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# **ONE POLL TO RULE THEM ALL: EXAMINING THE FEASIBILITY OF SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS IN INDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Democracy thrives on the active participation of citizens in governance through the periodic election of their representatives. In India, the electoral process—anchored in Articles 324 to 329 of the Constitution—ensures that this democratic participation occurs under the supervision of the Election Commission, an autonomous body established in 1950 to uphold the integrity of free and fair elections. However, the frequency and scale of elections in India have created persistent administrative, economic, and governance challenges. With one or more states going to polls nearly every year, the nation remains in a continuous cycle of political mobilization, diverting focus from governance and development. The financial burden is equally significant, as illustrated by the expenditure of over ₹60,000 crore during the 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections alone. Against this backdrop, the concept of **“One Nation, One Election”** has gained prominence as a potential reform to synchronize elections across all levels—national, state, and local. This proposal envisions a unified electoral calendar aimed at minimizing costs, improving administrative efficiency, and ensuring policy continuity. While its implementation poses logistical and constitutional challenges, it holds the promise of transforming India’s electoral framework into a more cohesive, cost-effective, and governance-friendly democratic model. The paper further delves deep into the various aspects of implementation on the given theme and its possibilities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy fundamentally relies on the active participation of citizens in governance through the election of representatives. In essence, an election is the process by which people choose their public representatives to participate in the democratic system. Given the practical impossibility of direct citizen governance, democracies employ a representative model. Under

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established guidelines, free and fair elections are conducted by an independent institution, allowing people to select their representatives through voting. This systematic approach is known as the electoral process.

India stands as the world's largest democracy,<sup>3</sup> with its Constitution establishing fundamental electoral rules. Specifically, Articles 324 to 329 in Part 15 of the Constitution govern the election process. The Election Commission, an autonomous body established on January 25, 1950, bears the critical responsibility of ensuring transparent and fair elections. Its mandate encompasses everything from announcing election dates to finalizing vote counts.<sup>4</sup>

Elections are often celebrated as the most vibrant expression of democratic principles. However, the current electoral landscape in India presents a unique challenge. Elections occur frequently, with one or more states holding polls almost every year.<sup>5</sup> This continuous electoral cycle creates a persistent state of political preparation that significantly impacts administrative and policy-making processes. The financial implications are substantial. The 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, for instance, consumed over 60,000 crore rupees and kept the country in election mode for approximately three months.<sup>6</sup> Similar patterns emerge across various states throughout the year, creating considerable administrative and economic strain. In this context, the concept of 'One Nation One Election' emerges as a potential solution to address these ongoing challenges. The proposal aims to streamline the electoral process, reduce repeated electoral expenditures, and potentially enhance governmental efficiency by synchronizing election schedules across different levels of governance. The proposed approach seeks to transform the current fragmented electoral system into a more cohesive and cost-effective democratic mechanism, potentially bringing significant administrative and economic benefits to the country's democratic framework.

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<sup>3</sup> Press Information Bureau, "Press Note on One Nation One Election" (Government of India) <https://pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=151892&ModuleId=3&reg=3&lang=1> accessed 24 November 2024

<sup>4</sup> Election Commission of India, "About ECI" (Election Commission of India) <https://www.eci.gov.in/about-eci> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Indian Express, "Upcoming Elections in India" (Indian Express) <https://indianexpress.com/elections/upcoming-elections-india/> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>6</sup> News18, "With About Rs 100 Cr Spent in Each LS Constituency, We Just Witnessed the Most Expensive Election Ever" (News18) <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/with-about-rs-100-cr-spent-in-each-ls-constituency-we-just-witnessed-the-most-expensive-election-ever-2171789.html> accessed 24 November 2024.

## 1. ONE NATION ONE ELECTION

### THE BRIGHTER SIDE

A recent Parliamentary Committee report submitted to both Houses of Parliament<sup>7</sup> highlighted several potential benefits of conducting all elections simultaneously. The proposed 'One Nation, One Election' approach aims to address multiple challenges in India's current electoral system. The report suggests that synchronized elections would not only reduce financial burden on the government but also decrease political party expenditures. Additionally, it could optimize human resource utilization and potentially counter voter apathy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly emphasized that this is no longer just a theoretical discussion, but a contemporary necessity for India, given the frequent electoral events occurring across the country.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of simultaneous elections is not novel. In fact, during the early years of Indian democracy—specifically in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967—both Lok Sabha and state assembly elections were conducted concurrently.<sup>9</sup> However, post-1967, the electoral landscape became more fragmented. Several factors contributed to this electoral complexity. Premature government dissolutions due to trust vote failures, political alliance breakdowns, and incomplete governmental tenures have become increasingly common. These circumstances have disrupted the original synchronization of electoral cycles, making the 'One Nation, One Election' concept increasingly relevant. The Law Commission had previously advocated for simultaneous elections in 1999,<sup>10</sup> recognizing the potential benefits. However, implementing this approach requires significant constitutional amendments. Complex legal modifications would be necessary, involving critical articles of the Indian Constitution.

Specific constitutional provisions that would need revision include:

- Article 83 (defining Lok Sabha's term)
- Article 85 (Presidential power to dissolve Lok Sabha)

<sup>7</sup> High Level Committee, "Report on One Nation One Election" (Government of India) <https://onoe.gov.in/HLC-Report-en> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "One Nation One Election is Our Commitment: PM Modi" (DD News) <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/one-nation-one-election-is-our-commitment-pm-modi/> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, "Simultaneous Election to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies" (Lok Sabha) [https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New\\_Reference\\_Notes/English/Simultaneous\\_election\\_to\\_Lok\\_Sabha\\_and\\_State\\_Legislative\\_Assemblies.pdf](https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/Simultaneous_election_to_Lok_Sabha_and_State_Legislative_Assemblies.pdf) accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>10</sup> "Simultaneous Elections: A Detailed Report" (Government of India) <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3ca0daec69b5adc880fb464895726dbdf/uploads/2022/08/2022082424.pdf> accessed 24 November 2024.

- Article 172 (Legislative Assembly term)
- Article 174 (Governor's power to dissolve Assembly)

Moreover, changes to the Representation of the People Act would be essential. These amendments would require carefully adjusting the tenure of various legislative bodies, potentially extending or reducing terms to create a synchronized electoral framework. The proposed approach represents a comprehensive strategy to streamline India's democratic processes, potentially reducing electoral fatigue, administrative disruptions, and financial strain while enhancing governmental efficiency. The concept continues to generate significant debate, balancing the practical challenges of implementation against the potential benefits of a more coordinated electoral system.

### **BENEFITS**

There are many advantages of one nation one election, which will give a new direction to the progress of the country, because the money spent in repeated elections will be saved. It can be used for such works as education, health and water crisis prevention etc., which will make it possible to improve the standard of living of the people. Along with the economic life of the people, improvement in social life will be ensured. Many countries have adopted the equation of one country one election to accelerate development. As in Sweden last year general elections, county and municipal elections were held simultaneously. Countries like Indonesia, South Africa, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Slovenia, Albania, Poland, Belgium also have a tradition of holding elections once.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the economic burden will be reduced by simultaneous elections, because in the year 2009 Lok Sabha elections, 11 hundred crore rupees,<sup>12</sup> in the year 2014, four thousand crore rupees were spent.<sup>13</sup> In the last Lok Sabha elections 2019, a huge expenditure of about six thousand crores was made. Similarly, the same situation has been seen in the elections to the Legislative Assemblies also. At the same time, due to frequent elections, the states have to stick to the code of conduct, which obstructs all kinds of development work.

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<sup>11</sup> "Panel on Simultaneous Polls Studied Process in Sweden, Germany, 5 Other Nations" (NDTV) <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/panel-on-simultaneous-polls-studied-process-in-sweden-germany-5-other-nations-6594155> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Press Information Bureau, "One Nation One Election: A Commitment to Development" (Government of India) <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=104557> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>13</sup> "At Rs 3,426 Crore, 2014 Lok Sabha Elections Costliest Ever" (Live Mint) <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/H62lpkVafdBdQGBQpEvibK/At-Rs3426-crore-2014-Lok-Sabha-elections-costliest-ever.html> accessed 24 November 2024.

The education sector is also greatly affected by this. It also has a social and economic side effect that the flow of black money increases. If elections are held simultaneously, the flow of black money will definitely be stopped.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, due to the simultaneous elections of Lok Sabha and Vidhansabha, mutual harmony will increase, because such issues will not arise again and again in the elections, due to which there is a possibility of disturbing social harmony.

### **ONOE RIFE WITH PROBLEMS?**

Simultaneous elections reflect development in the interest of the country. Of course, holding elections together will also have to face some problems, but in the context of getting rid of it forever, one nation one election is necessary. This can put regional political parties in trouble and limit their regional resources. A bigger issue pertains to the central paramilitary forces, as they will be needed in large numbers if this happens. Therefore, there will be a need for a large number of appointments in the central paramilitary forces. EVMs will be required to conduct simultaneous elections.

According to an estimate 12 to 15 lakh EVMs are currently fit for use. But when elections are held simultaneously, up to 30 lakh EVMs may be required for that<sup>15</sup>. Along with this, VVPATs will also have to be installed in all these EVMs. To complete all this, an additional requirement of four to five thousand crore rupees will be required.<sup>16</sup> This will certainly increase the capital expenditure. Not only this, the need of such a large number of EVMs will have to be met at once and they will also have to be replaced every three elections i.e., after 15 years, as their life span is only for fifteen years.<sup>17</sup> However, considering the benefits of simultaneous elections, the expenditure on it seems more logical and relevant. This will ensure timely implementation of the policies of the government and will also ensure that the administrative machinery is engaged in developmental activities instead of engaging in electoral activities.

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<sup>14</sup> Singh S P, "Simultaneous Elections: A Boon or Bane for Indian Democracy?" (2021) 15 *Journal of Indian Political Science Association* 56-70.

<sup>15</sup> "Election Commission Will Require Around 30 Lakh EVMs, 1.5 Year Preparation Time for Simultaneous Polls to LS, Assemblies" (Economic Times) <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/election-commission-will-require-around-30-lakh-evms-1-5-year-preparation-time-for-simultaneous-polls-to-ls-assemblies/articleshow/104731346.cms?from=mdr> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## WASTE OF MONEY DUE TO REPEATED ELECTIONS

All the political parties spend about sixty-seventy thousand crore rupees in the general elections and about the same amount is spent in the state assembly elections as well. If the two are taken together, then around Rs.1.25 lakh crore is spent by the political parties.<sup>18</sup> Now when the campaign from One Nation One Election will also be conducted only once in five years, surely the expenditure will also come down to half. If this money is saved, then the condition and direction of the country will be properly determined and people will get a good standard of living. It would not be an exaggeration to say that giving consent to an election in the country can add to the progress of the country.

A major concern in this regard is also related to black money. In such a situation, the main focus of the process of electoral reforms is to broaden the basic meaning of democracy, to make it more citizen friendly. It is also true that in today's time elections have become the biggest source of corruption. Seizing cash worth crores of rupees has become a tradition since the model code of conduct came into force. The candidates spend much more money than what has been earmarked for contesting elections.<sup>19</sup>

There does not appear to be any major flaw in the concept of one nation one election, but the way it has been opposed by political parties, it seems that it will not be possible to implement it in the near future. There is no doubt that India, the world's largest democracy, seems to be engulfed in the electoral maze all the time. A comprehensive electoral reform campaign is needed to get the country out of this maze of elections. But now this work will definitely be possible with the commitment of the government. One Nation, One Election is also a part of the developmental agenda of the government.<sup>20</sup>

## THE DARKER SIDE

At first glance, the proposal of holding simultaneous elections seems tempting. However, if we supported it without evaluating its opportunity cost, it would be downright childish. Apart from

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<sup>18</sup> Statista, "Election Expenditure by Political Party in India" (Statista) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1445564/india-election-expenditure-by-political-party/> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>19</sup> "Election Commission Makes Seizure of Over Rs 800 Crore in Ongoing Maharashtra, Jharkhand Polls" (Times of India) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/election-commission-makes-seizure-of-over-rs-800-crore-in-ongoing-maharashtra-jharkhand-polls/articleshow/115425472.cms> accessed 24 November 2024.

<sup>20</sup> supra n 6.

the constitutional and practical concerns, there are also a number of democratic concerns which deserve attention.

First, given the 'touching effect', it ensures a profitable edge for the ruling political party in particular, and national parties in general, over their other competitors in simultaneous elections. And this in itself is against the democratic nature of not giving equal opportunities to all. But its implementation at the regional level greatly increases the gravity of the threat, where it can have far-reaching consequences for democracy.

With this in mind, national political parties are likely to be in a dominant position in case of simultaneous elections, in which regional parties will either be less successful or will be forced to join hands with national level competitors.<sup>21</sup> However, whatever it may be, this will have a negative impact on the regional aspirations and demands, as it is the regional political parties that have been raising their issues in various democratic fora.

At the same time, as the 'touching effect' inherently gives prominence to the ruling party/coalition government, there is a constant risk of them being elected to political power, no matter what the cost. This would be fatal to democracy, as not only India but also the world's history is replete with such examples; Hugo Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, where a single party's dominance had reduced the democratic system to a mere farce for a fierce dictatorship.

Second, one of the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy is that a government that has popular support has the right to govern until it chooses to dissolve itself or loses popular support. Simultaneous election does not necessarily follow this principle. There may be cases where governments elected through simultaneous elections may either lose popular support or be dissolved mid-term. If a state government loses its majority in the middle of its term, the governor acting on behalf of the President of India will be forced to ask other parties/alliances to form the government as an alternative. Because the option of re-election is not available. If efforts to form the government still fail, the state would have to be governed by President's Rule under Article 356 of the Indian Constitution until the next scheduled

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<sup>21</sup> "Understanding Simultaneous Elections: Explained" (The Hindu) <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/understanding-simultaneous-elections-explained/article67592051.ece> accessed 24 November 2024.

elections. Which, obviously, would be anti-democratic.

This scenario also applies at the center level. If a central government loses its majority during its intervening term, the only available course of action is to invite the President to invite other parties/coalitions to form the government. If this measure also fails, then the country will have to be governed under President's rule with the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, which will be part of a dormant Lok Sabha and a functional Rajya Sabha, until the next election. This type of government would be far from being democratic, and in a way closer to a constitutional oligarchy.

It is no surprise that the Law Commission of India's draft report on holding simultaneous elections from 2018 also states that the current structure of the Constitution does not permit simultaneous elections, and asking states to hold such elections would require extensive amendments to the Constitution.<sup>22</sup> Extensive amendments would also have to be made in the Representation of the People Act and the manual process of Lok Sabha and State Legislatures.

Elections play a vital role in maintaining democratic accountability. The frequency of elections ensures that elected representatives and governments remain vigilant, as they must regularly engage with the general public. This continuous interaction subjects them to constant scrutiny, compelling them to deliver on their promises. Conducting simultaneous elections could diminish this accountability since representatives would no longer face mid-term evaluations by the electorate.

Over time, the foundation of democracy in India has grown stronger, with frequent elections playing a significant role in this process. They have facilitated the rise of regional political parties and provided a platform for regional aspirations to be represented at the national level. In essence, the regular conduct of elections has been instrumental in deepening democratic roots in India

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<sup>22</sup> Law Commission of India, *Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections* (2018) 56-72 [https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous\\_elections/LCI\\_2018\\_DRAFT\\_REPORT.pdf](https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/LCI_2018_DRAFT_REPORT.pdf) accessed 24 November 2024.

## 2. CONCLUSION

As far as is possible, holding simultaneous elections (other than the essential use of Article 356 and bye-elections) will help in reducing it to a large extent to a considerable amount and also reduce the period of time taken for the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct. This will make quite an effect, because in this phase, development activities do not take place and the activities of governments are also brought to a grinding halt. These disruptions occur more markedly at times of staggered elections. Second, there would be fewer policy uncertainty expectations and increase governmental engagement at the same time as bringing focus of the political attention to issues related to policies.

Of course, there is going to be an effort with the infrastructure that needs to be put in place because of this – building off of an already enormous repository of EVMs, then mobilizing VVPAT paper and election ink.<sup>23</sup> Of course, we can discuss methods other countries have used: postal ballots, single form for multiple contests in an election. Apart from that, it may be very essential to enact constitutional amendments so that future uniformity will be untouched. This may be done so as to avert government destabilization brought about by the passage of a no-confidence motion, and further and strictly making a motion of confidence compulsory for the formation of the government. Such recommendations have been proposed by the Central Law Commission in its 170th report concerning reforms in electoral legislation.<sup>24</sup> It is also important to consider reforms that include government funding for elections and the introduction of electronic voting, all the while respecting the wishes of the electorate during this process. Many political parties, above and beyond the narrow interests of political parties, have voiced their approval of these proposals. We can start with concurrent elections to Panchayats, Municipal Bodies, and State Assemblies. Of course, there will be many who would fret that the country is losing its electoral variety – but perhaps they must leave that to the mature Indian electorate.

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<sup>23</sup> supra n. 13.

<sup>24</sup> supra n. 8.