

# Examining the Effects of One Nation, One Election on Indian Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) has gained significant attention and debate in Indian politics in recent years. The concept of One Nation, One Election brings both significant opportunities and challenges for India's political landscape. While it promises benefits like cost savings, governance efficiency, and reduced political corruption, the unique political and cultural diversity of India's states raises concerns about the impact on federalism and regional representation.

The experiences of countries like South Africa, Indonesia, Sweden, and Brazil offer valuable lessons but also highlight the complexity of implementing such a system in a large and diverse nation like India. Before India can move toward ONOE, a comprehensive plan addressing the logistical, legal, and political challenges must be developed, ensuring that the core values of democracy and federalism are preserved.

This Research Paper explores the historical context, constitutional considerations, and potential impacts of ONOE on various aspects of India's political and democratic framework. It also draws comparisons with global precedents to provide a well-rounded perspective on the implications of this reform.

This Research Paper advocates for synchronizing the timing of Lok Sabha (Parliamentary) and State Assembly elections across all states to reduce the frequency of elections in the country.

**Key Words:** One Nation, One Election (ONOV), Policy, Democracy, India

## INTRODUCTION

Bharat or India is a unique country situated in the northern hemisphere of this globe. It stretches from snow-clad Himalayan mountain ranges to the tropical rain forests of the South covering the area of 32, 87,263 sq. Km. It is the seventh largest country which houses almost 18% of the world population distributed across 28 states and 8 union territories. It is not only the largest democracy of the world but also the mother of democracy and democratic principles. Prime Minister of India countered the prevalent notion of Athens being the cradle of democracy during his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021 by citing the mentions of words like sabha, samiti & sansad in the oldest composition of the world the Rigveda. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata also has the mention of people's representatives having voice in governance under the monarch (Government of India, 2023). In Lichhavi Republic, 7707 ganas came together to elect their ganapramukha and took decisions collectively in the Santhagara – the central assembly of the republic (Government of India, 2023). However, the history of India as a modern, democratic Republic can be traced back to 1947 when India became free from the colonial clutches of the British.

The modern Indian state came into being on 15th August of 1947. With the constitution of India coming to force in 1950, India adopted parliamentary democratic system. The constitution has vested the powers of conducting free and fair polls to the autonomous, constitutional body named Election Commission of India. Since 1952, ECI has conducted 18 national elections and hundreds of assembly elections all these years. 73rd & 74th constitutional amendments were made to assign constitutional status to local bodies i.e. panchayati raj institutions (include gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zila parishad) and urban local bodies (include

Municipal Corporations, Municipality and Nagar Panchayat) to promote people's participation in governance. There are 4852 urban local bodies and 2.62 panchayati raj institutions. Elections to these institutions are held every five years and it is the responsibility of the state election commission to conduct free and fair polls to these self-government bodies.

Looking to the mammoth magnitude and scale of our democracy, the country faces 5-6 elections every year. When election to local bodies is included, number of elections in the country increase manifold. Interestingly, election commission does not have its independent staff to conduct polls. Every time, polls are announced it requisites staff from the state governments, central governments and government run undertakings. State Election Commissions have to prepare electoral rolls every time before announcing elections to these bodies which in itself is a huge burden socially as well as economically. As a result, certain staff of the government continuously remains engaged in the electioneering process. Moreover, every time election to any of these bodies is announced, model code of conduct comes in force prohibiting government to undertake any developmental work which may be viewed as bribery to the voters. Disruption of government machinery and policy paralysis slows down the economic activity of the country and the cost of deferred economic activity is very huge. At the same time, frequent use of government staff adversely affects their morale. Therefore, it has become absolutely necessary to get rid of this complicated electoral process. Several times in past different agencies like ECI, Law Commission had recommended in its reports of 1999, 2015 and 2018 to adopt the practice of simultaneous elections. As a result, a high level committee under the chairmanship of former President Shri Ramnath Kovind was formed to explore the possibility of simultaneous elections in the country. The committee recommended that At the time of the next Lok Sabha election, all state assemblies and local bodies should be dissolved, no matter how much time is left in their term. This will help align all elections. The Committee recommended that Lok Sabha and state assembly elections be held together, and local body elections should follow within 100 days. The committee has made this recommendation following suggestions from different stakeholders and studying the cases in different countries.

### **Global Examples of Simultaneous Elections**

Many countries around the world practice some form of synchronized elections, either nationally or regionally. Below are a few global examples that can offer insight into how India might benefit or face challenges with the One Nation, One Election system:

#### **1. South Africa:**

South Africa holds its national and provincial elections simultaneously every five years. This approach ensures that elections are more cost-effective and minimizes disruptions to governance. However, since South Africa has a unitary system with less regional diversity than India, it does not face the same challenges of a federal democracy.

#### **2. Indonesia:**

Indonesia also practices simultaneous elections for its president, legislature, and regional assemblies. The 2019 election in Indonesia was the largest one-day election globally, involving over 190 million voters. While it improved efficiency, the sheer size and complexity of managing elections at multiple levels also highlighted challenges such as voter fatigue and the difficulty of managing logistics for such a large electorate. This is a relevant comparison for India, given its population size and diversity.

#### **3. Sweden:**

Sweden holds simultaneous elections for its Riksdag (national parliament), county councils, and municipal councils every four years. This system works efficiently in a smaller country with fewer layers of government compared to India. While it increases voter turnout and simplifies the electoral process, Sweden's homogeneous population makes it easier to implement.

#### **4. Brazil:**

Brazil uses simultaneous elections for its federal, state, and municipal offices every four years. While the system has helped save costs, the country has faced issues with electoral fraud and corruption, exacerbated by a complex voting process across multiple levels of government. Brazil's experience shows that without proper safeguards, ONOE in India might face similar risks of manipulation.

### **Potential Impacts of ONOE on Indian Democracy**

#### **1. Governance and Political Stability:**

Proponents of ONOE argue that it will lead to more stable governance. Frequent elections lead to governments focusing on short-term, populist measures rather than long-term policymaking. With ONOE, both the Union and State governments would be free from constant election cycles and the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct. This could improve the delivery of public services and allow policymakers to focus on development.

However, critics argue that simultaneous elections might create challenges for smaller regional parties, which often rely on local issues to gain traction. The national narrative may dominate, overshadowing regional concerns, and thus, state-level elections may become an extension of the national election campaign. This could weaken the federal structure and reduce the space for regional voices.

#### **2. Impact on Federalism:**

India's federal structure allows for political diversity, with states having the autonomy to govern based on their specific needs. By aligning all elections, ONOE risks diluting the federal principle by centralizing the political discourse. The diversity of political issues across states might be sidelined in favor of national concerns, especially in states with strong regional identities.

States like Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Kerala, where regional parties have a strong presence, may find it harder to compete with national parties in a synchronized election scenario, altering the balance of power between the center and states.

#### **3. Electoral Fatigue and Voter Engagement:**

One of the key challenges of simultaneous elections is voter fatigue. Managing both national and state elections simultaneously may overwhelm voters, especially in a country as large and diverse as India. Voters may struggle to differentiate between national and local issues, leading to uninformed or mechanical voting patterns.

Moreover, the logistical challenges would be immense. Managing a synchronized election for over 900 million eligible voters across India would require massive resources, including additional voting machines, staff, and security forces. While this would be a one-time cost, the scale of such an exercise would be unprecedented.

#### **4. Legal and Constitutional Challenges:**

For ONOE to be implemented, several amendments to the Constitution of India would be required. Articles relating to the tenure of legislatures, premature dissolution of assemblies, and federal principles would need revision. Additionally, there is no provision in the Constitution for the simultaneous extension or curtailment of legislative terms, raising complex legal challenges.

The possibility of a government collapsing before completing its term also complicates matters. India would need a mechanism to handle premature dissolutions or mid-term elections if one assembly or parliament falls before its scheduled tenure. This might result in either interim governments or delayed elections, which could destabilize the political system.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of One Nation, One Election brings both significant opportunities and challenges for India's political landscape. While it promises benefits like cost savings, governance efficiency, and reduced political corruption, the unique political and cultural diversity of India's states raises concerns about the impact on federalism and regional representation.

The experiences of countries like South Africa, Indonesia, Sweden, and Brazil offer valuable lessons but also highlight the complexity of implementing such a system in a large and diverse nation like India. Before India can move toward ONOE, a comprehensive plan addressing the logistical, legal, and political challenges must be developed, ensuring that the core values of democracy and federalism are preserved.

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