

One Nation, One Election: Towards Streamlined Governance and Electoral

Reform

Bihari, Saket

Assistant Professor, Teachers' Training College, Bhagalpur

Abstract

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) concept suggests coordinating the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies' election cycles in India. The historical background, viability, and ramifications of holding simultaneous elections are examined in this study. The practice, which was in use from 1951 to 1967, was interrupted by administrative and political difficulties. The High-Level Committee's proposals and recent debates draw attention to ONOE's potential advantages, which include improved governance, less financial strain, policy continuity, and less socioeconomic upheavals. Using information from stakeholder, expert, and public consultations, the report critically analyses constitutional, logistical, and political factors. This study highlights the transformative potential of ONOE as a crucial electoral reform for India by resolving issues over regional representation and democratic integrity. Legal and constitutional challenges that call for changes to Articles 75, 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 are carefully examined for their effects on the federal system and parliamentary governance. In light of the Ramnath Kovind Committee Report's Terms of Reference, the report proposes a nuanced approach based on international experiences in nations including South Africa, Sweden, Germany, and Indonesia. It comes to the conclusion that ONOE urges careful consideration and agreement from all parties involved, cautioning against jeopardizing the standard and vitality of India's democracy. This study highlights the revolutionary potential of ONOE as a crucial electoral reform for India, aiming to improve democratic efficiency and streamline government by resolving concerns regarding regional representation and democratic integrity.

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections, Constitutional Amendments, Electoral Reforms Governance Efficiency

Introduction

India's electoral procedures, which provide people the chance to influence national and state governance, are what characterize its dynamic democracy. Elections' frequent and disjointed timing, however, has sparked worries about how they will affect resource distribution, governance, and policymaking. The concept of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) suggests that the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies' election cycles be synchronized. Simultaneous elections were first held in the early decades following independence but were subsequently interrupted by administrative and political difficulties.

This reform is currently receiving more attention as a possible way to improve policy continuity, lessen budgetary constraints, and lessen governance upheavals. Despite major constitutional, practical, and political obstacles, ONOE provides a revolutionary change in India's democratic process and is backed by numerous commissions and experts. This study aims to examine the implications of ONOE for electoral reform and streamlined governance by re-examining its historical foundations and assessing its viability now. This will help to clarify the potential effects of ONOE on India's democratic system.

Committee on One Nation One Election

A notification regarding the "One Nation One Election" committee was released by the Law Ministry. Home Minister Amit Shah, Senior Congress politician Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, Ghulam Nabi Azad, NK Singh, Subhash C. Kashyap, Harish Salve, and Sanjay Kothari are among the seven members of the committee, which is chaired by former Indian President Ram Nath Kovind.

To learn about the opinions of many stakeholders, the Committee conducted in-depth discussions. Thirty-two of the 47 political parties that gave their opinions and recommendations favored simultaneous elections. The HLC discussed this issue in great detail with a number of political parties. A public notice that was published in newspapers across all States and Union territories prompted 21,558 responses from Indian individuals. Simultaneous elections were supported by 80% of respondents. The Committee invited legal experts for in-person interactions, including four former Chief Justices of India, twelve former Chief Justices of important High Courts, four former Chief Election Commissioners of India, eight State Election Commissioners, and the Chairman of the Law Commission of India. The Election Commission's perspective was also sought.

The committee looked at and suggested specific changes to the Representation of the People Act, the Constitution, and any other laws and regulations that would need to be changed in order to hold simultaneous elections. It also looked at and suggested whether the states would need to ratify the constitutional amendments. In the event of simultaneous elections, the committee also examined and suggested potential remedies for situations like a hung House, the adoption of a motion of no confidence, defection, or any other similar occurrence. All individuals, representations, and messages that the committee felt would help it in its work and allow it to finalize its recommendations were heard and considered.

The Committee suggests a two-step process to lead to the simultaneous elections after carefully weighing all recommendations and points of view. Elections for the State Legislative Assemblies and the House of People will be held concurrently as the first step. The second step involves coordinating the elections for municipalities and panchayats with those for the House of People and the State Legislative Assemblies. This will ensure that elections for municipalities and panchayats are held within a hundred days of those for the House of People and the State Legislative Assemblies. Additionally, the Committee suggests that all three levels of government should adopt a single electoral roll and Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) for elections.

The citizens are ultimately in charge of making decisions in a thriving and functional democracy. On September 2, 2023, the national government formed a high-level committee on "One Nation One Election" with this idea in mind. Eighty-one percent of the more than 20,000 respondents to the "One Nation One Election" committee supported simultaneous polling. The committee's lengthy report, which is 18,626 pages long, represents the thorough discussion with a wide range of contributors, including residents and specialists from all around the country, guaranteeing that every person's viewpoint is respected. There are seven different Terms of Reference that arrange the committee's recommendations. The committee came to the conclusion that implementing concurrent elections will revolutionize both the electoral process and overall governance. The committee unanimously suggests holding simultaneous elections across the nation due to the significant advantages. It recommends that the government enact the required constitutional amendments and changes to the current legislation in order to make this possible.

An important turning point in India's democratic development has been reached with the Union Cabinet's approval of the High-Level Committee's recommendations on simultaneous elections,

which were chaired by former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind. The concept of simultaneous elections, also known as "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE), aims to synchronize polls for local bodies, state legislative assemblies, and the Lok Sabha. This reform presents serious questions regarding federalism, democratic plurality, and logistical viability even though it promises efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Understanding Simultaneous Elections

The goal of simultaneous elections is to organize elections for local bodies, state legislative assemblies, and the House of People (Lok Sabha) in a predetermined amount of time. This strategy aims to match election cycles to minimize disturbance and resource consumption rather than requiring voting on a single day. In the past, India held concurrent elections from 1951–1952 until 1967. However, the early dissolution of the Lok Sabha (1970) and State Assemblies (1968–69) broke this cycle.

Rationale for Simultaneous Elections

1. **Governance and Development:** Frequent elections impose the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), delaying development programs and policies. Elections across tiers disrupt economic activities, including supply chains, production cycles, and investments.
2. **Cost Efficiency:** Conducting separate elections annually places a significant financial burden on the state. Simultaneous elections aim to streamline expenses.
3. **Resource Optimization:** Human resources, including security personnel and electoral officers, can be better utilized for their primary duties.
4. **Judicial and Societal Impact:** A unified election cycle reduces the strain on courts caused by election-related disputes and curtails identity politics, fostering societal cohesion.
5. **Voter Engagement:** Frequent elections induce voter fatigue. A synchronized approach may enhance voter participation by reducing the number of election events.

Key Recommendations of the High-Level Committee

1. **Phased Implementation:**

First Phase: Conduct Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections concurrently.

Second Phase: Hold elections for local bodies (Panchayats and Municipalities) within 100 days of the general elections.

2. **Constitutional Amendments:**

Amend Articles 83, 172, and introduce new Articles (e.g., 82A and 324A) to ensure synchronization.

Article 82A introduces a mechanism for fixed terms, allowing fresh elections in case of hung assemblies or no-confidence motions to complete the unexpired term.

3. **Unified Electoral Roll:**

A single electoral roll prepared by the Election Commission of India (ECI) in consultation with State Election Commissions.

4. **Logistical Preparations:**

Advanced planning for procurement of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and deployment of personnel by ECI and State Election Commissions.

5. **Implementation Group:**

Establish an oversight body to monitor the execution of simultaneous elections.

Challenges of Simultaneous Elections

1. **Federalism and State Autonomy:** Constitutional amendments to align state election cycles may bypass state ratification, potentially undermining federal principles.

2. **Overshadowing Regional Issues:** National elections may dominate public discourse, sidelining state-specific concerns and regional voices.

3. **Impact on Political Diversity:** National parties might gain disproportionate advantages, marginalizing regional players and disrupting political plurality.

4. **Accountability and Fixed Terms:** Frequent elections ensure regular scrutiny of political performance. Fixed terms may reduce responsiveness and dilute democratic accountability.

5. **Logistical and Financial Complexities:** Implementing simultaneous elections would require a massive scale-up of infrastructure, including EVMs and trained personnel.

Constitutional and Legislative Implications

1. **Amendments and State Ratification:** While changes to the term of Parliament and State Legislatures may not require state ratification, amendments concerning local bodies necessitate approval from at least half the states.

2. **Alignment with Federal Principles:** Constitutional consistency, as emphasized by Justice Dipak Misra, requires balancing national efficiency with state autonomy.

Balancing Efficiency and Democratic Integrity

Elections held simultaneously offer a chance to improve governance, cut expenses, and expedite the voting process. To protect federalism and the diversity of India's political fabric, this shift must be carried out carefully. To address the issues of overshadowing regional interests, logistical difficulties, and political accountability, thorough legislative considerations, stakeholder engagements, and gradual implementation are essential.

Comparison with Other Countries

The level of voter participation in elections is often used to gauge a democracy's strength. There is a widespread belief that increased voter turnout indicates a healthy democracy and strengthens democratic legitimacy. Nonetheless, research indicates a complex connection between election schedule and voter turnout. Voter turnout in successive parliamentary elections is continuously negatively correlated with the amount of time that has passed since the last one. This suggests that voter turnout tends to be lower the closer one election is to the one before it.

Furthermore, the frequency and timing of previous elections have an impact on voter turnout in elections held at levels lower than the national one, such as local or supranational competitions. Voter fatigue brought on by a packed election schedule or elections held close to one another frequently lowers turnout. Simultaneous elections, however, seem to have the reverse impact, boosting turnout and reducing election fatigue. These results demonstrate the intricate relationship between democratic engagement and election date. Examining the experiences of particular nations further demonstrates how coordinated election cycles could improve engagement and alleviate voter weariness.

South Africa, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines hold simultaneous elections offering useful model for India.

Nepal

Nearer to home, Nepal has already held simultaneous national and state elections in 2017.

The government of Nepal announced simultaneous national and state elections to be held nationwide on August 21, 2017. In 2015, Nepal approved a new Constitution, and this was to be the country's first election. However, the Nepalese Election Commission expressed reservations about how challenging it would be to hold such simultaneous polls throughout the nation. Following that, the administration held a two-phase election with a transitional period.

Consequently, Nepal's election was split into two stages. November 26, 2017 was the day of the first phase, while December 7 was the date of the second.

Germany

The effect of concurrent elections on German voter turnout is examined in Garman's research. The study, which used a difference-in-differences technique and a quasi-experimental design at the municipal level, discovered that holding two low-stakes elections together greatly boosted voter turnout.

To elaborate, Kostelka and associates repeated Garmann's study and broadened their focus to encompass federal elections. Their results cast doubt on the idea that the frequency of elections has no bearing on first-order (national) elections. Rather, they show that even for important elections, many elections can cause voter fatigue, which lowers turnout. They also suggest ways to combat voter tiredness while increasing engagement. These observations have wider ramifications for democracies. Theoretically, additional opportunities for citizen participation could result from frequent elections, but in practice, this could be counterproductive as it could overload voters. This calls into question how frequently elections should be held in order to preserve representative governance and prevent voter fatigue.

South Africa

Every five years, South Africa holds simultaneous national and provincial legislative elections, with municipal elections held two years later. Proportional representation (PR), the foundation of the electoral system, guarantees that party representation roughly resembles vote share. Municipal elections use a hybrid system that combines individual ward members with party-list representation. Since 2014, all South African citizens who are at least eighteen years old, including foreigners, are eligible to vote in National Assembly elections. However, only citizens of those regions are eligible to vote in provincial and local elections. A key component of the country's democratic system, the Electoral Commission of South Africa is a legally required organization that keeps an eye on the fairness of these elections. South Africa's PR system stands in contrast to majority-centric ones like First-Past-The-Post (FPTP), which can silence minority voices and frequently benefit larger parties. Given its reliance on FPTP, which permits triumphs through thin majorities, India may encounter opposition to its adoption of a PR system. This approach takes

advantage of elements that are crucial to India's electoral terrain, such as caste-based politics and swing votes.

Sweden

Every four years, on the second Sunday in September, Sweden's inhabitants elect representatives to the Riksdag and municipalities and regional councils. Party representation is guaranteed to reflect the distribution of votes thanks to its proportional representation system.

There are two kinds of referendums in Sweden: constitutional, which become legally binding if they are held in conjunction with general elections, and advisory, which measure public opinion without having legal force. Swedes rejected the euro in favor of keeping the krona in the country's most recent national vote in 2003. Locally, referendums are more prevalent; at least one is held each year in different municipalities, enabling direct public participation in local issues. Voter turnout in the most recent general election, held in 2022, was 84.2%.

With the help of the Sweden Democrats, Ulf Kristersson's Moderate Party established a minority administration. With the next general election set for 2026, Sweden's synchronized electoral cycles help to ensure high levels of participation.

Indonesia

2019 saw Indonesia move to simultaneous elections, which was a major turning point in the country's political evolution. Before direct presidential elections started in 2004, the president was chosen by the legislature, while elections for governors and mayors were held in a staggered fashion.

A 2013 Constitutional Court ruling that sought to simplify and lower the cost of elections served as the impetus for the move to concurrent elections. Even if the change increased efficiency, there are still issues, such as the underrepresentation of women in public office. Nonetheless, the highest level of female representation in Indonesian history was achieved in the 2019 legislative election. Despite these improvements, structural problems and logistical difficulties still exist. A few of politicians have routinely won throughout several election cycles, according to data from PUSKAPOL, the Centre for Political Studies, which raises concerns.

These nations' experiences demonstrate various methods for overseeing election dates and their effects on participation in democracy.

Conclusion

India's desire for an effective and cohesive electoral system is shown in the acceptance of simultaneous elections. But the path to "One Nation, One Election" needs to be supported by inclusive policymaking that honors regional sovereignty, democratic ideals, and practical considerations. This enormous change can only fortify the largest democracy in the world by striking a careful balance.

The democratic ideals that direct the development of our country's government are reflected in the support for simultaneous elections. This idea is reinforced by the reasoning presented in the Supreme Court's seminal ruling in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, in which the court emphasized the value of federalism and democratic procedures within the parameters of the Constitution.

The Court's ruling in this case, which highlights the sanctity of the democratic mandate and the circumstances under which state governments may be dissolved, forms a fundamental part of our understanding of the balance of power between the federal government and the states.

In line with the Court's emphasis on the integrity of elected administrations and the federal structure, simultaneous elections are suggested as a way to strengthen the democratic framework by guaranteeing stability and continuity in governance. It is hoped that this reform will simplify the electoral process, lessen the frequent interruptions brought on by staggered elections, and enable a more targeted approach to development and governance.

The drive for simultaneous elections is essentially a group effort to improve the democratic process and make it more responsive to the desire of the people and societal advancement. It is a step toward a more effective democratic process that also better reflects the nation's shared goals and dedication to the democratic values affirmed by the Supreme Court in the *S.R. Bommai* decision. With a focus on the possible advantages, such as significant cost savings and enhanced government efficiency, One Nation, One Election presents a revolutionary vision for India's democracy and election system. This project seeks to strengthen India's political structure while respecting federalism and guaranteeing that the elected government is answerable to the people by concentrating on policy-making and implementation through the suggested constitutional modifications. This initiative's successful completion will open the path for India's growth and help realize the goal of *Vikshit Bharat*, or Developed India, by 2047.

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