

## **One Nation One Election and its impact on Political Parties in India**

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### **Introduction**

India, as the world's largest democracy, conducts elections on an unparalleled scale involving millions of voters, political parties, security personnel, and administrative machinery. Over time, the electoral calendar has become fragmented due to the premature dissolution of legislative assemblies, coalition instability, and constitutional contingencies, resulting in frequent elections across different states. This continuous electoral cycle places significant financial, administrative, and governance burdens on the state and political stakeholders. In this context, the proposal of *One Nation One Election (ONOE)*, which advocates the synchronization of elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, has re-emerged as a major electoral reform initiative.

Historically, simultaneous elections were conducted in India between 1952 and 1967, ensuring stability and policy continuity. However, political realignments and constitutional breakdowns disrupted this system. The renewed ONOE debate reflects concerns over escalating election expenditure, prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, policy paralysis, and governance inefficiencies. Proponents argue that synchronized elections would promote administrative efficiency, fiscal prudence, and political stability, while critics warn of potential threats to federalism, democratic choice, and regional political diversity.

Political parties occupy a central role in shaping democratic representation, electoral competition, and governance. Any major reform to the electoral framework inevitably influences party behavior, campaign strategies, organizational structures, and voter engagement. ONOE may significantly alter the competitive landscape for national and regional political parties, affecting coalition politics, political financing, issue prioritization, and grassroots mobilization. Smaller and regional parties may face visibility challenges, while larger parties may gain strategic advantages due to resource consolidation.

This paper seeks to analyze the multidimensional impact of ONOE on political parties in India by examining its constitutional feasibility, political implications, and democratic consequences. It aims to assess whether the reform can balance governance efficiency with political pluralism, federal autonomy, and inclusive democratic participation.

### **Meaning and Concept of One Nation One Election (ONOE)**

The concept of One Nation One Election (ONOE) refers to the proposal of conducting simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies across India, instead of holding elections at different times throughout the year. Under this system, voters would cast their votes for both national and state governments in a single electoral cycle, once every five years, subject to constitutional provisions. The primary objective of ONOE is to streamline the electoral process, reduce the frequency of elections, and ensure continuity in governance and public administration.

Historically, India followed the system of simultaneous elections during the first four general elections held in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. This practice was disrupted due to political instability, premature dissolution of state assemblies, coalition breakdowns, and the

imposition of President's Rule in several states. As a result, elections began occurring at different intervals, leading to a perpetual election mode in the country.

Conceptually, ONOE is rooted in the principles of administrative efficiency, fiscal prudence, and governance stability. Frequent elections impose heavy financial burdens on the government and political parties, divert administrative resources, and disrupt policy implementation due to the repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct. Simultaneous elections aim to minimize these disruptions and allow governments to focus on long-term development planning.

From a constitutional perspective, ONOE requires harmonization of the tenure of legislatures and possible amendments to provisions related to the duration and dissolution of Parliament and State Assemblies. It also involves strengthening institutional mechanisms to handle situations such as hung assemblies or mid-term government collapse without destabilizing the synchronized cycle.

At a broader level, ONOE represents an attempt to reform India's electoral system while balancing democratic values, federal autonomy, and political diversity. It is not merely an administrative reform but a structural transformation of the electoral framework, with significant implications for political parties, voters, and governance.

#### **Historical Background: Simultaneous Elections in India (1952-1967)**

In the early years of the Indian Republic, elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were conducted simultaneously, reflecting a synchronized electoral framework aimed at ensuring political stability and administrative efficiency. This system was successfully implemented during the first four general elections held in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. At that time, both the central and state legislatures had uniform five-year terms, allowing voters to elect their representatives at the national and state levels in a single electoral cycle.

The practice of simultaneous elections facilitated efficient utilization of administrative machinery, security forces, and financial resources. It also enabled uninterrupted governance, as the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct occurred only once in five years. Politically, the dominance of a single party during this period contributed to stable governments and predictable legislative tenures, which supported synchronized elections.

However, the continuity of this system began to weaken after 1967 due to growing political fragmentation, coalition politics, defections, and the premature dissolution of several State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha. Constitutional provisions allowing early dissolution under exceptional circumstances further disrupted the synchronized cycle. As Assemblies were dissolved at different times, elections gradually became staggered across the country.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, India had transitioned into a system of frequent and unsynchronized elections, marking the end of the simultaneous election model. The historical experience demonstrates that while simultaneous elections were operationally feasible during a period of political stability, sustaining them requires strong institutional safeguards and political consensus to manage unforeseen disruptions in democratic governance.

#### **Federalism and Electoral Democracy in India**

India follows a unique model of federalism with a strong central structure, as envisaged in the Constitution, which divides powers between the Union and the States while maintaining national unity. Electoral democracy forms the backbone of this federal framework, enabling citizens to choose their representatives at both national and state levels through periodic, free, and fair elections. The dual electoral system ensures political accountability, regional

representation, and democratic participation across diverse social, linguistic, and cultural contexts.

Federalism in India allows states to exercise autonomy in governance, policy formulation, and political leadership, reflecting local aspirations and priorities. State elections often revolve around region-specific issues such as agriculture, employment, welfare schemes, and cultural identity, whereas national elections generally focus on broader concerns like economic policy, national security, and foreign relations. This separation enables voters to express differentiated political preferences at different levels of governance, strengthening democratic pluralism.

However, electoral democracy within a federal structure also presents challenges, including coordination between electoral cycles, administrative capacity, and political stability. Frequent elections can disrupt governance and strain public resources, while excessive centralization may undermine state autonomy. Any reform affecting the electoral process, such as synchronized elections, must therefore carefully balance efficiency with federal principles and democratic diversity. Preserving the independence of state-level political competition remains essential to sustaining India's vibrant multiparty democracy and constitutional federalism.

- Party system theory and electoral cycles
- Democratic accountability and voter behavior
- Role of political parties in representative democracy

### **Evolution of Electoral Cycles in India**

The evolution of electoral cycles in India reflects the changing dynamics of political stability, constitutional governance, and party competition. In the initial phase of the Indian Republic, elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were held simultaneously in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. This synchronization was possible due to stable governments, predictable legislative tenures, and the dominance of a single political party at both national and state levels. Uniform five-year terms ensured administrative efficiency and continuity in governance.

The breakdown of this synchronized cycle began after 1967, when political fragmentation, coalition governments, and internal party splits became frequent. Several State Assemblies were dissolved prematurely due to loss of majority, defections, and imposition of President's Rule under Article 356 of the Constitution. The Fourth Lok Sabha itself was dissolved early in 1970, further disrupting the alignment of electoral schedules. These developments resulted in elections being conducted at different times across states, marking the shift toward staggered electoral cycles.

The introduction of the Anti-Defection Law in 1985 sought to stabilize governments by curbing political defections, but coalition politics continued to generate instability in the 1990s. Hung assemblies, minority governments, and mid-term collapses became recurring phenomena, making synchronized elections increasingly impractical. Consequently, India entered a phase of continuous electoral activity, with some state or the other going to polls almost every year.

While staggered elections enhanced regional political autonomy and issue-based voting, they also increased election expenditure, administrative burden, and governance disruptions due to frequent enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct. These challenges rekindled the policy debate on reviving simultaneous elections under the *One Nation One Election* framework. The evolution of electoral cycles thus represents a balance between democratic flexibility and

governance efficiency, highlighting the need for institutional reforms that preserve federal diversity while improving electoral management.

### **Role of Anti-Defection Law and Political Instability**

Political instability has been a significant factor in disrupting the synchronized electoral cycle in India. During the late 1960s and 1970s, frequent defections by elected representatives led to the collapse of several state governments, resulting in premature dissolution of legislative assemblies and repeated elections. This phenomenon, popularly described as “Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram,” undermined democratic stability and weakened public trust in political institutions.

To address this problem, the Anti-Defection Law was introduced through the Fifty-Second Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985, incorporating the Tenth Schedule into the Constitution. The law sought to discourage political defections by disqualifying members of legislatures who voluntarily give up party membership or vote against party directives. Its primary objective was to ensure government stability, strengthen party discipline, and reduce opportunistic political realignments.

While the Anti-Defection Law has succeeded in reducing large-scale defections, it has not entirely eliminated political instability. Loopholes such as mass defections, mergers, judicial delays in disqualification proceedings, and strategic resignations have continued to destabilize governments in several states. Coalition politics and fragile alliances further contribute to governance uncertainty and mid-term collapses of legislatures.

As a result, the persistence of political instability continues to challenge the feasibility of synchronized elections under the *One Nation One Election* framework. Sustaining simultaneous elections requires stable legislative tenures and effective enforcement of anti-defection provisions. Strengthening the law, ensuring timely adjudication by presiding officers or independent authorities, and promoting internal party democracy are essential to minimize instability and create conditions conducive to electoral synchronization and democratic continuity.

### **Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of One Nation One Election (ONOE)**

The implementation of *One Nation One Election (ONOE)* raises significant legal and constitutional questions, as India’s electoral framework is governed by a detailed constitutional scheme that guarantees fixed tenures for legislatures and democratic accountability. Articles 83(2) and 172(1) of the Constitution prescribe a five-year term for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies respectively, unless dissolved earlier. Articles 85 and 174 empower the President and Governors to dissolve legislatures, while Article 356 provides for President’s Rule in case of constitutional breakdown in states. These provisions collectively allow flexibility in democratic functioning but pose challenges to the synchronization of elections.

To operationalize ONOE, constitutional amendments would be required to harmonize the tenure of Parliament and State Assemblies and to address scenarios of premature dissolution or hung legislatures. Amendments may also be necessary to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which regulates election procedures, scheduling, and qualifications. Any such changes must comply with the basic structure doctrine, particularly the principles of democracy, federalism, and free and fair elections.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) plays a crucial role in conducting elections under Article 324 and would require enhanced logistical capacity, manpower, and security infrastructure to manage nationwide simultaneous elections. Legal clarity would also be needed regarding the extension or curtailment of legislative terms to align electoral cycles.

Judicial observations and expert committee reports, including those of the Law Commission of India and parliamentary committees, have acknowledged the administrative benefits of ONOE while emphasizing the need for political consensus and constitutional safeguards. Courts have consistently upheld the sanctity of electoral rights and representative governance, cautioning against reforms that may dilute democratic accountability.

Thus, the legal feasibility of ONOE depends on carefully structured constitutional amendments, respect for federal autonomy, and the preservation of democratic principles. A phased or consensual approach is essential to ensure that electoral efficiency does not compromise constitutional integrity and democratic legitimacy.

### **Arguments in Favour of One Nation One Election (ONOE)**

The proposal of One Nation One Election (ONOE) aims to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, offering several administrative, economic, and governance-related advantages. One of the strongest arguments in favour of ONOE is the significant reduction in election expenditure. Conducting frequent elections imposes heavy financial burdens on the government, political parties, and candidates. Simultaneous elections would optimize the use of public funds, security deployment, electronic voting infrastructure, and human resources.

Another major benefit is administrative efficiency and governance continuity. Repeated elections lead to the prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, which restricts policy decisions, welfare announcements, and developmental projects. This often results in policy paralysis and delays in public service delivery. ONOE would minimize such disruptions, allowing governments to focus on long-term planning and effective implementation of development programs.

ONOE is also expected to improve political stability and policy consistency. Stable electoral cycles can encourage governments to pursue coherent policy agendas without constant electoral pressures. It may also reduce opportunistic populism driven by frequent election cycles and enable better fiscal discipline.

From a democratic perspective, synchronized elections may enhance voter participation and convenience, as citizens would vote once in a fixed cycle instead of multiple times for different elections. This could improve voter turnout and reduce electoral fatigue, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Additionally, ONOE may contribute to strengthening national integration and electoral discipline. Unified elections promote streamlined campaign management, reduce prolonged political polarization, and enable better coordination among constitutional institutions. It may also improve security management by limiting repeated deployment of forces across states.

Supporters argue that ONOE aligns with the goals of efficient governance, fiscal responsibility, and institutional stability while preserving democratic choice. With appropriate constitutional safeguards and phased implementation, ONOE has the potential to modernize India's electoral system and strengthen democratic governance without compromising federal values.

### **Impact of One Nation One Election (ONOE) on Political Parties in India**

The implementation of One Nation One Election (ONOE) is likely to significantly transform the functioning, strategies, and competitive dynamics of political parties in India. Political parties play a central role in mobilizing voters, shaping public discourse, and forming

governments. A synchronized electoral cycle would compel parties to restructure their campaign planning, organizational coordination, and resource allocation.

For national political parties, ONOE may offer strategic advantages due to their extensive organizational networks, financial resources, and media visibility. Consolidated elections would enable centralized campaign management and uniform messaging across states, potentially strengthening national narratives and leadership influence. Larger parties may benefit from economies of scale in campaigning and better coordination of volunteers and logistics.

However, regional and smaller political parties may face challenges in maintaining visibility and electoral relevance. State-specific issues may receive reduced attention in a nationalized electoral environment, potentially marginalizing regional identities and local governance concerns. Smaller parties with limited financial and organizational capacity may struggle to compete with well-funded national parties during simultaneous high-intensity campaigns.

ONOE may also impact political financing and expenditure patterns. While overall costs may reduce over time, parties would need to mobilize large funds at once, increasing dependence on centralized fundraising mechanisms. This could influence transparency and internal accountability within party structures.

In terms of coalition politics, synchronized elections may alter alliance strategies, seat-sharing negotiations, and post-election bargaining dynamics. Parties may prefer broader pre-poll alliances to maximize electoral efficiency, potentially reducing ideological diversity. ONOE may further reshape cadre mobilization and voter engagement, requiring long-term campaign preparedness rather than continuous localized electioneering. While this may professionalize party operations, it could also reduce grassroots political interaction. ONOE could strengthen organizational efficiency and political stability but may also concentrate political power and limit pluralism. Therefore, adequate safeguards are essential to protect regional representation, competitive fairness, and democratic inclusiveness within India's multiparty system.

### **Policy Implications and Reform Options**

The proposal of One Nation One Election (ONOE) carries far-reaching policy implications for India's constitutional framework, federal governance, electoral management, and political competition. While the reform promises administrative efficiency and cost reduction, its successful implementation requires carefully calibrated legal, institutional, and political strategies to preserve democratic values and federal balance.

A primary policy implication concerns the need for constitutional amendments to harmonize the tenure of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Provisions relating to dissolution, extension of terms, and emergency governance must be clearly defined to prevent arbitrary interference with democratic mandates. Safeguards must ensure that early dissolution does not permanently disrupt synchronized cycles. A phased implementation model, where selected elections are gradually aligned, may minimize institutional shocks and allow administrative preparedness.

Another crucial area is the strengthening of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Simultaneous elections would demand massive logistical coordination, enhanced security deployment, and advanced technological infrastructure. Policy reforms must focus on increasing ECI's financial autonomy, staffing capacity, cybersecurity resilience, and operational independence to maintain electoral credibility and integrity.

From a democratic standpoint, policies must protect federal autonomy and regional representation. Electoral synchronization should not suppress state-specific political discourse or marginalize regional parties. Legal mechanisms may be introduced to ensure adequate campaign broadcasting time, equitable funding opportunities, and fair media access for smaller political parties.

Reforms in political finance and transparency are equally important. Since parties would require substantial funds in a single election cycle, strict disclosure norms, spending ceilings, digital audit trails, and independent oversight mechanisms must be strengthened to prevent undue influence and corruption.

Another significant policy option involves alternative governance continuity mechanisms. In cases of hung assemblies or government collapse, constructive vote of no-confidence, caretaker governments with limited powers, or fixed-term legislatures with confidence renewal models could prevent frequent dissolutions without undermining democratic accountability.

Lastly, building political consensus and public trust is essential. Broad consultations with state governments, political parties, civil society, and constitutional experts should precede implementation. Public awareness initiatives can ensure voter confidence and institutional legitimacy. ONOE should not be treated merely as an administrative reform but as a constitutional transformation requiring balanced policy design, democratic safeguards, and gradual implementation to ensure stability, inclusiveness, and electoral fairness in India's federal democracy.

### **Conclusion**

The proposal of One Nation One Election (ONOE) represents one of the most ambitious electoral reforms in India's democratic history. It seeks to address persistent challenges such as escalating election expenditure, administrative overload, governance disruptions, and policy paralysis caused by frequent electoral cycles. The historical experience of simultaneous elections during the early decades of the Republic demonstrates that synchronization is institutionally feasible under conditions of political stability and strong governance mechanisms. However, contemporary political realities characterized by multiparty competition, coalition politics, and regional diversity demand a more cautious and balanced approach.

This study has highlighted that while ONOE may enhance administrative efficiency, policy continuity, and electoral discipline, it also raises serious constitutional, federal, and democratic concerns. The potential centralization of political discourse, marginalization of regional parties, dilution of state-specific issues, and risks to political pluralism cannot be overlooked. The impact on political parties is particularly significant, as synchronized elections may reshape campaign strategies, financing structures, alliance formations, and organizational dynamics, potentially favoring larger national parties over smaller regional formations.

The constitutional feasibility of ONOE depends on carefully crafted amendments that respect the basic structure doctrine, preserve federal autonomy, and protect electoral accountability. Strengthening the Election Commission, reforming political finance, and introducing governance continuity mechanisms are essential institutional prerequisites for successful implementation. Equally important is building political consensus and ensuring transparent public deliberation to maintain democratic legitimacy. Ultimately, ONOE should not be pursued solely as a cost-saving or administrative measure but as a comprehensive

democratic reform that balances efficiency with inclusiveness and constitutional integrity. A phased, consultative, and safeguard-driven approach offers the most viable pathway for harmonizing electoral cycles while preserving India's rich political diversity and federal democratic character.

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