



From Perpetual Campaigning To Policy Continuity: An Institutional Analysis Of One Nation, One Election

¹PRERANA ²SATHYA NARAYANASWAMY C

¹Legal Associate, ²Designated Partner

¹ Lexira Advocates, Solicitors and Legal consultants, Bangalore

ABSTRACT: "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) in India advocates concurrent elections for the centre and the State Legislative Assemblies. In the early decades following independence, concurrent elections were employed; however, many early dissolutions of state assemblies and intermittent periods of federal rule have led to a staggered electoral schedule. This continuous election cycle imposes significant financial, administrative, and governance restrictions. These risks include the regular application of the MCC, the diversion of society employees and security personnel, and the disruption of policy implementation. With the objectives of boosting voter turnout, cutting public spending, enhancing policy coherence, and streamlining election administration, ONOE is proposed as a solution to these problems. Despite its promises of better governance and economic efficiency, the initiative's execution faces substantial challenges, including constitutional amendments, federal concerns, and logistical constraints. Aligning national and state elections has the potential to obscure regional issues, marginalize small parties, and affect India's federal structure. However, with enough planning, ONOE can reduce election fatigue, optimize administrative and financial resources, and foster democratic functioning by allowing governments to focus on long-term policy objectives rather than ongoing campaigning. This article provides an institutional analysis of ONOE, examining its history, benefits, implementation challenges, and implications for India's democratic governance.

Key Words: ONOE, Concurrent Elections, MCC, Electoral Cost, Democratic Accountability, Voter turnout.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is considered an essential and permanent characteristic of the Indian Constitution, constituting a part of its basic structure. As conceived by the Indian Constitution, democracy mandates that citizens choose their representatives for the Parliament and State Legislative bodies through a defined method of election.

An election is delineated as "an election to fill a seat or seats in either House of Parliament or in the House or either House of the Legislature of a State".¹ Participating in elections an essential to concept connected to democracy; in fact, a democratic system is virtually impossible to imagine without them. They are a mechanism for ensuring political accountability and responsiveness because their primary function is

¹ The Representation of the People Act, 1951, Section 2(d)

to serve as a check on power, often being more effective at eliminating people from power than keeping them. Therefore, the foundational requirement for a successful democratic process is guaranteeing that elections are conducted freely and fairly.

Since managing elections on such a massive scale is an enormous and inherently problematic undertaking, direct, free, and fair elections are considered *sine qua non*. Consequently, the Constitution delegates the responsibility in India to Election Commission to oversee, guide, & manage elections for positions of State Legislative Councils, State Legislative Assemblies, Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, President, Vice President.²

ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION-PERCEPTION

An initiative to “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) in India suggests holding elections to Lok Sabha & all the State Legislative Assemblies in tandem. A concept, referred to as concurrent elections”, generally implies the election cycle in a way that elections to centre and State Assemblies are synchronized. This way, voters can cast their vote for both their National and State representatives on the same day within their designated constituencies, although the voting process may still take place in multiple phases throughout the country. This strategic alignment is primarily driven by the objective of streamlining the democratic exercise, achieving significant cost savings, and mitigating the detrimental impact of a continuous election cycle on effective governance.

The primary objectives of this proposal are to address several inefficiencies inherent in the current electoral structure. The plan seeks to achieve significant financial savings by reducing the substantial fiscal burden of frequently conducting elections, and it aims to ensure stable policy implementation and governance continuity by avoiding the frequent interruptions resulting from the imposition of Model Code of Conduct.

Several potential electoral reforms have been reviewed by high-level committees in the past, and the most prominent idea among them was the “One Nation, One Election” proposal. A concept of conducting concurrent elections was initially put forth by the Election Commission in 1983. This recommendation was reiterated by India’s Law Commission 170th Report, titled “Reform of Electoral Laws”-1999, which was led by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy. However, these proposals were ultimately stalled by various obstacles.

As of recently, atop September 18, 2024, the Union Cabinet, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi, validated the suggestions made by the High-Level Committee on concurrent Elections, which was chaired by former President Sri Ram Nath Kovind.³

Reportedly, committee received over 21,500 public responses, with a significant 80% expressing support for holding simultaneous elections. Furthermore, out of 47 political parties that submitted their views, a clear majority of 32 parties supported the measure, primarily arguing for its benefits in resource optimization and social harmony.⁴

As per the recommendations, the implementation of simultaneous elections is structured into two distinct phases. The first phase will combine the central and Assembly elections. The subsequent cycle involves holding elections to Panchayat and Municipalities with in a 100-day timeframe following the general

² The Constitution of India, 1950, Article 324

³ Cabinet accepts recommendations of High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, 18 Sep, 2024, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/cabinet-accepts-recommendations-of-high-level-committee-on-simultaneous-elections/?comment=disable

⁴ Santosh Kumar, Ritu Kataria, Saurabh Kalia, One Nation, One Election, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU, (Dec 17, 2024) <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=153577&ModuleId=3®=3&lang=1>

elections. To streamline this process, a joint electoral roll which will be utilized for every polls. The government is slated to commence comprehensive nationwide discussions and form an implementation working group.

To bring the simultaneous election plan into effect, the government intends to propose three pieces of legislation to Parliament. Of these three, two Bills are specifically focused on making the necessary Constitutional Amendments that will allow for the phased concurrent elections for the centre, State Assemblies, Panchayats and municipalities.⁵

HISTORY

In India, simultaneous elections for the centre and all State Legislative Assemblies were an established norm immediately after the Constitution was adopted. The Constitution stipulates that the standard for centre⁶ and State Legislative Assemblies⁷ is 5 years from their initial session, unless they are dissolved before that period ends.

The general elections initially for the centre and State Assemblies took place simultaneously in 1951-52, and this synchronization kept up in 1957, 1962 and 1967. In 1968 and 1969, this stable pattern of simultaneous elections was first broken when several State Legislative Assemblies were dissolved ahead of schedule. Further disruption occurred in 1970 when the 4th central government was dissolved prematurely, prompting new elections in 1971. Later, 5th Lok Sabha's term was continued until 1977 under A 352 due to the Emergency. Henceforth, only the 8th, 10th, 14th, and 15th Lok Sabhas have completed their full terms. Over time, State Assemblies have also encountered premature dissolutions and term extensions.

Currently, at least one region of the country experiences elections at any time during the year. As per NITI Aayog, "In the last 30 years, there has not been a single year without an election to either a State Assembly or Lok Sabha or both".⁸ These occurrences have significantly and permanently altered the structure of simultaneous elections, resulting in a nationwide trend of staggered election schedules. Such regular occurrences negatively impact administrative and developmental initiatives in the states or regions undergoing elections, as well as the governance process as a whole.

NEED FOR ONOE

Currently, the country witnesses an estimation of 5–7 State Assembly elections every year.⁹ This constant electoral cycle compels political parties to concentrate on immediate, popular measures to secure votes instead of pursuing structural reforms that would offer long-term public benefits.

1. Overcome the inefficiency due to MCC

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC)¹⁰ is a collection of guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India to regulate political parties and candidates before elections, ensuring a free and fair electoral process. It is developed through a consensus with political parties, who have agreed to respect and observe its principle.

⁵ Preetha Nair, Government plans 3 Bills to implement 'One Nation One Poll', THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS, Sep 30, 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Sep/30/government-plans-3-bills-to-implement-one-nation-one-poll>

⁶ The Constitution of India, 1950, Article 83(2)

⁷ The Constitution of India, 1950, Article 172(1)

⁸ Tarini Ranadive, One Nation, One Election, Lokatantra, <https://www.lokatantra.in/articles-details/One-Nation-One-Election>

⁹ Debroy, Bibek, and Kishore Desai, (2017: The 'What', 'Why' and 'How'. NITI Aayog Discussion Paper.

¹⁰ THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA, FAQs on Model Conduct of Conduct, <http://documents.gov.in/central/11949.pdf>

The Model Code is enforced from the moment the election schedule is announced by the Election Commission. The Code applies nationwide during the Lok Sabha elections, and state-wide during the Legislative Assembly elections. Crucially, while the code is in force and in the specific area where it is operational, nearly all activities – including development programs, welfare schemes, and capital projects are suspended, with routine administrative activities being the primary exception. Clause VII (vi) of the Model Code of Conduct limits the policy actions of ministers and authorities by prohibiting them from initiating or promising new projects, grants, or infrastructure developments after the election announcement.¹¹

The Parliamentary Standing Committee, in its 79th report,¹² articulated problems with the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct. The Committee specifically noted that the MCC's enforcement effectively halts all development programs and efforts of both the Central and State Governments in the states preparing for elections. Furthermore, the report highlighted that the regularity of elections results in MCC being imposed for prolonged periods, resulting in “policy paralysis and governance deficit”.

Critics argue that when considering all levels of elections, the application of MCC results in the loss of numerous workdays over the course of a government's term.¹³ Supporting this concern, an analysis by the NITI Aayog¹⁴ indicates that MCC is in effect in certain regions of the country for roughly for about four months annually, posing a significant challenge to governance by causing regular interruptions in government decision-making and the execution of projects. The MCC was in effect to eighty-two days during the most recent 2024 Lok Sabha elections.¹⁵ As per the data from the Election Commission, the MCC was enforced for a sum of 676 days from 2019 to 2024, which included both central and state elections.

Repetitive enforcement of MCC across various elections negatively affects governance efficiency and obstructs the advancement of public welfare programs in various states. A primary solution to prevent such interruptions would be the implementation of simultaneous elections.

2. Financial Burdens

Elections in India are an increasingly expensive undertaking. The expenses associated with conducting central elections have surged notably across successive years. The inaugural general election in 1951-52, which took place in 68 phases, had a minimal cost of Rs. 10.5 crore, while estimated expenditure for the 2019 general election was between Rs. 50,000 crore and Rs. 55,000 crore, as per the Centre for Media Studies.¹⁶ Touted as “most expensive” global electoral event, the 2024 Lok Sabha election saw MPs and parties spend over one lakh crore, drastically surpassing the expenditure of the 2019 polls.¹⁷

The high frequency of elections creates an extraordinary financial strain on the public treasury, i.e., Exchequer. The frequent cycle of elections in various State Assemblies forces political parties to constantly seek new funds and contributions. This continuous need for money is widely seen as a major catalyst for corruption and the circulation of illicit funds within the nation. Each year, the substantial costs involved in

¹¹ THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA, Frequently Asked Questions on the Model Code of Conduct, <https://www.eci.gov.in/faq/5/16>

¹² The Parliamentary Standing Committee, 79th Report. Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies, 17 December, 2015. https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/79th_Report.pdf

¹³ Milan Vaishnav, Caroline Mallory, and Annabel Richter, Does “One Nation, One Election” make sense for India ?.

¹⁴ Debroy, Bibek, and Kishore Desai, (2017). The ‘What’, ‘Why’ and ‘How’. NITI Aayog Discussion Paper. [REPORT_2017.pdf](https://niti.gov.in/reports-and-publications/REPORT_2017.pdf)

¹⁵ Election Commission of India, Press Note No. ECI/PN/23/2024

¹⁶ The Parliamentary Standing Committee, 79th Report. Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies, 17 December, 2015. https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/79th_Report.pdf

¹⁷ Aishwarya Paliwal, Most Expensive Polls Ever? Nearly Rs 1.35 Lakh Crore Spent in 2024 Election, INDIA TODAY, May 31, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha/story/lok-sabha-election-2024-expenditureelection-commission-2546455-2024-05-31>

conducting, managing, and supervising elections are borne by the Government of India alongside the different State Governments. This cost is further amplified by the huge expenses incurred by political parties and candidates themselves.

Simultaneous elections are expected to decrease the overall cost of holding elections. By conducting elections simultaneously, the process would be streamlined and made more efficient, eliminating redundancies and generating substantial long-term savings by cutting the exorbitant and ever-growing costs currently incurred with every separate election cycle.

A major loss in the current election process is the high cost of logistics, as resources are deployed twice: once for the State Assembly elections and again for the Lok Sabha elections. It is argued that holding a single election would eliminate the need for recurrent political party funding, which would consequently reduce manipulative practices associated with fundraising and the operational costs associated with polling stations and Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). Most importantly, it would allow the incumbent government more time to focus on fulfilling its electoral promises instead of being constantly preoccupied with year-round elections.¹⁸

3. Engaging security forces and civil servants

Elections require a broad gathering and reallocation of government staff, along with a considerable deployment of security personnel, such as the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), State Armed Police, and Home Guards, etc., to conduct, supervise and secure the polls. As 2 to 5 State Assemblies go to polls every six months, the security personnel are stationed for extended durations since the deployment of CAPF typically lasts throughout the election process. In the elections for the 16th Lok Sabha, the Election Commission utilized 1349 Companies of the Central Armed Police Forces.¹⁹ The ECI enlisted roughly 10 million polling officials to run and supervise the 16th Lok Sabha elections at approximately 9,30,000 polling stations nationwide,²⁰ leading to an average of about 10.75 personnel assigned to each station.

A major, often ignored cost is “governance downtime”.²¹ Government officials, including key civil servants, are diverted from their regular policy and administrative duties for months to oversee election logistics, resulting in time not spent on actual governance.

Simultaneous elections would allow these prominent officials and civil servants to dedicate their time to actual governance, policy work, and fulfilling electoral promises, rather than being perpetually preoccupied with year-round election duty.

4. Public Engagement

Voter turnout is a crucial indicator of a strong democracy, reflecting political engagement and civic spirit. Research by Shackle and Dandoy²² highlights that the simultaneity effect, i.e., holding multiple elections on the same date, significantly boosts turnout. This increase is attributed to several factors: higher stakes for political actors, more targeted, multi-level campaigns, and broader press coverage. The current challenge in ensuring participation stems from ‘voter fatigue’, which is often induced by holding elections in a staggered manner. The solution offered is simultaneous elections, where citizens cast votes for both levels of government at once, thereby potentially lessening voter fatigue.

¹⁸ Young Voices, Why ‘One Nation, One Poll’ needs greater consensus, ORF, (Jun.27, 2019), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/why-one-nation-one-poll-idea-needs-greater-consensus-52451>

¹⁹, “India Votes – The General Elections 2014”

²⁰ Strategic Plan Book of ECI

²¹ Choudhary Anika, Is the Idea of India’s One Nation, One Election A Miracle or A Disaster?, IIPA Publications, <https://www.iipa.org.in/GyanKOSH/posts/is-the-idea-of-indias-one-nation-one-election-a-miracle-or-a-disaster>

²² Vol. 34(3), Arjan H. Schakel & Régis Dandoy, Electoral Cycles and Turnout in Multilevel Electoral Systems, WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS, 605–623 (2014).

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice²³ found that frequent elections disrupt normal public life, impact essential services, and cause problems like road traffic disruption and noise pollution from rallies. They suggested that simultaneous elections would limit this period of disruption to a fixed timeframe.

It is also assumed that incidents related to hate, caste politics, and communalism would be limited to a one-time event.²⁴ According to an article by Dr. S. Y. Quraishi,²⁵ former Chief Election Commissioner, frequent electoral cycles are alleged to sustain and intensify issues of caste, religion, and communal tension nationwide. Dr. Quraishi posited that elections serve as polarizing catalysts, thereby accentuating problems like casteism, communalism, corruption, and crony capitalism. He advocated for simultaneous elections as a mechanism to mitigate these ongoing societal detriments resulting from a state of perpetual electioneering.

IMPLEMENTING CHALLENGES.

A 'One Nation, One Election' initiative seeks to align the elections for the Centre and all State Assemblies. Although it is often touted for its potential benefits in cost savings and administrative efficiency, its apparent lucrativeness is overshadowed by profound challenges in its implementation.

- 1. Federal Concerns:** A significant drawback of synchronous polling lies in the potential erosion of federal structure. When Lok Sabha and Assembly elections happen concurrently, the dominant national political agenda often eclipses state-specific issues. This creates a challenging environment for local political parties, which struggle to have their regional concerns adequately voiced for state and local body elections, as national political parties effectively take over the stage. The outcome is typically a 'national wave' that favours larger national parties, thereby marginalizing regional voices.²⁶ This imbalance fundamentally undermines the federal democratic structure and diminishes the rich diversity of Indian democracy.
- 2. Amendments to constitution:** The implementation of concurrent elections faces considerable constitutional and legal hurdles. Conducting aligned elections demands a comprehensive set of important amendments to the Constitution, specifically targeting the parts that govern election schedules, terms of office for legislators, and essential electoral procedures. The process for such far-reaching constitutional amendments is inherently arduous, necessitating the backing of a two-thirds majority in both houses of Parliament, and subsequent approval from at least half of the State Legislatures in India. Furthermore, significant modifications would be essential for existing electoral legislation, such as the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to legally synchronize the differing election timelines.
- 3. Logistical Issues:** The conducting of simultaneous elections is complicated by major operational hurdles, including the vast logistics, security, and manpower required across a large and diverse nation. The most significant challenge highlighted by the Election Commission of India is the massive initial investment needed for the extensive acquisition of more Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) devices, with a NITI Aayog paper estimating this procurement cost at over Rs. 9,300 crores.²⁷ Furthermore, the logistical challenge is compounded by the substantial recurring

²³ The Parliamentary Standing Committee, 79th Report. Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies, 17 December, 2015.

https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/79th_Report.pdf

²⁴ Young Voices, Why 'One Nation, One Poll' needs greater consensus, ORF, (Jun.27, 2019), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/why-one-nation-one-poll-idea-needs-greater-consensus-52451>

²⁵ <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/2016/06/13/holding-ls-assembly-polls-together-is-desirablebut-not-feasible>

²⁶ Debroy, Bibek, and Kishore Desai, (2017). Analysis of simultaneous elections: The 'What', 'Why' and 'How'. NITI Aayog Discussion Paper.

²⁷ Record-breaking election spending set to ignite rural demand, feel experts, THE ECONOMIC TIMES, May 05, 2024, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/loksabha/india/record-breaking-election-spending-set-to-ignite-rural-demandfelexperts/articleshow/109852310.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_m%20edium=text&utm_campaign=cpst

expenditure associated with replacing these machines every fifteen years and the increased warehousing costs for their storage.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The discussion about conducting simultaneous elections has been persistent, as India is progressively contemplating the “One Nation One Election” concept as a crucial reform to enhance governance and optimize democratic processes.

Currently, the staggered electoral schedule drains resources and keeps political entities in perpetual campaigning, detracting from serious policy focus. Evidence suggests simultaneous elections could be highly beneficial, leading to reduced electoral costs, higher voter turnout, and shorter periods of MCC restrictions. ONOE offers a solution by promising economic efficiency and a resolution to this policy paralysis, provided it is implemented with careful planning to protect democratic and federal principles.

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