

Before We Leap: Assessing the Feasibility and Risks of One Nation, One Election

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Abstract: One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is a proposed electoral reform in India that aims to synchronise the election schedules for the Lok Sabha (central parliament) and all state legislative assemblies. This would mean holding all these elections simultaneously on a single day or within a specific timeframe instead of the current staggered system. Potential benefits include lower costs, increased stability, reduced election fatigue, etc. However, there are potential drawbacks, such as loss of regional autonomy, difficulties in implementation, etc. The Indian government has considered ONOE for several years, but it has not yet been implemented. A High-Level Committee was appointed in 2018 to study the feasibility of ONOE, and it submitted its report in 2019. The report recommended that ONOE be implemented, but it also noted the challenges that must be addressed. The debate over ONOE will likely continue, as both sides have strong arguments. It is a complex issue with no easy answers.

Keywords: One Nation One Election(ONOE), Electoral, Law Commission, State Assemblies, Legislative, Model Code of Conduct, Lok Sabha, Simultaneous Polling

I. Introduction

A full-fledged and ideal one nation, one election model would call for simultaneous elections to all three tiers of panchayats, urban local bodies, state assemblies, and Lok Sabha synchronised to be held simultaneously. That means that on a single day and at the same polling booth, voters cast their votes for Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assembly or Local Bodies. This will result in forming a new Parliament, Legislative Assembly and local authorities. It's a familiar idea for the country to have elections simultaneously. For both the Parliament and the State Assembly, the general elections of 1951-52, 1957, 1962, and 1967 were held simultaneously. However, the cycle was disrupted by political upheavals, which led to midterm elections for Kerala and Odisha in 1960 and 1961, respectively. Several events, partly due to the lack of a clear mandate or the midterm collapse of the government and the frequent use of Article 356 and Article 352, which led to the extension of the elections, followed. Several parliamentary and state assemblies have been prematurely abolished in the past years. This has led to a disruption of the parallel voting cycle.

In different parts of the world, there is a practice in which elections take place simultaneously. However, many of those countries, including Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines, soon follow the Presidential form of government, where the elections at the Presidential and the Legislative levels are held together. In contrast, several countries, such as South Africa and Sweden, hold simultaneous elections at the national and provincial levels. Indonesia, the third largest democracy after India and the United States, recently conducted

simultaneous elections for the first time. India has also been encouraged by such global experiences to push ahead with simultaneous elections.

According to the 1999 Law Commission's 107th report, an annual cycle of elections should be ended. The report also stated that separate elections for a legislative assembly should be "an exception, not the rule." In its 2018 draft, the 22nd Law Commission suggested "restoring" simultaneous polling. With several recommendations on handling potential trouble spots, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice supported the proposal in 2015. It stated that the Indian Union Muslim League, Asom Gana Parishad, Shiromani Akali Dal, and AIADMK, among others, had supported it. It was rejected as unrealistic and undemocratic by the Indian National Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, Communist Party of India, and All India Trinamool Congress. A 2017 Niti Aayog report proposed a two-phase transition to simultaneous polling beginning with the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. No such move was made during the previous general elections, but there has been much synchronisation on a shared electoral roll since then.

II. Arguments in favour of One Nation One Election

Presently, the State Assemblies are elected every five to seven years. When political parties are motivated by short-term populist tactics to win elections rather than structural reforms that may be more advantageous for the public in the long run, this leads to a situation that negatively impacts development and governance processes. Similarly, there is a discrepancy in the parliamentary processes due to ongoing elections and the absence of a legislative schedule.

Article 85 states that only one Parliamentary session should be separated by more than six months. The Winter Sessions are held annually, typically starting in November and lasting through December. However, the most recent postponement of the session occurred in 2018, when elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, and Telangana prevented it from starting in November. India does not have a set legislative calendar unlike other nations like the US, Canada, and the UK. Over the years, this has caused multiple disruptions to parliamentary sessions, delaying urgent concerns. A further justification for holding simultaneous elections is the influence on governance that results from the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) being put into place ahead of time. The Election Commission released the MCC, a collection of rules governing political parties and candidates to guarantee free and fair elections. The MCC operates from when the election timetable is released until the results are publicised.

Except for standard administrative tasks, all other capital projects, welfare programmes, development initiatives, etc., are put on hold until the Model Code of Conduct takes effect. These disruptions in providing essential services could be prevented by simultaneously holding polls. India incurs high expenses for elections. The federal government and the corresponding state governments heavily bear annual election supervision and administration costs. Political parties spend a great deal of money while running for office. According to a report ('Poll Expenditure: The 2019 Elections') by the Centre for Media Studies, the 2019 Lok

Sabha election in India emerged as the most expensive election ever. The report estimated that around INR 55,000 crores (8 billion USD) was spent during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

This is merely a snapshot of the enormous financial drain in India during elections each year. It is also stated that having just one election would contribute to the situation where political parties would no longer need ongoing fundraising for elections, which would lessen the deceptive fundraising tactics involved. Simultaneous elections also save taxpayer money and improve fiscal balance, which may be put towards other development initiatives.

Elections are not only expensive and time-consuming, but they also require a large number of poll workers and security personnel to ensure their flawless operation. Poll workers are typically deployed for a shorter period (a few days before and following election day, as well as a few days before and after counting day). In contrast, security forces—especially the Central Armed Police Forces, are typically deployed throughout the election process and are always on the move. In addition to approximately 20 lakh state police officers and home guards, the most recent Lok Sabha had over 2.7 lakh paramilitary soldiers. Since there hasn't been a single year in India's recent history without elections, security and state police forces have been involved for an extended time when they could have been used for other internal security issues.

III. Arguments against One Nation One Election

Polls conducted simultaneously have advantages, but they also come with drawbacks. Opponents claim that having elections simultaneously drastically reduces the electorate's options. This might cause "national issues" to precede local ones, favouring national parties over local or regional ones. In other words, there would be a "national wave in favour of large national parties" if elections were held simultaneously, benefiting larger national parties at the expense of regional parties. This would threaten the depth and scope of Indian democracy and the nation's federal democratic system.

The primary objection to holding elections simultaneously is the issue of practicality. It is challenging to execute simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies because of the structure of the Constitution. To align the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies with the General Elections, the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies could be prematurely dissolved (Parliament of India 2015). The only option available in such a situation is to modify the terms of several state assemblies, which would obviously be unpleasant. This may involve extending or shortening the tenure of current members. Considering the logistics, security, and labour resource requirements, a significant operational problem must be solved, for holding elections on such a large scale is practically challenging.

The possibility that simultaneous elections could sway voter behaviour is another argument against the notion; in numerous instances, voters have supported the same parties in both the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies when simultaneous elections have been held. Situations like these may cause national issues to affect voter behaviour, even in elections for the State Assembly. When elections are held simultaneously, there is, on average, a 77% chance that Indian voters will choose the same party for both the State and the Centre,

according to an analysis by IDFC Institute. However, regular election cycles provide a certain amount of accountability because different local and state-level issues occasionally affect the elections.

A two-thirds majority in Parliament and ratification by at least half of the states are necessary for constitutional revisions to be made simultaneously with polls. Other than Article 356 on President's rule and Article 75(3) on collective responsibility and a no-confidence motion, amendments to Articles 83, 85(2) (B), and 174(2) (B) on the term of the House and dissolution of state assemblies will be required. This will take a lot of work, given the opposition in multiple states. Additionally, the 1951 Representation of People Act must be.

[IV] Conclusion

Simultaneous polling has several disadvantages, even though it has the potential to alter the Indian political system significantly. In this context, several important legislation and constitutional modifications require discussion and debate. Any change to policy in this area would also need to be approved by the general public, political parties, and other interested parties.

In addition, sustainability is over the long run if the coalition government or the incumbent party loses the majority between terms in the Lok Sabha or state elections. As the Parliamentary Standing Committee recommended, a two-cycle election method would be more appropriate. The first phase might coincide with the Lok Sabha elections, and the second phase would occur precisely thirty months after the first. Soon, such an arrangement would undoubtedly reduce the number of elections in the nation, which would lessen the regular disruptions to executing various welfare initiatives.

[V] References

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