

The Synchronised Ballot: Challenges and Opportunities for 2029

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kandi Kamala, Gedam Kamalakar. The Synchronised Ballot: Challenges and Opportunities for 2029. *Jr of Glob Pub Hea.* 2026; 8(1): 31–37.

ABSTRACT

The proposal for One Nation, One Election (ONOE) seeks to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies in India by 2029, marking a significant transformation in the country's democratic and federal architecture. Titled "The Synchronised Ballot: Challenges and Opportunities for 2029," this study critically examines the constitutional, political, administrative, and democratic implications of implementing simultaneous elections in a diverse and federal polity. The paper explores the historical evolution of India's electoral cycles, the rationale behind ONOE—such as governance stability, reduced election expenditure, administrative efficiency, and policy continuity—and the concerns it raises regarding federal autonomy, regional representation, electoral accountability, and voter behaviour. It further analyses institutional challenges including constitutional amendments, logistical preparedness of the Election Commission of India, and the management of premature dissolutions of legislatures. By situating the ONOE debate within comparative democratic frameworks and India's unique socio-political context, the study argues that while synchronised elections present opportunities for strengthening governance and reducing electoral fatigue, their success depends on broad political consensus, robust constitutional safeguards, and respect for India's plural federal structure. The paper concludes by outlining policy pathways and safeguards necessary for ensuring that electoral synchronisation enhances rather than undermines India's democratic future.

KEYWORDS

• One Nation • One Election • Simultaneous Elections • Indian Democracy • Electoral Reforms • Federalism • Constitutional Amendments • Election Commission of India • Governance Stability • Democratic Accountability • India 2029

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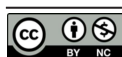
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➤ **Received:** 27-01-2026 ➤ **Accepted:** 28-02-2026



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INTRODUCTION

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to shape political authority and hold representatives accountable. In India, the world's largest democracy, elections have historically played a critical role in sustaining constitutional values, political participation, and federal balance. Against this backdrop, the proposal of *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE)—aimed at synchronising elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies by 2029—has emerged as one of the most significant electoral reform debates in contemporary Indian politics. The idea seeks to replace the existing staggered electoral cycle with a unified electoral calendar, thereby fundamentally reshaping the functioning of India's democratic and federal system.

The concept of simultaneous elections is not new to India. Between 1951 and 1967, elections to the Lok Sabha and most State Assemblies were held concurrently. However, political instability, premature dissolution of legislatures, and the imposition of President's Rule disrupted this synchrony, leading to the present system of frequent elections across different states and levels of government. Proponents of ONOE argue that the current model imposes substantial financial and administrative burdens on the state, contributes to governance paralysis due to the repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, and results in voter fatigue. From this perspective, electoral synchronisation is viewed as a means to enhance administrative efficiency, policy continuity, and political stability.

At the same time, critics caution that synchronised elections may undermine the federal spirit of the Constitution by diluting regional political voices and prioritising national narratives over state-specific concerns. Concerns have also been raised regarding democratic accountability, voter behaviour, and the potential centralisation of political power. Additionally, the implementation of ONOE poses significant constitutional and logistical challenges, including the need for multiple constitutional amendments, consensus among political parties, and enhanced capacity of the Election Commission of India to manage large-scale, simultaneous electoral exercises.

In this context, *The Synchronised Ballot: Challenges and Opportunities for 2029* seeks to critically examine the feasibility and implications of implementing ONOE in India. The study situates the debate within India's historical experience, constitutional framework, and comparative democratic practices. By analysing both the opportunities and risks associated with electoral synchronisation, this paper aims to contribute to an informed and balanced understanding of whether ONOE can strengthen India's democratic future or whether it risks unsettling the delicate equilibrium of its federal polity.

Historical Background of Elections in India

India's electoral history reflects a continuous process of democratic experimentation shaped by constitutional principles, political developments, and federal realities. The adoption of universal adult franchise at the time of independence in 1947 marked a radical democratic commitment, especially in a society characterised by deep social and economic inequalities. The Constitution of India, which came into force in 1950, laid the foundation for an independent and robust electoral system under the supervision of the Election Commission of India (ECI), entrusted with conducting free and fair elections at the national and state levels.

The first general elections held in 1951–52 established an important precedent in India's democratic journey. Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies were conducted simultaneously, inaugurating a synchronised electoral cycle across the country. This practice continued through the next three general elections in 1957, 1962, and 1967. During this period, electoral synchronisation was largely facilitated by political stability, the dominance of a single party at the national and state levels, and relatively limited instances of premature dissolution of legislatures.

However, the late 1960s marked a turning point in India's electoral history. The fourth general elections in 1967 witnessed the decline of one-party dominance and the rise of coalition governments and regional political forces. This shift introduced greater political pluralism but also increased governmental instability in several states. Frequent collapses of state governments, defections, and the imposition of President's Rule led to the premature

dissolution of legislative assemblies. As a result, the synchronised electoral cycle was gradually disrupted, giving way to the staggered and frequent elections that characterise India's current electoral system.

The period between 1971 and 1989 further entrenched electoral desynchronisation. While the Lok Sabha completed its full terms in some instances, several state assemblies faced early dissolutions due to political instability or central intervention. The Emergency (1975–77) and subsequent political realignments deepened mistrust between the Centre and the States, reinforcing concerns about federal autonomy. The emergence of coalition governments at the national level after 1989, along with the growing influence of regional parties, made electoral cycles increasingly diverse and asynchronous.

In the decades since the 1990s, India's electoral democracy has been marked by competitive multi-party politics, frequent elections, and heightened political mobilisation. While this has strengthened political participation and representation, it has also led to administrative strain, escalating election costs, and repeated disruptions to governance due to the Model Code of Conduct. These developments have revived debates on electoral reform, including the feasibility of returning to simultaneous elections as a means of improving governance efficiency.

Thus, the contemporary proposal for *One Nation, One Election* must be understood within this historical trajectory—from early synchronisation to fragmentation driven by political pluralism and federal dynamics. India's electoral history demonstrates that synchronised elections were once a functional reality, but also underscores the structural and political changes that complicate their revival today. Any attempt to reintroduce a synchronised ballot by 2029 must therefore account for the lessons of the past while adapting to the complexities of modern Indian democracy.

Ramnath Kovind Committee Report on 'One Nation, One Election'

In September 2023, the Government of India constituted a High-Level Committee (HLC) on *One Nation, One Election*, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, to examine the feasibility, constitutional issues, and practical

pathways for synchronising elections at all levels in India. After 191 days of consultations, research, and stakeholder engagement, the committee submitted its comprehensive report to President Droupadi Murmu in March 2024. The report, spanning over 18,600 pages, reflects inputs from political parties, constitutional experts, economists, state election authorities, and civil society stakeholders.

Recommendations

1. Support for Simultaneous Elections:

The committee expressed a unanimous opinion that simultaneous elections—initially for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, followed by municipality and panchayat elections within 100 days—would fundamentally transform India's electoral process and governance architecture.

2. Phased Implementation Approach:

To operationalise the reform, the panel recommended a two-step approach. The first phase focuses on synchronising national and state elections, while the second phase would align local body elections with the broader cycle.

3. Constitutional and Legal Framework:

Recognising the constitutional implications, the committee proposed amending multiple provisions of the Constitution to create mechanisms for “appointed dates,” manage mid-term dissolutions without breaking the synchrony, and define terms such as “full term” and “unexpired term.” It also suggested introduction of **Article 324A** to facilitate simultaneous elections for local bodies.

4. Electoral Administration:

A single electoral roll and unified voter identity system was recommended to streamline electoral processes across jurisdictions. Additionally, the committee emphasised the need for a dedicated Implementation Group to oversee logistics, resource deployment, and coordination among the Election Commission of India (ECI) and State Election Commissions.

Rationale and Evidence

The report argued that the loss of simultaneous elections after 1967 has imposed significant socio-economic and governance costs,

including policy paralysis due to the repeated application of the Model Code of Conduct, administrative overload, and expenditure inefficiencies. It cited research suggesting that synchronised polls could contribute to enhanced economic performance by reducing uncertainty and facilitating continuity in policy implementation.

Stakeholder Views

During consultations, the committee received responses from 47 political parties, with 32 in favour of simultaneous elections and 15 expressing reservations. The varied feedback highlighted both support for administrative efficiency and concerns about impacts on federal autonomy and state priorities—issues that the report acknowledged but argued could be addressed within a robust constitutional framework.

Implications for 2029

The committee's report explicitly envisages the possibility of holding the first synchronised national and state elections by 2029, contingent on political consensus and legislative action to amend the Constitution and align electoral timelines across the country.

The Synchronised Ballot: Challenges and Opportunities in the World

The idea of synchronised or simultaneous elections is not unique to India. Across the world, democracies have experimented with different electoral calendars to balance governance efficiency, democratic accountability, and federal autonomy. Comparative international experiences reveal that while synchronised elections can offer administrative and economic advantages, their success depends heavily on political culture, constitutional design, and institutional capacity.

Several countries follow fixed-term and synchronised election models. In the United States, federal elections for the President, Congress, and, in many cases, state-level offices are held on a fixed electoral calendar. While state elections are not always perfectly synchronised with federal elections, the fixed-term system ensures predictability and limits frequent electoral disruptions. This has contributed to administrative stability, though it has also been criticised for reduced voter turnout in midterm elections and increasing nationalisation of state-level political issues.

South Africa offers another example of coordinated elections within a quasi-federal system. National and provincial elections are held simultaneously every five years, while local government elections occur midway through the national cycle. This model balances electoral efficiency with local democratic accountability, demonstrating that partial synchronisation can function effectively in multi-level governance systems.

In **Indonesia**, a large and diverse democracy comparable to India in scale, simultaneous elections were introduced in 2019 for the presidency, national legislature, and regional representative bodies. The reform aimed to reduce election costs and political fragmentation. However, the experience also highlighted significant challenges, including logistical overload, administrative stress on election officials, and concerns about voter fatigue due to lengthy and complex ballots. These outcomes underscore the importance of institutional preparedness and phased implementation.

Brazil conducts synchronised elections for executive and legislative offices at the federal and state levels every four years, while municipal elections are held separately. This model has enhanced governance continuity and reduced election frequency, but critics argue that it strengthens national political narratives at the expense of local issues, a concern highly relevant to India's federal structure.

In parliamentary democracies such as the **United Kingdom** and **Germany**, elections are generally synchronised through fixed terms, but provisions for early dissolution remain. Germany's strong constitutional safeguards and cooperative federalism allow synchronised federal elections without undermining state autonomy. The UK experience, however, shows that political exigencies can still disrupt synchronisation, as seen during periods of early elections between 2017 and 2019.

Across these global cases, certain opportunities of synchronised ballots are evident: reduced election expenditure, administrative efficiency, predictable governance cycles, and enhanced policy continuity. At the same time, common challenges include the nationalisation of local politics, voter fatigue due to complex ballots, risks of centralisation, and the need for strong

institutional mechanisms to handle premature dissolutions without democratic compromise.

The global experience suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all model for electoral synchronisation. Successful implementation requires constitutional clarity, political consensus, and administrative resilience. For India, these international examples offer valuable lessons: synchronisation can work in large democracies, but only when adapted carefully to domestic federal realities and democratic diversity. As India considers the feasibility of a synchronised ballot by 2029, global practices underline the need for a calibrated, phased, and context-sensitive approach rather than wholesale replication.

Challenges of Implementing the Synchronised Ballot in India

Implementing *One Nation, One Election* (ONOE) in India by 2029 presents a range of constitutional, political, administrative, and socio-democratic challenges. While the idea promises administrative efficiency and reduced electoral fatigue, these challenges underscore the complexity of translating the proposal into practice in the world's largest democracy.

1. Constitutional and Legal Challenges

- **Multiple Constitutional Amendments Required:** Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356, among others, must be amended to synchronise Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections. Mid-term dissolutions of assemblies and the Lok Sabha also need legal clarification to maintain the synchronised cycle.
- **Federal Autonomy:** States may perceive ONOE as undermining their constitutional autonomy by prioritising national political cycles over regional priorities.
- **Judicial Oversight:** Any reform will likely be subject to judicial scrutiny to ensure it does not violate the federal structure or democratic rights, potentially delaying implementation.

2. Political Challenges

- **Consensus Across Parties:** Achieving agreement among diverse political parties, particularly regional parties

whose electoral strategies rely on staggered elections, is difficult.

- **Nationalisation of Politics:** Synchronised elections may amplify national issues in state polls, reducing space for regional and local agendas, which could alter political dynamics and disadvantage smaller or regional parties.
- **Electoral Timing Conflicts:** States with premature assembly dissolutions or ongoing political crises may face difficulties aligning with a fixed national electoral calendar.

3. Administrative Challenges

- **Election Commission Capacity:** Conducting simultaneous elections across India would be the largest logistical exercise ever undertaken, requiring enhanced manpower, technology, and coordination across the ECI and State Election Commissions.
- **Resource Mobilisation:** Synchronised elections would demand massive deployment of security personnel, polling staff, and electronic voting machines (EVMs) simultaneously nationwide.
- **Voter Management:** Managing voter rolls, ensuring accessibility, and avoiding electoral malpractices become more complex at this scale.

4. Socio-Democratic Challenges

- **Voter Fatigue and Complexity:** Longer and more complex ballots could lead to confusion or lower voter turnout, particularly among first-time voters and rural populations.
- **Impact on Local Governance:** The alignment of state and national elections could overshadow local issues, affecting municipal and panchayat elections, which play a critical role in grassroots democracy.
- **Public Perception and Legitimacy:** The reform may face resistance from citizens who perceive it as a centralisation of power or as prioritising efficiency over democratic choice.

5. Economic and Policy Challenges

- **Implementation Costs:** While long-term savings are projected, the initial cost of transitioning to synchronised elections—

including legal reforms, administrative training, and technological upgrades – could be substantial.

- Policy Continuity Risks: Synchronising elections may necessitate extensions or reductions in terms for some assemblies, potentially raising legal and ethical concerns about representative mandates.

CONCLUSION

The proposal of One Nation, One Election represents one of the most ambitious electoral reforms in India's democratic history. By aiming to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies by 2029, it seeks to address persistent challenges such as governance disruption, administrative overload, repeated application of the Model Code of Conduct, and escalating electoral expenditure. Historical experience shows that simultaneous elections were once feasible in India, but political fragmentation, premature dissolution of legislatures, and the rise of regional parties disrupted this synchrony. Analysis of the Ramnath Kovind Committee Report, constitutional provisions, and global experiences indicates that synchronised elections offer substantial opportunities. These include improved governance continuity, administrative efficiency, reduced electoral fatigue, and potential economic benefits. Comparative cases from countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia demonstrate that synchronisation can function effectively even in large, diverse democracies, provided there are robust institutional frameworks and political consensus.

At the same time, the reform faces significant challenges. Constitutional amendments, federal autonomy concerns, political consensus-building, administrative capacity, and potential voter fatigue are all critical factors that must be addressed. Ensuring that synchronised elections do not undermine regional representation or democratic accountability will require careful legal safeguards, phased implementation, and continuous stakeholder engagement. In conclusion, while the path to a synchronised ballot by 2029 is complex and fraught with challenges, it also offers a transformative opportunity for strengthening India's democratic system. With meticulous planning, broad political support, and adherence

to constitutional principles, One Nation, One Election has the potential to enhance governance efficiency and reinforce India's status as a resilient and mature democracy in the 21st century.

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