

One Nation, One Election Proposal: Federalism and Democratic Process in India

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Abstract

The 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal aims to restore simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all state legislative assemblies in India, a practice that prevailed from 1951–52 until its disruption in the late 1960s due to premature dissolutions. Its core objectives include reducing exorbitant electoral expenditures, minimizing governance disruptions from frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, enhancing policy continuity, and potentially boosting voter turnout through consolidated democratic exercises.

Key constitutional mechanisms proposed in the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, and related legislation involve amendments to Articles 83 and 172 (governing the duration of Parliament and state legislatures), insertion of new provisions such as Article 82A (establishing an 'appointed date' for synchronized polls post-general election) and Article 324A (empowering the Election Commission to manage implementation, including contingencies for mid-term dissolutions or hung assemblies), alongside adjustments for union territories and phased alignment of local body elections.

As of January 2026, the bills remain under detailed examination by the Joint Parliamentary Committee, whose tenure was extended in December 2025 amid ongoing consultations with stakeholders, reflecting continued parliamentary deliberation without final enactment.

This article addresses the central research question: To what extent does the ONOE proposal reconcile administrative efficiency with the preservation of India's quasi-federal structure and vibrant democratic process?

The fundamental tension lies in the promised gains—significant cost savings, reduced electoral fatigue, and sustained developmental focus—versus substantial risks to quasi-federalism (potential centralization and erosion of state autonomy) and electoral accountability (nationalization of regional issues, challenges in handling premature dissolutions, and implications for anti-defection mechanisms).

While the ONOE proposal presents compelling administrative and economic efficiencies, it poses profound challenges to India's quasi-federal framework and the pluralism of its democratic process, requiring robust constitutional safeguards to avoid violating the basic structure doctrine.

Keywords: One Nation One Election, Simultaneous Elections, Indian Federalism, Basic Structure Doctrine, Electoral Democracy, Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, Cooperative Federalism, Article 368

I. Introduction

India's democratic framework is a marvel of scale and resilience, yet it operates under persistent strain from its electoral architecture. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections engaged nearly 970 million eligible voters in a multi-phase process spanning weeks, demonstrating unparalleled civic participation. However, this vibrancy exacts significant costs. Independent estimates, corroborated by the High-Level Committee on One Nation One Election (chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind), place total expenditure for the 2024 general elections—covering public funds for logistics, security, and administration, plus party campaigns—at over ₹1.35 lakh crore (approximately \$16 billion). When factoring in state assembly and local body polls, India's near-perpetual election cycle imposes recurring burdens: repeated mobilization of paramilitary forces, extended enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) that halts policy decisions and infrastructure projects, and diversion of administrative energy from governance to electoral management. The Kovind Committee, in its March 2024 report, quantified how staggered elections contribute to "policy paralysis," estimating annual disruptions worth thousands of crores installed development. In a federal nation where elections occur almost every year across states, these cycles perpetuate electoral fatigue, raise questions of fiscal prudence, and prompt a deeper inquiry:

To appreciate the weight of these burdens, consider the evolution of India's electoral expenditures over time. In the first general elections of 1951–52, the total cost was a modest ₹9 crore—a figure reflecting the nascent republic's constraints. By the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, public expenditure alone approached ₹60,000 crore, with party spending pushing totals higher. The 2024 cycle marked a new pinnacle: analyses from think tanks and the Election Commission indicate government outlays on security (deploying over 300 companies of central forces), voter awareness campaigns, electronic voting machines (EVMs) and VVPATs, and logistical arrangements across 1.05 million polling stations contributed significantly to the ₹1.35 lakh crore aggregate. Political parties, particularly national ones like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reported expenditures nearing ₹1,500 crore individually, fueled by digital campaigning, rallies, and media buys. Beyond finances, the MCC's repeated imposition—often lasting months in staggered polls—delays critical projects: road constructions, welfare scheme rollouts, and budgetary allocations freeze, creating what economists' term "governance interruptions" that cumulatively hinder GDP growth potential.

These disruptions extend to human resources. Election duties pull teachers, government officials, and security personnel from regular roles, straining public services. Voter fatigue manifests in declining turnout in off-cycle state polls compared to synchronized national ones historically. In this context, the 'One Nation One Election' proposal emerges not as radical innovation but as a corrective to a drifted system, promising administrative streamlining while raising profound constitutional questions about federal balance and democratic pluralism.

The practice of simultaneous elections defined India's early democratic decades. The Constituent Assembly debates (1947–1949) envisioned a unified electoral framework under the new Constitution, with provisional Parliament serving dually as the Lok Sabha post-1950. The first elections (1951–52) synchronized Lok Sabha and state assembly polls across most states, a pattern

repeated in 1957, 1962, and 1967. This alignment stemmed from constitutional design: Articles 83 and 172 originally contemplated five-year terms commencing uniformly. Resource scarcity in post-partition India necessitated efficiency, and synchronization fostered national integration amid linguistic reorganization of states (1956).

The rupture began incrementally. In 1959, Kerala's assembly dissolved prematurely after President's Rule, desynchronizing its cycle. Similar dissolutions followed in other states during the 1960s, exacerbated by coalition instabilities and Article 356 invocations (over 100 times by the 1990s, later curbed post-S.R. Bommai). The 1967 elections saw partial simultaneity, but by 1971, Indira Gandhi's early Lok Sabha dissolution fully staggered national polls. The 1975–77 Emergency extended tenures, further fragmenting cycles. Post-1980s, with rising regional parties and hung assemblies, mid-term polls became routine, entrenching the current perpetual mode.

Revival discussions surfaced periodically. The Law Commission's 170th Report (1999) endorsed simultaneity for cost savings and governance focus. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (2003) echoed this. NITI Aayog's 2017 discussion paper and BJP manifestos (2014, 2019) kept the idea alive. Yet momentum crystallized only with the High-Level Committee (HLC) constituted in September 2023 under Ram Nath Kovind.

The Kovind Committee's report, submitted March 14, 2024, spans over 18,000 pages and draws from consultations with 47 political parties (21 supporting, others opposing or conditional), former Chief Election Commissioners, economists, and legal experts. Key findings highlight:

- **Fiscal Impact** — Simultaneous elections could save substantial public funds by consolidating deployments and infrastructure.
- **Governance Continuity** — Reduced MCC periods would minimize policy stalls.
- **Voter Engagement** — Historical data shows higher turnout in synchronized polls (e.g., 67% in 1967 vs. varying lower in staggered ones).
- **Security and Administration** — Fewer mobilizations ease burdens on forces and officials.

Recommendations unfold in phases:

1. Align Lok Sabha and state assemblies via constitutional amendments.
2. Subsequently integrate local bodies (panchayats/municipalities).
3. Establish a common 'appointed date' post-general election.
4. Handle contingencies: mid-term dissolutions trigger fresh polls for the remainder term or aligned short tenures.
5. Single electoral roll prepared by Election Commission of India (ECI) with state cooperation (amending Article 325).
6. Logistical preparations, including ID cards and EVM sufficiency.

The Committee addressed ratification concerns, suggesting most amendments fall under Article 368's simple majority, not the proviso requiring state assent.

This blueprint informed legislative action. On September 18, 2024, the Union Cabinet accepted the report. December 17, 2024, saw introduction of the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, and Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, in Lok Sabha by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal. Referred immediately to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) of 39 members (27 Lok Sabha, 12 Rajya Sabha), chaired by BJP MP P.P. Chaudhary.

Core provisions of the 129th Bill:

- Amend Article 83 (Lok Sabha duration) and 172 (state assemblies) to align terms.
- Insert Article 82A: President notifies 'appointed date' based on first Lok Sabha sitting post-general election; state terms synchronize accordingly.
- Insert Article 324A: Empower ECI for union territory/local body implementation.
- Contingencies: Hung assemblies or no-confidence motions trigger fresh polls concluding with the national cycle; unexpired terms curtail or extend minimally.

As of January 24, 2026, the bills remain under JPC scrutiny. The committee's tenure extended multiple times—most recently December 2025—to facilitate exhaustive consultations. December 2025 hearings featured 23rd Law Commission inputs affirming broad viability (no mandatory state ratification for core amendments). Economists testified on potential GDP boosts (0.5–1% via reduced disruptions). Stakeholder submissions reveal polarization: BJP and allies (e.g., JD(U), TDP) endorse efficiency; opposition (Congress, TMC, DMK) decry centralization risks. No final report tabled, with deliberations ongoing amid the 2026 Budget session.

This protracted trajectory underscores the proposal's contentiousness. Proponents frame ONOE as pragmatic modernization, aligning with global practices (e.g., South Africa's synchronized national-provincial polls) and Ambedkar's unitary leanings in federal design. Critics invoke quasi-federalism's basic structure (*Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, 1973; *S.R. Bommai*), warning of:

- State autonomy erosion via forced alignments.
- Regional issue nationalization, disadvantaging local parties.
- Accountability dilution through rigid tenures.
- Ratification bypasses.

Scholarly discourse (2025 publications in journals like *Economic & Political Weekly*, *Indian Journal of Constitutional Law*) amplifies these: some view ONOE as cooperative federalism enhancement; others as quasi-unitary shift.

Comparatively, federations vary: USA's staggered terms preserve sub-national independence; Germany's synchronized Bundestag-Länder polls balance efficiency; Indonesia's 2019 simultaneous national-regional-local experiment faced logistical chaos but cost savings.

The core tension juxtaposes efficiency imperatives—fiscal relief, governance continuity, administrative ease—against safeguards for pluralism, regional representation, and basic structure integrity (federalism, free/fair elections, separation of powers).

Methodologically, this doctrinal study examines constitutional texts, amendments, precedents (Bommai, Kihoto Hollohan on anti-defection), policy reports (Kovind HLC, Law Commission), parliamentary records, and scholarship. Critical normative evaluation integrates empirical insights (expenditure data, turnout trends) and selective comparative lessons.

The article proceeds: Section II details evolution and framework; Section III probes federalism implications; Section IV assesses democratic process/accountability impacts; Section V critically evaluates with alternatives/safeguards; Section VI concludes with findings and recommendations.

2. Historical and Conceptual Foundations

The Evolution of India's Election Cycles: From Simultaneity to Staggered Polls

From 1951–52 (the first general elections) through the fourth cycle in 1967, national and state polls were largely synchronized. The Constituent Assembly's transitional provisions—where the provisional Parliament doubled as the first Lok Sabha—created a natural alignment. Practical necessities reinforced this: a young nation recovering from Partition, with limited resources, found efficiency in holding polls together. Four full cycles occurred concurrently:

- 1951–52: Lok Sabha and most state assemblies.
- 1957: Fully simultaneous across the board.
- 1962: Again synchronized, amid external challenges like the Sino-Indian conflict.
- 1967: Largely simultaneous, though a few states (e.g., Nagaland, Pondicherry) had exceptions.

This era fostered a unified national electoral narrative while minimizing logistical strain. Voter turnout was robust, and governance benefited from aligned political mandates.

Now reflect: What caused the rupture? The breakdown began incrementally in the late 1960s, driven by political instability rather than deliberate design.

- 1959: Kerala's communist government dismissed under Article 356; fresh assembly polls desynchronized the state.
- Mid-1960s: Coalition fragility led to premature dissolutions in several states (e.g., Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan).
- 1967 elections: Congress lost power in nine states, producing hung assemblies and further mid-term polls.
- 1971: Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dissolved the Lok Sabha a year early for a fresh mandate, permanently decoupling national and most state cycles.
- 1975–77 Emergency: Extensions of tenures under constitutional provisions further fragmented alignments.

By the 1980s, with rising regional parties, frequent no-confidence motions, and routine use of President's Rule, staggered elections became the norm. Today, polls occur almost annually somewhere in India—creating the "perpetual election mode" critiqued in recent reports.

Core Constitutional Provisions Governing Electoral Cycles

At the heart of this evolution lie specific Articles that balance fixed tenures with democratic flexibility. Let us examine them closely.

- **Article 83(2):** The Lok Sabha "shall continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting... and no longer," unless sooner dissolved by the President on the Prime Minister's advice. The phrase "no longer" implies a maximum term, but dissolution allows early polls.
- **Article 172(1):** Parallel provision for state legislative assemblies—five years "from the date appointed for its first meeting... and no longer," unless sooner dissolved by the Governor (typically on the Chief Minister's advice).

These provisions embed a "fixed-yet-flexible" tenure: five years as the norm, but premature dissolution as a safety valve for political crises.

Now consider **Article 356:** If a state government cannot be carried on in accordance with the Constitution, the President may impose President's Rule, dissolving or suspending the assembly. Historically invoked over 100 times (most frequently pre-1994), it became a tool for desynchronizing cycles by triggering fresh state polls after central intervention.

Finally, reflect on the **federal division of powers** under the Seventh Schedule:

- **Union List (List I):** Entry 97 includes residual powers; electoral matters like delimitation and ECI superintendence fall here.
- **State List (List II):** Limited autonomy in local governance.
- **Concurrent List (List III):** Shared domains, but Union law prevails in conflict (Article 254).

This skewed distribution—strong Centre, weaker states—shapes electoral federalism. Elections to both Lok Sabha and assemblies remain under central oversight via the Election Commission (Article 324).

Federalism in the Indian Constitutional Context: Quasi-Federal and Basic Structure

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar called India "quasi-federal": federal in normal times, unitary in emergencies. Key features:

- Strong Centre: Emergency powers (Articles 352–360), appointment of Governors (Article 155), All-India Services (Article 312), and financial dependence of states.
- Asymmetric federalism: Special status for certain states (e.g., Jammu & Kashmir pre-2019, now union territories with assemblies).
- Cooperative elements: GST Council, NITI Aayog, inter-state councils.

Yet judicial doctrine elevated federalism to constitutional bedrock.

- **Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973):** The Supreme Court propounded the basic structure doctrine—certain features (including federalism) cannot be amended even by Parliament under Article 368. A 7-judge bench identified secularism, democracy, and federalism as essential.
- **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994):** A 9-judge bench explicitly declared federalism part of the basic structure. It curtailed arbitrary Article 356 use, requiring judicial review and parliamentary approval. Justice Sawant observed: "The States are not mere appendages of the Union... federalism is a basic feature ensuring unity in diversity."

Subsequent cases (e.g., Rameshwar Prasad v. Union of India, 2006; Nabam Rebia, 2016) reinforced limits on central intervention in state governments.

3. The 'One Nation One Election' Proposal: Framework and Rationale

Key Features of the 129th Amendment Bill and Related Legislation

The primary bill targets synchronization of Lok Sabha and state legislative assembly elections through targeted amendments:

- Modifications to **Article 83** (duration of Lok Sabha) and **Article 172** (duration of state assemblies) to facilitate aligned terms.
- Insertion of a new **Article 82A**, providing for simultaneous elections by linking assembly terms to a common cycle anchored in Lok Sabha elections.
- Insertion of **Article 324A**, empowering the Election Commission of India (in consultation with state election bodies) to oversee preparations, including a single electoral roll.

Related bills extend this to union territories (without legislatures) and, in a phased manner, to panchayats and municipalities—potentially requiring further amendments to Parts IX and IXA of the Constitution.

As of early 2026, these bills remain under examination by the Joint Parliamentary Committee (with extensions granted through late 2025 and ongoing deliberations), reflecting their evolving yet contested status.

Implementation Mechanics: Appointed Date, Cycle Alignment, and Mid-Term Disruptions

Central to the framework is the concept of an **appointed date**:

- The President, on the advice of the Election Commission, notifies this date as the first sitting of the Lok Sabha following a general election.
- All state assemblies' terms then synchronize to expire concurrently with (or align toward) this national cycle.

For initial alignment (transitioning from the current staggered system), the proposal contemplates a phased approach: assemblies with unexpired terms may continue until the next synchronized poll, with potential curtailment or extension minimized.

Most critically, contemplate the handling of **mid-term disruptions**—hung assemblies, no-confidence motions, or dissolutions:

- If a Lok Sabha or assembly dissolves prematurely, fresh elections fill only the unexpired portion of the term.
- The newly elected house serves solely for the remainder, ensuring realignment with the ongoing national cycle without perpetual desynchronization.

This avoids forced full five-year terms post-disruption, preserving accountability while prioritizing synchronization.

Official Arguments in Favor: Efficiency, Stability, and Democratic Enhancement

Key arguments include:

- **Administrative efficiency:** Consolidated polls reduce repeated mobilizations of security forces, officials, and machinery—easing logistical burdens in a vast nation.
- **Reduced Model Code of Conduct disruptions:** Fewer MCC impositions minimize "policy paralysis," allowing uninterrupted governance and project implementation.
- **Cost savings:** Substantial fiscal relief, with estimates suggesting reductions from the current multi-crore annual expenditures on separate polls.
- **Policy stability and continuity:** Aligned mandates enable long-term planning without perpetual electoral interruptions.
- **Potential for higher voter turnout:** Historical data from simultaneous cycles (1951–1967) shows elevated participation, possibly revived through consolidated democratic engagement.

These are framed as pragmatic gains for a developing democracy straining under perpetual elections.

4. Constitutional Challenges and Implications for Federalism

The 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal, while premised on administrative efficiency and governance continuity, raises significant constitutional concerns regarding India's federal structure. Although presented as a technical reform to synchronize electoral cycles, the proposed amendments engage directly with principles of federalism—a basic feature of the Constitution as established in landmark judgments such as *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973) and *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994). This section examines key challenges, including the procedural question of state ratification, substantive impacts on state autonomy, potential shifts in voter behaviour, and the broader debate between cooperative and competitive federalism.

Requirement of State Ratification under Article 368(2)

A threshold procedural issue concerns whether the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, attracts the proviso to Article 368(2), which requires ratification by at least half of the state legislatures for amendments affecting the federal distribution of powers—such as alterations to the Seventh Schedule, state representation in Parliament, or related provisions.

Proponents maintain that ratification is unnecessary. The High-Level Committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind framed the reforms as administrative in nature. This position gained support from preliminary views of the 23rd Law Commission, conveyed to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) in late 2025 consultations, which held that the core amendments do not directly impinge on the federal division of powers and can thus proceed via simple parliamentary majority.

Scholarly opinion, however, remains divided. Critics argue that inserting provisions like Article 82A—linking state assembly terms to the Lok Sabha cycle—effectively subordinates state legislative tenures to national contingencies, encroaching on state sovereignty in electoral matters. Such linkage, they contend, indirectly affects powers under the State List and the quasi-federal balance.

As of early 2026, with the bills still under JPC scrutiny following extensions granted in December 2025, this ratification debate remains unresolved and bears implications for the proposal's legitimacy and potential judicial review.

Impact on State Autonomy: Tenure Adjustments, Central Override, and Regional Issue Salience

Beyond procedure, the proposal poses substantive risks to state autonomy. The implementation mechanics—providing for fresh elections only for the unexpired portion of a term in cases of premature dissolution, or minimal extensions/curtailments for alignment—seek to maintain synchronization. However, these could result in state governments serving abbreviated terms, potentially diminishing their authority to pursue long-term regional policies.

A related concern is the possibility of indirect central override. A premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha could necessitate aligned state polls, imposing national political timelines on states regardless of local stability. The discretionary role of Governors under Article 174 in recommending dissolutions may exacerbate this in politically fragmented contexts.

Furthermore, simultaneous elections risk diminishing the salience of regional issues. The staggered system currently allows state contests to centre on local concerns—such as agrarian policies, caste dynamics, or state-specific welfare models—distinct from national narratives. Synchronization may elevate pan-Indian themes (e.g., foreign policy or prime ministerial leadership), thereby "nationalizing" state discourse and constraining the space for region-specific mandates essential to federal diversity.

Voter Behaviour Shift: Nationalization of Politics and Historical Evidence

Empirical and historical evidence supports concerns about altered voter behaviour. During the simultaneous cycles of 1951–1967, a pronounced "national wave" effect was observable, with Congress dominance amplified as voters tended to align national and state choices under the influence of figures like Jawaharlal Nehru. The advent of staggered polls coincided with the rise of regional parties—such as the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Left Front in West Bengal and Kerala—which capitalized on focused state-level campaigns.

Contemporary studies of overlapping polls (e.g., post-2014 analyses) reveal higher congruence in vote shares between Lok Sabha and assembly elections, suggesting that simultaneity reinforces national parties at the expense of regional ones. This nationalization could marginalize sub-national voices in India's multilingual and multicultural polity, altering the pluralistic character of electoral outcomes.

Cooperative versus Competitive Federalism

The proposal crystallizes a broader tension between cooperative and competitive federalism. Proponents portray ONOE as advancing cooperation: aligned cycles would promote national policy harmony, reduce governance disruptions across levels, and mirror collaborative mechanisms like the GST Council.

Critics, conversely, argue that it undermines competitive federalism—the idea of states as "laboratories of democracy" innovating distinct policies (e.g., varying approaches to prohibition or welfare schemes). Staggered elections enable such experimentation without national overshadowing; synchronization risks homogenization, tilting the constitutional balance toward unitary features contrary to recommendations of commissions like Sarkaria (1988) and Punchhi (2010), which emphasized preserving state autonomy.

In sum, while the ONOE proposal offers administrative benefits, its implications for federalism—procedural ambiguities, autonomy erosion, voter nationalization, and the cooperative-competitive dichotomy—warrant careful scrutiny against the basic structure doctrine. These challenges highlight the need for robust safeguards to preserve India's quasi-federal framework.

5. Implications for Democratic Process and Basic Structure

Beyond federalism, the 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal engages core elements of India's democratic process and the basic structure doctrine. The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that democracy, free and fair elections, and republican parliamentary governance form part of the Constitution's unamendable basic features (*Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, 1973; *Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain*, 1975). Synchronization of electoral cycles, while aimed at efficiency, raises questions about potential dilution of electoral accountability, shifts toward presidential-style politics, and impacts on institutional integrity. This section analyses these implications, balanced against counter-arguments from proponents.

Free and Fair Elections as a Basic Feature: Dilution of Accountability Mechanisms

Free and fair elections constitute an essential basic feature, encompassing not only periodic polls but also effective mechanisms for governmental accountability (*Mohinder Singh Gill v. Chief Election Commissioner*, 1978). A key concern is whether ONOE's synchronization undermines this by complicating mid-term accountability.

The proposal's contingency provisions—limiting fresh elections to the unexpired portion of a term following premature dissolution—preserve the possibility of no-confidence motions or dissolutions. However, critics argue that short residual terms may deter defections or no-confidence votes, as the resulting government would lack a full mandate for substantive policy-making. This could entrench unstable coalitions or weaken opposition scrutiny, indirectly insulating incumbents.

The interplay with the Tenth Schedule (anti-defection law) merits attention. Under *Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu* (1992), defection disqualifies legislators but does not automatically dissolve the house. In a synchronized regime, frequent defections might stabilize governments artificially, knowing that toppling one triggers only truncated elections. Such dynamics risk diluting voter sovereignty and the principle that governments must retain continual legislative confidence.

Separation of Powers and Parliamentary Democracy: Risk of Presidentialization

India's Constitution establishes a parliamentary system rooted in Cabinet responsibility to the Lok Sabha (Article 75) and state assemblies (Article 164), distinct from presidential models. Critics contend that simultaneous elections accentuate "presidentialization," where national leadership dominates campaigns, overshadowing collective Cabinet accountability.

Historical evidence from 1951–1967 supports this: dominant national figures influenced state outcomes, reinforcing one-party dominance. In contemporary multi-party contexts, synchronized polls may amplify prime ministerial visibility, with campaigns centred on national personalities rather than legislative performance. This could erode the Westminster-style emphasis on parliamentary sovereignty, tilting toward a de facto presidential contest and blurring separation of powers between executive and legislature.

Electoral Integrity: Role of the Election Commission and Institutional Interplay

Electoral integrity hinges on the Election Commission's independence (Article 324) and robust safeguards against manipulation. The proposed Article 324A empowers the Commission to manage synchronization, including single electoral rolls and contingency logistics—a potentially strengthening measure.

Yet concerns arise regarding workload concentration: conducting nationwide polls simultaneously strains resources, risking administrative lapses in a vast electorate. Interaction with anti-defection provisions and Governor discretion (Article 174) could invite disputes over dissolutions, burdening the Commission or courts. Proponents counter that consolidation enhances oversight by reducing fragmented polls prone to localized irregularities.

Counter-Arguments: No Violation of Basic Structure

Proponents, including opinions reflected in the Kovind Committee report and certain legal analyses, assert that ONOE does not violate the basic structure. Synchronization merely restores historical practice without abolishing periodic elections, accountability tools, or parliamentary responsibility. Mechanisms for mid-term polls preserve flexibility, and efficiency gains bolster democratic functioning by minimizing disruptions. Some judicial dicta (*e.g., observations in election petitions*) emphasize administrative reforms as compatible with constitutional essentials, provided core features remain intact.

As of early 2026, with the bills pending JPC finalization, these contentions remain testable only upon potential enactment and challenge. Nonetheless, the proposal's alignment with basic features—democracy, free elections, and separation of powers—turns on whether efficiency imperatives outweigh risks to pluralistic accountability.

In conclusion, while ONOE promises governance enhancements, its implications for the democratic process warrant rigorous judicial scrutiny against the basic structure. Safeguards addressing accountability dilution and institutional strain would be essential to reconcile reform with constitutional fidelity.

6. Comparative Insights

Comparative analysis of electoral cycle designs in other federal systems illuminates the perennial tension between administrative efficiency and the preservation of sub-national representation—core concerns in evaluating India's 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal.

Electoral Cycles in Select Federal Systems

United States The U.S. employs extensively staggered cycles: House of Representatives elections every two years, presidential elections every four years, one-third of Senate seats every two years, and state gubernatorial/legislative contests on varying schedules. This deliberate desynchronization insulates sub-national elections from national waves, enabling strong regional focus but at the cost of frequent polling and higher aggregate expenses.

Germany Bundestag (federal) elections occur every four years, while Landtag (state parliament) elections in the 16 Länder are staggered, typically on four- to five-year terms. Incidental overlaps occur, but no constitutional mandate for simultaneity exists. The system supports Länder autonomy—bolstered by the Bundesrat's legislative powers—while benefiting from coordinated federal-state administrative planning.

Australia Federal elections for the House of Representatives (three-year terms) and half the Senate are often held simultaneously, facilitated by provisions for double dissolutions. This yields partial efficiency gains, including cost reductions and higher turnout. State and territory elections remain largely independent, preserving sub-national policy distinction.

South Africa National and provincial elections are fully synchronized every five years, achieving significant administrative savings and streamlined voter participation. However, this model has drawn criticism for nationalizing provincial contests, where dominant national parties historically overshadow provincial-specific issues.

Lessons on Balancing Efficiency with Sub-National Representation

These jurisdictions reveal consistent trade-offs. Synchronized or semi-synchronized systems (South Africa, Australia) deliver efficiency benefits—lower costs, reduced logistical strain, and potentially higher turnout—but risk diluting sub-national representation through nationalization effects. Staggered models (United States, Germany) better safeguard regional pluralism and policy experimentation, though at greater fiscal and administrative expense.

For India, with its extraordinary linguistic, cultural, and political diversity, these precedents underscore the need for careful calibration. Synchronization may enhance governance continuity but requires robust safeguards—such as phased implementation or reinforced state consultation mechanisms—to mitigate risks of centralization and ensure that efficiency does not compromise the pluralistic essence of Indian federal democracy.

7. Critical Evaluation and Normative Reflections

The 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal presents a complex interplay of administrative advantages and constitutional risks. Viewed through the lens of the basic structure doctrine and India's quasi-federal framework, its merits and demerits must be carefully weighed to assess compatibility with constitutional values of democracy, federalism, pluralism, and accountability.

Weighing the Pros and Cons Through a Constitutional Lens

The primary strengths of ONOE lie in its potential to address systemic inefficiencies inherent in the staggered electoral system. Substantial fiscal savings—potentially reducing the multi-crore annual expenditure on separate polls—align with prudent resource allocation in a developing economy. Reduced imposition of the Model Code of Conduct would minimise governance interruptions, fostering policy continuity and long-term developmental planning. Historical precedent from 1951–1967 suggests higher voter turnout and streamlined administration, benefits that could enhance the effectiveness of democratic functioning without altering core constitutional provisions.

These gains, however, must be evaluated against significant constitutional costs. Synchronization risks eroding federalism—a basic feature—by subordinating state legislative tenures to national cycles, potentially enabling indirect central override and diminishing regional autonomy. The nationalization of politics threatens pluralistic representation, marginalising sub-national voices in a diverse polity. Furthermore, truncated terms post-mid-term dissolutions may weaken accountability mechanisms, complicating the parliamentary principle of continual legislative confidence. When measured against judicial safeguards in *Kesavananda Bharati*, *S.R. Bommai*, and *Kihoto Hollohan*, these implications raise legitimate concerns about compatibility with the basic structure, particularly free and fair elections and quasi-federal balance.

On balance, while the proposal's efficiency rationale is compelling and rooted in historical practice, its risks to federal pluralism and democratic accountability appear substantial absent mitigating measures.

Potential Safeguards

To reconcile these tensions, several safeguards could strengthen the proposal's constitutional viability:

- **Phased Implementation:** A gradual rollout—initially aligning Lok Sabha and select state assemblies, followed by local bodies—would allow empirical assessment of impacts on federal dynamics and voter behaviour, minimising disruptive transitions.

- **Consensus Through Ratification:** Requiring state legislature ratification under Article 368(2) for key amendments would foster cooperative federalism, ensuring broader political legitimacy and addressing procedural critiques.
- **Enhanced Mid-Term Contingency Rules:** Refinements such as guaranteed minimum tenure thresholds post-fresh polls, clearer guidelines on dissolutions, and judicially reviewable Governor discretion could preserve accountability while maintaining synchronization.

These mechanisms, if incorporated, would better align the reform with constitutional imperatives of pluralism and balance.

Normative Position

The ONOE proposal is normatively desirable in principle, offering pragmatic solutions to genuine governance challenges in a vast democracy. However, in its current form—as pending before the Joint Parliamentary Committee in early 2026—it remains fundamentally at odds with India's constitutional commitment to pluralistic federalism unless accompanied by robust safeguards. Efficiency cannot supersede the basic structure; rather, reform must reinforce unity in diversity. A safeguarded version—emphasising consensus, phased adoption, and accountability protections—could enhance democratic resilience without compromising the Constitution's quasi-federal ethos. Absent such amendments, the risks of centralisation and homogenisation outweigh the benefits, warranting caution in pursuit of this ambitious restructuring.

8. Conclusion and Way Forward

The 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) proposal represents an ambitious attempt to address undeniable challenges in India's electoral system—escalating costs, governance disruptions from frequent Model Code of Conduct impositions, and administrative strain in a perpetual election cycle. Drawing on historical simultaneity (1951–1967) and the recommendations of the High-Level Committee (2024), the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, offers a framework for synchronization that promises fiscal prudence, policy continuity, and enhanced voter engagement. However, as analysed, these efficiencies come with substantial constitutional risks: potential erosion of quasi-federal autonomy through tenure linkages and indirect central override, nationalization of politics diminishing regional pluralism, and strains on democratic accountability and the basic structure doctrine.

Central findings affirm that while the proposal does not outright abolish core features like periodic elections or parliamentary responsibility, its implementation mechanics—particularly contingency provisions for mid-term disruptions—could subtly shift power toward the Centre, homogenize political discourse, and complicate mechanisms such as anti-defection and no-confidence motions. Comparative insights from staggered (United States, Germany) and synchronized (South Africa) systems reinforce this tension: efficiency gains often correlate with reduced sub-national distinctiveness.

Policy and Judicial Recommendations

Should the bills proceed to enactment—still pending Joint Parliamentary Committee finalization as of early 2026—robust safeguards are imperative for constitutional compatibility:

- Mandatory state ratification under Article 368(2) for amendments affecting electoral federalism, ensuring consensus and cooperative legitimacy.

- Phased rollout, beginning with voluntary state alignment and empirical monitoring of impacts on regional representation.
- Strengthened contingency rules, including minimum tenure guarantees post-fresh polls and enhanced judicial oversight of dissolutions to preserve accountability.

If challenged before the Supreme Court (likely on basic structure grounds), viable review avenues include violations of federalism (*S.R. Bommai*), free and fair elections (*Mohinder Singh Gill*), and parliamentary democracy. The Court could scrutinise whether synchronization impermissibly alters the Constitution's quasi-federal equilibrium or dilutes pluralistic accountability, potentially striking down unsubstantiated provisions while upholding safeguarded elements.

Broader Implications for Indian Constitutionalism

In the 2026+ era—marked by deepening digital governance, evolving coalition politics, and assertions of regional identity—the ONOE debate encapsulates broader questions for Indian constitutionalism: How does the Republic balance unity with diversity amid centralizing pressures? The proposal underscores the enduring vitality of the basic structure doctrine as a bulwark against majoritarian reforms, while highlighting the need for adaptive institutions in a maturing democracy. Ultimately, pursuing synchronization without federal safeguards risks tilting toward unitary tendencies; with them, it could exemplify cooperative evolution, reinforcing India's constitutional resilience in an increasingly complex polity. Future reforms must prioritise pluralism, ensuring that efficiency serves—rather than supplants—the democratic ethos of unity in diversity.

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