

# One Nation One Election: An Overview

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## Abstract

India is a democratic country where people participate in decision-making process through their representatives. They elect their representatives of national level, state level, and local level through process of election. So, Election is very crucial for successful functioning of democracy in India. After Independence, from the first general election till 1967, elections of the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies were held together, but after some time, because of various factors, the cycle got disrupted and it no longer holds simultaneous elections. Time and again, various commissions, political parties and leaders have demanded that this anomaly should be corrected and elections at all levels should be conducted simultaneously, which means 'One Nation, One Election', that has been once again raised by the President of India as well as the Prime Minister of India. This paper analyzes the concept of 'One Nation One Election'. It examined the feasibility of implementing this idea as well as the challenges that the election commission will have to face.

**Keyword:** Democracy, Simultaneous election, One Nation One Election,

## Introduction

As per Abraham Lincoln, Democracy means “a rule of the people, by the people and for the people”<sup>1</sup>. In any country, it can be an indirect democracy or a direct democracy. When people directly participate in the decision-making process through referendum, initiative and recall, is called direct democracy. In an indirect democratic form of government, representatives of the people play a key role in law-making; these representatives are elected by the people through the process of election, which takes place periodically.

The Indian constitution has enshrined an indirect democratic system where election takes place periodically for Parliament, state assemblies and local bodies of administration. The duration of parliament and state assemblies is 5 years as per constitutional provisions of Article 83 and Article 172, respectively, but they can be dissolved earlier too. The Indian Constitution is silent on whether these elections should take place simultaneously. Since the first election of 1952 till the 1967 elections of Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies were held simultaneously, but after that, this election cycle got disrupted because of the early dissolution of state assemblies of various states and after that earlier dissolution of the parliament of India too.

Now, elections of these bodies don't take place simultaneously because of that we, here in India, face elections in every year after a gap of few months. Various commissions and committees have recommended for simultaneous elections in India. Former President Ramnath Kovind and our present PM Narendra Modi have also mooted this idea of 'One Nation, One Election'<sup>3</sup>. It started a whole new political debate in country where many opposition parties are against this electoral reform.

This idea is significant because it can resolve a number of issues related to the broken election system that exists now. Reducing the number of elections is one of the main goals, as they can be resource-intensive and can result in protracted political campaigning. Proponents contend that by combining elections, the disruptive effects on government may be reduced and elected officials could concentrate on enacting policies rather than running nonstop campaigns.

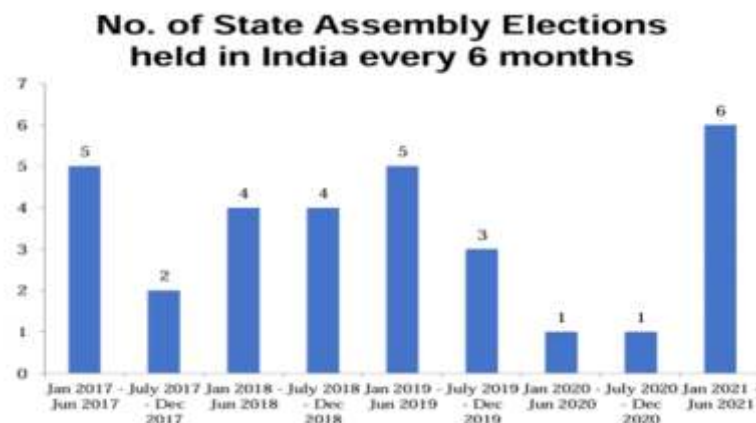
## Problems due to continuous elections

- **Frequent elections and campaigning-** Under the current system, politicians and political parties are always campaigning for elections. NITI Aayog analysis (2017) presents on an average 3 state legislative assembly elections conducted every 6 months. A system where politicians are continuously in campaign mode, taking their focus away from government and policy implementation, can result from the frequency of elections at different levels.

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Source: NITI Ayog analysis, 2017

- **Financial burden-** There are substantial financial costs associated with holding several elections. A significant amount of funding is set aside by political parties, electoral commissions, and the government for poll station organization, campaigning, and election security. The goal of consolidating elections is to lessen this expense.
- **Administrative challenges-** Administrative issues arise when many elections are managed and coordinated at the same time. During election seasons, government departments, security forces, and electoral commissions are overworked. By streamlining these administrative tasks, synchronization seeks to simplify logistics.
- **Increases responsibility:** Regular election cycles also improve accountability by keeping politicians' alert. Modi said to Zee News: "Our government is such that it is run by politicians, and elections are also fought by politicians, so their energy is divided, which hurts the nation. Take me for example; I do have to pay attention to elections. If they weren't there, I would be able to concentrate more."
- **Voter fatigue-** Voter fatigue could be exacerbated by the ongoing cycle of elections. If citizens are faced with the prospect of voting repeatedly, they can lose interest in their involvement in the democratic exercise. To boost voter turnout, synchronization aims to make the political process more convenient for voters<sup>4</sup>.

### Meaning of simultaneous elections

The idea of one nation, one election means any voter will have to vote for Lok Sabha, State legislative assembly and local body elections on a single day. It does not mean that elections in the whole country will take place on a single day because that is not possible and feasible in a huge country like India, which has around 94 crore voters as per the Election Commission of India. One nation, one election means that any voter of any region of the country will have to go once every 5 years to vote for the Lok Sabha, state legislative assembly and local body elections on the same day. It does not, however, imply that all polls must take place on the same day across the nation. Elections for the whole of India should be conducted in various phases. This basically means that elections for the Lok Sabha and State legislative Assemblies can be held in phases over a set period of time, with voters casting their votes for both on the very same day. In a nutshell, elections will happen once every 5 years; the rest of the time, neither administration nor voters will have to worry about elections, as happens in the present system. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has emphasized the need for a one voter list for both elections to streamline the process even more. One Nation, One Election's main goal is to lessen the number of polls conducted all across the nation by coordinating the dates of the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections in every State<sup>5</sup>.

### Advantages of One Nation One election

- **Decreased Expenses for Elections:** Frequent elections are a major contributing factor to political corruption. All election requires a huge quantity of money to be generated. Simultaneous elections can significantly lower political parties' election expenses. There would be no need to raise money twice. The pressure of

donations on people and corporate donors can be reduced by this. Political parties try to generate funds and donations constantly to fight elections because of the continuous cycle of elections one after another. It is estimated that the 2019 General election cost was around 60000 crores (it's not official). When we compared it to that of the 2014 general election, it was almost double.

Additionally, holding elections concurrently can lower the costs borne by the EC.

Seizure of black money during the election is increasing day by day. In 2019, Rs. 3377 crore was seized by EC, which is more than thrice compared to the 2014 general election. It can be said that frequent elections are a reason for driving corruption and black money generation<sup>6</sup>.

- **Better Governance:** Continuous elections keep engaging from the Prime Minister to MPs, MLAs, etc in election-related activity and campaigning. They could not concentrate on the governance of the country and state because winning the election is a priority for any political party. Paralysis of administration affects the growth and development of a country at various levels. Politicians focus on their electoral strategy for the better part of the year. It will assist the Center's senior leaders in abstaining from frequent campaigning at the expense of their ministerial duties.
- **Policy Decisions:** Model code of conduct acts as a hindrance in policy making while elections are going on. The model code of conduct comes into force when elections are announced by the Election Commission, and in that period, no new policy decisions are taken. Every year, there are around 4 months of model code of conduct in various parts of the country, as estimated by NITI Aayog. Because of this, Policy paralysis takes place at the national and state levels. At the time of the election, decisions regarding new policy are postponed, and current projects are not implemented because government personnel and the political elite are engaged with election-related work and neglect regular governance work. After just one election, there will be less time for the model code and more time for legislative discussion of matters about policy.
- **Same electoral rolls:** One electoral roll prepared by ECI be used for all elections. It will save time, money and energy of administration in duplicating the same things as it happens in the current system. Additionally, it will simplify things for the populace because, once they enlist, they will not worry about the removal of their names from the voters' list.
- **Security forces:** To guarantee that elections are held peacefully, various companies of paramilitary forces and state officers are deputed on duty. It requires extensive redeployment at great financial expense. Law enforcement personnel get involved with other duties as well. This system of elections can be used to limit such deployment<sup>8</sup>.
- **Enhance State finance:** Governments that hold regular elections adopt policies aimed at winning over voters each time around. Governments won't have to announce giveaways as frequently, even though this cannot be completely prohibited. Numerous state governments are in financial ruin as a result of frequent elections. They might have more stable finances if there were fewer elections.
- **Reduction in Horse Trading:** Elections held during certain periods may lessen the issue of elected officials engaging in horse trading, which persists despite the existence of anti-defection laws. It may be more difficult for them to establish alliances or transfer parties if elections are held at regular intervals<sup>9</sup>.
- **Improve the efficiency of government employees:** The electoral process involves more than one crore government workers, many of whom are teachers. They have to do various work related to elections now and then, which impacts their efficiency and productivity in their official duties. One nation, one election will aid in putting an end to this threat. They will have to engage only once in 5 years in election-related work; other times, they can do their official work as usual.
- **Diminishing vices:** The numerous elections that nearly always take place each year have led to the occurrence of casteism, communalism, corruption, and regionalism. Elections, most of the time, affect the social fabric of society because various identity issues surge during intense election campaigning. Religious riots, caste violence, and regionalism are at it's peak during the campaign period. One nation, one election theory may be useful in resolving these issues.
- **Beneficial for outside residents:** Many people in India have migrated from their place of voting, so most of the time they couldn't perform their right to vote because of time and the cost of moving. One nation, one

election can be a solution to those migrant people who want to exercise their voting rights. Those who live abroad will benefit from the chance to vote in all elections at once if they choose to cast ballots during an election<sup>10</sup>.

### Reasons for Criticism of this idea

- **Dilution of Regional Issues:** Regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity define India. Opponents worry that if elections are conducted simultaneously, local & regional issues may get less attention, homogenizing political discourse and maybe ignoring the particular issues that each state has. Opponents contend that if elections are held concurrently, voters will support the same party in the event of a “national wave” favoring that party, in that wave regional parties may lose relevance and be at a disadvantageous position; it has political motivations and could sway voters' decisions so they end up preferring national issues in regional election<sup>11</sup>.
- **Constitutional and federal structure-** The federal system of India gives states a great deal of autonomy. Opponents contend that forcing synchronized elections would violate states' rights to set their election schedules and threaten the federal structure of the nation<sup>12</sup>.
- **Voter's awareness and education:** High levels of public knowledge and comprehension are necessary for the implementation of synchronized elections. Opponents worry that voters won't be fully informed about the changes, which could cause confusion and possibly disenfranchise.
- **Institutional preparedness:** Strong institutional preparation is needed for the shift to synchronized elections, including revisions to electoral legislation, the administrative framework, and the Election Commission's capabilities. The integrity of the election system could be jeopardized if this procedure is rushed<sup>13</sup>.

### Challenges in implementation

- **Consensus of regional parties:** Creating a political consensus across all parties of countries on this issue is the biggest challenge because there is a perception that voters tend to choose the same party in both the state legislative assembly and the Lok Sabha when elections are conducted together. National issues and regional issues can be mixed in this system. Previous elections of 1952, 1957 & 1962 are examples of the same party winning in both elections. It will affect the political autonomy of the state. “There is clear empirical evidence that most Indian voters tend to choose the same party when elections are held simultaneously to both Centre and State, with the relationship diminishing as elections are held farther away.” Therefore, regional parties are apprehensive and suspicious about the concept of “One Nation, One Election”. These parties fear that they will lose power to more dominant national parties in the state assembly election. All parties meeting to discuss this idea proved that most of the regional parties are against this<sup>14</sup>.
- **Amendments to the constitution:** It will be required to amend the constitution of India as per the needs of One nation, One election. It is imperative on the part of the centre to agree with some states on reducing their assemblies while increasing the durations of assemblies of some states then it can only ensure simultaneous elections across India. To facilitate simultaneous elections, constitutional amendments will be required, the RPA 1951 needs to be amended, and the rules of State legislative Assemblies and Lok Sabha will have to be changed. Ratification by at least 50% of the states and a two-thirds majority in both chambers of Parliament would be necessary for this. Amendment in the constitution will be a very tough process because opinion of various parties is divided on this issue<sup>15</sup>.

### Suggestions

- The government, with the help of the Election Commission of India, should try to bring consensus among all parties while taking them in confidence that its intentions are in the national interest, not politically motivated. Various stakeholders should be engaged in discussion, consultation, and deliberation to accomplish this.
- As suggested by NITI Aayog's report, it can be done gradually with various phases. In the first phase, Lok Sabha election and state election could be held together, leaving aside local body election, this step can work as a confidence-building measure between the centre and various states. And in the next step local body

could also be held together. It will not be a good idea to push this electoral reform in one go because that can weaken the democratic spirit of our country.

- Purchasing the equipment and facilities needed to hold concurrent elections, including polling booths, voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) devices, electronic voting machines (EVMs), security guards, etc.
- Educating and generating awareness among the electorate on the advantages and difficulties of holding elections concurrently and making sure they can exercise their voting rights without difficulty or confusion.
- Developing a legislative structure to address scenarios like no-confidence resolutions, early assembly dissolutions, hung parliaments, and other potential outcomes during concurrent elections.

## Conclusion

The Election Commission of India had already recommended simultaneous elections in 1983. Justice B P Jeevan Reddy headed the law commission, in its 170th Report in May 1999, had stated: “We must go back to the situation where the elections to Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies are held at once”. In conclusion, the idea of "One Nation, One Election" is a complicated and multidimensional project that needs to be carefully thought through<sup>16</sup>. The advantages, which include lower election-related expenses, a stronger focus on governance, and expedited administrative procedures, are undeniable. But it is impossible to overlook the proposal's drawbacks and objections, which include constitutional issues, practical difficulties, and the possibility of weakening regional representation. A major obstacle to the implementation of synchronized elections is India's federal and constitutional framework, which gives states a great deal of autonomy. Any electoral reform must find a balance between maintaining national identity and fostering regional diversity. In addition, the logistical challenges of organizing elections in various political and geographic contexts present a challenging undertaking requiring careful preparation and funding. The representativeness of a synchronized voting system is called into question by the possible diluting effect of regional issues and the effects on coalition politics. Ensuring that the proposed reform does not unintentionally undermine the efficient representation of local and community interests is of utmost importance.

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