

One Nation One Election (ONOE): An Overview

Prof. Bina Rai

Principal

Avadh Girls' Degree College,

Lucknow

Email: bins.0280@gmail.com

Abstract

In democratic countries free and fair election are inseparable. It is impossible to visualize democracy without elections. The process of election is the corner – stone of any democratic system.

Elections play a crucial role in strengthening democracy, and free and fair elections are soul of the healthy democratic government and serve as means of communication between public and their representatives. The electoral process ensures citizen participation in the development of the country. In India, the democratic process is ensured through the election of people's representatives, whether for the central legislature or the state assemblies. The integrity of elections regarded as the lifeline of democracy rest upon the functioning of the Election Commission.

Keywords

Constitution, Democracy, Election Commission, One Nation One Election, State Legislature, Union Legislature

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Prof. Bina Rai

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Introduction:

There is a symbiotic relationship between elections and democracy. On the other hand, modern democracies appear to be dependent on elections for not only choice of the rulers and representatives but also for expression of the opinions and expectations of the citizens.

Indian Democracy is in a phase of transformation, which has been noticeable, more during the past one decade. The changes are taking place at various levels of the political structure but these changes can broadly be divided into two parts, the macro level changes and the micro level changes taking place at the level of the electoral constituencies and the contestants.

The macro level changes can be explained in terms of the growing importance of regional parties, the emergence of multi party system, and a shift from the one party dominance and shift from one party governance to coalition politics. These broad structural changes in Indian politics are not delinked from the basic opinion of the people. There is an increasing.

Apart from these broad changes in Indian politics there are some interesting micro-level changes also taking place. For example in 1990s election was different from some of earlier elections. Before 1990s most elections are marked by absence of any kind of strong wave for or against a political party and so there has not been any large-scale swing for political parties. But we find after a long break another party played major role to change the election scenario in 2014, 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Major swings the results of the electoral contest have been fluid at various stages. Even changes have seen in different state elections also.

India's democratic journey is often celebrated as the world's most ambitious experiment in electoral self-governance. From its bold adoption of universal adult franchise at independence to the consistent conduct of elections across an incredibly diverse population, the Indian model has earned global admiration. Yet beneath this endurance lies a history of strain—marked by political volatility, systemic inequalities, and institutional fatigue. The greatest achievement of India over the past 70 years is that she remained a democracy and continues to be so. Stating this may sound like stating something very obvious and ordinary. But it is worth stating. Many nations became free from colonial rule around the same time that became independent, could not remain democratic for long.

To safeguard elections from political or executive interference, the Constitution establishes the Election Commission as an autonomous and impartial authority. This all-India institution oversees the conduct of elections to the Parliament,

the state legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice President, ensuring that the electoral process remains free, fair, and non-discriminatory.

Election Journey:

India's first general elections were a global marvel and a logistical triumph. Over 173 million citizens were enrolled to vote—most for the first time—in an exercise that would choose 489 Lok Sabha members and 3,283 state legislators. Sukumar Sen, India's first Chief Election Commissioner. Working with minimal precedents and limited staff, he successfully conducted the world's largest democratic event—a feat that drew international praise. As historian Ramachandra Guha later remarked, "The Election Commission was the one institution that worked with extraordinary efficiency from the beginning." For millions of citizens, the act of voting was more than a democratic exercise—it was their first act of political equality.

Foundation of India's Electoral Democracy & Fragmentation of One-Party Dominance: Between 1952 and 1967, India conducted three general elections and multiple state assembly elections—on a synchronized electoral calendar. This era marked the rise of democratic awareness and political diversification. The 1967 general elections were a turning point in India's electoral history. For the first time, the Indian National Congress suffered significant setbacks—losing its majority in eight states. This ushered in an era of political flux, with unstable coalition governments formed by ideologically diverse and opportunistic alliances, popularly dubbed the "Samyukta Vidhayak Dal" experiments.

The period since 1977 has been marked by many substantial changes, in the nature of electoral politics and the structure of party competition, at both all-India level and in most states of Indian Union. The 1977 general election, held after the withdrawal of Emergency, was a public referendum on democratic repression. The Congress Party suffered its first-ever national defeat, and the newly formed Janta Party coalition came to power, restoring parliamentary democracy. (One of the most significant outcomes of this period was the postponement of general elections, both at the national and state levels. The life of the Fifth Lok Sabha, elected in 1971, was extended by over a year using the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, which amended Article 83(2) and related provisions to allow such extensions during Emergency. In effect, for nearly 21 months, India was ruled without electoral renewal or meaningful legislative accountability.

This erosion of democratic accountability had several consequences:

1. The Election Commission of India—already under pressure— was sidelined as political authority consolidated in the Prime Minister's Office.

- 2- Over 100 opposition leaders and civil society voices were imprisoned under preventive detention laws like Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA).
- 3- Civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and press, were severely restricted.
- 4- Judicial independence came under threat, especially following the ADM Jabalpur v. Shivkant Shukla (1976) judgment, where the Supreme Court controversially upheld suspension of habeas corpus.

The Janta Party's electoral victory in 1977 marked the first peaceful democratic transfer of power at the national level since independence seen as a popular repudiation of the Emergency, the Janta coalition represented a broad anti-Congress front, uniting factions across ideological spectrums—from socialists and liberals to Hindu nationalists and Gandhian. The Janta government was riddled with internal contradictions, personality clashes, and a lack of cohesive governance vision. The resignation of Morarji Desai in July 1979, A brief and unstable government under Charan Singh, and ultimately, the dissolution of the Lok Sabha in January 1980, triggering yet another mid-term general election.

The Coalition Decade: Between 1989 and 1999, instead of three elections that would have normally happened, the country underwent five parliamentary elections; out of which three times the Lok Sabha could not complete its term. All five elections returned a hung parliament forcing political parties to enter into coalitions to form governments. This period also witnessed the near complete de-linking of parliamentary elections and the state assembly elections barring a few states. Thus the area of election studies or research on election saw a numerical rise during this period. One of the most defining trends of this decade was the rise of regional parties and coalitional experiments at the state level.

At the national level, the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi and the resulting sympathy wave gave the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi a massive majority. Yet, by 1989, the party had lost that dominance, leading to a fractured mandate and the first non-Congress coalition government with external support from the Left and the BJP—a precursor to the chronic coalition era of the 1990s.

(In parallel, the criminalization of politics accelerated during this period. A 2004 report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) found that over 25% of candidates contesting in state and national elections had pending criminal cases, many of them involving serious charges like murder, rape, and extortion

This dual crisis—of defectors destabilizing governments and criminal elements entering legislatures—exacerbated electoral volatility and eroded public

trust in electoral institutions. Frequent elections, once a sign of democratic vibrancy, came to symbolize institutional failure and political opportunism. It also meant that each election became more expensive, conflict-prone, and litigated—leading to delays, repolls, and frequent Model Code of Conduct (MCC) imposition.

The rise of new political dynamics 2000-2024: Since 2000 reflects a significant transformation in voter behavior, party strategies, and the overall structure of political competition. This period witnessed the decline of unstable coalition governments and the emergence of stronger central leadership, alongside the expansion of regional parties in many states. Technological innovations—such as social media campaigning, data-driven voter outreach, and digital mobilization—reshaped political communication, while issues like nationalism, welfare delivery, governance efficiency, and identity politics gained renewed prominence. The demographic shift with a younger electorate, increasing urbanization, and rising expectations for development has further diversified electoral preferences. Together, these factors mark a transition from traditional, caste- and region-based politics towards a complex; multi-layered electoral landscape defined by ideological repositioning, centralized leadership, and technologically enhanced political engagement.

Between 1999 - 2024, India witnessed:

1. Five Lok Sabha elections (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019), (
2. Over 110 State Assembly elections, (
3. Hundreds of urban and rural local body elections, and (
4. Thousands of by polls and special elections. (

States such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, (West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu now vote at entirely different times from each other and from the Centre. While Haryana and Jharkhand were created in 2000 with the intent of better governance, their separate election cycles further intensified electoral frequency.

The Concept of One Nation One Election:

In this context, the concept of One Nation, One Election emerges not as a return to the past, but as an attempt to imagine a re- synchronized, future-facing electoral architecture—one that upholds the spirit of democracy while correcting the distortions that have accumulated over time.

The proposal for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) is rooted in India's constitutional history but has gained renewed momentum in the 21st century as a potential reform to reduce electoral frequency and enhance governance coherence. While democratic elections are indispensable to representative governance, the recurring conduct of Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections at different times has

resulted in overstretched administrative resources, fiscal burden, and fragmented political focus. ONOE seeks to restore synchrony by conducting national and state elections simultaneously, ideally once every five years.

In a country where two third of the population is struggling for two-square – meals a day, what is the extent of political involvement of the citizenry in policy making and its implementation? The so called middle class, the social sector and the educated classes can debate issue till the cows come home- the real voting power is elsewhere. Politics and need not based on rationality or logic; they are merely to be fine –tuned to look good for electoral results at the right time.

This would mean that elections for all levels of government would be held at the same time, once every five years. The idea has been proposed as a way to streamline the electoral process, reduce the burden on the exchequer, and improve governance and policy-making.

This idea, though seemingly new, harks back to India's early post-independence electoral experience (1952–1967) when synchronized elections were the norm. Its revival, however, is not merely nostalgic but policy-driven, supported by a range of institutional bodies that have assessed its feasibility, legal ramifications, and administrative logistics. Over the last two decades, 75 various expert committees, parliamentary panels, and reform commissions have weighed in on ONOE, offering a layered institutional perspective that underpins the reform's conceptual legitimacy. The federal system and its extension through decentralization – the lynch pin off which were elections and parties, seems to me to be reaching its limits. We may be reaching the limits of representative democracy and its capacity to promote social change. Elections are no doubt still an instrument of effecting changes in government but the changes that take place are increasingly losing any relevance for fundamental social change, whether it is the restructuring of the social base of the polity or the ushering in of a regimes of social justice.

Three Major Reports on ONOE:

1. The Law Commission of India (1999), chaired by Justice B. P. Jeevan Reddy, recommended reviving the system of simultaneous elections by synchronizing polls to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies at five-year intervals

2. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (2015), under the chairmanship of Dr. E. M. S. Natchiappan, highlighted that conducting elections separately leads to excessive financial expenditure, governance delays due to policy stagnation, disruption of essential public services, and significant administrative and manpower strain.

3. The Law Commission's Draft Report (2018), headed by Justice B. S. Chauhan, concluded that simultaneous elections cannot be implemented within the existing constitutional framework and would require comprehensive constitutional amendments, changes to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and revisions to the procedural rules of Parliament and State Legislatures. It further recommended that such constitutional amendments must be ratified by at least half of the State Legislatures.

4. NITI Aayog, the government's apex policy think tank, advanced the discourse on One Nation, One Election through its 2017 discussion paper "Simultaneous Elections: A Way Forward," prepared under the leadership of then Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya. The paper presented a strong economic, administrative, and democratic justification for electoral synchronization, highlighting escalating election costs, administrative strain on the Election Commission, and repeated deployment of security forces. Rather than advocating a single nationwide polling day, it proposed a flexible "two-window" model that would align national and state elections within two broad phases. The document also noted that prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct—affecting governance for nearly 7–8 months annually due to staggered elections—impedes welfare delivery and infrastructure development, and therefore recommended revising MCC guidelines to reduce governance disruption. While acknowledging constitutional and political challenges, NITI Aayog argued that ONOE is attainable through a phased and consensus-driven approach, beginning with partial alignment of state elections and supported by technological upgrades such as improved EVM-VVPAT systems and digital voter rolls.

5. In September 2023, the Government of India set up a High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind to assess the feasibility of One Nation, One Election. In its March 2024 report, the Committee proposed a two-phase implementation strategy supported by specific constitutional amendments, including Articles 82A, 324A, and revisions to Article 325, along with an "Appointed Date" to enable electoral synchronization. It also recommended a unified electoral roll, coordinated logistics between national and state election bodies, and phased institutional alignment. The report recorded broad support for ONOE, with over 80% of public responses and a majority of political parties endorsing the proposal, and concluded that ONOE does not violate the Constitution's basic structure.

Collectively, the Law Commission, NITI Aayog, and the High-Level Committee form a coherent institutional framework that has examined ONOE from legal, economic, administrative, and procedural perspectives, offering practical and actionable pathways rather than mere normative endorsement.

Pros of One Nation One Election:

1. Simultaneous elections would significantly reduce costs by eliminating repeated expenses on campaigning, security, transportation, and Election Commission resources.
2. Holding all elections together would shorten the electoral process, freeing up more time for governance and policy-making.
3. Synchronized polls would minimize frequent government changes, providing longer periods of political stability for effective policy implementation.
4. With fewer elections, politicians could focus more on governance rather than perpetual campaigning.
5. A single common electoral roll would eliminate duplication of effort and expenditure in preparing separate voter lists.

Cons of One Nation One Election

1. Implementing ONOE requires constitutional amendments to Articles 83(2) and 172(1), potentially involving premature dissolution of state assemblies and raising concerns over federal autonomy.
2. Combining all elections could overwhelm voters, causing voter fatigue, lower turnout, and less informed decisions.
3. National parties, with greater resources and reach, may dominate, sidelining regional parties and reducing political diversity.
4. The Election Commission would face massive logistical challenges in coordinating nationwide polling booths, security, and resources simultaneously.
5. National issues could overshadow state-specific concerns during campaigns, limiting voters' ability to evaluate state government performance.
6. Regional issues and voices represented by smaller parties may be muted, as national parties hold greater influence.
7. Voters often choose differently for national and state elections; simultaneous polls could complicate this distinct political behavior.
8. Simultaneous elections would roughly double the requirement for EVMs and VVPATs, straining resources.

While countries like Sweden, South Africa, and Brazil hold simultaneous elections, India's parliamentary system, vast diversity, scale, and risk of centralizing power through the "coat-tails effect" make direct comparisons difficult. The Economic Times Bureau, the true problem at hand is the centralization of power, often known as the "coat-tails effect" in the USA, which occurs when a powerful national leader or party supports candidates at the state level.

Conclusion:

The Supreme Court's landmark 2024 ruling invalidating the Electoral Bond scheme marked a critical shift—reinforcing citizens' right to information by eliminating anonymous donations and reinstating donor disclosure norms under the Representation of the People Act and the Companies Act. The Court mandated that donations above ₹ 20,000 be publicly disclosed, re-establishing fiscal transparency norms that had been weakened since 2017.

Institutional de-recognition of political parties failing to maintain internal democracy or transparency is a significant deterrent. Under Article 324 and ECI rules, parties may lose privileges like free airtime and subsidies over non-compliance. Former Chief Election Commissioner V. S. Sampath invoked such powers to enforce transparency guidelines during the 2014 general elections, signaling ECI's capacity to uphold ethical norms within the existing legal framework.

Transparent electoral finance is not merely a procedural necessity but the foundation of political legitimacy. Strengthening disclosure, empowering regulatory bodies, and ensuring public accountability remain essential to curbing undue influence and black money, thereby safeguarding the democratic mandate from financial distortions.

In conclusion, One Nation One Election is a concept that has the potential to streamline the electoral process, reduce costs, and improve governance. Before moving forward with One Nation One Election, it is important to carefully consider these challenges and ensure that the democratic process is not compromised. Ultimately, the goal should be to strengthen India's electoral system and improve governance for the benefit of all citizens.

Viksit Bharat @ 2047 based on principles of democracy is paramount. Democracy can function successfully only upon the trust of the people of the country, which is built and regularly assessed through periodical elections to ascertain the popular will.

A constitution has to be a 'living document' that is capable of adapting to changing needs and requirements of people and society. It has to be dynamic, effective and efficient responding to the changing conditions and growing needs of the citizens and meeting their expectations. However, at the same time, the fundamental values and basic features of the constitution cannot be compromised. In this background, we need to examine and implement the 'one nation, one election' rule; introducing reforms in the domain of the electoral system without damaging the inherent character and framework of the Constitution. Undoubtedly it is very tough task; there will

always be people who will doubt the changes and oppose them, and will want the status quo to be continued throughout.

If democracy is the heart of a nation, elections are the heartbeat of the democracy pulsating the hopes, aspirations and dreams of the citizens of a country. Holding elections is a sine qua non to call a particular nation “democratic”. The ‘One Nation, One Election’ (ONOE) concept significantly deviates from the inclusive democratic principles.

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