
ONE NATION ONE ELECTION IN INDIA: RECONCILING THE REFORM OF ELECTORAL SYNCHRONISATION WITH THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

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ABSTRACT

The One Nation One Election (ONOE) initiative proposes synchronising elections for the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies in India. This paper evaluates the feasibility and effectiveness of ONOE by examining constitutional challenges and the implications for cooperative federalism. It reviews relevant constitutional provisions governing electoral cycles, specifically Articles 83, 172, 324, 356, and 368, and identifies the legal and judicial obstacles to aligning assembly and parliamentary elections. The paper emphasises the necessity of constitutional amendments, judicial oversight, and intergovernmental cooperation, and at the same time, the administrative and financial considerations that are to be addressed with particular attention to the logistical requirements of conducting simultaneous elections for over 900 million voters. The findings of the paper highlight that enhanced Election Commission capacity, technological advancements, and coordinated planning could improve resource allocation and reduce costs associated with elections. The paper critically assesses the effects of ONOE on voter behaviour, regional party dynamics, and the federal structure. At the same time, ONOE has the potential to decrease voter fatigue and promote governance stability, it may also diminish the prominence of local issues and concentrate political power at the centre. The paper also conducts a comparative analysis of federal democracies, including the United States, Germany, and Australia, which can offer additional perspectives for addressing these challenges. The author employs the method of comparative analysis of legal documents, research papers, books, and official government websites for sources to investigate the origin, nature, potential developments, and challenges in implementation associated with the One Nation One Election process. This paper will conclude with policy recommendations, a phased implementation strategy, legal reforms, administrative improvements, and measures to safeguard democratic processes. Overall, ONOE is identified as a viable reform with the potential to enhance the efficiency, participation, and legitimacy of India's electoral system, demonstrating that the Constitution of India is a living document, and

changes to it are to be made over time to keep it relevant. However, while making these changes, we must keep the spirit of the basic structure doctrine in mind.

Keywords: One Nation One Election (ONOE); Synchronized Elections; Conflict of Interest (COI); Federalism; Simultaneous Elections; Voter's Behaviour.

Introduction

*"At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into a little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper. No amount of rhetoric or voluminous discussion can diminish the overwhelming importance of that point."*¹ - Sir Winston Churchill.

India is one of the largest democracies globally, operating under a federal system with multiple governance layers including central, state, and local bodies and this structure results in frequent electoral processes.² Lok Sabha elections occur every five years while state legislative assembly elections are held at varying intervals due to differing legislative terms or mid-term dissolutions and in addition to this by-elections for municipal and panchayat bodies contribute to an almost continuous electoral calendar and this frequency imposes substantial demands on the Election Commission of India, administrative resources, and public finances this frequent election cycle presents significant challenges for administration and governance.³

Government continuity is disrupted as officials are frequently preoccupied with electoral activities, leading to policy paralysis annually, as five to six state elections are conducted, keeping political parties and ministers in a continuous campaign mode as this persistent focus on electoral strategy detracts from effective governance and policy formulation.⁴ Policy paralysis is further exacerbated by the model code of conduct, which typically remains in effect for 45 to 60 days, during which no new schemes or projects are announced by central or state

¹ *The Power of the "little Man" in Democracy* | *the Daily Star*, www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/news/the-power-the-little-man-democracy-1649548. Accessed 31 August. 2025.

² Ravikar, Yadav. "Reconstructing India's Electoral Architecture: Legal, Constitutional, and Democratic Challenges in Implementing One Nation, One Election." *International Journal of Civil Law and Legal Research*, vol. 5, no. 2, 19 June 2025, pp. 46–56.

³ Id, at page. 47

⁴ Arun, Karthica, and Vardhini T Amirtha. "One Nation, One Election: A Constitutional Analysis of Its Implications on Federalism and Democratic Governance in India." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2025, pp. 241–256.

governments. Consequently recurring elections impede long-term governance and decision-making processes.⁵

The financial cost of conducting elections in a large democracy such as India is substantial. The 2019 Lok Sabha election alone was estimated to cost approximately Rs 60,000 to 70,000 crore, including indirect expenses such as security arrangements and administrative mobilisation in addition to this the frequent election cycle contributes to significant voter fatigue.⁶ In response to these challenges, the concept of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) has gained prominence.⁷ ONOE aims to streamline the electoral process, offering potential financial and administrative benefits. However, its implementation presents complex challenges due to India's constitutionally protected quasi-federal structure.⁸

Brief Historical background

The concept of simultaneous elections has historical precedence in India as it was implemented during the colonial period and continued under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919,⁹ which introduced diarchy and extended voting rights to specific citizen groups.¹⁰ This system evolved, culminating in the first general elections of 1951-52, when both the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies held elections simultaneously but the political instability subsequently disrupted this synchronisation.¹¹ Multiple elections occurred in five states, and the situation deteriorated further during the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977.¹² Scholars have observed that although simultaneous elections were financially and administratively efficient, their decline contributed to a heightened focus on regional issues and increased federal autonomy and this transition enabled states to determine their own election schedules, consistent with the principles of quasi-federal and cooperative federalism.¹³

Method of Study

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) proposal,

⁵ Id, at page. 248

⁶ Supra, note. 1

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The Reforms of 1919: Montagu-Chelmsford, the Rowlatt Act, Jails Commission, and the Royal Amnesty." *Gentlemanly Terrorists*, 20 July 2017, pp. 27–59, doi:10.1017/9781316890806.003.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Supra, note. 3

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Id, at page. 243

examining its legal, constitutional, administrative, and democratic implications. The analysis draws on law commission reports, expert data, and other relevant sources specific to ONOE. Key documents include the 170th and 255th Law Commission reports. The research examines the legal framework established by the Indian Constitution for the electoral process, with particular attention to Articles 83 and 172, which define the terms of the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. In addition to administrative and financial considerations, the study incorporates comparative analysis of international experiences, identifying best practices, lessons learned, and potential challenges based on examples from the United States, Germany, and Australia.

The Current Electoral System of India

A comprehensive understanding of the current electoral process in India is essential prior to examining the proposed scheme.¹⁴ The Constitution of India, which establishes the framework for the world's largest democracy, regulates the conduct of elections and other aspects of governance, specifically Articles 324 to 329 in Part XV of the Constitution,¹⁵ which govern the electoral process.¹⁶ India maintains an extensive procedural framework for conducting elections to its constitutional bodies, including the Lok Sabha (the Lower House), the Rajya Sabha (the Upper House), State Legislative Assemblies, and local governing institutions and the Constitution of India authorises the Election Commission of India and the State Election Commissions to oversee the conduct of free and fair elections.¹⁷

Elections in India are classified as either direct or indirect, direct elections pertain to the House of the People, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies such as Panchayats and Municipalities, in which citizens elect their representatives.¹⁸ Indirect elections apply to offices including the President, Vice President, and members of State Legislative Councils, where representatives are selected by previously elected officials instead of the general electorate.¹⁹

The Constitution grants the Election Commission of India the authority to administer elections

¹⁴ Shami, Soni. "One Nation- One Election and Federalism in India." *The Academy International Journal Of Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 2025, pp. 469–479.

¹⁵ *Part XV Elections*, www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/Part15.pdf. Accessed 31 Aug. 2025.

¹⁶ Ahuja, A., Ostermann, S. (2021). *The Election Commission of India: Guardian of Democracy*. In: Boin, A., Fahy, L.A., 't Hart, P. (eds) *Guardians of Public Value*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51701-4_2

¹⁷ *Supra*, note. 13 at page. 470

¹⁸ *Id*, at page. 480

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

for the Parliament, state legislatures, the President, and the Vice President.²⁰ In contrast, state election commissions are responsible for conducting elections for panchayats and municipalities as it was established in 1950 as a single-member body, the Election Commission of India has subsequently developed into a multi-member institution.²¹ The Election Commission of India is vested with the authority to conduct elections and is responsible for maintaining fairness and integrity within the democratic process.²² Its primary functions include delineating electoral constituencies, preparing and updating electoral rolls, announcing election schedules, recognising and registering political parties, and establishing codes of conduct for parties and candidates during elections.²³

Comparing the experiences of the Countries

The concept of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has been under discussion in India for an extended period, yet it remains unimplemented.²⁴ Several countries have adopted simultaneous election systems with varying degrees of success.²⁵ The United States, an early adopter, conducts presidential and Congressional elections concurrently every four years but this approach has reduced election costs and mitigated voter fatigue however, it has also led to prolonged and intense campaigns that may have a negative impact on governance.²⁶

South Africa conducts national and provincial elections simultaneously every five years, which enhances cost-effectiveness and reduces governance disruptions however, South Africa's unitary system and limited regional diversity present fewer challenges than those faced by federal democracies such as India.²⁷ Indonesia, which shares similarities with India in terms of population size and diversity, held simultaneous elections for the presidency, legislature, and regional assemblies in 2019 and this event, involving 190 million voters, was the largest one-

²⁰ Kanodia, Janvi. "The Case for Simultaneous Elections in India." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2024, doi:10.2139/ssrn.4785264.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Aarif Mohd waza. "Assessing the Feasibility and Implications of Implementing One Nation One Election in India." *International Journal of Advanced Technology and Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 3, 30 Nov. 2023, pp. 185–196, doi:10.59890/ijatss.v1i3.694.

²⁵ Id, at page. 192

²⁶ Shah, Dr. Shreedha, and Dr. Tejal Jani. "Examining the Effects of One Nation, One Election on Indian Democracy." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science*, X, no. VI, 2025, pp. 1674–1677, doi:10.51584/ijrias.2025.100600127.

²⁷ Id, at page. 1675

day election in the world.²⁸

Sweden holds concurrent elections for its Riksdag (national parliament), county councils, and municipal councils every four years but this system is effective in smaller countries with fewer governance layers and a more homogenous population, which facilitates implementation.²⁹ Brazil conducts simultaneous elections for federal, state, and municipal offices every four years, while this system has reduced costs, it has also led to challenges such as electoral fraud and corruption, partly due to the complexity of voting across multiple government levels, but Brazil's experience suggests that, without adequate safeguards, ONOE in India could encounter similar risks of manipulation.³⁰

The idea and rationale behind One Nation One Election

The practice of conducting simultaneous national and state elections, referred to as One Nation One Election, was discontinued after 1967 due to several factors, including the frequent invocation of Article 356 of the Constitution, which disrupted the synchronisation of electoral cycles.³¹ Additionally, the emergence of numerous regional political parties further complicated the scheduling of elections for instance between 2013 and 2015, Delhi conducted two legislative assembly elections and one general election within a short period.³² These instances illustrate the complexities associated with the current fragmented and staggered electoral timetable, emphasising the potential benefits of reintroducing One Nation One Election to enhance efficiency and coherence in the electoral process.³³

Frequent elections result in significant financial burdens for both the government and relevant stakeholders.³⁴ Political parties and candidates make considerable expenditures, including costs associated with voter outreach, campaign logistics, and ongoing campaign activities further the expenses arise from establishing polling stations, managing voting booths,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Id, at page. 1676

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Karthikeyan, Prathik. "Basic Structure Doctrine and the Possibility of Simultaneous Elections." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2018, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3666391.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jay, Gohil, et al. "EFFECT OF ELECTION EXPENDITURE ON INDIAN ECONOMY." *Journal Of Emerging Technologies And Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 10, no. 3, Mar. 2023, pp. 298–307, www.jetir.org/.

compensating poll workers, and procuring essential election materials such as ammonia paper and indelible ink.³⁵ And these operational costs become sine qua non, i.e necessary to ensure efficient polling and accurate vote counting.³⁶

The Election Commission of India (ECI) incurred substantial expenses during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, and for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections the ECI projects a significant increase in the number of polling stations.³⁷ If simultaneous elections are conducted, there will be a deficit in the required Ballot Units, Control Units, and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs).³⁸ Each Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) is priced at approximately Rs. 33,200.³⁹ Consequently, the ECI estimates an expenditure of around Rs. 4,555 crores for EVM procurement for an upcoming simultaneous election. EVMs have an average operational lifespan of 15 years.⁴⁰ The recurring costs for subsequent simultaneous elections remain considerable and notably the expenditure for VVPAT procurement is a recent development, as VVPATs have been mandatory only since 2017.⁴¹

If state assembly elections are held concurrently with Lok Sabha elections, additional costs are minimal and the primary requirements include supplementary voting materials and one additional Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) per polling station.⁴² Given their average operational lifespan of 15 years, EVMs, including Ballot Units (BUs), Control Units (CUs), and Voter-Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs), can be reused in subsequent elections while implementing simultaneous elections is both feasible and cost-effective, as it substantially reduces the expenses associated with conducting separate elections. Even periodic alignment of election schedules would result in significant government savings.⁴³

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC)⁴⁴ is enforced prior to each election cycle to promote free and fair elections in India the MCC applies to candidates, political parties, election officials, and government agencies⁴⁵, as it restricts the government from announcing financial grants or

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Id, at page. 298

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Committee Reports.” *PRS Legislative Research*, 2 Sept. 2025, prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/draft-report-simultaneous-elections. Accessed 02 Sept. 2025.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Supra, note. 19

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Model Code of Conduct*, www.eci.gov.in/mcc. Accessed 02 Sept. 2025.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

making promises that may influence voters or provide undue advantage to political parties.⁴⁶ Additionally, the MCC prohibits the announcement or initiation of new public projects or schemes during the designated pre-election period as these restrictions can complicate routine administrative functions and delay the implementation of essential public services.⁴⁷ A primary advantage of implementing the one nation, one election policy is the potential to increase voter turnout we can see that in the research by Casba Nikolenyi, a professor at Concordia University specialising in Indian elections, indicates that states conducting simultaneous elections have experienced higher voter participation rates.⁴⁸

The Implication of Simultaneous election on the nexus of federalism, democracy, and Basic structure Doctrine

Simultaneous elections, while offering certain advantages, present notable constitutional challenges. The principal concern regarding the 'one nation, one election' proposal is its potential conflict with the Indian Constitution, particularly in relation to federalism and the basic structure doctrine. Article 327,⁴⁹ read with Union List Entry 72,⁵⁰ empowers Parliament to regulate elections, whereas Article 328,⁵¹ along with State List Entry 37,⁵² authorises states to enact their own election laws, and this constitutional division is central to India's federal structure. The critical issue is whether holding simultaneous elections would compromise democratic principles and essential constitutional features, including the conduct of free and fair elections as emphasised by the Supreme Court.⁵³

A central issue in this discourse is that aligning Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections would necessitate amending the five-year terms established in Articles 83(2)⁵⁴ and 172(1)⁵⁵ of the

⁴⁶ Supra, note. 19

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Nikolenyi, Csaba. "Concurrent Elections and Voter Turnout: The Effect of the de-Linking of State Elections on Electoral Participation in India's Parliamentary Polls, 1971-2004." *Political Studies*, vol. 58, no. 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 214–233, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2009.00779.x.

⁴⁹ *Part XV Elections*, www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/Part15.pdf. Accessed 03 Sept. 2025.

⁵⁰ *Seventh Schedule*, www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf1/S7.pdf. Accessed 03 Sept. 2025.

⁵¹ Supra, note. 48

⁵² Supra, note. 49

⁵³ Bhatia, Gautam. "PUCL v Union of India: The Supreme Court and Negative Voting." *Constitutional Law and Philosophy*, 28 Sept. 2013, indconlawphil.wordpress.com/2013/09/28/pucl-v-union-of-india-the-supreme-court-and-negative-voting/. Accessed 04 Sept. 2025.

⁵⁴ "Article 83: Duration of Houses of Parliament." *Constitution of India*, 5 May 2023, www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-83-duration-of-houses-of-parliament/. Accessed 04 Sept. 2025.

⁵⁵ "Article 172: Duration of State Legislatures." *Constitution of India*, 13 June 2024, www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-172-duration-of-state-legislatures/. Accessed 04 Sept. 2025.

Constitution.⁵⁶ As K.C. Wheare describes the Indian Constitution as quasi-federal, and judicial decisions have affirmed that federalism is integral to its structure and on this ground the critics argue that simultaneous elections could facilitate single-party dominance at both the state and national levels,⁵⁷ citing the IDFC Institute's finding that 77 per cent of voters tend to support the same party during concurrent elections and we have the example of a single party prevailed nationally and in most states until 1967 and the current multiparty context suggests that simultaneous elections may threaten or diminish the federal character of the Indian polity.⁵⁸

We can support the argument for simultaneous elections by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's statements during the debates of the Constituent Assembly as Ambedkar characterised India as a quasi-federal country rather than a true federation, noting that the states did not unite through mutual agreement.⁵⁹ He asserted that no state possesses the authority to secede, underscoring the indivisibility of India's unity.⁶⁰ Ambedkar further described India as a single integrated entity governed by a unified authority, with state divisions existing solely for administrative purposes.⁶¹

A key argument against simultaneous elections is that they would limit voter's opportunities to hold governments accountable to once a year. In the current system, with staggered state elections, governments face electoral accountability on a yearly basis in various states.⁶² This structure reflects the federal and democratic nature of India's political system, serving as a safeguard against the entrenchment of political power.⁶³ Additionally, mechanisms such as judicial oversight and the council of minister's accountability to the legislature further reinforce political accountability beyond the frequency of elections.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The concept of One Nation, One Election seeks to streamline India's electoral process. This

⁵⁶ Supra, note. 19

⁵⁷ Dr. Madhu, Bala. "Simultaneous Elections in India: A Socio-Legal Perspective." *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2024.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Raju, K. H. Cheluva. "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar And Making Of The Constitution: A Case Study of Indian Federalism." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1991, pp. 153–64. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855548>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2025.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Supra, note. 56

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

research demonstrates that although the proposal has the potential to enhance governance efficiency and reduce electoral fatigue, it also entails significant risks. Implementation would necessitate constitutional amendments and introduce political and social challenges. The reform could shift the balance between central and state authority and redefine the relationship between national and local interests, thereby raising critical questions regarding the management of unity and diversity within India's democracy. This research contends that a cautious and incremental implementation of One Nation, One Election, guided by expert input and broad consensus, is essential to safeguard India's democratic values. The reform has the potential to become a significant milestone if supported by meticulous planning and a commitment to principles such as representation, accountability, and federalism. As India evaluates this approach, it is imperative to ensure inclusive participation in the electoral process and uphold the integrity of constitutional and democratic values.

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