



One nation, one election: A comprehensive analysis of the proposal and its implications for India

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Abstract

The proposal of "One Nation, One Election" aims to conduct simultaneous elections for both the Lok Sabha (national parliament) and all state legislative assemblies. This paper critically examines the advantages, challenges, and impacts of implementing this proposal within the context of India's diverse political, constitutional, and administrative landscape. By analyzing historical perspectives, the viewpoints of political analysts, constitutional experts, and recent studies, this paper evaluates whether synchronized elections would enhance India's democratic process or exacerbate its existing challenges. The analysis finds that while the proposal promises cost efficiency, political stability, and reduced electoral fatigue, its implementation faces significant constitutional, logistical, and political hurdles. A nuanced approach, including constitutional reforms and pilot projects, is recommended for evaluating its feasibility.

Keywords: One election, governance, one nation, democracy, citizenship, one vote, election commission

Introduction

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring that citizens actively participate in the political process. As the world's largest democracy, India conducts elections at multiple levels—national, state, and local. While this multi-tiered electoral system is an essential feature of India's democracy, it is also fraught with challenges related to cost, logistics, governance disruptions, and political instability. The concept of "One Nation, One Election" proposes a reform to hold simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies to address these issues.

India being one of the largest democracies in the world, it holds elections with much emphasis on it being free and fair. There are two types of election followed in India: Direct election – Where the citizens directly cast their vote and elect their representatives and Indirect election – Where the elected representatives elect the other members. Direct elections are held for Lok Sabha, State Legislative assemblies, local bodies across the country as laid down in the Indian Constitution, the *lex loci*. Though both the State assemblies and the Lok Sabha have same duration of 5 years, elections are conducted at different phase of time. One nation one election has been a topic of discussion since 1970s but in the recent past it has been debated like never before because of the PM Narendra Modi's pitch.

This paper explores the key arguments for and against this proposal, evaluates its potential impact on Indian democracy, and identifies the challenges that would need to be overcome for its successful implementation.

What Is One Nation One Election?

It is a practice by which the elections for the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and the local bodies are held at the same time. This essentially doesn't mean that the election must be on the same day throughout the country, but having election in a phase wise manner for a particular duration for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies wherein the voters will cast their vote for the two elections on the same day. In order to

simply this process further, the PM Narendra Modi has emphasised on having a single voter list for both the elections.

This system has been practiced in various countries across the globe namely Sweden, Indonesia, South Africa, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Belgium, Poland, Slovenia, Albania. With an aim to implement this system of election, to persuade the parties to gain support to implement this practice yet another time, to discuss the pros and cons of the idea All India Political Parties Meet was called for by the ruling government. Of the 40 Parties who were offered a seat to attend and discuss the matter, only some 19 parties turned up and between them there were divergent opinions. In their written submissions, the AIADMK, DMDK, Asom Gana Parishad, the Indian Union Muslim League and the Shiromani Akali Dal supported the idea, though with certain riders. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress, Trinamool Congress, the NCP, the CPI and the AIMIM opposed the idea as impractical. As there has been constant opposition to its implementation, it has brought this topic to the limelight again.

Since there are various nuances to be studied, feasibility to be ascertained, operational difficulties and possibilities to be discussed before implementing this system of election, various committees have been formed and feasibility study has been carried out. All the observations and suggestions have been put forth and mentioned the following reports:

- Law commission report in 1983
- Law commission report in 1999
- Parliamentary standing committee report
- Niti Ayog report etc.

Historical Context

The idea of simultaneous elections in India dates back several decades. Following centuries of colonial rule, the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950 transformed Indians overnight from subjects to citizens. Citizenship empowered Indians to elect their representatives at the federal and state levels on the basis of the principle of universal adult suffrage enshrined in Article 326 of the

Constitution. Article 324 of the Constitution mandated the creation of an independent body, namely the Election Commission of India to “superintend, direct and control” elections to Parliament, state legislatures, and the offices of the President and the Vice President of India. To facilitate the conduct of elections by the Election Commission of India, Parliament enacted the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and Representation of the People Act, 1951 and a series of rules were framed to effectuate such legislation, including the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 and Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961. Pursuant to these laws, the first general elections to Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies were held together in 1951-52. That practice continued over three subsequent general elections held in the years- 1957, 1962 and 1967. However, due to the premature dissolution of some Legislative Assemblies in 1968 and 1969, the cycle got disrupted for the first time in 1970. The Fourth Lok Sabha itself was dissolved prematurely and elections were held in 1971. Over the next 50-plus years, India didn’t have simultaneous elections.

Early discussions on this concept emerged in the 1960s, with the Elections Commission of India suggesting that conducting elections at the same time could reduce the costs associated with election processes and administrative burdens. Notably, the Sarkaria Commission (1988) reviewed the issue, though it did not recommend the idea, citing challenges related to constitutional amendments and potential disruptions to India’s federal structure.

Since 2017, the NITI Aayog and the BJP led NDA government have proposed a return to simultaneous elections in India highlighting that asynchronous elections negatively impact administrative and developmental activities in the poll-bound states/regions and the larger governance process in general. The NITI Aayog white paper and Law Commission Reports also note that simultaneous elections would bring about tremendous cost savings for political parties and the government. Indian elections are costly and despite stringent campaign finance regulations in India pursuant to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, campaign funding has remained opaque and the regulations have historically been observed more in the breach. The Electoral Bonds scheme introduced by the government in 2017 ostensibly to bring about transparency in electoral funding was itself struck down by the Supreme Court in 2024 as violative of the voters’ Right to Information about political funding under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution and for undermining electoral democracy in India. Against the backdrop of the contentious history of electoral reforms in India, the Speaker will evaluate electoral laws and practices to illuminate the considerations against which we must examine the proposed electoral reforms and elucidate whether these reforms will achieve their stated objectives.

In the 2018 Law Commission Report (Report No. 255), the proposal was revisited, and it acknowledged the potential benefits, including cost reductions and improved governance stability. However, the report also highlighted several challenges, including the need for constitutional reforms, logistical complexities, and potential impacts on federalism and regional autonomy.

Objectives of One Nation, One Election

1. Cost Efficiency

One of the primary justifications for simultaneous elections is the reduction of the high costs associated with India’s

elections. Conducting multiple elections at different times requires extensive resources in terms of security arrangements, logistical support, printing of ballots, and manpower. According to Rajeev Gowda (2017) ^[1], the cost of holding separate elections at the national and state levels could amount to over ₹50,000 crores (USD 6 billion) per election cycle. By synchronizing elections, these costs could be significantly reduced, allowing for the reallocation of resources towards developmental projects and public welfare programs.

2. Reduced Governance Disruption

Frequent elections disrupt governance, diverting both political attention and administrative resources. Governments are often in “election mode,” limiting their ability to focus on long-term policy development. Shubhranshu Choudhary (2018) ^[2] argues that holding simultaneous elections would allow governments to avoid the constant distraction of elections, thereby fostering an environment conducive to stable governance and long-term strategic planning.

3. Political Stability

The continuous electoral cycle in India often leads to political instability, with frequent electoral campaigns and shifting priorities. According to P. Chidambaram (2018), simultaneous elections would allow for a more focused approach to governance, where political parties and the electorate would spend more time on policy discussions and national development, rather than engaging in perpetual electoral contests.

Supporting Arguments for One Nation, One Election

1. Efficiency and Political Maturity

Proponents of the proposal argue that simultaneous elections will promote political maturity by reducing the frequency of electoral campaigns. Prakash Javadekar, former Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting, believes that this would not only improve political efficiency but also reduce election-related violence and voter fatigue (Javadekar, 2019) ^[3]. National elections, coupled with state elections, would reduce the interruptions that occur during periods of elections, enabling smoother governance operations.

2. National Unity and Consolidation

Simultaneous elections can lead to a more unified political atmosphere. BJP supporters, including Javadekar, argue that having a single electoral cycle would allow political campaigns to focus on national issues and consolidate public support across the country. This would strengthen India’s unity and national identity, as well as create a clearer mandate for political leaders to execute their policy agendas.

Feasibility of Implementing the System

For this system to be implemented, it is imperative to study the statutory provisions, the present system of conducting the election and the flaws we had in 1960s when this system was in vogue. The process of election right from the issuing notifications to accepting and scrutinizing the applications till the declaration of results is carried out the Election Commission as per the provisions given in the

- Representation of People’s Act, 1950
- Representation of People’s Act, 1951, etc

Also, the matters related to duration of houses of Parliament, State legislatures, qualification and disqualification of members, constitution of the Election commission, etc. are discussed in the Constitution of India.

Criticisms and Concerns

1. Constitutional and Legal Hurdles

A significant challenge to the One Nation, One Election proposal lies in the need for extensive constitutional amendments. Articles 83 and 85 of the Indian Constitution, which govern the tenure and dissolution of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, would require amendment to synchronize election cycles. Fali S. Nariman (2020) ^[4] highlights that such constitutional changes would require broad political consensus and could face significant opposition from states that perceive a loss of autonomy in the process.

2. Impact on Federalism

India's Federal Structure is based on the principle of decentralized power, granting states autonomy in several political and administrative matters. Critics argue that simultaneous elections could weaken this autonomy, as it would lead to greater influence by national parties at the cost of regional parties. K.K. Aziz (2021) warns that regional issues could be overshadowed by national political agendas, resulting in the marginalization of local concerns and minority voices.

3. Erosion of Regional and Minority Representation

Scholars like Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2019) ^[5] have expressed concerns that simultaneous elections could lead to the polarization of electoral campaigns, with issues of national security or foreign policy overshadowing critical regional matters. This could undermine the diversity of India's democracy and hinder the representation of smaller or regional political parties, which might struggle to compete against larger, national parties during synchronized elections.

Sec 14 and 15 of the Representation of People Act: It gives power to the Election Commission to conduct elections 6 months earlier than the due date. Art 83 and 172 says that the duration of the Assemblies is for 5 years. But it can be dissolved earlier by passing a no confidence motion or by imposing President's rule. In both these cases, the tenure will come to an end soon and the duration of 5 years cannot be fulfilled. But if the one nation one election system is to be implemented there must be synchronisation of elections as different state Assemblies are at different duration of their tenure. So, there has to be some mechanism through which the elections can be synchronised. NITI AYOOG has come with a solution to address this issue. With an aim to synchronise the duration before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, it came up with the idea of conducting elections in a phase wise manner i.e., by conducting elections for some 12 states in mid-2019 along with Lok Sabha elections and then for the remaining states in 2024 along with the next Lok Sabha election. But for this to be achieved, the existing government has to be dissolved earlier or the duration has to be extended.

This cannot be achieved without amending Constitution and other related Acts like the 1950 and 1951 Representation of Peoples Act. Though Sec 14 and 15 of the RPA 1951 allows

the Election Commission to conduct elections 6 months prior to the due date or 6 months after the last date, such a mass synchronisation can only be done by introducing drastic changes in the existing code. But this cannot be implemented as the 2019 election of Lok Sabha is already done with but the elections were not synchronised and the Phase 1 idea was not given force to. But what is true is that there has to be drastic amendments made in the Indian Constitution before any kind of synchronisation.

While it might sound easy to implement this system in a phase wise manner, in reality it is a herculean task, the reason being that the amendments cannot be easily made under Art 368 without obtaining majority and most importantly, without affecting the basic structure of the Indian Constitution.

How Does It Affect the Basic Structure?

A federal governmental set up is where there is bifurcation of power between the Centre and the State. This concept of federalism has been dealt with in detail in Indian Constitution wherein the powers of and the relationship between the centre and state are discussed at length. Even though we strictly don't follow the federalism principle, we in India have Quasi-federal structure and the States are given autonomy in areas which exclusively falls under the State list. This structure of federalism is said to be a basic structure of Indian Constitution in the case of Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala. This was also reiterated in the case of S.R. Bommai v. UOI. But if this system of one nation one election is to be given force to, there will be a constitutional massacre of the concept of federalism and democracy. This is because, the two options we are left to implement this system are:

- Extension of the duration or curtailing the duration of the existing state government to synchronize with the Lok Sabha election.
- President's rule is to be imposed and there must be dissolution of the State Assemblies.

But the discussion doesn't end there. Even after implementing this system, if there arises a need for mid-term elections, the synchronisation will get affected. So, the alternate mechanism they have come up with is that:

- If a 'no confidence motion' is to be passed in the assembly, then it must be followed by a confidence motion in favour of another party.
- If the majority party it's loses support halfway through, then the minority party would come to power.
- In worst case scenario, President's rule is to be imposed.

These practices take a serious toll on federalism and democracy. It affects democracy because the people are not going to be governed by the rulers for whom they have cast their vote. Minority government rule or President's rule is an imposition on the people which goes against their choices and decisions. It affects federalism because President's rule if imposed would impair the functioning of the State government.

It is a matter of serious concern because any amendment which goes against the basic structure of Indian Constitution will be struck down by the Judiciary by exercising judicial activism. With such a divergent view between the parties, it will be highly difficult to pass this constitutional

amendment and even when done, the odds of the amendment being struck down by the judiciary are pretty high.

Election Commission's View Point

Since the elections are conducted by the Election Commission, it is imperative to know how possible it will be for them to conduct a single election for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies throughout the country in a phased wise manner. National Election Commission puts the election process into motion for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. There are several aspects which are to be looked upon before conducting the election. Those include availability of EVMs, deployment of security forces, preparation of voters list and electoral rolls at the same time for all the 29 states and Union Territories.

In this line, Nasim Zaidi, the Chief Election Commissioner of India said that "As a Commission, this is our recommendation to the Law Ministry, that elections in the country can be held together for both State Assemblies as well as the Lok Sabha.... To conduct these elections simultaneously we would need certain logistic arrangements in terms of procurement of more electronic machines, hiring of temporary workers, and staggering the election date."

As far as availability of EVMs and VVPATs are concerned, the Election Commission has it in excess number than what is required for conducting Lok Sabha elections. It can be used for a lifetime of 15 years. 14.88 lakh Ballot Units and 11.3 lakh Control Units and 11.59 lakh VVPAT machines were used in the 2019 general elections. The Election Commission has 23.3 lakh Ballot Units, 16.35 lakh Control Units and 17.4 lakh VVPAT machines, including those blocked-in election petition cases. But this number is certainly not enough for conducting simultaneous election in India even after assuming that there would be a need of just 2.0 BU and 1.9 CU in each polling booth. The Parliamentary Committee Report states that the election commission has to spend at least 9300 Crores to purchase new machines.

Another major requirement of the Election Commission is Security Personal. As far as deploying them is considered, the idea of one nation one election is most advantageous, reason being they can be used for some other productive purpose for which they are actually trained throughout the whole tenure of the government.

Also, with the PM Narendra Modi's idea of having one voters list for both Lok Sabha and State Assemblies lots of time, effort and money can be saved. So, the Election Commission is justified in saying that they can carry out this mission provided appropriate amendments are made.

Analysis of Literature and Recent Debates

The 2018 Law Commission Report provides the most thorough examination of the "One Nation, One Election" proposal. It recognizes the advantages of simultaneous elections, such as cost savings and improved political stability, but also identifies substantial logistical challenges and the need for significant constitutional reforms. The Commission recommended a pilot project to test the viability of the idea, emphasizing the importance of gradual experimentation.

Recent political support for the proposal has been driven by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP, who see synchronized elections as a way to foster political efficiency

and national unity. However, the opposition, especially regional parties and constitutional experts, have voiced concerns about the disempowerment of states and the centralization of political power in the hands of national parties.

International Comparisons: One Nation, One Election

- **United States:** Elections are held separately for national and state levels, leading to disjointed governance and election fatigue. In contrast, One Nation, One Election in India aims to reduce these inefficiencies.
- **United Kingdom:** National elections occur every five years, with local elections on separate schedules. While synchronization could improve efficiency, concerns about regional issues being overshadowed remain, similar to potential challenges in India.
- **Brazil:** Holds simultaneous elections for national and local offices, which boosts cost-efficiency but can lead to national issues dominating local concerns, a challenge India may face.
- **Mexico:** Conducts elections for both national and local offices on the same day, reducing costs but causing polarization. India may experience similar issues with regional voices being marginalized.

Conclusion

The proposal for One Nation, One Election offers significant potential to improve India's electoral system by reducing costs, improving governance stability, and promoting long-term policy development. However, it faces numerous challenges, particularly related to the need for constitutional amendments, the risk of undermining federalism, and the marginalization of regional and minority voices. The path to implementing this proposal will require careful consideration of its implications on India's political diversity, representation, and democratic values.

As the debate continues, it is crucial to test the feasibility of simultaneous elections through pilot projects and public consultations, ensuring that any reform is implemented in a manner that upholds the principles of democratic inclusivity, federalism, and representation.

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