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## Federal implications of one nation one election model in India

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### Abstract

India's governance structure is democratic in nature, and elections are very significant in ensuring the effective functioning and stability of the existing structure. Based on federal principles, the union and state governments exist independently in most of the spheres in India. "The Election Commission of India (ECI)", created in 1950, is responsible for conducting elections for the Lok Sabha (LS) and state assemblies. The elections don't take place for LS and state assemblies at the same time, thus requiring both extensive human and monetary resources. Since the 1980s, the issue of spending too much resources on conducting elections has surfaced many times, and the idea of conducting simultaneous elections for both LS and state assemblies has been discussed. The idea is often called "One Nation, One Election" and has been propagated to reduce expenditure on the overall election process. The idea comes with several implications, including changes in party strategies, voting behaviour, centre-state relations, and many more. Currently, South Africa, Belgium, Sweden, Indonesia and the Philippines follow the "One Nation, One Election" model. The present paper focuses on the federal implications of the "One Nation, One Election" model if it is adopted in India. While the paper focuses on the Indian perspective, it also analyses the model's functioning in other nations and how it has affected multilevel governance there. The paper is analytical in nature, using comparative analysis and case study methods. It is based on a mixed-method approach using qualitative and quantitative research methods. The paper is based on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, government reports, case studies, etc.

**Keywords:** Elections, Election Commission, One Nation One Election, multilevel governance

### Introduction

The ECI is assigned the task of conducting elections for union and state governments by the Constitution. A large pool of resources, both human and monetary, is being spent on the election process. India is home to nearly 1.4 billion people living in 28 states and 8 union territories, making it challenging for the ECI to smoothly conduct the elections. The elections for the LS and state assemblies don't take place at the same time, and the commission has to conduct elections in some part or the other at very frequent intervals. Conducting elections on a frequent basis is not only a cumbersome process but also creates obstacles to effective governance and leads to delays in policy implementation. Before conducting elections, the commission implements the code of conduct, during which no new policy can be introduced in that particular state. It was in the 1980s when the issues related to the election process in India were discussed, and various alternatives were recommended by several committees and commissions. One of the alternatives that gained attention was conducting simultaneous elections for LS and state assemblies, which is often called the "One Nation, One Election" model. The model is suggested as it would lead to reducing the time and resources used in conducting elections and it is also argued that the model would make it easier for ECI to conduct elections. Worldwide, several nations follow the simultaneous election model- South Africa, Belgium, Sweden, Indonesia, and the Philippines. However, India differs from these nations in terms of population and the scale at which elections are conducted. There are several pros and cons related to the above-discussed model. India follows a federal model of governance where the union and state governments, in most of spheres, have independent authority. The change in the election process is bound to affect the federal principles in India and will also impact the centre-state dynamics.

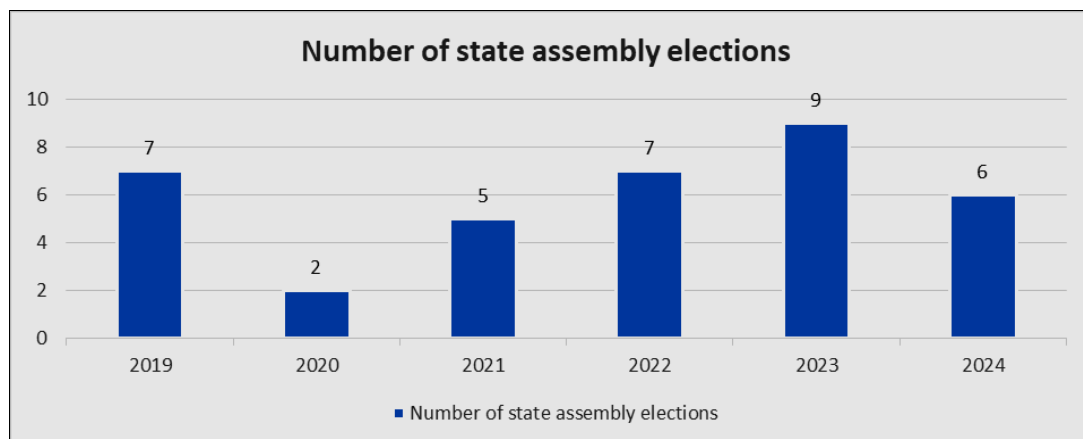
If the “One Nation, One Election” model is adopted, it will change the way political parties formulate their election strategies. The model is seen as a threat to the significance of regional parties and the overdominance of national parties in elections.

To understand the implications, mainly federal, of the “One Nation, One Election” model, it is important to understand the feasibility and effectiveness of the model in nations where it is followed. The paper, while focusing on the federal implications of the “One Nation, One Election” model in India, also provides a description of nations following a similar model of elections. The paper is divided into five sections- the first section provides a conceptual understanding of the “One Nation, One Election” model. The second section focuses on the evolution of the idea of simultaneous elections in India. The third section deals with the position of various political parties with regard to simultaneous elections. The fourth section provides a description of nations following a similar model and the effectiveness of this model in those countries. The fifth section sheds light on the federal implications of the “One Nation, One Election” model in India and what changes it is expected to bring in the federal dynamics, followed by the conclusion. The paper is based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, where the focus is on building arguments based on secondary data derived from government reports and scholarly articles.

### One Nation, One Election-

In simple terms, the “One Nation, One Election” model means conducting elections for the national and state

assemblies at the same time (Sandeep, 2022) [22]. In India, elections take place at three levels, namely- national, state, and local bodies, but the model covers the former two levels. For conducting elections at the local level (municipalities and panchayats), the mechanism is different, and a separate body, the State Election Commission, exists. The idea of simultaneous election is not new in Indian history; after independence, when the first elections were conducted in 1951-52, LS and state assemblies took place at the same time. The process continued in the following elections of 1957, 1962, and 1967; it was only after 1967 that simultaneous elections didn't take place due to the premature dissolution of certain state assemblies (Bairagi, 2022) [1]. Since then, the ECI has been conducting elections at frequent intervals, either for the LS or state assemblies. The election process is very long and cumbersome, leading to frequent hindrances in governance and policy implementation. Since independence, the idea of conducting simultaneous elections has surfaced several times but has never been implemented. The issue became a topic of debate in recent times as the current cabinet has given its nod to the idea of conducting simultaneous elections based on the report of the “High Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections” headed by former president of India Ram Nath Kovind. The committee was constituted in 2023 to assess the feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections in India (PIB, 2024) [20]. The interest in holding simultaneous elections can be understood from Figure 1, which shows the number of state assembly elections conducted by the election commission from 2019 to 2024.



Source: Election Commission of India

Fig 1: Number of State Assembly Elections conducted every year (2019-2024)

It can be seen in Figure 1 that in the past five years, the election commission has been conducting assembly elections very frequently, which requires a large pool of resources and manpower. The above-mentioned issues make the idea of “One Nation, One Election” a plausible alternative to the current election system in India.

### The Evolution of the idea of “One Nation, One Election” in India

The ECI, in 1983, argued in favour of conducting simultaneous elections in the country for LS and state assemblies in its First Annual Report. Highlighting the problems related to conducting frequent elections, the report stated-

*“During elections, whether for the Lok Sabha or the Assemblies, the entire administrative set up throughout the country slows down considerably, and all other normal functions and activities of the Government, including developmental work, are pushed to the background. These create a lot of hardships and sufferings to the common man. The situation continues for about 2 months during the conduct of every General election.”*

Apart from the major issue of slow-down of administration, the report also shed light on issues like frequent requirement of personnel for conducting elections, extensive financial resources, and many more. Later on, the Law Commission of India, 1999, in its 170<sup>th</sup> report, strongly argued in favour of conducting simultaneous elections. The report stated-

*“This cycle of elections every year, and in the out of season, should be put an end to. We must go back to the situation where the elections to Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies are held at once. It is true that we cannot conceive or provide for all the situations and eventualities that may arise whether on account of the use of article 356 (which of course, has come down substantially after the decision of Supreme Court in S.R. Bommai v. Union of India) or for other reasons, yet the holding of a separate election to a Legislative Assembly should be an exception and not the rule. The rule ought to be one election once in five years for Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies.”*

The report also suggested ways in which the idea of simultaneous election can be implemented. First of all, the commission accepted that the shift from the current election process cannot be implemented overnight; rather, it should be implemented in stages. It was also argued that the required constitutional amendment should be introduced to make the shift easy and feasible. The commission also argued that implementing the new model would require support from political parties. The “National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution”, in its report, shed some light on the idea of simultaneous elections. Along with several other measures to reduce the cost of conducting elections, the commission recommended conducting simultaneous elections to the extent possible (NCRCW Report, 2002) <sup>[18]</sup>. The BJP-led NDA government stressed the idea of simultaneous elections after coming into power in 2014. The issue was even discussed in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha. The “Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice” in its 79<sup>th</sup> report titled “Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies” in 2015, laid emphasis on various aspects related to conducting the simultaneous election. While preparing its report, the committee also considered the opinions of various political parties. While several parties argued in favour of conducting simultaneous elections, many parties rejected the idea altogether by arguing that it doesn’t fit into India’s political structure. After analysing all aspects, the committee was of the opinion that conducting simultaneous elections for LS and State Assemblies is not possible in the near future due to various legal and constitutional constraints. But an alternative can be developed where the election would happen in two phases; for some state assemblies, elections can be conducted with the LS elections and for the remaining state assemblies, state elections can be conducted at the midterm of LS. The Committee showed positive interest in the idea of simultaneous elections but also recognized the legal and constitutional constraints. Debroy and Desai (2017) <sup>[4]</sup>, in the NITI AAYOG’s working paper titled “Analysis of Simultaneous Election: The What, Why and How”, discussed the multifaceted dimensions of conducting simultaneous elections in India. The paper sheds light on the historical background of simultaneous elections, the possible criticism of the idea and the most effective way to implement the idea. The paper, in line with the above-mentioned Parliamentary Standing Committee report, vowed in favour of conducting elections in two phases rather than complete synchronization of LS and State Assembly elections. The paper also recognized the cost-effectiveness of conducting simultaneous elections. The

Law Commission, in its Draft Report in 2018 titled “Simultaneous Elections”, talked about several related provisions with the idea of simultaneous elections- as the financial implications, logistic issues, existing provisions, international perspectives and the issues in implementing the simultaneous election model. The commission argued in favour of conducting simultaneous elections but in a phased manner. The commission also recommends certain constitutional amendments that are mandatory to achieve the desired result, and in case of such amendments, the parliament may seek ratification from a minimum of half of the states. The commission also recommended the idea of a “constructive vote of no-confidence” to ensure the stability of governments (Law Commission Draft Report, 2018) <sup>[17]</sup>. In recent years, the issue of conducting simultaneous elections has gained prominence; a “High-Level Committee” under the leadership of the former President of India, Mr. Ram Nath Kovind, was constituted to give its recommendations on the idea of simultaneous elections. The committee also favoured simultaneous elections in a phased manner. The committee argued in favour of synchronization of LS and state assembly elections and later on the elections for Municipalities and Panchayats should be synchronized with the former. The committee argued that the loss of simultaneous elections since 1967 had baneful consequences for the society, polity and economy (High Level Committee Report, 2024). The union cabinet, on 18th September 2024, accepted the recommendation of the High-Level Committee to conduct simultaneous elections, which has made it an issue of debate among political parties and the general public.

### **Political Parties and their views on Simultaneous Elections**

All the above-mentioned commissions and committees have recognized the significant role of political parties in the successful and effective implementation of the simultaneous election model. Various reports have recommended that the government, while implementing the new model, should seek cooperation from national and regional political parties. The issue of simultaneous elections has received mixed views from the political parties. The High-Level committee constituted under Ramnath Kovind, while framing its report, asked for the opinion of 62 political parties about the idea of conducting simultaneous elections. Out of these 62 parties, 32 opined in favour of the initiative, while 15 parties strongly opposed the idea, and the remaining 15 parties didn’t submit their opinion. The parties which welcomed the idea positively were either the coalition partners of the BJP or had friendly behaviour towards the party (Verma *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[26]</sup>. The parties which supported the idea did it with the goals of bringing cost-effectiveness and better governance. The parties opposing the idea put forward various arguments to prove their claims. For instance, Congress and Trinamool Congress opposed saying that it goes against the doctrine of basic structure and the federal principles of the Indian Constitution. The Indian National Congress has condemned the idea of simultaneous elections as impractical and a strategy of the Bhartiya Janata Party to divert attention from important issues. Samajwadi party argued that the idea of conducting simultaneous elections makes the situation unfavourable for the state and regional parties. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) condemned the idea as



anti-democratic and a threat to the basic foundation of parliamentary government (Deccan Herald, 2024) [5]. Figure 2 shows the response from various political parties to the idea of simultaneous elections.

Serial No.	Political Party	Response
1.	Bhartiya Janata Party	Favour
2.	Aam Aadmi Party	Against
3.	Indian National Congress	Against
4.	National People’s Party	Favour
5.	Bahujan Samaj Party	Against
6.	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	Against
7.	All India Trinamool Congress	Against
8.	All India United Democratic Front	Against
9.	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	Favour
10.	All Jharkhand Student Union	Favour
11.	Apna Dal (Soney Lal)	Favour
12.	All India Majilis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen	Against
13.	ASOM Gana Parishad	Favour
14.	Biju Janata Dal	Favour
15.	Communist Party of India	Against
16.	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	Against
17.	Janata Dal (United)	Favour
18.	Lok Jan Shakti Party (R)	Favour
19.	Mizo National Front	Favour
20.	Naga People’s Front	Against
21.	Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party	Favour
22.	Samajwadi Party	Against
23.	Shiv Sena	Favour
24.	Sikkim Krantikari Morcha	Favour
25.	Shiromani Akali Dal	Favour
26.	United People’s Party Liberal	Favour
27.	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	Against
28.	Pattali Makkal Katchi	Favour
29.	Republican Party of India (Athawale)	Favour
30.	Tamil Mannila Congress (M)	Favour
31.	Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi	Against
32.	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation	Against
33.	Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal	Favour
34.	Social Democratic Party of India	Against
35.	United Kishan Vikas Party	Favour
36.	Bharatiya Samaj Party	Favour
37.	Gorakha National Liberal Front	Favour
38.	Hindustani Aavam Morcha	Favour
39.	Indian Makkal Kalvi Munnetra Kazhagam	Favour
40.	Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura	Favour
41.	Jan Surajay Shakti	Favour
42.	Rashtriya Lok Jan Shakti Party	Favour
43.	Nishad Party	Favour
44.	Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party	Favour
45.	Puthia Nidhi Katchi	Favour
46.	Rashtrawadi Congress Party (Ajit Pawar)	Favour
47.	Democratic Progressive Azad Party	Favour

Source: High-Level Committee Report 2024

Fig 2: Response From Political Parties to the Idea of Simultaneous Elections

It can be seen that the idea of simultaneous elections has attracted both negative and positive views from the political parties. One of the major issues with the idea highlighted by political parties lies in its perceived impact on the federal structure and the existence of regional parties. It is important to deliberate on these issues before taking the idea further. Before submitting its report, the High-Level

Committee took into consideration the functioning of the model of simultaneous elections in different nations and political structures to assess the feasibility of the model.

**Simultaneous Elections: A Comparative Analysis**

Simultaneous elections in one form or the other exist in several nations. The study of the existing structures will help in assessing the feasibility of the prescribed model in India. These are-

- 1. South Africa:** In South Africa, elections for the national and provincial governments are conducted together every five years. South Africa is a constitutional democracy where the president is the head of the government. It follows a three-tier structure, with the national government at the apex, the provincial government in the middle and the local government at the bottom. The elections for the national and provincial government, since 1994, have been conducted through proportional representation based on the party list system (South Africa Yearbook 2022-23) [24].
- 2. Sweden:** Sweden follows a parliamentary government model along with a constitutional monarchy, where elections take place every four years. The elections take place in September every four years, and the citizens vote for the national government along with the county and municipal council elections (Chaudhary, 2018) [3]. Elections in Sweden are conducted through the method of proportional representation, where parties are given seats based on their vote share. However, Sweden is essentially a unitary country where the regions do not hold significant authority (Hegewald *et al.*, 2018) [10].
- 3. Belgium:** In Belgium, elections for the national and regional governments take place simultaneously, along with the elections for the European Parliament (Batchik, 2024) [2]. The elections in Belgium are conducted based on the proportional representation method, which was adopted as early as 1899 (Pilet, n.d). Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy where the King is the head of the state, and the Prime Minister is the head of the government. Belgium is divided into three regions: the Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, and Brussels. The regional governments enjoy considerable and significant authority in their defined geographical area (Istaz, 2000) [13].
- 4. Indonesia:** Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world, and it is the largest democratic country to hold simultaneous elections (Simandjuntak, 2023) [29]. In Indonesia, the elections for the selection of president, vice president, and national and regional legislative bodies take place on the same day. Indonesia adopted the method of simultaneous elections in 2019, and since then, two times simultaneous elections have been conducted successfully, the latest being in April 2024. The method of simultaneous election was adopted in 2019 based on the decision of the Constitutional Court in 2013, which aimed at reducing the state’s expenditure on elections and preventing abuse of power and politics involving money (Rosyidi *et al.*, 2019) [28]. Elections in Indonesia are conducted through an open proportional representation system (Krisnantari & Ramadhani, 2023) [27].
- 5. Philippines:** The journey of simultaneous elections in

the Philippines began in 1995. An act was passed in 1992 that paved the way for the synchronization of all elections, beginning in 1995. As per the act, the election for the post of president, vice president, twenty senators, and elective members of the House of Representatives is to be held together. In the second phase, elections will be held for the provincial, city, and municipal elective officials. The Philippines follows the presidential form of government.

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that the nations that hold simultaneous elections use proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post system that exists in India. The scale at which elections are conducted in these nations is very different from India because of its geographical area. The only nation which comes closer to resembling India is South Africa, but unlike India, the President is the head of the government in South Africa. So, if the idea of simultaneous elections is implemented in India, it will require several changes not only in the constitution but also in the electoral process.

### **Federal Implications of “One Nation, One Election” in India**

The governance structure in India is based on federalism amid the vast diversity in terms of geography, culture, language and religion (Huma, 2015) <sup>[12]</sup>. Though the Indian Constitution doesn't promote complete separation between the centre and state, the state government still enjoys considerable autonomy and authority. In the case of the elections, the Parliament has the authority, as per Article 327 read in conjunction with Entry 72 in the Union List, to pass laws related to elections of the two houses of parliament and state legislature. However, in the absence of such legislation from Parliament, the state government can enact, as per Article 328, read in conjunction with Entry 37 in the state list, laws related to the elections of their respective assemblies (Kanodia, 2024) <sup>[14]</sup>. If the model of simultaneous election is adopted, the state governments will lose their power to enact laws regarding the elections of their respective assemblies. In the present structure, the Election Commission frequently conducts assembly elections in one state or another, which makes it difficult to materialize the idea of simultaneous elections even if it happens in a phased manner. In order to implement the model, the terms of certain state assemblies need to be curtailed or increased by a certain period. The whole idea of curtailing and extending the tenure goes against the federal idea enshrined in the Constitution. Articles 83 (2) and 172 (1) of the Indian Constitution state that the Parliament and the legislative assemblies would stay in power for five years from the day of its first meeting. The parliament and assemblies can be dissolved earlier only through the established procedure in the constitution, and the parliament can extend the duration of LS and legislative assemblies through law only in case of emergency (Desai, 2020) <sup>[6]</sup>. Any attempt on the part of the central government to curtail the tenure of assemblies to actualize the idea of simultaneous elections would be seen as a misuse of power and undermining the state government's proper functioning. The federal structure in India is designed in such a way that the general elections revolve around issues of national importance, while the assembly elections focus more on regional issues embracing the diversity of India. A major

issue with simultaneous elections raised by the critics is the suppression and shadowing of regional issues by national issues. If the general and assembly elections coincide, national issues will take centre stage (George, 2023) <sup>[8]</sup>. Currently, regional issues like local governance, leadership, and development are of utmost priority in the assembly elections (TOI, 2023) <sup>[25]</sup>, but there is a perceived threat of sidelining regional issues with the idea of simultaneous elections. In line with the threat to the significance of regional issues, the role and significance of regional political parties in simultaneous elections is still unclear. Regional Political Parties have played an important role in maintaining federal cohesion in India since the onset of the coalition era in 1989 (Goyal, 2024) <sup>[9]</sup>. The idea of simultaneous elections comes with the threat of dominance of national parties. Simultaneous elections are advantageous for the national parties as there are chances that they will dominate both national and state politics. Though some influential regional parties may survive, most of the smaller regional parties would disappear in the wave of simultaneous elections (Kumar, 2021) <sup>[15]</sup>. Highlighting the concern of the regional political parties, Singh (2022) <sup>[23]</sup> wrote-

*“Considering that national political parties will be in a dominating position in case of simultaneous elections, the regional parties will either be less successful or will be compelled to join hands with their national counterparts. Whatever be the case, it would have a negative impact on regional aspirations and demands as it is the regional political parties that primarily raise them at different democratic forums.”*

The issue of the disadvantageous position of regional political parties and the subsequent effect on the federal structure by the adoption of simultaneous elections is a cause of concern and is still unanswered. It has been argued that the idea of simultaneous election doesn't get along with the Indian federal structure. If implemented, it will undermine the federal dynamics and put the regional issues and political parties on the periphery. The idea is heavily in favour of the national government, raising concerns about over-centralization, which till now has been balanced by the competitive party system in India.

### **Conclusion**

The cabinet's approval of the idea of “One Nation, One Election” based on the Ram Nath Kovind-led committee has attracted diverse opinions from experts and political parties regarding the feasibility of the idea within the Indian democratic structure. The idea has been advocated to reduce the frequency of elections in the country, which requires a large pool of human and material resources. The idea is supposed to improve governance and policy implementation, which often get hampered because of the code of conduct applicable during the election period. On the contrary, the idea of simultaneous elections has been heavily criticised by opposition parties for being anti-democratic, against the Indian constitution and the federal dynamics of India. The paper argues that while there are several benefits of conducting simultaneous elections, there is also a perceived threat to some of the core foundations of the federal structure in India. Simultaneous elections will lead to over-shadowing of regional issues and political parties by national issues and political parties. Indian federalism aims to protect regional diversity and aspirations,

but the whole idea of simultaneous elections runs in contradiction to this goal. Regional political parties play an important role in bringing regional aspirations, needs, and demands to the forefront, and if their role is reduced, then regional aspirations will take the backseat. The idea comes with both positives and negatives, and any further step in the direction of implementing the new model should take care of the basic foundation of the Indian democratic structure, of which federalism plays an important part. It is a very bold step on the part of the government, considering the geographical and regional diversity in India. There are various examples all over the world of the effective functioning of simultaneous elections, but either those countries follow a different model of governance, mainly a Presidential form of government, or a different method of election. So, it is important to analyse the feasibility and effectiveness of simultaneous elections for India's parliamentary democracy before any further proceeding.

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