



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL**
**ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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“ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN FEDERALISM”

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Abstract

The proposal for “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE), or simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, represents one of the most consequential electoral reforms currently debated in India. While simultaneous elections were conducted during the first four general election cycles after Independence, the electoral calendar became progressively desynchronised following premature dissolutions of legislatures in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The contemporary proposal seeks to restore electoral synchronisation through constitutional and statutory changes. This article examines the implications of ONOE for Indian federalism, with particular attention to constitutional autonomy, political accountability, electoral competition, fiscal and administrative efficiency, and the balance between national and state-level political issues. The study adopts a qualitative doctrinal and analytical methodology, drawing upon constitutional provisions, parliamentary documents, and reports of the Law Commission and the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, scholarly literature, and legislative analysis. The article argues that simultaneous elections may generate administrative and financial efficiencies, reduce the frequency of the Model Code of Conduct, and potentially improve governmental continuity. However, these benefits must be weighed against significant federal concerns. Simultaneous electoral campaigns may strengthen nationalised political narratives, disadvantage smaller and regional parties, and reduce the institutional distinctiveness of state-level electoral mandates. The proposed framework also raises questions concerning premature dissolution, shortened legislative terms, constitutional amendment, and the accountability-stability balance inherent in parliamentary government. The article concludes that ONOE should not be assessed merely as an electoral-management reform; it is fundamentally a federal and constitutional reform whose legitimacy depends upon broad political consensus, protection of state autonomy, and institutional safeguards.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, Indian Federalism, Simultaneous Elections, Electoral Reform, State Autonomy, Constitutionalism

Introduction

Elections constitute the principal mechanism through which democratic legitimacy is periodically renewed. In a parliamentary federation such as India, elections perform a dual function. They determine the composition of representative institutions and simultaneously enable citizens to distinguish between national, state and local political priorities. The temporal organisation of elections is therefore not simply an administrative matter; it has consequences for representation, accountability, party competition and federal relations. The proposal for “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) seeks to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. The idea is not historically unprecedented. Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were held simultaneously in 1951–52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. The cycle subsequently broke down following premature dissolutions of several State Assemblies in 1968–69 and the premature dissolution of the Fourth Lok Sabha in 1970. Since then, national and state elections have increasingly occurred at different points in the electoral calendar.

The contemporary debate acquired institutional momentum with the constitution of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections under the chairmanship of former President Ram Nath Kovind in September 2023. The Committee submitted its report in March 2024 and recommended a phased model in which elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies would be synchronised initially, followed by elections to municipalities and panchayats within 100 days. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024 was subsequently introduced in the Lok Sabha on 17 December 2024. The Bill proposes, among other changes, the insertion of Article 82A and amendments to Articles 83, 172 and 327. It establishes a mechanism under which the terms of State Assemblies elected after an appointed date would be aligned with the full term of the Lok Sabha. The proposal consequently raises a fundamental question: Would simultaneous elections strengthen the efficiency of India's democratic system without weakening the federal character of the Constitution?

This article examines that question through a federalism-centred analysis. It argues that the central issue is not whether elections should be administratively streamlined, but whether electoral synchronisation can be achieved while preserving the political autonomy and accountability of India's States.

Background: From Electoral Synchronisation to Electoral Reform

India's original electoral system operated with considerable synchronisation between national and state elections. The first four general election cycles broadly maintained this arrangement. The breakdown was principally caused by political instability and premature dissolution rather than by a deliberate constitutional decision to abandon simultaneous elections. Over subsequent decades, India's electoral calendar became increasingly fragmented. Different State Assemblies came to have different terms, resulting in elections occurring almost continuously somewhere in the country. Governments, political parties and election administrations consequently operate within a recurring cycle of electoral mobilisation. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections identified stability, predictability, reduction of disruption, lower expenditure and enhanced voter participation among the principal arguments in favour of simultaneous elections. The legislative proposal introduced in 2024 attempts to create a constitutional mechanism for restoring synchronisation. Under the proposed Article 82A framework, the President would notify an appointed date following a general election, after which State Assemblies elected before the expiry of the Lok Sabha's full term would have their terms aligned with that cycle. In the event of premature dissolution, a fresh election would be held for the remainder of the synchronised term rather than initiating a new five-year cycle. As of the present stage, however, the proposal remains a constitutional amendment Bill under parliamentary consideration. It was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee comprising members of both Houses.

Literature Review

The literature on simultaneous elections can broadly be divided into four perspectives: electoral efficiency, democratic accountability, electoral behaviour and federalism.

Electoral Efficiency Perspective

Institutional reports have repeatedly identified the administrative and financial costs associated with India's frequent elections. The 79th Report of the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice examined the feasibility of simultaneous elections and highlighted the administrative burden generated by repeated elections. The High-Level Committee similarly argued that simultaneous elections could reduce recurring expenditure and administrative disruption. From this perspective, ONOE represents an attempt to consolidate electoral expenditure and administrative resources into a

predictable electoral cycle.

Democratic Accountability Perspective

The efficiency argument, however, must be balanced against the requirements of democratic accountability. Parliamentary government differs from presidential government because executive stability is dependent upon continuing legislative confidence. The debate is therefore not simply between “frequent elections” and “efficient elections”. It involves a deeper institutional tension between stability and accountability. The parliamentary system permits governments to fall when they lose legislative support. A rigid synchronised electoral cycle could create institutional difficulties when a government loses its majority before the end of its constitutionally or electorally synchronised term. The contemporary legislative proposal addresses premature dissolution by limiting the term of a newly elected legislature to the remainder of the synchronised cycle.

Electoral Behaviour and Voter Participation

Empirical research provides a more nuanced understanding of simultaneous elections. Nikolenyi's study of Indian elections between 1971 and 2004 found that the decoupling of state elections from national elections was associated with lower turnout in parliamentary elections, suggesting that concurrent electoral contests can influence voter participation.

However, turnout alone cannot establish whether simultaneous elections improve democratic quality. The central issue is whether voters can distinguish between national and state-level political choices when both elections take place at the same time.

Federalism Perspective

Federalism is the most contested dimension of ONOE. India is constitutionally described as a “Union of States”, but its democratic structure distributes substantial legislative and executive responsibilities between the Union and States. Separate electoral mandates permit citizens to evaluate governments according to different political criteria. State elections can focus on regional development, language, agriculture, welfare delivery, public health, education, state finances and local political identities, whereas national elections may emphasise foreign policy, national security, macroeconomic policy and Union-level governance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal and analytical research methodology. The research

relies principally on secondary and documentary sources, including: The Constitution of India and relevant constitutional provisions, The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, The High-Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections, Reports of the Law Commission of India, Parliamentary committee reports, Legislative analysis published by PRS Legislative Research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical and constitutional development of simultaneous elections in India.
2. To analyse the principal arguments supporting and opposing ONOE.
3. To assess the implications of simultaneous elections for Indian federalism.
4. To examine the potential consequences for political parties, electoral accountability and voter choice.

Analysis and Interpretation

ONOE and the Federal Balance

The central federal question is whether simultaneous elections alter the constitutional distribution of power between the Union and the States. Technically, simultaneous elections do not automatically transfer legislative powers from States to the Union. The Seventh Schedule, legislative lists and constitutional division of powers would remain substantially unaffected. The potential impact is instead political rather than strictly legal. When national and state elections are conducted together, voters encounter national and state candidates and campaigns simultaneously. National political narratives may therefore dominate electoral communication. A parliamentary election fought alongside State Assembly elections may transform state-level contests into extensions of the national electoral debate. This is particularly significant in a country characterised by linguistic, cultural, economic and regional diversity.

Nationalisation of State Elections

One of the most important potential consequences of ONOE is the nationalisation of state electoral politics. Political parties with extensive national organisational networks may possess advantages in simultaneous campaigns because they can mobilise resources, leadership and media exposure across multiple constituencies. Regional parties, by contrast, may have fewer financial and organisational resources. Their electoral messages may also receive less attention

when national issues dominate public discourse. This does not mean that regional parties would necessarily become electorally irrelevant. India's political history demonstrates considerable resilience of regional identities and state-specific political preferences. Nevertheless, simultaneous elections could alter the relative visibility and bargaining power of national and regional political actors.

State Autonomy and Democratic Choice

Federalism depends not merely on constitutional allocation of powers but also on the existence of politically meaningful autonomous institutions. Separate elections allow citizens to produce different mandates at different levels. A voter may support one party in a parliamentary election and another party in a State Assembly election because the voter evaluates the two governments differently. ONOE could reduce the frequency with which voters make these separate choices. Although voters would still technically cast separate votes, the psychological and political environment surrounding both contests would be simultaneous.

Administrative and Fiscal Advantages

The strongest case for ONOE concerns administrative efficiency. Repeated elections require the deployment of teachers, civil servants, police personnel and other public employees. Election management also requires extensive expenditure on security, transportation, polling infrastructure, electronic voting machines and personnel. Simultaneous elections could consolidate some of these costs and reduce the frequency of election-related mobilisation. The High-Level Committee has specifically identified financial savings, administrative efficiency and reduced disruption as major advantages.

Nevertheless, efficiency should not automatically be equated with democratic superiority. Elections are costly precisely because democratic participation requires institutional resources. The relevant policy question is therefore whether the savings are sufficiently substantial to justify the constitutional and federal costs associated with synchronisation.

The Model Code of Conduct

Another major argument for ONOE concerns the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). Repeated elections mean that the MCC is applied repeatedly in different parts of the country. Its application can constrain the announcement or implementation of certain governmental programmes during election periods. Supporters therefore argue that simultaneous elections would create longer periods of uninterrupted governance. The argument has merit, but it

requires qualification. The MCC is designed to protect electoral fairness. Its application should therefore not be understood simply as an administrative obstacle. Any reform should preserve the integrity of the electoral process even while seeking to reduce unnecessary disruption.

Premature Dissolution and Constitutional Stability

A major institutional difficulty concerns what happens when a government loses its majority. In a parliamentary democracy, governments may fall before the completion of a five-year term. The proposed framework attempts to resolve the synchronisation problem by holding a fresh election for the remainder of the original cycle. For example, if a State Assembly falls two years after a synchronised election, the newly elected Assembly could theoretically serve only the remaining three years.

Accountability versus Stability

The ONOE debate ultimately involves a constitutional trade-off between stability and accountability. The parliamentary system deliberately permits executive governments to lose office when they lose legislative confidence. The proposed synchronisation model cannot eliminate this feature without fundamentally changing parliamentary government.

Implications for Regional Parties

Regional parties play a central role in India's federal political system. They represent state-specific political interests and frequently participate in national coalition governments. Simultaneous elections could have mixed effects. On one hand, regional parties could benefit by mobilising state-specific identities within a single electoral event. On the other hand, the dominance of national campaign narratives could make it more difficult for smaller parties to communicate distinct regional programmes. The effect would consequently vary according to party organisation, media access, leadership popularity and the degree of congruence between national and state political preferences.

Constitutional Amendment and Federal Consent

The proposed reform raises an important constitutional question regarding the relationship between Parliament and the States. The High-Level Committee concluded that some amendments necessary for simultaneous elections would not require ratification by half of the States, while amendments relating to local bodies and certain electoral arrangements could require state ratification. From a federalism perspective, however, constitutional legality

should not be the sole measure of legitimacy.

Even when formal constitutional ratification is not legally mandatory, political consultation with State governments and regional parties is essential. A reform affecting the electoral foundations of State governments should ideally be implemented through cooperative constitutionalism rather than unilateral constitutional engineering.

Major Discussions and Findings

The analysis produces seven principal findings.

1: ONOE is not merely an electoral-management reform

The proposal affects the temporal structure of India's representative institutions. Its implications therefore extend beyond election administration into constitutional and federal politics.

2: Simultaneous elections could improve administrative efficiency

There are credible grounds for expecting reduced duplication of election-related expenditure, personnel deployment and administrative mobilisation. The High-Level Committee and earlier parliamentary studies have identified these potential benefits.

3: Federalism is affected primarily through political dynamics

ONOE does not necessarily weaken federalism by formally reallocating constitutional powers. Its more important effect could arise from the nationalisation of political discourse and changes in the relative electoral strength of national and regional parties.

4: Voter choice could become simultaneously broader and less differentiated

Citizens would vote for both levels of government in the same electoral period, potentially increasing participation. Yet the simultaneous campaign environment could make it more difficult for voters to distinguish national and state-specific issues.

5: Premature dissolution remains a structural challenge

The proposed “remainder-term” solution preserves electoral synchronisation but could create short-term governments. Such governments may face difficulties in policy planning and long-term governance.

6: ONOE could alter party competition

National parties with larger organisational and financial resources may gain strategic advantages from simultaneous campaigning. Regional parties could face greater competition for media attention and voter mobilisation.

7: Political consensus is essential

Because electoral synchronisation affects the constitutional relationship between the Union and

States, durable implementation requires extensive consultation among political parties, State governments, constitutional authorities and civil society.

Policy and Institutional Recommendations

The following safeguards could help reconcile ONOE with federal principles:

1. Federal consultation should precede implementation. State governments and regional parties should be involved in designing the synchronisation mechanism.
2. The Election Commission should receive adequate institutional capacity. Simultaneous elections would require substantial expansion of logistical, technological and human resources.
3. Premature dissolution rules should protect democratic accountability. The mechanism for dealing with hung legislatures and loss of confidence should be clearly defined without undermining parliamentary government.
4. Short-term governments should have clearly specified constitutional status. Their authority should not be unnecessarily restricted, particularly in relation to essential governance and public welfare.
5. State-level electoral discourse should be protected. Election administration and political parties should ensure that state-specific issues remain visible during simultaneous campaigns.
6. Campaign finance regulation should be strengthened. Simultaneous elections could increase the financial scale of electoral competition, making transparency and expenditure monitoring particularly important.
7. A periodic constitutional review mechanism should be established. The effects of ONOE on voter turnout, party competition, state autonomy and governance should be empirically assessed after implementation.

Conclusion

“One Nation, One Election” represents an ambitious attempt to restructure India's electoral calendar. Its proponents correctly identify genuine problems associated with repeated elections, including administrative mobilisation, financial expenditure and recurring electoral restrictions. Simultaneous elections could provide greater predictability to governments and political parties and may reduce certain forms of electoral disruption. However, the federal implications of ONOE require equally serious attention. India's federalism is sustained not only

by constitutional lists and institutional divisions but also by the existence of autonomous political arenas in which State governments can receive distinct electoral mandates. Simultaneous elections may alter these political dynamics by encouraging the nationalisation of electoral campaigns and strengthening the visibility of national political narratives.

The future of simultaneous elections should consequently be understood as a question of cooperative federal constitutionalism. If designed with sufficient safeguards, ONOE may streamline electoral governance while preserving federal democracy. If implemented without adequate institutional protections, however, it could unintentionally strengthen the political centralisation of India's electoral system. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not simply to achieve “one election”, but to ensure that electoral synchronisation does not come at the cost of India's plural and federal democratic structure.

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