



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION:
CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM OR
DEMOCRATIC TRADE-OFF?**

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ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM OR DEMOCRATIC TRADE-OFF?

Context

- The Parliament of India is set to take up the **Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill** to synchronise Lok Sabha and all state assembly elections, **inserting a new Article 82A** and **amending Articles 83 and 172**.
- It requires a two-thirds majority in both Houses and ratification by half the states.

About One Nation, One Election (ONOE)

- Its aim is to hold elections to **Lok Sabha and all the State Legislative Assemblies** simultaneously thereby returning to the electoral cycle which was in vogue **during 1952-1967**.
- A constitutional amendment, **two-third majority in both Houses of Parliament** and **ratification by at least half of the States** are required for the proposal as it impacts the federal structure.
- The proposed framework **includes Article 82A** for holding simultaneous elections and **amendments to Articles 83 and 172** to modify the duration of the **Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies**, respectively, for a common electoral cycle.

Rationale Behind Bill

- Lower the recurring cost of elections to governments and political parties.
- Minimise disruption to governance from **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)**.
- Reduce the burden of deployment on security forces and government employees.
- Strengthen the continuity of administration and policy implementation.
- Create more policy certainty to increase economic growth.
- The **High-Level Committee (HLC)** headed by Ram Nath Kovind, former President of India, has found that synchronised elections contribute to **1.5–1.6 percentage points of higher GDP growth**.

Arguments in Favour of ONOE

- **Administrative Efficiency:** Elections are held frequently, requiring the repeated deployment of security forces, election officials and teachers, which impacts governance and public service delivery.
 - ♦ Simultaneous elections may enhance administrative continuity.
- **Limited Reduced Model Code of Conduct:** The repeated imposition of the MCC delays new government schemes and policy announcements.
 - ♦ One synchronised election cycle would cut down on repeated administrative disruptions.
- **Cost savings:** The government says holding simultaneous polls would cut expenditure on logistics, polling infrastructure and security arrangements.
 - ♦ Official estimates point to significant savings in public resources over successive election cycles.
- **Certainty of Policy:** Fewer elections mean that governments can concentrate on long-term governance rather than constant electoral mobilisation.

Arguments Against ONOE

- **Questionable Economic Justification:** The main economic argument is the correlation between co-occurring elections and higher GDP growth. But:
 - ♦ **India's high growth phase (2003-11)** coincided with staggered elections.
 - ♦ The election timing cannot be the main reason for growth as the major growth drivers are the **1991 economic reforms, globalisation, IT expansion and capital inflows**.

- ♦ It suggests that part of the growth effect is transmitted through **higher government spending** and **fiscal deficits**, which raises concerns about political business cycles rather than structural economic gains.
- **Limited Impact on Election Expenditure:** Government election expenditure is very small as a share of public expenditure, according to Election Commission accounts.
 - ♦ A significant chunk of poll expenditure is unaccounted for (**'black money'**), independent studies estimate it to be **over ₹1 lakh crore in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections**.
 - ♦ Synchronisation could just shift spending rather than reduce it.
- **Federal Concerns:** Simultaneous elections could **cause a 'wave effect'** where voters could vote for the same party **both for Parliament and the State Assemblies**.
 - ♦ In **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)**, the Supreme Court held that parliamentary democracy and free and fair elections are part of the **Basic Structure of the Constitution**.
 - ♦ It may dilute the importance of state issues and weaken the regional parties which will affect the cooperative federal structure of India.

Examining ONOE

- **Political Dimension:** Under **Article 75**, parliamentary democracy is based on **collective responsibility**.
 - ♦ The question of constitutional complications regarding a premature dissolution or extended period of President's Rule arises when a government loses its majority before the common electoral cycle ends.
 - ♦ The **constructive vote of no-confidence**, introduced on the basis of Germany's practice, is a radical departure from India's established parliamentary practice.
- **Economic Dimension:** Government expenditure on elections is **less than 0.1% of the Union Budget**, as per the official data of the **Election Commission of India (ECI)**.
 - ♦ The money saved from government election spending seems rather modest.
 - ♦ Instead of eliminating interruptions in governance under MCC, they are **compressed into one nationwide election period** and could cause larger temporary interruptions.
 - ♦ The economic evidence for ONOE is still **correlational and not conclusive**.
- **Social and Constitutional Dimension:** Aligning the length of the Assembly term to elections raises issues of **popular mandate and electoral accountability**.
 - ♦ The proposal does **not cover Panchayat and Urban Local Body elections** which have been left to be conducted by State Election Commissions as per the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments**. So many governance and spending issues would still be there.

Way Forward: Strengthening Elections in India

- Reforms should aim to improve the quality and integrity of elections, for instance, not only through electoral synchronisation.
 - ♦ Requiring donations to be disclosed and making political funding more transparent.
 - ♦ Strict enforcement of **expenditure limits on candidates**.
 - ♦ Speeding up the process of **criminalisation of politics** and disqualification of convicted candidates as per the law.
 - ♦ Enhancing the **autonomy and institutional capacity of the Election Commission of India**.
 - ♦ Enhance campaign finance regulation, the use of technology and voter awareness while protecting **India's federal and parliamentary constitutional structure**.

Conclusion

- ONOE strives to improve governance through synchronised elections and better administrative efficiency. However, its economic benefits are still under debate and its constitutional, federal and democratic concerns need to be carefully examined.

- Any reform needs to take into account the far-reaching implications and balance efficiency with the **principles of parliamentary democracy, federalism and free and fair elections** that are part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] The proposal for 'One Nation, One Election' seeks to improve governance by synchronizing elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Critically examine its constitutional, political, economic and federal implications.

Source: IE

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