

One Nation, One Election: Where is India Heading?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in its third term in the office is adding further items to its populist agenda by proposing controversial legislations like the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), Waqf Bill, and 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE). On 17 December 2024, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal presented two bills for the 129th amendment to the Indian constitution. One bill proposed holding simultaneous elections at the national and state levels. The other proposed to hold simultaneous elections in the Union Territories as well. After fierce debate in Parliament, Speaker of the *Lok Sabha* (LS) Om Birla forwarded the bills to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) consisting of 27 *Lok Sabha* and 12 *Rajya Sabha* members.¹ So far, the JPC has met twice on 8 January and 25 February 2025 to discuss the feasibility of the implementation of the Bill. However, the final recommendation will be made in the future.

Background

The Ram Nath Kovind Committee, which was established in September 2023, had underlined in March 2024 that separate elections in the Centre and the States were costing the Indian economy and causing administrative and efficiency-related issues. The Committee proposed that to

¹ "One Nation One Election Bill Referred to Joint Parliamentary Panel," India Today, December 20, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/one-nation-one-election-bill-referred-to-joint-parliamentary-committee-consisting-of-39-mps-2652741-2024-12-20>.

compensate for these economic burdens, the government must hold elections simultaneously. Moreover, the elections for the local bodies be conducted in the next 100 days of the elections.²

Conducting simultaneous elections in India's political history is not an entirely new idea. From 1951 to 1967, India saw synchronized elections. However, the pattern was disturbed by the early dissolution of some state assemblies and of the *Lok Sabha* itself in 1970. Efforts were made in 1983 by the Election Commission of India (ECI), in 1999 by the Law Commission, and think-tanks like Niti Ayog, to revive the ONOE. States like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are already holding simultaneous elections.

What Do the Supporters of ONOE Say?

After the debate, the Speaker also forwarded the bill to 47 political parties, out of which 32 supported the bill, while 15 expressed their concerns. The supporters are mainly the BJP allies and NDA members.³ They base their arguments on six factors as outlined in the 79th Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee in 2015. Firstly, the simultaneous elections will reduce the cost compared to what is incurred in conducting separate elections in terms of administration and security. Secondly, ONOE will yield administrative efficiency by reducing the time consumed in holding elections separately throughout the year and directing the government to more specific agendas. Thirdly, the leaders will focus more on long-term policy goals instead of short-term policy approaches, which will enhance uniformity in implementation. Fourthly, simultaneous elections will reduce the frequent disturbance caused by the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) that limits the government's power during elections. Fifth, ONOE will result in improved voter turnout as separate elections cause voter fatigue. Lastly, instead of continued electioneering, the parties will focus more on the development agendas.⁴ Based on these six factors, the BJP aims that through ONOE, it will be able to put all its energies at once to secure popular support from 900 million registered voters in India through electioneering, and unchallenged policy agendas.

The Loopholes in Implementing ONOE

Besides the benefits which the supporters of the proposed bills project, the critics say that the proposition is a threat to India's federal structure, and is a move towards autocratic rule. The bill's

² Nikita Yadav, 'Decoding India's One Nation, One Election' Plan," *BBC*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly7vjp73zvo>.

³ "32 Political Parties support One nation, one election proposal, 15 oppose," *Business Standard*, December 12, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/32-political-parties-support-one-nation-one-election-proposal-15-oppose-124121200981_1.html.

⁴ Bhaswat Prakash, "One Nation One Election: A Comparative Analysis from Voter Behavior to Political Polarization," November 02, 2024, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5007991.

critics have raised concerns about the arguments advanced by its supporters. According to them, as far as the cost of the elections is concerned, the funds are issued in three categories for ECI, organization of the elections, and to buy EVMs. The implementation of ONOE would not reduce at least two aspects of the funding, as ECI will be requiring more funds for administration, printing of the ballots, and logistics. Similarly, more funds will be required to buy extra EVMs, which will be replaced every fifteen years. The Opposition has also raised concerns regarding the feasibility of the ONOE. Congress MP and member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on ONOE, Priyanka Gandhi, said that it is still unsure whether the bill's implementation will be cost-effective. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav said: "The decision of 'One Nation-One Election' will prove fatal for true democracy. It will also deal a big blow to the federal structure."⁵

Analysis

On the face of it, the implementation of ONOE bill would appear to bring economic and administrative efficiency. However, deeper analysis reveals its impacts on India's federal political structure and the autonomy of the State governments in prioritizing local issues. Firstly, ONOE will reduce the relevance of regional political parties as national parties will take charge in projecting their agendas with more strength. Not necessarily, but in most cases, the national parties believe that the power of their narrative will overcome the narrative of regional parties. Amitabh Tiwari, a political strategist in India, observes that in the states where simultaneous elections are organized, the party winning in the *Lok Sabha* is most likely to win the *Vidhan Sabha* (VS) elections too.

In Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, the LS and VS elections were held simultaneously in April-June 2024. The party that won the *Vidhan Sabha* elections also won the *Lok Sabha* elections. And pointedly, there was not much difference in the vote share. For example in Odisha, the BJP secured 45 percent votes in State assembly polls and 40 percent in LS polls. In Andhra Pradesh, NDA was able to secure 55 percent votes in VS, and 54 percent in LS. This is also related to the second impact that would be on people's choices. Because of different time periods of the elections, the people in a State were able to differentiate the performance of a party at the national level and State level. They made choices differently. For example, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and many other states have been governed by different governments at national and local levels at the same time. With elections being held simultaneously, the people would not have the choice to let their frustration out until the time span of the assembly is completed.

⁵ Akhilesh slams one nation one election, says its fatal for democracy," Hindustan Times, December 17, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/akhilesh-slams-one-nation-one-election-says-it-s-fatal-for-democracy-101734452200785.html>.

Thirdly, with the people unable to choose differently, based on their judgements about the government, lack of accountability will grow. Fourthly, the regional issues could likely become dormant in the face of the national issues. For now, the Central government is responsible for the national agendas, while the State government looks after domestic issues like floods, economic growth, employment and other social issues. As the agendas of the national parties will get stronger, there will be little space for the local concerns to be highlighted and addressed. Lastly, the proposition is itself against democratic principles as in case the bill is passed, Presidential rule will be imposed in the States and many assemblies will be dissolved prematurely against the will of the people.

Conclusion

The "One Nation, One Election" (ONOE) bill represents a bold reform idea with promises of cost savings and streamlined governance; yet it raises profound concerns about its impact on India's democracy and federalism. By aligning national and state elections, the bill risks marginalizing regional parties, diluting voter choices, and sidelining local issues in favor of national agendas. Critics argue that the logistical and financial implications, including the need for additional EVMs and enhanced administrative resources, may outweigh the projected benefits. While government sources suggest that full implementation of ONOE is unlikely before the 2034 elections, it remains essential to address these challenges to ensure that the proposed reform aligns with India's democratic ethos.