 2021).

Analysis

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining doctrinal analysis with empirical insights obtained through secondary sources such as government reports, law commission papers, academic journals, and expert opinions. The aim is to understand the multifaceted implications of implementing One Nation One Election (ONOE) in India, focusing on legal, administrative, political, and societal dimensions. This section elaborates on the findings derived from the applied research framework and theoretical models.

The constitutional viability of ONOE is one of the primary considerations. India's constitutional structure is inherently federal, designed to balance power between the Union and the States. Articles 83(2) and 172(1) of the Indian Constitution fix the tenure of the LokSabha and State Legislative Assemblies at five years, unless dissolved sooner. Implementing ONOE would require amending these provisions to synchronize the electoral calendar (Law Commission of India, 2018). The requirement of amending Article 356, which deals with President's Rule, also presents a significant challenge (Austin, 2003).

The research indicates that such amendments, though theoretically feasible, would require ratification by a majority of the states under Article 368(2) of the Constitution. This raises concerns about federal consent and the risk of centralization of political power (Bhushan, 2021). The Supreme Court in SR Bommai v. Union of India emphasized the federal character of the Constitution, cautioning against any dilution of state autonomy (AIR 1994 SC 1918).

Analyzing reports from the Election Commission of India (ECI) and NITI Aayog, the study explores the administrative feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections. The ECI (2016) has indicated that nearly 14 lakh electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter verifiable paper audit trails (VVPATs) would be required for a nationwide simultaneous poll. Additionally, increased manpower, security arrangements, and polling logistics would require systematic long-term planning (NITI Aayog, 2017).

However, the benefits of cost-saving are significant. The 2019 LokSabha elections alone cost the exchequer over ₹60,000 crore (ECI, 2019). When state elections are included, this figure escalates drastically. Synchronization could reduce this burden by 40% to 50%, according to Kumar (2020). Still, logistical challenges such as phased deployment, voter education, and regional language adaptability must be overcome.

The analysis suggests that ONOE could positively impact policy continuity and reduce governance disruptions. Frequent elections necessitate repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which delays administrative decisions and public policy implementation. By limiting the frequency of MCC enforcement, ONOE could lead to more stable governance cycles (Malhotra, 2019).

However, political scholars like Palshikar (2018) argue that synchronized elections may concentrate political discourse on national issues, marginalizing regional concerns. This could undermine the diversity of India's electoral democracy. Moreover, the risk of voter fatigue and over-simplification of complex political narratives may affect electoral quality and voter engagement (Yadav, 2016).

Empirical studies on voting patterns reveal a potential "coattail effect," where voters align their state-level choices with their national-level preferences during simultaneous elections (Vaishnav, 2017). This phenomenon can adversely affect regional parties and diminish the electorate's focus on local issues.

In states like Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, which have historically held simultaneous elections, data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) indicates a tendency toward unified voting behavior (Yadav, 2016). While this may contribute to political stability, it raises concerns about the weakening of checks and balances provided by regional parties (Roy, 2020).

The Supreme Court's interpretation of election-related provisions has consistently emphasized electoral freedom and democratic pluralism. The doctrine of "free and fair elections" is enshrined in Article 324 and has been interpreted as part of the basic structure doctrine (PUCL v. Union of India, AIR 2003 SC 2363).

Implementing ONOE without adequate safeguards could attract constitutional scrutiny, particularly if it is perceived as compromising state autonomy or manipulating electoral cycles for political gain. A possible workaround is the introduction of a transitional model where elections are held in two or more phases to align state assemblies gradually with the LokSabha cycle (Law Commission of India, 2018).

The analysis identifies significant tensions between ONOE and cooperative federalism. Scholars like Chatterjee (2021) emphasize that the proposal risks undermining India's federal ethos by aligning state political cycles with national objectives. Federal democracies like the USA and Germany maintain staggered elections to protect state-specific political identities (IDEA, 2020).

Furthermore, research shows that state governments serve as vital laboratories of democracy, experimenting with region-specific policies and leadership models (Chakrabarty, 2022). Synchronizing elections could inadvertently homogenize political choices, leading to a decline in democratic diversity.

A comparative analysis reveals that countries like South Africa and Sweden conduct synchronized elections effectively due to uniform administrative structures and lower diversity. In contrast, India's multilingual, multicultural, and multi-party system makes replication of such models problematic (IDEA, 2020).

Indonesia attempted a transition to simultaneous elections in 2019, but faced significant logistical issues, including over 500 polling officials dying due to exhaustion during vote counting (Chakrabarty, 2022). This serves as a cautionary tale for India, where voter size and administrative complexity are even greater.

Based on this multi-dimensional analysis, the study proposes a phased implementation strategy. One viable model is a two-cycle election system, where half the states align with LokSabha elections and the other half follow two-and-a-half years later. This would reduce electoral frequency while preserving democratic diversity (Law Commission of India, 2018).

Moreover, any shift toward ONOE should be preceded by the establishment of a permanent constitutional body on electoral reform, tasked with overseeing the synchronization process and safeguarding federal principles. Public consultations, inter-state consensus, and judicial oversight must be integral to this transition (NITI Aayog, 2017).

Lastly, the study notes the importance of civil society in shaping the ONOE discourse. Think tanks, NGOs, and academic institutions must play a role in educating the public, scrutinizing government proposals, and proposing viable alternatives. The vibrancy of India's democratic discourse hinges on active civic engagement (Chatterjee, 2021).

Surveys conducted by Lokniti-CSDS show that while a majority of urban respondents support ONOE for cost-related reasons, rural populations express concern over losing localized electoral agency (Roy, 2020). These findings underscore the need for nuanced, inclusive policymaking.

CONCLUSION

The concept of "One Nation, One Election" presents a transformative vision for India's democratic framework. By aiming to synchronize elections across all levels of governance—LokSabha and State Legislative Assemblies—it aspires to address the perennial challenges of electoral fatigue, administrative disruptions, and excessive public expenditure. As highlighted through the preceding analysis, this electoral reform could enhance governance stability, reduce the model code of

conduct's frequent interruptions, and allow political parties to concentrate more on policy and governance rather than perpetual campaigning.

However, the potential benefits must be weighed against significant legal, constitutional, logistical, and political challenges. Implementing simultaneous elections would necessitate a complex overhaul of existing constitutional provisions, particularly Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 of the Indian Constitution. The synchronization of diverse state assemblies, each with its unique electoral cycle, may require either curtailment or extension of legislative terms, which could raise concerns about federalism and democratic representation.

Furthermore, the heterogeneous political landscape of India—with its multiplicity of regional parties, socio-economic disparities, and varying degrees of political maturity—poses hurdles in ensuring uniform electoral readiness. Logistically, the Election Commission of India (ECI) would face enormous pressure to conduct elections simultaneously across the vast Indian geography, requiring significant investments in electronic voting machines (EVMs), personnel training, security, and infrastructure.

The review of literature and data further reveals that while countries like South Africa and Sweden conduct synchronized elections, India's federal structure and population scale make it a unique case that requires careful customization of such models. It is imperative that reforms are pursued through widespread stakeholder consultation, including political parties, state governments, legal experts, and civil society.

In conclusion, "One Nation, One Election" offers a compelling opportunity to modernize and streamline India's electoral process. Yet, its success hinges on achieving constitutional consensus, logistical preparedness, and a shared political will. If implemented judiciously, it could serve as a catalyst for deepening democratic efficiency and enhancing national governance.

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