

Parliamentary Delimitation: A Study on India's Demographic Struggle for Political Representation

Journal of Asian and African Studies

1–16

© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00219096241295634

journals.sagepub.com/home/jas

**Pankaj Kumar Patel** 

Department of Family & Generations, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), India

T. V. Sekher

Department of Family & Generations, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), India

Abstract

Delimitation of the parliamentary constituencies in India has been delayed for more than 50 years since 1971, leading to significant disparities in political representation across the states. Our analysis reveals that states experiencing rapid fertility decline over the last half century have become politically overrepresented, while the states with slower fertility decline remain under-represented. This distortion has harmed the principle of equality of votes and disproportionately benefits more affluent states. This study has used the Webster Method to propose the expansion of Lok Sabha to 793 seats by 2026 to correct these imbalances and reflect Indian's shifting demographic landscape.

Keywords

Parliament, political representation, delimitation, demographic transition, federalism, malapportionment

Background

India's democratic federal system has received widespread acclaim for maintaining national unity despite the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. If federalism truly serves as the unifying factor that keeps the most populous democracy in the world united, there are increasingly clear signs that it is weakening. The primary root cause is not interactions between the federal government and the many states but rather the disparities among them (Missaglia, 2019; Vaishnav and Hinton, 2019). For instance, India's prevailing inter-state fertility differentials have instigated a remarkable demographic transformation over the past few decades. The population of southern states have manifested a significantly lower growth rate than their counterparts in the northern region (James and Sekher, 2023; McMillan, 2001a; Retnakumar, 2009).

As a result, this has led to an imbalanced pattern of population expansion and the emergence of escalating demographic disparities throughout the nation. It is expected to widen further, notably between northern and southern states, since they are currently positioned at different stages of demographic transition. This trend will intensify among states in the coming years and continue

Corresponding author:

Pankaj Kumar Patel, Department of Family & Generations, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai 400088, India.

Email: pankajpatel.iips@gmail.com

until 2050 (Leuprecht, 2016). These demographic transitions can potentially affect the balance of power among states (Bookman, 1997), raise new questions about India's federal design, and create potential political conflicts (Bose, 1996) in terms of political representation.

The recent demonstrations against perceived fiscal injustice in tax devolution serve as proof of this. The crux of the issue lies in the modifications introduced by the 15th Finance Commission, which changed the population weightage from 17.5% based on the 1971 Census to 15% based on data from the 2011 Census. In addition, a new demographic performance criterion was added, accounting for 12.5% of the weightage, focusing on population control (XV Finance Commission, 2020). Southern states are concerned that these changes could disadvantage them in tax revenue allocation, as they favour states that have experienced higher population growth.

However, population is the driving force on which an electoral democracy runs. In modern representative democracies without extensive public engagement in terms of participation and representation, a democracy lacks vitality, the legitimacy of the political order is problematic, and the promise of political life remains unfulfilled (Patel and Sekher, 2024; Verba and Nie, 1987). India is a representative democracy, and to establish a representative democracy, the first step is to divide the voting population equally into spatial units called electoral constituencies or districts (Alam and Sivaramakrishnan, 2015; Bhavnani, 2021); this process is called delimitation (redistricting, or reapportionment as known in the United States).

The process of delimitation involves not only the demarcation or drawing of boundaries of territorial constituencies but also the readjustments in the allocations of seats to various states in the Lok Sabha (the lower House of the Indian Parliament) and allocations of seats to Legislative Assemblies of the states (Ahuja, 1998). However, delimitation is a complex and politically sensitive process that requires meticulous efforts. In India, a high-power independent body called the Delimitation Commission carried it out and played a crucial role in producing constitutional changes in the past (Verma, 2008).

Beyond electoral considerations, constituencies are vital in instilling democratic ethos in a population, which makes its periodic delimitation gravely important. An optimal demarcation of constituencies seeks to strike a harmonious balance among equal voting rights, ensuring community representation and safeguarding minority groups (Dutta, 2022). This process guarantees that the ratio of allocated parliamentary seats in the parliament to a state's population remains relatively uniform across the nation and adjusts in response to demographic changes. The rationale behind this endeavour, as rightly articulated by (Balinski and Young, 2001a; McMillan, 2000), is to safeguard the fundamental democratic principle of 'One Person, One Vote, One Value' across all states. The value of a vote in smaller states with fewer inhabitants should be equivalent to that in larger states with huge populations. For example, one can comprehend this notion by considering states such as Sikkim or Kerala, which have smaller populations, and contrasting them with larger states like Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra (Aditi et al., 2020).

Every democratic society typically engages in the periodic delimitation or redrawing of constituency maps. India, however, faces a unique challenge as it ceased this practice over five decades ago. The foundation for allocating the number of seats in the Lok Sabha to each state still relies on the 1971 Census figures. The temporary halt in this process is formally scheduled to end in 2026. This freeze has disproportionately burdened and posed challenges for Members of Parliament (MPs) in effectively representing sizable populations. In many constituencies, this has led to unmanageable electorates in terms of size (Retnakumar, 2009). Similar to issues with finance distribution, delays in the delimitation process will amplify existing disparities, as many northern states are experiencing faster population growth compared to southern states due to factors like population momentum and high fertility rates. The discrepancy in population growth is the primary underlying cause in both instances (Financial allocation and delimitation).

Data and empirical strategy

While political constituencies may not hold the same degree of significance as state boundaries, they fulfil vital political and administrative roles and can significantly affect people's lives. In this regard, our scholarly discourse aims to scrutinize the eventual consequences of persistent postponement of its delimitation in light of the country's shifting demographics. Our analysis critically assesses the frozen state of delimitation and evaluates the political and legal responses it has elicited. In addition, it advocates for a comprehensive examination of the questions arising from this issue to rectify the exceedingly unequal political representation of states in the Lok Sabha caused and intensified by the 42nd and 84th amendments to the Indian Constitution.

In this study, the term 'political representation' stands for the number of candidates elected by the people from different states to represent them in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha). The Indian parliament comprises the Lok Sabha (House of the People or Lower House) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States or Upper House). This study focuses exclusively on the Lok Sabha, composed of MPs directly elected by the people. Therefore, whenever the term 'parliament' is used in this study, it refers explicitly to the Lok Sabha.

To conduct our analysis, we employ the Webster method to illustrate the extent of malapportionment that will have accrued by the time the suspension on delimitation expires in 2026 and till the next expected census in 2031. Webster method is a widely accepted and well-established mathematical formula known for its impartial allocation of an electoral constituency. For the details of the method, see (Balinski and Young, 2001b). Subsequently, to ensure no state loses its current number of seats if Lok Sabha is allowed to grow, divisors for the seat projection have been obtained by dividing the population of Kerala state by its existing number of Lok Sabha seats for the proportionate allocation of seats. This calculation is pertinent because Kerala has experienced the slowest population growth among major states for a longer time, resulting in a higher likelihood of losing seats in the Lok Sabha than other states.

The population figures for this analysis are derived from census estimates. These estimates provide state-wise population data from 1901 to 2011 and include decadal variations in population figures. All population figures from previous censuses have been adjusted to match the census 2011 jurisdiction (Registrar General of India, 2022). Newly projected population figures for India and its states up to 2031 have been used for the analysis from the Technical Group on Population Projections report (National Commission on Population, 2020). Subsequently, the electoral data have been sourced from the Election Commission of India (ECI, 2024) website.

The Third Delimitation Commission of 1973 employed proportional representation for the 15 major states.¹ However, the utilization of proportional representation was not obligatory in the case of India's centrally administered Union Territories (UTs). Instead, the allocation of seats in UTs depended on parliamentary discretion. Furthermore, states with populations below the 6 million threshold, as specified by the Thirty-First Amendment (1973), were exempted from the compulsory adoption of proportional representation. In alignment with these criteria and considering the increase in the number of major states due to bifurcation or state reorganization since 1973, our study focuses on 20 states and 2 UTs with populations exceeding six million (combined 98.4% of the total population of India based on the 2011 Census figures). These additional states and UTs include Himachal Pradesh, Jammu Kashmir and Ladakh (UT), Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, NCT of Delhi (UT), and Telangana. This study did not adjust Smaller States and UTs² constitutionally exempt from proportional representation.

Evolving constitutional and legal provisions

The Constitution of India mandates the regular practice of reallocation and territorial extent of the constituencies within Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies after each population census, as

mandated in Articles 81 and 82 (Chopra, 2019). It all began following India's liberation from British colonial rule in 1947; the country adopted a constitution on 26 January 1950, establishing a union parliament with a bicameral legislature modelled after the Westminster system (Aditi et al., 2020). The Constitution has established certain fundamental principles for delimitation while leaving the basic procedural framework to be determined by the parliament. Article 327 of the Constitution grants authority to the parliament to electoral delimitation and conduct elections. Articles 81, 82, 170, 330, and 332 of the Constitution address the legal provision of delimitations and related subjects (Gupta, 2015; Khosla, 2012).

The Constitution also regulates the aggregate number of seats in the Lok Sabha. The Seventh Amendment (1956) established a ceiling for the number of elected seats, specifically at 520, consisting of 500 seats representing India's states and 20 seats from its Union Territories (UTs). Subsequent adjustments, as delineated in the Fourteenth Amendment in 1962, the Thirty-First Amendment in 1973, and the Goa, Daman, and Diu Reorganisation Act in 1987, have culminated in the maximum authorized capacity of the Lok Sabha, at 550, comprising 530 seats for states, 20 for UTs (Vaishnav and Hinton, 2019). Currently, the Lok Sabha accommodates a maximum of 543 elected representatives from 28 states and 8 UTs.

Delimitation Commissions have been appointed four times in India, in 1952, 1963, 1973, and 2002, under the Delimitation Commission Acts 1952, 1962, 1972, and 2002 respectively (Arumugam, 2015). The number of Lok Sabha constituencies was fixed following all four successive delimitation orders, resulting in 494, 520, 542, and 543³ constituencies, respectively. The third delimitation was the last comprehensive delimitation exercise that occurred during 1972–1976, where 542 seats were allocated among then 22 states and 9 UTs, utilizing 1971 Census data. However, after Independence, the seat allocation exercise in India was undertaken for the first time without any delimitation commission on the eve of the first general elections in 1951. The office of the President of India then drew the constituencies with the assistance of the Election Commission of India (Verma, 2002).

Initially, it was anticipated that constituency boundaries would be adjusted following each decennial census. However, the Constitution (42nd) Amendment-1976 postponed the revision of seats for 25 years until 2001. In 2001, the Constitution (84th) Amendment was enacted, subsequently extending by another 25 years until the publication of the first census figures after 2026. Nevertheless, the 84th Amendment permitted limited delimitation to ensure population equality of constituencies within the state based on the 2001 Census data while preventing an increase in parliamentary seats based on the current population. The rationale for endorsing these freezes was rooted in India's exploding exponential population growth, varying population growth rates among states, population control policy and agenda of population stabilization (Government of India, 2000). Southern states had effectively controlled population growth through robust Family Planning Programs, and it was argued that strictly adhering to demographic criteria for the delimitation would unfairly disadvantage these states, potentially leading to a loss of representation for them in the national parliament.

Population riddle and disparities emerge from the freeze

India's population has grown substantially, surging from 548 million (1971 Census) to 1.21 billion (2011 Census), encompassing four decades. Furthermore, it is expected to reach 1.47 billion by 2031 (National Commission on Population, 2020). Thus, despite the consistent growth, this burgeoning demographic reality has not been allowed to be reflected in its representative institutions for the last 50 years. This discrepancy causes a devaluation of the voting power of constituents residing in densely populated states or constituencies compared to those in sparsely populated states or constituencies (Aditi et al., 2020; Verma, 2002, 2008).

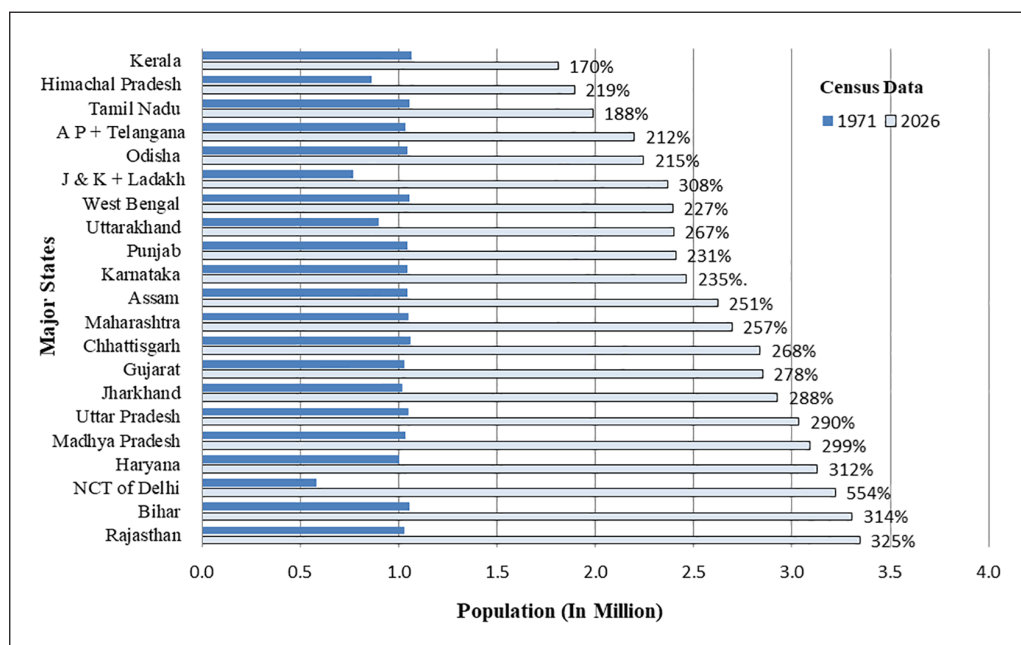


Figure 1. Change in average population size per constituency in 1971 and 2026 for major states of India.

Source: Registrar General of India (2022) and National Commission on Population (2020) and author's computation.

(1) The population figures for the states formed after the 1971 Census are adjusted to the 2011 census jurisdiction. (2) AP – Andhra Pradesh, J & K – Jammu and Kashmir, NCT – National Capital Territory.

It is also important to consider how the current distribution of MP seats favours more affluent regions, which have experienced a more rapid fertility decline over the last few decades. These wealthier states, particularly in southern India, have benefitted from robust family planning programmes, improved healthcare, and higher levels of education, leading to slower population growth. As a result, they now hold more parliamentary seats relative to their population size, making them politically overrepresented. In contrast, northern states, with higher fertility rates and less access to such socio-economic advancements, are under-represented. This imbalance reinforces regional economic disparities and skews the democratic principle of equal representation.

In the subsequent decades, concerns regarding the considerable disparity in the execution of delimitation have come true. To illustrate, from 1971 to 2026, Rajasthan is expected to have a 325% increase in the average population size per constituency. By 2026, Rajasthan is expected to have the most substantial ratio, with 3.4 million individuals represented by each MP, followed by Bihar (3.3 million), the NCT of Delhi (3.2 million), Haryana (3.1 million), Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh (each at 3.0 million). Figure 1 shows the state-wise change in the average population per electoral constituency since the third delimitation (1972–1976), which used 1971 Census data, extending to the anticipated data up to 2026. It is crucial to acknowledge that some geographical regions have been combined in our analysis due to significant alterations in their administrative status, such as the reconstitution of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories (Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh) in 2019 and the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in 2014.

The delay in conducting a comprehensive delimitation process has resulted in a nationwide inequitable distribution of representation. At present, an MP in Lok Sabha represents a population

of approximately 2.2 million (2011 census), and projections indicate that this figure is expected to rise to 2.7 million by 2031, which is more than double what was finalized as one million forty-four thousand population per constituency in the third delimitation for major states. Back then, out of the total strength of 542 seats, 35 were allocated⁴ to the smaller states and UTs with a population of 6 million or less. The remaining 507 seats were allocated among the 15 major states (ECI, 1976), which had a combined population of 529.4 million (96% of the country's total population based on the 1971 Census). Dividing this figure by 507 yielded an average of one million forty-four thousand, which was applied to each state's population. For instance, Uttar Pradesh, which had a 1971 population of 88.3 million, got 85 seats; Tamil Nadu, with a population of 41.2 million, got 39 seats; and so on. This allocation ensured a roughly consistent seat-population ratio among the states (Sivaramakrishnan, 1997).

The distortions that have arisen since the freeze are greater, and rectifying these disparities may entail challenging political endeavours. However, it is necessary to understand the magnitude of disparities prevailing since the freeze. This discrepancy was particularly evident in the 2024 general elections, wherein the most populous constituency, Malkajgiri in Telangana, has a staggering 3.7 million registered electors, significantly surpassing the smallest constituency, Lakshadweep, which has a mere 57,000 electors. However, Lakshadweep may be considered exceptional as it has a UT status. Therefore, let us take some examples from major states; the electoral weight of the Idukki constituency in Kerala, with only 1.2 million electors, is more than twice that of the Bangalore North constituency in Karnataka, which has 3.2 million registered electors.

Several instances of a similar nature are prevalent across the country, wherein the electoral size in the constituencies considerably exceeds the state and national averages. Such cases include Chevella (2.9) in Telangana, Dhubari (2.6) in Assam, Maval (2.8) and Shirur (2.5) in Maharashtra, Bangalore Rural (2.8) and Bangalore central (2.4) in Karnataka, Indore (2.5) in Madhya Pradesh, Patna Sahib (2.3) in Bihar, so on. Furthermore, significant differences in electorate size are observed within individual states as well. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the Nagina constituency accommodates 1.6 million electors, whereas Ghaziabad boasts an electorate nearly twice as large, amounting to 2.9 million electors. This goes against the Constitutional provision in Article 81(2) (a), which ensures that each state is allotted seats in the Lok Sabha in a way that maintains a consistent ratio between the number of seats and the population of the state (Sivaramakrishnan, 2000, 2015).

Figure 2(a) and (b) shows the growing size of constituencies and the increasing disparity among constituencies of major states since the freeze. Figure 2(a) shows the distribution of the electors list of the first election in 1977 after the last comprehensive delimitation (1972–1976). This figure clearly demonstrates uniformity and equal distribution across constituencies. In contrast, Figure 2(b), which depicts the distribution of the recent electors list for the 2024 election, reveals how constituencies have grown unevenly in the absence of regular delimitation, violating the fundamental democratic principle of one vote, one value.

Proportional seats distribution

During this period of delimitation freeze, research conducted by political thinkers and social scientists highlighted the significant malapportionment of certain regions. These scholars (McMillan, 2001b; Retnakumar, 2009; Sivaramakrishnan, 2015) passionately advocated for an immediate resolution to rectify this situation. The discrepancies become increasingly evident when we revise calculations incorporating the most recent projected figures. Assuming the total number of seats remained at 543, the 22 major states (20 States and two UTs) have a share of 524 seats in the present Lok Sabha. We employ the Webster methodology for the proportional distribution of seats to

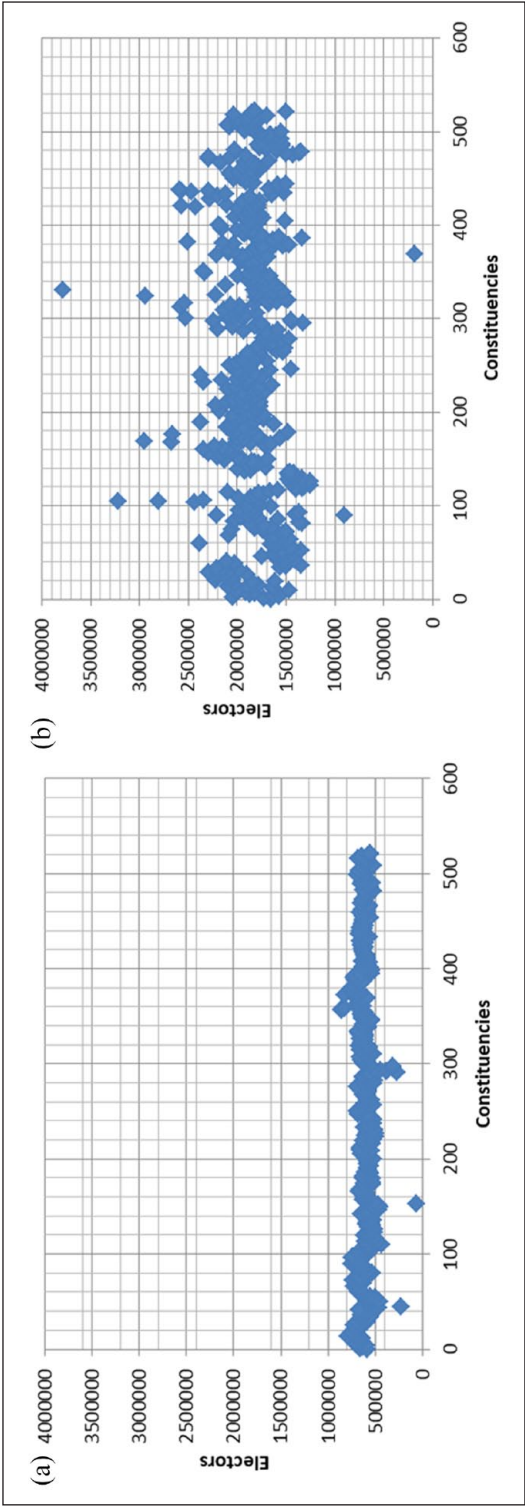


Figure 2. Distribution of electorates of major states of India (1977 vs 2024): (a) Scatterplot of electors in 1977 election. (b) Scatterplot of electors in 2024 election.

Source: Authors' calculations and data from the Election Commission of India. 1977 was the first election since the last comprehensive delimitation (1972–1976), and 2024 is the latest election after 50 years constitutional freeze on delimitation.

each state based on projected population figures for 2026 and 2031. Table 1 presents the revised seat allocation for major states.

These revised allocations manifest significant alterations in the distribution of parliamentary representation across states. By 2026, Uttar Pradesh will singularly command 91 seats out of the 524 constituencies of major states, an increase of 11 from its current allocation of 80 seats. However, Tamil Nadu will experience a reduction of 10 seats from its present count of 39. While five southern states, including Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu, will collectively lose 26 seats, a group of four northern Indian states, including Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, will gain an additional 31 seats. These trends are anticipated to amplify with time in accordance with population projections. For instance, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are collectively projected to gain 22 seats by 2031, while Kerala and Tamil Nadu will lose up to 18 seats. Other states like West Bengal, Odisha, and Karnataka would observe reductions of 5, 4, and 3 seats, respectively. Whereas, Jharkhand, the NCT of Delhi, Gujarat, and Haryana are about to gain two seats each.

The analysis clearly indicates that if seats were allocated based on the principle of standard proportionate population per seat, southern states, which have effectively managed population growth, would substantially lose their current representation in the Lok Sabha. However, states in the north, which have larger populations and faster rates of population growth, would gain considerable parliamentary seats in the near future. In another perspective, the northern states are currently under-represented (with a greater population per MP) due to the lack of a proportional reallocation of seats based on the population sizes of the states and the equal value for one vote principle. In comparison, the southern states are over-represented (with a comparatively lower population per MP) in the Lok Sabha.

The way ahead

At present, Indian parliamentarians are accountable to vastly larger constituencies than their counterparts in many other democratic nations featuring a bicameral legislative system. The Lower House of their parliaments possesses a comparatively higher strength than the Lok Sabha in India. One could contend that India, arguably having a population of 1.4 billion, is the most populous country globally, yet it allocates a mere 543 seats to its lower House. The United Kingdom, with a population of 67.3 million, bestows 650 seats to its lower House, while France, with a population of 65.6 million, designates 577 seats. Similarly, Germany, housing a population of 83.4 million, allots 736 seats to its lower chamber (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023; United Nations, 2023).

It is high time to increase the number of seats in the Lok Sabha. Increasing the parliamentary seats would effectively address the ballooning size of constituencies, which hinders MPs' responsiveness to their constituents' needs. The process will eventually cause greater pain the longer it takes, potentially resulting in abrupt shifts in the political power balance during future constituency delimitation exercises. Therefore, expanding the Lok Sabha's seats appears to be a more viable political option than redistributing the existing seats among states.

Using 2001 Census figures, McMillan (2001b) has proposed that the Lok Sabha should have expanded from its then composition of 545 members to 668 members to ensure that even the most overrepresented state does not lose any seats under delimitation. Whereas, reflecting upon 2011 Census data, Vaishnav and Hinton (2019) calculations suggest 718 members in the Lok Sabha and 848 representatives when projected for the year 2026.

Our computations using newly projected population figures for India and its states present the revised seat allocation for states (see Table 2) and indicate that the composition of the Lok Sabha should be expanded to encompass 793 seats by 2026, followed by a potential increase to 811 seats

Table 1. Proportional seat distribution in Lok Sabha by keeping the total number of Lok Sabha seats as in 1976, changes across major states for 2026 and 2031.

Sl. no.	State	Current distribution (since 1976)	Projected proportional seats (2026)	Over-under representation (2026)	Projected proportional seats (2031)	Over-under representation (2031)
1.	Tamil Nadu	39	29	+10	28	+11
2.	Kerala	20	14	+6	13	+7
3.	Andhra Pradesh	25	20	+5	20	+5
4.	West Bengal	42	38	+4	37	+5
5.	Odisha	21	18	+3	17	+4
6.	Telangana	17	14	+3	14	+3
7.	Karnataka	28	26	+2	25	+3
8.	Himachal Pradesh	4	3	+1	3	+1
9.	J & K + Ladakh	6	5	+1	5	+1
10.	Punjab	13	12	+1	12	+1
11.	Uttarakhand	5	4	+1	5	0
12.	Assam	14	14	0	14	0
13.	Maharashtra	48	48	0	48	0
14.	Chhattisgarh	11	12	-1	12	-1
15.	Jharkhand	14	15	-1	16	-2
16.	NCT of Delhi	7	8	-1	9	-2
17.	Gujarat	26	28	-2	28	-2
18.	Haryana	10	12	-2	12	-2
19.	Madhya Pradesh	29	34	-5	34	-5
20.	Rajasthan	25	31	-6	31	-6
21.	Bihar	40	49	-9	51	-11
22.	Uttar Pradesh	80	91	-11	91	-11
	Total	524	524		524	

Sources: Authors' calculations; Election Commission of India; National Commission on Population (2020). J & K – Jammu and Kashmir, NCT of Delhi – National Capital Territory of Delhi.

Table 2. Projected seat distribution in Lok Sabha for 2026 and 2031, ensuring no state loses its current number of seats.

Sl. no.	State and UTs	Current seats (since 1976)	Projected seats (2026)	Seats gained (2026)	Projected seats (2031)	Seats gained (2031)
1.	Uttar Pradesh	80	134	+54	137	+57
2.	Bihar	40	73	+33	77	+37
3.	Maharashtra	48	71	+23	73	+25
4.	Rajasthan	25	46	+21	48	+23
5.	Madhya Pradesh	29	50	+21	51	+22
6.	Gujarat	26	41	+15	42	+16
7.	West Bengal	42	56	+14	56	+14
8.	Karnataka	28	38	+10	39	+11
9.	Jharkhand	14	23	+9	24	+10
10.	Haryana	10	17	+7	18	+8
11.	Chhattisgarh	11	17	+6	18	+7
12.	Assam	14	20	+6	21	+7
13.	NCT of Delhi	7	12	+5	13	+6
14.	Odisha	21	26	+5	26	+5
15.	Andhra Pradesh	25	30	+5	30	+5
16.	Telangana	17	21	+4	21	+4
17.	Punjab	13	17	+4	17	+4
18.	Tamil Nadu	39	43	+4	43	+4
19.	J & K + Ladakh	6	8	+2	8	+2
20.	Uttarakhand	5	7	+2	7	+2
21.	Himachal Pradesh	4	4	0	4	0
22.	Kerala	20	20	0	20	0
	Total	524	774	+250	792	+268
	Smaller states and UTs	19	19	0	19	0
	Total	543	793	+250	811	+268

Sources: Authors' calculations, Election Commission of India; National Commission on Population (2020).

(1) Smaller States and UTs – this calculation did not adjust the 19 seats constitutionally exempt from proportional representation. (2) (a) Divisor for the year 2026 is fixed at the population of 1,810,350 per seat and (b) Divisor for the year 2031 is fixed at the population of 1,834,750 per seat.

by 2031, with the primary goal of preventing any state from experiencing a reduction in its current parliamentary representation. Even though four northern Indian states, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, are expected to gain an additional 129 seats collectively by 2026, whereas five southern states, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu, are predicted to gain only 23 seats collectively. This discrepancy may pose a significant concern for the southern states as the balance of political power appears to be shifting in favour of the northern states.

Given the context, we suggest an alternative method considering the population eligible to vote in an election (18+ populations) instead of the total population in a state to decide the number of seats (see Table 3). Computational analysis reveals that by employing the 18 years and above population for the calculation, the strength of the Lok Sabha in 2026 will be 738, which is 55 seats fewer than the calculation based on the entire population (refer Table 2), and a major share of these 55 seats comes from northern states. This approach may not completely address the underlying issue of inter-state imbalance. Still, it does help mitigate to some extent the widening gap between southern and northern states regarding parliamentary representation.

Another potential approach to tackle this problem might involve adjusting the Lok Sabha seats following the most recent census data while keeping the current number of Rajya Sabha seats per state unchanged. This adjustment maintains the essence of democratic principles without significant compromise and helps counterbalance the increased number of seats favouring northern states in the Lok Sabha. However, the alternatives mentioned above come with their own set of limitations.

Discussions

Indeed, the process of drawing electoral boundaries introduces significant challenges. It is difficult to find even a few scholarly works addressing the issues surrounding electoral delimitation in India, particularly the absence of comprehensive explanations concerning demographic disparities and their impact on political representation. This deficiency in knowledge is conspicuous. Therefore, changing demographic patterns must receive a more profound and thorough scholarly examination, particularly from political scientists and demographers. In the long run, failure to take early corrective action may put the principles of representative democracy, as stated by Verma (2002), in jeopardy, negatively affecting the very nature of representative democracy in the country.

Over the preceding five decades, the socio-demographic landscape of India has significantly changed. Projections indicate an escalation in the country's population to 1.47 billion by 2031, resulting in the world's highest per capita representation ratio (De Santo and Le Maux, 2023). First, the variation in population growth combined with the processes of urbanization and migration have altered the demographic composition of all constituencies. Some constituencies have attained a condition of saturation in population growth, primarily attributable to spatial constraints, whereas others are undergoing rapid and substantial expansion.

Second, the representation of members belonging to scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) in reserved⁵ constituencies remains unaltered despite an increase in their population. Consequently, if the Lok Sabha's composition in a given state does not evolve according to shifting demographics, the representation of SC and ST groups across the nation will likely deviate from their actual population distribution (Kumar, 2018).

Third, as the deadline for reconsidering the freeze is approaching, apprehension looms in the minds of people of the southern states regarding a potential significant shrinkage of their Lok Sabha seats. Expressing concern, southern states contend that allocating seats based solely on

Table 3. Projected seat distribution in Lok Sabha for 2026 and 2031 using population 18years and above, ensuring no state loses its current number of seats.

Sl. no.	State and UTs	Current seats (since 1976)	Projected seats (2026)	Seats gained (2026)	Projected seats (2031)	Seats gained (2031)
1.	Uttar Pradesh	80	117	+37	123	+43
2.	Maharashtra	48	71	+23	73	+25
3.	Bihar	40	60	+20	64	+24
4.	Rajasthan	25	41	+16	43	+18
5.	Madhya Pradesh	29	43	+14	46	+17
6.	West Bengal	42	56	+14	56	+14
7.	Gujarat	26	38	+12	40	+14
8.	Karnataka	28	37	+9	38	+10
9.	Jharkhand	14	20	+6	21	+7
10.	Haryana	10	16	+6	17	+7
11.	Andhra Pradesh	25	30	+5	30	+5
12.	NCT of Delhi	7	12	+5	13	+6
13.	Assam	14	19	+5	19	+5
14.	Tamil Nadu	39	43	+4	43	+4
15.	Telangana	17	21	+4	21	+4
16.	Punjab	13	17	+4	18	+5
17.	Chhattisgarh	11	15	+4	16	+5
18.	Odisha	21	24	+3	24	+3
19.	J & K + Ladakh	6	8	+2	8	+2
20.	Uttarakhand	5	6	+1	7	+2
21.	Himachal Pradesh	4	4	0	4	0
22.	Kerala	20	20	0	20	0
	Total	524	719	+195	745	+221
	Smaller states and UTs	19	19	0	19	0
	Total	543	738	+195	764	+221

Sources: Authors' calculations, Election Commission of India; National Commission on Population (2020).

(1) Smaller States and UTs – this calculation did not adjust the 19 seats constitutionally exempt from proportional representation. (2) Divisors with 18years and above population – (a) Divisor for the year 2026 is fixed at a population of 1,387,000 per seat (b) Divisor for the year 2031 is fixed at a population of 1,426,300 per seat.

population figures would be unjust for states that have effectively managed the population growth. They argue that their economic performance, low fertility rates, and high levels of women's empowerment and education, resulting in a lower population growth rate, would translate into a loss of political and economic influence at the national level.

This concern is already compounded by the recent decision of the Fifteenth Finance Commission to utilize the 2011 census figures, rather than the 1971 census, in the distribution formula for Union government tax revenue among the states. Fourth, continuing the existing system could mean fewer resources (e.g. MPLAD fund) for northern states with high population growth rates. Another counterargument arises about whether the people of those states should be punished for the failure in effectively popularizing family planning programmes.

Undoubtedly, there is an urgent need for a fresh delimitation exercise, as the freeze will end in 2026. Many cross-country studies have indicated that a rising population, resulting in a proportional increase in the number of constituencies, benefits representation (De Santo and Le Maux, 2023). However, one school of thought suggests continuing with the freeze on the distribution of seats till the population stabilizes in all states. Nevertheless, maintaining the status quo regarding delimitation is just a temporary means to create an artificial sense of political stability while distorting the fundamental principles of democracy even further. Even if the justifications for the delimitation freeze are given due consideration, the current delimitation freeze does not account for any active attempts to resolve the concerns involved.

We acknowledge that, at present, there is no easy solution to reduce this disparity if we go by current population distribution. Alternatively, a different formula or approach could be developed for allocating seats based on the weightage of various demographic and socio-economic parameters, as done by the 15th Finance Commission. The parliament must evolve a particular proportionality-based solution to safeguard the interests of all stakeholders. Therefore, the initial step towards addressing this issue should involve legislators engaging in comprehensive dialogues, considering the cause and effect of various options. All stakeholders and institutions within which the political processes are embedded should initiate this dialogue. This may include the public, politicians, civil society organizations, political parties, the Election Commission, and the media. It can play a crucial part in raising awareness on the issue and creating a political stimulus for the legislators to engage with the issue and act upon it.

Conclusion

The electoral delimitation and the conduct of elections are fundamental cornerstones of a parliamentary democracy. The parliament, empowered with the authority to formulate laws pertaining to the delimitation, seems to have fallen short in addressing the challenges adversely affecting democratic processes in a just and unequivocal manner. The discourse concerning India's future representation should not be delayed any further. It is essential to acknowledge India's shifting demographics and revise the allocation of parliamentary seats accordingly, as this is foundational to upholding the principle of equality within the electoral franchise.

The significance and necessity of the delimitation have increased further following the passage of the Women Reservation Bill-2023 in the parliament. This legislation mandates the allocation of one-third of seats, potentially allotted by rotation to different constituencies, for women in both the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies. This reservation also extends to the seats designated for SC and ST in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures.

In conclusion, this article highlighted the seriousness of the issue and proposed a possible solution. Now, there is a need to take a fresh look at the rules and statutes governing the delimitation of electoral constituencies. A comprehensive national dialogue should be initiated to address

the various aspects of inter-state disparity in representation. Failing to seize this opportunity may exacerbate the harm inflicted upon India's federal framework. Although the delimitation is inevitable, but adverse consequences from freeze can be minimized to a great extent. So, given the existing disparity and varying concerns, it is crucial to facilitate extensive dialogues to understand how the population as a whole interacts with political representation.

Acknowledgements

The authors cordially acknowledge the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) for helping them understand the Census dataset for conducting this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the completion of this paper.

Data availability

Data used in this study is publicly available on the Census of India and Election Commission of India website.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Pankaj Kumar Patel  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4689-7500>

Notes

1. 15 Major States: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal.
2. Smaller States & Union Territories: Tripura, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Manipur, Nagaland, Goa, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, Lakshadweep, Mizoram, and Pondicherry.
3. Daman and Diu Lok Sabha constituency came into existence in 1987, following the implementation of the Goa, Daman, and Diu Reorganisation Act-1987; leading the number of Lok Sabha constituencies to 543 from 542.
4. Utilization of proportional representation is not obligatory in the case of India's centrally administered UTs; rather, the allocation of seats in these territories is contingent upon parliamentary discretion. In addition, states with populations falling below the threshold of 6 million, as stipulated by the Thirty-First Amendment in 1973, are exempted from the mandatory implementation of proportional representation.
5. The state-specific allocation of scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) reserved seats is determined as mandated by Clause (2) of Article 330 of The Indian Constitution. This clause stipulates that the reservation of seats for SC and ST candidates in each state should align with the respective share of these communities in the state's total population.

References

- Aditi Singh V and Ashesh A (2020) *Redrawing the Electoral Boundaries: Debunking the Doxas of Delimitation* (No. 1; Issue 1, pp.1–24). Gurugram, India: Pranab Mukherjee Foundation. Available at: <https://www.pmf.org.in/research-series/samanvaya-research-series-vol-1/>

- Ahuja ML (1998) *Electoral Politics and General Elections in India, 1952–1998*. 1st ed. New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications.
- Alam MS and Sivaramakrishnan KC (eds) (2015) Introduction. In: Sivaramakrishnan KC and Alam MS (eds) *Fixing Electoral Boundaries in India: Laws, Processes, Outcomes, and Implications for Political Representation*. 1st ed. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, pp.1–16.
- Arumugam T (2015) Indian electoral politics a critical analysis. *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 76(3): 389–391.
- Balinski ML and Young HP (2001a) Apportionment. In: Balinski ML and Young P (eds) *Fair Representation: Meeting the Ideal of One Man, One Vote*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp.1–5.
- Balinski ML and Young HP (2001b) The method of Webster. In: Balinski ML and Young P (eds) *Fair Representation: Meeting the Ideal of One Man, One Vote*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp.23–35.
- Bhavnani RR (2021) The effects of malapportionment on economic development. *PLoS ONE* 16(12): e0259150.
- Bookman MZ (1997) *The Demographic Struggle for Power: The Political Economy of Demographic Engineering in the Modern World*. London: Routledge.
- Bose A (1996) Demographic transition and demographic imbalance in India. *Health Transition Review* 6: 89–99.
- Chopra R (2019) Explained: why Lok Sabha is still 543. *The Indian Express*, 14 October. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/article-81-constitution-explained-why-lok-sabha-is-still-543-6067542/>
- De Santo A and Le Maux B (2023) On the optimal size of legislatures: an illustrated literature review. *European Journal of Political Economy* 77: 102317. Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/poleco/v77y2023ics0176268022001203.html>
- Dutta S (2022) Evolving rationales of boundary making in India: beyond states. *India Review* 21(4–5): 493–511.
- ECI (1976) *DPACO (1976)*. New Delhi, India: Election Commission of India, pp.3–4). Available at: <https://www.eci.gov.in/146-archive-delimitation-orders>
- ECI (2024) Election commission of India. Available at: <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/index>
- Government of India (2000) *National Population Policy-2000*. New Delhi, India: Department of Family Welfare, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Nirman Bhavan. Available at: <https://www.india.gov.in/national-population-policy-2000>
- Gupta S (2015) Drawing electoral boundaries in India. In: Alam S and Sivaramakrishnan KC (eds) *Fixing Electoral Boundaries in India: Laws, Processes, Outcomes, and Implications for Political Representation*. 1st ed. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, pp.46–63.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) *Parline: The Ipu's Open Data Platform*. Paris: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- James KS and Sekher TV (2023) India's population change: critical issues and prospects. In: James KS and Sekher TV (eds) *India Population Report*. New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, pp.1–18.
- Khosla R (2012) Fourth delimitation commission: the emergent issues. *Journal of Political Science* 8(1): .
- Kumar AP (2018) Of delimitation, demography and democracy. *Economic and Political Weekly* 53(07): 10–11.
- Leuprecht C (2016) Scanning the consequences of demographic change for the emerging security landscape. In: Masys AJ (ed.) *Exploring the Security Landscape*. Cham: Springer, pp.141–157.
- McMillan A (2000) Delimitation, democracy, and end of constitutional freeze. *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(15): 1271–1276.
- McMillan A (2001a) *Population Change and the Democratic Structure*. New Delhi, India: Seminar, pp.50–56.
- McMillan A (2001b) Constitution 91st amendment bill: a constitutional fraud? *Economic and Political Weekly* 36(14–15): 1171–1174.
- Missaglia N (2019) Inequality: global India's domestic bottleneck? In: Tramballi U and Missaglia N (eds) *India's Global Challenge*. Milano: Ledizioni, pp.85–110.

- National Commission on Population (2020) *Population Projection for India and States 2011–2036*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Technical Group on Population Projections. Available at: https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/Population%20Projection%20Report%202011-2036%20-%20upload_compressed_0.pdf
- Patel PK and Sekher TV (2024) Young India, ageing parliament. *Economic and Political Weekly* 59(31): 13–17.
- Registrar General of India (2022) India – A-02: decadal variation in population 1901–2011, India. Available at: <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/43333>
- Retnakumar J (2009) Demographic inequalities and implications for political representation in India. In: *XXVI international population conference of the IUSSP- 2009*, Morocco, 27 October. Available at: <https://ipc2009.popconf.org/papers/90401>
- Sivaramakrishnan KC (1997) Under-franchise in urban areas: freeze on delimitation of constituencies and resultant disparities. *Economic and Political Weekly* 32(51): 3275–3281.
- Sivaramakrishnan KC (2000) North-south divide and delimitation blues. *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(35–36): 3093–3097.
- Sivaramakrishnan KC (2015) Delimitation in India: a political-historic overview. In: Alam MS and Sivaramakrishnan KC (eds) *Fixing Electoral Boundaries in India: Laws, Processes, Outcomes, and Implications for Political Representation*. 1st ed. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, pp.64–87.
- United Nations (2023) *World Population Prospects – 2023*. New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/MostUsed/>
- Vaishnav M and Hinton J (2019) *India's Emerging Crisis of Representation*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/india-s-emerging-crisis-of-representation-pub-78588>
- Verba S and Nie NH (1987) *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Available at: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo3637096.html>
- Verma AK (2002) Issues and problems in India's delimitation exercise. *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 63(4): 371–388.
- Verma AK (2008) Fourth delimitation of constituencies: an appraisal. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(11): 12–16.
- XV Finance Commission (2020) *Report of Fifteenth Finance Commission in Covid Times Report for 2021–26* (Main Report, October 2020 No. Volume 1; p.446). New Delhi, India: XV Finance Commission. Available at: <https://fincomindia.nic.in/commission-reports-fifteenth>

Author biographies

Pankaj Kumar Patel is a doctoral researcher and senior project officer at the International Institute for Population Studies. His research interests include political and social demography, youth political representation, parliamentary representation, gender and mixed methods.

T. V. Sekher is a professor and head of the Department of Family & Generations at the International Institute for Population Sciences, India. His research interests include social demography, gender issues, population ageing, health services and management, reproductive and child health, history of population and health, family studies, and social welfare programmes.