



Original Article

One Nation – One Election in India: A Constitutional and Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of “One Nation–One Election” proposes synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies across India to improve administrative efficiency, reduce public expenditure and limit governance disruptions caused by frequent electoral cycles. This study examines the practicality of implementing simultaneous elections within the Indian framework by analyzing relevant constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations and recommendations of various committees. It further explores comparative electoral practices in countries such as South Africa and Sweden to evaluate both feasibility and democratic consequences. Additionally, the paper incorporates perspectives of Indian scholars and political analysts, presenting both the perceived benefits and underlying concerns. Adopting a constitutional and federal perspective, the study aims to provide a balanced assessment of this reform and its potential impact on India’s electoral democracy.

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections, Indian Constitution, Electoral Reform, Federalism, Election Commission of India, Comparative Democracy.

Introduction

India, recognized as the world’s largest democracy, conducts elections across its 28 states and 8 Union Territories with remarkable frequency and scale. Since the disruption of synchronized elections after 1967, the country has entered a phase of continuous electoral cycles, often described as a “permanent election mode,” which places a significant burden on governance, administrative machinery and public finances. The Election Commission of India has noted that general elections involve over 900 million voters, requiring vast logistical arrangements and financial resources.¹ Frequent elections also lead to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which restricts policy decisions, delays development programmes and slows administrative functioning. In this context, the proposal of “One Nation – One Election” (ONOE) seeks to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, aiming to reduce expenditure, enhance governance efficiency and ensure policy continuity.² However, the proposal raises complex constitutional and federal concerns, particularly regarding legislative tenure, state autonomy and political stability, making it both a transformative and contested reform initiative.

Historical Context and Evolution

The concept of simultaneous elections has its origins in India’s early post-independence period. After the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950, the first general elections in 1951–52 were conducted simultaneously for the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies. This practice continued in 1957, 1962, and 1967, supported by political stability and full-term governments at both central and state levels. During this phase, synchronized elections ensured administrative efficiency, reduced costs, and allowed uninterrupted governance.³ However, this system began to break down in the late 1960s due to increasing political instability. The premature dissolution of the Fourth Lok Sabha in 1970 and the early collapse of several State Assemblies, including Haryana (1967) and Punjab (1968), disrupted the uniform electoral cycle. The use of Article 356, enabling President’s Rule, further contributed to this fragmentation. Additionally, the rise of coalition politics and regional parties weakened centralized political control, resulting in frequent government changes and mid-term elections.⁴ Consequently, India transitioned into a system of staggered elections, with each state following its own electoral schedule independent of national elections.

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Revival of the Idea

The idea of restoring simultaneous elections re-emerged in policy debates due to rising election costs, governance disruptions and administrative inefficiencies. The Election Commission of India first formally proposed the idea in 1983 under Chief Election Commissioner S.L. Shakdhar, emphasizing its potential to improve governance and reduce expenditure. The 170th Report (1999) of the Law Commission of India further supported this proposal, recommending a structured election calendar and necessary constitutional amendments.⁵

The proposal gained momentum with the 2015 Parliamentary Standing Committee report chaired by E. M. Sudarsana Natchiappan, which highlighted economic and administrative benefits and suggested mechanisms like a constructive vote of no confidence to ensure stability. The NITI Aayog, under Amitabh Kant, further advanced the idea in 2017 by proposing phased implementation and legal reforms. The 2018 draft report of the Law Commission, led by B. S. Chauhan, outlined constitutional challenges, including synchronizing legislative tenures.⁶

In 2023, the Government of India constituted a High-Level Committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind to examine the feasibility of ONOE. This reflects the continued relevance of the proposal in contemporary policy discourse. However, unlike the relatively stable political environment of the 1950s, today's fragmented and federal polity poses significant challenges. Thus, implementing simultaneous elections requires balancing efficiency with constitutional principles, federal autonomy and democratic diversity.

Literature Review

The concept of "One Nation – One Election" has generated extensive academic, constitutional, and policy debate in India, focusing on its feasibility, constitutional validity and democratic implications. Existing literature places the discussion within broader themes of electoral reform, governance efficiency, federalism and political accountability. Early electoral history shows that simultaneous elections were practiced between 1951 and 1967, but subsequent political developments led to their discontinuation. Contemporary studies argue that frequent elections impose heavy financial costs, disrupt governance due to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct and encourage short-term policymaking. At the same time, scholars caution that any reform must balance efficiency with constitutional principles and democratic diversity.⁷

The Election Commission of India, under S. L. Shakdhar in 1983, supported simultaneous elections, highlighting reduced expenditure, administrative burden, and governance disruptions. Rising election costs and repeated deployment of security forces strengthen this argument. The Law Commission of India in its 170th Report (1999) recommended restoring synchronized elections through a structured electoral calendar, while its 2018 Draft Report under B. S. Chauhan emphasized the need for constitutional amendments and proposed a constructive vote of no-confidence to ensure stability.⁸

The Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015), chaired by E. M. Sudarsana Natchiappan, stressed economic and administrative benefits, noting that frequent elections create voter fatigue and hinder development. It suggested phased implementation through adjustment of Assembly tenures. Similarly, the NITI Aayog (2017), led by Amitabh Kant, proposed a two-phase election cycle and emphasized institutional readiness, arguing that synchronized elections would improve policy continuity and governance efficiency.⁹

Scholarly opinions remain divided. Subhash C. Kashyap supports the idea with safeguards for federalism, while Madan B. Lokur warns against weakening cooperative federalism. Rajeev Bhargava highlights risks to political pluralism, whereas Faizan Mustafa views frequent elections as essential for democratic accountability.¹⁰ Comparative studies show that countries like South Africa and Sweden follow synchronized elections, while Germany and the United States adopt staggered systems due to strong federal structures.

Overall, literature indicates that while simultaneous elections offer economic and administrative advantages, they raise concerns regarding constitutional amendments, federal balance, and democratic representation, requiring a cautious and consensus-based approach.

Objectives

- To examine the historical evolution and constitutional framework of simultaneous elections in India along with key institutional recommendations.
- To evaluate the benefits, challenges, and implications of synchronized elections on federalism, governance, and political representation.
- To compare India's electoral system with international practices and suggest feasible reforms for implementing "One Nation – One Election."

Methodology

This doctrinal, analytical study uses secondary sources and qualitative methods to examine constitutional, legal, political, and comparative aspects of "One Nation–One Election." It analyses official reports, judicial decisions, and global practices to assess feasibility, challenges, and democratic implications, presenting a balanced view within constitutional democracy and cooperative federalism.

Constitutional and Legal Considerations

Implementing *One Nation – One Election* in India requires extensive constitutional, statutory, and procedural reforms rather than mere administrative coordination. The Constitution currently provides independent electoral cycles for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, reflecting federal autonomy and democratic diversity. According to the Election Commission of India, frequent elections impose substantial financial costs and disrupt governance due to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.¹¹ However, synchronizing elections necessitates reconciling these separate cycles without undermining constitutional principles, which requires amendments under Article 368.

▪ Key Constitutional Provisions Implicated

Several constitutional provisions directly affect the feasibility of simultaneous elections. Article 83(2) and Article 172(1) prescribe five-year terms but allow premature dissolution, complicating synchronization.¹² The use of Article 356 can dissolve State Assemblies, disrupting fixed cycles. Similarly, Article 85 and Article 174 empower dissolution of legislatures, creating uncertainty. While Article 324 grants supervisory authority over elections, it does not permit alteration of legislative tenures without constitutional backing.

▪ Amendments and Legal Changes Required

The reform would require amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, 356, and possibly 324, with ratification by at least half of the states due to federal implications. Changes to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 are also necessary to ensure fixed terms, regulate early dissolution, and introduce a "constructive vote of no-confidence," as suggested by the Law Commission of India, to maintain governmental stability.¹³

Challenges to Synchronization

Mid-term dissolutions remain the primary challenge, raising questions about whether fresh nationwide elections or interim arrangements should follow. Federalism concerns are equally significant, as synchronization may be viewed as limiting state autonomy. Judicial scrutiny under the basic structure doctrine established in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* could invalidate reforms that weaken democracy or federalism.¹⁴ Political consensus is another hurdle, as states and regional parties may resist uniform electoral cycles.

▪ Possible Legal Innovations and Safeguards

Proposed safeguards include a constructive vote of no-confidence, fixed-term legislatures modeled on systems in United Kingdom and Sweden, and caretaker governments to ensure continuity during disruptions.¹⁵ A phased implementation approach has also been suggested to balance efficiency with constitutional flexibility.¹⁶

▪ Views from the Judiciary and Legal Experts

Experts emphasize caution. Justice B.S. Chauhan highlighted the need for major constitutional restructuring, while Justice Madan B. Lokur warned against undermining federalism. P.P. Rao stressed safeguarding democratic vibrancy, and Subhash Kashyap noted the necessity of broad consensus. Rajeev Bhargava cautioned against weakening pluralism.¹⁷

Overall, simultaneous elections demand a careful, gradual redesign of India's constitutional framework, balancing efficiency with democratic integrity and federal principles.

Comparative International Perspective

A comparative assessment of electoral systems across major democracies reveals that while the idea of synchronized elections has practical appeal in terms of governance efficiency and cost reduction, its implementation is deeply contingent upon constitutional architecture, political traditions and institutional maturity. In the context of India, where federalism, multi-party competition, and socio-political diversity are pronounced, lessons from other nations must be adapted cautiously rather than adopted mechanically. For instance, **South Africa**, governed by the Constitution of South Africa, conducts national and provincial elections simultaneously every five years, a model that has demonstrably reduced administrative expenditure and ensured policy coherence between different tiers of government, with studies by the Electoral Commission of South Africa indicating cost savings of up to 30% in combined electoral cycles.¹⁸ However, this synchronization is facilitated by a relatively centralized federal design and a smaller electorate compared to India's vast and heterogeneous population. Similarly, **Sweden**, under the Instrument of Government, mandates fixed election dates, holding national, regional and municipal elections concurrently every four years, which has consistently resulted in voter turnout exceeding 80%, as reported by Statistics Sweden.¹⁹ This system underscores the importance of institutional discipline and predictability, though its unitary structure limits direct applicability to India's quasi-federal framework.

In contrast, the experience of the **United Kingdom**, operating under a flexible constitutional arrangement and previously guided by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (since repealed), demonstrates that even legally mandated fixed terms can be overridden by political exigencies such as early dissolution of Parliament, as evidenced during the 2017 and 2019 elections.²⁰ This highlights a critical challenge for India: legal provisions alone cannot guarantee synchronization without strong political consensus and stability. Meanwhile, **Germany**, a

federal parliamentary republic under the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, deliberately avoids synchronized elections due to the constitutional autonomy of its *Länder* (states), but ensures stability through the innovative mechanism of a constructive vote of no confidence, which requires a successor government to be simultaneously elected before an incumbent is removed. Scholars and reports from the German Federal Constitutional Court suggest that this mechanism has significantly reduced premature dissolutions and electoral volatility²¹, offering a potentially adaptable reform pathway for India to minimize disruptions without enforcing strict simultaneity.

On the other hand, the **United States**, under its federal presidential system defined by the United States Constitution, exemplifies a deliberately staggered electoral model, with presidential elections every four years, congressional elections every two years and state-level elections determined independently. Data from the Federal Election Commission show that this decentralization is intrinsic to American federalism, prioritizing local autonomy over administrative uniformity.²² This model reinforces the argument that staggered elections can coexist with democratic stability and may even enhance accountability by ensuring continuous electoral engagement.

Taken together, these comparative insights suggest that while synchronized elections can yield administrative efficiency, cost savings and policy alignment—as seen in South Africa and Sweden—their success depends on structural conditions such as centralized governance, fixed electoral tenures and limited scope for premature dissolution. Conversely, experiences from the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States demonstrate that flexibility, federal autonomy and political contingencies often necessitate staggered electoral cycles. Therefore, for India, any move toward “One Nation – One Election” must balance the goals of efficiency and stability with the constitutional principles of federalism, democratic accountability and political pluralism, possibly through hybrid reforms such as fixed election windows, strengthened anti-defection laws and the introduction of mechanisms akin to the constructive vote of no confidence to reduce mid-term disruptions without undermining state autonomy.

India's Comparative Challenge

India's pursuit of simultaneous elections under the “One Nation – One Election” framework faces significantly deeper constitutional and structural constraints than countries such as Sweden and South Africa. The Indian constitutional system is founded on cooperative federalism, where both the Union and the States derive authority directly from the Constitution, rather than from a centralized hierarchy. This dual structure, repeatedly affirmed by the Supreme Court of India, restricts any unilateral attempt to alter legislative tenures for synchronization. In *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, the Court explicitly held federalism to be part of the Constitution's basic structure, thereby limiting reforms that may undermine state autonomy.²³ Moreover, India's electoral scale—over 900 million voters as reported by the Election Commission of India—makes synchronization an enormous logistical challenge involving security, personnel and infrastructure. The country's vast socio-cultural diversity and strong regional party systems further complicate uniform election cycles, as state-specific issues risk being overshadowed in a synchronized national election. Additionally, scholars argue that frequent elections

strengthen democratic accountability and citizen engagement, making the normative case for synchronization less compelling in India's context.²⁴

Implementation Roadmap

■ Law Commission of India (2018 Draft Report)

The Law Commission of India, chaired by Justice B.S. Chauhan, recommended amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 to enable synchronization.²⁵ It proposed phased alignment of elections, introduction of a constructive vote of no-confidence to prevent premature dissolution and the creation of a common electoral roll. Safeguards such as caretaker governments were also suggested to ensure continuity in exceptional situations.

■ NITI Aayog

The NITI Aayog proposed a two-phase model: synchronizing Lok Sabha and several State Assembly elections initially, followed by the remaining states after 30 months.²⁶ It emphasized fixed legislative terms, improved logistical capacity and highlighted benefits such as reduced election expenditure, minimized governance disruptions and limited application of the Model Code of Conduct.

■ Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015)

The Committee chaired by Dr. E.M. Sudarsana Natchiappan noted that frequent elections cause administrative strain and increased costs.²⁷ It recommended achieving synchronization in two stages by extending or curtailing some State Assembly tenures, stressing the need for broad political consensus.

■ High-Level Committee (2023–2024)

The Committee led by Ram Nath Kovind is currently evaluating feasibility through consultations with stakeholders including the Election Commission, experts, and political parties. It aims to propose a comprehensive implementation framework.

■ Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India has indicated readiness to conduct simultaneous elections subject to legal and political consensus, while highlighting challenges such as increased EVM (*Electronic Voting Machine*) / VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) requirements and security deployment.

■ Judicial Observations

The Supreme Court of India, in *Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu*, emphasized political stability, but constitutional experts warn that altering legislative terms may violate the Basic Structure Doctrine.

■ Academic Contributions

Experts like Subhash C. Kashyap support gradual reform, while S.Y. Quraishi highlights practical challenges. Critics such as Faizan Mustafa and Madan B. Lokur caution against weakening federalism and democratic plurality²⁸.

Conclusion

"One Nation – One Election" is a significant reform proposal aimed at improving governance efficiency by synchronizing elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. It seeks to reduce public expenditure, limit administrative disruptions caused by frequent elections, and create a more stable policy environment. The reform also has the potential to enhance voter engagement and streamline the use of institutional resources, making the electoral process more organized and predictable. However, the proposal raises serious constitutional and federal concerns, as India's diverse political structure requires careful balancing of national and regional interests. Its implementation would demand major constitutional amendments, strong political consensus, and institutional readiness. While international examples offer guidance, India must adopt a tailored approach that safeguards

democratic values, preserves federalism, and ensures inclusive representation across all regions.

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Conflicts of interest

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