



The New Constituency Map of Britain?

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Executive summary

1. This paper summarises the outcomes of a detailed projection of the impact of the proposed 'reduce and equalise' rules for constituency boundaries.
2. The projection shows that boundary changes may not have the widely anticipated partisan effects. Rather than 'neutralising' the modest element of pro-Labour advantage arising from the existing boundaries, the key impact of the proposals could be to enhance the overall bias of the electoral system against the Liberal Democrats.
3. Uncertainty about election modelling and the number of alternative ways of arranging constituencies that conform to the rules means that a range of outcomes is possible. However, even adjusting the boundaries produced by the core projection deliberately to maximise Conservative advantage would only have produced a tiny Conservative majority in 2010.
4. The guidelines, principles and policies of the Boundary Commissions are the main determinant of which particular boundary scheme is implemented. Transparency, together with public, expert and political acceptance of these principles is therefore a matter of genuine importance. The Commissions may wish to conduct more detailed research than before into the broad criteria people feel are important in drawing up constituencies.
5. Given the government's intended abolition of a right to a public inquiry on boundary changes, it is important that representations (both for and against the Commission's provisional recommendations) are made by local people and interested groups on the detail of boundary proposals so that these best reflect what people want from their constituency boundaries.

Introduction

The Government's Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill is progressing through parliament, so far at the rapid rate desired by its authors. As well as calling a referendum on changing to the Alternative Vote, timetabled for May 2011, the Bill also triggers an important change to constituency boundaries. The number of MPs will fall from 650 to 600, and other than in a couple of exceptional cases the registered electorate of each constituency as of December 2010 must be within plus or minus 5 per cent of the average (around 76,000).

This aim of this paper is to undertake a 'dry run' of drawing new parliamentary boundaries under the Bill's new proposed rules, which differ from those used in the past. The December 2010 figures being of course unavailable, the latest available electorate figures are used (and the new rules mean that there may be big differences in outcome caused by relatively small changes in the number of electors in individual constituencies). The model is not a prediction of what is going to happen, merely an illustration of the sort of overall outcome that *could* result. The detail (see Appendix 3) is also instructive in showing the kind of constituencies that will result – their size and the sort of uncomfortable decisions (crossing county boundaries, violating natural communities, splitting wards) that the Boundary Commissions will have to take, and on which the public voice should be heard during the consultation process.

The detailed projection

	Current	Model	Change	% change
Con	306	285	-21	-6.9
Lab	258	245	-13	-5.0
LD	57	45	-12	-21.1
Other	29	25	-4	-13.8
TOTAL	650	600	-50	-7.7

The result of the modelling is surprising and counter-intuitive, in that it indicates Labour might be the party that takes the smallest proportionate share of the losses of seats. While it is quite possible that the method used to model the outcome has caused Labour to outperform compared to what would happen in a real set of boundary changes, the fact that a reasoned model can produce such a result indicates that the assumptions and working methods of the Boundary Commissions, and the opportunity (or lack thereof) for public participation are vitally important.

The Liberal Democrats are down heavily. Part of the reason for this is that their seats do not clump together as much as those of the other parties, and boundary changes mean that areas which are not necessarily unsympathetic to the party, but where the party has not previously campaigned hard, are added from neighbouring constituencies. Lib

Dem majorities are on average smaller than those of the larger parties (the mean Lib Dem majority was 12.5 per cent, compared to 19.0 per cent for the Conservatives and 19.3 per cent for Labour). This tends to render them less able to withstand adverse boundary changes. However, some Liberal Democrat incumbents in the past (notably Malcolm Bruce in Gordon and Sarah Teather in Brent) have survived despite extensive redistributions.

The number of seats each party would notionally have won in 2010 is only one measure of the effect of a boundary review. Boundary changes will also affect what happens with a given amount of swing away from the result in 2010. The author's impression is that under the core projection, while Labour's showing is better than might have been expected, the number of target marginals vulnerable to a small to medium swing in Labour's favour has decreased, making Labour's task of winning an overall majority significantly harder. The number of Labour seats with small majorities may also have grown, making it easier for a pro-Conservative swing to deliver them a majority. These effects are unlikely to be large, but might end up being a highly significant consequence at a future election.

The projection by region is given in the table below.

	Current	New	Con		Lab		LD		Other	
Eastern	58	56	51	-1	2	0	3	-1	0	0
East Midlands	46	44	26	-5	18	+3	0	0	0	0
London	73	69	26	-2	38	0	5	-2	0	0
North East	29	26	0	-2	24	-1	2	0	0	0
North West	75	69	19	-3	45	-2	5	-1	0	0
South East	84	82	73	-1	4	0	3	-1	2	0
South West	55	53	37	+1	4	0	12	-3	0	0
West Midlands	59	54	29	-4	23	-1	2	0	0	0
Yorkshire & Humber	54	50	19	0	29	-3	2	-1	0	0
ENGLAND	533	503	280	-17	187	-4	34	-9	2	0
SCOTLAND	59	52	0	-1	38	-3	8	-3	6	0
WALES	40	30	5	-3	20	-6	3	0	2	-1
BRITAIN	632	585	285	-21	245	-13	45	-12	10	-1
NORTHERN IRELAND	18	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	-3
UNITED KINGDOM	650	600	285	-21	245	-13	45	-12	25	-4

A spectrum of possible outcomes

Modelling election results can only ever be an approximate business, even more so when the precise constituency boundaries are unknown. It is therefore wise to present the results of the modelling exercise not in terms of a single definite 'prediction' but rather as a spectrum of projections. The table below offers several alternatives.

	Current	Con best case	Aug 2010 estimate	Mid-point	Core detailed	Lab best case
Con	306	302	294	289	285	276
Lab	258	221	233	240	245	258
LD	57	51	50	46	45	42
Other	29	26	23	25	25	24

Note: The August 2010 estimate is from Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Steven Crone's work (http://www.democraticaudit.org/download/Projecting_the_impact_of_reduce_and_equalise.pdf) and the methodology is described in that paper.

The rest derive from the core projection (see Appendix 1 for more detail), and involve some guesswork and approximation. For the 'Conservative best case' outcome the core model has been tweaked in each locality to reflect a helpful decision for the Conservatives (in terms of maximising their seats in 2010) in a notional boundary consultation process, and also giving them the benefit of the doubt where a modelled result would be very close. The same has been done for Labour in their 'best case' scenario. Although a party may get everything it wants in one locality, it is unlikely to do so everywhere, so both these scenarios are at the furthest end of probability. Still, they are dramatic – in the best Conservative case they could have – just – won an overall majority in 2010, and in the best Labour case they would not make any net losses from the boundary review and a Lib/Lab coalition might have had enough MPs to make it work.

Another estimate has been derived from these two extreme projections – simply taking a mid-point between the two. This produces a slightly more pro-Conservative outcome than the core projection, with the Conservatives down 17 (equivalent to 5.6 per cent of Conservative MPs) and Labour down 18 (7.0 per cent of Labour MPs). This mid-point estimate may therefore adjust slightly for any potential and inadvertent bias in the core projection method and decisions.

The importance of detail – and getting involved

It is crucial to understand that in boundary modelling there is more than one way of drawing up a set of boundaries that conform to the rules; in many areas there are large numbers of permutations that will produce more or less sensible constituencies. The core projection here is not, therefore, a prediction of what the Boundary Commissions

will do, merely what they *could* do. As well as different possibilities for particular local detail, some of the larger decisions such as which counties to pair might also go differently.

The Commissions will need to decide which criteria are most important when judging the best of a number of permitted alternatives each of which satisfies the numerical rule about size. They will also frequently need to exercise judgement where several alternatives scores more or less equally well in terms of desirable criteria.

To achieve the most democratic result of this boundary review, it is desirable that the criteria for judgement are transparent and reasonable and reflect a degree of consensus among stakeholders. These stakeholders include the Commissions' accumulated judgement and experience of drawing boundaries, the views of experts in the field, the interests of local authorities and political parties, and last but not least the consumers of the results, namely the electorate. In the past the framework for decisions within the legal rules has not been widely discussed, but under the new rules it is arguably more important than ever before. Among the criteria that could be considered are these which are mentioned in the Bill (Section 11 new Schedule 2, Rule 5 (1):

- Special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency;
- Local government boundaries as they exist on the most recent ordinary council-election date before the review date;
- Any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies;
- The inconveniences attendant on such changes.

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldbills/026/11026.6-12.html#j50>)

The definition within these headings could do with some fleshing-out, particularly the meaning of 'accessibility', 'local ties' and 'inconveniences' which have often in the past been the basis of the most specious arguments deployed during the boundary review process. Among questions that flow from this are:

- The use of measures such as public transport links and drive-time compactness to make 'accessibility' more meaningful (contiguity by road is currently desirable but not essential, and two existing seats in Lancashire fail this criterion)
- The extent to which the Commissions should seek to avoid the division of small to medium sized towns, typified in the current boundaries by the unfortunate burgh of Kirkintilloch and a major potential problem under the new rules in areas such as Lancashire and the Black Country.
- Criteria for cross-county seats.
- Criteria on which wards may be split.

- Arithmetic equality within the 5 per cent threshold – the current Bill does not specify that a boundary scheme with 1 per cent average deviation is, other things being equal, to be preferred to one with 4.9 per cent average deviation.
- The relationship of towns to surrounding rural areas in terms of ‘local ties’. A possible consequence of the new rules is that some towns (such as Coventry) may have basically urban constituencies festooned with small rural additions to make up numbers, and it is by no means clear that this is ideal for representation.

It may be that the Commissions will want, before commencing a review, to commission research and consultation on which ‘local ties’ and ‘inconveniences’ are felt most strongly by voters, both in general principles and in specific areas.

The Bill proposes to abolish public inquiries and substitute a period in which the Commissions are open to representations. This proposal has come in for harsh and justified criticism, including from the author. If it survives into the final legislation, it is all the more important for the democratic credentials of the boundary drawing process that interested parties and local residents make the best of the representations process. This is a complex matter involving the interplay of local opinions with what is possible in the wider context of boundaries spanning an entire region, and there is scope for official and unofficial advice on how to make the best arguments to the Commissions. The Commissions will seek information about local views and alternatives to consider, and it is in everyone’s interests that this goes as widely as possible. It is important that people who support the Commission’s provisional recommendations in an area have their voices heard as well as objectors.

Conclusion

The model, and the spectrum of possible outcomes, indicates that when and if the government’s Bill is passed it is far from the end of the process of drawing new constituency boundaries. There will be methodological decisions for the Boundary Commissions, and specific decisions and then consultation on what the recommendations for individual areas might be, at which the public has a right to be heard (even if not the same strong rights as under the old process). Boundary determination has been up to now an arcane aspect of British democracy, but the Bill, however unsatisfactory and dubious the intentions behind it, offers a chance to shine a light upon it.

Appendix 1: About the core model

The new estimates here are derived from a detailed mapping of the United Kingdom in accordance with the rules in the Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill. The electorate figures for each area have been taken from the figures for each ward available in summer 2010 from the four Boundary Commissions, and an allocation made first (as the Bill specifies) to the four nations, giving England 503, Wales 30, Scotland 50 (plus the two island special cases allowed in the Bill) and Northern Ireland 15 for a total House of Commons of 600 MPs. The allocations to each country may be slightly different on the December 2010 electorate figures which the Commissions will use as the basis for drawing the new boundaries – Wales is on the cusp between 29 and 30 seats, and higher population growth in England will mean that its share will drift up, and the other nations' shares drift down, over time. Given population projections, each boundary review in Scotland will be a game of musical chairs, with one seat disappearing and considerable change to many of those remaining.

We intend to revisit boundary drawing when the December 2010 figures are available at ward level, and the extent to which constituency size has drifted above or below the 5 per cent threshold will be an indication of how unstable the new boundaries will be over time.

Leaving aside the two island groups exempted, constituencies were then drawn that conformed with the government's criterion of a maximum permitted deviation from the standard size of 5 per cent, i.e. a rigid maximum electorate of 79,800 and a rigid minimum of 72,200. In general, the model has tried to avoid drawing constituencies at the furthest ends of the margin of toleration and keep to a tighter band (74,000 to 78,000) for most of them.

The Bill indicates that English regional boundaries should be regarded as important, and the modelling has assumed, therefore, that regional boundaries should not be crossed.

The Bill also mentions county boundaries, and the presumption has been that county boundaries should be respected where possible, although with the tight margins for permitted variation in size this is seldom viable. Even counties with close-fit entitlements to a whole number of seats, like Suffolk, are disrupted because neighbouring counties are well away from a whole number of seats. Some large groupings of London boroughs are an inescapable outcome of the Bill.

County pairing is probably particularly sensitive to changes in electorate numbers over time, so it is quite possible that pairings that were not possible on the electorate figures used here will be on the December 2010 numbers – and vice versa.

In some areas local government wards will have to be split, a practice which is strongly disfavoured by the Boundary Commissions. The size of wards in big metropolitan

authorities (Leeds wards are 15-17,000 electors each) and Scotland makes it difficult to construct constituencies out of whole wards which fit the size requirements (in Birmingham it is apparently possible, but at the cost of having contrived constituencies that do not fit any local identity). In modelling the results, whole wards are used where possible.

In Scotland the modelling method may have a significant effect, in that there is wholesale crossing of local authority boundaries in order to minimise the number of wards split. The presumption of using whole wards is more important for a model (that loses credibility if the arbitrary numbers involved when one makes assumptions about how many electors are in each part of a split ward) than for a real Boundary Commission review. The Boundary Commission for Scotland may well take the view that it would be better not to have long 'chains' of local authorities with overlapping seats, and will be able to split wards on a precise and defensible basis. This effect from the ward size and local government structure in Scotland may mean that the reality is more different from the model here than elsewhere. However, this is unlikely to affect the overall partisan numbers much.

In constructing cross-county constituencies, care has been taken to try to make the two sides of the constituency genuine partners with something in common rather than two half-constituencies or areas with few real connections. Cross-county transport routes and patterns of commuting have been taken into account (for example in the 'Stortford & Stansted' seat straddling Hertfordshire and Essex) or common traditions and social structure (for example 'Clay Cross & Ollerton' in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire).

Where possible, regard is given to continuity with past constituencies and with local government boundaries (like shire districts) – rather than completely tear up the map, a virtue has been placed on retaining recognisable units, such as a constituency similar to one that currently exists, or existed before the 2010 redistribution of seats, or avoids crossing too many district council boundaries. A few constituencies can be left completely alone. There are 62 of these in the model, i.e. fewer than one in ten, but perhaps more than might have been expected given the constraints, even though there was a presumption to continuity.

To be left alone requires meeting two criteria – that the current seat has the right number of electors in it, and that it is not affected by knock-on change from neighbouring seats that need alteration. Because changes in one area will cause 'ripples' possibly across an entire region, an MP who currently has 76,000 electors is far from guaranteed not to have their constituency radically changed or effectively abolished.

One assumption which may affect the partisan complexion of the model result is what might be called, following the customary terminology of redistricting ('doughnuts' for compact urban seats, 'sandwiches' for towns split in two and combined with rural/suburban hinterland), a collapsed sandwich. Norwich is an example of this – the two seats currently combine city wards with either a small (South) or large (North)

component from outside the city boundary and they are both a bit small. The city of Norwich as a whole has about 90,000 electors, so it is possible to have a single seat comprising most of the city, or to continue the outward creep of the Norwich seats into the surrounding area. In the model, the current 'sandwich' is collapsed into a City of Norwich seat plus two seats based on the surrounding area. The City of Norwich seat would have been Labour in 2010, hence a model gain for Labour in Norfolk. The downside for the party is that where once there were two marginals that the party could target (and would have supplied Labour MPs in the 2005 parliament) there is now just a safe-ish Labour seat and no realistic target for a gain in the area. Such 'collapsed sandwiches' are produced by the model in Norwich and a number of other areas.