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ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: A STEP TOWARDS ELECTORAL REFORMS OR A CHALLENGE TO FEDERALISM?

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ABSTRACT

The proposal for 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) seeks to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, with a longer-term proposal for synchronisation of local-body elections. Supporters argue that a common electoral cycle can reduce public expenditure, repeated deployment of administrative machinery, disruption caused by the Model Code of Conduct, and the policy uncertainty associated with frequent elections. Critics, however, contend that simultaneous elections may weaken the political distinctiveness of States, encourage nationalised voting behaviour, constrain the timing of democratic accountability, and create constitutional difficulties when a House loses its majority before the end of its term. This paper examines ONOE as an electoral reform through the constitutional principles of parliamentary government, federalism, democratic accountability, free and fair elections, and the basic structure doctrine. It traces the historical existence of simultaneous elections, analyses the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, and evaluates arguments concerning cost, governance, voter choice, federalism and constitutional stability. It argues that synchronisation is not inherently incompatible with federalism, but its legitimacy depends on preserving the autonomy and accountability of State governments. A constitutionally durable model should therefore combine phased synchronisation, safeguards for premature dissolution, strengthened Election Commission capacity, transparent political-finance rules, and mechanisms ensuring that a State legislature is not effectively subordinated to the national electoral calendar.

KEYWORDS: One Nation One Election; Electoral Reform; Federalism; Simultaneous Elections; Constitutional Law.

1. INTRODUCTION

Elections are the principal mechanism through which representative government derives democratic legitimacy. In India, however, elections have progressively become dispersed across the constitutional calendar. The Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies generally operate on different electoral cycles, while local-body elections follow their own schedules. The result is a country in which some part of the electorate is regularly engaged in campaigning, voting and election administration. The idea of 'One Nation, One Election' attempts to reverse this fragmentation by establishing a common electoral cycle for Parliament and the State Assemblies. The proposal is therefore more than an administrative exercise: it raises questions about the relationship between the Union and the States, the duration of legislative mandates, and the nature of parliamentary accountability.

India did not begin with permanently staggered elections. General elections to the Lok Sabha and most State Assemblies were held together in 1951–52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. The cycle was disrupted when several Assemblies and the Lok Sabha were dissolved at different times, producing the staggered electoral calendar familiar today. The historical experience is relevant because it shows that simultaneous elections are not alien to the constitutional system; at the same time, restoring synchronisation now requires constitutional and statutory

1 Adjustm ents because the existing terms are no longer aligned.

The contemporary proposal is principally contained in the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2024, together with the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024. The constitutional Bill proposes a new Article 82A and changes to Articles 83 and 172, among other provisions, to create a framework for simultaneous elections. As of September 2026, the Bills remain under consideration by a Joint Parliamentary Committee, which has continued nationwide consultations with political parties, State governments, constitutional experts and civil

2 Society.

This paper asks whether ONOE should be understood principally as an electoral reform or as a structural alteration of Indian federalism. It contends that both characterisations contain part of the truth. Simultaneous elections can address genuine administrative and fiscal costs, but the design of the reform determines whether those gains are achieved without diminishing State-level democratic choice. The appropriate constitutional test is therefore not simply whether elections occur on the same schedule, but whether the system continues to preserve the essential features of parliamentary government, federalism, periodic elections and meaningful political accountability.

2. Meaning and Constitutional Design of One Nation, One Election

ONOE does not mean that every election must be conducted on one day. The proposed model contemplates a common electoral cycle, with polling potentially conducted in phases. The Election Commission of India has stated that simultaneous elections would require separate sets of Electronic Voting Machines and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail units for the parliamentary and assembly contests at each polling station. Thus, the central concept is syn chronisation of tenure and electoral timing rather than a single nationwide polling event.

The proposed Article 82A would establish the mechanism for simultaneous elections after a general election to the Lok Sabha. Under the Bill, the President would issue a notification on the date of the first sitting of the newly elected Lok Sabha, and the terms of State Assemblies constituted after that date would ordinarily expire with the end of the Lok Sabha's five-year term. If the Lok Sabha or an Assembly were dissolved prematurely, the subsequent election would ordinarily be for the remainder of the unexpired period, rather than creating a new full five-year cycle. The Bill also contemplates a limited mechanism by which the

Election Commission may recommend that an Assembly election not be held simultaneously.

3 Where Circumstances Make Simultaneous Polling Impracticable.

This architecture reveals the principal constitutional tension. Under Articles 83 and 172, the normal duration of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is five years, subject to earlier dissolution. Parliamentary government also depends on the confidence relationship between the executive and the elected House. If a government falls, the Constitution does not ordinarily guarantee that the same legislature will continue for a predetermined five-year period irrespective of political events. A synchronised electoral calendar therefore requires rules for no-confidence motions, hung Houses, coalition collapse, President's Rule, and mid-term dissolution.

The High Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind proposed a phased approach: first, synchronising Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, and subsequently aligning local-body elections within a specified period. It also recommended a common electoral roll as a related reform. The Committee's approach recognises that the problem is institutional rather than merely logistical: election timing, electoral rolls, ad ministrative personnel, security forces, EVMs and VVPATs must all be coordinated.

3. Historical and Comparative Perspective

The first four general election cycles provide an important constitutional precedent for

simultaneous elections. The early Republic operated with a broadly common electoral calendar because the first Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were constituted within the same period. The subsequent fragmentation was not caused by a constitutional principle requiring staggered elections; it resulted from political instability, early dissolution and changes in the life of legislatures. This history weakens the argument that synchronisation is constitutionally foreign to India, but it does not by itself establish that synchronisation is constitutionally mandatory.

Comparative constitutional experience demonstrates that election synchronisation can take different forms. Some presidential systems naturally combine executive and legislative election cycles, while parliamentary systems use different mechanisms. Germany, for example, has developed a constructive vote-of-no-confidence mechanism under which a Chancellor can be removed only when the Bundestag simultaneously elects a successor. Such mechanisms reduce the risk that a government collapse automatically produces an electoral crisis. India's constitutional structure, however, is distinct: it combines parliamentary responsibility with a federal division of powers and multiple elected governments. Any imported model must therefore be adapted rather than copied.

The comparative lesson is that simultaneous elections require a constitutional solution to instability. Merely shortening the tenure of an Assembly elected after a mid-cycle election may synchronise dates, but it does not resolve the democratic question of how voters should respond when a government loses majority support. A durable reform must preserve the principle that governments remain responsible to their respective legislatures and that voters retain an effective remedy when a political executive loses legitimacy.

4. Arguments Supporting ONOE as Electoral Reform

4.1 Reduction in Electoral Expenditure and Administrative Burden

The strongest case for ONOE is administrative. Repeated elections require deployment of polling personnel, security forces, teachers and other public employees; movement and storage of EVMs and VVPATs; expenditure on logistics; and repeated training. The Election Commission already maintains substantial stocks of election equipment, and simultaneous elections would require separate EVM and VVPAT sets for the two contests. Although the initial procurement requirement may be significant, the proponents argue that a predictable

4 five-year cycle could reduce recurring mobilisation and replacement costs over time.

The High Level Committee similarly identified financial and administrative savings as major rationales for synchronisation. Frequent elections can divert officials from ordinary

administration and require security arrangements that might otherwise be directed toward routine policing. Schools and public institutions are also commonly used as polling infrastructure. A common electoral cycle could concentrate these disruptions into a defined period rather than producing repeated interruptions.

4.2 Governance and the Model Code of Conduct

Supporters also argue that frequent elections can affect governance because the Model Code of Conduct restricts certain governmental announcements, transfers and policy actions once elections are announced. The legal status of the Code differs from that of a statute, but its practical impact on governmental decision-making is substantial. If elections are continuously occurring somewhere in the country, Union and State governments may repeatedly operate under election-related constraints or political pressures. A common electoral window could create longer periods in which governments can focus on implementation and policy evaluation.

This argument should nevertheless be stated carefully. The Model Code of Conduct is not itself proof that elections are a governance failure. Democratic governments must remain electorally accountable, and policy restraint during elections can protect the fairness of the contest. The real issue is whether the frequency of elections has become so high that administrative continuity is unnecessarily impaired. That is an empirical question requiring transparent data rather than assumption.

4.3 Policy Stability and Long-Term Planning

A government that knows its electoral horizon may be more willing to pursue policies whose benefits emerge gradually. Repeated elections can incentivise short-term announcements, particularly where political parties anticipate another contest within a few months. Synchronisation could provide a relatively stable policy period between election cycles. Supporters also contend that businesses and investors benefit from greater predictability when election-related uncertainty is concentrated rather than recurring.

4.4 Voter Convenience and Political Fatigue

A common election cycle could reduce voter fatigue. Campaigns, rallies and political advertising occur repeatedly in staggered elections, and citizens may experience a prolonged electoral atmosphere. Simultaneous elections could allow voters to participate in national and State contests at the same time while keeping the rest of the five-year period relatively free from election mobilisation. This argument is especially relevant to a large country in which election administration requires substantial public participation.

5. ONOE and the Federal Structure

The central constitutional objection to ONOE is not that synchronisation automatically abolishes federalism. Rather, the concern is that a common electoral calendar can alter the political relationship between the Union and the States. India's federal structure is characterised by constitutional distribution of powers, independent State governments and legislatures, and political accountability at more than one level. Federalism has been recognised as a basic feature of the Constitution, including in the Supreme Court's 7 jurisprudence under the basic structure doctrine.

The fear of 'nationalisation' of State elections deserves serious attention. When Lok Sabha and Assembly elections occur together, national issues, national leadership and national party campaigns may dominate political communication. State-specific issues may receive less attention, particularly where one party or coalition has a strong national profile. The result could be a convergence of electoral choices even though voters are legally casting separate votes for two distinct governments. That possibility does not prove that ONOE violates federalism, but it demonstrates that electoral design can affect the practical operation of federal democracy.

Federalism is not merely a division of legislative subjects in the Seventh Schedule. It also requires political space for States to articulate distinct preferences. The Constitution allows voters to choose one party for the Lok Sabha and another for the State Assembly. Simultaneous elections preserve that legal freedom, but the political environment surrounding the vote may influence how effectively voters can exercise it. The constitutional question is therefore intertwined with political science: formal autonomy may survive while practical differentiation becomes weaker.

A second federal concern is the possibility of premature dissolution. If a State Assembly is elected shortly before the common cycle, reducing its term so that it expires with the Lok Sabha would shorten a mandate conferred by State voters. Conversely, extending the Assembly's term to reach the common date would prolong a mandate beyond the ordinary five-year period and could raise constitutional objections. The proposed framework largely addresses this through transitional arrangements and remainder-of-term elections, but

A third concern is the relationship between the Union and State Election machinery.

While the Election Commission of India conducts elections to Parliament and State Legislatures under Article 324, State Election Commissions conduct local-body elections under Articles 243K and 243ZA. If local elections are also synchronised, coordination between constitutional authorities becomes essential. The reform should not allow the Union

electoral calendar to displace the constitutional role of State institutions.

6. Democratic Accountability and Premature Government Collapse

The most difficult problem for ONOE is not the ordinary five-year cycle but what happens between elections. Parliamentary democracy assumes that a government must retain the confidence of the House. A synchronised election model cannot make a government immune from defeat simply because the electoral calendar has been fixed. If the Chief Minister or Prime Minister loses majority support, constitutional accountability must continue to operate.

One possible response is to permit the formation of a replacement government without a fresh election. Another is to require a constructive vote of no confidence, whereby the existing government can be removed only if another leader is simultaneously capable of commanding legislative confidence. A third possibility is a limited caretaker arrangement until the common election date. Each solution has advantages and risks. A constructive vote can enhance stability, but it may also make it harder for a legislature to remove a genuinely unpopular government. A caretaker model may preserve synchronisation, but an excessively long caretaker period can weaken democratic accountability.

The constitutional principle should be that synchronisation is subordinate to responsible government, not the other way around. The electoral calendar should serve democracy rather than become a reason to preserve a government that has lost legislative confidence. Any legislation implementing ONOE should therefore contain precise rules for hung Houses, coalition breakdown, death or resignation of a Chief Minister or Prime Minister, repeated failed attempts to form a government, and President's Rule. These rules must be transparent and subject to judicial review.

7. Basic Structure and Constitutional Validity

The Supreme Court's basic structure doctrine places substantive limits on constitutional amendment. In Kesavananda Bharati, the Court held that Parliament's amending power under Article 368 does not extend to destroying the Constitution's basic structure. Subsequent decisions have identified federalism, democracy, republicanism, judicial review and the rule of law among the principles protected by the doctrine. S.R. Bommai in particular emphasised

8 The Constitutional Importance of Federalism and Secularism.

The mere synchronisation of election dates should not, by itself, be treated as destruction of federalism. Parliament and State Assemblies would remain separate institutions, with distinct legislative powers and separate executives. Voters would continue to cast separate

votes. The stronger constitutional challenge would arise only if the implementation mechanism substantially altered the federal balance—for example, by making State governments effectively dependent upon the Union electoral cycle, by undermining the independent functioning of State legislatures, or by materially weakening the electorate's ability to hold State governments accountable.

The amendment procedure is also important. A constitutional amendment affecting the election of the President or Vice-President, the representation of States, the powers of States, or other specified federal provisions may require ratification by at least one-half of the State Legislatures under Article 368(2). Whether every provision of the proposed ONOE architecture attracts the ratification requirement depends on the precise text enacted. The requirement is therefore not a procedural technicality: where federal interests are directly affected, State participation in constitutional amendment reinforces the legitimacy of the reform.

Judicial review would remain available after enactment. Courts would likely examine whether the new constitutional scheme maintains the essential characteristics of parliamentary democracy and federalism. The strongest defence of ONOE would consequently be a design that preserves separate mandates, State autonomy, meaningful no-confidence mechanisms and periodic elections, while the strongest challenge would focus on any provision that effectively subordinates State electoral accountability to a national timetable.

8. Practical and Institutional Challenges

Implementation at India's scale is a major logistical undertaking. The Election Commission must maintain sufficient EVMs and VVPATs, polling personnel, transport, secure storage and counting infrastructure. The Commission's own material indicates that simultaneous elections require separate equipment for parliamentary and assembly contests.

Large-scale procurement therefore has financial implications, even if proponents expect long-term savings. The reform should include an independently audited cost-benefit assessment before each implementation phase.

Security is another challenge. Elections require central and State security personnel, and simultaneous elections would create a very large peak demand. Concentrating elections may reduce the total number of deployments over a five-year period, but it can also create an exceptionally large requirement during the common election window. The system must ensure that security needs do not compromise ordinary policing or the administration of justice.

Political finance is equally important. A common election may reduce the frequency of

campaign expenditure, but it may also concentrate enormous amounts of political spending into one period. If national and State campaigns occur together, wealthier parties may gain an organisational advantage. ONOE should therefore be accompanied by stronger transparency in political donations, effective expenditure monitoring, timely disclosure of party finances and meaningful enforcement of existing election laws.

The role of the Election Commission must also be protected. Its constitutional independence is central to electoral legitimacy. The Commission should have adequate personnel, budgetary autonomy, technical capacity and transparent decision-making procedures. A reform that expands its logistical responsibility without strengthening institutional capacity could undermine the very objective of holding elections efficiently and fairly.

1. Arguments Against ONOE: A Critical Evaluation

Opponents argue that ONOE may favour large national parties because simultaneous elections increase the visibility of national leadership and national campaign narratives. Smaller and regional parties may find it harder to compete for attention and resources. This objection is not conclusive: voters can and often do distinguish between levels of government. Nevertheless, the possibility of a 'coattail effect' is sufficiently plausible that the reform should be accompanied by measures protecting the visibility of State-level issues and ensuring equal campaign rules.

Another objection is that frequent elections are themselves a form of accountability. A staggered system means governments face electoral scrutiny at different times, and the political success or failure of one State can influence public debate elsewhere. Eliminating staggered elections could reduce the opportunities for voters to express dissatisfaction between national elections. The response is that democratic accountability need not disappear between elections: legislatures, opposition parties, courts, media and civil society remain active. Yet elections provide a unique form of direct political sanction, and a common cycle necessarily concentrates that sanction at particular intervals.

A further objection concerns constitutional rigidity. The more closely the terms of different legislatures are tied together, the more difficult it may become to respond flexibly to political crises. If a State experiences instability, the constitutional system should be able to accommodate that crisis without distorting the entire national election cycle. A good ONOE framework must therefore be resilient enough to permit exceptions while preventing exceptions from becoming so frequent that synchronisation loses practical meaning.

These criticisms do not establish that ONOE should be rejected outright. Rather, they show that

synchronisation cannot be evaluated only through the lens of administrative efficiency.

Electoral reform must also consider representation, competition, accountability and federal diversity. A system that saves money but reduces meaningful political choice would not be a successful democratic reform.

10. A Balanced Model for India

A workable model should begin with a limited objective: synchronise Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, while treating local-body synchronisation as a later stage. The first phase should be preceded by a detailed constitutional and administrative roadmap published by the Election Commission and Parliament. The roadmap should identify the transitional years, the Assemblies affected, the proposed tenure adjustments and the treatment of mid-term vacancies or dissolutions.

Second, the law should protect the confidence principle. If a government falls, the first preference should be formation of an alternative government within the existing House. A constructive vote of no confidence could be considered after extensive consultation, but it should be drafted carefully so that it does not prevent legitimate changes of government. Only where no stable government can be formed should a fresh election become necessary. If a fresh election is held, the new House could serve only the remainder of the common cycle, subject to constitutional safeguards.

Third, federal safeguards should be explicit. State-specific issues must remain visible during common campaigns; election authorities should ensure equitable access to campaign and broadcasting opportunities; and State Election Commissions should retain their constitutional independence for local elections. Parliament should also consult State Legislatures before making subsequent changes to the synchronisation framework.

Fourth, ONOE should be part of a broader electoral reform package. Simultaneous elections do not directly solve criminalisation of politics, opaque political finance, internal party democracy, misuse of government resources, misinformation, or the need for greater transparency in candidate selection. A comprehensive reform agenda should address these issues separately. Otherwise, ONOE risks becoming a solution to an administrative problem while leaving deeper democratic problems untouched.

Finally, implementation should be evidence-based. The Government and Election Commission should publish measurable indicators: election expenditure, personnel deployment, number of polling days, security deployment, policy interruptions, voter turnout, campaign spending, and administrative savings. Independent review after the first common

cycle would allow Parliament to correct unintended effects without treating the reform as irreversible.

11. CONCLUSION

One Nation, One Election is neither inherently a threat to federalism nor a complete answer to India's electoral challenges. It is a constitutional design choice whose consequences depend on the rules surrounding it. The historical existence of simultaneous elections demonstrates that the idea is compatible with India's constitutional experience. The present proposal, however, operates in a much more complex political environment and therefore requires stronger safeguards than a simple restoration of the 1950s model.

The principal benefits of synchronisation are credible: reduced repetition of election administration, more predictable governance, potential savings in public resources and reduced disruption caused by continuous election activity. At the same time, the federalism and accountability concerns are equally substantial. A national electoral calendar can influence the political salience of State issues; premature tenure adjustments can affect the value of mandates; and rigid synchronisation can create constitutional difficulties when governments lose legislative confidence.

The constitutional objective should therefore be balance. ONOE should preserve the separate democratic identities of the Union and the States while coordinating their electoral calendars. It should never permit the convenience of synchronisation to override parliamentary responsibility. If designed with clear rules for premature dissolution, constructive alternatives to immediate elections, State-level safeguards, independent election administration and broader political-finance reforms, simultaneous elections could become a meaningful electoral reform. If designed without those safeguards, however, the reform may concentrate political power and weaken the plural character of Indian federal democracy.

Ultimately, the question is not whether India should have fewer elections merely because fewer elections are cheaper. The deeper question is whether electoral frequency can be rationalised without reducing the citizen's ability to choose, replace and hold accountable governments at both national and State levels. A constitutionally sound ONOE framework must answer that question affirmatively. Only then can 'One Nation, One Election' legitimately be described as an electoral reform rather than merely an administrative rearrangement.

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