

“Constitutional and Legal Dimensions of One Nation, One Election: Challenges and Opportunities”

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Abstract

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election*, which seeks to introduce simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, has gained prominence as a major electoral reform in India. While the proposal is justified on grounds of administrative efficiency and governance stability, it raises significant constitutional concerns relating to democratic accountability, federalism, and the basic structure of the Constitution.

This study adopts a doctrinal and analytical approach to examine the constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, judicial precedents, and official reports governing electoral processes in India. The analysis highlights that although the Constitution does not expressly prohibit simultaneous elections, the existing legal framework does not support such reform without substantial constitutional and statutory amendments. Judicial jurisprudence underscores that electoral reforms must conform to constitutional principles and cannot prioritise administrative convenience over democratic and federal values.

The study concludes that *One Nation, One Election* is neither inherently unconstitutional nor unconditionally desirable. Its implementation requires carefully calibrated constitutional safeguards, political consensus, and institutional readiness to ensure that electoral efficiency is achieved without compromising India's democratic and federal framework.

Keywords: *One Nation, One Election; Constitutional Law; Electoral Reforms; Federalism; Democratic Governance; Election Law.*

1. Introduction

Elections form the cornerstone of India's constitutional democracy, ensuring the expression of popular sovereignty, political accountability, and representative governance. The Constitution of India envisages periodic elections to Parliament and State Legislatures, administered by an independent Election Commission. While this framework has sustained democratic governance across diverse contexts, the increasing frequency of elections has raised concerns regarding administrative efficiency, governance continuity, and public expenditure.

In this context, the proposal of *One Nation, One Election*, advocating simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, has gained renewed attention as a potential electoral reform. India followed a system of concurrent elections in the early years of the Republic, but subsequent premature dissolutions of legislatures led to the present staggered electoral cycle. Proponents of simultaneous elections argue that electoral synchronisation would reduce costs, minimise disruptions caused by repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, and enhance policy stability.

However, the proposal raises significant constitutional and legal concerns. Synchronising electoral cycles necessitates scrutiny of constitutional provisions governing legislative tenure, dissolution, emergency powers, and Union–State relations. Questions relating to democratic accountability, federal autonomy, political pluralism, and voter choice underscore the need for a careful constitutional evaluation rather than a purely administrative assessment.

Judicial interpretation, particularly through the basic structure doctrine, has played a central role in shaping India’s democratic and electoral jurisprudence. Accordingly, the present study examines the constitutional and legal dimensions of *One Nation, One Election*, analysing whether simultaneous elections can be implemented consistently with constitutional values, democratic principles, and the federal structure, while identifying possible legal safeguards to reconcile electoral efficiency with constitutional governance.

2. Statement of the Legal Problem

Despite India’s constitutional commitment to democratic governance and periodic elections, the existing staggered electoral system has raised concerns relating to administrative efficiency, governance continuity, and public expenditure. The proposal of *One Nation, One Election* seeks to address these concerns by synchronising elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. However, such synchronisation presents unresolved constitutional and legal challenges.

The Constitution prescribes fixed legislative tenures while permitting premature dissolution under specified circumstances. Implementing simultaneous elections would therefore require constitutional and statutory modifications affecting legislative tenure, dissolution, and emergency powers, creating tension with core constitutional principles of democracy, federalism, and political accountability.

Further, the absence of an explicit legal framework for simultaneous elections generates uncertainty in exceptional situations such as hung legislatures or loss of majority. Measures such as extension or curtailment of legislative terms raise concerns regarding democratic legitimacy and compliance with the basic structure doctrine.

Accordingly, the central legal problem examined in this study is whether *One Nation, One Election* can be implemented within the existing constitutional framework without undermining democratic accountability, federal autonomy, and the basic structure of the Constitution, and whether adequate legal safeguards exist to reconcile electoral efficiency with constitutional governance.

3. Review of Literature

Indian scholarly discourse on *One Nation, One Election* has primarily focused on its constitutional feasibility, democratic implications, and impact on federal governance. Early constitutional analysis can be traced to reports of the Law Commission of India, which examined the historical practice of simultaneous elections and acknowledged that the original constitutional scheme did not oppose concurrent electoral cycles.¹ The Law Commission, while recognising administrative and financial advantages, cautioned that extensive constitutional amendments would be necessary to operationalise the proposal without compromising democratic stability.²

Several Indian legal scholars have critically analysed the proposal through the lens of constitutional law and the basic structure doctrine. Scholars argue that provisions relating to the tenure and dissolution of legislatures under Articles 83 and 172 are integral to representative democracy and cannot be altered mechanically in pursuit of electoral uniformity.³ Judicially evolved principles of democratic accountability and federal balance are frequently cited as constitutional constraints on any reform that seeks to curtail or extend legislative terms for administrative convenience.⁴

Political science and governance-oriented studies in Indian journals have examined the impact of frequent elections on governance efficiency and policy continuity. These studies suggest that repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct adversely affects development initiatives

¹ Law Comm'n of India, *170th Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws* (1999).

² Law Comm'n of India, *255th Report on Electoral Reforms* (2015).

³ Subhash C. Kashyap, *Electoral Reforms and the Indian Constitution*, 45 J. INDIAN L. INST. 23 (2003).

⁴ S.P. Sathe, *Judicial Activism and Electoral Democracy in India*, 4 SCC J. 1 (2001).

and administrative decision-making, thereby strengthening the case for electoral synchronisation.⁵ However, such works also caution that governance efficiency should not be prioritised at the cost of democratic responsiveness and electoral choice.⁶

From a federal perspective, Indian scholars have raised concerns regarding the implications of simultaneous elections on State autonomy and regional political expression. Studies published in Indian constitutional and public administration journals highlight the risk of national issues overshadowing State-specific concerns, potentially weakening the federal character of Indian democracy.⁷ These concerns are reinforced by analyses that emphasise India's asymmetric political diversity and the need to preserve distinct electoral mandates at different levels of government.⁸

Institutional perspectives provided by the Election Commission of India and parliamentary committees form an important part of the literature. Official reports acknowledge the logistical feasibility of simultaneous elections but underscore the need for legal clarity, political consensus, and constitutional safeguards.⁹ These documents adopt a pragmatic approach, balancing administrative considerations with constitutional limitations.

Despite the growing body of Indian literature on *One Nation, One Election*, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship focuses either on administrative efficiency or political desirability, with comparatively limited doctrinal engagement on judicial review, enforceability, and long-term constitutional implications. There is also a lack of integrated legal analysis examining how constitutional amendments, statutory reforms, and judicial interpretation must collectively operate to ensure that simultaneous elections remain consistent with democratic and federal principles. The present study seeks to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive constitutional and legal evaluation of the proposal within the Indian framework.

⁵ Election Comm'n of India, *Background Paper on Simultaneous Elections* (2018).

⁶ Yogendra Yadav, *Democracy and Electoral Politics in India*, 39 ECON. & POL. WKLY. 567 (2004).

⁷ M.P. Singh, *Federalism and Electoral Politics in India*, 10 NAT'L L. SCH. INDIA REV. 45 (1998).

⁸ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy*, 41 ECON. & POL. WKLY. 567 (2006).

⁹ Parliamentary Standing Comm. on Personnel, Pub. Grievances, Law & Justice, *79th Report on Feasibility of Simultaneous Elections* (2015).

8. Objectives of the Study

The present study is undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the constitutional framework governing elections in India and assess the legal feasibility of implementing the *One Nation, One Election* proposal within the existing constitutional structure.
2. To analyse the constitutional provisions relating to the tenure and dissolution of Parliament and State Legislatures in the context of electoral synchronisation.
3. To evaluate the implications of simultaneous elections on democratic accountability, representative governance, and electoral fairness.
4. To assess the impact of the *One Nation, One Election* proposal on the federal structure of the Constitution and the autonomy of State Legislatures.
5. To examine the role of judicial interpretation and constitutional doctrines, particularly the basic structure doctrine, in determining the permissibility of large-scale electoral reforms.
6. To identify the legal, institutional, and procedural challenges associated with the implementation of simultaneous elections in India.
7. To suggest constitutional, statutory, and policy-oriented measures that may enable the adoption of *One Nation, One Election* while preserving democratic values and federal balance.

9. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Questions

1. Whether the existing constitutional framework permits the implementation of *One Nation, One Election* without violating the basic structure of the Constitution of India?
2. What constitutional amendments and statutory changes are required to synchronise the electoral cycles of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies?
3. How does the *One Nation, One Election* proposal impact the principles of democratic accountability, representative governance, and electoral fairness?
4. To what extent does the proposal affect the federal structure of the Constitution and the autonomy of State Legislatures?

5. What role does judicial interpretation play in determining the constitutional validity and limits of simultaneous elections in India?
6. Whether governance efficiency and administrative convenience can be constitutionally justified grounds for large-scale electoral reform?

Indicative Hypotheses

1. The implementation of *One Nation, One Election* requires substantial constitutional amendments and must conform to the basic structure doctrine to be legally sustainable.
2. While simultaneous elections may enhance administrative efficiency, their constitutional validity depends on adequate safeguards to preserve democratic accountability and federal autonomy.

10. Research Methodology

The study adopts a doctrinal and analytical methodology to examine the constitutional and legal dimensions of the *One Nation, One Election* proposal. It analyses constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, judicial decisions, and official reports governing electoral processes in India to identify relevant legal principles and constitutional limitations.

The doctrinal approach is used to interpret provisions relating to legislative tenure, dissolution, electoral administration, and democratic governance, while the analytical approach evaluates the implications of simultaneous elections on democracy, federalism, and governance efficiency. The research relies exclusively on Open Access primary and secondary sources, including constitutional texts, case law, Indian legal journals, and institutional reports.

The study is confined to the Indian legal system and focuses on contemporary reform debates, with reference to earlier constitutional and judicial developments to ensure doctrinal continuity.

11. Statutory Framework and Judicial Analysis

The *One Nation, One Election* proposal must be assessed within the constitutional and statutory framework governing elections in India. Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution prescribe fixed tenures for legislatures, while Articles 85 and 174 permit dissolution under specific conditions, reflecting a balance between democratic stability and accountability. The Representation of the People Act, 1951 provides detailed electoral procedures but does not envisage synchronised electoral cycles, thereby necessitating statutory amendments alongside constitutional changes.

Judicial interpretation has consistently recognised free and fair elections as a basic feature of the Constitution, emphasising voter choice, political pluralism, and democratic accountability. The Supreme Court has cautioned against reforms that alter electoral processes solely for administrative convenience. Jurisprudence on legislative tenure, particularly in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, underscores the importance of federalism and democratic legitimacy, subjecting any curtailment or extension of legislative terms to strict constitutional scrutiny.

While the Constitution does not expressly prohibit simultaneous elections, judicial precedents impose substantive constraints grounded in the basic structure doctrine. Accordingly, any move towards One Nation, One Election must be supported by carefully calibrated constitutional and statutory amendments, robust safeguards, and political consensus, ensuring that democratic integrity and federal autonomy are preserved.

12. Critical Analysis and Discussion

The proposal of *One Nation, One Election* represents a significant departure from India's prevailing electoral practice and therefore warrants careful constitutional scrutiny. While the rationale for simultaneous elections is often grounded in administrative efficiency, cost reduction, and governance stability, these considerations must be evaluated against the constitutional values of democracy, federalism, and political accountability that form the bedrock of India's constitutional order.

From a constitutional perspective, the most critical concern relates to the tenure and dissolution of legislatures. The Constitution envisages fixed terms for elected bodies, subject to dissolution based on political contingencies and democratic will. Any attempt to artificially extend or curtail legislative terms to achieve electoral synchronisation risks undermining the representative mandate of the electorate. Such measures may conflict with the principle that governments derive legitimacy from continuous democratic consent rather than administrative convenience. Consequently, the constitutional permissibility of simultaneous elections depends not merely on formal amendments, but on whether such changes preserve the democratic substance of periodic electoral accountability.

The proposal also raises substantial federal concerns. India's federal structure is characterised by political, social, and cultural diversity, reflected in distinct electoral mandates at the Union and State levels. Simultaneous elections may result in the nationalisation of electoral discourse, where national issues overshadow State-specific concerns, thereby diluting regional representation and State autonomy. This could weaken the federal balance by indirectly

centralising political narratives and electoral outcomes. While proponents argue that cooperative federalism can accommodate such reforms, the absence of adequate safeguards may transform cooperative arrangements into coercive uniformity.

Democratic accountability constitutes another critical dimension of the analysis. Frequent elections, although administratively demanding, provide voters with regular opportunities to evaluate governmental performance. The reduction of electoral frequency may weaken mechanisms of political accountability, particularly in States where governments face mid-term instability or loss of public confidence. While alternatives such as constructive votes of no confidence or fixed-term legislatures have been proposed, their compatibility with India's parliamentary system and political culture remains uncertain.

At the same time, the arguments in favour of *One Nation, One Election* cannot be dismissed outright. The repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct has demonstrably affected governance continuity and delayed policy implementation. The financial burden associated with frequent elections, both on the public exchequer and political actors, raises legitimate concerns regarding the sustainability of the current electoral model. From this perspective, electoral reform aimed at rationalising election schedules may contribute to administrative efficiency and long-term policy planning.

However, governance efficiency alone cannot serve as a sufficient constitutional justification for restructuring electoral democracy. The Constitution prioritises democratic legitimacy over administrative expediency. Any reform must therefore strike a careful balance between efficiency and accountability, ensuring that electoral synchronisation does not erode voter choice, political pluralism, or institutional checks and balances.

Institutionally, the feasibility of simultaneous elections also depends on political consensus and constitutional trust. Large-scale electoral reforms imposed without broad democratic agreement risk constitutional instability and increased judicial intervention. The absence of a clear statutory framework addressing exceptional situations—such as hung legislatures, coalition breakdowns, or premature dissolutions—further complicates the proposal and exposes it to constitutional challenges.

In essence, the *One Nation, One Election* proposal presents both opportunities and risks. While it offers potential benefits in terms of governance efficiency and electoral management, it simultaneously raises profound constitutional, federal, and democratic concerns. The success of such a reform depends not on its conceptual appeal, but on the robustness of the legal

framework, the presence of adequate constitutional safeguards, and the preservation of the core democratic values enshrined in the Constitution of India.

13. Findings

The study finds that *One Nation, One Election* is not per se unconstitutional; however, its implementation necessitates substantial constitutional and statutory amendments. Existing provisions relating to legislative tenure and dissolution do not permit electoral synchronisation, and any reform must conform to the basic structure doctrine, particularly democratic and federal principles.

Judicial jurisprudence consistently underscores free and fair elections, democratic accountability, and representative legitimacy as core constitutional values. These principles limit reforms that alter electoral cycles primarily for administrative efficiency, which alone cannot justify departures from established democratic processes.

The findings further indicate that while simultaneous elections may enhance administrative coordination and reduce electoral disruptions, they pose potential risks to federalism by marginalising State-specific political issues. Without adequate safeguards, such reforms may weaken State autonomy and the federal balance.

Additionally, although frequent elections impose financial and governance burdens, electoral reforms must not dilute political accountability or voter choice. Ultimately, the feasibility of *One Nation, One Election* depends on broad political consensus, institutional readiness, and a coherent legal framework addressing exceptional situations, failing which the proposal risks constitutional invalidity and democratic erosion.

14. Conclusion

The study concludes that the proposal of *One Nation, One Election* represents a significant constitutional reform with far-reaching implications for India's democratic and federal structure. While the objective of synchronising elections seeks to address concerns relating to governance efficiency, administrative continuity, and electoral expenditure, such considerations must remain subordinate to the constitutional values of democracy, federalism, and representative accountability.

The analysis demonstrates that the existing constitutional framework does not presently facilitate simultaneous elections without substantial amendments to provisions governing the tenure and dissolution of legislatures. Any such amendments must conform to the basic

structure doctrine and preserve the democratic legitimacy of elected governments. Judicial jurisprudence underscores that periodic elections are not merely procedural mechanisms but integral to the constitutional guarantee of democratic governance.

The study further highlights that although simultaneous elections may offer administrative advantages, they also pose risks to federal autonomy and political pluralism. The potential centralisation of electoral discourse and dilution of State-specific mandates necessitate the incorporation of robust constitutional safeguards to maintain the federal balance. Governance efficiency, though desirable, cannot be pursued at the expense of voter choice and political accountability.

In conclusion, *One Nation, One Election* is neither constitutionally impermissible nor automatically desirable. Its feasibility depends on the development of a carefully calibrated legal framework, broad political consensus, and institutional safeguards that reconcile electoral reform with the foundational commitments of the Constitution. Any move towards simultaneous elections must therefore be guided by constitutional prudence, democratic legitimacy, and respect for India's pluralistic federal order.

15. Suggestions / Recommendations

1. Targeted Constitutional Amendments

Any implementation of *One Nation, One Election* should be supported by limited constitutional amendments that clearly define conditions for electoral synchronisation while complying with the basic structure doctrine and democratic accountability.

2. Statutory Mechanism for Contingencies

A clear statutory framework should address exceptional situations such as hung legislatures and premature dissolutions to prevent democratic uncertainty or executive overreach.

3. Protection of Federal Autonomy

Legal safeguards must be incorporated to preserve State autonomy and State-specific democratic mandates through a cooperative federal approach.

4. Strengthening the Election Commission

The Election Commission of India should be provided with adequate resources and authority to effectively manage simultaneous elections without compromising electoral integrity.

5. Phased and Consultative Approach

A gradual, consultative implementation involving political parties, constitutional experts, and civil society should be adopted to ensure legitimacy and preparedness.

6. Judicial Review and Public Deliberation

All reforms should remain subject to judicial review and be preceded by meaningful parliamentary debate and public engagement to reinforce transparency and democratic acceptance.

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