



One Nation, One Election: A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Systems in India, South Africa and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The idea of "One Nation, One Election" in India proposes simultaneous elections for both the Lok Sabha (national parliament) and all state legislative assemblies. This initiative has been the subject of political and administrative discussions for years and aims to streamline the electoral process, reduce fiscal costs, and minimize frequent disruptions caused by staggered elections. Proponents of the policy argue that it would lead to better governance, as governments would have a more stable and continuous tenure without the looming threat of mid-term polls. However, critics highlight the complex challenges it poses, including logistical issues, constitutional amendments, and concerns about federalism and democratic integrity. This article delves into the historical origins, the rationale for the proposal, its potential advantages, disadvantages, and the constitutional and political challenges that need to be addressed. Ultimately, "One Nation, One Election" raises fundamental questions about the future of India's electoral system and governance.

Introduction

The concept of "One Nation, One Election" refers to a system in which all elections—national and state—are held simultaneously across India. This means the elections for the Lok Sabha and the various state legislative assemblies would take place on the same dates, in a single phase or multiple phases, but at the same time across the country. This idea has generated considerable debate, with political leaders and



scholars presenting various viewpoints on its feasibility and desirability. The debate centers on the advantages it offers, particularly in terms of cost-efficiency and governance, and the challenges it poses in terms of logistical execution, political consensus, and constitutional requirements.

On Wednesday, September 18, 2024, the Union Cabinet approved the recommendations of a high-level committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind. The committee had suggested holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as the first step, followed by municipal and panchayat elections within 100 days of the general election.

After the implementation of One Nation, One Election, if any state government falls into a minority, elections will be held there. The newly elected assembly's term will only last for the remaining period of the original term.

Historical Context

The idea of simultaneous elections is not entirely new to India. After India gained independence in 1947, simultaneous elections were held for both the Lok Sabha and state assemblies in 1951-52, 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, due to the premature dissolution of certain state legislative assemblies and the national government, the synchronization between national and state elections broke down, leading to the current scenario where elections are staggered across different times and states.

The "One Nation, One Election" proposal was resurrected in recent years by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The idea has found both strong support and opposition, indicating its potential to significantly alter India's electoral and governance landscape.

Rationale Behind One Nation, One Election

There are several reasons proponents argue in favor of simultaneous elections:

1. **Cost Efficiency:** Elections in India are an expensive affair. Staggered elections lead to repeated deployment of security forces, electoral staff, and administrative resources. By holding elections simultaneously, the government could significantly reduce the financial burden on the exchequer.
2. **Reduced Disruptions:** Elections in India often bring governance to a standstill, with the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct that prevents governments from announcing new policies or programs. Frequent elections across different states mean that governance is constantly disrupted. Simultaneous elections could reduce these interruptions, ensuring more consistent governance.
3. **Boost in Governance:** With simultaneous elections, governments at both the national and state levels could have fixed tenures without the constant pressure of upcoming elections. This would allow them to focus on governance and long-term policy-making rather than short-term electoral gains.



4. **Voter Fatigue:** Staggered elections can cause voter fatigue, as citizens are repeatedly called to the polls. Simultaneous elections could increase voter turnout by simplifying the process and ensuring that all citizens are engaged in the democratic process at the same time.

5. **Political Stability:** Proponents argue that simultaneous elections would lead to more political stability by aligning the national and state government cycles. This would minimize the constant churn of governments that characterizes India's political landscape, leading to better policy coherence and long-term planning.

Challenges and Concerns

Despite the potential benefits, the "One Nation, One Election" proposal also faces significant challenges:

1. Constitutional and Legal Hurdles: India's constitution provides for separate terms and electoral schedules for the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. Implementing simultaneous elections would require significant constitutional amendments, including potentially changing the structure of the federal system. Additionally, provisions would need to be made for situations where a government loses its majority mid-term and elections are required.

2. Federalism Concerns: India is a federal union, and state governments have significant autonomy. Some critics argue that simultaneous elections could undermine the autonomy of states by making state elections too closely tied to national issues. Voters might focus more on national-level parties and issues, diluting the significance of local governance.

3. Logistical Complexity: India is the world's largest democracy, with over 900 million eligible voters spread across diverse geographies. Conducting simultaneous elections would be a massive logistical undertaking, requiring the coordination of security forces, electoral staff, and resources across all states. The sheer scale of such an operation presents a formidable challenge.

4. Mid-Term Elections: One of the biggest challenges to simultaneous elections is the scenario where a government—whether at the national or state level—loses its majority before completing its term. Currently, when a government falls, elections are held for that particular body alone. Under "One Nation, One Election," provisions would need to be made for such situations, either through caretaker governments or staggered polls, which could undermine the uniformity of the electoral process.

5. Impact on Voter Behavior: Simultaneous elections may also alter voter behavior. In a country as diverse as India, local issues often play a critical role in determining the outcome of state elections. Critics argue that simultaneous elections could lead to national issues and the performance of national parties



overshadowing local concerns, thus skewing the results in favor of larger national parties like the BJP and Congress.

Legal and Constitutional Requirements

Implementing "One Nation, One Election" would require significant changes to India's legal and constitutional framework. Article 83 of the Indian Constitution stipulates the duration of the Lok Sabha, and Article 172 deals with the duration of state legislative assemblies. Amending these provisions would be necessary to synchronize their terms. In addition, several laws, including the Representation of the People Act, 1951, would need to be revised to account for the new electoral system.

Moreover, there would need to be provisions for exceptional situations such as the premature dissolution of governments. The concept of "constructive vote of no-confidence" or caretaker governments could be introduced to maintain stability in case a government loses its majority before the next scheduled election.

Political and Public Opinion

The political landscape in India is divided on the issue of simultaneous elections. The ruling BJP and some other political parties have supported the idea, citing its potential benefits for governance and electoral efficiency. However, several opposition parties, including regional players, have expressed concerns about the impact on federalism and local representation.

Public opinion on the issue also appears to be mixed. While some segments of the population support the idea of reducing the frequency and cost of elections, others are wary of the potential centralization of power and the overshadowing of state-specific issues by national concerns.

International Examples

Simultaneous elections are not unique to India. Several countries, including South Africa, Sweden, and Indonesia, hold national and regional elections simultaneously. These examples show that the system can work, provided there are strong constitutional safeguards and mechanisms to address mid-term crises. However, the Indian context, with its vast diversity and complex federal structure, poses unique challenges that would need to be addressed through careful planning and robust legal frameworks.

One Nation One Election in South Africa

In South Africa, the practice of holding simultaneous elections has been an integral part of its political system since the advent of democracy in 1994. Unlike India's ongoing debate over "One Nation, One Election," South Africa already conducts national, provincial, and local elections simultaneously, ensuring a more streamlined electoral process. The elections take place every five years, providing a uniform political cycle that aligns the different levels of government. This system is grounded in the need for



efficiency and cost-effectiveness, as it reduces the logistical complexity and financial burden of conducting multiple elections at different times.

South Africa's system of simultaneous elections operates within the framework of its federal structure, wherein powers are shared between the national government, nine provincial legislatures, and local municipalities. Voters participate in a single day of voting, casting separate ballots for the National Assembly, provincial legislatures, and local government representatives. This integrated electoral process minimizes the frequency of electoral disruptions and allows the government to focus more on governance rather than electioneering.

One of the primary advantages of simultaneous elections in South Africa is the reduction in election-related costs. The financial burden of organizing separate elections for different levels of government is substantially lower when elections are held together. This also leads to a reduction in the time and resources required for mobilizing electoral machinery, including voter registration, ballot preparation, and deployment of security forces.

Furthermore, simultaneous elections contribute to political stability by providing a predictable electoral calendar. With all elections held at the same time, governments across national, provincial, and local levels are likely to have coordinated policy goals and political agendas. This can facilitate more effective governance and collaboration between different levels of government, leading to more consistent public service delivery and policy implementation.

However, simultaneous elections in South Africa are not without challenges. One potential drawback is the risk of national issues overshadowing provincial and local concerns. During election campaigns, the focus often shifts to national-level parties and leaders, which can detract attention from local governance issues. This raises concerns about whether voters adequately differentiate between national and local elections when casting their votes, which could result in local government candidates being elected based on national party platforms rather than their competency in handling local issues.

Another challenge is the need for strong logistical coordination. Organizing elections across a vast and diverse country like South Africa requires a robust electoral system capable of managing large voter populations and ensuring the integrity of the process. South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) plays a pivotal role in maintaining this system, but concerns about election-related violence and political tensions continue to be relevant issues in certain regions.

Despite these challenges, simultaneous elections in South Africa provide a model for other democracies exploring electoral reform. The system contributes to cost savings, political stability, and streamlined



governance, although careful attention must be paid to balancing national and local concerns. The success of this electoral model is largely due to the nation's strong democratic institutions, which ensure fair and transparent elections at all levels of government. As countries like India debate the feasibility of adopting a "One Nation, One Election" policy, South Africa's experience offers valuable lessons on the benefits and challenges of implementing such a system in a federal democracy.

One Nation One Election in Sweden

In Sweden, the practice of simultaneous elections, akin to the "One Nation, One Election" concept, has been a longstanding part of the country's democratic system. Swedish citizens vote in elections for three levels of government—national (Riksdag), regional (county councils), and municipal (local councils)—on the same day, every four years. This system of synchronized elections enhances efficiency, reduces the administrative costs of conducting separate elections, and minimizes the potential for electoral fatigue among voters.

Sweden's approach is deeply rooted in its political and administrative structure, which emphasizes efficiency and democratic participation. By aligning elections at all levels, the country reduces the frequency with which political parties need to campaign and focus on electioneering, allowing more time for governance. Moreover, voter turnout in Sweden is traditionally high, and the simultaneous election model contributes to this by reducing the need for repeated mobilization efforts and voter fatigue.

One of the advantages of Sweden's system is the consistency it brings to governance across different levels. When elections are held simultaneously, governments at the national, regional, and local levels can begin their mandates together, ensuring a coordinated political and policy-making process. This alignment of electoral cycles allows for more stable and continuous government programs, as opposed to staggered election systems that can result in frequent shifts in power and policy direction.

However, like other countries that follow this model, Sweden faces challenges related to the overshadowing of local issues by national politics. During the election period, national party platforms and leaders often dominate the discourse, which can limit the attention given to regional and local concerns. This can lead to local elections being influenced by national-level political dynamics, potentially weakening the focus on regional governance issues.

Despite this, Sweden's system of synchronized elections has been successful in promoting a balanced and stable democratic process. The country's electoral institutions are robust, ensuring fair and transparent elections at all levels. The simultaneous election model has also minimized disruptions to governance, allowing Swedish political institutions to function with minimal interference from the election cycle.



In conclusion, Sweden's experience with simultaneous elections offers insights into the potential benefits of such a system, including cost efficiency, streamlined governance, and increased voter participation. As debates about "One Nation, One Election" continue in countries like India, Sweden's model provides an example of how synchronized elections can contribute to a more efficient and stable democratic process, while also highlighting the importance of addressing local governance issues even in a nationally focused electoral environment.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding "One Nation, One Election" in India is a reflection of the broader challenges of maintaining a balance between electoral efficiency and democratic values in a diverse, federal system. The proposal has significant potential to improve governance, reduce the cost and frequency of elections, and ensure better administrative efficiency. However, the legal, logistical, and political challenges it poses are considerable. Any move towards implementing simultaneous elections must be backed by broad political consensus, constitutional amendments, and careful logistical planning. In the end, India must weigh the potential gains against the risks of centralizing electoral processes and diluting the importance of state elections in the nation's democratic framework.

Only a robust and well-crafted strategy can ensure that "One Nation, One Election" contributes to the deepening of India's democracy, rather than undermining the autonomy of state governance or the diversity of electoral issues. The future of this electoral reform will depend on sustained dialogue, expert analysis, and the political will to address the concerns of all stakeholders in India's multifaceted democracy.

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