ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION – A POLICY OF NEW INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Elections form the cornerstone of democracy in India, ensuring representation through periodic participation of the people in the decision-making process. The responsibility of conducting elections to the **Lok Sabha**, **Rajya Sabha**, and State Legislatures (both **Vidhan Sabha** and **Vidhan Parishad**) lies within the ambit of The **Election Commission of India**, which is an autonomous constitutional body established under **Article 324** of the Indian Constitution. At the grassroots level, elections to **panchayats** and **municipalities** are conducted by the **State Election Commissions (Hereafter SEC)** as per (Osmania University, 2024-08-31) provisions of **Article 243K and 243ZA**, introduced through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.

In a country where elections are held almost every year across different states, the idea of **One Nation, One Election (hereafter ONOE)** has emerged as a subject of intense debate. The concept of ONOE envisions simultaneous elections across the country for the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local bodies (or combination of any two). Advocates of the idea argue that this unified approach could strengthen governance by minimizing the interference caused by continuous elections. It is believed that aligning elections could help governments shift their focus from short-term populist measures to long-term policy development, while also substantially reducing the financial and administrative burden of repeated electoral exercises.

Yet, this proposal has ignited sharp debate, particularly concerning its impact on India's federal structure, political diversity, and regional representation. The issue has regained prominence with the submission of a detailed report by the **High-Level Committee** led by former President **Ram Nath Kovind**, which has revived discussions around the practicality, benefits, and constitutional challenges of implementing One Nation, One Election.

History and Evolution

The concept of **simultaneous elections in India** is not new—it has historical roots dating back to the early years of the Republic. From **1951 to 1967**, elections to the **Lok Sabha** and the **State Legislative Assemblies** were conducted concurrently. This period reflected a high degree of political stability and institutional alignment, where both Union and State governments often completed their full five-year terms. The first three general elections—1952, 1957, and 1962—saw citizens casting their votes for both levels of government on the same day or within the same time frame, leading to an efficient and cost-effective electoral process.

However, this synchronous system began to break down post-1967 due to a combination of political and constitutional developments. The fourth general election of 1967 marked a turning point, as for the first time since independence, the Indian National Congress faced serious setbacks in several states. This political fragmentation led to the emergence of **coalition governments**, particularly in state legislatures, which were inherently less stable and more susceptible to collapse. As a result, several State Assemblies were **dissolved prematurely**, breaking the uniform electoral cycle.

The problem was compounded by **frequent defections**, **internal party conflicts**, and the imposition of **President's Rule** under Article 356, all of which contributed to the disalignment of election schedules. Unlike the earlier era of centralized political control, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a shift towards a **multi-party system**, increased federal assertiveness, and regional political volatility. These factors created a mosaic of staggered election cycles across India that continues to this day.

Attempts have been made in the past to revisit the idea of synchronized elections. In **1983**, the **Election Commission** recommended restoring the simultaneous election cycle, citing administrative convenience and cost-effectiveness. Again in **1999**, the **Law Commission of India**, in its 170th report, emphasized the potential benefits of a harmonized electoral calendar. Despite these recommendations, the absence of political consensus and the complex constitutional amendments required to enforce such a change kept the idea largely theoretical.

The issue re-emerged with renewed urgency in the past decade, particularly under the current government, which has strongly advocated for the ONOE model. The recent formation of a **High-Level Committee (Hereafter HLC)** worked under the chairmanship of **former**

President Ram Nath Kovind and its subsequent report has reignited national discussions, not just on feasibility, but on whether such a system can coexist with the foundational principles of **federalism and democratic plurality**.

Thus, the evolution of India's electoral system from synchronized beginnings to staggered complexity reflects a broader narrative of its political maturation—marked by diversity, democratic deepening, and constitutional challenges.

Prominent Studies

The **HLC (2023–2024)**, reignited focus by offering a roadmap for phased implementation of ONOE, addressing both constitutional prerequisites and federal concerns. Earlier, the **Law Commission of India**, through its **255th Report (2015)** and **Working Paper (2018)**, acknowledged the demand and need. It recommended amending the Constitution and the **Representation of the People Act, 1951(hereafter RPA, 1951)**, and emphasized modifying the **Anti-Defection Law** to prevent fragmented mandates that break synchronized cycles of elections. Flexibility in issuing election notifications was also suggested.

The **Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015)** supported the idea but warned of massive logistical costs (~₹9,284 crore) and operational challenges. Similar sentiments were echoed by the **National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2002)**, which stressed aligning election calendars to ensure continuity in governance. **NITI Aayog's 2017 Paper** provided a phased approach to implementation, while earlier committees like **Dinesh Goswami's (1990)** and the **Tarkunde Committee** linked the frequency of elections to political instability and financial malpractice.

Judicial pronouncements further reinforce the philosophical underpinnings of ONOE. In **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)**, the Supreme Court curtailed misuse of **Article 356**, safeguarding the tenure of State Assemblies and indirectly supporting synchronized elections. In the **Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu (1992)** case the court upheld the **Anti-Defection Law**, reinforcing the need for stable legislatures. Meanwhile, **Union of India v. ADR (2002)** upheld electoral transparency, aligning with ONOE's aims of efficiency and informed voting. The **ECI v. Haryana (1984)** case cemented the Election Commission's central role in election administration, which is crucial for any large-scale coordination like ONOE.

These reports and judgments, taken together, frame ONOE not just as a political innovation, but as a long-standing, constitutionally significant conversation about balancing democratic depth with administrative efficiency.

Notable Personalities on One Nation, One Election

S.Y. Quraishi – Former Chief Election Commissioner

S.Y. Quraishi has been a vocal critic of the One Nation, One Election proposal in its current form. While acknowledging its intent to reduce electoral costs and streamline governance, he has repeatedly flagged the **practical, constitutional, and federal challenges**. In several interviews and op-eds, including one in 2023, he pointed out that **simultaneous elections would require at least 5.5 million EVMs and VVPATs**, and that synchronizing terms of all assemblies would violate the spirit of democratic representation. He has cautioned against centralizing electoral processes at the cost of **state autonomy**.

Justice Madan B. Lokur – Former Supreme Court Judge

Justice Madan, in his writings and public talks, has argued that while the concept of ONOE seems administratively appealing, it carries **deep constitutional implications**. He raised concern that aligning the electoral cycles of Parliament and the State Assemblies could **distort the balance of power in a federal structure**, and might need judicial scrutiny. His views focus on the **principle of accountability**, noting that staggered elections allow citizens to continuously express dissatisfaction with governments, rather than waiting five years.

Law Commission Members

The Law Commission's collective viewpoint, especially as articulated in its **255th Report (2015)** and **2018 Working Paper**, reflects a cautious optimism. While they recommended serious consideration of ONOE, they emphasized that it can only be introduced through **rigorous constitutional amendments**, including changes to Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174. They acknowledged the concept's merit but stressed that **political consensus** and **wider public consultation** are non-negotiable.

Manoj Jha – Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha, RJD)

Manoj Jha has emerged as one of the most prominent political voices to oppose ONOE. In his

speeches in 2023 and 2024, he has labelled the idea as an attempt to create a **"unitary electoral dictatorship"** in a nation that thrives on regional diversity. He argues that elections are not mere administrative exercises but democratic events that reflect the **local pulse**, and simultaneous elections risk **flattening political plurality**.

Former President Ram Nath Kovind

As Chairperson of the High-Level Committee on ONOE in 2023, Kovind brought institutional credibility to the idea. Though not publicly partisan in his views, his leadership of the committee reflected the **Centre's interest in reviving the proposal**. His role is largely procedural, guiding the discussion toward **feasibility studies and constitutional alignment**.

Year-wise Timeline of ONOE Debate

-1951–1967:

- India conducts **simultaneous elections** for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies in its early years of democracy.

- Political instability and premature dissolutions break the synchronization.

-1983:

- The **Election Commission** under S.L. Shakdhar recommends restoring simultaneous elections in its report to the government.

-1990:

- **Dinesh Goswami Committee** suggests reforms to reduce frequent elections and promote political stability.

-1999:

- **Law commission (**170th report) submitted by **Justice BP Reddy**

-2002:

- The **National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution** advocates for

simultaneous elections to ensure continuity in governance.

-2003:

- The than home minister **Dr. Lal Krishna Advani** proposed the concept of One nation, One Election in front of **All Parties Meet**

-2015003A

- **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice** submits a detailed report on ONOE.

- **Law Commission (255th Report)** backs phased implementation.

-2017:

- **NITI Aayog Working Paper** recommends a **two-phase implementation** strategy.

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly supports ONOE in speeches, giving momentum to the concept.

-2018:

- **Law Commission Working Paper** suggests amending core constitutional provisions.

- Serious debates emerge in the legal and academic community regarding feasibility and federalism.

-2020–2022:

- ONOE debate cools down amid COVID-19 and more urgent governance issues.

-2023:

- **HLC headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind** is formed.

- Political and legal discussions revive with renewed attention.

-2024:

- HLC's report submitted; political leaders respond with mixed reactions.

- Critics like **Manoj Jha** and legal experts question timing and intent.

- Public interest litigation (PILs) filed seeking clarity on constitutional validity.

Discussion and Analysis

1. Arguments in Favour

The proposal for simultaneous elections is not just an administrative suggestion — it represents a **structural overhaul** of India's democratic machinery. Proponents argue that it promises to address five major areas: governance dysfunction, financial efficiency, administrative overload, socio-political fragmentation, and electoral corruption.

a. Ending "Perpetual Election Mode" and Policy Paralysis

One of the most significant concerns is that India, as a democracy, is **always in election mode**. In any given five-year cycle, at least one major state election takes place every few months. The frequent invocation of the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** under the **Representation of the People Act, 1951**, essentially freezes decision-making during election periods — no new schemes can be announced, tenders are stalled, and development work is halted.

This frequent policy standstill leads to **'governance by hesitation'**, where ministries delay reforms fearing electoral repercussions. Political parties, aiming for short-term wins, avoid long-term structural reforms, resulting in **sub-optimal policy outcomes**. ONOE could therefore allow governments at both the Centre and State levels to function **without the constant fear of electoral backlash**, promoting long-range planning and inter-departmental coordination.

b. Electoral Fatigue and Administrative Overload

According to data from the **Election Commission of India**, the **2024 General Elections** involved over **10.5 lakh polling stations** and a deployment of more than **1.5 crore personnel**, including central forces, government employees, and polling officers. Elections disrupt the

regular functioning of bureaucracy, schools, health services, and rural development initiatives, especially in under-resourced states.

ONOE would **optimize deployment**, allowing the Election Commission to plan resources in a unified manner and reducing the logistical stress that otherwise recurs every few months. More importantly, it would **free up human capital** from electoral duty to resume their primary roles in governance and development.

c. Fiscal Prudence and Reducing Wasteful Expenditure

The cost of conducting elections in India is enormous — and growing. In the **2019 Lok Sabha Elections**, the **Election Commission spent ₹12,000 crore**, while political parties collectively spent over **₹60,000 crore**, as per estimates by the Centre for Media Studies. If state elections are added to the equation, the **cumulative five-year expenditure** on elections could easily cross **₹1.25 lakh crore**.

ONOE would consolidate election expenditure — cutting down on repeat logistics, security deployment, infrastructure usage, and media expenditures. Even if initial implementation involves a one-time cost spike (due to extra EVMs/VVPATs), the **long-term economic dividends** are projected to be significant, particularly for a developing economy like India where public spending has opportunity costs.

d. Rebuilding the Social Fabric and Political Stability

The frequent cycles of elections tend to deepen **identity politics**. Caste, religion, and regional identities are repeatedly mobilized, polarizing communities and undermining national cohesion. When every state becomes an electoral battleground, national integration takes a backseat to **hyper-localized vote bank politics**.

A synchronized election calendar could help stabilize political narratives and discourage **constant populist rhetoric**. This, in turn, would allow public discourse to shift toward developmental issues, policy debate, and democratic accountability beyond superficial identity markers.

e. Reducing Crony Capitalism and Black Money Circulation

Frequent elections create **repeated incentives for illicit funding**. The short window for

electoral success motivates parties to seek quick and often opaque financial inputs. While reforms like **electoral bonds** were intended to bring transparency, they have been criticized for introducing **anonymous corporate influence** over policymaking.

By reducing the number of elections, ONOE would reduce the **frequency of campaign financing**, lowering opportunities for quid-pro-quo deals and enabling stricter enforcement of funding laws. Experts argue that **reducing demand reduces corruption at source**, thus hitting the root of crony capitalism.

f. Better Security and Logistical Planning

Each election requires **massive deployment of security forces**, including paramilitary and local police, often diverted from other duties like counter-insurgency or disaster relief. With elections stretched across multiple states and phases, this pressure becomes **cyclical and unsustainable**.

ONOE would allow for **integrated, pre-planned security coverage** with optimal use of resources. It would also improve transportation of EVMs, coordination with district administrations, and gains trust in the electoral process due to uniformity.

2. Concerns Against One Nation, One Election

While ONOE has its administrative and fiscal appeal, it also raises **significant constitutional, federal, logistical, and democratic concerns**. Experts across the political and legal spectrum have flagged these issues, arguing that centralizing electoral cycles may pose more challenges than benefits, particularly in a diverse and federal polity like India.

a. Federalism at Risk

One of the most critical objections comes from the **federal spirit of the Indian Constitution**. Synchronizing elections across the Centre and all States risks marginalizing regional narratives. In a joint electoral environment, **national issues are likely to overshadow local priorities**, making it difficult for voters to focus on state-level governance matters.

Smaller, regional parties with limited resources may find themselves at a disadvantage compared to national parties with **deeper financial and organizational strength**. The result

could be a **homogenized political landscape**, weakening India's pluralistic ethos. This contradicts the intent behind India's quasi-federal structure, where both the Union and the States are expected to function autonomously within their spheres.

b. Threat to Political Accountability

Frequent elections may be costly and cumbersome, but they also serve an **accountability function**. They allow voters to **frequently assess and penalize non-performing governments**, keeping public representatives responsive and grounded. ONOE could potentially extend the **'safety period'** for elected officials, reducing opportunities for democratic feedback and enabling complacency.

Additionally, in the event of a mid-term government collapse in a State, the rigid electoral cycle under ONOE could mean that **President's Rule becomes a default solution**, creating governance vacuums and disenfranchising state voters for prolonged periods.

c. Logistical and Resource Burdens

The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** will face unprecedented pressure in conducting elections at such a massive, synchronized scale. With **over 10.5 lakh polling booths**, ensuring flawless execution would require not just **extensive planning** but also **huge investments** in infrastructure and manpower.

The **2015 Parliamentary Standing Committee** estimated that implementing ONOE would require nearly **₹9,284 crore** for the procurement of additional **EVMs and VVPATs**. Further, India's diverse geographical conditions, varying security threats, and administrative disparities make simultaneous elections an operational nightmare. Any **error in a simultaneous election** affects the **entire democratic cycle**, unlike staggered elections where errors can be localized and corrected.

d. Constitutional and Legal Challenges

ONOE would necessitate **sweeping constitutional amendments**, especially to Articles **83(2), 172(1), 85, and 356**, among others. Changes would also be required in the **RPA, 1951**, and possibly the **Anti-Defection Law**, to synchronize the political calendar.

As per **Article 368**, such amendments would not only require a **special two-thirds majority in Parliament** but also **ratification by at least half the states**. Any attempt to override this federal consensus risks violating the **basic structure doctrine**, as reaffirmed in **Keshavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)**. The Supreme Court has made it clear that federalism is part of the Constitution's core structure and cannot be diluted through parliamentary majoritarianism alone.

e. Governance Vacuums and Voter Confusion

Another overlooked concern is the practical issue of **mid-term instability**. If a state government falls before the synchronized election cycle, the only options would be **President's Rule or forming unstable alliances**, both of which compromise governance. The inability to call fresh elections as needed could leave citizens **without adequate representation** in crucial times.

Simultaneous elections could also lead to **voter confusion**, especially among **first-time or low-information voters** who might be handed ballots for multiple tiers of government at once. This could **increase invalid votes**, reduce informed choices, and undermine the quality of electoral participation—defeating the very purpose of democratic elections.

f. Public Trust and Systemic Risk

In a staggered system, errors or malfunctions in EVMs or VVPATs can be corrected in isolated contexts. But under ONOE, a **single technical failure**—or worse, **allegations of bias or manipulation**—could erode trust in **all levels of governance** simultaneously. The Election Commission's capacity to **simultaneously manage fair elections across a billion-voter democracy** without institutional risk is still uncertain.

3. Assessing the Realism of Concerns Around One Nation, One Election

While the theoretical concerns about ONOE are substantial, it's crucial to examine their practical implications through empirical data and case studies.

a. The U.S. Experience: A Federal Country with Unified Election Day

The United States, a federal nation, conducts the federal, state, and local elections on a single

day—that is the first Tuesday of November in even-numbered years. Despite concerns about national narratives overshadowing local issues, American voters often differentiate between levels of government:

- In the 2022 midterm elections, several states elected governors from one party while choosing congressional representatives from another, indicating voter discernment between federal and state issues.

However, it's important to note that the U.S. operates under a presidential system, where the executive branch is separate from the legislature, reducing the likelihood of mid-term government collapses—a challenge more prevalent in India's parliamentary system.

b. The 'Big Face' Phenomenon in Indian Elections

A significant concern with ONOE is the potential overshadowing of regional issues by dominant national figures, leading to a homogenized political landscape. Historical data supports this:

- **General Elections (2014)**: The Bhartiya Janta Party, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, secured a majority in the Lok Sabha, and this momentum carried into subsequent state elections, with the party forming governments in several states.

- **General Elections (2019)**: The Bhartiya Janta Party won 303 seats in Lok Sabha, and the 'Modi wave' influenced voter behaviour in various state elections held around the same period.

This trend suggests that simultaneous elections could amplify the influence of prominent national leaders, potentially marginalizing regional parties and issues.

c. Counter-Evidence: Voter Discernment in State Elections

Despite the 'big face' phenomenon, Indian voters have demonstrated the ability to distinguish between national and state elections:

- **Delhi Assembly Elections 2015**: The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) won 67 out of 70 seats with a 54.3% vote share, while the BJP secured only 3 seats with a 32.2% vote share, despite its national dominance at the time .

- **Odisha Assembly Elections 2019**: The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) retained power with 112 out of 147 seats and a 44.71% vote share, even as the Bhartiya Janta Party made significant gains nationally .

- **Andhra Pradesh Assembly Elections 2019**: The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) got 49.95% vote share for winning 151 out of 175 seats, while the Bhartiya Janta Party failed to make a significant impact.

- **Chhattisgarh Assembly Elections 2018**: The Indian National Congress (INC) got 43.0% vote share for winning 68 out of 90 seats, whereas the Bhartiya Janta Party managed only 15 seats with a 33.0% vote share .

- **Rajasthan Assembly Elections 2018**: The Indian National Congress got 39.30% vote share for winning100 out of 200 seats, narrowly surpassing the Bhartiya Janta Party's 38.08% vote share for 73 seats.

- **Madhya Pradesh Assembly Elections 2018**: The INC emerged as the largest party with 114 seats and a 40.89% vote share, while the BJP closely followed with 109 seats and a 41.02% vote share .

- **Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections 2012**: The Samajwadi Party (SP) achieved a majority with 224 out of 403 seats and a 29.15% vote share, indicating voter preference for regional parties over national ones in certain contexts.

4. Kovind Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections

In early 2024, a committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind laid out a detailed plan for holding elections across India all at once. The government accepted the plan, showing serious intent to change how elections happen in the country.

a. Step-by-Step Approach

- The committee suggests doing this in two steps:

  - First, the elections for the Parliament and the state assemblies will be held simultaneously.

o   Then, within about 100 days, local elections for city councils and village bodies will take place.

This gradual approach is meant to help the system adjust without too much trouble.

b. Changes to the Constitution

- Two bills are proposed to make this happen:

    o   The first bill does not need state approval and includes:

        ▪   A new rule letting the President set a fixed date to align elections.

        ▪   Clear rules about how to handle assemblies that end before their full term.

        ▪   More power for Parliament to organize synchronized elections.

    o   The second bill, which needs states to agree, proposes:

        ▪   A law letting Parliament coordinate local elections.

        ▪   A unified voters list for all elections, with states playing a smaller role in managing elections.

c. Handling Early Assembly Breakups

- If an assembly or Parliament is dissolved early, new elections will only fill the remaining time.

- This helps prevent political parties from breaking assemblies just to avoid having elections at the same time.

d. Managing the Logistics

- India has over 10 lakh polling stations and needs about 10 million workers for elections.

- To hold simultaneous elections, the country would need to buy many more voting

machines, costing over ₹10,000 crore.

- Training staff and coordination between different regions will be key for success.

e. Economic Effects

- The committee predicts:

    o A boost of about 1.5% in economic growth after switching to simultaneous elections.

    o A small increase in government spending before elections, causing a slight rise in the fiscal deficit.

    o Overall public spending could jump nearly 18% due to election campaigns and welfare programs.

While this may push the economy short-term, careful budgeting will be important later.

f. Impact on Political Money

- Holding fewer elections could reduce illegal funding in politics.

- Businesses and contractors might face less pressure for donations.

- For example, the Election Commission seized over ₹10,000 crore worth of illegal cash and goods during the last general elections.

- This reform could help bring more honesty to election financing.

5. The Best Way to Implement One Nation, One Election

a. Strengthening Political Stability

- To make One Nation, One Election work, we need stronger rules to avoid frequent government collapses that disturb synchronized election cycles.

- A useful solution is the **Constructive Vote of No Confidence**, used in Germany's

parliament.

- This means a government can only be removed if a new one is ready to take its place immediately, which prevents unnecessary breaks and keeps the system stable.

b. Fixing Issues with Anti-Defection and Hung Governments

- India's Anti-Defection Law stops politicians from switching sides just for power, but it does not stop governments from falling if they lose majority support.

- With the constructive vote rule, any attempt to remove a government must also name a new leader or coalition to replace it.

- This encourages responsible politics and helps keep governments stable, which is important when elections are fixed on the same schedule.

c. Phased Approach to Synchronize Elections

- Instead of changing all election dates at once, it is better to do it step-by-step.

- First, synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Then, include local elections like those for panchayats and municipalities.

- Laws should clearly explain how to handle the current assemblies' terms during the transition, so there are no gaps in governance.

d. Improving Election Systems and Staff

- Holding many elections together will need stronger election infrastructure.

- This means upgrading voting machines like EVMs and VVPATs, and creating a single voter list managed by the Election Commission.

- Election staff at all levels must receive proper training to run simultaneous elections smoothly.

e. Building Political Agreement and Respecting Federalism

- Success depends on all political parties and both central and state governments

working together.

- The federal structure of India must be honored, especially when it comes to local elections and state powers.

- Ongoing discussions with political leaders, state governments, and civil society can help address concerns and build wide support.

f. Final Thoughts on the Best Approach

- Combining legal reforms like the constructive no-confidence vote, a phased rollout, and stronger election systems is the best way forward.

- This plan supports political stability, respects state autonomy, reduces election fatigue, and strengthens India's democracy.

Conclusion

One Nation, One Election could really help India by making elections simpler and less frequent. Right now, elections happen all the time, which can slow down government work and cost a lot of money. If we hold all elections together, the government can focus on important issues instead of being stuck in election mode.

There are concerns about how this might affect states and local politics, but with the right planning and cooperation, these problems can be solved. The Kovind Committee's ideas and examples from other countries show that it's possible to make this change without hurting democracy.

As Jawaharlal Nehru said, ***"The art of a nation is to make its future, not merely to accept it."*** India can take this chance to build a stronger democracy by bringing all elections together.

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