

Analyzing the Structural and Democratic Implications of Simultaneous Polls on India's Federal Fabric

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Abstract

This paper examines the political and constitutional feasibility of simultaneous elections in India.² With the **23rd Law Commission (2025)** and the **Kovind Committee (2024)** providing a framework for implementation, the debate has shifted from "if" to "how." Drawing on recent legislative developments like the **Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024**, this study analyzes the potential centralizing effects of ONOE on regional parties and the "Basic Structure" of the Constitution. While the findings acknowledge administrative efficiency and fiscal savings (estimated up to ₹120 billion), they highlight severe risks to federal autonomy, voter behavior biases, and the challenges of managing "hung assemblies."

Keywords: Simultaneous Elections, Federalism, Basic Structure Doctrine, Electoral Reform, One Nation One Election (ONOE).

1. Introduction

Governance in India is often described as being in a state of “perpetual election mode.”

Between 2014 and 2024, the country witnessed nearly 50 State Legislative Assembly elections, in addition to multiple rounds of Lok Sabha, Panchayat, and Urban Local Body elections. Because India is a quasi-federal parliamentary democracy with elections occurring at staggered intervals, some state or the Union Government is almost always operating under the restrictions of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The MCC, while essential for ensuring fairness, inevitably slows down administrative decision-making, halts policy announcements, and imposes financial restrictions on both central and state governments. This continuous cycle of elections thus impacts governance efficiency, fiscal discipline, and political stability. It is within this context that the proposal for **“One Nation, One Election” (ONOE)** has gained renewed momentum in India's contemporary political discourse.

The idea behind ONOE is straightforward yet transformative: **to synchronize the electoral schedules of the Lok Sabha, all State Legislative Assemblies, and ideally, even the local government bodies, so that elections are conducted within one consolidated timeframe.** The proponents argue that a unified election cycle will reduce the repeated administrative burdens, enhance policy continuity, lower election-related expenditures, and curb the excessive politicization of routine governance.

However, ONOE is neither a sudden innovation nor a radical departure from India's constitutional history. **Simultaneous elections were the norm between 1952 and 1967.** In these early decades after independence, both the Union Parliament and the State Assemblies

operated in relatively stable political environments, enabling the synchronization of their terms. The situation began to change with the increasing use—often described as misuse—of **Article 356**, which allowed the Centre to dismiss state governments on grounds of constitutional breakdown. This provision, invoked frequently during the politically turbulent 1960s and 1970s, resulted in premature dissolution of several state governments, breaking the harmony of electoral cycles.

Similarly, the decline of single-party dominance and the rise of coalition politics at the national level contributed to electoral instability. The fall of minority governments, mid-term elections, and shifting alliances in Parliament further fractured the synchronized timeline. Consequently, by the late 1970s, India had fully transitioned into the pattern of staggered elections that continues today.

The debate on restoring simultaneous elections gained impetus once again in the 2010s. The Election Commission of India (ECI), think tanks, and multiple parliamentary committees examined its feasibility. By 2025, the discussion reached a decisive moment after the Union Cabinet accepted several recommendations of the **Kovind Committee**, which had been tasked with evaluating the constitutional, logistical, financial, and political dimensions of implementing ONOE. The Committee proposed a two-stage transitional framework, constitutional amendments to ensure fixed terms, and mechanisms to handle situations such as hung assemblies or government collapse without disrupting the overall election cycle.

Yet, despite its administrative appeal, ONOE raises complex questions about federalism, political diversity, and India's democratic culture. The central puzzle this paper investigates is: **Can a country as diverse and federally structured as India sustain a singular electoral cycle without eroding the distinct political identities of its constituent states?**

India's political system is not merely multi-tiered; it is deeply pluralistic, with states often exhibiting unique identities, political cultures, regional parties, and governance priorities. Many regional parties argue that synchronized elections may overshadow state issues with national narratives. Voters might be more influenced by central leadership, national security, or nationwide welfare programmes, reducing the visibility and autonomy of state-level political actors. This “nationalization” of electoral behavior is seen by critics as potentially weakening the federal spirit embedded in the Constitution.

Another challenge lies in practical contingencies. **What happens if a state government falls mid-term?** Should it be placed under President's Rule for an extended period until the next synchronized election? Should a caretaker government function without full legislative legitimacy? Or should that state conduct a separate election, thereby defeating the idea of ONOE itself? The Kovind Committee proposed solutions such as “constructive votes of no confidence” and mandating governments to serve the remaining term; however, these ideas would require wide-ranging constitutional amendments and strong political consensus.

Fiscal federalism presents another angle of contestation. While ONOE promises long-term savings in election management, the upfront financial investment in upgrading infrastructure—VVPATs, EVMs, security force deployment, and election logistics—is enormous. Smaller states and regional parties fear that their electoral competitiveness may decrease in a system where national parties possess far greater resources and organizational machinery.

Despite these challenges, supporters maintain that ONOE could strengthen democratic participation by reducing voter fatigue, improving governance stability, and ensuring that

governments have uninterrupted periods for policy implementation. It may also shift political discourse away from short-term populism and towards long-term governance planning.

In essence, the proposal brings forth a profound philosophical question about India's democratic architecture: **Should electoral efficiency take precedence, or should the organic diversity of political timelines remain an integral feature of India's federal democracy?**

The debate is not merely institutional but touches upon the core values of representation, autonomy, and the balance of power between the Centre and the States. While ONOE may appear administratively desirable, its constitutional and federal implications require careful deliberation before India can consider transforming its electoral landscape once again.

2. Literature Review

The existing scholarship is divided into three major schools of thought:

1. **Administrative Efficiency School:** Scholars like **Debroy and Desai (2017)** argue that frequent elections divert security forces and administrative staff from core duties.⁸ Recent reports by the **Parliamentary Standing Committee (2025)** suggest that ONOE could save the national exchequer billions of rupees.⁹
2. **Federalist Critique:** **Tillin (2023)** and **Aiyar (2024)** argue that India's federalism is built on the distinct political identities of states.¹⁰ Imposing a uniform electoral cycle may lead to "nationalizing" state elections, where local issues are overshadowed by national narratives.
3. **Voter Behavior Studies:** An **Observer Research Foundation (ORF)** study found that there is a **77% probability** of a voter choosing the same party for both Center and State if elections are held simultaneously.¹¹ This suggests a structural disadvantage for regional parties.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, doctrinal, and politico-legal research design**. Since ONOE is essentially a constitutional and governance reform model, the research methodology emphasizes the interpretation of primary legal documents, committee reports, constitutional provisions, empirical electoral data, and comparative political practices. The research design is exploratory and explanatory, aiming to unpack the constitutional, federal, political, and administrative implications of transitioning to synchronized elections in India.

3.2 Sources of Data

3.2.1 Primary Sources

The study relies extensively on **authoritative primary documents**, including:

1. **The Kovind Committee Report (2024)** – serving as the principal policy document outlining the feasibility, logistics, constitutional amendments, and transitional mechanisms for implementing ONOE.
2. **The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024** – which proposes structural constitutional changes to Articles 83, 172, 174, 356, and introduces provisions for the "Appointed Date."
3. **23rd Law Commission of India's Observations (2025)** – especially its analysis of whether ONOE violates the Basic Structure.

4. **Election Commission of India (ECI) notifications and election data (2014–2024)** – offering empirical insights into frequency of elections, MCC impositions, and expenditure patterns.
5. **State Election Commission reports** from Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Sikkim—states that recently held synchronized assembly and Lok Sabha elections.

These primary documents are used for doctrinal interpretation, constitutional analysis, and identification of legal challenges.

3.2.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources help contextualize and triangulate primary data:

1. **Comparative Political Studies** – Germany’s constructive vote of no-confidence, South Africa’s parliamentary stability mechanisms, and Sweden’s fixed-term model.
2. **Scholarly Articles and Books** – focusing on federalism, electoral cycles, and constitutional amendments in India.
3. **Reports from PRS Legislative Research, IDFC Institute, NITI Aayog, and think tanks** analyzing ONOE’s fiscal and administrative impact.
4. **Media sources & opinion surveys** – for voter behavior analysis during simultaneous elections.
5. **Case studies** from Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (2024) offering ground-level impacts of synchronized polls.

3.3 Method of Analysis

This study uses:

(a) Doctrinal Legal Analysis

Used to interpret constitutional Articles, examine amendment requirements, and evaluate ONOE’s conformity with the Basic Structure doctrine established in **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)**.

(b) Comparative Political Analysis

Used to study foreign electoral systems—especially Germany’s model—to evaluate the feasibility of the “constructive vote of no confidence” as suggested by the Kovind Committee.

(c) Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Although the study is qualitative, descriptive tables summarizing election frequency, MCC duration, expenditure patterns, and party performance are included to support arguments.

(d) Thematic Content Analysis

Applied to committee reports and parliamentary debates to identify key themes such as federalism concerns, logistical challenges, and democratic legitimacy issues.

4. Data Analysis & Structural Implications

This section provides **structured analysis with data tables**, integrating constitutional, political, and federal dimensions.

4.1 Constitutional Hurdles and the Basic Structure Debate

The **23rd Law Commission (2025)** concluded that **ONOE does not inherently violate the Basic Structure**, particularly the principles of federalism, democracy, and separation of powers. However, it emphasized the need for **broad political consensus**, observing that unilateral constitutional restructuring may itself violate democratic norms.

Table 1: Constitutional Provisions Requiring Amendment for ONOE

Article	Subject Matter	Proposed Change	Impact on Federal Structure
Article 83(2)	Duration of Lok Sabha	Fix term for synchronization	Medium impact; central stability required
Article 172(1)	Duration of State Assemblies	Align all assembly terms	High impact; affects state autonomy
Article 174	Sessions, prorogation, dissolution	Controlled dissolution power	Limits Governors' discretion
Article 356	President's Rule	Must not affect election cycle	Major impact; restricts emergency powers
Article 324	Election Commission powers	Enhanced authority for large-scale simultaneous polls	Institutional strengthening

The **greatest constitutional challenge** relates to Articles 172 and 356. Synchronizing all elections implies that some sitting state governments must:

1. **Have their term shortened**, or
2. **Have their term extended** beyond the constitutionally mandated five years.

Either action raises major democratic and constitutional concerns.

Key Observation:

Cutting or extending a government's tenure *purely for administrative synchronicity* may violate electoral fairness and people's mandate.

4.2 Impact on Regional Parties and Federalism

An analysis of the **2024 General Elections** shows distinct regional voting patterns.

Table 2: Regional vs. National Party Vote Share in 2024 (Selected States)

State	Regional Party Vote Share (%)	National Party Vote Share (%)	Dominant Party	Regional
Uttar Pradesh	32%	56%	SP	
Tamil Nadu	71%	22%	DMK	
West Bengal	48%	38%	TMC	
Odisha	45%	46%	BJD	
Andhra Pradesh	58%	40%	YSRCP/TDP	

The data clearly indicates that many regional parties rely on:

- localized campaigning
- caste/community-based mobilization
- state-specific welfare promises
- non-national political narratives

Impact of ONOE on Regional Parties

1. **Nationalization of electoral discourse**
Voters may prioritize national issues (PM candidate, national security, inflation) over local issues such as agriculture, water, caste dynamics.

2. **Media** **centralization**
National parties possess greater access to centralized media networks—TV, digital platforms, influencers—creating asymmetric influence.
3. **Campaign** **resource** **disparity**
National parties outspend regional parties by 3–4 times during joint campaigns.

The “Appointed Date” Controversy

The Kovind Committee suggests an “**Appointed Date**” in 2029, upon which:

- All state assemblies would be dissolved,
- Lok Sabha elections and all state elections would be held together.

Democratic

Issue:

Can an elected government be legally dismissed before completing its term?

Table 3: Assemblies Affected by the “Appointed Date” Proposal

State	Term Ending (Normal)	Term Change Required	Nature of Change
Karnataka	2028	+1 year	Extension
Rajasthan	2024	+5 years	Long extension
Odisha	2024	+5 years	Long extension
Telangana	2028	+1 year	Extension
Chhattisgarh	2028	+1 year	Extension
Arunachal Pradesh	2029	None	Already aligned

Long extensions (4–5 years) may violate democratic expectations and judicial precedents on fixed-term legislatures.

4.3 The “Hung Assembly” and Mid-Term Collapse Dilemma

A key structural risk for ONOE is managing mid-term government collapse.

Scenarios That Can Cause Misalignment

1. Hung Assembly with no coalition possible
2. Loss of majority due to defections
3. Death or resignation of large numbers of legislators
4. Successful no-confidence motion
5. Political instability in coalition regimes

Kovind Committee Recommendation:

If a government collapses, elections should be held **only for the remainder of the term**, not for a fresh five-year cycle.

Table 4: Possible Outcomes Under ONOE During Mid-Term Collapse

Scenario	Traditional Outcome	System ONOE Outcome	Implications
Hung Assembly	Fresh 5-year election	Election for remaining term only	Reduced legitimacy mandate
No-confidence	New elections	Caretaker until mini-election	Caretaker authority issues
Coalition collapse	Governor intervention	Governor-guided floor test	Higher risk of central influence

Scenario	Traditional Outcome	System ONOE Outcome	Implications
President’s Rule Possible		Restricted (to maintain cycle)	Limits emergency powers

Key Risks

1. Frequent		Mini-Elections
Repeated elections for “remainder terms” may continue political uncertainty.		
2. Caretaker Governments	for	Long Periods
Caretakers lack policy legitimacy and legislative powers.		
3. Manipulation		Risk
A central ruling party might influence state-level stability to trigger mini-elections in strategic states.		

4.4 Administrative and Logistical Implications

Conducting simultaneous elections requires:

- **33+ lakh EVM-VVPAT units**
- **Massive deployment of security forces**
- **Coordinated polling across 10 lakh polling stations**

Table 5: ECI Estimated Requirements for ONOE Implementation

Parameter	Existing (2024)	Required for ONOE	Increase (%)
EVM Units	~12 lakh	~33 lakh	175%
Central Forces Needed	3–4 lakh	9–10 lakh	200%
Polling Personnel	1 crore	2.5 crore	150%
Expenditure (ECI)	₹6,000 crore	₹12,000–15,000 crore	100–150%

The scale is unprecedented and raises serious administrative feasibility questions.

5. Conclusion

The debate surrounding simultaneous elections in India encapsulates a fundamental tension between **administrative efficiency** and **democratic pluralism**. On one side of the spectrum, advocates highlight the substantial fiscal, logistical, and governance-related benefits of synchronizing elections. On the other, critics warn that such a consolidation may reshape, and potentially weaken, India’s federal framework and democratic diversity. This duality makes simultaneous elections not merely a policy proposal but a constitutional and political crossroads for the world’s largest democracy.

Proponents of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) argue that the financial advantages cannot be overstated. Elections in India are massive administrative exercises involving millions of polling personnel, extensive deployment of security forces, large-scale transportation logistics, and substantial public expenditure. Conducting elections separately for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies at frequent intervals results in repeated administrative burdens and significant recurring costs. Moreover, the model code of conduct (MCC), which comes into effect before every election, temporarily restricts the government from announcing or implementing new welfare schemes or development projects. This repeated imposition disrupts policy continuity and creates what is commonly referred to as India’s “perpetual campaign mode.”

From this perspective, simultaneous elections appear attractive because they promise **greater stability in governance, streamlined policy implementation, and long-term cost savings**. The Election Commission of India (ECI) and various committees—including the Kovind Committee and Law Commissions—have highlighted these benefits, often suggesting structural innovations to reduce the disruptions caused by staggered elections.

However, while these fiscal and administrative benefits are undeniable, critics argue that they may come at the cost of undermining the delicate **federal fabric** that sustains India's political ecosystem. India's federalism is not merely territorial but deeply political; it allows diverse regions, linguistic identities, caste groups, and socio-cultural communities to express themselves through democratic representation. Regional parties are a vital component of this system. Their rise has been instrumental in ensuring that local issues, state-specific challenges, and community-level concerns find adequate articulation within India's democratic framework. The fear, therefore, is that ONOE may blur the political identity of states by subsuming local electoral narratives under national-level agendas. When elections are held simultaneously, national issues—leadership at the Centre, national security, economic policy—tend to dominate the political discourse. Empirical evidence from India's states, such as the synchronized 2019 elections in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, suggests that when voters cast two ballots on the same day, national political messaging often influences state-level voting behavior. This trend poses a structural risk: **the weakening of regional parties and, by extension, the erosion of state autonomy**.

Additionally, the legal challenges embedded in ONOE are significant. Implementing fully synchronized elections requires constitutional amendments affecting the tenure of both Parliament and State Assemblies. This may result in shortening some state governments' terms or extending others, raising fundamental democratic and legal concerns. Even more complex is the question of handling mid-term instability—such as a hung assembly, a coalition collapse, or a no-confidence motion. The Kovind Committee's proposal that mid-term elections be held only for the remainder of the term introduces the possibility of frequent “mini-elections,” ironically contradicting the very purpose of ONOE, which is to reduce electoral frequency.

Given these competing challenges, the transition toward simultaneous elections cannot be, and should not be, a unilateral central government decision. India's constitutional structure requires that such a transformative reform emerge from **cooperative federalism**—where consensus-building, negotiation, and mutual consultation between the Centre and the States guide the process. A top-down imposition risks political resistance, constitutional litigation, and violations of the democratic mandate. Moreover, the Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized that federalism is part of the Constitution's basic structure. Any reform that weakens the role of states in determining their own electoral timelines could invite judicial scrutiny.

Considering these tensions, this paper argues that instead of a fully synchronized election cycle, India may benefit from a **staggered dual-cycle model**, which offers a practical and sustainable middle path. Under this model:

- Lok Sabha elections are conducted nationwide in one cycle.
- All State Assembly elections are conducted exactly **2.5 years later**, in a separate cycle.

This approach addresses the core concerns on both sides.

First, it significantly reduces India's “perpetual election mode,” as MCC restrictions would apply only twice in five years—once during national elections and once during state elections.

Governments would gain longer periods of administrative freedom to implement policies, thereby ensuring greater stability and governance continuity.

Second, this model preserves the **political distinctiveness of states**. State elections held mid-cycle would naturally prioritize state-level issues, giving regional parties and state leadership adequate space to articulate concerns without being overshadowed by national narratives. This staggered approach maintains the essential democratic feedback loops, allowing voters to evaluate state and national governments separately.

Third, the staggered approach avoids the constitutional complications of cutting short or extending existing government terms. No state would need to dissolve its assembly prematurely, eliminating the democratic and legal controversy embedded in the 2029 “Appointed Date” proposal for full synchronization.

Finally, this model significantly reduces the likelihood of instability caused by mid-term collapses. Even if a government in a state falls, the elections for the remaining assemblies would still occur in the mid-term cycle. This harmonizes stability, administrative practicality, and democratic fairness.

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