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# Does “One Nation, One Election” Make Sense for India?

Milan Vaishnav, Caroline Mallory, and Annabel Richter



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## Introduction

One of the central motifs of the past decade of governance under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been the embrace of policy measures that seek to apply uniform solutions to disparate policy dilemmas facing the country. These measures, often termed [One Nation](#) policies, are motivated by a desire to replace the existing patchwork of state-specific policies, regulations, and regimes with measures that are identical across the length and breadth of India.

There are numerous examples of such One Nation policies being propagated and, in several cases, implemented in the eleven years since Modi came to power. For instance, in 2016, Parliament passed a series of constitutional amendments to introduce a new [Goods and Services Tax \(GST\)](#), which introduced a unified value-added tax in place of state-specific levies. This reform, known informally as [One Nation, One Tax](#), had been debated and discussed for nearly two decades and was widely touted as an important precursor to forging a common market across India's twenty-eight states.

In a similar vein, the government rolled out a new initiative to allow Indian citizens to take advantage of subsidized food rations irrespective of their state of residence. This scheme, commonly termed [One Nation, One Ration Card](#), was intended to increase access to welfare benefits, especially for the millions of internal migrants in India without a fixed place of residence.

Earlier this year, the government announced the launch of a [new online portal](#) that will provide students, faculty, and researchers across the country's public higher education institutions with open access to international scholarly journals and articles under a scheme it has dubbed One Nation, One Subscription.

Most notably, the government recently signaled its intention to pursue a monumental One Nation policy that has been long discussed but only recently outlined in detail. This measure, known as [One Nation, One Election](#), would do away with India's current system of staggered elections for state and national assemblies, replacing it with a framework of simultaneous elections. The proposal, which has featured in many of [Modi's speeches](#) in the past, was advanced by a [high-level committee](#) (HLC) established by the government in 2023.

The committee's [report](#) was released in March on the eve of the 2024 general elections. It provides a full-throated embrace of simultaneous elections, arguing that such a system "will significantly enhance transparency, inclusivity, ease and confidence" of voters and "spur development process and social cohesion, deepen the foundations of [the] democratic rubric, and realise the aspirations of India, that is Bharat."<sup>1</sup>

A few months after the dust settled on India's 2024 general elections, the cabinet announced it had endorsed the core thrust of the HLC's proposal. In December 2024, the government introduced the [Constitution \(One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment\) Bill, 2024](#), empowering the Election Commission of India (ECI) to implement simultaneous state and national elections. At the time of publication, the bill is being reviewed by a parliamentary standing committee, and its future is uncertain.

India began its democratic journey with simultaneous state and national elections, dating back to the first postindependence elections held in 1951–1952. Local elections, which determine who wields power in rural and urban local bodies, were not uniform across states until the early 1990s, when the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution instituted a three-tiered system of local elections across India known as [Panchayati Raj](#). Although the HLC incorporated local body elections into its report, they were omitted in the government's bill, which focused only on state and national elections.<sup>2</sup>

In India's parliamentary system, there is no fixed-term requirement for Parliament or the various state assemblies. For instance, if a government collapses due to a vote of no confidence or a change in coalition arrangements, and no other governing coalition can be found, a fresh election is called, which leads to a deviation from the established electoral calendar. In addition, the central government wields extraordinary powers under [Article 356](#) of the Constitution to dismiss an elected state government if it believes it can no longer carry out its remit. Over time, the use (and [regular misuse](#)) of this provision, known as President's Rule, has also contributed to the staggered electoral calendar.

The offset voting calendar that emerged is, in some sense, the product of the natural, often unpredictable rhythms of parliamentary government. Indeed, a core difference between presidential and parliamentary systems is that, in the former, presidents and legislatures are each elected independently for a fixed term in office. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the executive is determined by the party or coalition that constitutes a majority of the legislature, whose members are directly elected. The [essence of parliamentarism](#), in a nutshell,



is that the executive is directly (and regularly) accountable to the legislature. One direct consequence of this accountability is that elected governments do not necessarily complete their full terms in office.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the government's legislative proposal for holding simultaneous elections in India, which builds on the HLC's recommendations and several preceding reports and analyses. The government's [stated rationale](#) for moving to a system of simultaneous elections rests on assumptions of increasing savings (of time, money, and bureaucratic resources), boosting voter engagement, and maximizing government efficiency. As the analysis below shows, some of these assumptions appear sound and could potentially lead to better outcomes. However, others rest on shaky, if not entirely questionable, premises. Fundamentally, a move toward One Nation, One Election will further presidentialize India's parliamentary system, deepening a trend already underway. Perhaps the most troubling shortcoming of the plan for simultaneous elections is that, as is further explained below, this move could lead to *more*, not *fewer*, elections. The appeal of aligning India's staggered election calendar is obvious, but there are less disruptive, less dramatic solutions to the underlying problems the government wishes to solve.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the history of elections in independent India, including the reasons for the staggered nature of the electoral calendar, and outlines past proposals for implementing simultaneous elections. The third section provides a summary of the proposed constitutional amendment, currently under review by a parliamentary committee. The fourth section presents the arguments made in favor of One Nation, One Election, while the following section presents several salient critiques of the scheme. The sixth and final section concludes with a summary assessment and offers some recommendations for electoral reforms worth considering.

## History

The founders of independent India made a conscious decision to retain the Westminster system of parliamentary government that prevailed under the British Raj. Under this system, India would have a bicameral national legislature comprising the Lok Sabha (or House of the People) and the Rajya Sabha (House of the States). Members of the Lok Sabha represent territorial constituencies for a period not exceeding five years and are directly elected by the people under first-past-the-post, single-member-district electoral rules. Members of the Rajya Sabha, in turn, are indirectly elected by members of the respective state assemblies to serve six-year terms. In both bodies, seats are allocated to federal states based on population.

The party or coalition that possesses majority support in the Lok Sabha forms the government and selects the prime minister, who in turn selects their council of ministers (or cabinet). The prime minister serves as the head of government, while an indirectly elected

president serves as the official head of state in a largely ceremonial role.<sup>3</sup> If the government loses the support of a majority of members of the Lok Sabha, it must resign, and either an alternative government is formed under new leadership or a fresh election is called. India's state assemblies operate on an identical system with one exception: Some states have bicameral state legislatures. In both state and national bodies, the executive is directly answerable to the lower, directly elected chamber. The principal design feature of interest here is that neither the Lok Sabha nor the state assemblies have fixed five-year terms; both can be dissolved earlier.

## Cracks in the Calendar

The first two elections after independence, held in 1951–1952 and 1957, witnessed concurrent parliamentary and state assembly elections. That pattern began to break down in subsequent years. One of the earliest exceptions took place in Kerala in 1959, when the ruling Indian National Congress (hereafter, the Congress Party) invoked President's Rule to dismiss the then-ruling Communist government in the state, placing it under central administration until a fresh election could be held in 1960.

In 1962 and 1967, general elections were held alongside state assembly elections in nearly all states, but in 1967 the Congress Party lost control in numerous states, and the reliable five-year cycle was disrupted soon after. After the 1967 setback, a flurry of party [defections](#) led to the dissolution of many state assemblies, which scrambled the timeline of state elections. The wanton application of President's Rule in several states compounded the situation. The final nail in the coffin of simultaneous elections was prime minister Indira Gandhi's decision in 1971 to call early national elections, firmly delinking state and national election calendars for good. A few years later, during the twenty-one-month period of emergency rule imposed by Gandhi between 1975 and 1977, the Lok Sabha's term was extended beyond its natural five-year term.

By happenstance, some state elections remain concurrent with general elections. For instance, elections in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha have, in recent cycles, taken place alongside general elections. This is a quirk of the electoral calendar and remains the exception, rather than the rule.

Assuming the current Lok Sabha finishes its full five-year term, the next general election will be held in April–May 2029. Two regions completed elections just months after the May 2024 Lok Sabha polls—the state of Haryana and the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir—and two more went to the polls in late 2024 (Jharkhand and Maharashtra). The city-state of Delhi elected a new assembly in February 2025. One more state (Bihar) will hold elections in 2025, five states in 2026, six states in 2027, and ten more in 2028. This assumes the absence of unforeseen circumstances that might prompt early assembly elections.

Of course, there is always the outside chance that the Lok Sabha does not complete its full five-year term, given that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) relies on a coalition to form a majority. However, [most experts](#) believe the prospects of a coalition rupture are slim.

## The Push for Simultaneity

The idea of reviving simultaneous elections stretches back at least four decades. In 1983, the ECI's [first annual report](#) endorsed a relinking of state and national electoral calendars on the grounds that doing so would save money, time, and resources.<sup>4</sup>

In the intervening years, multiple governmental reports have revisited this idea, although none has prompted a serious legislative effort by governments of various political dispensations. On two separate occasions—in [1999](#) and [2018](#)—the Law Commission, a nonstatutory expert body that advises the government on legal reform, has underlined the benefits of simultaneous polls, reiterating claims that India's staggered election calendar disrupts governance, places an undue burden on government resources, and creates other inefficiencies.<sup>5</sup> The commission argued that simultaneous elections should be the default, with nonsimultaneous state polls the exception in extenuating circumstances rather than the rule. This sentiment was further echoed by the findings of a [2015 parliamentary standing committee](#) report, which affirmed that simultaneous elections would be beneficial and should not be seen as a threat to India's federal structure.

The last official statement on this issue, prior to the recent HLC report, was a 2017 white paper published by [NITI Aayog](#), the central government's policy think tank. This paper outlined a scheme in which state and national elections would be synchronized initially, but a midterm election date (two and a half years later) would serve as a fallback should states require early elections. For instance, if a state assembly were dissolved eighteen months after coming into power, the state would come under President's Rule (central administration) until fresh elections were held on the midterm date. The newly elected assembly would serve until the next midterm election date (in five years). If, however, a government fell near the end of its five-year term, it would come under temporary central control until the national election date.<sup>6</sup>

## The HLC Report

The NITI Aayog paper was the closest approximation of a blueprint that the Modi government offered until September 2023, when it announced the creation of the HLC led by former Indian president Ram Nath Kovind. The [government resolution](#) authorizing the committee clearly stacked the deck in favor of simultaneous polls. The text of the resolution

deemed it was “in the national interest” and “desirable” to hold simultaneous elections in the country. The committee’s terms of reference, therefore, did not relate to debating the merits of the idea, but rather developing a road map for implementation.

The committee provided a road map for synchronizing elections at the local, state, and national levels in a phased approach that requires substantial constitutional alterations.

The first step in the envisioned process is to synchronize national and state assembly elections. The second step involves holding local body elections within one hundred days of the (newly) combined national/state polls. For the first phase, if an elected state or national assembly is dissolved—due to a no-confidence vote, for example—then fresh elections are called, and a new government is elected to serve the remainder of the previous government’s elected term. So, for instance, if a state government fell in year four of its term, new elections would be held, and the newly elected government would only govern for the final year of the original term (to remain “on schedule”). For local elections to be brought into alignment with state/national polls, the committee recommended that Parliament be given powers to ensure that local body elections are held shortly after state and national polls (within one hundred days).

To synchronize three levels of elections in India, the committee recognized there must be a one-time transitory measure that serves to sync these timelines. When this measure is triggered, it will dissolve all state assemblies such that elections to the assemblies coincide with the next general election. One consequence of this decision is the nationalization of elections at all levels of government, a move that is perceived to benefit national parties, and the ruling party at the center more specifically (the BJP, at present).

## The Constitutional Amendment Bill

On December 17, 2024, the government introduced the [Constitution \(One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment\) Bill, 2024](#), in the Lok Sabha. In the statement of objects and reasons appended to the bill, the government cited the HLC’s recommendations, [stating](#) that “there is an imperative need for holding of simultaneous elections for various reasons and given that elections have become expensive and time consuming.”

The bill makes several fundamental constitutional changes. First, it inserts a new article—Article 82a—stipulating that, on the date of the first sitting of the Lok Sabha after a general election, the president will issue a notification that all state assemblies constituted before the expiration of the Lok Sabha’s full term will end concurrently with the Lok Sabha’s term. This is a one-time transitory measure to align state and national polls. The next general election, the new article notes, will take place simultaneously alongside elections to all state assemblies. The ECI is granted expansive powers to delay any state assembly election it deems fit

by making a recommendation to the president.<sup>7</sup> However, if a given state election is deferred, its term (whenever it commences) would coincide with the full term of the Lok Sabha.

Second, the bill amends Article 83, which sets the terms of the Lok Sabha, to clarify that any new parliament constituted in the event of an early (“midterm”) election (say, in the case of a coalition collapse) would only operate for the duration of the “unexpired” term of the immediately preceding Lok Sabha. The bill makes a similar change to Article 172, which relates to the terms of India’s various state assemblies.

Finally, the bill amends Article 327 of the Constitution to clarify that Parliament may, from time to time, pass laws about the conduct of simultaneous elections (in addition to amending provisions having to do with the conduct of state and national elections and the preparation of electoral rolls).

Because certain union territories in India also have elected assemblies (Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu and Kashmir), the government also introduced the [Union Territories Laws \(Amendment\) Bill, 2024](#), to enact identical provisions for assembly elections in these specified union territories.<sup>8</sup>

Article 368 of India’s Constitution outlines the procedures for amending the Constitution. In short, there are three types of constitutional amendments, each with its own ratification procedure. The first category requires a simple majority in both houses of parliament, the same threshold any ordinary bill must cross to become law. This pertains to specific provisions enumerated in various constitutional articles that can be amended by ordinary legislative procedure. The second category relates to amendments that require a “special majority,” or two-thirds of both houses of parliament. This is the default procedure for most constitutional amendments. The third and final category pertains to amendments that require both a special majority of Parliament as well as ratification by at least half of all state legislatures. For instance, a majority of states must assent to amendments that affect the legislative dynamics between the center and the states or anything pertaining to the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, which outlines the allocation of powers and functions between the union and the state legislatures.

There is a general consensus that, at the very least, the One Nation, One Election bills require a two-thirds majority of those present and voting in both houses of Parliament to gain passage. The bigger question is whether the envisioned amendments belong in the third category above, which would trigger a state ratification process. On this score, opinion is divided. Some [constitutional scholars](#) argue that the constitutional amendments to bring about simultaneous elections would require state assent. However, other statements—including the [HLC report](#) itself—posit that state ratification is not needed since the bills technically do not amend the legislative entries under the Seventh Schedule.<sup>9</sup> The HLC report states that only amendments that adjust the schedule of local body elections would require ratification by half of all states. For the time being, the government’s bills have sidestepped the question

of local body elections altogether. It is widely expected that the parliamentary standing committee reviewing the draft legislation will comment on the contentious question of constitutional ratification.

## Government's Rationale

This section examines the rationale for simultaneous elections, drawing on the HLC report and various government statements. Broadly, the arguments in support of simultaneous elections fall into one of three categories: increasing savings of time, money, and bureaucratic resources; boosting voter engagement; and maximizing government efficiency.

### Savings

Proponents of One Nation, One Election argue that aligning state and national elections will generate savings of at least three types—time, money, and bureaucratic resources. The following subsections consider each in turn.

**Time.** Supporters argue that simultaneous elections will result in saving time in at least two respects. First, if state and national elections are held together, then parties will no longer need to remain in campaign mode in perpetuity. At present, the staggered election calendar means that as soon as one election is over, there is inevitably another vote around the corner. Under an aligned calendar, once the election period is over, barring any unforeseen midterm polls, parties (and candidates) would be able to focus on substantive matters of governance as opposed to simply preparing for the next election. Frequent elections, it is argued, instill a culture of “[short-termism](#)” in politics, incentivizing activities that deliver a quick electoral return at the expense of long-term governance and development gains. With political actors perennially in election mode, it is argued that politicians are incentivized to engage in populist activities that are politically attractive though economically detrimental.

A second type of time savings, supporters argue, relates to the time spent by voters, namely those who do not continuously reside at the address where they are registered to vote, such as seasonal migrants and students. Under the current system, voters who do not reside at their permanent address must travel home, often making arduous journeys by multiple forms of transport, so that they can vote where they are officially registered (or simply choose not to vote at all). Under current law, there is no provision for voting out of station, except for members of the armed forces, diplomats, and a few other special cases.

**Money.** In addition to saving time, backers of One Nation, One Election, have also argued that simultaneous elections will reduce the exorbitant sums of money spent on elections. This also has two aspects.

First, reform proponents argue that under a system of aligned elections, parties can essentially double dip resources when campaigning for state and national elections, such that there are certain classes of expenditure (perhaps advertising) where they can achieve cost savings. For instance, if a party were investing heavily in billboards and signs, those signs could promote the party brand for both state and national polls.

Second, proponents argue that there would be a significant cost savings in terms of government spending on organizing elections. According to the 2017 paper published by [NITI Aayog](#), the Government of India spent around \$634 million on the 2014 general election. This does not include funds that state governments might have allocated toward the general election, though it does capture the central government's contribution to the cost of holding state assembly elections that coincided with the Lok Sabha elections. This 2014 figure represented a significant increase (in nominal terms) over the estimated \$230 million spent organizing the 2009 elections. Elections in a large state are estimated to cost between one-tenth and one-twelfth of a general election.<sup>10</sup> If elections at the state and national levels were held simultaneously, the government could likely save on administrative costs.

**Bureaucratic resources.** The ECI, which oversees state and national elections, is comprised of a few hundred people principally based in Delhi at the agency's headquarters. During election time, the ECI draws on a much larger pool of government workers to carry out elections, from government teachers to public administrators and health workers. The [HLC report](#) notes that the 2019 general election required the services of 7 million government employees serving as temporary election officials spread across 1.2 million polling stations.

The HLC report further argues that schools and education personnel bear a special burden since many schools double as polling stations, leading to their closure on (and often in the lead-up to) election day as preparations are underway. Importantly, elections also require the deployment of security forces to protect against security threats and ensure the conduct of orderly elections. India is no stranger to [threats and violence](#) during election time, although violent incidents have [declined dramatically](#) in the growing presence of security forces over time. In recent years, the ECI has coordinated with central paramilitary and police forces to provide election-time security in a staged manner across the country.

## Public Engagement

A second rationale offered in support of simultaneous elections is that holding state and national elections together would increase public engagement. The argument is twofold.

First, more frequent elections can induce voter fatigue, depressing turnout as voters tune out elections and opt to stay home during hectic polling periods. For instance, one [study](#) found that turnout in national elections increased by 5 percentage points when they were held



concurrently with state assembly elections, although state election turnout was unaffected by co-temporal national elections. [Comparative evidence](#) suggests that simultaneous elections are commonly associated with a turnout boost, though the documented increase in India tended to be smaller than what was found in other countries.

Second, the [HLC report](#) suggests that less frequent elections entail “a more equitable allocation of political opportunities and responsibilities within political parties.”<sup>11</sup> According to the HLC report, with simultaneous elections, party leaders—who typically dominate elections—would not have the ability to saturate the political space at all levels. This reality, in turn, would create greater opportunities for low-level political leaders to grab the spotlight—a contrast to the current mode of domineering party bosses. The HLC report also suggests that leaders who typically contest at multiple levels would have to pick only one to focus on, creating a more diverse candidate pool.

## Government Efficiency

A third rationale offered in support of simultaneous elections relates to government efficiency. One of the unique features of Indian elections is an innovation called the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), an informal set of norms that are issued by the ECI and that grant the body the moral authority to monitor the election campaign to ensure a level electoral playing field. The MCC comes into force once the ECI announces dates for an upcoming election and ends once all votes are counted. During this window, both the ruling party/government and opposition parties/candidates are expected to adhere to a set of norms stipulating what is (and is not) appropriate conduct. These norms pertain to a range of activities, such as speech, electioneering, and advertising. While the MCC is not a formal legal document, the ECI draws on it to name and shame those who defy its parameters, occasionally referring cases to law enforcement if there are credible allegations of political actors violating existing laws.

One of the key restrictions of the MCC is that the government of the day cannot announce any new schemes during election time out of a concern that doing so might unduly sway voters. Over time, proponents of One Nation, One Election have railed against the MCC, claiming that it disrupts governance and leads to policy paralysis because governments cannot carry out their normal business, such as launching new development schemes or infrastructure projects. When aggregated across multiple tiers of elections, some critics have argued that the MCC leads to hundreds of days of lost work over a government’s term. The [NITI Aayog analysis](#) suggests that the MCC is applicable (in some part of the country or another) for about four months every year. During national elections, the MCC is operative for the entire country; for state polls, it only applies to the state conducting elections.

Finally, some supporters of One Nation, One Election have argued that simultaneous elections would facilitate better coordination between state and national authorities. It is not clear what the underlying mechanism might be, other than the fact that simultaneous



elections are more likely to result in a greater alignment between state and national electoral outcomes. Indeed, [extant research](#) shows that simultaneous elections in India are associated with lower rates of split-ticket voting.

## Critiques

The previous section presented the varied justifications of simultaneous elections. This section evaluates the merits of these arguments.

### Savings

**Time.** One of the key arguments in favor of simultaneous elections is that it would save time for parties, candidates, and voters alike. With respect to voters, this argument does indeed have merit. If state and national elections were held together, migrants and others who need to travel to vote at their place of registration could do so in one fell swoop rather than making multiple trips. On its face, the same logic applies to parties and candidates.

But there is a bit of sleight of hand at work in this argument. As discussed above, the ruling BJP has [attempted to nationalize](#) even the most local of elections. Rather than allowing state or local units to contest state or local elections, the party has often relied on deploying its national leadership for subnational contests. Indeed, a common refrain in political circles is that Modi and his top aide and Home Minister Amit Shah devote as much energy to municipal corporation elections in the city of Hyderabad as they do to statewide assembly elections in the state of Telangana.

In practice, this means that top BJP leaders must divert attention from matters of governance because they are constantly in campaign mode. To be fair, this strategy is not unique to the BJP; most parties deploy their respective national leaders to campaign in state and even local elections. However, Modi's popularity has consistently outpaced that of his rivals, which gives his party's efforts to nationalize subordinate elections greater salience. But the decision to utilize a party's high command in subnational polls is not necessarily a feature of staggered elections, but rather a political choice borne out of a considered political strategy to promote the apex leadership (namely, the prime minister or the party leader) rather than to rely on state-level party leaders (for example, distinct chief ministerial faces in state elections).<sup>12</sup>

To be fair, the BJP will not be able to bank on Modi's popularity forever. Eventually his popularity will either decline and/or he will transfer power to a successor. In fact, there are signs the BJP is already modifying its campaign strategy to reduce its overreliance on

the prime minister. As one [astute commentator](#) noted, in the state assembly elections that followed the 2024 general election, the BJP triumphed in states like Haryana, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra without campaigning extensively on what some have called “Modi magic.”

**Money.** When it comes to cost savings on campaign expenditures, it is not immediately obvious why simultaneous elections would involve less money. The same political economy in India that leads to massive election expenditures, making Indian elections [the world’s most expensive](#), would remain even if state and national calendars are aligned. Of course, there is some merit to the argument that parties could economize if they don’t have to run separate campaigns for state and national elections. However, that logic does not extend to candidates’ own expenditures, which would likely be just as large in staggered versus simultaneous elections. But if the root of the problem is excessive spending, it behooves the government to address the political economy of excessive campaign expenditures.

Instead, much of its effort has focused instead on [creating new ways](#) to mobilize campaign finance that cannot easily be detected, monitored, or publicized. These include the “[electoral bonds](#)” scheme, an innovation of the Modi government that allowed individuals, firms, and associations to contribute to political parties without either the donor or recipient having to disclose the transaction. After much delay, the Supreme Court [invalidated](#) the scheme in February 2024.

Furthermore, under a system of aligned elections, there are arguably new ways in which money and horse-trading might make its way into the system. Because any government brought to power via a midterm election (held in the event of a government collapse, for instance) would only serve the balance of the original government’s unexpired term, there are strong incentives for parties and lawmakers to engage in backdoor deals and bribes to avoid government dissolution at all costs. The inability to serve a full five-year term after a midterm election could tempt lawmakers to engage in horse-trading to avoid this undesirable outcome. Even if such efforts fail, a new government would have little incentive to govern for the long haul if its time horizon is only a few years. In this sense, the short-termism that the institutionalization of simultaneous elections is meant to curb might still come to pass, albeit through a different channel.

**Bureaucratic resources.** In terms of the administrative costs of holding elections, the argument against the current system is a bit of a red herring. Historically, there has been little public (or private) concern expressed over the operational costs of elections, costs that are certainly worth bearing given the centrality of elections in any democratic system. It is true, according to government data, that the costs of administering elections have soared as the ECI’s regulatory footprint and election day security requirements have grown. Despite rising costs, the amount spent on the 2014 elections represents around 0.03 percent of India’s overall gross domestic product (GDP). According to ballpark estimates, state elections—even

in large states—cost around one-tenth (or less) of this sum. One back-of-the-envelope [calculation](#) estimates that the government spent around 0.12 percent of its GDP on state and national elections across a five-year time horizon. To put government spending on elections into proper context, the government spent roughly [20,000 crore rupees](#) (\$2.3 billion) over five years on the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS), which funds constituency development projects at the direction of individual members of Parliament.<sup>13</sup> This is multiples of the costs of holding a nationwide general election.

In some ways, arguments about the administrative costs of holding elections in India are analogous to [debates one often hears](#) in the United States about cutting government funding to National Public Radio, the National Endowment of the Arts, and similar programs, which represent an infinitesimally small share of the federal budget compared to defense, social security, and interest payments. Further, simultaneous polls would necessitate increased expenditures on some items, such as additional electronic voting machines. So, entries must be made on both sides of the ledger. If the goal is truly to cut costs, there are simply more effective ways to do so.

When it comes to diverting bureaucratic resources, there are legitimate arguments to be made about the diversion of government officials and security forces to conduct, supervise, and secure elections on a staggered basis. Although, here too, there is a hint of irony in that politicians and senior officials so fondly tout the massive “[dance of democracy](#)” that serves as a source of soft power and immense pride for the Indian republic and its citizens. Frankly, India’s robust electoral procedures distinguish it from richer countries like the United States, where the election machinery is, to put it mildly, [shambolic](#).

When it comes to the deployment of security forces during elections, it is worth noting that not all security forces are on duty at the same time, given that there is a well-oiled system of rotation and staggered deployment for regional elections. Furthermore, there has also been a massive rise in the sheer number of paramilitary forces over the past several decades, lessening concerns about overstretch. As political scientists [Amit Ahuja and Devesh Kapur](#) have documented, the numerical strength of India’s Central Armed Police Forces almost doubled between 1990 and 2020. In 1991, the scholars found, central paramilitary forces were less than half of the size of the Indian Army; by 2020, that percentage had grown to more than 80 percent. Of the Ministry of Home Affairs’ total police budget, analyst [Yashovardhan Azad](#) estimates that nearly three-quarters went to central police forces in fiscal year 2019–2020. Therefore, arguments based on the idea that elections create shortages in the security realm are less persuasive today than they were even a decade ago.

In fact, one potential issue with simultaneous elections is that they would involve a much more significant, one-time deployment of security forces, which could lead to concerns about readiness and vulnerabilities elsewhere.

## Public Engagement

When it comes to public engagement, supporters of One Nation, One Election make reasonable arguments about voter fatigue, suggesting that frequent, nonsimultaneous polling periods engender greater voter apathy. Extant evidence suggests that where national and state elections are simultaneous, turnout in national elections is higher. However, the fatigue argument would suggest that staggered elections would experience decreased turnout thanks to fatigued or disengaged voters.

If one considers all state elections from 1951 to 2023, state voter turnout (averaged over the period of each Lok Sabha term) has increased from 51.3 percent to 72.5 percent. That is, as state and national elections grew increasingly untethered, turnout in state elections rose. In the past decade alone, average annual state election turnout has not dipped below 65.8 percent (which incidentally was also the turnout percentage in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections). Indeed, India has also seen record-high turnouts for parliamentary polls in recent years; the last three general elections (in 2014, 2019, and 2024) saw the three highest participation rates on record, with 2019 claiming the top spot with 67.4 percent turnout.<sup>14</sup>

One back-of-the-envelope method of assessing claims about voter fatigue is to compare turnout rates in states and territories where assembly and parliamentary elections occur in quick succession. These are the kinds of places one would expect voters to demonstrate a sense of fatigue or inattention. Consider six regions: Arunachal Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra. Each has experienced at least one instance of proximate elections between 2004 and 2019. (Haryana, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra have done so consistently.) In each case, state elections followed national polls by twelve months or less. On average, turnout in state elections increased by 4.4 percentage points relative to the turnout the state experienced in the preceding general election. The fatigue thesis would imply that voters might be turned off from voting so soon after national polls; the data show otherwise. Turnout in state polls occurring months after national elections has not declined.

One might also examine how turnout rates in state and national elections differ when polls are nonproximate (that is, when state elections take place more than one year after national elections). On average, between 2004 and 2019, state turnout exceeded national turnout by roughly 9 percentage points in these cases. Therefore, what one might conclude from this simple comparison is that while proximate elections do not necessarily decrease turnout, turnout might be even higher if state and national polls were not held in such quick succession (in other words, more than twelve months apart).

Overall, neither comparison suggests that staggered elections depress state turnout or that the voter fatigue thesis is ironclad. The comparisons do suggest that, compared to national elections, turnout is higher in nonproximate state elections than in proximate state elections.

## Government Efficiency

One of the principal arguments in favor of aligned state and national polls is the notion that the prevailing staggered system slows down the wheels of governance because of the restrictions placed on sitting governments when the MCC is in force. It is undoubtedly true that when the MCC is operative, there are limits on what governments can do.

But a few caveats are in order. First, the MCC does not grind government to a halt; it merely restricts announcements of new programs or schemes (to ensure a level playing field for challengers and incumbents). The ECI itself has clarified that the MCC should not interfere with ongoing implementation of existing government schemes and programs. Second, the MCC is only operative in the given state or states where elections are being held. It does not place nationwide restrictions on what governments can and cannot do. In other words, if the state of Karnataka is going to the polls, the MCC would only be in force in that state; it has no bearing on governance in India's other states, union territories, or at the national level. To the extent the MCC hinders national governance, it is restricted to the period around Lok Sabha elections alone.

Aside from the formal limits placed on governments when the MCC is operative, there is the additional concern that the central government will be reluctant to announce new policies for fear of backlash. If another election is always around the corner, this could paralyze governments and disincentivize them from taking big decisions. While such arguments are commonplace, the numerous examples of risk-taking by the central government in the recent past challenge this view. Over the past several years, the ruling dispensation has undertaken hugely politically risky actions when it felt doing so was in the national interest—including the passage of the Goods and Services Tax (2016), unilateral change in Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional status (2019), introduction of class-based (as opposed to caste-based) affirmative action (2019), and passage of a trio of farm law reform bills (2021).

Above all, however, the efficiency argument in favor of aligned polls must also address the fact that simultaneous elections could lead to more elections. Under the proposed system of simultaneous elections, if a government loses a vote of no confidence and a fresh election is called, the newly elected government will only serve the remainder of the unexpired term. Ironically, this could result in *more*—not *fewer*—elections. Imagine, for instance, a state government collapses in the fourth year of its term on account of a vote of no confidence. If no other party or coalition can muster a majority, a fresh election would be called, and the newly elected government would only complete the final year of the unexpired term. A second election would then be held for a full, five-year term. In other words, one could end up in the precise situation the policy was intended to avoid. A government in office for an extremely short duration is unlikely to be administratively [efficient or effective](#).

## Democracy's Future

Since Modi's arrival on the national political scene in 2014, the prime minister has dominated the electoral landscape like few leaders before him. Elections, both at the state and national level, have often resembled [plebiscites](#) in favor of (or in opposition to) Modi's leadership, harkening back to elections in India during the time of former prime minister Indira Gandhi.

This presidential style of politics at the national level was [actually preceded](#) by the consolidation of presidential forms of governance at the state level. Indeed, Modi's own tenure as chief minister of Gujarat offered one such example. But Modi was no outlier; chief ministers of [all major states](#) govern in a presidential style in which elections are typically contested in their name, with the party and individual candidates often relegated to second- or third-order issues.

At a fundamental level, a move to a One Nation, One Election framework is likely to further presidentialize India's parliamentary system for at least three reasons.

First, as legal scholar [Gautam Bhatia](#) has argued, the essence of parliamentary government is that the executive is continuously accountable to the parliament and, by extension, the people. A shift toward a system resembling fixed terms upends this. The United Kingdom learned this lesson the hard way. In 2011, Parliament passed the "[Fixed-term Parliaments Act](#)," which fixed a general election date for the United Kingdom. Parliament moved to repeal the act in 2022, acting on concerns that the new scheme incentivized parliamentary gridlock and limited Parliament's ability to hold the executive to account.

Further, there is the related concern that, if the ECI chooses to delay an election for any reason (as the draft amendment allows it to do), the legislation does not specify the governance arrangement that would prevail in the interim. Therefore, [two issues arise](#) in this case. First, the ECI faces no constraints in ordering a delay. And, second, in the case of such a deferral, there is no clarity as to who would run the government administration. One possibility is that the central government imposes Article 356 (President's Rule), bringing the state under central control until a new election is held and further fueling a recentralization of administrative authorities.

Second, standardizing state and national elections on a five-year cycle also creates fewer opportunities for public participation and debate. The current staggered system of elections allows voters to act as a check on a dominant national party through state elections. Furthermore, the prevailing staggered calendar also bolsters the federal structure. In recent years, as [accountability institutions have waned](#), Parliament's power has been usurped by the executive, and the courts have demonstrated a mixed ability to curb executive power. Federalism has proved to be among the most potent checks on governmental power. If elections are simultaneous, there is a risk that state-specific issues will get overshadowed by national-level concerns.

Finally, there is credible research suggesting that simultaneous elections minimize split-ticket voting. For instance, a [2020 study](#) compared how voters behaved in simultaneous versus proximate elections (when state and national elections were 180 days apart or less). The authors find that simultaneous elections boosted the importance of parties at the expense of individual candidates; voters were 18 percent more likely to say that the party of their chosen candidate was their most important consideration. Additionally, voters were 13 percent more likely to report that they voted for the same party in state and national elections. The authors established that reduced split-ticket voting was due to voters' cognitive constraints: Informational overload and the increased costs of processing information for multiple levels of government encouraged them to make a single choice across tiers of government.

Of course, Indian voters are nothing if not shrewd. It is entirely possible that, if simultaneous elections were implemented, voters would quickly adapt to the new regime by demonstrating an ability to discern between concurrent elections occurring at multiple tiers.

## Reform Possibilities

There are many reasonable arguments in favor of scrapping India's staggered calendar and adopting a new framework of One Nation, One Election. And one can hardly dispute the intuitive appeal of a less disruptive, more organized, and less cumbersome electoral process. But, as with other One Nation policies that have been implemented or are being contemplated, there are costs (some seen, others unseen) to enforcing uniformity. Those costs include the vibrancy of democracy and the balance of power in India's federal structure.

One possible middle-ground solution is to address some of the underlying challenges that One Nation, One Election is trying to address in a far too heavy-handed manner. As the scholar [Pranay Kotasthane](#) has argued, if the MCC is perceived to undermine governance and induce policy paralysis, one option is for the ECI to convene an all-party meeting in which the terms of the MCC are renegotiated in ways that either shorten the time the code is in force or exempt certain governmental activities from its ambit. The MCC was the [outcome](#) of a cross-party consensus, nudged along by the ECI. However, its structures are not set in stone, and there is a case to be made that the code should evolve with the times.

Similarly, if there is a concerted desire to tackle the scourge of unaccounted ("black") money in elections, the government can contemplate a range of steps to clamp down. For instance, the government could prohibit political contributions in cash, insisting that every rupee of political giving proceeds via a digital payment system. Right now, the law [states](#) that parties can receive contributions of up to 2,000 rupees in cash. But the contribution disclosure threshold stands at 20,000 rupees. The generous gap between the two creates a loophole because, without disclosure, there is no way for regulators to know if a contribution between 2,000 and 20,000 rupees was made in cash. Short of banning cash donations,



Parliament could pass a law aligning the cash and disclosure thresholds. In the same vein, the government could pass legislation that requires those digital contributions to be verified with the contributor's Aadhaar number to avoid so-called ghost donations. Taken together, these moves would not only increase the transparency of political giving but also reduce the likelihood of black money entering the political domain.

A third reform possibility is for the ECI to take steps to streamline the time taken for elections, especially Lok Sabha elections, to mitigate concerns about disruptions to governance. Leaving aside the first general elections in 1951–1952, which played out over 119 days, the 2024 Lok Sabha election was the longest in seven decades. Based on the time taken between the first and last phase of voting, the 2024 election unfolded over forty-three days, up from thirty-five in 2014 and twenty in 2004. The MCC was operative for even longer than these time periods (since the MCC goes into effect as soon as the ECI announces the election calendar).

Another option would be to consider a modification of the One Nation, One Election idea. For now, local body elections have been left out of the ambit of the government's simultaneous election plans, despite their inclusion in the HLC report. Perhaps this is a reflection that aligning elections at all three tiers of government (national, state, and local) in one swoop was a bridge too far.

But if the government insists on streamlining elections, there is arguably a better path. One possibility has been articulated in a forthcoming book by Devesh Kapur and Arvind Subramanian.<sup>15</sup> Based on our reading, it helps to think about elections in India as taking place on three levels: level 1 (national), level 2 (state), and level 3 (local). Level 2 functions as a check on level 1, and level 3 acts as a check on level 2.

One option is to make national (level 1) and local (level 3) polls simultaneous, because 3 does not act as a check on 1. If national (level 1) and state (level 2) elections were aligned, level 2 would not be able to function as an effective check on level 1. By the same token, if state (level 2) and local (level 3) polls were aligned, level 3 would not be able to act as a potential check on level 2. National (level 1) and local (level 3) polls, in contrast, are sufficiently distant from one another.

This proposal goes some distance toward addressing some of the arguments put forward by the government and backers of One Nation, One Election, but it reflects a compromise solution that also takes on board the federal structure and the need for strong checks on executive power.

A second option, which commentators like [Swaminathan Aiyar](#) have dubbed “one nation, two elections,” would reorient elections around two dates. Lok Sabha elections would proceed as planned, but halfway through Parliament's term, all states would go to polls in a midterm election. This has the benefit of reducing the frequency of elections but delinks state and national elections, mitigating concerns about centralization and threats to



federalism. This is slightly different from the 2017 NITI Aayog proposal, which offers the possibility of a midterm election but only as a remedy in cases where a state government falls apart.

A variant on this idea, suggested by the Law Commission in its [2018 report](#), would be to club state elections into two groups. The first group would consist of states that would go to the polls at the time of the national election, and the second group would consist of states that would hold polls around the halfway mark of the Lok Sabha term. This option has the benefit of reducing the potential disruption posed by staggered elections but without dramatically altering the calendar of the various state assemblies. Under this construct, while the first group of states would be linked to national polls, elections in the second group of states could serve as a midterm verdict.

## Conclusion

A central challenge to legislating uniformity in a country as diverse as India is the risk of opening the door to unintended consequences. One Nation policies offer the innate appeal of eliminating patchwork answers, replacing them with one-size-fits-all solutions that might improve efficiency and coordination.

But the fundamentals of democratic institutional design should not be reimagined without first achieving broad consensus, something that is lacking in the current debate. Most importantly, there are less intrusive, less disruptive solutions to the problems that proponents of simultaneous elections seek to fix. Surprisingly, these ideas—perhaps less flashy, dramatic, and politically alluring than a dramatic overhaul such as One Nation, One Election—have received little airtime in the current debate. Nevertheless, they represent a promising place to start.



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## Notes

- 1 Government of India, High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, Report on Simultaneous Elections in India (New Delhi, 2024), 281, available via Internet Archive Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250320080622/https://onoe.gov.in/HLC-Report-en>.
- 2 Although not explicitly referenced in the draft bill, it is possible that the government could—at a later date—advance legislation incorporating simultaneous local body elections.
- 3 The president is elected by an electoral college consisting of the elected members of the upper and lower houses of Parliament and the members of the respective state legislative assemblies.
- 4 The recommendation was reiterated in the 2002 Report of the [National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution](#).
- 5 The 2018 report is available in draft form and was never finalized.
- 6 If the Lok Sabha were prematurely dissolved, the report offers two possible remedies. First, if the balance of the Lok Sabha's term was short, a newly enacted constitutional provision could empower the president to carry out the administration of the country until regularly scheduled elections were held. A second possibility, if the remainder of the term was long, would be to hold a fresh election with the new government serving out the remainder of the previous government's term.
- 7 For instance, the ECI might choose to delay elections in cases where natural disasters or civil conflict make it difficult, if not impossible, to safely hold polls. But, whereas Article 356 stipulates the precise conditions under which the ECI can postpone an election, the draft constitutional amendment is silent on the criteria by which the ECI can order a delay. See Saket Surya and Shirin Pajnoo, "[Legislative Brief: The Constitution \(129th Amendment\) Bill, 2024 and The Union Territories Laws \(Amendment\) Bill, 2024 \(Simultaneous Elections Bills\)](#)," PRS Legislative Research, June 5, 2025.
- 8 Specifically, this bill proposes amendments to Section 5 of the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963; Section 5 of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991; and Section 17 of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019.
- 9 The Seventh Schedule contains three lists: items under the sole jurisdiction of the union (central) government, items under the sole jurisdiction of state governments, and items under the concurrent jurisdiction of both the union and the states.

- 10 Figures are converted to that year's U.S. dollars from Figure: Election expenditure (Provisional) by Government of India towards Lok Sabha Elections in section 3.14. The 2017 NITI Aayog report argues that the 2014 Lok Sabha elections cost around 3870 crore rupees, while the 2015 state assembly election in Bihar, one of India's most populous states, cost around 300 crore rupees. The 2009 Lok Sabha election, by contrast, cost 1,114 crore rupees. One crore is a unit of value equivalent to 10 million Indian rupees.
- 11 Government of India, *Report on Simultaneous Elections in India*, 155.
- 12 As lawyer [Gautam Bhatia](#) argues, "if the concern . . . is that frequent State elections hamper governance and the business of Parliament, then simultaneous elections seem a needlessly complicated answer when a simple one is available: that State elections should be primarily fought by State party units, while national politicians can get on with the task of governance."
- 13 There are around 790 members of Parliament (MP) in India across the lower and upper houses. Each MP has an annual allocation of 5 crore rupees (about \$578,000 in current U.S. dollars).
- 14 Authors' calculations based on official data from statistical reports published by the Election Commission of India, <https://www.eci.gov.in/statistical-reports>.
- 15 This argument was contained in a draft manuscript of the book viewed by the author.

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