



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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ONE NATION ONE ELECTION: EFFICIENCY OR ERODING OF FEDERALISM?

- *Shafaq Gupta*

INTRODUCTION

India's electoral calendar is a constant cycle of general elections every five years, and state assembly elections staggered across the calendar. This system not only ensures democratic accountability but also leads to frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, administrative slowdowns, and massive election expenditure. In response, the concept of "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) has gained traction, where Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections are held simultaneously across the country.

While the idea promises efficiency, cost-cutting, and better governance, it also raises fundamental concerns about India's federal structure, regional representation, and democratic diversity. This article critically examines whether ONOE is a constitutional reform towards greater efficiency or a centralizing move that weakens the soul of Indian federalism.

WHAT IS ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION?

The concept of ONOE envisions simultaneous elections for:

- The Lok Sabha (House of the People),
- All 28 State Legislative Assemblies.

It suggests that the electoral cycle be aligned, either through constitutional amendments or restructuring the terms of various state legislatures so that elections across all levels are held once every five years. This model was operational in India until 1967, but political instability, premature dissolutions of assemblies, and coalition governments eventually led to the current staggered election system.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR

1. REDUCED COSTS AND RESOURCES

The Election Commission of India spends crores of rupees in each round of elections. Synchronization could significantly reduce this financial burden—on logistics, polling staff, security, and infrastructure.

2. MINIMIZED GOVERNANCE DISRUPTIONS

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is imposed during every election, halting new policy decisions and public projects. With continuous elections across states, this frequently puts governance in limbo. ONOE would minimize such disruptions.

3. GREATER FOCUS ON GOVERNANCE OVER POPULISM

Frequent elections pressure governments to indulge in short-term populist schemes. A fixed-term, synchronized election schedule may allow leaders to focus more on long-term development and less on constant campaigning.

4. VOTER FATIGUE REDUCTION

Multiple elections lead to voter fatigue, lower turnout, and a decline in citizen engagement. ONOE could improve turnout and interest by making voting a singular, periodic civic event.

5. BOOST TO NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Some proponents argue that ONOE will bring a sense of unity and shared national purpose by synchronizing the political agenda across the country.

DISADVANTAGES LEADING TO EROSION OF FEDERALISM

Despite its operational benefits, ONOE invites serious constitutional and political challenges, especially in the context of India's quasi-federal structure.

1. VIOLATION OF FEDERAL PRINCIPLES

India's federalism is asymmetric and flexible, with state governments independently elected and answerable to state electorates. Aligning their terms with the central government could dilute their autonomy and undermine the federal balance envisioned in the Constitution.

2. ONE NATION, ONE NARRATIVE

Simultaneous elections may tilt the scales in favour of national parties and overshadow regional issues. National narratives could dominate the political discourse, leaving state-specific concerns underrepresented and weakening regional voices in Parliament and State Assemblies.

3. LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES AND LEGAL HURDLES

Holding elections for 543 Lok Sabha seats and nearly 4,000 Assembly constituencies at the same time would require massive coordination and resources. More importantly, it would require amendments to the Constitution, Representation of the People Act, and possibly dissolution or extension of existing assemblies—raising ethical and constitutional red flags.

4. SCENARIO AFTER MID-TERM COLLAPSES

In India's vibrant democracy, premature dissolutions of assemblies or the Lok Sabha are not rare. ONOE does not offer a credible framework to address mid-term collapses or hung assemblies. Imposing President's Rule or delaying elections to maintain alignment may be unconstitutional and anti-democratic.

5. THREAT TO REGIONALISM AND COALITION POLITICS

The vibrancy of Indian democracy comes from coalition politics and the flourishing of regional parties. ONOE could concentrate political power in the hands of dominant national parties, marginalizing smaller players and reducing political diversity.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS REQUIRED

ONOE is not just an administrative reform—it requires significant constitutional engineering, including:

1. ARTICLE 83(2): DURATION OF THE LOK SABHA

“The House of the People, unless sooner dissolved, shall continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting...”

This provision gives the Lok Sabha a fixed five-year term. To implement simultaneous elections:

- It may be necessary to curtail or extend the term of an existing Lok Sabha to synchronize with state legislatures.
- Alternatively, the terms of future Lok Sabhas could be modified to align with a master electoral calendar.

2. ARTICLE 172(1): DURATION OF STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES

State Assemblies have independent five-year terms, depending on when they were elected. To synchronize all elections:

- You would have to either dissolve some assemblies prematurely or
- Extend the term of others—both require constitutional backing and political consensus.

3. ARTICLES 85(1) AND 174(1): POWERS TO DISSOLVE LEGISLATURES

In the ONOE framework, automatic dissolution of all legislatures would be required to align terms. These articles currently require the executive (Centre or State) to act on cabinet advice, and no mechanism exists for synchronized dissolution or term alteration for election alignment.

These Articles may need to be modified to:

- Permit uniform dissolution of legislatures in sync with the national electoral calendar.
- Provide for a fixed election schedule or empower an independent body (like ECI or a constitutional authority) to recommend such dissolutions in special circumstances.

4. ARTICLE 356: PRESIDENT’S RULE

This article allows the President to impose central rule in a state when there is constitutional breakdown. In practice, if an Assembly collapses mid-term, and elections are postponed to maintain synchronization, President's Rule could be misused to delay fresh elections, creating a democratic vacuum.

Safeguards must be added to ensure ONOE is not used to delay democratic processes or suppress state mandates through prolonged central rule. Perhaps an upper limit on the delay period, or a "temporary caretaker legislature" mechanism.

5. REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT, 1951 (RPA)

The RPA, 1951 is the statutory framework that governs:

- Election conduct,
- Timelines,
- Qualifications, disqualifications,
- By-elections,
- Election offences, and more.

ONOE would require sweeping amendments to this law, especially to:

- Define rules for synchronised by-elections in case of mid-term vacancies,
- Prescribe a uniform election calendar,
- Lay down rules for rescheduling in case of Assembly collapse,
- Provide clear definitions for "exceptional circumstances" where re-synchronization may be allowed.

6. SCHEDULE VI AND SCHEDULE VII: DIVISION OF POWERS

Elections to state assemblies fall under the State List (Entry 37) and elections to Parliament under the Union List (Entry 72). Since ONOE directly interferes with State election cycles and legislative terms, it might:

- Alter the balance between Centre and States, and
- Be seen as a violation of federal autonomy.

There is a need to amend Schedule VII to add an enabling provision under the Concurrent List, allowing Parliament to legislate jointly with states on ONOE-related matters—with the prior consent or ratification of States.

7. ARTICLE 368: CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PROCEDURE

The changes discussed above would require a Constitutional Amendment Bill, which must:

- Be passed by a special majority in both Houses of Parliament, and
- Be ratified by at least 50% of state legislatures, because it affects the powers and terms of state legislatures and touches the federal structure.

This is a formidable political and legislative challenge that requires broad bipartisan and regional support.

JUDICIAL PERSPECTIVE

The Supreme Court has not ruled directly on ONOE, but past judgments like **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, 1994** emphasized the importance of federalism as a basic feature of the Constitution. Any move that attempts to centralize power or undermine the autonomy of state governments would likely face strict judicial scrutiny.

In another case of **Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain, 1975**, the emphasis was laid on free and fair elections as a cornerstone of democracy. Synchronisation should not compromise electoral fairness or reduce democratic accountability between elections.

Most importantly, the case of **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)**. In this case, the doctrine of Basic Structure was laid down. Any constitutional amendment to synchronize elections must not violate the basic structure, like democracy, federalism, and separation of powers.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *One Nation, One Election* holds undeniable appeal in terms of efficiency, cost-saving, and electoral discipline. By reducing the frequency of elections, the model aims to curb policy paralysis, bring consistency in governance, and lessen the administrative and financial burden on the Election Commission, security forces, and state machinery. For voters, it could reduce fatigue and encourage informed decision-making by turning elections into focused moments of national reflection.

However, these benefits must be carefully weighed against the constitutional, federal, and democratic implications of synchronising all elections. India's political fabric is deeply federal, with State governments deriving their legitimacy independently from their voters. Forcing uniform electoral cycles could dilute regional autonomy, disrupt the natural democratic rhythm of states, and centralise power disproportionately. Furthermore, the constitutional and statutory amendments required for implementation are far-reaching and demand consensus across party lines and federal units—something that is increasingly difficult in today's polarised political environment.

In essence, while the ONOE model is administratively sound, its execution demands robust legal safeguards, political maturity, and institutional resilience to preserve the core values of Indian democracy. Any move toward synchronisation must prioritise democratic integrity over convenience. It is not merely about *when* India votes—but *how* that timing affects the health of its federal and democratic structure.