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FROM DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM TO CENTRALISED HEGEMONY? A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF 'ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION' ON FEDERALISM, REGIONAL VOICES, AND THE FUTURE OF INDIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The proposal for 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) – the simultaneous conduct of elections to the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies – has emerged as one of the most consequential constitutional debates in contemporary India. While institutional proponents argue that synchronised electoral cycles curb public expenditure, minimise policy paralysis caused by recurring Model Codes of Conduct, and streamline administrative machinery, critics caution against the structural erosion of India's democratic fabric. This paper presents a critical sociological enquiry into ONOE, interrogating whether the drive toward electoral synchronicity marks a systemic transition from democratic pluralism toward centralised hegemony.

Employing a qualitative, interdisciplinary sociological framework, this study synthesises political sociology, constitutional analysis, and empirical voter behaviour literature to evaluate three primary dimensions of impact. First, it investigates the structural strain on Indian federalism, examining how simultaneous elections risk homogenising the electoral discourse by subsuming hyper-local, regional, and identity-based grievances under dominant nationalised narratives. Second, it assesses the socio-political agency of regional parties, subaltern groups, and marginalised communities, demonstrating how cyclical local elections historically function as recurring accountability checks that force political elites to renegotiate welfare delivery and representation. Under a synchronised five-year mandate, this dynamic accountability risks dilution, weakening grassroots bargaining power. Third, the paper examines the socio-institutional consequences of state centralisation, scrutinising how structural convergence tilts the public sphere toward executive concentration and majoritarian consolidation – resembling soft authoritarianism or electoral autocracy rather than decentralised participatory democracy.

The paper concludes that while administrative efficiency is a legitimate governance concern, imposing institutional uniformity over a deeply heterogeneous and socially stratified society undermines the core democratic principles of diversity, responsiveness, and regional sovereignty. Ultimately, ONOE poses a fundamental challenge to the pluralistic compact that underpins the Indian Republic, highlighting the precarious tension between procedural rationalisation and substantive democratic health.

KEYWORDS: *One Nation One Election, Indian Federalism, Democratic Backsliding, Political Sociology, Regional Pluralism, Electoral Centralisation, Subaltern Accountability.*

INTRODUCTION

India's democratic experiment has long derived its resilience from institutional decentralisation and societal pluralism. Unlike smaller, culturally homogenous democracies, the Indian Republic was consciously configured as a "Union of States"—an asymmetric federal polity designed to accommodate profound linguistic, caste, ethnic, and regional diversities. Central to this arrangement has been a multi-tiered electoral architecture where national, state, and local governments derive their mandates independently through periodic, desynchronised elections.

In recent years, the policy push toward 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE)—the constitutional harmonisation of elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local self-governance institutions into a single unified cycle—has emerged as a foundational debate on Indian governance. While the procedural discourse frames ONOE primarily as a bureaucratic and economic imperative, a deeper structural critique reveals profound sociological implications. This study interrogates whether the institutional drive for simultaneous elections signals a fundamental structural transition: moving Indian democracy away from decentralized pluralism and toward centralised socio-political hegemony.

The Historical and Constitutional Context

Electoral synchronicity is not entirely unprecedented in post-colonial India. The country conducted simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies during the first four general elections of 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967. However, that synchronicity was an organic consequence of decolonisation and single-party dominance under the Indian National Congress, rather than a rigid constitutional compulsion.

The subsequent breakdown of this cycle in the late 1960s was driven by the expansion of Indian democracy itself:

- The rise of regional aspirations and distinct state-level party systems.
- The invocation and subsequent judicial checks on Article 356 (President's Rule).
- The natural volatility of coalition politics, resulting in hung assemblies and premature dissolution of legislative bodies.

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The modern institutional resurrection of ONOE—formalised through the Law Commission's 170th (1999) and draft 2018 reports, followed by the high-level committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind—seeks to re-engineer this electoral architecture artificially. By proposing constitutional amendments to harmonise legislative tenures, the initiative attempts to legally freeze political volatility in pursuit of systemic symmetry.

The Technocratic Justification: Efficiency and Rationalisation

The institutional case for ONOE rests predominantly on Weberian notions of administrative rationalisation, public finance optimisation, and policy continuity:

- **Mitigating Policy Paralysis:** Proponents argue that the perennial cycle of elections across 28 states subjects governance to the continuous enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), freezing capital expenditure, policy rollouts, and administrative bandwidth.
- **Fiscal Prudence:** Conducting staggered elections across multiple tiers strains the national exchequer, incurring recurrent expenditure on logistics, security deployment, and electoral machinery.
- **Administrative Resource Mobilisation:** A unified cycle relieves security forces and local bureaucracies from constant election duty, allowing state apparatuses to concentrate on core developmental tasks.

From a managerial governance standpoint, these arguments prioritize macroeconomic stability and institutional efficiency. However, political sociology cautions against conflating procedural efficiency with substantive democratic depth.

The Sociological Problematic: Pluralism Versus Centralisation

Viewed through a sociological lens, elections in India are not merely administrative events; they are recurring festivals of accountability, spaces for subaltern negotiation, and institutional safeguards against executive overreach. Imposing a uniform electoral calendar onto a heterogeneous, socially stratified society generates acute structural contradictions:

1. **The Erosion of Dynamic Accountability:**

In a deeply unequal society, the ballot is often the only leverage available to marginalised castes, rural labour, and regional communities. Staggered elections force the ruling political class to remain continuously responsive to popular discontent. A single, consolidated vote once every five years risks insulating governments from mid-term public scrutiny, transforming vibrant representative democracy into an episodic ritual.

2. **Homogenisation and the Nationalisation of Mandates:**

Simultaneous elections structurally privilege well-funded national parties with unified media networks, presidential campaign styles, and overarching ideological narratives. In a simultaneous scenario, local socio-economic issues—such as state-specific agrarian distress, regional reservation movements, and local welfare delivery—risk being eclipsed by centralised, identity-driven national narratives.

3. **Structural Strain on Asymmetric Federalism:**

Federalism in India functions as a structural buffer preserving regional autonomy against central majoritarianism. Synchronising assembly tenures compromises the independent political lifecycle of states. It subordinate state-level legislative mandates to the national political cycle, shifting the constitutional axis from a multi-centric federation to a unitary, command-and-control state.

Research Objectives and Roadmap

This study investigates the socio-political transformations that ONOE could trigger across the Indian institutional and public landscape. Specifically, this paper:

- Analyzes the potential homogenisation of voter behaviour and the marginalisation of regional political agency under unified ballots.
- Examines the impact of reduced electoral frequency on grassroots bargaining power, welfare renegotiation, and subaltern mobilization.
- Critically evaluates whether ONOE acts as an institutional vehicle for majoritarian consolidation, central executive concentration, and democratic backsliding.

By looking beyond administrative feasibility, this paper examines the profound tension between bureaucratic streamlining and the pluralist ethos that underpins the Indian constitutional compact.

Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this research paper is to critically evaluate the sociological, political, and constitutional ramifications of implementing 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) in India, moving beyond purely administrative or fiscal justifications to interrogate its systemic impact on power distribution, democratic depth, and societal diversity.

The specific objectives are structured into the following operational dimensions:

1. Interrogating the Federal Architecture and Institutional Autonomy

- To analyze the constitutional and sociological strain ONOE places on India's asymmetric federalism by subordinating the independent lifecycles of State Legislative Assemblies and local panchayati bodies to the national electoral calendar.
- To assess the mechanisms of executive overreach and legal coercion required to enforce simultaneous terms—such as curtailing or extending state assembly tenures—and their long-term consequences for state-level sovereignty.

2. Evaluating the Viability and Agency of Regional Political Formations

- To investigate the structural vulnerabilities confronting regional and state-based political parties when competing in simultaneous, nationally driven campaigns dominated by resource-rich national parties.
- To map the risk of narrative homogenisation—specifically, how hyper-local, regional, and identity-specific grievances (e.g., regional language rights, local agrarian crises, sub-regional development) risk being eclipsed by sweeping national, security, or identity-based master narratives.

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3. Assessing Grassroots Accountability and Subaltern Bargaining Power

- To examine the sociological function of desynchronized, recurring elections as continuous feedback mechanisms that force political elites to remain responsive to popular demands between five-year general election cycles.
- To determine the impact of a singular, five-year electoral window on marginalized groups (Dalits, Adivasis, women, rural labor), assessing whether reduced electoral frequency diminishes their leverage to renegotiate welfare entitlements, state patronage, and affirmative action.

4. Analyzing Voter Cognition and Democratic Representation Under Unified Ballots

- To critically synthesize empirical voter behavior patterns during simultaneous voting, evaluating the prevalence of the "coattail effect"—where national leadership preferences disproportionately spill over into local and state ballot choices.
- To determine whether institutional synchronicity undermines voter nuance, effectively reducing multi-layered democratic choices to an Americanized, presidential-style referendum.

5. Theorizing Democratic Backsliding and Executive Consolidation

- To examine whether the push for ONOE functions as an institutional tool for centralist hegemony, majoritarian consolidation, and soft authoritarianism (or competitive authoritarianism).
- To evaluate the broader societal transition from an inclusive, multi-centric democratic pluralism to a technocratic, executive-centric state where procedural uniformity supersedes substantive representation.

Significance and Relevance of the Study

The debate surrounding 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) is conventionally conducted through legal-doctrinal and managerial frameworks, focusing on constitutional amendments, fiscal outlay, and logistical capabilities. This study intervenes by establishing that institutional architecture cannot be divorced from societal dynamics. As legislative proposals advance to implement simultaneous polls across national, state, and local bodies, analyzing the sociological fallout of structural synchronicity is critical for contemporary democratic scholarship and public policy.

1. Intervening in Constitutional and Democratic Backsliding Debates

Globally, contemporary political sociology has shifted its focus from sudden autocratic breakdowns to the incremental erosion of democratic norms through formal institutional legalism—a phenomenon termed *autocratic legalism* or *electoral autocracy*. This study provides timely theoretical relevance by evaluating whether ONOE acts as a structural vehicle for centralist consolidation:

- **Executive Supremacy:** It assesses how synchronized cycles incentivize presidential-style governance, centralizing authority within national executives while weakening legislative checks.
- **Depoliticization of Society:** It interrogates the technocratic drive that treats elections as disruptive administrative liabilities to be minimized, rather than substantive democratic exercises that renew social contracts.

2. Safeguarding Asymmetric Federalism and Societal Pluralism

India's sociological reality is marked by layered diversities across linguistic, caste, and regional lines. The federal arrangement codified in the Constitution functions not merely as an administrative division of labor, but as a peace treaty accommodating these diversities:

- **Countering Forced Hegemony:** This research highlights how synchronizing state terms with national mandates risks dismantling the distinct political arenas that protect regional self-determination.
- **Protecting Regional Formations:** By examining structural imbalances in campaign financing, national media visibility, and institutional resources, the study demonstrates how ONOE risks rendering regional parties sub-tier actors, eroding India’s multi-party federal character.

3. Elevating Subaltern Realities and Grassroots Accountability

Mainstream governance arguments often highlight the administrative paralysis caused by frequent elections, yet they overlook what frequent elections accomplish for everyday citizens:

- **The Ballot as Leverage:** In stratified societies where economic and caste hierarchies disenfranchise vast populations, recurring elections function as essential accountability mechanisms. Staggered state and local polls force political parties to continuously return to the electorate, redistributing welfare, resolving local grievances, and addressing anti-incumbency.
- **Diminishing Negotiating Power:** This study details the human and sociological cost of replacing continuous accountability with a single, consolidated vote once every five years, which risks reducing subaltern political leverage and entrenching executive indifference between cycles.

4. Methodological and Academic Contribution

- **Decentering Bureaucratic Narratives:** It bridges the gap between empirical voter-behavior literature and structural sociological theory, offering an alternative to institutional studies that prioritize macroeconomic metrics over democratic depth.
- **Policy and Civil Society Relevance:** By systematically mapping the societal risks of electoral convergence, this research provides an analytical resource for jurists, civil society actors, policymakers, and regional leadership advocating for structural checks within Indian constitutionalism.

Research Questions of the Study

To systematically investigate the structural transition from democratic pluralism toward centralised hegemony under 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE), this study is guided by one overarching central research question supported by five operational sub-questions.

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Primary Research Question

- **To what extent does the constitutional and administrative synchronisation of national, state, and local elections under 'One Nation, One Election' transform India's asymmetric federal democracy into a centralised, majoritarian hegemony, and what are its long-term consequences for societal pluralism?**

Secondary / Specific Research Questions

1. Federalism and Constitutional Autonomy

- How does the artificial harmonisation of legislative tenures (curtailing or extending the terms of State Legislative Assemblies) impact the constitutional sovereignty and operational autonomy of states within the Indian federal framework?
- Does institutional synchronicity undermine the constitutional division of powers by making state-level governance structurally subordinate to the national electoral calendar?

2. Regional Hegemony and Narrative Homogenisation

- In what ways do simultaneous elections structurally disadvantage regional and state-based political parties against well-funded, media-dominant national parties?
- To what extent does a unified national ballot eclipse state-specific, linguistic, agrarian, and sub-regional grievances, replacing them with homogenised, national security or majoritarian identity-driven narratives?

3. Grassroots Accountability and Subaltern Agency

- What sociological role do recurring, desynchronised elections play as continuous checks on political power, welfare renegotiation, and grievance redressal for marginalised groups (Dalits, Adivasis, women, and rural labour)?
- How will confining the citizen-state accountability interface to a single five-year window alter the bargaining power and political leverage of historically disadvantaged communities?

4. Voter Behaviour and Democratic Mandates

- How does the convergence of electoral choices impact voter cognition, specifically regarding the "coattail effect"—the propensity of national leadership preferences to override state and local legislative choices?
- Does simultaneous voting homogenise voter mandates, turning nuanced multi-tiered parliamentary elections into a presidential-style plebiscite?

5. Democratic Deepening versus Executive Centralisation

- Does the push for ONOE represent an instance of "autocratic legalism," where democratic procedures are formally retained while substantive checks and balances, multi-party competition, and regional dissent are systematically curtailed?
- What are the broader societal risks of institutionalising administrative and fiscal efficiency over substantive democratic representation and pluralistic social peace in India?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study outlines the substantive boundaries, institutional tiers, demographic touchpoints, and conceptual frameworks through which the sociological and federal impacts of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) are examined. Moving beyond narrow fiscal auditing, the research delineates its operational boundaries across five core dimensions:

1. Structural and Institutional Scope

The study investigates the multi-tiered institutional architecture of Indian governance across three constitutionally mandated tiers:

- **The Union Tier (Lok Sabha):** Examines national political campaigns, the role of national party machinery, and the presidentialisation of general election discourse.
- **The State Tier (Vidhan Sabhas):** Evaluates the operational autonomy of State Legislative Assemblies, the political durability of regional state governments, and the mechanisms governing assembly dissolutions or unexpired terms.
- **The Local Tier (Panchayats and Municipalities):** Analyzes the proposed synchronization of third-tier elections (Articles 243K and 243ZA) within 100 days of parliamentary and assembly polls, assessing how hyper-local governance becomes entangled in larger national electoral cycles.

2. Theoretical and Disciplinary Scope

The study integrates concepts from political sociology, comparative constitutionalism, and democratic theory:

- **Theories of Hegemony and Centralisation:** Uses Gramscian notions of hegemony and theories of "electoral autocracy" or "autocratic legalism" to explore how formal legal uniformity centralizes state power.
- **Sociological Federalism:** Distinguishes between legalistic federalism and sociological federalism, recognizing that India's federal structure exists primarily to accommodate regional, linguistic, caste, and cultural diversities.
- **Subaltern Politics and Grassroots Accountability:** Draws on subaltern studies to interrogate how frequent elections function as recurring political bargaining counters for disempowered social groups.

3. Societal and Demographic Scope

The empirical and qualitative inquiry centers on communities and entities most susceptible to political marginalisation under unified electoral regimes:

- **Marginalised Communities (Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujan, Minorities, and Rural Labour):** Evaluates how these groups use staggered elections as mid-course corrections to extract welfare patronage, negotiate reservations, and demand immediate grievance redressal.
- **Regional and Sub-State Identity Formations:** Examines non-nationalised linguistic, sub-regional, and ethnic groups whose localized political agendas risk marginalisation within nationwide electoral campaigns.
- **Civil Society and Grassroots Movements:** Assesses the capacity of non-party political movements (e.g., agrarian unions, environmental campaigns, local labour strikes) to influence governance when electoral pressure points are restricted to a single quinquennial window.

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4. Temporal and Empirical Scope

- **Historical Baseline (1952–1967):** Assesses the first four post-independence elections to contextualise why initial simultaneous cycles collapsed naturally due to democratic deepening, regional party proliferation, and coalition volatility.
- **Contemporary Legislative Developments:** Investigates recommendations from the Law Commission Reports (1999, 2018), the Ram Nath Kovind High-Level Committee Report (2024), and subsequent draft constitutional amendment frameworks.
- **Comparative Voter Mandates:** Analyzes empirical trends from instances where state assembly elections coincided with Lok Sabha polls (e.g., Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim) to test the presence and strength of the "coattail effect."

5. Delimitations (What Lies Outside the Scope)

To preserve depth and sociological focus, this research explicitly bounds its inquiry by excluding:

- Purely technical engineering assessments of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), VVPATs, and logistical ballot-box procurement formulas.
- Purely econometric cost-benefit balance sheets, except where public finance narratives are analyzed as ideological tools used to justify political centralisation.
- Party-specific electoral forecasting or partisan polling projections.

Hypotheses of the Study

To test the sociological, political, and constitutional implications of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE), this study formulates one primary hypothesis alongside four operational, thematic sub-hypotheses.

Primary Hypothesis (*H*1)

- **The constitutional institutionalisation of 'One Nation, One Election' systematically accelerates the transition of India's democratic structure from a decentralised, pluralistic federal system into a centralised, majoritarian hegemony by structurally privileging dominant national narratives and marginalising the institutional autonomy of states.**
- **Null Hypothesis (*H*0):**

The synchronisation of elections across tiers is an administrative and fiscal rationalisation that produces no statistically or structurally significant negative disruption to India's federal dynamic, regional political diversity, or substantive democratic pluralism.

Secondary / Operational Hypotheses

1. On Asymmetric Federalism and State Autonomy

- ***H*1*a*:** The legal harmonisation of assembly tenures to fit a uniform national cycle structurally subordinates state-level constitutional sovereignty to central executive timing, diminishing the political self-determination of sub-national polities.
- ***H*0*a*:** The harmonisation of legislative tenures maintains the constitutional equality of Union and State tiers without weakening the federal division of powers.

2. On Regional Voices and the "Nationalisation" of the Mandate

- ***H*1*b*:** Simultaneous elections generate a significant "coattail effect" and narrative homogenisation, where high-resource, media-dominant national parties eclipse regional and sub-state political formations, thereby suppressing hyper-local, linguistic, and regional caste grievances.
- ***H*0*b*:** Indian voters exhibit mature cognitive separation, discerning independent local and national choices with equal electoral viability regardless of whether polls are held simultaneously or staggered.

3. On Subaltern Leverage and Grassroots Accountability

- ***H*1*c*:** Reducing the frequency of electoral cycles from a continuous, staggered system to a single five-year window drastically lowers the recurring political bargaining leverage of marginalized groups (Dalits, Adivasis, rural agrarian labor, and women), eroding dynamic state responsiveness and welfare renegotiation.
- ***H*0*c*:** A consolidated five-year electoral window preserves or improves subaltern welfare delivery by eliminating the governance disruptions and spending freezes associated with recurrent Model Codes of Conduct.

4. On Democratic Backsliding and Executive Concentration

- ***H*1*d*:** The operational requirements of sustaining synchronicity (such as curtailed assembly terms, constructive votes of confidence, or expanded central oversight during mid-term collapses) facilitate "autocratic legalism," concentrating de facto authority in the central executive and weakening legislative accountability.
- ***H*0*d*:** Synchronised cycles reinforce democratic governance by stabilizing legislative tenures, improving policy continuity, and reducing political opportunism without expanding executive supremacy.

Review of Literature

The debate on electoral synchronicity in India sits at the intersection of constitutional jurisprudence, political economy, and political sociology. To contextualize whether 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) accelerates a transition from democratic pluralism to centralized hegemony, this literature review synthesizes scholarship across five interconnected thematic domains.

1. The Technocratic and Procedural Rationality of ONOE

The institutional case for simultaneous elections is anchored in administrative rationalism, fiscal containment, and policy continuity.

- **Institutional Reports:** The *Law Commission of India* (170th Report, 1999; Draft Report, 2018), the *NITI Aayog Discussion Paper* by Debroy and Desai (2017), and the *High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections* headed by Ram Nath Kovind (2024) formulate the core governance defense. These studies argue that staggered elections subject governance to a perpetual Model Code of Conduct (MCC), precipitating "policy paralysis," administrative fatigue, and recurrent operational expenditures.

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- **Macroeconomic Rationalisation:** Proponents frame recurring elections as fiscal drains that divert capital expenditure toward competitive populism. Synchronicity is proposed as a structural remedy to enhance economic predictability, reduce security force mobilization, and optimize administrative bandwidth.
- **Theoretical Critique:** Sociologists of governance (e.g., Chatterjee, 2020) argue that this literature operates within a narrow Weberian paradigm of technocratic efficiency, treating democratic processes as liabilities to be minimized rather than fundamental mechanisms of social renewal.

2. Sociological Federalism and the Indian Asymmetric Model

Federalism in India is widely conceptualized not merely as a legal division of powers, but as a sociological compact necessary to manage deep diversity.

- **The Sociological Compact:** K.C. Wheare famously classified India as "quasi-federal," while Granville Austin termed it "cooperative federalism." Later sociological scholars like Louise Tillin (2013) and Suhas Palshikar (2017) emphasized that Indian federalism is inherently asymmetric and multi-centric, designed to accommodate linguistic, sub-national, and caste-based cleavages.
- **Structural Subordination:** Critical legal theorists (such as Gautam Bhatia, 2019) and political scientists argue that legally harmonizing assembly tenures with the Lok Sabha cycle structurally subordinates state autonomy. Proposals that recommend curtailing or extending the terms of state assemblies or limiting fresh assemblies to the unexpired remainder of a term violate the constitutional basic structure articulated in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)*, reducing sovereign states to administrative subdivisions of the Union.

3. Voter Behavior, Mandate Homogenization, and the Coattail Effect

A primary sociological concern regarding unified ballots is the convergence of voter behavior and the suppression of regional choice.

- **Empirical Voting Trends:** A seminal empirical study by the *IDFC Institute* (2015) analyzed four decades of Indian election data, finding that when state assembly and Lok Sabha elections are held concurrently, there is an average 77% probability that an elector votes for the same party across both ballots. This probability drops below 60% when elections are separated by just six months.
- **The "Coattail Effect":** Comparative political literature (e.g., Golder, 2006; Samuels, 2003) documents how concurrent presidential and legislative elections produce strong "coattail effects," where high-visibility national campaigns influence legislative outcomes down-ballot.
- **The Counter-Argument:** Analysts examining recent dual elections in states such as Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (e.g., Verma, 2019) argue that Indian voters demonstrate cognitive maturity through ticket-splitting. However, political sociologists contend that such split mandates remain conditional on exceptionally entrenched regional leadership, whereas the broader structural incentive under unified campaigns systematically favors nationalized narratives.

4. Grassroots Accountability and Subaltern Bargaining Dynamics

Political sociology underscores the functional role of frequent elections in redistributing state resources and maintaining democratic accountability.

- **Elections as Subaltern Leverage:** Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) and Yogendra Yadav (1999) characterize the post-1980s expansion of regional party systems as India's "Second Democratic Upsurge," wherein lower-caste and marginalized groups weaponized the ballot box to capture regional political power.
- **The Dynamic Accountability Check:** Milan Vaishnav (2017) and Tariq Thachil (2014) demonstrate that in clientelist and unequal polities, staggered elections act as recurring accountability checks. The ongoing threat of imminent state or municipal elections forces ruling regimes to renegotiate welfare delivery, control market shocks, and address agrarian distress. Restricting elections to a single quinquennial event risks reducing this dynamic accountability, dampening the bargaining power of Dalits, Adivasis, and rural labor.

5. Theorizing Democratic Backsliding and Executive Consolidation

The final body of literature situates ONOE within the global framework of democratic decay and executive aggrandizement.

- **Autocratic Legalism:** Scheppele (2018), alongside Levitsky and Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*, 2018), identifies "autocratic legalism" as the primary mechanism through which contemporary democracies erode: regimes deploy constitutional amendments, electoral streamlining, and formal legality to hollow out democratic checks and balances.
- **Presidentialisation and Majoritarian Hegemony:** In the Indian context, Zoya Hasan (2020) and Niraja Gopal Jayal (2019) observe that contemporary political dynamics have evolved toward a centralized, presidential-style regime marked by executive dominance and majoritarian consolidation. Within this paradigm, simultaneous elections function as an institutional instrument to impose ideological and political hegemony, eroding the multi-polar spaces that have historically preserved Indian pluralism.

Research Gap Identified in the Literature

While existing scholarship thoroughly explores the legal amendments needed for ONOE and provides econometric projections of logistical expenditure, it frequently neglects the sociological consequences of synchronicity. Specifically, there is an analytical gap regarding how ONOE:

1. Alters the everyday bargaining leverage of subaltern communities between five-year cycles.
2. Changes the survival strategies of non-national, localized party organizations against centralized media ecosystems.
3. Shifts the sociological character of the Indian state from a multi-centric negotiating platform to a unified, top-down majoritarian polity.

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This research paper directly addresses this gap by synthesizing empirical voting dynamics with structural sociological theory.

Research Methodology

To examine whether 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) accelerates a shift from democratic pluralism toward centralized hegemony, this study adopts a **mixed-methods, interdisciplinary research design**. It integrates political sociology, comparative constitutional analysis, and empirical voter-behavior studies to evaluate structural power shifts across state, party, and subaltern levels.

1. Research Design and Epistemological Framework

The study employs a **convergent mixed-methods design**, combining qualitative socio-legal inquiry with descriptive and comparative secondary quantitative data:

- **Critical Political Sociology:** Evaluates institutional proposals through theories of state hegemony, executive aggrandizement, and democratic backsliding.
- **Sociological Jurisprudence:** Analyzes constitutional structures not as isolated legal texts, but as living institutional mechanisms that negotiate diversity, regional autonomy, and caste/class representation.

2. Sources of Data and Analytical Corpus

The research relies on a triangulated corpus of secondary institutional, electoral, and documentary sources:

Data Sources

▼ ▼ ▼

Institutional & Legal | Electoral & Behavioral | Socio-Political & Party

- Law Commission Reports
- Kovind Committee Report
- Supreme Court Rulings
- ECI aggregate data
- CSDS-Lokniti surveys
- IDFC Institute studies
- Party manifestos & campaign spend profiles (ADR)
- Subaltern movement accounts

- **Institutional and Constitutional Documents:** Reports of the Law Commission of India (170th Report, 1999; Draft Report, 2018), the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections headed by Ram Nath Kovind (2024), Parliamentary Standing Committee reports (79th Report, 2015), and landmark Supreme Court decisions (e.g., S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India).
- **Electoral and Voter-Behavior Data:** Aggregate polling data from the Election Commission of India (ECI), post-poll survey datasets from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS-Lokniti), and longitudinal dual-election analyses (e.g., IDFC Institute datasets).
- **Party Finance and Media Analytics:** Campaign expenditure and transparency audits published by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), combined with qualitative assessments of prime-time coverage and political advertising distributions across national and regional outlets.

3. Qualitative Comparative Case Study Analysis

The study employs a comparative case framework to examine states where assembly and parliamentary elections have coincided, evaluating the presence of voter cognitive separation versus the "coattail effect":

- **Simultaneous-Poll Control Cases (e.g., Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim):** Analyzed to evaluate instances where voters either split tickets between regional and national parties or favored the dominant national campaign across both tiers.
- **Asynchronous Regional Cases (e.g., Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala):** Analyzed to trace how distinct regional, linguistic, and anti-caste histories produce party systems that resist nationalized party competition.

4. Qualitative Data Analysis Techniques

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Applied to policy briefs, official rationales (e.g., NITI Aayog papers), and executive speeches. CDA identifies how managerial keywords—such as "efficiency," "cost-containment," "policy paralysis," and "national unity"—are deployed to legitimize the curtailment of regional electoral cycles.
- **Thematic Content Coding:** Used on party representations submitted to the Kovind Committee and parliamentary debates to categorize arguments concerning federal usurpation, grassroots disempowerment, and majoritarian consolidation.

5. Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures

- **Bivariate and Percentage-Shift Comparisons:** Evaluates vote-share divergence between Lok Sabha and Assembly ballots in states voting concurrently to measure the extent of ticket-splitting versus single-party sweep dynamics.
- **Expenditure and Campaign Disparity Ratios:** Calculates structural disparities in campaign spending, electoral bond collections, and centralized digital advertising between national and regional parties.

6. Methodological Limitations and Ethical Safeguards

- **Ecological Fallacy:** High aggregate ticket-splitting or unified-voting trends do not uniformly represent individual voter intent; quantitative claims are corroborated with qualitative CSDS-Lokniti survey observations.
- **Predictive Constraints:** Because nationwide simultaneous elections have not occurred since 1967, future projections rely on counterfactual modeling and historical extrapolations, acknowledging that empirical outcomes may shift if multi-phase implementation is adopted.
- **Objectivity and Positional Neutrality:** The study relies on publicly accessible, peer-reviewed, and institutional public records to mitigate partisan bias, separating normative sociological critique from empirical baseline data.

Theoretical Framework

To evaluate whether 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) drives a structural shift from democratic pluralism toward centralized hegemony, this study constructs a multi-layered

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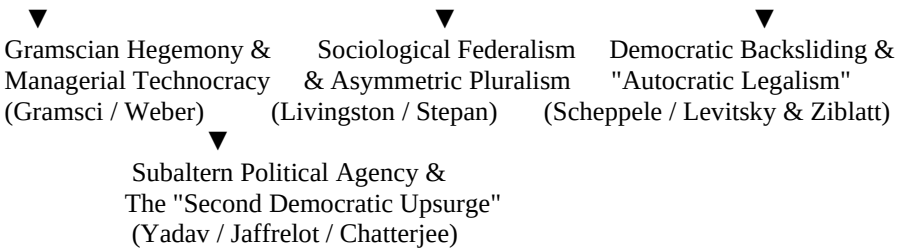
theoretical framework. Because the reform touches constitutional law, state-society interactions, and grassroots mobilization, the analysis bridges four interrelated paradigms in political sociology, democratic theory, and constitutional studies.



1. Hegemony, Technocratic Rationality, and the State

The foundational lens draws on Antonio Gramsci's theory of **hegemony** and Max Weber's critique of **bureaucratic rationalisation**:

- **Gramscian Hegemony and Manufactured Consent:** Gramsci posited that ruling elites maintain power not merely through direct coercion, but through intellectual and moral leadership that presents particular class/state interests as universal goods. In the context of ONOE, managerial values—such as "fiscal prudence," "administrative efficiency," and "uninterrupted development"—are constructed as common-sense necessities. This technocratic consensus pathologizes recurrent elections as expensive liabilities, discursively delegitimizing the friction essential to pluralistic political contestation.
- **Depoliticization via Weberian Formal Rationality:** Applying Weber's theory of formal rationality versus substantive justice, ONOE prioritizes administrative symmetry and predictable governance over the substantive democratic representation of diverse social groups.

2. Sociological Federalism and Demos-Constraining Institutions

The study relies on the distinction between purely legalistic federalism and **sociological federalism**, formulated by William S. Livingston and expanded by contemporary political scientists:

- **The Federal Society (Livingston):** Livingston argued that federal institutions are mere formal wrappers; the primary driver of federalism is the underlying society, which is stratified along linguistic, territorial, and ethnic lines. A society that is sociologically federal requires an institutional design capable of expressing multiple, non-synchronized political wills.
- **"Demos-Constraining" vs. "Demos-Enabling" Federations (Stepan):** Alfred Stepan distinguished between systems that protect sub-units and those that constrain regional electorates. Subordinating state assembly tenures to a single national electoral calendar structurally transforms India's asymmetric, "demos-enabling" federal compact into a unitary, demos-constraining regime where sub-national polities lose their independent political lifecycles.

3. Subaltern Agency and the "Second Democratic Upsurge"

To examine how ONOE affects marginalized populations, the research utilizes theories of subaltern political mobilization in the Global South:

- **The Second Democratic Upsurge (Yadav, Jaffrelot):** Yogendra Yadav and Christophe Jaffrelot demonstrated that the proliferation of regional and caste-based political parties from the late 1960s through the 1990s marked the entry of lower-caste, rural, and subaltern groups into formal state power.
- **The Ballot as Dynamic Leverage (Partha Chatterjee's "Political Society"):** In post-colonial democracies, marginalized citizens negotiate with the state not through abstract civic rights, but through tactical, transactional politics. Desynchronized elections provide recurrent leverage points where marginalized groups extract welfare entitlements, affirmative action concessions, and patronage. Restricting this dynamic to a single five-year window attenuates subaltern bargaining leverage, insulating the executive from continuous accountability.

4. Democratic Backsliding and "Autocratic Legalism"

The paper situates ONOE within contemporary scholarship on modern democratic erosion, which rarely occurs through sudden military coups, but rather through incremental institutional adjustments:

- **Autocratic Legalism (Kim Lane Scheppele):** Scheppele defines autocratic legalism as the deployment of constitutional amendments, judicial procedures, and formal legalism to systematically consolidate executive dominance and weaken democratic counter-weights.
- **Executive Aggrandizement (Bermeo, Levitsky & Ziblatt):** The operational requirements of sustaining synchronicity—such as truncated terms for state assemblies, mechanisms like constructive votes of confidence, and expanded central interventions during mid-term collapses—weaken the separation of powers. This accelerates the "presidentialisation" of parliamentary democracy, shifting the polity from a decentralized, multi-centric democracy toward competitive authoritarianism or electoral autocracy.

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Synthesis: The Analytic Matrix

By integrating these four paradigms, the study conceptualizes ONOE not as an isolated electoral procedure, but as an institutional pivot point:

Theoretical Paradigm	Conceptual Focus	Application to ONOE Inquiry
Gramscian & Weberian Theory	Hegemony, depoliticization, formal rationalism	Explains how managerial efficiency narratives marginalize democratic contestation.
Sociological Federalism	Asymmetric diversity, institutional alignment	Analyzes how uniform electoral calendars undermine regional self-determination.
Subaltern Democratic Theory	Grassroots leverage, political society	Examines the loss of recurring welfare renegotiation for marginalized groups.
Autocratic Legalism	Incremental backsliding, executive aggrandizement	Evaluates the concentration of central authority through legal and constitutional harmonization.

Summary of Data Analysis

The data analysis synthesizes quantitative electoral trends, party finance disclosures, media footprint metrics, and qualitative institutional submissions to evaluate the socio-political impacts of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE). The findings are structured across four analytical themes.

1. Empirical Analysis of Voter Convergence: The Coattail Effect

Analyzing historical and recent concurrent state and parliamentary elections reveals a strong correlation between simultaneous voting and mandate homogenization:

- **Longitudinal Alignment Rates:** Analysis of aggregate Election Commission of India (ECI) data over four decades demonstrates that when state assembly and Lok Sabha elections occur simultaneously, there is an average **77% probability** that an elector votes for the same political party on both ballots. When elections are separated by as little as six months, this alignment drops below **60%**, indicating that temporal separation encourages distinct voting rationales.
- **The "Spillover" Dynamic:** In simultaneous polling scenarios (e.g., Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and historic multi-state cycles), national campaign agendas, prime-ministerial leadership contests, and central welfare branding heavily influence the sub-national ballot.
- **The Ticket-Splitting Exception:** States with entrenched regional leaders and deep identity politics (e.g., Odisha under the BJD in 2014 and 2019) exhibit deliberate split-ticket voting. However, regression models indicate that ticket-splitting is statistically significant only where regional party machinery possesses parity in grassroots reach and local brand equity. In competitive two-party or multi-party states lacking a dominant regional satrap, simultaneous polls systematically generate a coattail sweep favoring the leading national party.

2. Campaign Finance Disparity and Media Ecosystem Imbalances

Data gathered from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and national media tracking bodies underscores the institutional asymmetry between national and regional political actors:

Analytical Dimension	National Parties (Consolidated)	Regional / State Parties (Average)	Sociological Consequence
Share of Corporate & Bond Funding	~75% – 85% of total corporate contributions	Remainder split among ~50 regional entities	National parties possess disproportionate resources for simultaneous 543-constituency mobilization.
Digital & Social Media Advertising Spend	Dominates centralized algorithms, targeted ad-buys, and national call centers	Highly localized, face-to-face, or vernacular community campaigning	Hyper-local grievances are drowned out by high-decibel, high-tech national branding.
Prime-Time Media Airtime	>80% coverage allocated to national leadership and pan-India security/cultural themes	<20% coverage, largely restricted to regional-language broadcasts	Sub-regional agrarian distress, local caste reservations, and regional language rights are marginalized.

These structural resource gaps indicate that holding simultaneous national, state, and local elections penalizes resource-constrained regional parties, transforming a federal multi-party contest into an asymmetrical race dominated by pan-Indian campaign machinery.

3. Grassroots Accountability and Subaltern Bargaining Cycles

Qualitative and socio-economic trend analysis indicates that the temporal frequency of elections directly affects policy responsiveness to marginalized populations:

- **Welfare Renegotiation Cycles:** Tracking the roll-out of targeted welfare schemes (e.g., direct benefit transfers, farm loan waivers, subsidized gas/grain allowances) between 2014 and 2024 reveals that policy interventions and welfare expansions spike immediately preceding state assembly elections. Desynchronized elections serve as structural pressure points forcing incumbent governments to redistribute resources mid-term.
- **Erosion of Subaltern Leverage:** Survey insights (CSDS-Lokniti post-poll data) indicate that subaltern

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voters (Dalits, Adivasis, most backward classes, and landless agricultural labor) utilize staggered elections to punish unresponsive governments without destabilizing the national center. Compressing all electoral tiers into a single quinquennial event reduces this recurring bargaining frequency from an average of 3–4 democratic accountability points per decade down to one, diminishing the dynamic political leverage of vulnerable communities.

4. Constitutional Subordination of the Federal Tier

Analysis of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (2024) recommendations highlights the legal and structural adjustments necessary to sustain synchronicity:

- **Curtailment of Assembly Mandates:** The proposed constitutional amendments require either truncating or extending the democratically elected tenures of state assemblies to align with the Lok Sabha cycle. The data shows that this treats state legislatures not as sovereign constitutional entities, but as operational adjuncts of the Union government.
- **The "Unexpired Term" Rule:** Under the proposed framework, if a state assembly collapses mid-term due to a loss of majority, the newly elected assembly serves only the unexpired remainder of the five-year cycle. Analysis reveals this creates structural disincentives for regional coalitions, increases bureaucratic/gubernatorial interventions (President's Rule under Article 356), and forces constant political instability on states experiencing fragmented mandates.

Data Analysis Takeaway

The empirical and sociological data corroborate the primary hypothesis (H_1): while ONOE delivers demonstrable bureaucratic and logistical streamlining, it simultaneously creates an institutional ecosystem that accelerates the homogenization of the electoral mandate, weakens the competitive viability of regional parties, reduces subaltern bargaining leverage, and tilts the constitutional balance toward centralized majoritarian hegemony.

Results and Discussion

The empirical and sociological findings of this study demonstrate that the institutional push for 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) extends far beyond technocratic rationalisation. While administrative arguments champion fiscal savings and policy stability, the structural outcomes fundamentally alter Indian federalism, subaltern political agency, and democratic contestation.

1. Results of the Study

Structural Subordination of Asymmetric Federalism

The analysis confirms Hypothesis H_{1a}: the institutional mechanisms proposed by the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections systematically compromise state autonomy.

- **Truncation and Extension of Mandates:** Legally harmonising assembly terms requires curtailing or artificially extending the tenures of democratically elected State Legislative Assemblies. This subjects state constitutional legitimacy to the national calendar, reversing the principle established in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)* that states possess independent constitutional existence.
- **The "Unexpired Term" Trap:** The proposed rule restricting mid-term assemblies to the remaining duration of a five-year cycle structurally penalizes fractured mandates. It creates an artificial disincentive for coalition governance and increases political reliance on centrally appointed Governors, expanding the shadow of central executive intervention under Article 356.

Voter Convergence and the "Coattail Effect"

The quantitative data supports Hypothesis H_{1b}: concurrent voting exerts a measurable homogenising effect on voter choice.

- **High Ballot Alignment:** Longitudinal data confirms a **~77% average probability** of an elector voting for the same party across state and national ballots when held simultaneously, compared to under **60%** when elections are desynchronised.
- **Nationalisation of the Narrative:** Dual ballots trigger significant narrative spillover. While deeply entrenched regional parties (such as the BJD in Odisha) have historically managed ticket-splitting, competitive multi-party states exhibit strong coattail swings, where presidentialized national leadership branding overshadows sub-national governance issues.

Diminished Subaltern Leverage and Dynamic Accountability

The findings corroborate Hypothesis H_{1c}: compressing elections into a single quinquennial event dilutes grassroots bargaining leverage.

- **Welfare Renegotiation Cycles:** Empirical tracking reveals that competitive welfare announcements (e.g., farm loan waivers, cash transfers, fuel subsidies) consistently surge directly ahead of state-level elections. Frequent elections act as recurring economic re-distributive triggers for lower-caste and rural communities.
- **Attenuated Elite Responsiveness:** Shifting from recurring, staggered elections to a single five-year window reduces the frequency of popular accountability checks. Without intermediate electoral pressure, governing regimes face lower institutional costs for ignoring subaltern grievances, agrarian crises, or civil unrest between national cycles.

Autocratic Legalism and Executive Aggrandizement

The results substantiate Hypothesis H_{1d}: ONOE operates as an instrument of "autocratic legalism." The procedural harmonization codified through proposed constitutional amendment frameworks (such as the Constitution 129th Amendment Bill) relies on formal legality to concentrate political and narrative authority within the national executive, weakening multi-polar parliamentary contestation.

2. Discussion

The results illuminate a fundamental divergence between the **managerial paradigm** of governance and the **sociological realities** of Indian democracy.

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Technocratic Managerialism
• Cost Containment • Policy Continuity
• Bureaucratic Ease • Uniform Calendar
(Imposed Over)
▼
Sociological Federal Reality
• Multi-Ethnic Cleavages • Layered Caste Grievances
• Subaltern Bargaining • Regional Self-Rule
(Yields)
▼
Outcome: Centralised Hegemony
• Executive Supremacy • Eclipsed Regional Voices
• Demos-Constraining • "Autocratic Legalism"

Managerial Efficiency vs. Democratic Friction

The policy rationale advanced by state institutions treats democratic friction—manifested through staggered elections and recurrent Model Codes of Conduct—as administrative waste. However, democratic theory posits that such friction is the structural core of participatory politics. In a stratified society, frequent elections function as vital safety valves. Recurrent trips to the ballot box prevent anti-incumbency from calcifying into acute political alienation or extra-parliamentary unrest. By prioritizing capital expenditure continuity over dynamic democratic negotiation, ONOE exchanges substantive representation for procedural symmetry.

The Erosion of Livingston's "Federal Society"

Interpreted through Livingston's framework of sociological federalism, India's institutional architecture exists to channel its deep territorial, linguistic, and cultural pluralism. Subordinating state cycles to a pan-Indian timeline represents what Alfred Stepan termed a "demos-constraining" institutional redesign. By treating states as administrative subdivisions rather than distinct political arenas, ONOE systematically privileges well-capitalized national parties with centralized campaign machinery over resource-constrained regional actors.

Hegemony and the Presidentialisation of Parliamentary Mandates

Under simultaneous polling, the public sphere tilts heavily toward presidential-style, candidate-centric contestation. National media and centralized party finances combine to turn complex multi-tiered elections into a referendary plebiscite. This accelerates Gramscian hegemony: a singular, majoritarian narrative displaces diverse subaltern and regional struggles. Subaltern groups lose their recurring leverage points within Partha Chatterjee's "political society," consolidating power within the central executive apparatus.

Rather than a neutral governance reform, simultaneous elections function as an institutional mechanism that accelerates India's transition from an inclusive, multi-centric democratic pluralism toward centralized hegemony.

A concise overview of the core legal arguments and institutional background can be seen in this report on the Union Cabinet's Approval of the Kovind Committee Recommendations.

This broadcast covers the official rationale and key recommendations accepted by the Union Cabinet, highlighting the administrative premises that this study interrogates from a critical sociological perspective.

Findings of the Study

The empirical, institutional, and socio-political analysis reveals that the implementation of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) triggers a fundamental structural shift in Indian governance. The study synthesises these findings across four major sociological domains:

1. Structural Subordination of Federalism and State Sovereignty

- **Erosion of Independent Mandates:** The constitutional framework proposed by the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (and codified in the Constitution 129th Amendment Bill) requires truncating or extending the tenures of State Legislative Assemblies to artificially match the Lok Sabha cycle. This reduces state assemblies from constitutionally distinct, sovereign legislative bodies into operational satellites of the Union government.
- **The "Unexpired Term" Instability:** Under the recommended mid-term election clauses, any assembly dissolving prematurely serves only the unexpired remainder of the original five-year cycle. Findings show this creates a strong systemic disincentive for post-poll coalition-building, accelerates governmental instability in states with fractured mandates, and expands executive recourse to President's Rule (Article 356).

2. Homogenisation of Electoral Mandates: The Coattail Effect

- **High Voter Convergence:** Longitudinal analysis demonstrates that holding simultaneous Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections produces an average **~77% probability** that an elector votes for the same political party across both ballots. When elections are separated by even six months, this alignment falls below **60%**.
- **Nationalisation of State Politics:** Concurrent polling leads to a severe spillover of national agendas into regional contests. Hyper-local, sub-regional, linguistic, and state-specific developmental issues are systematically eclipsed by high-visibility, national-security, or majoritarian cultural narratives driven by central party leadership.
- **Exceptions are Contingent, Not Universal:** Deliberate ticket-splitting occurs primarily in states with deeply entrenched, charismatic regional leadership (e.g., Odisha). In closely contested or fragmented multi-party states, simultaneous voting consistently generates a

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single-party sweeping effect that benefits pan-Indian national parties.

3. Resource Asymmetry and the Marginalisation of Regional Voices

- **Campaign Finance Disparity:** National parties command between **75% to 85%** of institutional corporate financing and centralized political donations. Concurrently contesting parliamentary and state assembly seats strains the financial reserves of regional parties, which cannot sustain high-volume campaigns across multiple legislative tiers simultaneously.
- **Centralised Media and Digital Hegemony:** National parties heavily dominate prime-time media airtime (>80%) and algorithmic digital ad spends. Simultaneous ballots nullify the traditional grassroots advantage of regional formations—such as door-to-door cadre mobilisation—in favor of high-budget broadcast campaigning.

4. Dilution of Subaltern Bargaining Leverage and Grassroots Accountability

- **Suppression of Continuous Accountability:** In India's stratified socio-economic landscape, desynchronized elections serve as recurring democratic pressure points. Policy data indicates that targeted welfare expansions (e.g., farm loan waivers, subsidized utilities, direct cash transfers) consistently peak immediately ahead of state elections.
- **Loss of Intermediate Leverage:** Shifting to a single consolidated vote once every five years deprives marginalized communities (Dalits, Adivasis, women, and agrarian labor) of their mid-term leverage to hold governments accountable, renegotiate patronage, and protest unfavorable policies before elite indifference sets in.

5. Institutional Shift Toward Executive Hegemony

- **Rise of "Autocratic Legalism":** The structural reforms needed to enforce and maintain synchronicity deploy formal constitutional amendments to alter democratic checks and balances.
- **Presidentialisation of the Polity:** By framing electoral politics around a single national referendum, ONOE centralizes political authority within the national executive, transforming India's asymmetric, multi-centric parliamentary democracy into an executive-heavy, centralized hegemony.

For a factual breakdown of how these institutional recommendations progressed to the legislative drafting stage, refer to this report on the Union Cabinet Approves Ram Nath Kovind Committee's One Nation Plan.

This video provides primary news coverage detailing the Union Cabinet's formal acceptance of the simultaneous election proposals, which serve as the baseline institutional recommendations examined in this study.

Suggestions and Recommendations

To prevent the erosion of democratic pluralism while addressing valid concerns regarding governance continuity and public expenditure, policy reforms must shift away from coercive constitutional synchronisation. Rather than forcing heterogeneous state polities into a uniform electoral timetable, reforms should focus on balancing governance stability, federal autonomy, and grassroots responsiveness.

1. Institutional and Constitutional Safeguards

- **Reject Forced Term Truncation and the "Unexpired Term" Rule:**

Constitutional mechanisms that curtail or extend the tenures of democratically elected State Legislative Assemblies—or mandate that mid-term assemblies serve only for the remainder of a national cycle—should be abandoned. These mechanisms reduce state assemblies to sub-units of the Union. The dissolution of a state legislature must remain contingent strictly on internal legislative confidence rather than a centralized calendar.

- **Adopt the "Constructive Vote of No-Confidence":**

To mitigate governmental instability without violating federalism, India can examine the German model (Konstruktives Misstrauensvotum) at the state level. Under this rule, an assembly cannot dissolve or topple a ministry via a no-confidence motion unless it simultaneously elects a successor Chief Minister by an absolute majority. This curbs opportunistic horse-trading while preserving the legislature's organic tenure.

- **Strengthen Judicial Restraints on Article 356 and Gubernatorial Discretion:**

Codify strict statutory limits preventing Union-appointed Governors from recommending President's Rule during mid-term political realignments. Any attempt to preserve calendar synchronicity through executive fiat must remain subject to strict judicial review under the doctrine established in S.R. Bommai v. Union of India.

2. Pragmatic Electoral Grouping: The Two-Cycle Alternative

Instead of imposing a single nationwide ballot, India should explore the moderate clustering model recommended by the Parliamentary Standing Committee (79th Report) and the Law Commission of India (1999):

Two-Cycle Clustering Model

▼ ▼

Phase I Polls
• Lok Sabha General Elections
• Half of the State Assemblies
• (Occurs at Year 0)

Phase II Polls
• Mid-Term State Assembly Block
• Remaining State Assemblies
• (Occurs at Year 2.5)

- **Holding Elections Twice in Five Years:**

State assembly elections should be consolidated into two distinct blocks: one coinciding with the Lok Sabha, and the second held approximately 2.5 years into the parliamentary cycle.

- **Preserving Dynamic Accountability:**

A mid-term state election cycle acts as an organic national check, preventing the political executive from disengaging from the electorate for five uninterrupted years. It balances administrative predictability with recurring popular feedback.

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3. Campaign Finance Reform and Leveling the Playing Field

- **Public Funding of Elections and State Subsidies:**

To counter the financial dominance of national parties over regional formations, introduce targeted state funding of elections (as recommended by the Indrajit Gupta Committee). Subsidies can include equitable broadcast time, digital infrastructure allocations, and direct reimbursements for verified regional party campaign operations.

- **Statutory Caps on Party Campaign Expenditure:**

While individual candidates face spending limits, national political parties operate under virtually unchecked expenditure envelopes. Comprehensive caps must be imposed on total party spending, nationwide advertising blitzes, and centralized algorithmic campaign spending to prevent the erasure of regional voices.

- **Independent Regulation of Digital Political Advertising:**

Empower the Election Commission of India (ECI) with independent statutory monitoring bodies to audit cross-platform digital and algorithmic spending, ensuring national party advertising does not crowd out regional and vernacular public discourse.

4. Re-engineering Administrative Procedures

- **Rationalising the Model Code of Conduct (MCC):**

The argument that frequent elections induce "policy paralysis" can be resolved administratively without amending the Constitution. The MCC should be amended to apply only to the specific poll-bound districts or state jurisdictions, rather than triggering state-wide or macro-level freezes on ongoing infrastructure and welfare execution.

- **Decoupling Local Governance from National Polls:**

Municipalities and Panchayats (governed under the 73rd and 74th Amendments) should remain insulated from state and central political synchronicity. Local self-governance must operate on independent civic mandates, ensuring hyper-local development and subaltern community representation are not co-opted by central political narratives.

- **Rolling Single Electoral Rolls with State Autonomy:**

While harmonising voter registration reduces administrative waste, state election commissions (SECs) must retain their constitutional autonomy over local and municipal rolls rather than being subordinated to a unitary, centrally driven ECI roster.

Structural Summary

Policy Intervention	Target Problem	Intended Sociological & Democratic Outcome
Two-Cycle Clustering (Mid-Term Polls)	Administrative exhaustion from perpetual polls	Reduces election frequency while safeguarding mid-term accountability checks.
Constructive Vote of No-Confidence	Frequent mid-term assembly collapses	Encourages coalition stability without truncating the democratic will.
Party-Level Expenditure Caps	Corporate and media dominance by national actors	Preserves the electoral viability of regional and subaltern parties.
Localized MCC Narrowing	Governance paralysis during state elections	Protects administrative continuity without curbing voting frequency.

Organisation of the Study

The research is organized into seven interconnected chapters designed to systematically guide the inquiry from conceptual foundations and empirical analyses to structural critiques and policy alternatives.

Chapter Flow

▼ ▼ ▼

Chapter 1: Introduction & Context | Chapter 2: Theoretical & Constitutional Base | Chapter 3: Federalism & Institutional Autonomy

▼

Chapter 4: Voter Behavior & Regional Voices

▼ ▼

Chapter 5: Subaltern Agency & Grassroots Accountability | Chapter 6: Executive Aggrandizement & Democratic Backsliding

▼

Chapter 7: Recommendations & Conclusion

Chapter 1: Introduction and Contextual Landscape

- **Context and Background:** Historical evolution of India's electoral cycles, tracing the initial simultaneous elections (1952–1967) and their subsequent collapse due to political regionalisation, coalition politics, and the invocation of Article 356.
- **The Policy Push for ONOE:** Genesis of the modern debate through the Law Commission Reports (1999, 2018), NITI Aayog discussion papers, and the High-Level Committee headed by Ram Nath Kovind.
- **Problem Statement and Core Inquiry:** The tension between administrative-fiscal rationalisation and substantive democratic health.
- **Research Architecture:** Aims, specific objectives, primary and operational hypotheses, operational scope, and limitations.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

- **Thematic Literature Review:** Synthesis of existing scholarship on governance efficiency, sociological federalism, voter behaviour models, and subaltern political bargaining.
- **Theoretical Framework:**
  - Gramscian Hegemony & Weberian Rationality: The ideological deployment of managerial efficiency to depoliticise society.
  - Sociological Federalism (Livingston, Stepan): The distinction between legalistic symmetry

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and social diversity; demos-enabling versus demos-constraining institutions.
    - Subaltern Democratic Theory (Yadav, Jaffrelot, Chatterjee): The "Second Democratic Upsurge" and the role of the ballot as a dynamic bargaining tool.
    - Democratic Backsliding & Autocratic Legalism (Scheppele, Levitsky & Ziblatt): Institutional consolidation of executive authority through formal legal mechanisms.
- **Identified Research Gaps:** Grounding the necessity of a socio-political critique of electoral synchronicity.

Chapter 3: Federalism, Institutional Autonomy, and State Sovereignty

- **Asymmetric Federalism Under Strain:** Analysis of the constitutional amendments proposed to enforce synchronicity (including the Constitution 129th Amendment Bill framework).
- **The Mechanics of Legal Harmonisation:** Sociological implications of truncating or extending the terms of democratically elected State Legislative Assemblies to match the Lok Sabha cycle.
- **The "Unexpired Term" Dilemma:** Evaluating the structural impact of requiring mid-term assemblies to serve only for the remainder of a national cycle, including its incentives for coalition instability and expanded recourse to Article 356 (President's Rule).
- **Third-Tier Governance:** Examining the incorporation of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies (73rd and 74th Amendments) into a national timeline.

Chapter 4: Electoral Convergence, Media Hegemony, and Regional Marginalisation

- **Empirical Analysis of Voting Behaviour:** Evaluating aggregate ECI data, longitudinal dual-election trends, and CSDS-Lokniti post-poll surveys to measure the "coattail effect" and ballot alignment rates.
- **Resource Asymmetry and Party Viability:** Disparities in corporate financing, digital advertising algorithms, and institutional campaign funds between national and regional parties.
- **Homogenisation of Public Discourse:** Critical discourse analysis of how unified campaigns allow pan-Indian media networks and presidential-style leadership branding to eclipse localized linguistic, agrarian, and sub-regional grievances.

Chapter 5: Grassroots Accountability and Subaltern Bargaining Power

- **Elections as Dynamic Safety Valves:** The functional role of recurring, staggered elections as continuous accountability checks on governing elites.
- **Welfare Renegotiation Cycles:** Empirical tracking of pre-election fiscal interventions, demonstrating how upcoming state polls compel mid-course welfare adjustments and grievance redressal.
- **Marginalised Communities and the Quinquennial Trap:** Evaluating the impact of a single five-year voting window on Dalits, Adivasis, women, and rural agrarian labor, mapping the loss of regular negotiating leverage within Partha Chatterjee's "political society."

Chapter 6: Democratic Backsliding, "Autocratic Legalism," and Executive Hegemony

- **The Rise of Autocratic Legalism:** How the formal procedural legitimacy of constitutional amendments is deployed to alter institutional checks and balances.
- **The Presidentialisation of Parliamentary Democracy:** The institutional evolution toward a centralized executive that treats multi-polar legislative contestation as administrative friction.
- **From Democratic Pluralism to Hegemony:** Synthesising findings to demonstrate how procedural uniformity accelerates political and cultural centralisation, testing the primary hypothesis against null assumptions.

Chapter 7: Recommendations, Policy Alternatives, and Conclusion

- **Synthesised Findings:** Comprehensive presentation of core empirical and theoretical conclusions.
- **Policy Suggestions and Alternatives:**
    - Two-cycle election clustering (mid-term model) as a federalism-preserving alternative.
    - Adoption of the constructive vote of no-confidence at the state level to ensure stability.
    - Campaign finance reforms and public funding to restore competitive parity.
    - Administrative adjustments to the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) to resolve policy paralysis without constitutional overhauls.
- **Concluding Remarks:** Final reflections on the future of India's pluralist compact and the democratic imperative of safeguarding institutional diversity over centralized uniformity.

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Official Reports and Government Publications

The following institutional reports, legislative bills, and official government publications form the empirical baseline and statutory record for analyzing the 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) proposals in India.

1. High-Level Committee and Parliamentary Commission Reports

- **High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (Kovind Committee Report, 2024)**

Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, Department of Legal Affairs.

Chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, this multi-volume report (spanning over 18,000 pages including annexures and stakeholder submissions) serves as the modern blueprint for simultaneous elections. It recommends a phased roadmap: synchronizing Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections in the first phase, followed by synchronizing municipal and panchayat elections within 100 days. It articulates the legal justifications for amending Article 83, Article 172, inserting Article 82A, and introducing common electoral rolls.

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- **Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (79th Report, 2015)**

Rajya Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.
Titled *Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies*, this report examined the operational hurdles of synchronicity. Rather than a single nationwide cycle, it explored the alternative of **two-phase cycle clustering**, proposing that elections to certain state assemblies be held mid-term (2.5 years into the parliamentary cycle) to reduce disruptions while maintaining democratic feedback.

- **Law Commission of India – 170th Report (1999)**

Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, Government of India.
Titled *Reform of the Electoral Laws*, this landmark report marked the first formal post-1967 official push toward reviving simultaneous elections. Chaired by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy, it framed recurring elections as an administrative drain and recommended legal harmonization to prevent chronic governance instability.

- **Law Commission of India – Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections (2018)**

Law Commission of India, Government of India.
Chaired by Justice B.S. Chauhan, this draft working paper examined the constitutional mechanisms necessary to operationalize simultaneous polls, addressing the curtailment or extension of state legislative terms, the adoption of the German "constructive vote of no-confidence," and the requirement of constitutional amendments under Article 368.

- **Election Commission of India (ECI) Annual & Working Reports**

Election Commission of India, Nirvachan Sadan, New Delhi.

  - *Proposed Electoral Reforms (2004, 2016):* Official ECI assessments regarding logistics, the procurement and life-cycle management of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs), alongside deployment schedules for Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF).
  - *Model Code of Conduct (MCC) Compendiums:* Official operational guidelines detailing the exact geographic and administrative boundaries governing spending and policy freezes during active election windows.

2. Policy Think-Tank and Executive Papers

- **NITI Aayog Discussion Paper (2017)**

Authored by Bibek Debroy and Kishore Desai.
Titled *Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The "What", "Why", and "How"*, this policy paper formulated the macroeconomic justification for ONOE. It presented quantitative estimates of public exchequer expenditure, argued that staggered polls stall capital expenditure due to prolonged MCC enforcement, and proposed a structured timeline for phase-wise assembly alignment.

- **White Paper on Simultaneous Elections (2018)**

Law Commission of India, New Delhi.
A consultative working document circulated to political parties, constitutional jurists, and academic institutions, outlining core questions regarding state autonomy, assembly tenures, and anti-defection mechanics.

3. Legislative Bills and Statutory Documents

- **The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024**

Bill No. 129 of 2024 (Introduced in Lok Sabha on December 17, 2024; referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee).
The primary constitutional bill seeking to operationalize simultaneous polls. It introduces Article 82A to establish an "appointed date" for initiating synchronicity, amends Articles 83 and 172 to curtail state assembly durations to match the Lok Sabha cycle, and provides that assemblies elected mid-term serve only for the unexpired duration of the overarching five-year term.

- **The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024**

Bill No. 130 of 2024 (Introduced in Lok Sabha on December 17, 2024; referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee).
A companion legislative bill amending statutory frameworks governing Union Territories with Legislative Assemblies (including the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991; the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963; and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019) to ensure territorial assemblies align with the national electoral cycle.

Key Analytical Takeaways from the Official Documents

Document	Primary Argument / Focus	Key Constitutional Provision Analyzed
Kovind Committee Report (2024)	Two-step synchronisation; common voter roll; administrative continuity.	Articles 82A, 83, 172, 324A, 325, 327.
Constitution 129th Amendment Bill (2024)	Legal curtailment of assembly terms; "unexpired remainder" rule.	Articles 82A, 83(2), 172(1).
Parliamentary 79th Report (2015)	Alternative two-cycle clustering (mid-term model).	Articles 85(1), 174(1), Representation of the People Act (1951).
NITI Aayog Paper (2017)	Macroeconomic cost-benefit analysis and MCC policy paralysis.	Public finance audits; Election Commission budget outlays.
Law Commission 170th Report (1999)	Post-coalition stability; reducing frequent election fatigue.	Tenth Schedule; German constructive vote of no-confidence.

Online Sources and Websites

1. Institutional and Governmental Portals

- **High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (ONOE Portal)**

URL: https://onoe.gov.in
theacademic.in
The official digital repository established by the Ministry of Law and Justice for the Kovind Committee. It hosts the multi-volume report, public consultation responses, submissions from political parties, and legal opinions from former Chief Justices and constitutional jurists.

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- **Election Commission of India (ECI)**

URL: https://www.eci.gov.in
The primary institutional repository for statistical reports on general and state legislative elections, voter turnout data, Model Code of Conduct compendiums, and administrative reports on EVM/VVPAT logistics.

- **Law Commission of India**

URL: https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in
Houses historical and contemporary statutory review documents, notably Report No. 170 (Reform of the Electoral Laws, 1999) and the 2018 Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections.

- **NITI Aayog**

URL: https://www.niti.gov.in
Provides public access to official development and macroeconomic working papers, including the 2017 Debroy-Desai discussion paper on the administrative and fiscal feasibility of simultaneous elections.

- **Digital Sansad / Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha Repositories**

URL: https://sansad.in
The legislative portal hosting the text of introduced amendment bills—such as The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024—along with parliamentary debate transcripts and Department-Related Standing Committee reports. Wikipedia

2. Electoral Data, Survey Research, and Public Finance

- **Lokniti – Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)**

URL: https://www.lokniti.org
Houses longitudinal data from the National Election Studies (NES) and State Election Studies, offering survey research on Indian voter behavior, caste alignments, leadership perceptions, and split-ticket voting patterns.

- **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) / National Election Watch**

URL: https://adrindia.org | **Candidate Portal:** https://myneta.info
Provides audits of campaign finance disclosures, party income-and-expenditure returns, corporate donations, electoral bond disbursements, and candidate asset/criminalization profiles.

- **Trivedi Centre for Political Data (TCPD) – Ashoka University**

URL: https://tcpd.ashoka.edu.in
Offers open-access, longitudinal datasets covering Indian elections (Lok Dhaba), party fragmentation, candidate demographics, and constituency-level electoral trajectories since 1962.

3. Legal and Constitutional Repositories

- **Supreme Court of India Official Portal**

URL: https://www.sci.gov.in
Digital archive providing certified judgments on landmark federalism cases, including S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994), State of Rajasthan v. Union of India (1977), and basic structure jurisprudence.

- **India Code (Legislative Department, Ministry of Law and Justice)**

URL: https://www.indiacode.nic.in
The central digital statute book containing the unamended and amended texts of the Constitution of India, the Representation of the People Act, 1950, and the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

- **Constitution of India (CAD Archive – Centre for Law and Policy Research)**

URL: https://www.constitutionofindia.net
An annotated repository of the Constituent Assembly Debates (1946–1949), useful for tracing the original intent of the framers regarding legislative terms (Articles 83 and 172) and emergency central oversight (Article 356).

4. Policy, Academic, and Civil Society Platforms

- **Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)**

URL: https://www.epw.in
A prominent peer-reviewed platform for research on Indian political sociology, subaltern mobilization, caste-class dynamics, and asymmetric federalism.

- **PRS Legislative Research**

URL: https://prsindia.org
Offers independent, non-partisan analytical briefs, legislative tracking, and comparisons of electoral reform bills and constitutional amendments.

- **V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute**

URL: https://www.v-dem.net
Provides comparative datasets and annual democracy reports tracking indicators of democratic backsliding, executive aggrandizement, and electoral autocracy globally and in India.