

Representation, Redistribution and India's Revised Federal Compact



Deepanshu Mohan and Ankur Singh 22/Apr/2026

The question is not whether population should matter in determining representation. It must. The question is whether it should be the only principle that does.



Canoeists practice on the Yamuna River at sunset, in Prayagraj, Tuesday, April 21, 2026. Photo: PTI.

The recent bill to amend the Women's Reservation Bill, which failed to pass in the Lok Sabha, was tethered to delimitation, and delimitation is not a neutral exercise. It is, arguably, the most consequential reallocation of political power since independence.

To treat these as separate developments is to misread the institutional design. The expansion of representation for women is being implemented through a mechanism that will simultaneously reorder representation across regions. This is not incidental. It is structural.

The scale of this reordering becomes clearer when placed against the arithmetic of representation. **India's Lok Sabha**, currently at 543 seats, is widely expected to expand

beyond 800 following delimitation. Within such an expansion, even proportional gains can conceal relative losses.

Early projections suggest that while **southern states** may see their seat counts rise in absolute terms, their share could fall from roughly 24% to closer to 20%, while northern states consolidate a larger share of parliamentary influence.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

The demographic penalty

Delimitation will realign parliamentary seats according to population. That principle carries intuitive democratic appeal. In India's context, however, it produces a deeply uneven outcome.

States that reduced fertility over the past five decades now face a relative loss of political voice. States that lagged in demographic transition stand to gain. This is not conjecture. It follows directly from the arithmetic. In an expanded Lok Sabha, northern states will see their seat share rise while southern states, despite absolute gains, will experience a relative decline.

The gap between states such as **Uttar Pradesh** and **Tamil Nadu**, already considerable at 80 to 39 seats today, is set to widen sharply under new projections.

What appears as democratic correction is, in effect, a demographic penalty.

This raises a fundamental question of distributive justice. Should political representation reward population size alone, or should it also account for the outcomes of governance? Southern states did not arrive at lower fertility passively. They invested in public health, expanded schooling, and advanced women's agency, a developmental path the Union itself promoted. To now reduce their relative political voice is to signal that policy success carries a political cost. A federation that penalises its most effective units risks distorting the very incentives it depends upon.

The concern deepens when set against the condition of fiscal federalism. The Union's reliance on **cesses and surcharges**, revenues that are not shared with states, has grown from under 11% of gross tax revenue a decade ago to over 14% in recent years.

Centrally Sponsored Schemes have expanded significantly, now exceeding **Rs 5.41 lakh crore annually**, frequently dictating state expenditure priorities while requiring co-financing.

High-contributing states already receive considerably less per rupee of tax contribution than lower-income counterparts. Redistribution, in principle, is central to any federal arrangement. But when redistribution is systematically coupled with declining representation, the equation changes. What emerges is a configuration in which some states finance growth while others accumulate influence over how that growth is allocated.

The institutional question

Seen through the lens of public choice theory, the current moment is unsurprising. Political actors respond to incentives embedded in institutions. Delimitation tied to population produces a predictable outcome: regions with higher population growth gain representation, and parties with stronger electoral bases in those regions gain structurally. The linkage with the Women's Reservation Act is therefore not merely procedural. A deeply popular reform provides political cover for a more consequential redistribution of power.

The institutional mechanism compounds the concern. The Delimitation Commission operates with extraordinary authority; its decisions carry the force of law and are not subject to parliamentary modification. A transformation of this magnitude, one that reshapes the federal balance, will be executed through a process that is formally legal but politically insulated from deliberation.

There is also the question of the underlying data. The forthcoming exercise will rest on the 2011 Census, given the absence of a fresh enumeration. This is not a technical inconvenience. It is a democratic deficit. Representation is being recalibrated against demographic realities that are now fifteen years old, even as demands for a comprehensive caste census remain unresolved. Institutional design, in this context, is not neutral. It shapes outcomes long before they are publicly debated.

The economic consequences follow directly. When high-performing states face both reduced fiscal returns and diminishing political influence, their capacity for long-term investment is constrained. Capital formation in infrastructure, education, and health depends on fiscal space, space that is already being compressed by rising co-financing obligations and narrowing revenue autonomy.

Resources that might otherwise have been directed toward productive investment are redirected toward compliance. This is the classic crowding-out problem, transposed to the architecture of federal finance. Over time, it weakens the regions that drive national growth. The federation becomes more redistributive, but risks becoming less productive.

The Women's Reservation Act deserves unqualified support. Expanding women's representation in legislative bodies is not negotiable. But the framework within which it is being implemented demands serious scrutiny.

India is not simply adding more representatives. It is redefining how representation itself is distributed, and doing so through a process that conflates democratic inclusion with a structural reordering of federal power.

The question is not whether population should matter in determining representation. It must. The question is whether it should be the only principle that does, and whether a federal system as complex and diverse as India's can be reduced to a single demographic metric without consequence.

This is not a moment of incremental reform. It is a moment of reordering, and its consequences will be far harder to reverse than to recognise.

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