



One Nation, One Election in India: Constitutional Challenges, Federal Dynamics and Implications for Democratic Governance

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Abstract

The proposal for simultaneous elections, popularly described as One Nation, One Election (ONOE), has developed from a recurring electoral reform debate into an important constitutional proposal in India. This study examines its historical evolution, constitutional requirements, federal implications, administrative rationale and possible consequences for democratic governance. The substantive analysis covers institutional developments up to 31 December 2024 and is based primarily on secondary documentary and statistical evidence. A qualitative, descriptive-analytical and comparative research design is adopted. The analysis indicates that simultaneous elections involve substantially more than aligning polling dates. A durable common electoral cycle requires mechanisms for dealing with premature dissolution, loss of legislative confidence and exceptional elections. The 2024 constitutional proposal attempts to address these issues through an unexpired-term mechanism under which a legislature elected after premature dissolution may serve only the remaining period of the common electoral cycle. Although synchronisation could reduce repeated administrative mobilisation and provide greater predictability in election management, nevertheless its overall fiscal and macroeconomic benefits remain empirically unsettled. The proposal also raises questions concerning parliamentary responsibility, State electoral autonomy, federal balance, voter behaviour and multi-level democratic accountability. The study concludes that ONOE constitutes a significant institutional redesign whose implications need to be assessed through constitutional, federal, administrative and democratic perspectives rather than through administrative efficiency alone.

Keywords: One Nation One Election; simultaneous elections; Indian federalism; constitutional amendment; electoral reform; parliamentary democracy; electoral governance; democratic accountability

Introduction

India's constitutional system combines parliamentary government with a federal distribution of authority between the Union and the States. Both levels operate through elected legislatures, politically accountable executives and constitutionally defined areas of responsibility. Elections within such a system do more than select representatives. They provide citizens with opportunities to assess political leadership, public policy, government performance and competing claims to democratic authority. Election timing therefore interacts with legislative tenure, government formation, parliamentary responsibility, political competition, State autonomy and electoral accountability.

The contemporary proposal for simultaneous elections is generally described as One Nation, One Election. In its principal form, it seeks to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. A broader framework has also contemplated closer coordination of municipal and panchayat elections. The issue consequently extends beyond election-management convenience and enters the fields of constitutional design, federalism and democratic governance. Simultaneous national and State elections are not historically unfamiliar to India. Elections to the Lok Sabha and most State Legislative Assemblies were broadly aligned during the first four general-election cycles beginning in 1951–52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. This arrangement did not result from a permanent constitutional requirement imposing one electoral calendar. It arose because newly constituted legislatures initially began and completed broadly corresponding terms. Premature dissolution of several State Assemblies in the late 1960s, followed by the early dissolution of the Fourth Lok Sabha, progressively disrupted this alignment.

Institutional interest in restoring a more consolidated electoral cycle developed gradually. The Law Commission of India considered the issue in its 170th Report, while later parliamentary, governmental and legal assessments examined constitutional amendments, administrative requirements and possible transition mechanisms. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, constituted in September 2023, submitted its report in March 2024 and recommended a two-stage approach. In December 2024, the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, was introduced, proposing a new Article 82A and amendments to Articles 83, 172 and 327. The Bill and the related Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill were referred for joint parliamentary scrutiny on 20 December 2024 (Law Commission of India, 1999; High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, 2024).

The principal constitutional difficulty lies in maintaining synchronisation after political instability. Articles 83 and 172 provide normal five-year durations for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies while permitting earlier dissolution. Governments may lose legislative confidence, coalitions may collapse, and legislatures may become incapable of sustaining viable governments. A permanent common election cycle must therefore provide not only a shared starting point but also a mechanism for restoring synchronisation whenever an individual legislature ends early. The 2024 proposal addresses this through an unexpired-term mechanism. If the Lok Sabha or a State Assembly is prematurely dissolved, a fresh election may still be conducted, but the newly constituted House would serve only the remaining portion of the common electoral cycle. The arrangement preserves recourse to voters while preventing a mid-cycle election from creating another independent five-year electoral timetable.

The administrative dimension is also important. Following the 2024 Special Summary Revision of electoral rolls, India had more than 96.88 crore registered electors. Conducting elections for an electorate of this scale requires extensive mobilisation of polling personnel, EVMs, VVPAT systems, transport, security forces, polling stations and administrative infrastructure (Election Commission of India, 2024). Large electoral scale provides a plausible basis for examining whether fewer separate election periods could reduce recurring mobilisation. Nevertheless,

reduced frequency does not automatically establish the magnitude of financial savings. Simultaneous elections may require a larger quantity of equipment, personnel, reserve capacity and security resources to be available at one time.

The issue also possesses a federal dimension. State governments have their own electoral legitimacy, legislative institutions and policy responsibilities. State elections often focus on regional political leadership, welfare policies, development, local alliances and issues that differ from those prominent during national contests. A permanently synchronised calendar would leave these institutions intact but connect State electoral terms more closely to the Lok Sabha cycle. The proposal therefore raises several related questions. How can synchronisation operate without weakening parliamentary responsibility? What are the implications of shortened terms following premature dissolution? How might a common electoral cycle affect State political autonomy and electoral accountability? Are projected administrative and economic benefits sufficiently supported by evidence? The present study examines these questions within a unified constitutional and governance framework.

The study has four interrelated objectives. First, it examines the historical evolution and constitutional development of simultaneous-election proposals in India, with particular reference to institutional developments up to 31 December 2024. Second, it analyses the constitutional and legal changes required to establish and maintain simultaneous elections, especially in relation to legislative tenure, premature dissolution and parliamentary responsibility. Third, it evaluates the implications of electoral synchronisation for Indian federalism, State-level political autonomy, electoral accountability and democratic governance. Fourth, it assesses the administrative, financial and governance arguments associated with simultaneous elections together with available evidence concerning their possible effects on voter behaviour, electoral competition and economic governance.

The study is guided by four research questions. First, how has the proposal for simultaneous elections evolved in India, and what major constitutional and institutional developments shaped it up to 31 December 2024? Second, what constitutional and legal changes are required to establish and maintain simultaneous elections, particularly where a legislature is prematurely dissolved? Third, how might synchronisation affect Indian federalism, State political autonomy, parliamentary accountability and democratic governance? Fourth, to what extent are the administrative, financial and governance benefits attributed to simultaneous elections supported by available evidence, and what does existing research indicate about their effects on voter behaviour and electoral competition?

Literature Review

The literature relevant to simultaneous elections extends across constitutional law, federalism, party-system research, electoral administration, voter behaviour and political economy. These strands frequently examine different aspects of the proposal and therefore require integrated analysis. Constitutional scholarship provides the broad theoretical foundation. Austin (1999) treats the Indian Constitution as an institutional and political framework whose functioning

cannot be understood through formal provisions alone. Choudhry et al. (2016) similarly demonstrate that constitutional institutions operate through interactions among legislatures, governments, courts, parties and citizens. From this perspective, ONOE requires examination not merely of Parliament's formal amending power but also of how proposed changes interact with existing institutions.

The basic-structure doctrine provides an important constitutional context. In *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), the Supreme Court established limits on Parliament's constituent power. *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) further reinforced the constitutional importance of federalism and democratic government. These judgments do not determine the constitutionality of ONOE in advance, but they identify principles relevant to any future examination of substantial constitutional restructuring.

Federalism scholarship provides another major analytical foundation. Rao and Singh (2005) describe Indian federalism as an evolving interaction of constitutional rules, political incentives and intergovernmental bargaining. Singh and Verney (2003) emphasise the comparatively centralised features of India's parliamentary federation while recognising the effects of coalition politics and changing party competition. Sinha (2004) likewise demonstrates that federal relations have evolved alongside wider political and economic changes.

Tillin (2013, 2017) highlights the role of territorial accommodation and State political arenas in India's democratic development. Adeney (2007) similarly emphasises the significance of institutional structures capable of accommodating territorial and social diversity. These studies indicate that State governments are not merely administrative units but independent arenas of political representation and accountability. Party-system research reinforces this interpretation. Chhibber and Kollman (2004) show that the distribution of authority across governmental levels affects the organisation of political competition. Where subnational institutions exercise meaningful authority, parties possess incentives to organise around State-specific political issues. This provides an important context for examining the consequences of holding national and State elections simultaneously.

Official literature has generally focused more strongly upon administrative and constitutional feasibility. The Law Commission's 170th Report argued for gradual movement towards a situation in which Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections would ordinarily occur within one electoral cycle (Law Commission of India, 1999). The Parliamentary Standing Committee subsequently examined election expenditure, administrative and security deployment, the Model Code of Conduct and constitutional constraints created by differing legislative terms (Parliamentary Standing Committee, 2015).

Debroy and Desai (2017) further developed the administrative case for synchronisation. They argued that recurring elections can keep governments and political parties in continuing election mode and examined possible transition mechanisms. Their analysis nevertheless recognised that differently timed Assembly terms create substantial implementation difficulties. The Law Commission's 2018 draft report represented an important development because it explicitly

recognised that comprehensive synchronisation would require constitutional and statutory amendments. It considered legislative tenure, confidence procedures and transitional mechanisms, thereby moving the debate from administrative desirability towards institutional design (Law Commission of India, 2018).

The HLC (2024) brought these issues into a single comprehensive framework. Its mandate covered constitutional amendments, State ratification, hung Houses, no-confidence motions, defection, election logistics, voting-machine requirements and common electoral rolls. Its recommendations formed the institutional basis of the constitutional legislation introduced in December 2024. Recent academic research has provided a more critical evaluation. Agney and Thomas (2023) examine the feasibility of ONOE and identify constitutional and practical difficulties alongside potential administrative benefits. Wani and Dar (2024) analyse simultaneous elections in the context of India's plural society and overlapping social cleavages, drawing attention to the relationship between common elections, federal balance and democratic stability.

Research on electoral behaviour provides additional insights. Chatterjee and Dutta (2024), reviewing 89 studies, find important differences in factors affecting national and State electoral choices. Leadership, communication, ideology, policy performance and ground-level campaigning may have different levels of importance in national and State contests. Their findings do not directly establish the effect of ONOE, but they demonstrate that elections at the two levels are not politically identical. Balasubramaniam et al. (2020) provide one of the most directly relevant empirical studies. Using historical variation between synchronised and closely timed non-synchronised elections, they report greater same-party electoral outcomes and reduced split-ticket voting during synchronised contests. They do not find a statistically significant turnout effect. However, the study remains an unpublished working paper, and its findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously rather than regarded as final empirical consensus.

The political-economy literature also indicates that election timing can influence governmental behaviour. Khemani (2004), analysing Indian States, identifies electoral cycles in selected fiscal and policy decisions. Although the study does not examine ONOE directly, it establishes that election timing can affect policy incentives. Singh et al. (2024) examine economic consequences more directly and report comparatively favourable economic growth, investment and capital-expenditure patterns associated with synchronised electoral cycles. Their findings provide a significant contribution to the debate, although the historical observational design makes strong causal claims difficult. The contrast with the more limited economic effects identified by Balasubramaniam et al. (2020) illustrates the unsettled nature of the evidence. Yadav and Kumar (2025) subsequently examine ONOE through constitutional challenges, democratic implications and electoral reform. Their study is relevant because it considers the debate after the December 2024 constitutional proposal. It highlights possible administrative benefits while also drawing attention to federalism, legislative autonomy and electoral accountability. The reference is used here as subsequent scholarly interpretation; the substantive institutional analysis of the present study remains limited to developments up to 31 December 2024.

The literature therefore reveals a clear gap. Official studies focus predominantly on constitutional mechanisms and administrative feasibility; federalism scholarship examines Centre–State relationships more broadly; and empirical research separately addresses voter behaviour and economic effects. Relatively little work integrates these dimensions with the specific institutional framework proposed in December 2024. The present study seeks to address that gap.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical and comparative research design. The descriptive component traces the historical and institutional development of simultaneous elections from India's early broadly synchronised electoral cycles to the emergence of a specific constitutional proposal in December 2024. The analytical component examines legislative tenure, premature dissolution, parliamentary responsibility and the mechanisms required to preserve synchronisation following an unexpected election. The comparative component evaluates competing claims concerning simultaneous and staggered elections in relation to administrative deployment, federal autonomy, voter behaviour and economic governance.

The study relies primarily upon secondary documentary and statistical evidence. Official constitutional and institutional sources were purposively selected because they directly define the legal and administrative dimensions of the proposal. Academic sources were selected according to their relevance to four analytical themes corresponding to the research objectives: institutional evolution; constitutional and parliamentary design; federal and democratic implications; and administrative, behavioural and economic effects. Peer-reviewed research and recognised academic books were prioritised, while working papers were used only where they provide directly relevant evidence. The substantive period of the study ends on 31 December 2024. Later academic scholarship may be considered where it evaluates developments within the defined period, but subsequent political or legislative events are not incorporated into the substantive findings. Documentary material is analysed thematically, and no original econometric model is estimated. Quantitative evidence is interpreted according to the design and limitations of the original research.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Institutional Evolution and Constitutional Design

India's early electoral experience establishes that broad synchronisation is possible, but it also shows why such an arrangement is difficult to sustain. National and most State elections initially occurred within similar cycles because legislatures began their terms at approximately corresponding points. Once particular legislatures were dissolved early, subsequent elections generated independent calendars. The modern proposal differs from the earlier historical arrangement because it seeks to establish a constitutional mechanism through which synchronisation can be restored after premature dissolution. The central issue is therefore no longer simply whether elections can be held together, but how a common cycle can survive political instability. The proposed unexpired-term mechanism directly addresses this problem. If

the Lok Sabha or a State Assembly is dissolved early, a fresh election can still occur, but the replacement House would serve only until the common cycle ends. This prevents a mid-term election from creating another independent five-year timetable.

The mechanism provides continuity to synchronisation but creates the possibility of shortened legislative mandates. If dissolution occurs late in the cycle, a newly elected legislature could operate for a relatively brief period before another general election becomes due. The institutional trade-off is therefore between calendar stability and the duration normally associated with a fresh electoral mandate. The proposal does not eliminate parliamentary instability or mid-term elections. Rather, it attempts to prevent those events from permanently disrupting the national cycle. This makes ONOE more accurately a system of recurring electoral realignment than a guarantee that elections will occur only once every five years.

Parliamentary Responsibility and Federal Dynamics

Parliamentary democracy requires the executive to retain legislative confidence. A common electoral timetable cannot override this principle. Coalition breakdown, resignation, loss of majority or inability to form a stable government can make an early election necessary. Any durable framework must therefore preserve a route for political change between scheduled general elections. The unexpired-term model allows this while returning the replacement legislature to the common cycle. Its constitutional significance lies in reconciling two objectives that can come into tension: maintaining parliamentary responsibility and preserving electoral synchronisation. The federal implications arise primarily from the relationship between State political cycles and the Lok Sabha timetable. States would retain their legislatures, executives and constitutional powers, but their electoral calendars would become more closely connected to the national cycle.

State elections frequently develop around region-specific leadership, welfare programmes, development questions, local alliances and political identities. Separate election periods may allow these issues greater independent visibility. Simultaneous polling would not prevent citizens from considering them, but national and State campaigns would take place within the same political environment.

It is not possible to conclude that this would uniformly favour national parties. Strong regional parties may remain highly competitive and may themselves benefit from concentrated mobilisation. The more defensible conclusion is that common timing may change the environment of multi-level political competition, with effects likely to vary among States. The federal issue therefore extends beyond the formal distribution of legislative powers. The temporal independence of State electoral cycles represents an additional dimension of State political life that would be reduced under permanent synchronisation.

Administrative, Financial and Governance Effects

The administrative case for ONOE is based upon reducing repeated election-management cycles. Elections require personnel, equipment, transportation, security deployment, training, polling

stations and substantial coordination. Synchronisation could reduce the number of separate mobilisation periods and make long-term planning more predictable. However, simultaneous elections create higher peak demand. Equipment that can currently be reused between elections conducted at different times may need to be available simultaneously. Larger reserve stocks, storage facilities, transport arrangements and security deployments could therefore be required.

A proper fiscal assessment must distinguish recurring operational costs from capital and peak-capacity costs. Fewer election periods do not necessarily produce proportional net savings. The financial effect can only be established through complete lifecycle costing rather than the gross expenditure of one election.

The Model Code of Conduct also requires careful interpretation. Repeated elections can create recurring periods in which certain government announcements and discretionary decisions are restricted. Yet routine administration and ongoing programmes do not stop entirely. Claims of complete governance paralysis therefore overstate the formal effect of election periods. The more precise empirical question is whether recurring elections materially delay decisions, divert public personnel or increase administrative costs. This is an area where better disaggregated evidence would significantly improve the debate.

Voter Behaviour and Democratic Accountability

Table 1. Electoral Scale of Lok Sabha Elections in India, 2014–2024

Election Year	Total Electorate (crore)	Total Votes Polled (crore)	Voter Turnout (%)	Polling Stations
2014	83.41	55.42	66.44	9,27,553
2019	91.19	61.47	67.40	10,37,848
2024	97.98	64.64	66.10	10,52,664

Source: Election Commission of India, General Election Statistical Reports and *Atlas of Lok Sabha Elections 2024*.

The data demonstrate the expanding administrative scale of Indian elections. Between 2014 and 2024, the electorate increased from approximately 83.41 crore to 97.98 crore, while the number of polling stations increased from 9.28 lakh to more than 10.52 lakh. Total votes polled also increased from approximately 55.42 crore to 64.64 crore. At the same time, voter turnout remained relatively stable at around two-thirds of the electorate. These trends indicate that election administration increasingly requires extensive infrastructure, personnel, security arrangements and logistical coordination. In the context of simultaneous elections, this growing scale strengthens the relevance of administrative consolidation, but it also suggests that any common electoral exercise would require substantial peak capacity in polling personnel, voting equipment, transport and security.

Synchronised elections may influence how political choices are framed. When national and State elections occur separately, each contest develops its own leadership narratives, policy priorities and campaign environment. When they occur together, voters face multiple electoral choices during the same political period. Existing empirical research suggests that synchronisation may be associated with greater same-party voting and lower split-ticket voting. This indicates that timing can influence political behaviour, although it does not show that citizens become incapable of distinguishing national and State responsibilities.

Same-party voting is not inherently less democratic, just as split-ticket voting is not inherently superior. The more important question is whether citizens possess meaningful choices and adequate information regarding the responsibilities of different governments. The effect is also unlikely to be uniform across India. States dominated by strong regional parties may behave differently from States characterised by national-party competition. Candidate quality, alliances, local issues and leadership may interact with common timing in different ways.

Accountability also operates between elections through legislatures, courts, public debate, journalism and civil society. Electoral frequency should therefore not be treated as the sole measure of democratic accountability.

Economic Effects

Election timing may influence economic governance through governmental fiscal decisions, administrative priorities and political uncertainty. Historical research on Indian States indicates that election cycles can affect some categories of policy behaviour, while more recent work has examined growth, capital expenditure and investment around synchronised cycles. The available findings are not uniform. Some research identifies favourable economic patterns associated with synchronisation, while other analysis finds much weaker economic effects. Differences in historical periods, variables and research methods make it difficult to derive one definitive estimate.

Historical periods of synchronisation also differed substantially from contemporary India in economic structure, party competition and governance. Election timing cannot therefore be isolated perfectly from broader institutional change. The academically defensible conclusion is that electoral cycles may influence economic behaviour, but the magnitude and causality of any economic benefit associated with ONOE remain uncertain. Economic projections should therefore supplement, rather than substitute for, constitutional and democratic analysis.

Major Findings

The analysis produces eight principal findings. First, India has historical experience with broadly simultaneous elections, but this experience also demonstrates that premature dissolution can disrupt a common cycle. Second, the 2024 proposal represents a constitutional restructuring rather than a simple administrative rescheduling exercise. Third, the unexpired-term mechanism offers a practical method of restoring synchronisation after premature dissolution but may result in shortened legislative mandates.

Fourth, State constitutional powers would remain formally distinct, yet State electoral calendars would become more closely connected to the Lok Sabha cycle, giving the proposal a genuine federal dimension. Fifth, administrative consolidation could reduce repeated deployment of election resources, although net fiscal savings cannot be determined without accounting for peak-capacity costs. Sixth, recurring election periods may affect selected government decisions, but the Model Code of Conduct does not halt ordinary governance.

Seventh, available research suggests that synchronisation can influence voting behaviour, particularly split-ticket voting and same-party outcomes, but the evidence does not establish a universal advantage for national or regional parties. Eighth, macroeconomic effects remain uncertain because existing empirical studies produce different results. Taken together, these findings show that ONOE involves a trade-off among electoral predictability, administrative coordination, parliamentary flexibility, State political autonomy and democratic accountability.

Challenges and Policy Implications

The principal constitutional challenge is preserving parliamentary responsibility while maintaining a stable common electoral calendar. Governments that lose legislative confidence cannot remain in office solely to avoid disrupting synchronisation. The institutional framework must therefore continue to permit political crises to be resolved through alternative government formation or elections. Shortened legislative terms create a second challenge. Where a mid-cycle election occurs, voters should know clearly how long the resulting legislature will remain in existence. Transparency over the duration of the mandate is essential.

Federal diversity must also be recognised. States possess different party systems, coalition structures and political histories. A uniform timetable may therefore produce heterogeneous effects across the federation, making meaningful consultation with State institutions important. Administrative planning should be based on complete lifecycle requirements rather than headline election-expenditure estimates. Voting machines, storage, security, transportation, training, reserve capacity and polling personnel should all be included in fiscal comparisons.

Rules governing exceptional postponement of an Assembly election should also be precise. The grounds for postponement, its maximum duration and the institutional arrangements applicable during the intervening period require clarity. Finally, if a simultaneous-election framework is implemented, its actual effects should be independently evaluated over multiple cycles. Expenditure, turnout, split-ticket voting, representation, legislative duration, frequency of mid-term elections and administrative deployment should be compared with the claims made before implementation.

Conclusion

The study examined One Nation, One Election as a constitutional and governance reform rather than merely as a proposal to change polling dates. Its central finding is that establishing simultaneous elections is less difficult than preserving them within a parliamentary federation where individual governments and legislatures may experience political instability. India's early

electoral history demonstrates that national and State elections can occur within broadly common cycles. The subsequent breakdown of synchronisation demonstrates why a modern system requires institutional mechanisms capable of responding to premature dissolution.

The 2024 proposal addresses this through an unexpired-term mechanism. A legislature elected after premature dissolution may continue only until the end of the pre-existing common cycle. This prevents a mid-term election from establishing a permanently independent timetable. The mechanism solves one institutional problem while creating another. Synchronisation gains durability, but a fresh electoral mandate may be substantially shorter than a conventional legislative term. The constitutional implications therefore involve a balance between calendar stability and parliamentary flexibility.

The federal effects are similarly nuanced. Simultaneous elections would not abolish State governments or redistribute their legislative powers, but State electoral terms would become more closely tied to the Lok Sabha cycle. This alters the temporal autonomy of State politics and may change the campaign environment within which State-specific issues are debated. Administrative consolidation constitutes one of the stronger potential benefits. Fewer separate electoral periods could reduce repeated mobilisation of personnel, equipment and security resources. Yet common elections would also generate greater peak requirements, making the overall fiscal effect dependent upon implementation design. The evidence concerning voter behaviour shows that timing may influence same-party and split-ticket voting, but it does not establish that voters lose the capacity to distinguish institutional responsibilities. Nor does it show that synchronisation produces a uniform advantage for one category of political party.

Economic evidence remains less settled. Electoral cycles may affect expenditure, investment and policy decisions, but existing research does not provide a definitive estimate of the macroeconomic effects of nationwide synchronisation. The four research questions therefore lead to a common conclusion. Historically, simultaneous elections are possible but difficult to maintain. Constitutionally, permanent synchronisation requires rules governing legislative tenure and premature dissolution. Federally, common timing changes the relationship between State and national electoral cycles without eliminating State authority. Administratively, potential efficiencies exist, but their magnitude remains uncertain. ONOE should consequently be understood as an institutional trade-off involving electoral predictability, administrative coordination, parliamentary responsibility, federal political autonomy and democratic accountability. Its assessment should rest on constitutional analysis and reproducible empirical evidence rather than on assumptions that either its benefits or its risks are self-evident.

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