
ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION AND THE FEDERAL STRUCTURE OF INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Rajnish, Research Scholar, Dept of Law, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Rakesh Kumar, Faculty at the Department of Law, Professor, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan
Garhwal University

ABSTRACT

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) has sparked a significant debate in India's political and constitutional discourse. It proposes holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, with the objective of reducing the frequency of elections, curbing public expenditure, and enhancing administrative efficiency. While the proposal aims to streamline the electoral process, it raises critical concerns about its compatibility with the federal structure of the Indian Constitution. India's federalism, characterized by the distribution of power between the Centre and the States, is anchored in diversity, regional autonomy, and democratic decentralization. This research paper undertakes a critical analysis of ONOE through the lens of India's quasi-federal system. The study explores the historical background of simultaneous elections, examines the constitutional and legal provisions involved, and evaluates the impact of ONOE on state autonomy and democratic representation. It assesses the potential benefits of the proposal, such as electoral cost reduction, improved policy continuity, and governance stability, while also highlighting serious concerns such as the erosion of regional issues, over-centralization of power, and the logistical and legal challenges in synchronizing election cycles. The paper also draws comparative insights from federal democracies like the United States, Australia, and Germany to understand how they handle electoral synchronization without compromising federal principles. Ultimately, the research argues that while electoral reforms are necessary, any move towards implementing ONOE must be guided by constitutional morality, respect for the federal spirit, and a consensus-driven approach. The paper concludes with recommendations to balance electoral efficiency with the preservation of democratic and federal values, suggesting a phased or semi-synchronized model as a more practical alternative.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, federalism, constitutional amendment, democratic process, electoral reform, Indian Constitution, state autonomy.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Concept of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE)

The concept of "*One Nation, One Election*" (ONOE) has emerged as one of the most significant and contentious proposals for electoral reform in contemporary Indian political discourse. It refers to the idea of conducting simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha (the House of the People) and all State Legislative Assemblies across the country. The rationale behind the proposal is to streamline the electoral process, reduce the cost and frequency of elections, and ensure governance is not frequently disrupted by election-related activities. Historically, simultaneous elections were once a reality in India. After the first general election in 1951-52, elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were conducted together until 1967. However, the cycle was disrupted due to various political events such as the premature dissolution of certain State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha. Since then, India has seen staggered elections, with different states going to the polls at different times, resulting in an almost perennial election cycle.

In recent years, the ONOE proposal has gained renewed attention, particularly with support from the Central Government, various national-level political parties, and policy think tanks like NITI Aayog. The proponents argue that frequent elections across different states cause policy paralysis, disrupt developmental work due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, and involve exorbitant public expenditure. Moreover, they contend that a unified electoral process could help reduce the influence of caste, religion, and local populism by encouraging a more national outlook among the electorate. Despite its perceived advantages, ONOE has sparked intense debate among scholars, constitutional experts, regional political parties, and civil society groups. The core of this debate lies in whether the idea aligns with the federal structure envisaged by the Indian Constitution or undermines the principles of decentralization and regional autonomy that are fundamental to Indian democracy.

1.2 Purpose of the Paper: To Critically Examine ONOE and Federalism

The central objective of this research paper is to critically examine the ONOE proposal through the lens of India's federal structure. The Indian Constitution establishes a quasi-federal system, a unique blend of federalism with a strong unitary bias. This delicate balance between the Union and the States is essential to accommodate India's immense diversity in language, culture, regional aspirations, and political dynamics. Federalism in India is not merely a political arrangement; it is a constitutional guarantee for the coexistence of different layers of governance, allowing for effective decentralization and the representation of local interests. The ONOE proposal, by seeking to unify election schedules for the sake of national coherence and administrative efficiency, raises concerns about the extent to which it may encroach upon the independence and autonomy of state governments.

This paper aims to explore whether the implementation of ONOE would violate the federal spirit by forcing all states to adhere to a uniform electoral calendar, even if that means curtailing or extending the tenure of democratically elected state governments. Such a move could have serious

implications not only for democratic legitimacy at the state level but also for India's commitment to cooperative federalism, which emphasizes the mutual respect and autonomy of both the Centre and the States. By undertaking a comprehensive legal, political, and constitutional analysis, the paper seeks to determine whether ONOE is a feasible electoral reform or a potential threat to the foundational principles of Indian federalism.

1.3 Importance of Elections in a Federal, Multi-Party Democratic System Like India

Elections are a vital feature of any functioning democracy, serving as the primary means by which citizens participate in the political process. In a federal, multi-party democratic republic like India, elections hold an even greater significance. They are not just a mechanism for choosing representatives but are also reflective of regional aspirations, social realities, and the pluralistic ethos of the nation. India's federal structure allows each state to have its own elected government with distinct legislative and executive powers. This autonomy ensures that regional diversity is respected and that governance is responsive to local needs and contexts. The existence of a multi-party system further enhances this by allowing regional parties to emerge and represent specific state or community interests that might otherwise be overlooked in a centralized system.

Staggered elections, although often criticized for their frequency, provide a continuous opportunity for political accountability and public engagement. They enable voters in different parts of the country to assess their governments based on local issues, regional performance, and contextual realities. The regional differentiation in electoral outcomes is also a key indicator of the health of India's federal democracy. In this context, the ONOE proposal must be evaluated carefully. By synchronizing all elections, the risk of national issues overshadowing local concerns increases significantly. Voters may be influenced by central narratives, undermining the space for state-level political discourse and accountability. Moreover, political parties may find it harder to tailor their campaigns to the specific needs of each region if they are compelled to address the electorate at both levels simultaneously. Therefore, elections in India are not merely administrative events; they are essential expressions of a complex, layered democracy that thrives on decentralization, diversity, and differentiated governance. Any attempt to alter the structure or timing of these elections must be measured against these democratic values.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypothesis

The central theme of this paper revolves around a key constitutional and democratic question: Does the proposal of One Nation, One Election align with or undermine the federal structure of India?

To explore this question, the paper seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What are the constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks governing elections in India?
2. What historical experiences and challenges led to the current system of staggered elections?

3. What are the key arguments for and against the implementation of ONOE, particularly in relation to federalism?
4. How do other federal democracies manage their electoral cycles, and what lessons can India draw from them?
5. What constitutional amendments and procedural reforms would be necessary to implement ONOE, and how would they impact the autonomy of State governments?
6. Is it possible to achieve the objectives of ONOE through alternative models that preserve federal balance and democratic decentralization?

Based on the review of legal texts, academic literature, policy papers, and judicial precedents, the paper proposes the following hypothesis:

While the proposal of One Nation, One Election may offer certain administrative and financial efficiencies, its blanket implementation poses a significant threat to the federal spirit enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Any meaningful reform must ensure that the principle of state autonomy is not compromised in the pursuit of electoral uniformity.

In the subsequent sections, the paper will explore the historical background of elections in India, delve into constitutional provisions relevant to ONOE, evaluate the arguments from both sides, and analyze comparative global practices. It will conclude by offering recommendations that aim to reconcile the goals of electoral efficiency with the imperatives of federal democracy.

-
1. Election Commission of India, *Report of the Committee on Simultaneous Elections* (2016) <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/8751-report-of-the-committee-on-simultaneous-elections/>
 2. Law Commission of India, *170th Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws* (1999) <http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/101-169/Report170Vol1.pdf>
 3. NITI Aayog, *Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections: Saving Cost and Time* (January 2017) https://www.niti.gov.in/files/document_publication/Simultaneous-Elections.pdf
 4. K.C. Wheare, *Federal Government* (Oxford University Press, 5th edn, 1963)
 5. Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1999)
 6. M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* (LexisNexis, 8th edn, 2018)
 7. Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. VII (1948), speech by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on federal structure
 8. Supreme Court of India, *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, AIR 1994 SC 1918
 9. Supreme Court of India, *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, AIR 1973 SC 1461
 10. Sujit Choudhry (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution* (Oxford University Press, 2016)
 11. Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections to the Lok Sabha, 1951-2019* <https://eci.gov.in/statistical-report/statistical-reports/>
 12. Arvind P. Datar, 'Simultaneous Elections: A Constitutional and Practical Challenge' (2019) *Indian Journal of Constitutional Law* 9(1)
 13. Palshikar, Suhas, 'Democracy and Federalism in India: Safeguarding Democratic Spaces' (2020) *EPW* Vol. 55, Issue No. 5
 14. Baxi, Upendra, *The Indian Supreme Court and Politics* (Eastern Book Company, 1980)
 15. Bhattacharya, Dhruva, 'One Nation, One Election and the Problem of Federalism' (2023) *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 58, Issue No. 20
 16. Sathe, S.P., *Judicial Activism in India: Transgressing Borders and Enforcing Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

2 Literature Review

The debate surrounding the proposal of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* has stimulated considerable academic, institutional, and legal commentary. Various scholars, think tanks, and constitutional bodies have examined the implications of ONOE on Indian democracy, governance, and federalism. The Law Commission of India, in its 170th Report on Electoral Reforms (1999), first seriously advocated for simultaneous elections, arguing that frequent polls burden the exchequer, drain administrative resources, and disrupt policy continuity¹. Later, the NITI Aayog's Discussion Paper (2017) reinforced this stance by highlighting the benefits of ONOE in terms of cost-efficiency, reduced governance disruption, and improved voter turnout². Legal scholar Arvind Datar has argued that the practical difficulties of ONOE stem from the constitutional framework itself, which does not envisage a fixed term for all legislatures due to the possibilities of premature dissolution³. Similarly, M.P. Jain, in his seminal work on Indian constitutional law, observes that while Article 83(2) and Article 172 fix a five-year term for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, respectively, their dissolution remains contingent on evolving political circumstances⁴.

Federalism scholars such as Suhas Palshikar and Dhruva Bhattacharya critique ONOE for its potential to centralize political power and undermine the autonomy of regional governments⁵. They argue that simultaneous elections risk subordinating state and local issues to national narratives, thereby marginalizing regional parties and voters. This concern resonates with the judicial emphasis on federalism as a basic structure of the Constitution, notably in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994), which underscores the importance of maintaining a balance of power between the Centre and states⁵. ONOE's centralizing tendencies, therefore, could erode the pluralistic and multi-tiered nature of Indian democracy. The Election Commission of India (ECI), in various reports, has acknowledged the benefits of ONOE but insists that its implementation would require major constitutional and legal amendments, including changes to Articles 83, 172, 356, and the Representation of the People Act, 1951⁶. Comparative analyses with other federations like the United States, Germany, and Australia suggest that while synchronizing elections can bring efficiency, it is rarely practiced due to the autonomy of constituent units⁷. Thus, the literature broadly acknowledges the merits of ONOE in administrative terms but expresses caution regarding its compatibility with India's federal, multi-tiered democracy. Most scholars emphasize the need for widespread consensus and constitutional safeguards before any shift toward a unified electoral calendar.

-
1. Law Commission of India, *170th Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws* (1999) <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports.htm> accessed 19 May 2025.
 2. NITI Aayog, *Discussion Paper: Analysis of Simultaneous Elections* (January 2017) https://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Simultaneous-Elections.pdf accessed 19 May 2025.
 3. Arvind Datar, 'One Nation, One Election: Legal and Constitutional Hurdles' (2020) *The Hindu* <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/legal-hurdles-to-one-nation-one-election/article30806727.ece> accessed 19 May 2025.
 4. M P Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* (8th edn, LexisNexis 2018) 546–548.
 5. Suhas Palshikar and Dhruva Bhattacharya, 'One Nation, One Election and the Problem of Federalism' (2023) *Economic and Political Weekly* <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/21/commentary/one-nation-one-election.html> accessed 19 May 2025.

6. Election Commission of India, *Annual Report 2016–17*, Chapter 6: Simultaneous Elections <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/4161-eci-annual-report-2016-17/> accessed 19 May 2025.
7. Centre for Policy Research, *Electoral Synchronisation in Federal Democracies: A Comparative Study* (2018) <https://cprindia.org/research/reports/electoral-synchronisation-in-federal-democracies> accessed 19 May 2025.

3 Historical Background

The concept of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) is not a novel proposal in the Indian constitutional and electoral landscape. In fact, the practice of simultaneous elections was the norm during the initial decades following India's independence. However, due to several political and constitutional developments, this practice gradually collapsed, giving rise to the present-day pattern of staggered elections. Understanding the historical context of simultaneous elections in India is essential to assess the current debate surrounding ONOE and its implications on the federal structure.

3.1 Simultaneous Elections in India until 1967

After gaining independence in 1947 and adopting the Constitution in 1950, India conducted its first general elections in 1951–52. During this time, simultaneous elections were held for the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies. This practice continued smoothly through the next three general elections- 1957, 1962, and 1967. These elections were conducted in a coordinated manner across the country, ensuring that voters exercised their franchise for both the central and state governments at the same time.

This synchronization was enabled by the uniformity in the electoral calendar of the Lok Sabha and various State Assemblies, whose terms were broadly aligned. The efficiency of this system was visible in the streamlined deployment of administrative and security personnel, reduced financial expenditure, and minimized disruption to developmental activities. Simultaneous elections also meant that the electorate was exposed to political discourse on both national and local issues at a single point in time, arguably enhancing political awareness and participation.

3.2 Reasons for Discontinuation of Simultaneous Elections

The continuity of synchronized elections was disrupted primarily due to the premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha and various State Legislative Assemblies, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Fourth Lok Sabha, elected in 1967, was dissolved prematurely in 1970, necessitating fresh elections in 1971. Around the same time, several state assemblies also experienced political instability, leading to early dissolution.

The process snowballed further during the 1970s and 1980s due to increased political fragmentation, the emergence of coalition politics, and the frequent use of Article 356 of the Constitution, which empowers the Centre to impose President's Rule in states under certain circumstances. These developments disrupted the electoral cycle, resulting in staggered elections

across different states and the Centre. As a result, the synchronization of elections was lost, and the democratic process became an almost continuous phenomenon in India.

The administrative, financial, and governance-related challenges of frequent elections became a matter of concern. Campaigning and implementation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) often stalled policy decisions and development programs. These challenges eventually prompted the consideration of restoring simultaneous elections, leading to deliberations by various committees and institutions.

3.3 Key committee references

3.3.1 Law Commission of India: 170th & 255th Reports

The Law Commission of India has played a pivotal role in rekindling the debate around ONOE. In its **170th Report on Electoral Reforms (1999)**, the Commission strongly recommended the feasibility of holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The report noted that recurring elections not only placed a burden on the public exchequer but also diverted the attention of the government and civil machinery from governance to election management¹. The Commission acknowledged that the existing constitutional framework did not strictly prohibit simultaneous elections, but achieving it would necessitate thoughtful amendments and political consensus.

Building upon this, the **255th Report of the Law Commission (2015)** revisited the issue of electoral reforms, this time with greater urgency. It reiterated the benefits of ONOE, including financial prudence, reduction in policy paralysis due to MCC enforcement, and improvement in voter participation. However, the report also emphasized the complex constitutional amendments required, particularly to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174, and cautioned against abrupt transitions without broad political agreement².

3.3.2 Election Commission of India's Viewpoint

The Election Commission of India (ECI), being the constitutional authority responsible for conducting elections in India, has also weighed in on the issue. The ECI has consistently acknowledged that simultaneous elections would indeed reduce the strain on election machinery, logistics, and manpower. According to various statements and internal reports, the Commission supports the idea in principle but notes that implementation would require “immense” constitutional and legal restructuring, along with the political will of all stakeholders³.

The ECI has also raised concerns about the feasibility of conducting synchronized elections in a country as vast and diverse as India. Issues such as premature dissolution of assemblies, differing political circumstances in states, and the need to uphold democratic mandates make uniformity a challenging proposition. The Commission has suggested possible solutions, including the use of constructive votes of no-confidence, fixed terms for legislatures, and amendments to prevent premature dissolution, but underlines that these would require substantial constitutional safeguards⁴.

3.3.3 NITI Aayog's 2017 Discussion Paper

The debate received renewed momentum when the NITI Aayog-India's premier policy think tank released a Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections in January 2017. The paper, prepared under the leadership of then-Vice Chairman Arvind Panagariya, provided a detailed analysis of the advantages and challenges of ONOE⁵.

The paper argued that frequent elections lead to a permanent campaign mode, disrupt normal governance, and divert public funds toward electoral expenses. According to the report, simultaneous elections could ensure continuity in policymaking, enhance governance stability, and reduce the influence of populist politics during election periods. Moreover, it argued that voter fatigue would decline, and national and regional issues could be addressed more holistically in a single electoral exercise.

However, the NITI Aayog also recognized that implementing ONOE would be constitutionally complex. It proposed two alternative solutions: first, a gradual synchronization model, where elections could be aligned in phases over two election cycles; and second, constitutional amendments to fix the tenure of legislatures and mandate synchronized elections regardless of early dissolution⁶. The paper emphasized the need for building political consensus and public awareness, advocating for a consultative approach involving all major stakeholders, including political parties, legal experts, and civil society.

-
1. Law Commission of India, **170th Report on Electoral Reforms**, 5.1–5.2 (1999).
 2. Law Commission of India, **255th Report on Electoral Reforms**, Part IV, Ch. II (2015).
 3. Election Commission of India, **Press Note on Simultaneous Elections**, EC/PN/2016/06 (2016).
 4. Id.
 5. NITI Aayog, **Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections: Towards a Shared National Vision**, 3–4 (Jan. 2017).
 6. Id. at 10–12.

4 Federal Structure under the Indian Constitution

4.1 Defining Federalism in the Indian Context: The Quasi-Federal Nature

Federalism is a system of governance in which sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central government and constituent units such as states or provinces, enabling each tier to operate independently in certain domains. Classical federalism involves a clear division of powers, mutual autonomy, and equality between the levels of government. However, the Indian Constitution does not adopt a classical federal framework; instead, it manifests a unique *quasi-federal* structure.

K.C. Wheare, a pioneering constitutional scholar, described federalism as a system where governmental powers are constitutionally split between a centre and constituent units¹. Whereas observed that India's Constitution, while federal in structure, has a strong unitary bias, especially evident in emergency provisions and the Centre's overriding powers over the states, hence the term *quasi-federal*².

This understanding was further elaborated by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark judgment of **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)**, where it was held that federalism is part of the Constitution's basic structure and cannot be abrogated or diluted³. The Court underscored that states are sovereign within their constitutional domain and cannot be treated as mere appendages of the Centre.

The doctrine of the basic structure was initially propounded in the **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)** case, where the Court included federalism among the inviolable features of the Constitution⁴. This means any constitutional amendment or policy must preserve the federal balance.

Thus, Indian federalism is a carefully calibrated balance between a strong centre and relatively autonomous states, distinct from the purely federal models found in countries like the United States or Canada.

4.2 Relevant Constitutional Provisions: Distribution of Powers

The Indian Constitution clearly demarcates powers between the Union and the states through several articles, primarily Articles 1, 245 to 263.

Article 1: The Union and Its Territory

Article 1 proclaims India as a "Union of States" rather than a federation, which is a deliberate choice to emphasize the unity and indivisibility of the nation⁵. Unlike federations, where states are sovereign entities coming together, Indian states are integral parts of the Union, created and reorganized by the Centre without their consent⁶. This foundational provision establishes a unitary tilt within the federal framework.

Articles 245-263: Legislative Powers and Distribution

Article 245 defines the territorial jurisdiction of laws enacted by Parliament and state legislatures. Parliament can legislate for the entire territory of India, whereas state legislatures can legislate only within their respective states⁷.

Article 246, along with the **Seventh Schedule**, divides subjects into three lists:

- **Union List (List I):** Subjects of national importance such as defense, foreign affairs, atomic energy.
- **State List (List II):** Subjects like police, public health, agriculture.
- **Concurrent List (List III):** Subjects like education, forests, marriage laws, where both Union and states may legislate⁸.

In the event of conflict between Union and state laws on concurrent subjects, **Article 254** gives precedence to Union law, reinforcing the primacy of Parliament⁹.

Articles 262 and 263 provide mechanisms for inter-state dispute resolution and for constituting inter-state councils to foster cooperation between the Centre and states¹⁰.

While these provisions enshrine a division of powers, several articles give the Centre overriding authority. For example, **Article 249** empowers Parliament to legislate on a state subject if the Rajya Sabha passes a resolution by a two-thirds majority, emphasizing national interest¹¹. Similarly, **Article 252** permits Parliament to legislate for two or more states by their consent, further blending federal and unitary features¹².

Article 356 and President's Rule: Centre's Control Over States

One of the most significant and controversial provisions highlighting the unitary bias within India's federalism is **Article 356**, which authorizes the President to impose President's Rule in any state if the state government is unable to function according to constitutional provisions¹³.

Although intended as a safeguard to maintain constitutional governance, Article 356 has historically been used for political purposes by the Centre to dismiss state governments, especially those led by opposition parties¹⁴. Between 1950 and 1994, the power under Article 356 was invoked over 90 times¹⁵.

The Supreme Court in the **S.R. Bommai** judgment imposed strict judicial review over the use of Article 356, ruling that it cannot be used arbitrarily and must be based on material facts indicating failure of constitutional machinery¹⁶. This judgment has significantly restrained misuse, but the existence of Article 356 remains a powerful lever of central authority over states.

4.3 Role and Autonomy of State Governments

States play a crucial role in India's federal system, managing vital sectors like law and order, public health, agriculture, and education. The Constitution grants the state exclusive jurisdiction over subjects in the State List, enabling them to enact laws and policies tailored to regional needs¹⁷.

However, states face constraints that limit their autonomy:

- **Financial Dependence:** States rely heavily on fiscal transfers from the Centre. The **Finance Commission**, constituted under Article 280, recommends the distribution of revenues and grants between the Centre and states¹⁸. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), governed by the GST Council, a federal body with significant Centre influence, has altered state fiscal autonomy¹⁹.
- **Legislative Restrictions:** Although states have legislative power over State List subjects, Parliament can legislate on these subjects under special provisions like Articles 249, 250 (during emergencies), and 252²⁰.
- **Governor's Role:** Governors, appointed by the President on the advice of the Centre, act as constitutional heads of state. Their discretionary powers, especially in hung assemblies and government formation, have often been criticized as instruments of the Centre's influence²¹. Governors also recommend the imposition of President's Rule, further affecting state autonomy.

Despite these limitations, Indian states have developed robust political systems and have asserted themselves in policy-making and governance. The rise of regional parties and coalition governments has added vibrancy to the federal structure. Concepts such as cooperative federalism encourage collaboration between the Centre and states, aiming to mitigate central dominance and promote shared governance²².

-
1. Wheare, K. C. (1963). *Federal Government* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
 2. Ibid.
 3. *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, AIR 1994 SC 1918.
 4. *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, AIR 1973 SC 1461.
 5. The Constitution of India, Article 1.
 6. Austin, G. (1999). *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press.
 7. The Constitution of India, Article 245.
 8. The Constitution of India, Article 246 and Seventh Schedule.
 9. The Constitution of India, Article 254.
 10. The Constitution of India, Articles 262-263.
 11. The Constitution of India, Article 249.
 12. The Constitution of India, Article 252.
 13. The Constitution of India, Article 356.
 14. Austin, G. (1999). *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press.
 15. Ibid.
 16. *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, AIR 1994 SC 1918.
 17. The Constitution of India, State List (Seventh Schedule).
 18. The Constitution of India, Article 280.
 19. Chakraborty, P. (2019). GST and the Federal System in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 54(1), 42-49.
 20. The Constitution of India, Articles 249, 250, 252.
 21. Arora, B. (1995). Intergovernmental Relations in India: Retrospect and Prospect. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 25(2), 109-127.
 22. Jha, R. (2014). Cooperative Federalism in India: An Analysis. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 60(4), 820-833.

5 The Proposal for One Nation, One Election

The idea of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) has garnered significant attention in India’s political and academic discourse in recent years. The concept envisions synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and all State Legislative Assemblies, replacing the current system of staggered electoral cycles. Proponents argue that simultaneous elections will reduce costs, enhance governance, and prevent the frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which hinders developmental activities. However, this proposal has raised critical concerns regarding its feasibility, constitutional validity, and, most importantly, its implications for India’s federal structure.

5.1 What the Proposal Entails: Simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections

The proposal for One Nation, One Election aims to conduct elections for both the Centre and the States at the same time, once every five years. Presently, elections to the Lok Sabha and various State Assemblies are held at different times due to the varied expiry dates of their respective tenures or premature dissolutions.

Under the ONOE model, all elections would occur simultaneously across the country. This may follow one of two models:

- **Complete Simultaneity:** All elections (Lok Sabha and State Assemblies) held at once.
- **Phased Synchronization:** States are grouped based on expiry of terms to gradually align them over a period of time¹.

Supporters of the idea claim that this would:

- Reduce the frequency and cost of elections for the Election Commission and public exchequer.
- Minimize policy paralysis caused by repeated enforcement of the MCC.
- Improve administrative efficiency by freeing officials from frequent electoral duties.
- Foster national cohesion and a uniform development agenda².

However, critics argue that such synchronization could:

- Undermine federal autonomy.
- Leads to over-centralization of power.
- Diminish voter focus on regional issues by conflating national and state elections³.

5.2 Legislative and Constitutional Amendments Required

The implementation of ONOE would necessitate significant constitutional and legislative changes, affecting fundamental aspects of the Indian political system.

Article 83 – Duration of Houses of Parliament

Article 83(2) stipulates that the Lok Sabha shall continue for five years from its first meeting unless sooner dissolved. Synchronizing elections would require either curtailing or extending the tenure of the House—both options would require constitutional amendments⁴.

Article 85 – Sessions of Parliament and Dissolution

This article gives the President the power to dissolve the Lok Sabha. Under ONOE, mechanisms would have to be devised to avoid premature dissolution and ensure continuity of the Lok Sabha, possibly via constructive vote of no confidence or mid-term caretaker arrangements⁵.

Article 172 – Duration of State Legislatures

Similar to Article 83, Article 172(1) provides that every State Legislative Assembly shall continue for five years. This would also need to be amended to synchronize terms, requiring either early dissolution or extension of Assemblies, raising federal concerns as the Centre could influence state-level governance⁶.

Article 174 – Dissolution and Summoning of State Legislatures

The Governor's power to summon or dissolve State Legislatures, under Article 174, would need to be exercised in a synchronized and uniform manner. This implies a stronger role for the Centre in state matters, potentially violating the spirit of federalism⁷.

Article 356 – President's Rule

Article 356 permits the imposition of President's Rule in case of failure of constitutional machinery in a state. Under ONOE, safeguards would be required to prevent repeated elections in states under Article 356, disrupting the synchronized cycle⁸.

Article 324 – Superintendence of Elections

Article 324 vests the Election Commission of India (ECI) with the authority to conduct elections. Implementing ONOE would greatly expand the ECI's responsibilities and logistical burdens, necessitating enhancements in infrastructure, manpower, and digital technology⁹.

The above changes would require constitutional amendments under Article 368, and because they affect the representation of states, they must be ratified by at least half of the state legislatures in addition to being passed by both Houses of Parliament by a special majority¹⁰.

5.3 Parliamentary Standing Committee and NITI Aayog Recommendations**5.3.1 Parliamentary Standing Committee Report (2015)**

In December 2015, the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, in its 79th Report, supported the concept of simultaneous elections. Key recommendations included:

- Amending the Constitution to effect changes in Articles 83, 172, etc.
- Use of no-confidence motions only when coupled with a constructive vote of confidence (i.e., identifying an alternative government simultaneously).
- Holding simultaneous elections in two phases—one in states whose Assemblies' terms end close to the general election, and the second phase to align the rest¹¹.

The Committee acknowledged the logistical and legal challenges, but concluded that phased implementation was feasible and desirable, provided political consensus and constitutional amendments were achieved.

5.3.2 NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2017)

In 2017, the NITI Aayog released a discussion paper titled “*Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The What, Why and How*”. It endorsed the proposal and recommended:

- Synchronization of elections in two phases over a five-year period.
- Conduct of elections using electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) systems with full transparency.
- Creation of a single electoral roll for use in both Lok Sabha and state elections¹².
- Legal safeguards to ensure full-term governments by amending the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

The paper also stressed the importance of building national consensus, upgrading ECI capabilities, and ensuring non-partisan enforcement of the MCC.

5.4 Critical Assessment: Practicality and Federal Tensions

While the idea of ONOE may seem appealing from a cost and governance perspective, its implementation raises serious constitutional, legal, and federal challenges.

- Legal Complexity: Synchronizing elections would require curtailing or extending the tenure of elected legislative bodies—this impinges on democratic mandates and raises questions of legitimacy¹³.
- Federalism at Risk: India’s federal structure allows for decentralization and diversity in governance. A synchronized election regime may lead to a presidential-style domination by national parties, marginalizing local issues and regional parties¹⁴.
- Logistical and Financial Constraints: The ECI would need to deploy enormous resources, including EVMs, polling personnel, and security arrangements. Moreover, the risk of constitutional crises due to no-confidence motions or President’s Rule in a synchronized system is substantial.

- Democratic Maturity: The staggered nature of elections ensures that governments remain **continuously accountable**. ONOE might weaken this accountability by concentrating electoral mandates to one period every five years¹⁵.

-
1. Election Commission of India. (2016). *Status Paper on Simultaneous Elections*. <https://eci.gov.in/>
 2. NITI Aayog. (2017). *Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections*. Retrieved from <https://niti.gov.in>
 3. Palshikar, S. (2018). Simultaneous Elections: Potential Threat to Federalism. *EPW*, 53(7), 10-12.
 4. The Constitution of India, Article 83.
 5. Bakshi, P. M. (2021). *The Constitution of India* (16th ed.). Universal Law Publishing.
 6. The Constitution of India, Article 172.
 7. Ibid, Article 174.
 8. Ibid, Article 356.
 9. The Constitution of India, Article 324.
 10. The Constitution of India, Article 368.
 11. Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice. (2015). *79th Report on Simultaneous Elections*. Rajya Sabha Secretariat.
 12. NITI Aayog. (2017). *Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections*. <https://niti.gov.in>
 13. Bhatia, G. (2016). Problems with the Idea of Simultaneous Elections. *Indian Constitutional Law and Philosophy*. <https://indconlawphil.wordpress.com/>
 14. Arora, B. (2018). Electoral Reform and Federal Tensions. *Journal of Federal Studies*, 14(2), 122-138.
 15. Yadav, Y. (2017). Electoral Cycles and Democratic Accountability. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/>

6 Arguments in Favor of One Nation, One Election

The proposal for **One Nation, One Election (ONOE)**-which envisions synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies has been at the center of political reform discussions in India. Proponents of the idea argue that it can bring efficiency, stability, and democratic enrichment. This section analyzes five principal arguments in favor of ONOE: cost and resource efficiency, reduced disruption to governance, avoidance of “perpetual election mode,” increased voter turnout, and the promotion of long-term national policy focus.

6.1 Cost and Resource Efficiency

India is one of the largest democracies in the world, and elections are an expensive affair. According to the Centre for Media Studies, the 2019 general elections cost over ₹55,000 crore, making them the most expensive elections globally¹. When combined with frequent state elections, this expenditure multiplies. Conducting simultaneous elections would significantly cut costs related to logistics, security, polling infrastructure, and staff deployment. Furthermore, it would allow the Election Commission to allocate resources more judiciously without repeated mobilization efforts.

6.2 Reduced Disruption to Governance

Frequent elections impose the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which restricts the government from announcing new schemes or policies, leading to governance paralysis². This temporary pause in decision-making hampers developmental work. Under ONOE, with elections held at fixed intervals, the MCC would be enforced less frequently, allowing uninterrupted governance and continuous implementation of welfare schemes.

6.3 Avoidance of “Perpetual Election Mode”

India experiences elections almost every year at various levels, Lok Sabha, state assemblies, panchayats, and municipalities. This keeps political parties and leaders in a constant campaign mode, diverting their attention from policy-making to vote-seeking strategies³. Synchronizing elections would shift the focus from constant campaigning to policy delivery and institutional development.

6.4 Increased Voter Turnout and Reduced Voter Fatigue

Frequent elections lead to voter fatigue, especially among urban voters and migrant populations⁴. By consolidating elections into a single event every five years, citizens would be more motivated to participate, knowing their vote impacts both state and national governance simultaneously. Studies have shown that simultaneous elections result in higher voter turnout due to increased enthusiasm and convenience⁵.

6.5 National Focus on Long-Term Policies

Frequent elections often result in short-term populist promises tailored to specific regional issues, which hinders a unified national policy vision. ONOE would compel political parties to harmonize

their manifestos, presenting a balanced mix of national and regional agendas. This shift would encourage long-term policymaking and help align national development goals with state-level execution.

6.6 Enhanced Administrative Efficiency and Governance Continuity

Frequent elections require massive administrative machinery, which disrupts the normal functioning of government departments. Teachers, police, and district officials are routinely deployed on election duty, affecting public services such as education, law enforcement, and civil administration. Under ONOE, such disruptions would be minimized as administrative resources would be utilized more efficiently and only once every five years⁶.

6.7 Focused and Issue-Based Campaigning

With synchronized elections, political parties would be compelled to articulate a more comprehensive and substantive political agenda that addresses national and state concerns simultaneously. This could reduce the reliance on divisive rhetoric and identity-based politics, promoting debates focused on governance, economy, education, and national security⁷.

6.8 Better Deployment of Security and Human Resources

India requires hundreds of thousands of security personnel to maintain law and order during elections. The repeated deployment of forces not only strains the system but also diverts them from their primary responsibilities⁸. ONOE would reduce this burden by limiting security deployment to a single synchronized event, ensuring efficient use of human resources and better security management.

6.9 Curtailment of Political Instability

Frequent elections can lead to political instability when governments fall due to shifting political alliances or defections. A fixed election cycle could discourage such instability by requiring a structured timeline for governance and limiting mid-term disruptions. Stable tenures could improve coalition discipline and reduce the formation of opportunistic post-election alliances⁹.

6.10 Strengthening the Federal Structure through Electoral Harmony

ONOE has the potential to enhance cooperative federalism by synchronizing the political cycles of the central and state governments. A unified electoral timeline may reduce center-state tensions and facilitate better coordination in implementing national policies. When governments at all levels are elected together, the shared mandate can foster a more harmonious policy environment¹⁰.

6.11 Minimization of Electoral Malpractices and Model Code Violations

Frequent elections create more opportunities for electoral malpractices, including black money usage, vote-buying, and repeated violations of the MCC. With ONOE, the Election Commission could monitor a single election cycle more effectively and take stringent action against violations, thereby ensuring cleaner and fairer elections¹¹.

6.12 Learning from International Practices

Many countries conduct simultaneous elections, including South Africa, Indonesia, and Sweden. These countries have demonstrated that synchronized elections are not only logistically feasible but also enhance democratic stability and voter engagement¹². India can adopt global best practices while customizing the ONOE model to suit its federal and multicultural framework.

6.13 Streamlined Policy Continuity and Economic Growth

Elections often result in economic slowdowns due to policy uncertainty and delays in approvals. The fiscal burden increases due to populist spending and sudden policy reversals during elections. ONOE would reduce such disruptions, create a stable investment climate, and support consistent policy implementation, thereby boosting economic growth¹³.

-
1. Centre for Media Studies. (2019). *Poll Expenditure in India: 2019 General Elections*. Retrieved from <https://cmsindia.org>
 2. Election Commission of India. (2020). *Model Code of Conduct Guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://eci.gov.in>
 3. Mehta, P. B. (2018). *India's Election Cycle and Policy Paralysis*. Indian Express, April 15.
 4. Kumar, A. (2017). *Voter Fatigue and Participation Trends in Indian Democracy*. Indian Journal of Political Science, 78(4), 623–637.
 5. Sinha, R. (2020). *Simultaneous Elections: A Comparative Voter Behavior Analysis*. Journal of Electoral Studies, 12(2), 88–102.
 6. Ministry of Law and Justice. (2016). *Report on Simultaneous Elections*. Law Commission of India, Report No. 255.
 7. Jha, P. (2019). *Elections and Issue-Based Politics in India*. The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy.
 8. National Police Academy. (2021). *Election Security Protocols in Indian States*. NPA Publication.
 9. Singh, R. (2020). *Political Stability through Electoral Reform*. Journal of Federal Governance, 11(3), 55–67.
 10. Rao, V. (2018). *Federalism and Electoral Harmony in India*. Indian Journal of Public Affairs, 6(1), 25–42.
 11. Chaudhary, S. (2021). *Electoral Malpractices and Reform Strategies in India*. Economic and Political Weekly, 56(8), 38–45.
 12. IDEA. (2020). *Simultaneous Elections: International Experiences and Lessons for India*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
 13. Subramanian, A. (2019). *Policy Uncertainty and Economic Growth During Elections*. Economic Times, July 5.

7 Federal Concerns and Democratic Criticisms

The proposal of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has generated extensive political and academic debate. While the policy promises cost savings and administrative streamlining, it also raises serious federal and democratic concerns. India's Constitution envisages a federal structure where states enjoy significant political autonomy and represent diverse social and cultural interests. Centralizing the electoral process through ONOE risks distorting this delicate balance. This section critically explores the federal concerns and democratic criticisms of ONOE under key themes.

7.1 Potential Centralization of Power — Threat to State Autonomy

India's constitutional structure, although often described as quasi-federal, enshrines a meaningful degree of autonomy for state governments under Part VI of the Constitution. The idea of synchronized elections across the Centre and all states introduces the risk of excessive centralization, as it could lead to the dilution of states' independent political mandate and electoral authority. Synchronizing state elections with the Lok Sabha may effectively tether the states' political calendar to the Centre, limiting their capacity to govern independently based on regional needs and priorities¹.

This centralization poses risks to cooperative federalism, a principle explicitly advocated in the Indian polity. Critics argue that such uniformity reduces the scope for political experimentation and responsiveness to state-specific developments². States like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, known for their strong regional identities and autonomous political cultures, may find themselves at odds with a system that curtails their electoral independence³.

Furthermore, centralizing election schedules could strengthen the political dominance of national parties at the expense of regional ones, tilting the federal balance in favor of the Union government⁴. This perceived consolidation of power undermines the vision of “unity in diversity”, a core principle underpinning India's democratic model.

7.2 Undermining Regional Issues and Local Representation

A major criticism of ONOE is that it may undermine the salience of regional issues, which are often distinct from national agendas. Currently, staggered elections allow state voters to make informed choices based on localized concerns, such as regional development, caste dynamics, or linguistic identity, without being influenced by national narratives. Simultaneous elections risk homogenizing electoral discourse, with national leaders and issues taking precedence in campaigns and media attention⁵.

In such a scenario, voters might prioritize national parties and leaders over state-specific concerns, resulting in the marginalization of regional issues and local governance accountability. Research shows that when voters are confronted with multiple ballots simultaneously, they are more likely to align their choices for national and state elections, a phenomenon known as the coattail effect⁶. This risk diminishes the distinctiveness and autonomy of state political mandates.

Moreover, the representation of marginalized and regionally dominant communities, whose needs may not align with the national narrative, could be compromised. State elections currently serve as platforms for such communities to articulate their voices in the democratic process⁷. ONOE could stifle this diversity of expression, reducing the democratic vibrancy of Indian elections.

7.3 One-Size-Fits-All Elections vs. Local Diversity

India is an incredibly diverse country with wide-ranging political, cultural, and economic contexts across its states. From tribal-majority constituencies in the Northeast to industrialized states like Maharashtra or agrarian strongholds in Punjab, the “one-size-fits-all” approach of simultaneous elections fails to account for local diversity⁸. The electoral calendar of each state often takes into consideration local festivals, climate, harvesting seasons, and regional administrative schedules. ONOE may disrupt these localized timelines, imposing a standard electoral rhythm that does not suit all regions equally⁹.

The constitutional framers deliberately allowed states to have separate election schedules to reflect regional diversity and ensure tailored governance¹⁰. Overriding this flexibility to achieve uniformity may lead to alienation of state populations who feel their unique identity is being subsumed under national concerns.

Further, in states with coalition governments or smaller party rule, political instability is more frequent, and the ability to hold timely elections ensures that people are not governed by unrepresentative or dysfunctional administrations. Imposing fixed synchronized cycles could prolong the tenure of weak governments and delay corrective electoral interventions¹¹.

7.4 Impact on Regional Political Parties

Regional political parties have played a crucial role in deepening democracy in India by decentralizing power and representing local identities and issues. These parties thrive in an electoral ecosystem that allows them to highlight regional narratives, oppose central policies when necessary, and tailor their campaign strategies to local voters. ONOE threatens to erode the influence of these parties, as simultaneous elections with national polls could drown out their voices in the broader media and political discourse¹².

National parties—owing to their financial strength, media reach, and high-profile leadership—are likely to dominate combined election campaigns. This may lead to a disproportionate advantage for parties like the BJP and Congress, marginalizing regional parties like DMK, TMC, BJD, and others, who rely more on state-level political cycles to build momentum¹³.

Studies show that synchronized elections often lead to similar voting patterns across Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha, benefiting national parties disproportionately and disrupting the balance of power in federal governance¹⁴. This shift could reduce the effectiveness of regional checks and balances that currently hold central policies accountable through robust state opposition.

7.5 Legal Challenges: What If a Government Falls Prematurely?

Perhaps the most pressing constitutional and legal challenge to ONOE is the question of premature dissolution of a legislature. Both state assemblies and the Lok Sabha can fall before completing their five-year terms due to a vote of no-confidence, breakdown of coalition governments, or political realignments. If ONOE is implemented, and a state government or even the central government falls mid-term, how will that be reconciled with the principle of synchronized elections?

This leads to two problematic alternatives: either install a caretaker government for an extended period until the next synchronized cycle (thereby violating democratic norms), or conduct mid-term elections, which would break synchronization and defeat the entire purpose of ONOE¹⁵.

Amending Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution to align the terms of legislatures raises serious constitutional concerns. Such changes would require not only parliamentary support but also ratification by a majority of state legislatures. Many states may oppose these amendments as an infringement on their constitutional autonomy¹⁶.

Moreover, judicial interpretation of the basic structure doctrine implies that tampering with the federal character of the Constitution—even through parliamentary amendments—may be declared unconstitutional by the courts¹⁷. Hence, legal uncertainties remain a significant obstacle to implementing ONOE within India's current constitutional framework.

-
1. Basu, D. D. (2013). *Introduction to the Constitution of India* (22nd ed.). LexisNexis Butterworths Wadhwa.
 2. Arora, B. (2018). Simultaneous Elections and Federalism in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(10), 34-40.
 3. Jaffrelot, C. (2015). The regionalisation of Indian politics. *Contemporary South Asia*, 23(3), 291-303.
 4. Palshikar, S. (2017). Regional parties and the future of Indian politics. *Journal of Indian Political Science*, 78(4), 845-860.
 5. Suri, K. C. (2013). Democratic process and electoral politics in Andhra Pradesh, India. *Working Paper*, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.
 6. Chhibber, P., & Kollman, K. (2004). *The Formation of National Party Systems*. Princeton University Press.
 7. Yadav, Y. (2000). Understanding the second democratic upsurge. *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, 120-145.
 8. Election Commission of India. (2021). *Statistical Report on General Elections*. Retrieved from <https://eci.gov.in>
 9. Kumar, R. (2019). Challenges in conducting elections in India: A logistical perspective. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 65(4), 655-672.
 10. Austin, G. (1999). *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press.
 11. Sridharan, E. (2012). The Indian Election System: Staggered Polls and Governance. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 71(1), 143-160.
 12. Heath, O., & Ziegfeld, A. (2018). Electoral competition and the rise of regional parties. *Electoral Studies*, 55, 58-67.
 13. Verma, R. (2019). Nationalizing India's Electoral Politics. *Seminar*, (714).
 14. Sinha, A. (2017). Voting behavior in simultaneous elections: An analysis. *Journal of Indian Politics*, 12(3), 210-226.
 15. Chatterjee, P. (2019). Legal challenges to electoral reforms. *Indian Law Review*, 5(1), 32-48.
 16. Kohli, A. (2012). Politicization of election timetables: Risks and remedies. *Journal of Democracy*, 23(3), 86-98.
 17. Supreme Court of India. (1973). *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, AIR 1973 SC 1461.

8 Comparative Perspective of One Nation, One Election

The debate surrounding the proposal of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) in India has spurred interest in how other federal democracies manage their electoral cycles.. As a large, diverse federal democracy, India must critically assess the feasibility of ONOE by comparing it with other mature federal systems. This section evaluates how federal democracies like the United States, Germany, and Australia structure their electoral timelines and whether their models support or caution against synchronized elections. Further, it draws pertinent lessons on what India can learn from or must reject based on these international experiences.

8.1 Federal democracies like the USA and Germany. Australia: DO they synchronize elections?

8.1.1 United States: Fragmented Electoral Federalism

The United States is a federal republic with one of the most decentralized electoral systems globally. Federal, state, and local elections are conducted independently under the purview of state legislatures. While the Presidential election occurs every four years, Congressional elections are held biennially, and state elections follow varied timelines, depending on individual state constitutions and legislations¹.

For example, gubernatorial elections in states like Virginia and New Jersey occur in odd-numbered years, while others synchronize them with federal elections. Despite the logistical burden, this staggered model upholds the principle of state autonomy, allowing issues of local importance to dominate state-level elections. Critics of ONOE argue that India's attempt to impose a common electoral calendar is incompatible with this principle of federalism, where states must retain control over their democratic processes².

However, the U.S. experience also reveals that voter fatigue and declining turnout in off-cycle elections can be an issue, giving rise to debates about aligning some elections with federal cycles to increase participation³. Still, no serious constitutional attempt has been made to enforce synchrony due to the strong federal culture and political autonomy of states.

8.1.2 Germany: Mixed Synchronization with Constitutional Flexibility

Germany is another federal parliamentary republic, where both national (Bundestag) and state (Länder) elections are held under a semi-synchronized framework. While federal elections occur every four years, each state decides the term and timing of its elections, leading to variations across the country⁴.

Some states attempt to align their elections with federal polls for logistical convenience, but there is no legal compulsion to do so. For example, states like Bavaria and Hesse occasionally hold elections around the same time as Bundestag elections, but others maintain independent cycles. The German model emphasizes constitutional flexibility and regional autonomy, enabling states to choose based on practical and political considerations⁵.

Importantly, German electoral laws also provide mechanisms to dissolve parliaments and call early elections when political instability arises. This flexibility contrasts with ONOE's rigidity and strengthens the argument that synchronizing elections should not come at the cost of democratic responsiveness and local governance.

8.1.3 Australia: Staggered Elections and Electoral Decentralization

Australia is a federal parliamentary democracy, where the House of Representatives is elected every three years, and the Senate has six-year staggered terms. State and territory elections are held independently and at different intervals, governed by each state's constitution. The decentralized structure ensures that state-level concerns receive adequate attention and are not subsumed by national issues⁶.

Although some states occasionally align elections with the federal calendar for convenience, synchronization is neither the norm nor a legal requirement. Furthermore, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and its state counterparts function autonomously, reinforcing the principle of decentralized electoral management⁷.

Australia has experienced double dissolutions and early polls triggered by political crises, emphasizing the need for electoral systems to remain flexible. Critics of ONOE point to this flexibility as essential to any robust federal democracy, something India's proposed model may lack unless supported by significant legal and institutional reforms.

8.2 Lessons India Can (or Cannot) Draw

From the above comparisons, it is evident that mature federal democracies do not strictly enforce synchronized elections. Instead, they prioritize electoral autonomy, local representation, and institutional flexibility. While India might learn from these examples, several caveats and context-specific factors must be considered:

8.2.1 Electoral Synchronization Is Rare in Federal Democracies

All three countries examined allow sub-national units to determine their own election dates. Even where synchronization occurs, it is generally voluntary and contextual, not enforced through constitutional mandates. India must recognize that uniform electoral cycles are not inherent to federalism; rather, they may even contradict it when enforced uniformly (Watts, 2008).

8.2.2 Importance of Local Issues and Representation

In all three federations, the staggered nature of elections ensures that local issues are not overshadowed by national campaigns. Synchronizing elections in India could lead to the nationalization of electoral discourse, marginalizing regional identities and weakening the representativeness of democratic institutions, as seen in debates within Germany and the U.S.⁸.

8.2.3 Flexibility to Address Political Instability

Countries like Germany and Australia have robust mechanisms to handle mid-term dissolutions and political crises, which ONOE currently lacks. The absence of such mechanisms in India raises concerns about democratic paralysis if synchronization is rigidly enforced. Thus, legal frameworks must evolve alongside electoral reforms if India chooses to implement ONOE.

8.2.4 Institutional Readiness

Electoral management bodies in Australia and Germany exhibit high levels of institutional independence and technological sophistication. For ONOE to succeed, the Election Commission of India (ECI) must be strengthened to ensure logistical feasibility, maintain electoral integrity, and handle challenges such as voter roll synchronization, security deployment, and voter education⁹.

8.2.5 Voter Turnout and Engagement

While synchronized elections may improve voter turnout by consolidating electoral attention, as some U.S. studies suggest, this comes with the risk of oversimplifying complex local issues. The lesson for India is to strike a balance between enhancing participation and preserving issue-specific electoral engagement¹⁰.

8.2.6 Constitutional Safeguards

India's constitutional structure demands that any move towards ONOE be supported by broad political consensus and constitutional safeguards. Unlike Germany and Australia, where electoral systems are designed with significant legislative flexibility, India would require multiple amendments and ratification by a majority of states to enable ONOE legally and constitutionally¹¹.

8.3 Comparative Summary and Analysis

Country	Synchronization Status	Key Features	Relevance to India
United States	No	States hold elections independently	Shows the high cost of staggered elections
Germany	Partially	Voluntary synchronization; informal clustering	Demonstrates the benefits of semi-synchronization
Australia	Occasionally synchronized	Some fixed terms, voluntary alignment	Suggests an incremental approach via fixed terms

These examples suggest that while full synchronization is rare in federal democracies, partial or voluntary alignment is both feasible and beneficial. Synchronization improves voter turnout and reduces costs, but it also risks diluting local issues and over-centralizing campaigns.

-
1. Anzia, S. F. (2011). Election timing and the electoral influence of interest groups. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 412-427.
 2. Benz, A. (2008). *From Unitarism to Asymmetric Federalism in Germany: Taking Stock After Reunification*. *German Politics*, 17(4), 485-500.
 3. Chatterjee, P. (2019). Legal challenges to electoral reforms. *Indian Law Review*, 5(1), 32-48.
 4. Foley, E. B. (2016). *Presidential Elections and Majority Rule: The Rise, Demise, and Potential Restoration of the Jeffersonian Electoral College*. Oxford University Press.
 5. Hughes, C. A. (2001). *Electoral Systems in Australia: Strengths, Weaknesses and Reform Options*. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 36(1), 1-20.
 6. Jaensch, D. (1997). *The Politics of Australia*. Macmillan Education.
 7. Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5-28.
 8. Keyssar, A. (2009). *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. Basic Books.
 9. Poguntke, T., & Webb, P. (Eds.). (2007). *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford University Press.
 10. Sridharan, E. (2014). Federalism and the party system in India. *India Review*, 13(1), 15-41.
 11. Watts, R. L. (2008). *Comparing Federal Systems* (3rd ed.). McGill-Queen's University Press.

9 Judicial Interpretation and Constitutional Morality of One Nation, One Election

The proposal for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is deeply interwoven with constitutional values, judicial interpretation, and the principle of federalism. This section critically explores the legal and moral underpinnings of ONOE by analyzing landmark Supreme Court decisions on Centre-State relations, evaluating the role of constitutional morality in electoral design, and considering its compatibility with the basic structure doctrine.

9.1 Supreme Court Decisions on Centre-State Relations

India's federal structure is defined by a balance between unity and regional autonomy. The Supreme Court has consistently upheld this balance, emphasizing cooperative federalism while also recognizing the autonomy of the states. Notable cases include:

- **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994):** The Court stressed that federalism is part of the basic structure of the Constitution. It held that the states are not mere appendages of the Centre and enjoy autonomy within their constitutional limits¹.
- **State of West Bengal v. Union of India (1962):** The Court acknowledged the division of powers between the Centre and the states, reinforcing the idea that both are supreme within their respective spheres².
- **Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India (2006):** The Court emphasized that parliamentary democracy and federalism must function in harmony and that any centralization must not infringe upon the basic structure of the Constitution³.

These judgments underline that any major structural change like ONOE must not disturb the federal equilibrium.

9.2 Constitutional Morality in Electoral Design

The doctrine of constitutional morality has gained prominence in Indian jurisprudence. It refers to adherence to the core principles and values enshrined in the Constitution, such as justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

In **Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India (2018)**, the Court elaborated on constitutional morality, stating that it acts as a guiding beacon for constitutional functionaries to uphold democratic values⁴. In the context of ONOE, constitutional morality demands inclusive dialogue, federal consensus, and non-partisan implementation.

ONOE must therefore be evaluated not just on administrative convenience but on how well it aligns with democratic values like representation, participation, and accountability. Imposing a uniform electoral schedule may risk undermining state autonomy and regional expression, which are key facets of Indian federalism.

9.3 Possible Conflict with the Basic Structure Doctrine

The **basic structure doctrine**, established in **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)**, holds that Parliament cannot alter the essential features of the Constitution, such as democracy, secularism, federalism, and the rule of law⁵. Implementing ONOE would require substantial constitutional amendments, including changes to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356. These changes would affect the duration and dissolution of both state and central legislatures.

Such amendments could potentially:

- Curtail the states' power to dissolve their assemblies independently.
- Impose a fixed election schedule that might disregard political crises or coalition breakdowns at the state level.
- Centralize electoral control, reducing the political autonomy of states.

These aspects could be interpreted as violating the basic structure, particularly the federal feature of the Constitution. In **Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain (1975)**, the Court invalidated an attempt to override judicial review, reinforcing that even electoral reforms must conform to constitutional limits⁶. Thus, unless ONOE respects state autonomy and is implemented through a wide political consensus, it risks judicial invalidation.

9.4 Harmonizing Judicial Interpretation with ONOE

To align ONOE with constitutional principles, the following considerations are essential:

Voluntary Synchronization: Encouraging states to voluntarily align elections could uphold federalism and avoid legal challenges.

Phased Implementation: A phased approach involving two cycles instead of full synchronization could be a middle ground.

Consultative Mechanism: Creating a constitutional body or committee involving the Election Commission, Law Commission, and representatives from all states can ensure that the reform reflects cooperative federalism.

Safeguards for State Autonomy: Amendments should preserve the right of states to govern themselves, even while aligning with a broader national schedule.

Judicial Oversight: Ensuring that the implementation is open to judicial review could foster constitutional trust and transparency.

-
1. S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, AIR 1994 SC 1918.
 2. State of West Bengal v. Union of India, AIR 1963 SC 1241.
 3. Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India, (2006) 7 SCC 1.
 4. Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India, (2018) 8 SCC 501.
 5. Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, AIR 1973 SC 1461.
 6. Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain, AIR 1975 SC 2299.

10 Recommendations:

10.1 Recommendations for Implementing One Nation, One Election

The proposal for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) presents a complex yet transformative vision for India's democratic and administrative architecture. While the benefits of synchronized elections are numerous, their successful implementation necessitates a detailed, inclusive, and constitutional roadmap. This section explores actionable recommendations to ensure that the ONOE initiative respects federal principles, strengthens democracy, and gains broad-based legitimacy.

10.1.1 Phase-Wise Implementation: A Gradual and Practical Approach

Rather than adopting a sweeping nationwide implementation in one go, a phased rollout of ONOE can mitigate political, legal, and logistical challenges. A step-by-step strategy may include:

Phase I – Synchronization within Categories: Begin by aligning elections within the categories of the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. For instance, group certain states whose assemblies are nearing dissolution with the Lok Sabha schedule.

Phase II – Two-Cycle Model: Implement a two-cycle election system. One cycle would include the Lok Sabha and half the state assemblies, and the other would include the remaining state assemblies, with a gap of 2.5 years between the two.

Phase III – Full Synchronization: Upon successful completion of the above phases and positive assessment by constitutional bodies, a final shift to full ONOE could be initiated. This approach minimizes disruption to ongoing legislative terms and builds trust through incremental adjustments.

10.1.2 Safeguards for Federal Autonomy

Federalism, being a part of the Constitution's basic structure, must not be compromised. Therefore, ONOE should include safeguards such as:

- **State Autonomy in Dissolution Decisions:** Ensure that states retain the authority to dissolve their assemblies under exceptional circumstances, such as loss of majority or emergency.
- **Role of the Inter-State Council:** Strengthen the Inter-State Council's consultative role in determining synchronization frameworks.
- **No Blanket Imposition:** Synchronization should not be enforced uniformly without taking into account local political and administrative realities.

These measures would prevent central overreach and uphold the spirit of cooperative federalism.

10.1.3 Wider Consultation with States and Regional Parties

A significant democratic reform like ONOE cannot succeed without the participation and consent of key stakeholders:

- **State Governments:** Conduct state-wise consultations to address region-specific concerns about loss of political space and autonomy.
- **Regional Political Parties:** Engage regional parties in structured dialogues through parliamentary committees and all-party conferences.
- **Civil Society and Academia:** Invite opinions from electoral reform experts, think tanks, and constitutional scholars to enrich the debate with diverse perspectives.

This inclusive approach ensures that ONOE is not seen as a top-down imposition but as a product of national consensus.

10.2 Building National Consensus and Political Will

The success of ONOE depends heavily on building a national consensus. Political will across the ideological spectrum is critical. Steps include:

- **Constitutional Amendment Bill (Article 368):** Initiate a formal amendment process by introducing a bill in Parliament to amend Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356.
- **Ratification by States:** As per Article 368(2), amendments affecting federal provisions require ratification by at least half of the state legislatures.
- **All-Party Committees:** Form all-party committees to review the proposal, make recommendations, and ensure that all views are accommodated.

Without bipartisan support, ONOE risks becoming a politically divisive agenda rather than a reformative exercise.

Legal and Institutional Reforms

To operationalize ONOE effectively, India must undertake legal and institutional reforms:

- **Strengthen the Election Commission of India (ECI):** Provide the ECI with greater resources, independence, and autonomy to manage larger-scale elections.
- **Electoral Infrastructure:** Expand the number of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) to handle simultaneous voting.
- **Judicial Mechanisms:** Establish fast-track courts to adjudicate election-related disputes swiftly, ensuring timely resolutions.

These reforms would enhance institutional readiness and public trust in the election process.

10.3 Public Awareness and Voter Education

A synchronized election model requires an informed electorate. The following steps are vital:

- **Pan-India Awareness Campaigns:** Run media campaigns in multiple languages to explain ONOE and its benefits.

- **Curriculum Inclusion:** Introduce modules on electoral systems and ONOE in school and college curricula.
- **Collaboration with NGOs:** Partner with civil society organizations to conduct grassroots-level awareness drives.

Educating voters reduces misinformation and increases participatory democracy.

Risk Mitigation and Contingency Planning

Simultaneous elections present several risks, such as unforeseen dissolution of a legislature or political instability. A contingency framework is essential:

- **Mid-Term Election Protocols:** Establish clear guidelines for dealing with early dissolution of legislatures under ONOE.
- **Buffer Periods:** Create buffer periods to allow for postponed elections without affecting the overall synchronization.
- **By-Elections Mechanism:** Frame rules for by-elections in the event of individual seat vacancies between general elections.

These protocols would ensure that ONOE remains functional even in unpredictable political climates.

-
1. Election Commission of India. (2017). Discussion Paper on Simultaneous Elections.
 2. Law Commission of India. (2018). Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.
 3. Constitution of India, Article 368.
 4. Government of India. (2023). Report of the High-Level Committee on One Nation, One Election.
 5. The Inter-State Council Secretariat. (2020). Reports on Centre-State Relations.
 6. Supreme Court of India. (1994). S.R. Bommai v. Union of India.
 7. Ministry of Law and Justice. (2022). Electoral Reforms and the Role of ECI.

11 Conclusion: One Nation, One Election and the Federal Structure of India – A Critical Analysis

11.1 Summary of Findings

The concept of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) has garnered significant attention in India's democratic discourse. The analysis of the Indian federal structure and the ONOE proposal reveals both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, synchronized elections promise administrative convenience, fiscal prudence, and governance stability. On the other hand, they pose concerns related to constitutional complexity, state autonomy, political representation, and democratic vibrancy.

From a constitutional perspective, the Indian federal system is quasi-federal, a term first popularized by K.C. Where and reinforced by judicial pronouncements in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* and *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*. While the central government holds overriding powers, the autonomy of state governments is constitutionally protected. ONOE requires amendments to key constitutional provisions such as Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, 324, and 356. These changes are not merely procedural but could potentially alter the spirit of cooperative federalism.

The proposal's feasibility was also explored through a comparative lens. Federal democracies like the United States, Germany, and Australia have resisted synchronizing elections. They prioritize decentralization, regional autonomy, and continuous democratic engagement. These models reveal that while synchronized elections may increase efficiency, they risk undermining core federal principles and localized political expression.

Moreover, the arguments in favor of ONOE, including cost efficiency, reduced governance disruptions, and a national focus on long-term policies, have been convincingly presented. However, counter-arguments such as the threat of centralized power, marginalization of regional issues, and legal ambiguities in cases of mid-term dissolution remain strong. The debate is thus marked by a dynamic tension between administrative rationality and constitutional federalism.

11.2 A Balanced View: Merits vs. Federal Integrity

While the ONOE proposition has some compelling advantages, these must be carefully weighed against the foundational principles of Indian federalism. It is imperative to recognize that democratic processes, though resource-intensive, are crucial for maintaining political accountability and citizen engagement. Elections are not merely mechanical events but essential instruments of democratic participation and federal expression.

Implementing ONOE without adequate safeguards may skew political power towards the center, diminishing the relevance of state-specific mandates. As highlighted in various reports and legal commentaries, simultaneous elections may lead to the "coattail effect," wherein voters align their preferences for state elections based on central leadership, eroding the independence of regional

electoral outcomes. This effect is inconsistent with the principle of autonomous state governance envisioned in the Constitution.

Further, the possibility of mid-term dissolutions of legislatures raises critical legal and logistical concerns. If a state assembly or the Lok Sabha is dissolved prematurely, it would either disrupt the synchronized cycle or necessitate the imposition of President's Rule, thereby affecting democratic continuity. The Law Commission has underscored this challenge and proposed solutions such as fixed-term legislatures and constructive votes of no confidence, but these suggestions are yet to find a broad consensus.

Thus, a blanket implementation of ONOE could dilute the pluralism embedded in India's federal structure. A more nuanced and flexible approach is necessary—one that respects constitutional boundaries while striving for electoral efficiency.

11.3 Preserving the Federal-Democratic Balance

India's constitutional architecture is grounded in the idea of unity in diversity. Any electoral reform must align with this ethos. While ONOE seeks to unify electoral timelines for efficiency, it must not result in the homogenization of political expression or the erosion of federal autonomy. Democratic federalism thrives on a multiplicity of voices, and elections at different times allow regional narratives and issues to gain prominence.

Rather than enforcing complete synchronization, the government could explore partial synchronization or clustering of elections in a phased manner. This would strike a balance between reducing electoral fatigue and preserving state autonomy. Legal reforms should aim to promote electoral integrity and reduce the misuse of political power, without compromising the principles of federalism.

The central and state governments must collaboratively engage in this reform process, ensuring that all stakeholders—political parties, the Election Commission, civil society, and the judiciary—are consulted. A consensus-driven approach is vital to uphold the spirit of cooperative federalism. Judicial safeguards must also be instituted to prevent any abuse of constitutional amendments that may emerge from ONOE implementation.

Finally, any reform must be guided by democratic values. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized in the Constituent Assembly, the Constitution must not only provide a political framework but also preserve democratic ideals and safeguard civil liberties. The same principle applies to ONOE—it must be tested not only on the basis of cost-saving or administrative feasibility but also on its ability to uphold India's democratic and federal character.