

Assessing One Nation One Election Through a Federal Lens

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Abstract

The recent endorsement by the Government of India of the High-Level Committee's recommendations, chaired by former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind, to implement synchronised elections has reignited scholarly and political discourse around the feasibility and implications of the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) model. This article undertakes a critical examination of the ONOE proposition by contextualising it within India's constitutional framework and electoral history. It explores both domestic precedents and global analogues of synchronised elections while analysing insights from various expert committees. The inquiry further delves into the practical, administrative, and normative dimensions of ONOE, interrogating whether such a model strengthens democratic efficiency or threatens the federal equilibrium that underpins India's pluralist polity. Additionally, it investigates whether ONOE can meaningfully engage with the socio-political cleavages that characterise Indian electoral behaviour—marked by regional diversity, caste affiliations, linguistic identities, and the multiplicity of party systems. In doing so, the article questions whether ONOE signifies a transformative leap toward the government's envisioned 'Amrit Kaal', or whether it portends centralisation at the cost of democratic decentralism.

Keywords: *Simultaneous Elections, Reforms, ONOE, Federal Democracy*

Introduction: Why ‘Simultaneous Elections’?

India, constitutionally defined as a ‘Socialist’, ‘Secular’, and ‘Democratic Republic’, proudly upholds its status as the world’s largest democracy. Since attaining independence on August 15, 1947, it has evolved into a constitutional federal democracy governed by a parliamentary framework. In federations like ours, where both central and state governments operate within distinct constitutional spheres, the complexities of managing frequent elections become increasingly evident. Over the years, India has grappled with the practical implications of this arrangement, as state legislative elections are often staggered and occur at irregular intervals, creating a near-continuous cycle of electoral activity while also posing other sets of inconveniences. Such conditions have fueled an ongoing debate regarding the need for comprehensive electoral reforms. Studies based on electoral reforms increasingly focus on the financial implications of frequent elections, especially the substantial costs involved in mobilizing personnel and the extended imposition of the ‘Model Code of Conduct’ coupled with socio-political consequences. These have spurred deeper inquiries into the viability of ‘One Nation One election (ONOE)’ framework. However, the implementation of such a model necessitates a careful, constitutionally sound approach without compromising the core democratic ethos.

Over time, various expert committees have examined a range of electoral reform proposals, including public financing of elections, the introduction of the right to recall elected representatives, and transitioning from the ‘first-past-the-post system’ to ‘proportional representation’. Among these, the ONOE or ‘simultaneous elections’ proposition has emerged as one of the most contentious and widely debated reforms. In practical terms, ‘simultaneous elections’ refers to the concurrent conduct of elections across all three levels of governance—namely, the Lok Sabha (House of the People), the State Legislative Assemblies (Vidhan Sabha) and the local governing bodies that promises to entail a unified electoral process in which citizens cast their votes on the same day for all levels of representation (Debroy & Desai, 2017). To operationalize this, recently, in a notable policy advancement, the Union Cabinet, led by Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, accepted the recommendations of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections—chaired by former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind on September 18, 2024 (GOI, 2024). The subsequent sections of

this article will explore the evolution of ‘electoral democracy’ and the pressing need for envisioning ONOE and related electoral reforms.

Charting the Trajectory of Electoral Democracy in India

A historical analysis of India’s electoral environment reveals that elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were initially conducted concurrently during the first two post-independence decades - specifically in 1951-1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967. The inaugural general elections, conducted from October 1951 to May 1952, followed a three-tier system involving the election of the President and Vice-President, representatives to the lower houses at both centre and state levels, and members of the Upper House. This synchronization was primarily facilitated by political hegemony of a single national party, as regional formations had not yet attained significant influence.

India’s General Elections under its new constitution, held in 1951-52, marked an unparalleled democratic undertaking- rightly described as the “largest democratic experiment in human history” (Park, 1952, p. 1). Approximately, 4500 seats across the Parliament and State Assemblies were contested concurrently. An estimated 700 million ballot papers were printed, and 224, 000 polling stations were established, equipped with over two million metal ballot boxes. The elections required around 56, 000 presiding officers, supported by ‘280,000 clerks and 224,000 law enforcement personnel (Park, 1952). Nearly two million individuals were engaged in facilitating the electoral process, either as officials or political operatives with the financial outlay (in terms of total expenditure) surpassing Rs 10 Crores (Express, 2023). Despite significant socio-administrative challenges ranging from widespread illiteracy to logistical concerns involving migrant voter registration, the Indian state effectively managed to uphold electoral integrity. However, many disruptions followed in the synchronized electoral cycles with the extensive use of Article 356 of the Constitution topping the list of reasons. In this regard, the ECI convened a conference of all India Parties in New Delhi on November 13, 1956 (ECI, 1957). Simultaneous elections were widely viewed as operationally efficient, benefiting both voters and electoral administrators, while also providing strategic advantages to political parties and candidates.

Proceeding towards the gamut of electoral democratic exercise, the Government of India conducted the second national elections from February 24 to March 14, 1957. Approximately, 115 million voters, representing nearly 60% of the eligible electorate of 193 million and more than 50 political parties, alongside numerous independent candidates, contested the elections (Roach, 1957). With approximately 2,00,000 polling stations set up, the results were declared by April 1 (Roach, 1957). The electoral process saw the ballot boxes, and the implementation of indelible ink for voter authentication, alongside other processes involved in the making of the electoral history. Furthermore, the third general elections witnessed participation from approximately 114 million voters (Weiner, 1962). The electoral machinery had now matured, reflecting greater operational efficiency and electoral literacy among the populace.

The fourth general elections marked a turning point in India's political history, signaling a substantial shift in the nation's electoral landscape. The Congress' representation in the Lok Sabha dropped significantly—from 73.1% to 54.6%—resulting in the loss of 81 seats. Meanwhile, opposition parties like the Swatantra Party and the Jana Sangh gained momentum, increasing their seats from 18 and 12 in 1962 to 44 and 35 respectively, accompanied by modest improvements in their vote shares (ECI, 1968). The election marked a significant rise in anti-Congress political sentiment and witnessed the consolidation of coalition-based politics at both the state and national levels.

A comprehensive analysis between 1962 and 1967 elections reveals significant voter realignment. While some voters demonstrated continued allegiance to the Congress, many defected to opposing parties. As Morris-Jones (1967) noted, the Congress's political monolith had been significantly fractured. The dominance of a single party was no longer an accurate portrayal of India's political structure. However, this did not culminate in a stabilized multi-party system and electoral base; instead, it fostered a fluid cross-party polity marked by uncertainty and complexity. Although Congress remained the most influential party, its seat losses at both national and state levels outpaced the decline in vote share. Commenting on the 1967 election, Da Costa observed:

The Indian Electorate long believed to be passive and resistant to change, now displays clear signs of political transformation. Youth, the less educated, illiterate masses, marginalised communities, and especially those in the lowest

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brackets are reshaping traditional loyalties. while candidates perceive this as a contest for power, for political analysts it marks a historic rupture from the past. (1971, p. 171)

In the years that followed, the pattern of synchronised elections in India gradually unraveled. This disruption began with the early dissolution of several state legislative assemblies in 1968 and 1969, followed by the premature termination of the fourth Lok Sabha in 1970, which led to fresh elections in 1971. The fifth Lok Sabha's tenure was unusually extended until 1977 under the Emergency provisions. Although some Lok Sabhas, like the eighth, fourteenth, and fifteenth, completed full five-year terms, others—such as the sixth, seventh, ninth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth—were dissolved early. Similar inconsistencies were observed in the functioning of State Assemblies across the nation.

India's political landscape also underwent a metamorphosis with the proliferation of regional parties, which emerged as powerful stakeholders in their respective states. Today, electoral activity is a perpetual phenomenon, with some part of the country always in campaign mode. This staggered election cycle imposes significant burdens in terms of time, resources and administrative strain on voters, political parties and electoral institutions alike. The continuous state of electoral mobilisation reinforces the argument for restoring a framework of simultaneous elections to counteract the inefficiencies and fragmentation of the current system.

The Proposal of 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE)

The proposition of ONOE has emerged as a recurrent theme in the Indian constitutional and administrative discourse, envisioned as a transformative reform to enhance the efficacy and coherence of the country's democratic processes. This model, as stated earlier, seeks to align elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and local self-governments within a unified timeframe, thereby addressing issues of policy disruption, administrative fatigue, and escalating election-related expenditure. Over the decades various expert bodies, commissions and scholars have reiterated the need for synchronizing the electoral calendar to strengthen the governance architecture.

With reference to the same, the ECI in its First Annual Report (1983) strongly

advocated for restoring the practice of simultaneous elections, which was followed up during the initial decades of our political milieu post-independence - specifically in 1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. The Commission listed seven compelling reasons to justify this move, the most prominent being the need to deduct the humungous fiscal and logistical burden incurred through staggered elections. Additionally, the Commission highlighted that preparing rolls multiple times for separate elections results in duplicative effort and cost. Furthermore, it stated that elections necessitate the deployment of millions of civil servants and security forces, disrupting their core responsibilities for extended periods. Another major dilemma identified was the excessive use of money in elections, particularly in repetitive campaign cycles (ECI, 1984).

A noteworthy recommendation by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) (2002), chaired by Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, in its 2002 report, underscored the detrimental effects of disjointed elections and frequent implementation of the Model Code of Conduct on policy continuity and developmental planning. This observation aptly aligns with the broader concern expressed by Upendra Baxi who cautions that reforms in electoral scheduling run together with the principles of constitutional morality. To argue further, the dialectic between constitutional morality and public morality serves well the promotion of constitutional good governance and the production of constitutionally sincere citizens (Baxi, 2020). Baxi's argument, of course, does not explicitly focus on implementing ONOE but certainly reinforces the need for a balanced approach to electoral reform.

Likewise observations from the Law Commission of India (2018), under the leadership of Justice B.S. Chauhan in its 180th draft report supported the idea of simultaneous elections on the grounds of the report stated above - conserving public funds, minimizing administrative fatigue and pressure on security personnel, facilitating policy consistency and processes to developmental activities rather than endless electoral engagements (GOI, 2018). The Commission clarified that implementing such a model would require certain procedural overhaul, such as amendments particularly of Article 83 and 172 of the Indian Constitution, along with changes to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and the Rules of Procedure of both Parliament and State Legislatures.

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Recently the government of India constituted a high-level committee under Shri Ram Nath Kovind (2023-24), the former President of India, to examine the legal feasibility and structural implications of implementing ONOE. The Committee's report remarked that frequent elections create a climate of political uncertainty, hinder long-term investment and disrupt governance cycles. Contrastingly, synchronised elections, it argued, would ensure stability, predictability in policy execution, enhanced voter participation and optimal public expenditure (GOI, 2024). The committee proposed a one-time dissolution of all State Assemblies and local bodies during the next general election followed by synchronised elections within a 100-day framework. It also recommended constitutional amendments, including the "introduction of Article 324A proposing to bring local body elections under the purview of synchronisation, subject to state ratification" (GOI, 2024). Furthermore, the committee proposed a unified electoral roll, with the ECI designated as the central authority, to reduce redundancy and enhance electoral transparency.

In this context, one is reminded of Subhash C. Kashyap's observation that "Synchronisation is not centralisation. It is coordination for coherence—a necessary reform in a democracy as large and complex as India" (2011, p. 23). Kashyap's remark underscores a critical distinction: the ONOE proposal should not be viewed through the lens of authoritarian consolidation, but rather as a pragmatic reform aimed at streamlining electoral processes while preserving democratic plurality. Drawing from this perspective, several committees over the decades have proposed synchronising elections to mitigate electoral fatigue, curb excessive expenditure, and enhance policy continuity. These recommendations further reflect a growing consensus that electoral reforms must evolve in tandem with India's socio-political and economic transformations.

Can ONOE be Really Advantageous?

A primary rationale of ONOE is to mitigate governance disability by the reducing the frequent imposition of the MCC. Empirical data from the ECI reveal that between 2019 and 2024, the MCC was active for a total of 676 days. This implies roughly 113 days annually where policy and development initiatives are paused (ECI, 2024). In 2024 general elections, the MCC remained in force for 82 days, temporarily freezing development projects, welfare initiatives and appointments (Al Jazeera, 2024). Governments are barred from launching new

schemes or announcing major policy decisions during this period, which affects both the efficiency and continuity of governance. When multiple states hold staggered elections, these disruptions become recurring, leading to prolonged periods of administrative standstill.

Table 1

Data on MCC for recently conducted elections

Enforcement of Model Code of Conduct Each Year in India							
2019		2022		2023		2024	
Jharkhand	50 days	Goa	51 Days	Meghalaya	43 days	A n d h r a Pradesh	82 days
Haryana	30 days	Manipur		Nagaland		Arunachal Pradesh	
Andhra Pradesh	71 days	Punjab		Tripura		Odisha	
Arunachal Pradesh		Uttarakhand		Chattisgarh		Sikkim	
Odisha		Uttar Pradesh	36 days	Madhya Pradesh	54 days	Jammu & Kashmir	52 days
Sikkim		Gujrat		Mizoram		Haryana	
		Himachal Pradesh		Rajasthan Telangana			
Total	150 days	Total	149 days	Total	97 days	Total	134 days

Source: Data compiled from Election Commission of India (2019a, 2019b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024)

It is also noteworthy to add here that elections in India are not only operationally complex but also financially intensive. The cumulative expenditure borne by GOI, state governments and contenting political parties is massive. While the state bears the official cost of managing elections- deployment of forces, polling infrastructure and logistics- the candidates and parties incur significant

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campaign expenditures. As per Rule 90 of the Conduct of Election Rules (ECI, 2022), the spending limit for candidates contesting parliament elections in large states is capped at Rs 95 lakhs, for assembly elections at 40 lakhs. However, these are often breached in practice. The unregulated expenditure by political parties and the resort to off-the-books funding channels contribute to the proliferation of black money in Indian elections, a phenomenon acknowledged by scholars like Vaishnav (2017), who links rising electoral costs with corruption and clientelism.

The cost of elections has seen an exponential surge. The first general elections in 1951-52 cost the exchequer Rs 1.05 crore. By contrast, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections cost an estimated Rs 50,000 crore as per the Centre for Media Studies (Business Standard, 2024). While projections had earlier suggested that the 2024 elections might touch 1 lakh crore, the actual expenditure is estimated to have far exceeded this mark, highlighting the unsustainable nature of the current electoral cycle (Business Standard, 2024). Clearly, simultaneous elections would not only rationalise resources but could also improve transparency and reduce the scope for unethical financial practices.

Table 2

Expected Election Expenditure Over the Decades

Election Year	Type	Cost (Approx.)
1951-2	Lok Sabha	Rs 10.5 Cr
2009	Lok Sabha	Rs 1,100 Cr
2014	Lok Sabha	Rs 3,870 Cr
2019	Lok Sabha	Rs 50,000 Cr
2024	Lok Sabha	Rs 1,00,000 Cr

Source: Data compiled from NDTV (2019), Indian Express (2023) & Business Standard (2024)

Scholars argue conducting simultaneous elections can invigorate democratic participation. Repeated elections in different states throughout the year often lead to “voter fatigue”, resulting in declining turnout especially in urban and migrant populations (Yadav, 1996). Consolidating election cycles can create a unified electoral event, thereby encouraging higher voter turnout. The NITI

Ayog, in its discussion paper (2017), pointed out that simultaneous elections could serve as a corrective mechanism to enhance voter engagement and reduce electoral apathy. Voting for both national and state-level representatives on the same day simplifies the process, reduces voter burden and streamline civic engagement.

Another persuasive argument in favour of ONOE is the reduction in governance disruption caused by the persistent election cycle. Political leadership, bureaucratic machinery and administrative resources are routinely diverted to election campaigning and logistical arrangements, detracting from developmental activities. According to Dr. S. Y. Quraishi, former Chief Election Commissioner, “the country is perpetually in election mode” (2019, p. 24), which severely undermines good governance and strategic long-term policy implementation. A synchronized electoral calendar as proposed by multiple commissions and scholars, may thus realign electoral politics with the principles of stable and accountable governance.

Discussing Federal Implications

The notion of synchronising national and state elections in India introduces a serious constitutional dilemma concerning the structure of Indian federalism. By compressing the temporal gap between national and regional polls, ONOE potentially fosters a drift towards a unitary form of governance, as it compromises the operational and ideological autonomy of state governments (Aiyar, 2023). Non-simultaneous elections offer voters the cognitive and temporal space to weigh national and regional issue independently. This reinforces the essence of electoral democracy by allowing distinct mandates at each level, a view supported by democratic theorists like Arora and Kailash (2018) who argue that staggered elections reflect India’s “competitive federalism”. These intervals provide space for parties and voters to focus on context-specific concerns, avoiding the subsumption of regional interests under the national agenda. Moreover, as Yadav (1996) describes in his analysis of “holding -together federalism”, India’s federal structure thrives not despite its diversity, but because it accommodates and manages competing identities through separate electoral arenas.

Critics of ONOE also caution that it could severely weaken these decentralized dynamics. As Tillin (2016) warns, simultaneous elections may incentivise national parties to dominate state elections by blurring issue boundaries,

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thereby homogenising political discourse. The result could be a decline in the salience of regional concerns, leading to erosion of local accountability and diversity in representation. This tendency toward centralisation poses a risk to the multi-level governance system that India has patiently nurtured over decades (Palshikar, 2020). Evidence from post-1999 electoral data supports these fears. In states like Arunachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Karnataka and Odisha where elections coincided with Lok Sabha polls, voter behaviour tended to favour the same party at both levels, reflecting what political scientists describe as the “coattail effect” (Chakravarty, 2016). Originally identified by Campbell (1960) in the American context, this effect occurs when a popular national figure sways outcomes for down-ballot candidates from the same party. In India, this reduces the likelihood of differentiated electoral outcomes and consolidates power vertically in favor of national parties.

Historical precedents from India’s early post-independence decades, when simultaneous elections were the norm, further validate this concern. During that period, national parties enjoyed a pronounced advantage in both state and national polls, reinforcing central authority (Kumar, 2021). While this may have contributed to short-term political stability, it also restricted the evolution of regional autonomy and local political agency, both of which are essential for sustaining a vibrant federal system in a deeply diverse society.

Thus, the ONOE proposal cannot be viewed merely as a technocratic or economic reform. Rather, it poses a fundamental question about the kind of polity India aspires to be. As Tillin insightfully observes, ONOE is designed “to centralize political life [and] reverse the trend of the last several decades which saw state politics as the preeminent arena of Indian politics” (2016, p. 16). If implemented without adequate safeguards for federal autonomy, ONOE may compromise the very essence of Indian democracy: its ability to accommodate and empower a plurality of voices across diverse regional landscapes.

Conclusion:

In summation, the proposal for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) remains at a nascent stage of discourse and policy formulation. While it promises potential advantages in terms of administrative efficiency, cost rationalisation, and governance continuity, its broader constitutional, federal, and socio-political implications are yet to fully unfold. From a societal perspective, the effects of

ONOE are equally complex. Proponents claim that synchronisation may reduce voter fatigue, increase participation, and improve electoral efficiency (ECI, 1962; ECI, 1968). On the other hand, political behaviour in India has historically reflected a distinction between national and state-level voting patterns, with voters often making nuanced choices in each domain (ECI, 1957; ECI, 1953). A simultaneous format could blur these distinctions, potentially reducing the representational diversity of Indian democracy.

ONOE gains additional significance when positioned within the context of 'Amrit Kaal'. To maintain efficiency and stability during a time of transition, the government portrays it as a component of a broader institutional reform agenda (PIB, 2019). The plan is in line with the desire for continuous governance in the service of long-term national objectives. However, by concentrating political power and discourse at the Centre, it may run counter to 'Amrit Kaal's' inclusive and pluralistic ethos if pursued without sufficient safeguards. A balanced perspective therefore suggests that the debate should not be framed as a binary of acceptance or rejection. Instead, the possibilities such as phased synchronization, where groups of state align, could be explored.

In conclusion, ONOE embodies both opportunity and risk. The vision of facilitating the government's aspirational 'Amrit Kaal' through synchronised elections must be weighed against the concerns of federal imbalance and democratic centralisation voiced by critics. As the policy architecture is still in development, it would be premature to arrive at definitive conclusions. Electoral reforms of such magnitude demand cautious deliberation, informed debate, and rigorous constitutional scrutiny. Only time, and empirical evaluation, will determine whether ONOE will emerge as a transformative stride in India's democratic journey or pose unforeseen challenges to its federal ethos.

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