

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION:
CONSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS**

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ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: CONSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS

Context

- Comparative international experience and constitutional principles raise concerns regarding **federalism, democratic accountability, and institutional design** for the proposed 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) in India.

About One Nation, One Election (ONOE)

- It refers to the proposal to conduct **simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies** in India.
- The idea aims to synchronise electoral cycles so that elections across the country occur **at the same time or within a short period**.
- It proposes that elections for **Lok Sabha, and State Legislative Assemblies** should be conducted **simultaneously**, once every five years.
- Two implementation models:
 - Complete Synchronisation:** All Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections are held **together every five years**.
 - Two-Cycle Model:** Elections are conducted in **two phases within a five-year cycle**, grouping states together.

Historical Background

- 1951–1967:** Elections to **Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were held together**. This system broke down due to:
 - Premature dissolution of State Assemblies;**
 - Political instability;**
 - President's Rule in several states;**
 - As a result, electoral cycles **gradually staggered across the country**.

Constitutional Framework in India

- India adopted a **parliamentary system based on legislative accountability**.
- Dr. **BR Ambedkar** argued in the Constituent Assembly that democracy cannot maximise both **stability and responsibility** simultaneously.
- India chose **responsibility**, meaning the executive remains accountable to the legislature at all times.
- Key Constitutional Provisions:**
 - Articles 75 & 164:** Collective responsibility of the executive to the legislature.
 - Articles 83 & 172:** Maximum tenure of five years for legislatures (not guaranteed).
 - Early dissolution is therefore a **democratic safeguard**, allowing voters to renew the mandate when governments lose confidence.
- ONOE alters this logic by treating dissolution as an administrative inconvenience rather than a democratic mechanism.

Key Committees and Reports

- Law Commission of India (1999):** It suggested exploring simultaneous elections to reduce **political instability and expenditure**.
- Parliamentary Standing Committee (2015):** It recommended **phased synchronisation of elections**.
- NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2017):** It proposed a **two-phase election model**.
- High-Level Committee (2023):** It was chaired by **Former President Ram Nath Kovind**, the committee recommended **implementing ONOE through constitutional amendments**.

Constitutional Amendment Proposal

- The proposal has taken legislative form in the **Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024**, based on recommendations of the **High-Level Committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind**.

- **Key Features:**
 - ♦ **Proposed Article 82A:** Empowers the **President to notify an 'appointed date'** aligning all State Assembly tenures with the Lok Sabha.
 - ♦ **Curtailment of State Assembly Tenure:** Assemblies formed after the appointed date may have their **terms shortened** to synchronise with national elections.
 - ♦ **'Unexpired-Term Elections':** If a legislature dissolves early, the newly elected legislature will serve **only the remaining portion of the original term.**
 - ♦ **Election Deferral:** The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** may recommend **deferring State elections** if simultaneous conduct is impracticable.
- **Proposed Constitutional Changes:** Implementing ONOE requires amendments to several constitutional provisions, ie:
 - ♦ **Article 83:** Duration of Lok Sabha;
 - ♦ **Article 85:** Dissolution of Lok Sabha;
 - ♦ **Article 172:** Duration of State Legislative Assemblies;
 - ♦ **Article 174:** Sessions of State Legislature;
 - ♦ **Article 356:** President's Rule;
- Changes would also be required in **Representation of the People Act, 1951.**

Arguments in Favour of ONOE

- **Reduction in Election Expenditure:** Frequent elections involve significant costs for election administration, security forces, and campaign expenditure. Simultaneous elections could reduce **public spending.**
- **Governance Efficiency:** Frequent elections lead to repeated enforcement of the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)**, which may delay policy decisions, and development projects.
 - ♦ ONOE could ensure **continuity in governance.**
- **Reduced Political Polarisation:** Continuous election cycles keep political parties in **permanent campaign mode.**
 - ♦ Simultaneous elections may allow governments to focus more on **policy-making and administration.**
- **Administrative Convenience:** Holding elections together reduces the need for repeated mobilisation of election officials, security personnel, and Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

Arguments Against ONOE

- **Threat to Federalism:** India is a **federal polity**, and states have independent political dynamics. Simultaneous elections may:
 - ♦ Reduce the importance of **regional issues;**
 - ♦ Strengthen **national parties at the expense of regional parties;**
- **Constitutional Challenges:** The parliamentary system allows **early dissolution of legislatures.** If a government collapses, fresh elections must be held.
 - ♦ Synchronising elections may require **curtailing or extending legislative terms**, which raises constitutional concerns.
- **Impact on Voter Behaviour:** Research indicates that **simultaneous elections may produce a 'national wave effect'.** Voters may vote for the same party at both National level, and State level.
 - ♦ It may reduce the **distinct political choices available in federal elections.**
- **Logistical Difficulties:** India conducts elections in phases due to security requirements, large voter population, and administrative constraints.
 - ♦ Simultaneous elections would require **massive deployment of resources.**

Federalism Concerns

- **Basic Structure Doctrine:** In **S.R. Bommai vs Union of India (1994)**, the Supreme Court declared that **federalism is part of the Constitution's basic structure.**
 - ♦ States therefore possess **independent democratic legitimacy.**
- **Impact of Synchronisation:** ONOE could curtail State mandates for administrative convenience, and distort federal autonomy.

- ◆ For example, if a State elects its legislature in **2033**, synchronisation could force the mandate to expire in **2034**, reducing the elected government's tenure to just **one year**.
- **Problem of 'Unexpired-Term Elections':** The most controversial element of the proposal is **mid-term elections for residual mandates**.
- **Constitutional Issues:** The Constitution does **not recognise the concept of a residual mandate**.
 - ◆ Although the proposed amendments claim the new House is not a continuation of the old one, the system effectively preserves earlier electoral cycles.
- **Risks of Constitutional Abuse:** The proposed **Article 82A(5)** allows the Election Commission to recommend **deferral of State elections without clear safeguards**.
 - ◆ Unlike **Article 356**, which contains parliamentary oversight and time limits, this provision lacks explicit institutional checks.

Case Study of Indonesia & Other International Experience

- Indonesia conducted a **historic simultaneous election in 2019**, combining elections for the **President, national parliament, regional legislatures, and local councils** on a single day.
- **Key Outcomes:**
 - ◆ Nearly **900 poll workers died** and more than **5,000 fell seriously ill** due to extreme administrative pressure.
 - ◆ During the **2024 election**, the toll remained significant with **over 100 deaths and nearly 15,000 illnesses**.
 - ◆ In **June 2025**, Indonesia's **Constitutional Court ruled** that national and local elections must be separated from **2029 onwards**, spaced about **two to two-and-a-half years apart**.
- **Implication:** The Court held that simultaneous elections created **administrative overload, voter fatigue, and reduced quality of democratic participation**.
 - ◆ Indonesia's experience demonstrates that **electoral efficiency cannot override democratic and administrative sustainability**.

Comparative Global Experience

- **Canada:** **Federal and provincial elections occur independently**. Reflects strong federal autonomy.
- **Australia:** Synchronisation is practically impossible. **State legislatures have fixed four-year terms**, while the **federal House of Representatives has a maximum tenure of three years**.
- **Germany:** Germany's political stability is often misunderstood. Elections in **Länder (states) are deliberately staggered**.
 - ◆ Stability comes from the **Constructive Vote of No Confidence**, which requires the Bundestag to elect a successor before removing a Chancellor.
- **United States:** Fixed election cycles work because of the **presidential system**, where the executive's tenure is independent of legislative confidence.

Possible Implementation Models

- **Fixed-Term Legislatures:** Introduce fixed five-year terms to prevent premature dissolution.
- **Constructive Vote of No Confidence:** A government can be removed only if a **new government is simultaneously elected**.
- **Two-Election Cycle:** Conduct elections in **two groups of states every 2.5 years**.

Conclusion

- The promise of **administrative efficiency and cost savings** offered by **One Nation, One Election** is likely overstated. In contrast, the **proposal raises profound constitutional concerns** like curtailment of State mandates, weakening of federalism, distortion of parliamentary accountability, and risk of prolonged unelected governance.

- Comparative experience, particularly **Indonesia's failed experiment with simultaneous elections**, demonstrates that electoral synchronisation can impose heavy democratic and administrative costs.
- India's constitutional design emphasises **responsibility, federal autonomy, and continuous democratic accountability**. Any reform that disrupts these foundational principles risks undermining the **basic structure of the Constitution**.

Source: TH

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] The proposal for 'One Nation, One Election' raises significant constitutional and federal concerns in India's parliamentary democracy. Examine.

