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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

One Person, One Vote, One Anxiety: Delimitation and the Federal Balance

 THE HINDU

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POLITY

GS2

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Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped

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THE LIFT LINE

Democracy promises that every vote counts equally, but **delimitation** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/delimitation/>) asks whether every state should count equally too.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The delimitation question is the sharpest **federalism** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/federalism/>) debate of the decade, and it is tailor-made for **GS Paper 2**. A proposal, discussed as a possible **131st Constitution Amendment**, would raise the strength of the **Lok Sabha** to roughly **850 seats** and trigger a fresh, population-based **delimitation**. On paper it advances the democratic ideal of **one person, one vote**. In practice it would shift seats toward the more populous northern states and could reduce the relative weight of southern states that successfully controlled their populations. That is a genuine constitutional dilemma, not a partisan slogan, and the best answers hold both truths at once.

GS Paper 2: functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the **federal structure**, and the structure and functioning of the legislature. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **Article 81** governs the composition of the Lok Sabha; **Article 82** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/article-82-delimitation/>) requires readjustment of seats after **each census**; **Article 170** deals with the composition of State Legislative Assemblies; delimitation was frozen by the **42nd Amendment (1976)** and the freeze was extended by the **84th Amendment (2001)** until the first census taken after **2026**; the Lok Sabha currently has **543** elected seats; delimitation is carried out by a **Delimitation Commission** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/delimitation-commission/>) whose orders cannot be questioned in any court; the new Parliament building was designed with larger seating capacity. For **Mains**, argue that representation and federal trust must be reconciled through consensus, not arithmetic alone.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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India froze the allocation of Lok Sabha seats across states at 1971 census levels to reward states that pursued family planning without punishing them at the ballot box. The **42nd Amendment** first imposed this freeze, and the **84th Amendment** extended it to the first census after **2026**. Internal boundaries within states were redrawn in 2002 based on the 2001 census, but the total seats per state were untouched.

That constitutional deadline is now approaching. Once the first census after 2026 is available, the legal basis for the freeze lapses, and a fresh delimitation becomes possible. The proposal to expand the House to around **850 seats**, and the fact that the new Parliament building can seat far more members than the old chamber, has turned an abstract deadline into a live political fault line, popularly framed as the **north-south divide**.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The case for equal representation

A citizen in a fast-growing northern state today may be represented by an MP who speaks for far more people than an MP from a slower-growing southern state. This violates the principle of **one person, one vote**, the idea that each vote should carry roughly equal weight. On this logic, delimitation based on current population is simply overdue justice for under-represented voters, and freezing representation indefinitely entrenches **malapportionment** (<https://ujjayi.com/terms/malapportionment/>).

The case against penalising success

The counter-argument is equally principled. States that invested in health, education and family planning brought their fertility rates down. If seats are now reallocated purely by population, these states lose relative influence in Parliament precisely because they succeeded at a national goal. That looks less like justice and more like a penalty for good governance, and it corrodes the federal bargain.

DIMENSION	ARGUMENT FOR REALLOCATION	ARGUMENT FOR CAUTION
Core principle	One person, one vote	Cooperative federalism (https://ujjayi.com/terms/cooperativ-e-federalism/)
Whom it favours	Under-represented, populous states	States that curbed population growth
Risk	Entrenched malapportionment	Alienation and federal distrust
Time horizon	Corrects a delayed adjustment	Punishes long-term policy success

Expansion is not automatically neutral

Simply enlarging the House to 850 seats does not dissolve the tension. If the extra seats are distributed by current population, the relative share of slower-growing states still falls even if their absolute numbers rise. The design of the reallocation formula, not merely the size of the House, is what determines fairness.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use a **twin-legitimacy frame**. A representative democracy draws legitimacy from two sources at once: the **individual voter**, who deserves equal weight, and the **federal unit**, the state, which deserves a stable place in the Union. Most mature federations resolve the clash by weighting one chamber toward population and another toward the units, the way the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha already divide labour. The delimitation debate becomes tractable when you stop treating it as a single-variable optimisation and start asking how both legitimacies can be protected together. Note also that this proposal is distinct from the **130th Amendment** and should not be conflated with it.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Post-2026 census -> delimitation freeze lapses -> proposal: expand Lok Sabha to ~850 + reallocate by population -> populous north gains relative weight, south fears loss -> federal trust at stake -> resolve via consensus + safeguards, not arithmetic alone

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Build political consensus before constitutional change.** A reallocation of representation touches the federal core and should proceed through wide all-party and inter-state consultation, not a bare majority.
- ② **Consider safeguards that protect federal balance.** Options discussed by scholars include capping any state's relative loss, or strengthening the role of the states' chamber, so no region is left feeling penalised.
- ③ **Separate House expansion from reallocation.** Enlarging the House to improve the MP-to-citizen ratio can be considered on its own merits, distinct from the [contentious](https://ujiyari.com/vocabulary/contentious/) question of redistributing shares between states.
- ④ **Communicate the constitutional timeline honestly.** Clarify that this flows from the lapse of the 84th Amendment freeze and is distinct from the 130th Amendment, to prevent misinformation from inflaming the debate.

PYO LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

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This links to UPSC 2021 (Though the federal principle is dominant in our Constitution and that principle is one of its basic features, it is equally true that federalism under the Indian Constitution leans in favour of a strong Centre) and to recurring questions on the Rajya Sabha and cooperative federalism. Delimitation is the freshest lens on the same enduring theme.

Practice question: Population-based delimitation after 2026 pits the principle of equal representation against the federal balance of the Union. Critically examine the dilemma and suggest a way forward that safeguards both. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Constitution of India, Articles 81-82 (<https://legislative.gov.in/>), Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in/>), The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com/>)

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