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ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF ONE NATION ONE ELECTION AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract

The concept of "One Nation, One Election" has been a subject of significant debate in our country as it has the potential to transform the political and economic landscape of India. This research paper delves into the economic viability and political implications of synchronizing elections across the country for the Lok Sabha and state legislatures. By examining historical precedents, economic data, and various electoral practices, the research evaluates whether this reform can lead to substantial cost savings, improved governance and reduced policy paralysis caused by frequent elections in India. The research further explores the impact of ONOE on regional politics, analyzing whether it could centralize the political discourse, diminish the influence of regional parties and undermine federalism. It also investigates concerns about the logistical and constitutional challenges of implementing this reform and addresses the socio-political implications for India's diverse electorate which is our backbone. Through a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating economic analysis, political theory and comparative studies, this research paper aims to provide us a nuanced understanding of how "One Nation, One Election" could reshape India's democratic framework and political structures. The findings offers critical insights into the feasibility and consequences of ONOE. Few recommendations have also been proposed so as to balance economic efficiency with the preservation of India's pluralistic and federal ethos.

Historical Background-

After independence, India adopted the system wherein Lok Sabha elections along with all State Legislative Assembly elections simultaneously took place. A common electoral roll for each constituency was prepared and used for both Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, thus avoiding duplications and easy management of the voters. The idea of simultaneous elections is not new for India. Elections to Lok Sabha and all State legislative Assemblies were held simultaneously from 1951 to 1967 after the adoption of the Constitution. The first general

elections to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies took place simultaneously in 1951-52 and this became a trend for three more consecutive general elections conducted in 1957, 1962, and in 1967¹. The method worked initially as both the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were constitutionally directed to serve five-year terms, ensuring synchronization. During the first few elections, the dominance of the Congress Party at both central and state levels provided political stability, which facilitated simultaneous elections. The absence of coalition politics and the relatively smaller number of political parties reduced the chances of premature dissolution of assemblies.

This cycle of simultaneous elections went amiss in 1968 and 1969 because of the premature dissolution of some of the State Legislative Assemblies. The Fourth Lok Sabha was also dissolved prematurely in 1970, and fresh elections were held in 1971. Unlike the First, Second, and Third Lok Sabha, which completed their full five-year terms, the term of the Fifth Lok Sabha was extended up to 1977 under Article 352 due to the declaration of Emergency². Since then, only a few Lok Sabha terms have lasted the full five years, like the Eighth, Tenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth. Furthermore, increasing political fragmentation at the state level led to frequent changes in government and non-systematic elections.

Cost Evaluation and Implications of Implementing One Nation, One Election in India-

"One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) has generated mixed opinion in India. Its proponents believe that it will reduce election-related expenses and streamline governance, but its critics raise the issue of massive initial costs and logistical challenges. Lok Sabha elections have seen a significant jump in the recent years. Compared to the cost incurred for conducting 2009 Lok Sabha elections at about Rs. 1115 crores, the same for the year 2014 more than tripled to about Rs. 3870 crores³. State wise elections cost about significant amount and would vary by population size, with a handful of 3-4 states voting annually and therefore making for a substantial expense in the total count. Evidently, panchayat and municipal corporations also involve election expenditures that go on to contribute to the financial costs of staggered electoral cycles. Business organizations like CII, FICCI, and ASSOCHAM supported the

¹ <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/dec/doc20241217473101.pdf>

² <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/dec/doc20241217473101.pdf>

³ https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf(Page-12, Para 3.15)

proposal, highlighting the positive impact on economic stability by reducing disruptions and costs associated with election cycles⁴.

Financial Implications of ONOE

Potential Cost Savings:

- 1. Reducing Administrative Overlap in Elections-** Synchronizing of elections will only reduce the following repeated administrative cost burdens that are associated with educating voters; that are to set up polling stations and deploy polling staff.
- 2. Streamlining Security Expenditures-** Elections involve massive deployments of security personnel, including para-military staff. Simultaneous elections will eliminate repetitive security arrangements.
- 3. Cost Savings in Political Campaigns-** Political parties and candidates spend billions on campaigns for separate elections. Synchronization may result in the consolidation of campaigns.
- 4. Savings due to lesser MCC Disruptions-** The Model Code of Conduct bars the governments from announcing new projects or policies during elections. Elections frequently delay developmental activities for long periods.

While ONOE guarantees long-term savings, the initial costs are high:

The Election Commission of India will require 12–15 lakh extra Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) units. The Parliamentary Committee report indicates that ECI expects an expenditure of about Rs. 9300 crores for procurement of EVMs and VVPATs. However, this cost would be a one-time cost and EVMs and VVPATs could be used for subsequent elections given a life of about 15 years⁵. The construction of 800+ warehouses to accommodate the additional EVMs and VVPATs. Training millions of election officials and security personnel to handle simultaneous elections. Organizing large-scale campaigns to educate voters about the new system. Constitutional amendments and electoral law changes, Articles 83, 85, 172, and 174 to facilitate ONOE. Establishment of machinery for the early dissolution of assemblies or the Lok Sabha. The cost of holding elections for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies has been pegged at Rs. 4500 crore by the ECI in case elections are held simultaneously. These figures indicate that simultaneous elections would help the

⁴ <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/dec/doc20241217473101.pdf>

⁵ [https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf\(Page-34, Para 5.41\)](https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf(Page-34, Para 5.41))

exchequer curtail election expenditures in a significant manner⁶.

Impact of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) on Governance and Development-

Model Code of Conduct: MCC is issued by the ECI to ensure political parties and contestants follow certain behavioural codes⁷. The MCC is imposed a month before the start of the election dates, until the results of an election are announced⁸. The free and fair elections do come at the cost of large governance and development difficulties, as implemented in the elections. The idea of One Nation, One Election intends to reduce electoral cycles and hence periods of application of MCC.

Current Impact of MCC on Governance and Development

MCC prevents governments from releasing new policies, schemes, or projects that can sway voters. This leads to delays in policy decisions and stalling of vital policy implementation. A significant number of administrative and law enforcement resources is diverted towards election-related tasks, which further hampers normal governance. Infrastructure and development projects are delayed during MCC enforcement for not wanting to sway the electoral vote. Non-simultaneous elections would need to impose MCC four times in 5 years, as compared to once in five years. Anecdotally, for instance, in Maharashtra, if the days spent on election campaigning and voting were to be added together it could amount to about 300 days in an average year in some states⁹. Projects with new approval and budget allocation see significant delays. Construction, infrastructure, etc., are directly dependent on government contracts. Those industries see the slowdown during an election period.

Possible Advantages of ONOE in Resolution of MCC-Related Issues:

The synchronisation of elections through ONOE will ensure MCC is enforced only once in five years, reducing interruptions. Governments can work on long-term governance and development without being interrupted frequently due to MCC. Since the number of interruptions will be fewer, infrastructure and developmental projects can be completed within the stipulated time. Improved MCC cycles will provide steady economic activity as well as

⁶ https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf(Page-14, Para 3.22)

⁷ https://legalaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf, Page 9

⁸ HLC REPORT, Page no-167(Para 27)

⁹ HLC REPORT, Page no-167(Para 28)

allow industries dependent on government services and clearances to proliferate Election-related resources, such as personnel and finances, would be used more effectively in a coordinated election system. Administrators and law enforcement agencies can focus on governance rather than being diverted, time and again, into election-related activities.

Recommended Strategies on Effective Management of MCC in ONOE

Reform MCC Guidelines: Exemptions for critical projects and emergency decisions to ensure seamless governance. Completion of ongoing programs during MCC should not be interrupted.

Transparency Enhancement: Using a digital platform, track and communicate the developmental project position to the public during an MCC period. Strong checks must prevent MCC exceptions misuse.

Phased Implementation of ONOE: Pilot the synchronized election model in select states to address operational challenges before nationwide implementation.

Effect on Regional Parties and Impact on Federalism-

THERE CAN BE VARIOUS EFFECTS OF ONOE ON REGIONAL PARTIES SUCH AS-

- **Resource constraints** – Various regional parties may face issues in mobilizing resources to compete with national parties on a larger scale.
- **Coalition dynamics** – ONOE can lead to more pre – election alliances, altering regional political strategies.
- **Marginalization of regional issues** – ONOE might amplify national narratives and issues which can ultimately lead to sidelining of regional concerns like ethnic and minority rights, local development and agrarian and rural concerns.
- **Shift in campaign strategies** – regional parties might be forced to align their agendas with national narratives to remain relevant in public and politics in general, leading to their diluted focus on local issues and regional identities.

IMPACT ON FEDERALISM –

- **Erosion of state autonomy** - ONOE may weaken the federal structure by centralizing political discourse in favour of national parties like the BJP, INC OR AAP.
- **Uniform governance cycle** - If ONOE is implemented then states may lose their flexibility to dissolve assemblies and conduct elections on regional needs and issues.

- **Uniform policy prioritization** - simultaneous elections could result in one –size –fits –all approach to governance, where central priorities and agendas dominate, potentially ignoring the diverse developmental needs of individual states.

One of the most prominent example of impact on regional parties and federalism in India due to simultaneous elections was the time in 1950s-60s during which the INC dominated the overall discourse overshadowing regional movements like the **Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu**¹⁰ and parties which endorsed it, as voters prioritized national agenda over local issues due to which regional parties struggled to gain traction.

Influence on Voter’s behaviour and Impact on Coalition Politics-

INFLUENCE ON VOTER BEHAVIOUR-

- **Nationalization of elections** – Many voters may prioritize national issues like national security over local concerns and issues affecting the electoral prospects of regional parties.
- **Reduction in voter fatigue** – A simultaneous and single election cycle may lead to enhanced voter turnout but might dilute focus on regional governance.

Internationally, Bulgaria's experience illustrates us the impact of frequent elections on voter fatigue. Between years 2021 -24 Bulgaria held six elections in span of three years, leading to decreased voter turnout and engagement. Internationally, Bulgaria's experience illustrates the impact of frequent elections on voter fatigue¹¹.

IMPACT ON COALITION POLITICS –

Regional parties play a pivotal role in in forming coalition governments and synchronizing elections at a time might diminish their bargaining power, as national narratives could overshadow regional priorities.

Historical context: Regional parties such as **Shiv Sena (Maharashtra)** and **JMM (Jharkhand)** have historically leveraged their influence in coalition dynamics and by implementing ONOE this advantage could be eroded.

¹⁰ A. Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy*, Macmillan, 2007

¹¹ Bulgaria's sixth election in three years sparks further political soul-searching | Euronews

The NITI Aayog's 2017 report, "Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The 'What', 'Why', and 'How'", discusses the potential impact of simultaneous elections on coalition politics in India. The report suggests that synchronizing national and state election cycles could stabilize coalition governments by reducing the frequency of elections, thereby minimizing political disruptions and fostering consistent policy implementation across the nation. However, it also acknowledges concerns that simultaneous elections may diminish the bargaining power of regional parties in coalition formations, as national narratives might overshadow regional issues and agendas.

Case Study and Historical Context-

Historical context: Pre-1967 Simultaneous Elections in India -

From the years (1952 to 1967), India conducted simultaneous elections for the state legislative assemblies and Lok Sabha. This practice was disrupted due to the political instability caused by coalition governments and mid-term dissolutions of state legislative assemblies. During this period, regional parties in India had limited influence, as national parties like Indian national Congress dominated both state and central elections and overall political narrative.

However, the breakdown of elections at same time gave way for regional parties to rise like the (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu) and (Shiv Sena in Maharashtra), tailoring their campaigns to address specific state issues without competing with national narratives and parties at large.

Case Study – Telangana¹² (2018):

- **Context:** The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), a regional party in the newly formed state of Telangana, preponed the state elections in 2018, to avoid coinciding with the Lok Sabha elections of 2019.
- **Reason:** TRS feared that simultaneous election with Lok Sabha could overshadow their regional agenda with national narratives propagated by parties like the BJP and INC.
- **Impact of strategy:** The TRS strategy succeeded in avoiding voter polarization based on national issues, which helped them secure a decisive victory in the state elections.
- **Observation:** This instance underscores the apprehension of regional parties

¹² TRS dissolved assembly to avoid 'Modi factor' in 2019: J P Nadda | India News - The Indian Express

regarding the overshadowing of local issues in synchronized elections.

Insights from Historical and Contemporary Contexts:

Simultaneous elections could streamline the administrative processes and reduce costs of elections but may pose challenges for regional parties, as national issues could dominate, undermining federalism. Historical experiences and case study mentioned above highlights the tension between electoral efficiency and the preservation of diverse regional voices in India's democratic framework.

Effect of ONOE on Regional Minorities and Marginalized Groups-

ONOE has the potential to marginalize issues pertinent to regional minorities or backward classes in India, as their concerns and issues might not align with national narratives. ONOE has the potential to overshadow concerns of regional minorities like Gorkhas, Bodos, Bhils, Santhals and Muslims (are regional minorities in several states) each of which faces unique challenges related to identity, rights and socio – economic development.

Example: Tribal and Dalit issues often receive more attention in state elections of Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh than in national one i.e. of Lok Sabha, because they are in considerable number in these states and have influence in political arena. Synchronized elections have the ability to overlook their concerns.

Arguments For and Against ONOE in the Regional Context-

Arguments For-

- **Administrative Efficiency:** There would be reduced logistical and financial burden.
- **Governance Stability:** It would ensure continuity in policy implementation.

Arguments Against-

- **Undermining Diversity:** It risks marginalizing regional identities.
- **Monopolization:** National parties may dominate the overall discourse, overshadowing regional voices and concerns.

Regional Identity and Campaign Strategies-

Regional parties may need to rethink and reconfigure their strategies to be able to compete in a landscape dominated by national narratives. National narratives like the one propagated by the BJP during 2019 have the capacity to distract public from their regional concerns. For

example AAP in Delhi focuses on governance issues unique to the region like free water, electricity and medical facilities for people and BJD in Odisha campaigns on regional identity and welfare programs. If ONOE is implemented then these parties may need to change their way of campaign and governance along with new measures for protecting regional identities of their people.

Comparative Study: Implementing One Nation, One Election in India and Lessons from Other Countries-

I. Cross-National Comparisons

Some nations hold simultaneous elections for their central and local authorities. Their practice is a potential source of informative learning for the prospective benefits and detriments of ONOE.

- 1. South Africa:** National and provincial elections take place every five years¹³. Local government elections take place independently thus easing the burdens on logistics. However, this has also led to a stronger dominance and hold of the ruling national party, limiting provincial autonomy.
- 2. Indonesia:** Elections of president, national legislature, and regional councils of Indonesia are simultaneous every five years¹⁴. The big archipelago country is confronted with logistical difficulties almost similar to India. Furthermore, simultaneous elections were designed to reduce electoral expenditure and streamline governance. However, studies point out that the extreme focus on national-level leadership often overshadowed the significance of local elections in Indonesia, reducing regional accountability.

Lessons for India

The historical and international context of simultaneous elections provides us some critical insights and lessons –

- South Africa's **Independent Electoral Commission** manages all the elections, with uniformity and clarity. Simultaneously coordinating Lok Sabha and State Assemblies while the local bodies have separate election may make easier India's shift.

¹³ HLC REPORT, Page no-117

¹⁴ HLC REPORT, Page no-120

- **Advanced Planning** i.e. in depth pre-election planning ensures smooth implementation despite Indonesia's geographical diversity. Indonesia's electronic voter registration and electronic voting could be used by India to deal with its vast electorate.
- **Policy Alignment vs. Regional Autonomy:** While simultaneous elections in India may ensure better coordination between central and state policies, they risk undermining the regional autonomy.
- **National vs. Local Issues:** A combined electoral cycle has the potential to overshadow local concerns like farmer distress and drug addiction in Punjab, ethnic and tribal identity protection in the North eastern states such as Assam and farmer suicides in Vidarbha and Marathwada regions in Maharashtra, reducing accountability at the state level.
- **Potential Impact on Regional Parties:** The historical and eventual rise of regional parties post-1967 suggests and indicates that non-simultaneous elections create space for regional aspirations. A return to simultaneous elections as practiced earlier might reverse this trend, centralizing political narratives.

II. Intra-State Comparisons

The federal structure of India poses unique challenges for the complete application of ONOE as state elections are held separately at their assembly term.

1. **Phased Polling in the Early Period of Indian Independence- 1947-1967:** India had conducted general elections simultaneously for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. This was discontinued due to avoidable dissolution and political instability.

ONOE Implications: Political stability and mechanisms for handling premature dissolutions are necessary to ensure that the elections stay in sync.

2. **Simultaneous Elections (Lok Sabha + Assembly Elections)**

2019: Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim.

2014: Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

ONOE Implications: Cost-saving in terms of resources and manpower. Enhances voter turnout by consolidating election efforts. Requires alignment of the tenure of both central and state governments. State-specific issues may get overshadowed by

national issues during campaigns.

III. Key Challenges in Adapting International Practices to India

1. **Diverse Electoral Timelines:** Unlike countries with fixed-term legislatures, India's assemblies may be dissolved prematurely, disrupting synchronization efforts.
2. **Population Size and Geographic Scale:** India alone has more than 900 million voters, and none other has, which is very difficult to match logistically
3. **Federal Autonomy:** Indian states have an intrinsic constitutional prerogative with regard to its legislative tenure: that is where the synchronization really becomes difficult to implement.
4. **Voter Awareness and Behaviour:** Because simultaneous elections put the spotlight mostly on national instead of regional topics, the electoral choices of voters in their representation change.

IV. Suggestions for Adoption of ONOE in India

1. **Gradual Harmonization:** First, test the ground with phased alignment of some states' elections with Lok Sabha.
2. **Electoral Calendar:** A constitutional amendment for the fixed electoral calendar.
3. **Development of Election Infrastructure:** Usage of EVMs, and more storage structure development along with human resource training to increase scale.
4. **Technology:** Increase ease of digital forms of registration and enhance the transparency through the blockchain-based voting.
5. **Consensus Building:** Consult the political parties, the state governments, and the other stakeholders to acquire the buy-in for the ONOE model.

Challenges and Recommendations for Implementing One Nation, One Election in India:

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" actually aims to centre the idea of synchronizing Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections, thus making elections less frequent with associated distractions. However, such a scheme in a vast and complex democracy like India presents many challenges.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges: Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356 of the Constitution

call for amendments so that the term of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies may be made identical. Legal intricacies involved in obtaining a consensus for the amendment of these provisions are that it should receive two-thirds majority of Parliament and approval by half of the states. No amendment is necessary which would extend this term beyond five years. The only change is that in the event of a mid-term dissolutions, the term of the reconstituted legislature shall be for a period lesser than five years and for the remaining unexpired period of the original term of five years¹⁵. Assemblies or the Lok Sabha can be dissolved prematurely before the completion of their term in view of political instability. This may disrupt the election cycle. These issues can be managed by introducing constitutional measure to handle premature dissolutions, such as caretaker governments or temporary extensions. Establish a mechanism for deferred elections in exceptional cases.

Logistical Challenges: Sufficient infrastructure for safely storing EVM machines in all the districts. Training millions of election officials and security personnel for handling simultaneous elections. Coordinating the deployment of central paramilitary forces and local police across the nation. It can be tackled by providing sufficient funds to purchase more EVMs and construct storage arrangements. Large-scale training for election officials and investment in logistics management technology should be made.

Political and Federal Obstacles¹⁶: Regional parties are wary of identity loss and marginalization in the event of synchronized elections. Interests of national and regional parties are difficult to reconcile. States are likely to consider ONOE as an infringement on federal rights. Managing these obstacles by consulting with political parties and state governments to achieve consensus. A structure that would provide equal participation to regional parties and uphold federal principles should be formed.

Financial Issues: The purchase of EVMs, VVPATs, and the construction of infrastructure may amount to more than ₹13,000 crore. Political parties may face a problem in mobilizing resources for a pan-India campaign. By dedicating fund to support the initial implementation, which will solve this issue to certain extent. There could be cap on campaign expenditures to level the playing field for all sides.

¹⁵ HLC REPORT, Page no-260(Para 7)

¹⁶ https://legallaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf, Page 17 (Para 4.4)

Operational Challenges: Voter Awareness¹⁷ and Education i.e. increased voter understanding is critical for this new system. Disruptions such as floods or riots could disrupt coordinated elections. Coping up with the challenges by conducting voter awareness campaigns nationwide through print and electronic media. Prepare contingency plans in case of disruption and ensure elections are conducted smoothly.

Implementation Recommendations:

1. Phased Implementation- Pilot Projects to begin with a few states to conduct simultaneous elections and check the feasibility. Gradual Rollout in Implementing ONOE in phases over 10-15 years to deal with unforeseen challenges.
2. Institution Building- Strengthening the Election Commission of India to improve the capacity and independence of the ECI to conduct simultaneous elections.
3. Technology Integration- Digital Solutions such as leveraging technology like blockchain for secure and transparent voting. Data Management like using advanced analytics to plan logistics and resource allocation.

FINAL OPINION

The proposal for "ONOE" by union government stands at the crossroads of economic pragmatism and democratic complexity of our nation. This research paper dives into the potential economic benefits of synchronized elections, including substantial cost savings, reduced administrative burden and the possibility of fostering policy stability by mitigating the constant cycle of elections. However, the stated economic advantages should be weighed against the implications for our federal structure and regional politics. While the idea of unified elections across India could streamline governance, it risks marginalizing regional voices and could reduce the autonomy of state governments in tailoring their electoral agendas to local concerns and issues. The proposal also raises significant logistical and constitutional challenges, for example the need for amendments to align electoral cycles and address scenarios of mid-term dissolution of state legislatures. A balanced approach is essential to address these concerns and policymakers must consider some mechanisms to preserve regional diversity and ensure equitable representation while pursuing economic efficiency. Ultimately, the success of "One Nation, One Election" depends on its ability to harmonize economic benefits with the foundational principles of Indian democracy and federalism that underpin our

¹⁷ https://legallaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/simultaneous_elections/NITI_AYOG_REPORT_2017.pdf, Page 17 (Para 4.4)

polity. By engaging in a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue, the government should explore a path that aligns economic aspirations with our democratic ideals, so that it can be ensured that progress does not come at the expense of India's diverse political fabric.

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