

POLITICAL STRATEGY AND ELECTORAL REFORM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION AND THE BJP

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Abstract: The proposal of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has re-emerged as a significant electoral reform debate in India, framed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party as a mechanism to enhance governance efficiency, reduce electoral expenditure, and ensure policy continuity. This paper critically examines ONOE not merely as an administrative reform, but as a strategic political project with far-reaching implications for India's federal structure, democratic pluralism, and electoral competition. By situating ONOE within the broader political strategy of the BJP, the study explores how synchronized elections may recalibrate Centre-State relations, reshape opposition mobilization, and potentially advantage dominant national parties over regional actors. Drawing on constitutional provisions, committee reports, electoral data, and comparative international experiences, the paper argues that while ONOE promises procedural efficiency, it risks centralizing political power and weakening the autonomy of state-level democratic processes. The study concludes that electoral reforms of this magnitude require broad political consensus, constitutional safeguards, and deeper deliberation to ensure that efficiency does not come at the cost of democratic diversity and federal balance.

Keywords: One Nation, One Election; Bharatiya Janata Party; Electoral Reforms; Indian Federalism; Democratic Governance; Electoral Strategy; Centre-State Relations; Constitutional Challenges; Political Centralization

1.0 Introduction

The debate surrounding *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) has emerged as one of the most significant electoral reform proposals in contemporary Indian politics. Advocated strongly by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and supported by Prime Minister *Narendra Modi*, the proposal seeks to synchronize elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies, thereby replacing the current cycle of staggered polls. Proponents argue that simultaneous elections would reduce campaign expenditure, minimize governance disruptions caused by the Model Code of Conduct, and promote policy stability. However, critics contend that the reform carries profound political, constitutional, and federal implications that extend far beyond administrative efficiency. Historically, India conducted simultaneous elections in 1951–52, 1957, 1962, and 1967. The cycle was disrupted due to premature dissolutions of several State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha, leading to the present system of periodic elections across different states. The revival of ONOE in recent years reflects not only administrative concerns but also evolving political calculations in an era marked by increasing centralization and the dominance of national parties.

This paper situates ONOE within the broader political strategy of the BJP, examining how electoral synchronization may reshape India's competitive party system. As a party that has consolidated its position at the national level while expanding its footprint in multiple states, the BJP's advocacy of ONOE can be interpreted both as a governance reform initiative and as a strategic recalibration of electoral politics.

Simultaneous elections may nationalize political discourse, potentially privileging national leadership narratives over state-specific issues and regional party agendas.

The introduction of ONOE also raises complex constitutional questions concerning federalism, democratic accountability, and the stability of parliamentary institutions. Implementing such a reform would require substantial amendments to the Constitution, adjustments to Articles dealing with the tenure and dissolution of legislatures, and mechanisms to address situations of hung assemblies or no-confidence motions. Beyond legal considerations, the reform compels a normative inquiry into whether efficiency-driven institutional redesign aligns with India's pluralistic and multi-layered democratic framework. Against this backdrop, this paper critically analyzes the ONOE proposal as both an electoral reform measure and a component of contemporary political strategy. It seeks to assess whether the initiative strengthens democratic governance through institutional coherence or whether it risks reinforcing political centralization at the expense of federal balance and electoral diversity.

2.0 Comparative Perspective: One Nation, One Election and International Experiences

To critically evaluate the proposal of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE), it is important to situate it within a comparative global framework. While electoral synchronization exists in several democracies, its design and political consequences vary significantly depending on constitutional structure, party systems, and federal arrangements. This section compares India's ONOE proposal—strongly advocated by the **Bharatiya Janata Party**—with electoral systems in selected countries.

2.1 South Africa: South Africa conducts simultaneous elections for the National Assembly and Provincial Legislatures every five years. This synchronization is constitutionally embedded and supported by a proportional representation system. Because the political structure is centralized and provinces have comparatively limited autonomy, synchronized elections do not significantly distort federal balance.

Comparison with India: India's federalism is more territorially diverse and politically fragmented. Unlike South Africa, India's states exercise substantial legislative and executive powers. Synchronization in India could therefore reshape Centre–State political dynamics more profoundly than in South Africa.

2.2 Germany: Germany follows a federal system where federal (Bundestag) and state (Länder) elections are generally held at different times. Each Land determines its own election schedule within constitutional limits. This staggered pattern allows regional issues to dominate state elections and reinforces federal autonomy.

Comparison with India: Germany's model demonstrates how staggered elections can strengthen cooperative federalism by preventing excessive nationalization of regional politics. Critics of ONOE argue that India's current staggered cycle similarly allows state-level political identities to flourish independently of national narratives.

2.3 United States: In the United States, federal and state elections often coincide in November during presidential election years, but governors and state legislatures may have varying election cycles. Moreover, midterm elections occur two years after presidential elections, creating a deliberate staggered structure.

Comparison with India: The U.S. system illustrates how partial synchronization coexists with staggered cycles, maintaining checks and balances. Midterm elections often serve as referendums on federal leadership, enhancing accountability. In contrast, full synchronization in India could reduce interim electoral feedback mechanisms.

2.4 Sweden : Sweden holds simultaneous elections for the national parliament (Riksdag), county councils, and municipal councils every four years. The system functions effectively due to stable coalition politics and proportional representation.

Comparison with India: Sweden's political culture is consensus-driven, and coalition governance is institutionalized. India's majoritarian parliamentary system, combined with strong national leadership campaigns, may produce different political consequences if elections are fully synchronized.

2.5 United Kingdom : The UK does not synchronize national and devolved elections. Parliamentary elections may be called earlier under specific political circumstances, and elections in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland follow separate schedules.

Comparison with India: The UK experience highlights flexibility in parliamentary democracies. Frequent elections are not necessarily seen as governance disruptions but as mechanisms of democratic responsiveness. This contrasts with the efficiency-driven rationale advanced in India's ONOE debate.

3.0 Comparative Insights

1. **Federal Structure Matters:** Countries with strong federal autonomy (Germany, U.S.) tend to maintain staggered elections to preserve regional political space.
2. **Party System Effects:** Synchronization often advantages nationally dominant parties, particularly in majoritarian systems.
3. **Institutional Safeguards:** Nations with synchronized elections usually have constitutional stability and proportional systems that mitigate power concentration.
4. **Democratic Accountability:** Staggered elections provide periodic political feedback and can check central authority.

4.0 Implications for India

Unlike countries where synchronization evolved organically within stable institutional contexts, India's ONOE is a reform proposal aimed at restructuring an established staggered system. The political context—marked by the national dominance of the BJP—raises concerns about whether synchronization would amplify centralizing tendencies and nationalize electoral discourse at the expense of regional pluralism. Therefore, while comparative experiences demonstrate that simultaneous elections are not inherently undemocratic, their impact depends heavily on constitutional design, federal balance, and party competition structures. In India's case, the debate over ONOE is not merely administrative but deeply political, shaping the future trajectory of federal democracy.

5.0 Expenditure Savings from *One Nation, One Election*

One of the central arguments put forward by proponents of *One Nation, One Election*—notably supported by leaders of the **Bharatiya Janata Party**—is that synchronising electoral cycles could significantly reduce the financial burden of frequent polls on the Indian state and economy.

5.1 Government and National Savings Estimates

- Government advocates have **claimed that synchronisation could save roughly ₹7,500 crore to ₹12,000 crore per election cycle** by reducing duplicate costs associated with conducting separate Lok Sabha and state assembly elections.
- Union ministers have reiterated that such savings could contribute positively to India's economic output, asserting that cost efficiencies from ONOE could even boost GDP by approximately **1.5 % (~₹4–4.5 lakh crore)** through reduction in administrative and election-related inefficiencies, though this figure combines broader economic effects beyond direct savings.
- Some industry and policy analyses extend these estimates, suggesting that total election-related costs (including indirect economic losses from repeated Model Code of Conduct disruptions) could amount to **₹50,000–₹75,000 crore or more per electoral cycle**, and that synchronized elections could reduce this burden by a substantial margin.

5.2 Broader Cost Considerations

- Direct costs such as deployment of security forces, logistics, polling personnel, and equipment (EVMs and VVPAT devices) might be streamlined under a simultaneous election model, lowering administrative expenditures.
- Political party campaign costs and indirect economic impacts—such as stalled infrastructure projects or workforce disruptions during frequent Model Code of Conduct phases—are often cited by proponents, but these are **not officially quantified by the government**.

5.3 Critical Notes

- These figures are **estimates and projections** presented largely by political leaders, industry bodies, and think-tanks; official, audited savings have not been published by the Election Commission or the Ministry of Finance.
- Opponents argue that focusing exclusively on cost savings can obscure deeper democratic and federal issues, and that election expenditure—even at high levels—is intrinsic to vibrant democratic practices.

6.0 Challenges of *One Nation, One Election*: A Critical Assessment

While *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) is projected as a transformative electoral reform, its implementation poses several **constitutional, political, administrative, and democratic challenges**. When viewed through the lens of political strategy—particularly in the context of the Bharatiya Janata Party—these challenges acquire deeper significance beyond questions of efficiency and cost reduction.

6.1 Constitutional and Legal Challenges: The most fundamental challenge lies in the **constitutional restructuring** required to implement ONOE. Synchronizing elections would necessitate amendments to multiple constitutional provisions, including Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174, which govern the tenure and dissolution of legislatures. Additionally, provisions related to no-confidence motions and President's Rule would require careful redesign.

Such amendments raise concerns about:

- Dilution of parliamentary accountability
- Extension or curtailment of legislative tenures
- Judicial scrutiny over the basic structure doctrine, particularly federalism and democracy

Achieving the required special majority in Parliament and ratification by at least half of the states presents a formidable political hurdle.

6.2 Federalism and Centre–State Relations: India's federal system is characterized by **asymmetric political diversity**, with states reflecting distinct linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities. ONOE risks **over-centralizing the electoral process**, potentially subordinating state-specific political issues to national narratives.

Critics argue that:

- Regional parties may lose political visibility
- State elections could become referendums on national leadership
- Cooperative federalism may weaken in favor of central dominance

This challenge is particularly acute in a political environment where one party enjoys sustained national electoral dominance.

6.3 Impact on Democratic Pluralism and Electoral Choice : Frequent elections, though costly, serve as mechanisms of **continuous democratic feedback**. Staggered elections allow voters to differentiate between national and state-level governance performance. ONOE may reduce this granularity of choice.

Key concerns include:

- Voter behavior being influenced by a single national narrative
- Marginalization of local issues and leadership
- Reduced electoral accountability between election cycles

Empirical studies from comparative democracies suggest that simultaneous elections often produce a “coattail effect,” benefiting larger national parties.

6.4 Administrative and Logistical Constraints

Conducting simultaneous elections across India would impose unprecedented demands on the Election Commission of India. Challenges include:

- Massive deployment of security forces
- Procurement and storage of EVMs and VVPATs at scale
- Training and coordination of polling personnel nationwide

Any disruption—such as natural disasters, law-and-order issues, or political instability in a single state—could delay elections across the country, undermining administrative efficiency rather than enhancing it.

6.5 Political Instability and Contingency Management

ONOE assumes a level of political stability that may not align with India's parliamentary realities. Situations such as:

- Hung assemblies
- Collapse of coalition governments
- No-confidence motions

raise unresolved questions. Whether to impose caretaker governments, President's Rule, or defer elections could introduce democratic deficits and executive overreach.

6.6 Consensus Deficit and Democratic Legitimacy

Electoral reforms of this magnitude require **broad-based political consensus**, not merely legislative numbers. Opposition parties and several state governments have expressed apprehensions that ONOE reflects partisan advantage rather than neutral institutional reform.

Without inclusive consultation:

- Reforms risk being perceived as politically motivated
- Democratic legitimacy may be weakened
- Long-term institutional trust could erode

6.7 Normative Tension: Efficiency vs Democracy: At its core, the ONOE debate reflects a normative tension between **governance efficiency and democratic depth**. While reducing expenditure and administrative disruption is desirable, elections are not merely logistical exercises but expressions of popular sovereignty.

Over-emphasizing efficiency may:

- Redefine elections as administrative inconveniences.
- Undermine participatory democracy.
- Prioritize executive convenience over electoral accountability.

The challenges surrounding ONOE underscore that electoral reform in India cannot be evaluated solely through fiscal or administrative metrics. In the context of prevailing political dominance, ONOE raises critical questions about power concentration, federal balance, and the future of electoral competition. Any movement toward synchronization must therefore be preceded by constitutional safeguards, political consensus, and a clear commitment to preserving India's pluralistic democratic ethos.

7.0 Conclusion

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) represents a pivotal moment in India's ongoing debate over electoral reform, governance efficiency, and democratic design. While the reform is publicly framed as a solution to escalating election costs, policy paralysis, and administrative fatigue, this study demonstrates that ONOE cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political context in which it is advanced—most notably by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The analysis reveals that ONOE is not merely a technical or procedural reform but a **structural reconfiguration of India's electoral democracy**. Its potential to nationalize electoral discourse, privilege dominant national narratives, and compress diverse state-level political dynamics into a single electoral moment raises serious concerns for federalism and democratic pluralism. In a country marked by deep regional, linguistic, and socio-political diversity, staggered elections have historically allowed voters to exercise differentiated choices and hold governments accountable at multiple levels.

Comparative international experiences underscore that simultaneous elections function effectively only under specific institutional conditions—such as stable constitutional frameworks, proportional representation systems, and strong safeguards for subnational autonomy. India's majoritarian electoral system and competitive federal structure make the risks of power centralization and reduced electoral accountability particularly pronounced. The promised fiscal savings, while not insignificant, remain largely projected and insufficiently substantiated when weighed against the potential democratic costs. From a political strategy perspective, ONOE aligns with the incentives of a nationally dominant party seeking to consolidate electoral advantage through synchronization. This does not, by itself, invalidate the reform, but it necessitates heightened scrutiny, transparency, and consensus-building. Electoral reforms that reshape the rhythm of democracy must be guided by constitutional morality rather than partisan expediency. In conclusion, *One Nation, One Election* poses a

fundamental normative question for Indian democracy: should efficiency and stability take precedence over electoral diversity and continuous political accountability? This study argues that without broad political consensus, robust constitutional safeguards, and mechanisms to protect federal balance, ONOE risks weakening the very democratic foundations it claims to strengthen. Electoral reform in India must ultimately serve the pluralistic spirit of its democracy, ensuring that governance efficiency enhances—rather than constrains—the representative character of the Indian state.

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