

# Delimitation Debate - Seat Allocation, Federalism, and the 2027 Census

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## Delimitation Debate Latest News

- The delimitation debate has intensified as the Centre pushes for a constitutional amendment to redraw Lok Sabha constituencies, with the exercise set to be triggered once data from the 2027 Census is published.

## About Delimitation

- Delimitation is the process of fixing the number of seats and redrawing the boundaries of territorial constituencies for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, based on population data from the latest Census. It involves two distinct exercises:
  - Reallocation of seats among States and Union Territories based on their population share.
  - Redrawing of constituency boundaries within each State.
- The exercise is carried out by an independent Delimitation Commission, whose orders have the force of law and cannot be challenged in court.

- **Constitutional Provisions**

- **Article 81:** Deals with the composition of the Lok Sabha and requires that seats be allocated among States, “so far as practicable,” on the basis of a national average population per seat.
- **Article 82:** Provides for readjustment of seats and constituency boundaries after every Census.
- The maximum number of Lok Sabha seats permitted by the Constitution is 550.

## **The Freeze on Seat Reallocation**

- The last time Lok Sabha seats were reallocated among States was in 1973, based on the 1971 Census. That ratio continues to apply today.
- On two occasions, in 1976 and 2001, Parliament deliberately froze the reallocation of seats among States. The freeze was extended until the first Census after 2026.
- The last delimitation exercise, set up in July 2002 after the 2001 Census, only redrew constituencies within States without altering the seat share of individual States.
- Its recommendations were implemented in 2008, and the 2009 Lok Sabha elections were held in the newly drawn constituencies.

## **News Summary**

- The Union government plans to initiate a fresh delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies which requires a two-thirds majority in Parliament to pass a constitutional amendment. An amendment was moved in April 2026 but could not be passed.
- The proposals placed before Parliament in the previous session were:
  - Increase the size of the Lok Sabha to a maximum of 850 seats.
  - Distribute these seats among the States based on the 2011 Census through a fresh, country-wide delimitation.
  - Reserve one-third of the total seats for women.
- **Is a Constitutional Amendment Necessary?**
  - A constitutional amendment is not required for a fresh delimitation to take place. The terms for the next delimitation are already written into Articles 81 and 82.
  - An amendment is needed only if the existing constitutional provisions are to be changed, for instance, to raise the ceiling of 550 seats, or to use the 2011 Census instead of the 2027 Census as the basis.
- **What Happens Without an Amendment**
  - If no amendment is passed, the following sequence will unfold once the 2027 Census data is published:
    - Reallocation of the existing Lok Sabha strength among States and Union Territories based on the 2027 Census population.
    - Delimitation of individual constituencies within each State.
    - Implementation of women’s reservation, which under existing provisions can be rolled out only along with delimitation.
  - Notably, reservations for women would apply to one-third of seats nationally as well as one-third of the seats within each State.

## Which States Could Gain or Lose

- The core political tension arises from differential population growth across States.
- At present, the distribution of 543 Lok Sabha seats is based on 1971 Census figures. Once the benchmark shifts to the population recorded in the first Census after 2026:
  - Southern States are likely to face a reduction in their share of Lok Sabha seats.
  - Hindi-speaking States, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, are likely to gain seats.
- This is because southern States achieved population stabilisation earlier, while several northern States continued to record higher growth rates.
- **The Unequal Value of Votes**
  - The freeze on seat reallocation has created significant disparities in the value of each vote.
  - In 1967, an MP across most major States represented roughly four to five lakh electors. Today:
    - An MP from Kerala represents about 14 lakh electors.
    - An MP from Uttar Pradesh or Bihar represents around 19 lakh electors.
    - The current national average would be about 18 lakh voters per constituency.

## The Central Tension: Federalism vs Democracy

- Article 81 requires seats to be allocated among States “so far as practicable” on the basis of a national average. This deliberate flexibility allows for a balance between two principles that can pull in opposite directions:
  - **Federalism**: The representation of States as units of the Union, which argues against penalising States for successful population control.
  - **Democracy**: The principle of one person, one vote, one value, which argues that every vote should carry equal weight regardless of where it is cast.
- Resolving this tension is the central challenge of the delimitation debate.

## The Problem of Gerrymandering

- Equal numbers of voters per constituency do not by themselves guarantee equal value for every vote.
- The way voters are grouped can dramatically affect electoral outcomes. This manipulation of boundaries is called gerrymandering.
- Consider a simple illustration. Suppose there are 50 voters, Party A has 20 supporters and Party B has 30, spread across five constituencies of 10 voters each.
  - **Fair distribution**: Voters are distributed evenly, and the result broadly reflects the overall vote share, with each party winning seats roughly in proportion to its support.
  - **Cracking**: Party A’s voters are spread thinly across all constituencies. Despite holding 40% of the total vote, Party A may fail to win even a single seat, leaving 40% of voters without representation.
  - **Packing**: Party B’s voters are heavily concentrated in a few constituencies. Party B wins those seats by huge margins but wastes votes elsewhere, allowing Party A to win more seats overall despite having fewer supporters.

- This demonstrates that the drawing of constituency boundaries can profoundly shape democratic representation, independent of population equality.

## Way Forward

- Broad political consensus across parties and regions before finalising any amendment.
- Transparent criteria for both seat reallocation and boundary drawing.
- Safeguards against gerrymandering through independent oversight and public consultation.
- Consideration of compensatory mechanisms for States that stabilised populations, such as greater representation in the Rajya Sabha or fiscal devolution adjustments.
- Clear timelines so that the exercise does not create uncertainty around election cycles.
- Public awareness about what delimitation involves and how it affects representation.

**Source: TH**

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