



PROJECTING THE IMPACT OF 'REDUCE AND EQUALISE'

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Background

In August 2010, Democratic Audit was asked by BBC *Newsnight* to produce estimates of the likely impact of the coalition's 'reduce and equalise' proposals for Westminster constituencies. These proposals involve reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600 and seeking to equalise the number of electors in each constituency. With the exception of 2, or possibly 3, remote Scottish constituencies, this will mean that all constituencies should fall within +/- 5 per cent of the average – approximately 76,000 electors per seat. The process of drawing up the new constituencies will be led by the fully independent Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our estimates are principally focussed on the likely geographical impact of the reforms, i.e. the areas of the country which are most likely to lose seats. We do not yet have the electorate figures which the Boundary Commissions will use to inform their recommendations (these will only become available in December 2010). Neither do we have full information about how the Boundary Commissions will approach the task. For instance, it is not yet clear whether constituencies will be permitted to cross regional boundaries. Nonetheless, it is possible to predict with a high degree of accuracy the changes in the number of seats at a regional level.

Newsnight also asked us to consider the possible political impact of the changes. While it is possible to draw conclusions about how the proposals could impact on party representation, these findings must be regarded as purely indicative. The effect of boundary changes can only be assessed once the geography of the new boundaries is actually known. However, based on current evidence, we can make some reasonable assumptions about how the regional changes would translate in terms of political representation. Stark regional contrasts in political representation, together with the geographical clusters of constituencies with smaller electorates in metropolitan areas outside of London, provide some obvious pointers.

Which parts of the country will lose seats?

The current distribution of seats by country/region is shown in table 1. There will be a separate boundary review process for each constituent country of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), each of which will have a specific seat quota. Using the 2009 Electoral Statistics, we first calculated how many seats each country would be entitled to in a 600 seats House of Commons, assuming an average of 76,000 electors per seat. It is then possible to calculate how many seats each country is likely to lose under the proposals.

We assume that the reforms mean there will be 503 seats in England (-30), 30 in Wales (-10), 52 in Scotland (-7) and 15 in Northern Ireland (-3).

We then calculated, on the same basis, how many of the 503 seats in England each of the English regions would be entitled to. The results are shown in table 1. The North West is predicted to lose the most seats (-7), followed by the West Midlands (-5) and Yorkshire and the Humber (-4). The fewest seat reductions are likely in the East of England (-1) the East Midlands (-2) and the South West (-2).

Table 1: Number of current Parliamentary constituencies by region/country, and projected distribution of constituencies in 2015

| | Before | After | Change |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Greater London | 73 | 70 | -3 |
| South West | 55 | 53 | -2 |
| West Midlands | 59 | 54 | -5 |
| North West | 75 | 68 | -7 |
| North East | 29 | 26 | -3 |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 54 | 50 | -4 |
| East Midlands | 46 | 44 | -2 |
| East of England | 58 | 57 | -1 |
| South East | 84 | 81 | -3 |
| ENGLAND TOTAL | 533 | 503 | -30 |
| | | | |
| Scotland | 59 | 52 | -7 |
| Wales | 40 | 30 | -10 |
| GB TOTAL | 632 | 585 | -47 |
| | | | |
| Northern Ireland | 18 | 15 | -3 |
| | | | |
| UK TOTAL | 650 | 600 | -50 |

It is important to note a number of caveats about these estimates:

1. The figure produced for the 'quota' for each region or country is rarely an integer, meaning that numbers need to be rounded up or down. Within England, we have made some attempt to take into account sub-regional variations in the size of constituencies, as well as clusters of small constituencies, but a more detailed analysis would be needed to confirm the estimates for the English regions.
2. The estimates are based on the December 2009 electoral registers – whereas the boundary review will be based on the December 2010 registers. Assuming late voter registrations added in the run-up to the 2010 General Election are mostly retained ('carried forward') on the new registers, the average number of electors per constituency will be moderately higher (although this is unlikely to make much difference to estimates at a regional scale).
3. While constituencies will not cross country borders, some of the new constituencies within England may need to cross regional boundaries.

Despite these caveats, we would expect these figures to be accurate to the degree of +/- 1 seat for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and each of the English regions.

What would the impact be on party representation at Westminster?

It is very difficult to produce precise estimates of the likely partisan impact of these changes without knowing precisely how the new constituency boundaries would be drawn.

However, we can make a number of assumptions to produce a rough estimate of the likely impact on representation in the House of Commons.

- First, there are clear regional variations in party representation, which give us some idea of how the parties are likely to be affected. For instance, since almost two-thirds of North West MPs are Labour, the seat reductions in the North West will hit Labour harder than anyone else. Conversely, as there are 0 Liberal Democrat MPs in the East Midlands and only 2 Labour MPs in the East of England, we know that the changes in these regions will have little or no impact on these parties' representation.
- Second, current variations in constituency sizes highlight that those with smaller electorates are disproportionately located in metropolitan areas. For instance, it is clear that all of the former Metropolitan County Council areas of England (Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands, West Yorkshire) will lose at least one seat. Merseyside is likely to lose two seats and 'Greater Birmingham' may lose as many as three. As most of these metropolitan seats have Labour MPs, we have assumed that seat losses in regions such as Yorkshire and the Humber will disproportionately impact on Labour.¹ Likewise, seat reductions in Scotland and Wales are most likely in more densely-populated, Labour-voting areas.
- Third, it is possible to identify specific constituencies within regions which are effectively 'islands' of representation for a particular party and have very small electorates – thus making them highly vulnerable as a result of boundary changes. For example, Berwick-upon-Tweed in the North East (one of only 2 Liberal Democrat seats in the region) has only 57,000 electors. On balance, we have assumed that boundary changes will cause the Liberal Democrats to lose this seat. Likewise, the neighbouring Plaid Cymru seats of Dwyfor Meirionnydd and Arfon in North Wales have 46,000 and 41,000 seats respectively – it is difficult to imagine how the party could retain two seats in this part of Wales given the likelihood of the country as a whole losing 10 seats.

Using these assumptions, we produced the regional estimates shown in table 2. The aggregate estimates for the overall impact on party representation are shown in table 3.

Table 2: Possible regional outcome of 2010 General Election in Great Britain if it had been fought in 600 (rather than 650) constituencies

| | Change | Labour | Lib Dem | Cons | SNP | PC |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|---------|------|-----|-----|
| Greater London | -3 | -2 | 0 | -1 | --- | --- |
| South West | -2 | -0 | -1 | -1 | --- | --- |
| West Midlands | -5 | -3 | 0 | -2 | --- | --- |
| North West | -7 | -4 | -1 | -2 | --- | --- |
| North East | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | --- | --- |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | -4 | -3 | -1 | 0 | --- | --- |
| East Midlands | -2 | 0 | 0 | -2 | --- | --- |
| East of England | -1 | 0 | 0 | -1 | --- | --- |
| South East | -3 | 0 | -1 | -2 | --- | --- |
| ENGLAND TOTAL | -30 | -14 | -5 | -11 | --- | --- |
| Scotland | -7 | -5 | -1 | 0 | -1 | 0 |
| Wales | -10 | -6 | -1 | -2 | | 0 |
| GB TOTAL | -47 | -25 | -7 | -13 | -1 | |

¹ It should be noted that several metropolitan areas outside of London have 1 or 2 Liberal Democrat MPs – often representing constituencies surrounded by safe Labour seats. Depending on how boundaries are re-drawn in these areas, it is therefore possible that additional Liberal Democrat seats could be vulnerable.

Table 3: Possible outcome of 2010 General Election if it had been fought in 600 (rather than 650) constituencies

| | Seats won at 2010 General Election | Impact of seat reductions | Est. MPs in 600 seat Commons |
|---------------|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Conservatives | 307 | -13 | 294 |
| Labour | 258 | -25 | 233 |
| Lib Dem | 57 | -7 | 50 |
| Others | 28 | -5 | 23 |
| TOTAL | 650 | -50 | 600 |

Note: these estimates are based on specific assumptions and should be interpreted principally as a guide to the likely impact. The number of seats each party would actually lose is probably in the range of +/- 4. Thus, Conservative losses could range from 9-17, Labour from 21-29 and the Liberal Democrats from 3-11.

These estimates suggest that, if the 2010 election had been fought on the basis of 600 seats with equalised electorates, Labour would have lost ground relative to the two other main parties. As many as half of the 50 seats due to disappear from the Commons could be notionally Labour seats. The boundary changes and seat reductions are therefore likely to provide a slight benefit to the Conservatives. However, it is not enough to give the Tories a majority – they still fall 7 short under these projections. This outcome might have been just enough for the Conservatives to govern with the DUP, who would probably have been reduced from 8 to 7 MPs as a result of the changes – although such an arrangement would almost certainly have been difficult to broker. Given the political circumstances, hindsight suggests that a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition would still have been the most likely outcome.

About Democratic Audit

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation, which researches issues concerning democracy and human rights in the United Kingdom. We are grant funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, governed by an independent Board of Trustees, and based at the University of Liverpool. The Audit's Director is Dr. Stuart Wilks-Heeg, who is also Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Liverpool.

About the authors

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