
One Nation, One Election: Rationale, Challenges, and Future Directions

Dr. Noor Fatima Ansari¹

¹Assistant Professor Political Science, Mahila Mahavidyalaya P. G. College, Kanpur Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The concept of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) has gained renewed attention in India as a proposed reform to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. The rationale behind this proposal lies in reducing the frequent electoral cycles that impose significant financial burdens on the exchequer, disrupt governance due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, and divert administrative machinery from developmental activities. By aligning elections, proponents argue that ONOE could enhance policy continuity, improve governance efficiency, and encourage a more stable political environment conducive to long-term planning and development. However, the proposal raises several constitutional, political, and logistical challenges. India’s federal structure, characterized by diverse political dynamics across states, makes synchronization complex, particularly in cases of premature dissolution of legislatures. Constitutional amendments would be required to adjust the tenures of legislative bodies, which may raise concerns about democratic representation and accountability. Additionally, critics argue that simultaneous elections could overshadow regional issues, favoring national narratives and potentially disadvantaging smaller or regional parties. From an operational perspective, the implementation of ONOE would demand substantial resources, including increased availability of electronic voting machines and security personnel. Despite these challenges, the proposal holds potential for reform if approached through consensus-building, phased implementation, and robust institutional mechanisms. The future of ONOE will depend on balancing efficiency with democratic principles, ensuring that electoral reforms strengthen rather than undermine India’s pluralistic and federal polity. Present paper purports to examine the rationale, challenges and future directions on One Nation One Election (ONOE). The paper is based on critical review of literature and secondary data.

Key Words: *One Nation One Election, Electoral Reforms; Relevance of ONOE*

Introduction

The concept of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* seeks to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies across India. The primary objectives of this reform include simplifying the electoral process, reducing the financial burden associated with frequent elections, and enhancing governance efficiency. Proponents argue that ONOE could significantly improve administrative continuity and policy implementation by minimizing disruptions caused by recurring electoral cycles (Election Commission of India, 2015; Law Commission of India, 1999). However, its success depends on administrative preparedness, constitutional amendments, and broad political consensus. A carefully designed phased or staggered implementation may help achieve this ambitious reform while preserving democratic values and federal balance.

Historically, India conducted simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies between 1951 and 1967. This cycle was disrupted due to premature dissolutions of legislatures and political instability, leading to the current system of staggered elections (Election Commission of India, 2015). The resulting frequent elections have led to substantial financial expenditures on electoral management, logistics, and

security. Studies suggest that synchronized elections could significantly reduce these costs (Law Commission of India, 1999). Frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) during elections restricts policy announcements and delays development initiatives, thereby affecting governance (NITI Aayog, 2017). A synchronized electoral cycle could ensure uninterrupted governance and better utilization of administrative resources. Additionally, it may reduce voter fatigue and improve electoral participation by streamlining the voting process (Parliamentary Standing Committee, 2015). Continuous electioneering often fosters political polarization; hence, a unified election cycle could contribute to greater political stability and policy consistency.

The rationale for ONOE has gained renewed attention in recent years. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (2024) provided a comprehensive roadmap for implementation, and its recommendations were approved by the Union Cabinet in September 2024, marking a significant step toward electoral reform (Government of India, 2024). The proposal aligns with broader governance reforms aimed at improving efficiency and reducing administrative burdens. The idea is not unprecedented globally. Countries such as Sweden and South Africa conduct simultaneous national and sub-national elections, while nations like Brazil and Indonesia follow synchronized election cycles under different governance systems (International IDEA, 2022). These international experiences provide useful insights but must be adapted carefully to India's federal and parliamentary framework. Despite its advantages, ONOE faces several challenges. Constitutional amendments would be required, particularly concerning Articles 83, 85, 172, and 356, to align electoral cycles (Law Commission of India, 2018). Political resistance from states, concerns over federal autonomy, and the risk of overshadowing regional issues by national narratives remain significant obstacles. Moreover, logistical challenges, including the availability of electronic voting machines and security personnel, must be addressed.

Rationale:

India, one of the world's largest and most vibrant democracies, places a strong emphasis on the conduct of free and fair elections. The electoral system operates through both direct and indirect mechanisms. In direct elections, citizens vote directly to elect their representatives to institutions such as the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies, whereas indirect elections are used for offices like the Rajya Sabha, where elected representatives choose members (Election Commission of India, 2023). With over 900 million eligible voters, India represents the largest democratic electorate globally (International IDEA, 2022). The constitutional framework establishes a federal structure with a clear division of powers between the Union and the states, and entrusts the independent Election Commission of India (ECI) with the responsibility of conducting elections at national, state, and local levels (Government of India, 1950). The ECI has earned a reputation for ensuring impartiality and transparency in electoral processes. However, the staggered electoral calendar, particularly since the late 1960s following the breakdown of simultaneous elections, has created challenges such as rising election expenditure, administrative strain, and voter fatigue (Election Commission of India, 2015). Frequent elections also result in repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which constrains policy decisions and disrupts governance (NITI Aayog, 2017). In addition, continuous electioneering often diverts political attention from long-term development goals to short-term electoral gains. The idea seeks to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, thereby reducing costs, enhancing governance efficiency, and promoting policy continuity (Law Commission of India, 1999; Parliamentary Standing Committee, 2015). Proponents argue that simultaneous elections would reduce the financial burden on the exchequer and political parties, improve administrative efficiency, and allow governments to focus on governance rather than electoral mobilization. Despite these potential benefits,

ONOE raises serious concerns regarding federalism and democratic representation. India's diverse socio-political landscape necessitates strong regional representation, and simultaneous elections may lead to the dominance of national narratives over local issues, thereby marginalizing regional parties (Sridharan, 2014). Critics argue that such a reform could weaken accountability of state governments and dilute the federal structure enshrined in the Constitution (Law Commission of India, 2018). Furthermore, the logistical complexity of conducting simultaneous elections in a country of India's size and diversity requires substantial resources, including electronic voting machines, security personnel, and administrative coordination.

The implementation of ONOE would also require significant constitutional amendments, particularly to provisions related to the tenure and dissolution of legislatures (Government of India, 1950; Law Commission of India, 2018). Political consensus remains a major hurdle, as regional parties may resist reforms that could potentially reduce their electoral influence. International experiences from countries such as Sweden, South Africa, and Indonesia provide useful insights, but these models operate under different political systems and cannot be directly replicated in India (International IDEA, 2022). At the same time, the potential benefits of ONOE are considerable. It could reduce the frequency of elections, lower public expenditure, minimize governance disruptions, and enhance policy stability. By eliminating the near-permanent election cycle, political leaders may be able to focus more on developmental policies and long-term governance strategies (NITI Aayog, 2017). However, claims regarding improved governance outcomes remain debated and require empirical validation. Thus, while the concept of One Nation, One Election presents a compelling vision for electoral reform, its implementation must be approached with caution. A balanced and phased strategy that incorporates stakeholder consultations, safeguards federal principles, and addresses logistical challenges is essential. Ultimately, the success of ONOE will depend on its ability to reconcile efficiency with democratic diversity and federal integrity in one of the world's most complex political systems.

Challenges in One Nation One Election:

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* in India, which seeks to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, presents a range of complex constitutional, political, administrative, and socio-economic challenges. While the idea promises efficiency and cost reduction, its implementation raises fundamental concerns regarding the structure and functioning of India's democracy. One of the foremost challenges is its compatibility with India's federal structure. The Constitution of India establishes a system in which the Union and the states operate with a degree of autonomy, each having independently elected governments with fixed yet flexible tenures. Synchronizing elections would require either curtailing or extending the terms of certain State Assemblies, which could undermine the democratic mandate of elected governments (Law Commission of India, 2018). Critics argue that ONOE may weaken federalism by centralizing political narratives and diminishing the importance of regional issues, as national-level campaigns could overshadow state-specific concerns (Sridharan, 2014). This could adversely affect regional parties that rely on localized agendas and voter engagement. Another major challenge lies in the constitutional and legal framework. Implementing ONOE would necessitate substantial amendments to multiple constitutional provisions, including Articles 83, 85, 172, and 356, which govern the tenure and dissolution of legislatures (Government of India, 1950). Additionally, legal clarity would be required on how to handle situations such as a hung assembly, vote of no confidence, or premature dissolution of either Parliament or State Assemblies. The absence of clear mechanisms for such contingencies raises concerns about democratic continuity and governance stability (Law Commission of India, 2018).

Logistical and administrative constraints also pose significant hurdles. Conducting simultaneous elections across a vast and diverse country like India would require a massive increase in resources, including electronic voting machines (EVMs), voter verifiable paper audit trails (VVPATs), polling personnel, and security forces (Election Commission of India, 2015). Ensuring adequate deployment of central and state security forces to maintain law and order during nationwide elections would be particularly challenging. Moreover, training election officials and coordinating across states with varying administrative capacities adds further complexity. Political feasibility is another critical concern. ONOE requires broad consensus among political parties, particularly regional parties that may perceive the reform as detrimental to their electoral prospects. Regional parties often depend on localized campaigning and issue-based mobilization, which could be diluted in a synchronized election dominated by national narratives (NITI Aayog, 2017). Achieving agreement among diverse political stakeholders in India's pluralistic democracy is inherently difficult, making political resistance a significant barrier to implementation.

There are also concerns related to voter behaviour and democratic representation. Studies suggest that when elections are held simultaneously, voters may exhibit a tendency to vote for the same party across different levels of government, a phenomenon known as the "coattail effect" (Tillin, 2015). This could reduce the independence of voter choice and weaken the accountability of state governments. Furthermore, simultaneous elections may reduce opportunities for voters to evaluate governments at different levels separately, thereby affecting the quality of democratic decision-making. The issue of governance continuity in case of premature dissolution is particularly problematic. If a government falls before completing its term, holding fresh elections would disrupt the synchronized cycle, potentially defeating the purpose of ONOE. The alternative—imposing President's Rule or caretaker governments until the next synchronized election—raises concerns about democratic legitimacy and governance efficiency (Law Commission of India, 2018).

Financial considerations, although often cited as a benefit, also involve complexities. While ONOE may reduce long-term electoral expenditure, the initial costs of transitioning to a synchronized system—such as procuring additional EVMs and upgrading infrastructure—would be substantial (Election Commission of India, 2015). Additionally, the financial burden on political parties during a single large-scale election could increase campaign intensity and spending, potentially exacerbating concerns about electoral funding and transparency. Finally, India's socio-political diversity adds another layer of difficulty. The country's varied linguistic, cultural, and regional contexts require flexible electoral arrangements that allow for localized political expression. A rigid, synchronized election system may not adequately accommodate this diversity, leading to potential disenfranchisement or reduced political engagement in certain regions (International IDEA, 2022). While ONOE offers potential advantages in terms of efficiency and governance stability, its implementation is fraught with multifaceted challenges. Addressing these issues would require careful constitutional design, robust institutional mechanisms, and broad-based political consensus. A phased or hybrid approach, combined with safeguards to protect federalism and democratic representation, may be necessary to ensure that electoral reforms strengthen rather than undermine India's democratic framework.

Emerging Issues and Concerns:

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* has generated renewed debate in India, not only around its feasibility but also regarding a range of emerging issues that extend beyond traditional concerns of cost and governance. As the discourse evolves, these issues increasingly reflect the complex interaction between electoral reforms, democratic representation, institutional capacity, and technological change. One of the key emerging issues relates to the evolving nature of India's federalism. While earlier debates focused on

constitutional amendments, current discussions emphasize the dynamic balance between cooperative and competitive federalism. Synchronizing elections may unintentionally strengthen centralizing tendencies by aligning political cycles and narratives across the country, potentially reducing the autonomy of states in shaping their own political agendas (NITI Aayog, 2017). This concern is particularly relevant in a context where regional political parties play a critical role in representing diverse socio-cultural and economic interests.

The growing assertion of regional identities makes it imperative to assess whether ONOE could dilute the voice of states in the national political framework. Another emerging issue is the impact of ONOE on electoral behavior and democratic accountability. Recent scholarship suggests that simultaneous elections may lead to a “nationalization” of voting patterns, where voters prioritize national leadership over state-level considerations (Tillin, 2015). This trend could reduce split-ticket voting and limit voters’ ability to differentiate between performances of governments at different levels. As a result, state governments may become less accountable to local electorates, thereby weakening decentralized democratic governance. Additionally, concerns have been raised about whether a single electoral cycle would reduce the frequency of democratic engagement, limiting opportunities for citizens to periodically express political preferences (Law Commission of India, 2018).

Technological and infrastructural readiness has also emerged as a critical concern. The scale of conducting simultaneous elections across India would require a significant expansion of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter verifiable paper audit trails (VVPATs), along with enhanced cybersecurity measures (Election Commission of India, 2015). With increasing digitization of electoral processes, concerns regarding data security, misinformation, and the integrity of digital campaign platforms have become more prominent. The rise of social media-driven political campaigns further complicates this landscape, as synchronized elections could amplify the spread of misinformation on a national scale within a short time frame. Financial transparency and campaign financing represent another emerging dimension. While ONOE is expected to reduce public expenditure on elections, it may simultaneously increase the scale and intensity of political campaigning, leading to higher spending by political parties in a single election cycle (NITI Aayog, 2017). This concentration of campaign finance raises concerns about the influence of money power and the need for stronger regulatory mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in political funding.

The issue of governance continuity in exceptional situations has also gained prominence. In cases of premature dissolution of legislatures due to political instability, maintaining synchronization would require either the imposition of interim arrangements or the curtailment/extension of legislative terms. Such measures raise questions about democratic legitimacy and constitutional propriety (Law Commission of India, 2018). Emerging proposals, such as constructive votes of no confidence or fixed-term legislatures, are being debated as potential solutions, but their applicability in India’s political context remains uncertain.

Another important concern is the inclusivity of the electoral process. India’s diverse socio-economic landscape necessitates targeted political mobilization to ensure participation from marginalized groups. Simultaneous elections may reduce the space for localized campaigning and issue-based mobilization, potentially affecting the political inclusion of disadvantaged communities (International IDEA, 2022). This raises broader questions about whether efficiency-driven reforms might inadvertently compromise the representational character of Indian democracy. Environmental and administrative sustainability has also emerged as a contemporary issue. While ONOE could reduce the cumulative environmental footprint of multiple elections, the scale of a single nationwide election could create significant short-term logistical and environmental

pressures. Managing large-scale deployment of personnel, transportation, and materials in a synchronized manner would require careful planning to ensure sustainability (Election Commission of India, 2015). Finally, the political economy of electoral reforms is itself an emerging issue. The success of ONOE depends not only on institutional readiness but also on political will and consensus-building. Divergent interests among national and regional parties, combined with electoral competitiveness, make it difficult to achieve agreement on such a transformative reform. The growing polarization in Indian politics further complicates consensus-building efforts, making the pathway to implementation uncertain.

The emerging issues surrounding ONOE highlight that electoral reform in India is no longer limited to administrative efficiency but encompasses broader questions of democratic accountability, federal balance, technological integrity, and political inclusivity. Addressing these concerns requires a nuanced and participatory approach that incorporates diverse stakeholder perspectives. A phased implementation strategy, supported by constitutional safeguards and institutional innovations, may provide a viable pathway. Ultimately, the success of ONOE will depend on its ability to adapt to India's evolving democratic landscape while preserving its foundational principles.

Future Directions:

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* has opened up significant debate regarding its long-term prospects and future directions in India's democratic and governance framework. While the reform is still under consideration, recent policy developments, committee recommendations, and academic discussions indicate that ONOE may evolve gradually through institutional innovation, political consensus, and phased implementation. One of the most important prospects of ONOE lies in its potential to enhance governance efficiency and policy continuity. Frequent elections under the current system often led to repeated imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, which delays developmental programmes and disrupts administrative functioning. A synchronized electoral cycle could reduce such interruptions and allow governments to focus more consistently on long-term policy planning and implementation. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections has argued that ONOE could strengthen "transparency, inclusivity, and confidence" in the democratic process while also fostering socio-economic development (Vaishnav et al., 2025). Additionally, aligning electoral cycles may improve macroeconomic stability by reducing policy uncertainty associated with frequent elections. Another important future direction is the possibility of phased implementation. Rather than immediate nationwide synchronization, policymakers have suggested a gradual alignment of election cycles. For instance, one approach involves conducting Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections together initially, followed by local body elections within a specified time frame (e.g., 100 days). Such a staggered model would allow institutional adaptation while minimizing disruption to the federal structure (Indian Express, 2024). Reports indicate that, even if legislative approval is secured, full implementation may not occur before 2034, highlighting the long-term and incremental nature of the reform.

Institutional and constitutional reforms will play a crucial role in shaping the future of ONOE. The introduction of the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, represents a significant step toward operationalizing the proposal by enabling synchronization of electoral cycles (Wikipedia, 2024). Future directions may include the adoption of mechanisms such as fixed-term legislatures, constructive votes of no confidence, and provisions for caretaker governments to handle premature dissolutions. These institutional innovations are essential to maintain stability while ensuring democratic accountability. Political consensus-building remains central to the prospects of ONOE. Given India's multi-party system and strong regional political dynamics, achieving agreement across political stakeholders is both necessary and challenging. The

success of ONOE will depend on cooperative federalism, where both the Union and the states participate in shaping the reform framework. Some analysts suggest that political compromise—such as adjusting the tenure of legislatures or aligning electoral schedules through mutual agreement—could pave the way for broader acceptance. Without such consensus, constitutional amendments requiring special majorities and state ratification may remain difficult to achieve.

Technological advancement and administrative capacity also offer promising directions for ONOE. India's experience with large-scale elections and the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) provides a strong foundation. Future improvements in electoral technology, digital voter databases, and cybersecurity can further strengthen the feasibility of simultaneous elections. However, these advancements must be accompanied by robust safeguards to ensure transparency, data protection, and public trust. Another emerging prospect is the integration of electoral reforms with broader governance reforms. ONOE could be complemented by measures such as a unified electoral roll, electoral finance transparency, and reforms in campaign regulation. These complementary reforms would enhance the overall integrity and efficiency of the electoral system, ensuring that ONOE is not implemented in isolation but as part of a comprehensive democratic reform agenda.

At the same time, the future direction of ONOE must carefully address concerns related to federalism and democratic diversity. Safeguards may be required to ensure that regional issues and local governance priorities are not overshadowed by national narratives. Institutional mechanisms—such as strengthening state-level autonomy, promoting regional debates, and ensuring equitable media representation—could help balance national and local interests. The prospects of One Nation, One Election in India are promising but contingent upon careful design and inclusive implementation. The reform has the potential to streamline electoral processes, enhance governance efficiency, and reduce costs, but it must be pursued through a phased approach supported by constitutional safeguards, technological readiness, and political consensus. Ultimately, the future of ONOE will depend on its ability to harmonize efficiency with the principles of federalism, democratic accountability, and political diversity that define India's constitutional framework.

Conclusion:

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election (ONOE)* represents one of the most ambitious electoral reforms in contemporary India, seeking to restructure the country's electoral calendar in the interest of efficiency, stability, and governance continuity. As this paper has highlighted, the rationale for ONOE is rooted in the need to reduce the financial and administrative burden of frequent elections, minimize disruptions caused by the Model Code of Conduct, and enable governments to focus more consistently on long-term policy planning and development. In principle, a synchronized electoral cycle has the potential to streamline governance processes, improve resource utilization, and foster a more stable political environment. However, the analysis also demonstrates that the proposal is fraught with significant constitutional, political, and institutional challenges. India's federal structure, characterized by a delicate balance between Union and State powers, raises fundamental questions about the feasibility of synchronizing electoral cycles without undermining regional autonomy and democratic accountability. The need for extensive constitutional amendments, particularly concerning the tenure and dissolution of legislatures, further complicates implementation. Moreover, concerns about the marginalization of regional issues, the dominance of national narratives, and the potential weakening of voter choice highlight the risks associated with a uniform electoral framework in a diverse polity.

The emerging issues surrounding ONOE—such as its impact on electoral behaviour, campaign financing, technological preparedness, and inclusivity—underscore the complexity of electoral reform in a large and heterogeneous democracy. While technological advancements and institutional innovations offer promising pathways, they must be accompanied by robust safeguards to ensure transparency, security, and public trust. Equally important is the challenge of achieving political consensus in a competitive multi-party system, where differing interests and priorities often hinder collective decision-making. Looking ahead, the future directions of ONOE suggest that a gradual, phased approach may be the most viable path forward. Rather than immediate nationwide implementation, aligning electoral cycles over time, supported by constitutional reforms and stakeholder consultations, could help mitigate risks while preserving democratic principles. Complementary reforms—such as strengthening electoral finance regulation, enhancing institutional capacity, and safeguarding federalism—will be essential to ensure that ONOE contributes positively to India's democratic evolution.

In conclusion, while ONOE offers a compelling vision for improving governance efficiency and electoral management, its success ultimately depends on its ability to balance efficiency with democratic diversity, federal integrity, and institutional resilience. Electoral reforms of such magnitude must not only address administrative concerns but also uphold the foundational values of representation, accountability, and inclusiveness that define India's democracy. A cautious, consultative, and constitutionally grounded approach will therefore be crucial in determining whether ONOE can emerge as a transformative reform or remain an aspirational idea within India's evolving political landscape.

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