



How pressing is the case for further equalisation of constituency electorates?

Lewis Baston

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1. Introduction

The democratic case that elected representatives should represent more or less the same number of people is both self-evident and long-standing. Indeed, demands that constituencies should be equalised, as a condition for ensuring the equality of the ballot, were first made by the Chartists 150 years ago. While the often grotesque anomalies associated with the relative sizes of early Victorian electorates have long since been eradicated, the current variations in UK constituency electorates have also been argued by some to be unjustifiable from a democratic perspective. This point is often made with reference to the two extreme ends of the variation - both na h-Eileanan an Iar and the Isle of Wight return a single MP, despite the fact that the latter has six times as many electors as the former.

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, currently making its way through Parliament, contains provisions for constituency electorates to be 'equalised' so that all fall within five per cent of a UK average of around 76,000 voters – aside from a very small number of exceptions granted to the remotest parts of Scotland (including na h-Eileanan an Iar). The Bill, which received its second reading in the House of Commons on 6 September this year and entered committee stage in the House of Lords on 30 November, also makes provisions for the referendum on the Alternative Vote in May 2011, and a reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600.

Despite its rapid progress so far through both the Commons and the Lords, the Bill has proved highly controversial within Parliament. Both the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee in the House of Commons and the House of Lords Constitution Committee have raised serious concerns about the lack of public consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny associated with the Bill. As of 1 December, the marshalled list of amendments to be moved in committee stage in the Lords runs to over 120 items. Yet, other than in a handful of mostly peripheral areas, public awareness of the likely implications of equalising constituency electorates is highly limited.

This paper therefore seeks to provide an overview of some of the key issues raised by the government's proposals, some of which are especially obvious in individual

localities. It complements a separate Democratic Audit paper, published on 15 November, examining the strength of the case for reducing the number of MPs, and has been published alongside the results of a detailed projection of the possible partisan impacts of the proposed boundary changes.

This paper is structured around five key questions in relation to the proposals to equalise constituency electorates, as follows:

- Why equalise?
- What should be equalised?
- Are there any grounds not to equalise?
- How great a problem are unequal electorates at the moment?
- Will the new system represent an improvement?

In posing these questions, the paper highlights a number of specific issues which can be illustrated with reference to particular localities in the UK – although in many cases the problem or dilemma in question will be found in a variety of other geographical areas. These place-specific problems, which appear as boxed sections of text throughout the document, are as follows:

- The KENSINGTON problem: population more than twice the electorate
- The DEVONWALL problem: territory and identity
- The ISLE OF WIGHT problem: geography
- The COVENTRY problem: 5 per cent limit too tight
- The MALDON problem: changing partners
- The NORTHERN IRELAND problem: volatile registers

2. Why equalise?

The argument that constituencies should have more or less the same number of people has impeccable democratic credentials. There are four key arguments which are made to support this proposition that there should be a reasonable degree of equality in the number of people/electors in each constituency.

- **Representation** – in a democratic country where citizens are equal, they should have access on fair and equal terms to representation in the legislature and the services offered to constituents by MPs.

- **Voting power** – the power of the individual elector in deciding an election should be equal, which is achieved by equalising constituency size.
- **Prevention of gerrymandering** – a requirement for equal sized districts prevents the use of malapportionment techniques, whereby smaller districts are created in order to secure the dominance of a particular political party.
- **Eliminating electoral bias** – even non-partisan boundary reviews may create differential constituency sizes which become associated with patterns of partisan dominance. Electoral bias will be especially evident if one party tends to win in seats with below-average electorates, while another tends to win where electorates are above average size.

In the UK context, some of these arguments are more important than others. For instance, the need to minimise scope for gerrymandering has particular relevance in the USA, but is of no real concern in the UK, where the power to draw boundaries has been taken out of political control and is instead undertaken by independent Boundary Commissions. Moreover, the arguments about voting power and electoral bias, widely used in recent UK debate, are often misleading. It is true that allowing variations that are too wide or systematic would cause inequities in both voter power and party representation. However, recent boundary reviews have largely been successful in preventing such inequities occurring as a result of electoral geography.

Indeed, the sources of voter inequality and partisan bias largely lie elsewhere. For instance, constituency size is only a relatively small component of voting power under 'first-past-the-post' elections, with the degree of marginality mattering far more. Thus, an elector who lives in an oversized, but critical, marginal has much more effective voting power than one who lives in a small safe seat. The evidence of a need to correct electoral bias in the UK is also questionable. It is true that there has been a small element of size bias towards Labour, caused by the over-representation of Wales, and the tendency for population growth to take place in Conservative rural and suburban areas. However, this element of bias is both small compared to other sources of electoral bias (such as differential turnout and vote distribution) and was reduced under the revised boundaries put in place for the 2010 General Election.¹

In the UK context, the first of the four arguments, equality of representation, is therefore probably the strongest. If an MP has significantly fewer constituents than another, this means that her constituents have better access to representation and power than others.

¹ It could be argued that the government proposals, contained in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill actually creates a small size bias, with up to three Liberal Democrat MPs and one SNP benefiting from the special treatment accorded to seats covering the Highlands and islands of Scotland.

3. What should be equalised?

Constituencies may be 'equalised' either on the basis of registered electors or on the basis of population. Where unequal voter power and partisan electoral bias are the principal concerns, then it is logical to seek to equalise the number of electors in each constituency. However, if the principal concern is to secure equality of representation, then it will be necessary to take a different direction to the approach currently proposed by the UK government. An MP represents all of his or her constituents, regardless of whether they are on the electoral register or even entitled to be on the electoral register. Resident foreign citizens, asylum applicants, children and prisoners are all entitled to the MP's constituency services and have a legitimate claim on the voice of that MP in Parliament. Equality of *population* is thus clearly an important principle, and is the basis for the highly equalised system of congressional districting in the United States.

The KENSINGTON problem: population more than twice the electorate

The size of the average constituency in England in 2007 was 71,489 in registered electors and 96,582 in population; the ratio of population to registered electors is therefore usually around 4:3.

However, there are a number of constituencies where the registered electorate is grossly out of line with the resident population. In the worst case, Kensington & Chelsea, the registered electorate is less than half the estimated population – a constituency of 62,874 electors comprised 134,717 in population. By population, the Isle of Wight (with 109,810 electors) was not Britain's largest constituency in 2007 – it was third, behind Regent's Park & Kensington North and Cities of London and Westminster.

Since the current system of boundary reviews in the UK only takes account of registered electors, the principle of equality of representation risks being compromised. Of England's 529 constituencies in 2007, there were 45 where the registered electorate comprised less than two-thirds of the local population, and eight where the proportion was less than 60 per cent. There is an obvious geographical concentration of seats where the population significantly exceeds the electorate. Twenty-six of the 45 seats with the highest population: electorate ratios were in London, and this applied to six of the top eight.

Table 1: Parliamentary Constituencies in which the electorate comprised less than 60 per cent of the estimated population, 2007

	Total registered Parliamentary electors	Estimated population	Electors as a proportion of the population
Bradford West	64,115	113,199	56.6%
Cities of London and Westminster	73,170	139,567	52.4%
Hackney North and Stoke Newington	61,802	105,013	58.9%
Hampstead and Highgate	66,902	114,396	58.5%
Holborn and St. Pancras	66,477	117,513	56.6%
Kensington and Chelsea	62,874	134,717	46.7%
Regent's Park and North Kensington	79,939	146,473	54.6%
Sheffield Central	58,857	101,043	58.2%

Source: Office of National Statistics *Mid-2007 Population Estimates for Parliamentary Constituencies in England and Wales* (2009)

At the other end of the scale, some seats have an abnormally low ratio of population to electorate, although the deviations are smaller. A total of 26 seats had more than 80 per cent of population registered, and three had more than 82 per cent registered (Christchurch, Ludlow and Poole).

There are several reasons why a constituency might have many more people than registered electors and these factors tend to coincide in inner-urban seats. First, levels of registration may be poor, generally because of the characteristics of the local population – most notably, concentrations of frequent home-movers, private tenants, second home owners, Commonwealth citizens, some ethnic groups, students and young people. These factors are evident in all metropolitan areas, but particularly in inner-London. Second, constituencies with an unusually high proportion of the population aged below 18 will have a lower proportion of the population on the register. This pattern is found in several constituencies in inner cities, most notably the two inner Birmingham seats (Ladywood, Sparkbrook & Small Heath), and also seats such as Slough and Bradford West. Third, some constituencies have large numbers of residents who are ineligible to vote (non-UK, Commonwealth or Irish citizens, as well as prisoners) will therefore have a bigger gap between population and electorate. With one or two exceptions, such differences are again most evident in inner-London.

Using population as a basis for drawing districts would be more philosophically coherent, but would arguably also constitute a major departure from past UK practice. A viable compromise may be to amend the Bill to take account of population in a manner

analogous to the land area constraint which it already contains.² With a 4:3 ratio of people to electors, the average constituency will have around 101,000 in population. A suitable point to restrict population might be somewhere between an upper limit of 114,000 (three people per two electors) and 126,700 (five people per three electors). The number of constituencies affected would then be between about 6 and 40 or so. Its principal effect would be to redress the under-representation of London's population (particularly inner London) under electorate-based districting.

4. Are there any grounds not to equalise?

It should be noted that strict equality of constituency electorates is not the goal of the proposed legislation. Indeed, while virtually nobody would seek to defend district boundaries that were randomly or systematically highly unequal, just as few would wish to argue for absolutely equal electorates of, say, 76,000 electors each.

The Bill provides for a strict rule (except for the defined special cases) that constituencies must be within 5 per cent of the UK quota, and thus avoids the trap of an absolute prioritisation of numerical equality.³ Furthermore, once that criterion has been met there is no further priority to equalising numbers. Thus, there is no indication in the Bill that a scheme with an average deviation of 0.1 per cent from quota is to be preferred to one that has an average deviation of 4.9 per cent.

Once we accept that absolute equality in the number of electors is not the objective, a number of issues are raised. What should be the extent of permitted variation from the quota? Should equalisation be the only, or main, criterion, or will some weight also be given to other factors? Should specific variables, such as land-mass, be permitted to 'trump' the equality criterion in particular cases. Should equalisation of electorates in the lower chamber be counter-balanced via recognition of other criteria of representation in the second chamber? We consider each of these sets of issues in turn below.

(i) Defining common-sense limits of equalisation

² The Bill currently exempts seats of more than 12,000km² from equalisation and bans those of more than 13,000km²

³ While prioritising equality of numbers over all else prevents malapportionment, it also creates opportunities for other forms of gerrymandering. If one is permitted to ignore physical and administrative geography in pursuit of numerical equality, the way is opened for carefully calibrated districts that achieve purposes such as biasing the electoral system towards a party, or making it almost impossible to dislodge incumbents. This is widely practised in the United States, which combines strict equality rules with blatant and ludicrous partisan gerrymandering.

There are three or four questions which need to be posed in relation to the limits of equalisation in practice:

- What to do about the anomalies – islands, sparsely populated and grossly overpopulated areas? With 600 or so MPs, tolerating a few exceptional cases may not have much overall effect on the fairness of the system (although it is contrary to the strict premise of equalisation).
- How to define equality of numbers for the normal cases – what margin of variation around the mean is to be permitted? While the Bill proposes 5 per cent, many opponents of the Bill would argue that 10 per cent would allow more sensible constituency boundaries to be drawn.
- To what extent should differentials between populations and electorates be taken into account? As we have noted, equalising on the basis of electorates can result in constituencies with wide variations in population. However, if equalisation were to be based principally on population figures, wider variations in electorates would need to be permitted.
- Is the available data robust enough to enable equalisation within narrow bands? In practice, the ‘registered electorate’ in almost any locality is a number which is incomplete and unstable. Such problems are likely to become more apparent in the next few years with the introduction of ‘individual voter registration’ (see below). We should not try to be more precise than the available data actually permits.

The ISLE OF WIGHT problem: geography

The Isle of Wight is the largest constituency by number of electors in the UK, with around 110,000 electors. It is not connected to the mainland except by ferries. There are three broad possibilities: it can have one large constituency (as at present), two small constituencies (as technically entitled, but unwanted by islanders, at the last boundary revision), or a seat straddling a ferry crossing. None of the feasible options - ‘Southsea & Ryde’, ‘Southampton Central & Cowes’ and ‘Lymington & West Wight’ – constitutes anything like a natural constituency, but one or other is required under the Bill.

(ii) Giving weight to criteria other than electorate/population

Equality of size is clearly a desirable quality in a system of drawing legislative districts, but there are other criteria to be considered.

- **Geography:** the existence of obvious geographical anomalies has already been alluded to. The current Bill could be argued to be arbitrary in its treatment of

such cases, since it recognises some claims to special treatment on grounds of geography but not others. Thus, two island seats (na h-Eileanan an Iar; Orkney and Shetland) are protected, but the Bill denies this to the Isle of Wight, which is disconnected from the mainland, and Anglesey (which admittedly has bridges). The Bill also proposes that equality of numbers should override physical and social geography, thus allowing, in principle, cross-estuary seats in the Mersey, Humber, Severn, Tamar and Ribble areas.

- **Navigability:** Even without such extreme cases, common sense demands that a constituency should be contiguous (preferably contiguous by road, a criterion violated by one or two seats such as Rossendale & Darwen even now) and ideally 'compact' in geographical terms such as drive-time.
- **Respect of territorial boundaries:** the Bill retains the ban on constituencies that have parts of more than one component nation of the UK, and gives a strong and welcome hint to the Boundary Commission for England that it should have regard to and preferably not cross the regional boundaries.
- **Administrative clarity:** must play a part as well, in that a constituency that keeps whole wards and crosses as few important local government boundaries as possible is to be preferred to one that bears no relation to the rest of the administrative map.
- **Affective loyalty:** is important but difficult to quantify. The constituency link is often held to be one of the strengths of the House of Commons, but this works best when there is a real entity rather than a geographic abstraction for the MP to represent. The roots of parliamentary representation are in representation of communities rather than individuals – boroughs and counties sent MPs to parliament, no electors. Although democracy means taking numbers of individuals seriously, the role of representing a community is still an important one.
- **Stability over time:** is also an important criterion in assessing a 'good' system of constituency boundaries, although in single member seats it conflicts somewhat with equality of numbers.
- **Representation of minorities:** minorities are also entitled to representation in a national parliament, and boundaries should not be drawn in a way as to hinder their representation (a philosophy underlying the Voting Rights Act in the United States).

The DEVONWALL problem: territory and identity

The 'Devonwall' problem is where the arithmetic and geography demand the violation of a boundary that has a very strong basis in community identity. The difference between Cornwall and Devon is long-established and clear, but the Bill's boundary rules will involve a constituency that straddles this frontier. The two parts of the constituency will never gel properly. As David Cameron observed, the Tamar is not the Amazon, but representation is about the communities that people feel and live in, and local identities are important. It seems oddly centralist and non-conservative to disrespect these feelings.

There have been protests already, supported by all the Cornish MPs and the local authority, that Cornwall should be kept whole. While it is an extreme case, the Bill risks similar unpopularity in other areas, rather like the rationalist imposition of the Heath-Walker local government reforms in 1972-74 – anyone proposing a 'Luton West & Dunstable' seat would be well advised to stay away from Dunstable, for instance.

(iii) Issues raised by the land-area constraint

The Bill proposes (Rule 4) to prohibit constituencies of more than 13,000km², and to exempt constituencies of more than 12,000km² from the electorate equality rule. As highlighted above, it is clearly reasonable to take physical geography into account in boundary determination (although it is contradictory to the broad philosophy outlined by the Bill's authors). However, in doing so in several special cases the Bill raises a number of questions.

1. Upon what criteria did the government base their thresholds for land area? What discussions took place, and between whom, that resulted in the choice of these figures rather than any other thresholds? Were there any studies conducted that suggested that these were the limits of an area that an MP should be able to represent?
2. The information on the land area of constituencies and wards appears not to be readily available. It would have assisted the scrutiny of this Bill and discussion thereof if such figures (at least in cases that raised the possibility of the land area constraint applying) had been produced so that it is clear what was being proposed.
3. The land area constraint, *prima facie*, seems to mostly affect northern Scotland. Sub-quota seats are to be allowed to persist in the Highlands. But the allocation

of the 598 seats (leaving aside the two island exceptions) is done initially by nation of the UK, meaning that perhaps the entire burden of allowing seats with large land area but small electorate will be borne by having larger electorates in urban Scottish seats.

(iv) Defining representation in second chambers

Many constitutional systems recognise the balance between population and the different national or sub-national entities within a state through using different philosophies of representation in a bicameral system for each house, and having strong powers for the second chamber. In this way, elected second chambers often have a territorial dimension to their composition that balances the principle of equalisation in lower houses.

The extreme example is the United States, with a rigidly population-based House and a Senate with practically equal powers where California (population 37 million) has the same representation as Wyoming (population 544,000). The same pattern is also to be found in the powerful elected Senate in Australia, and to some extent the indirectly elected Bundesrat in Germany (states with fewer than 2 million inhabitants have three members each, while those with over 7 million inhabitants have six members each).

It is significant that the highly equalised lower house boundaries in Australia and the United States are accompanied by strong second chambers which are anything but equalised in terms of seats per elector. In neither state is arithmetic equality considered a sole basis for representation in the national legislature. Small states in the US are particularly powerful because of the composition and power of the Senate.

The Bill proposes adopting only one half of the American/ Australian philosophy. The powers of the second chamber in the UK are very weak by comparison with those countries, and the current unelected body is clearly not capable of performing the same balancing role within the UK's current, quasi-federal political system. Whether a reformed upper House could play such a role is currently unclear, since proposals for an elected second chamber have yet to be put forward by the current UK government.

5. How great a problem are unequal electorates at the moment?

While the current Rules of Redistribution include provisions to seek more equalised electorates, the Boundary Commissions are not currently tasked by a specific goal of ensuring this is realised in practice. The current Rules for Redistribution were codified

in 1986 (but have been effective since an important amendment in 1958).⁴ These rules did not establish an order of priority between the different Rules, meaning that the Boundary Commissions' instructions were logically inconsistent. In practice, the Commissions satisfied, not following any of the Rules precisely but getting 'near enough' on them all (although the margin of tolerance on the number of seats in Great Britain under Rule 1 became stretched). With successive reviews, the Commissions tended to put a higher priority on equality of registered electorate and a lower one on respecting local government boundaries (even though local authorities became larger in successive reorganisations). As a result, the Commissions have managed to get closer to equality in successive reviews under current rules.

Past reviews highlighted a number of variables affecting equality, including:

- The allocation of constituencies to the component parts of the UK – the reduction of Scottish representation in 2005 and on a smaller scale the increase in Northern Ireland representation in 1983 both brought the standard deviation down.
- The length of time since enumeration – the Commissions work from data that may be quite old before the first election under new boundaries, as with the 2010 electorates that were based on figures from 2000, or the 1974 electorates based on figures from 1965 (that did not include 18-21 year olds who gained the vote in 1969).
- Commission policy – for instance, London seats became more equal in size after 1997 because the Commission decided that constituencies that crossed London borough boundaries would be acceptable in some circumstances.

Evidence that greater equalisation has been achieved over time is presented in table 2, which provides the standard deviations⁵ for seat sizes at general elections since 1950. The UK figure is affected by the differences in treatment of the nations of the UK (Northern Ireland had large seats before 1983, Scotland had small seats before 2005, and Wales still has small seats) while the English figure is a clearer reflection of the effects of Commission policy and population movement. The standard deviation figures are given as raw numbers and also as units, with the average size in each election standardised at 100. Broadly, 95 per cent of seats are within 2 standard deviations of the mean. The standard deviation of the electorate size of a model for Welsh seats conforming to the government's Bill is unit 2.1.

⁴ The original post-war rules on redistribution contained a rigid arithmetical rule, albeit with a very large permitted deviation of 25 per cent, but this was abandoned in 1958 when the interval between reviews was extended and a higher priority than before given to 'organic' criteria of community.

⁵ Standard deviation is a measure of how 'spread out' a set of data is – a small standard deviation indicates that most of the values are bunched fairly close together, i.e. in this context 'equal'.

Table 2: Standard deviation of seat size at elections since 1950

	UK		England	
	SD number	SD unit	SD number	SD unit
1950	9,249	16.8	8,431	15.0
1951	9,513	17.0	8,680	15.2
1955	8,678	15.7	7,508	13.3
1959	9,789	17.4	8,703	15.2
1964	11,171	20.7	10,831	18.6
1966	12,888	22.6	11,966	20.4
1970	16,841	26.9	15,930	24.8
1974	13,338	21.3	12,081	18.8
1979	15,496	23.9	14,540	21.9
1983	8,434	13.0	6,870	10.2
1987	9,536	14.4	8,222	11.9
1992	10,717	16.1	9,611	14.0
1997	7,961	12.0	5,852	8.5
2001	8,560	12.7	6,539	9.4
2005	8,485	12.4	7,481	10.7
2010	7,809	11.1	6,205	8.6

Figure 1 presents these standard deviations (in unit terms) of constituency size since 1950 (the October 1974 election is excluded). The broad pattern is clear – that constituencies have been getting more equal in size since the late 1970s.

Figure 1: Unit standard deviation of seat size 1950-2010

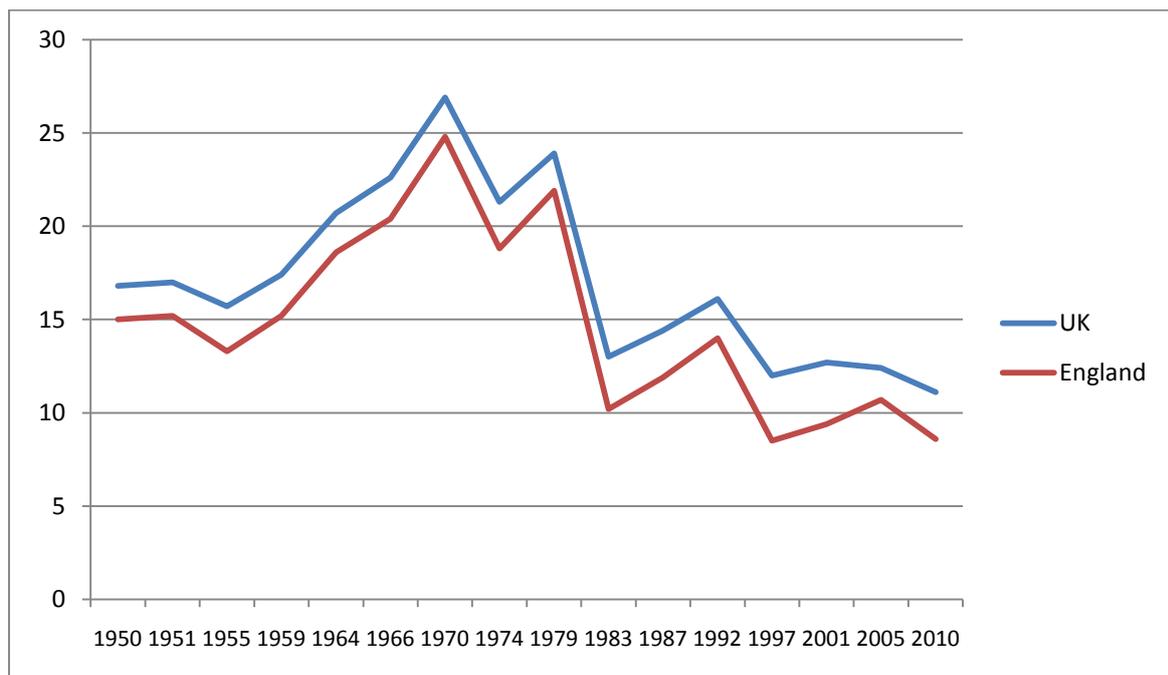
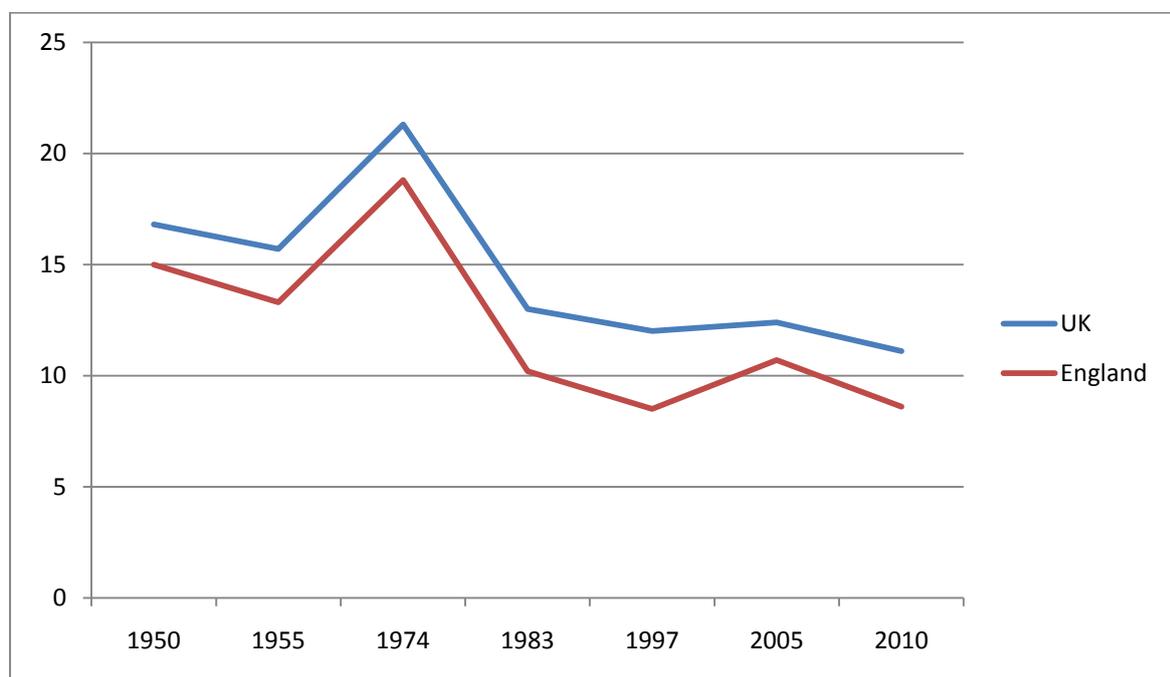


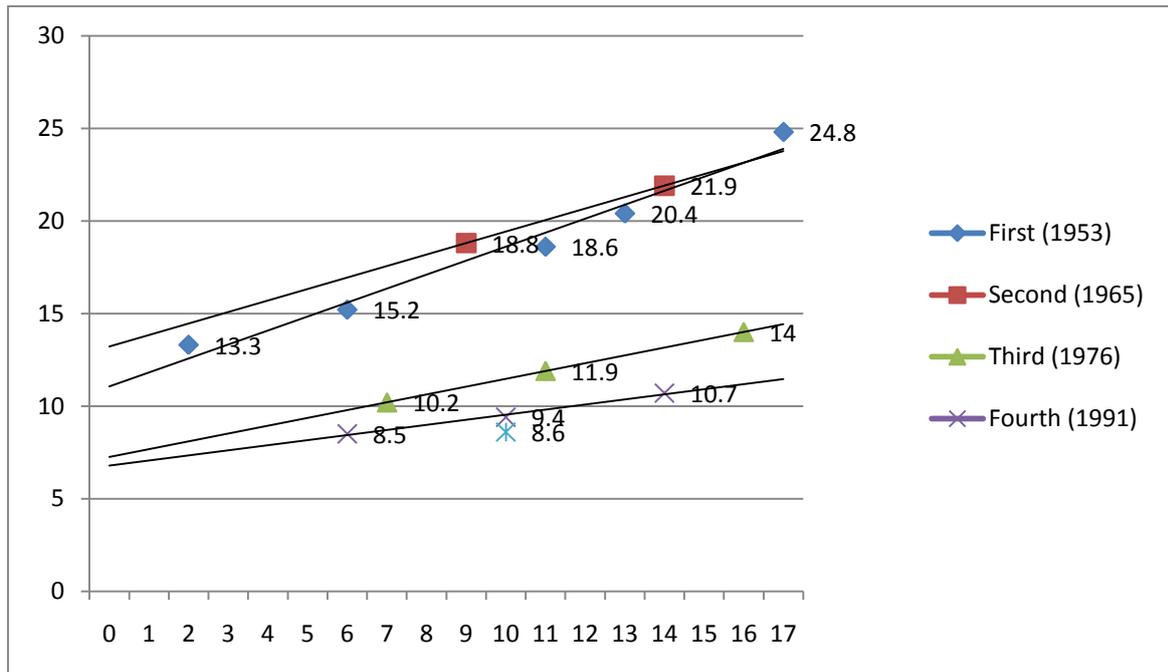
Figure 2 presents the same data for election years when new boundaries were introduced (including the Scotland-only boundary changes in 2005 but not the extra Milton Keynes seat in 1992). Again, this chart illustrates the trend for successive reviews to produce more equalised results. The major exception is 1974, and this is explicable in terms of the delayed implementation of the review (it was ready in 1969 but not used in the 1970 election), the differing franchise in 1974 from the enumeration date in 1965, and the impact of substantial population movement during this period.

Figure 2: Unit standard deviation in constituency size after redistributions, 1950-2010



Between boundary changes (and between the enumeration date and the boundaries coming into operation), the electorate of constituencies does tend to drift away from equal size. However, it seems clear – contrary to received opinion – that the drift of population is slower than it was between 1945 and 1974 (and for that matter between 1918 and 1945). What is probably happening is that more of it is now self-cancelling, in that rapid movements in urban areas involve inflows and outflows, rather than as in previous decades one-way flows of population caused by planned decentralisation from major cities to new towns and the more general dynamics of suburbanisation.

Figure 3: Drift from equality between redistributions 1955-2010



Standard Deviation of electorate of English seats, by year since enumeration (expressed as percentage of mean).

The slowing-down of population movement is clear from figure 3 – the steeper slope of the lines for the 1950s and 1960s indicates the rapid growth and shrinkage of different constituencies, as compared with the flatter lines of more recent years.

6. Will the new system represent an improvement?

It seems reasonable to assume that, under the new rules, there will be a greater notional equality of electorates – reflected in a further narrowing of the standard deviation – and that more frequent reviews will ensure that the drift from equality over time is minimised. However, the new provisions also raise two key sets of concerns. First, the frequency of reviews necessary to maintain constituency electorates at +/- 5 per cent from the mean is likely to be highly disruptive. Second, the volatility of the electoral registers, especially given the planned acceleration of individual elector registration, is likely to have significant effects on future boundary mapping.

(i) The frequency of boundary reviews

Boundary reviews are disruptive to MPs in particular, but also to political and community organisations and a source of confusion to electors. An over-frequent cycle of reviews (such as the one per parliament proposed in the Bill) combined with a very precise numerical definition of equality will produce constantly shifting boundaries.

With at least some fluctuations in registered electorate caused not by 'real' population movements but by administrative issues with the register and the resources local authorities have available to register electors, it is a recipe for instability.

It is worth adding that the quality of representation may suffer, because MPs will have weaker incentives to work hard in serving constituents in areas which are being transferred out of their constituency at the end of the parliament.

The need for frequent boundary reviews could anyway be argued to be less pressing than it was in past decades. The level of inequality of size apparent at the 2010 election does not indicate any urgent problems with the generality of seats – rather the contrary, as the standard deviation of constituency size in the UK was its lowest on record. The difference in size between the average Labour and average Conservative constituency was also the smallest since 1959, indicating that size differences did not play an important part in affecting partisan electoral outcomes in 2010.

The general trend to more equal outcomes in successive boundary reviews, and slower net population change between reviews, suggest that more can be accomplished to move towards the goal of equal size without the disruption, hurry and expense of a special boundary review during this parliament (and every parliament thereafter). **A fairly minor, consensual redrawing of the Rules under the existing legislative framework could have accomplished a lot of what the government is attempting to do with this Bill.** A small Bill could codify the Commission's rule of thumb of permitting 10 per cent variation and give that higher priority than the other Rules, and the government could get the size of the House of Commons down a bit without legislation by encouraging the Commissions to take Rule 1 (setting the number of MPs from Great Britain at 613) more seriously. It is only haste, that seems driven by political calculation, that is causing these options not to be considered.

A wider range of toleration of size differences would not involve (as a rigid 5 per cent does) violating established community identities in order to correct relatively small size differences. A 10 per cent threshold would allow, except in the case of the Isle of Wight which could be a permitted exception, all English seats to be composed as at present from a single county (or unitary plus 'parent' county), although Wiltshire and Cornwall are both very close to the threshold.

It would be far simpler to tolerate a bit more than 5 per cent deviation from the quota in circumstances like those pertaining in Coventry.

The COVENTRY problem: 5 per cent limit too tight

The city of Coventry currently has three constituencies, with electorates of 73,035 (North East), 72,871 (North West) and 73,652 (South) as of 6 May 2010. With a quota of 76,000, Coventry is entitled to 2.88 seats, which because of the fortuitously even distribution of electors in each seat means that none of them quite hits the floor of 72,200 electors for the permitted 5 per cent deviation. As it stands, Coventry's seats could be left alone at the boundary review. However, it is quite possible that when the precise figures are available in December (for Coventry electorates and the overall quota) a seat might have fallen just below the 5 per cent threshold and the current neat, 3-seat pattern using complete wards, will not be possible.

It might, however, still be possible to reach an internal solution within Coventry's boundaries if a small area – and we are talking about possibly as few as 1,000 electors – were detached from, say, South to allow North West to attain the right number without their loss dragging South under the threshold. To shave slivers off large wards (Coventry wards have around 12,000 electors) and attach them to different constituencies seems a pointlessly disruptive and irritating procedure to achieve a minor improvement in arithmetic equality at the moment of enumeration. Because registration numbers fluctuate, this confusing imposition on the residents of the area concerned might not be necessary if one were to use the figures from six months previously or one year later.

The other possibility with Coventry is for it to annex territory from neighbouring areas. To one side there is Solihull borough, whose wards themselves have 9,000 electors and whose neighbouring ward to Coventry (Meriden) is not particularly connected to the city. To the north, the city constituencies could annexe the Exhall area of Bedworth, but this would disrupt constituencies in north Warwickshire quite severely (probably causing the division of Nuneaton town between two seats). Or there are some rural wards such as Stoneleigh and Ryton-on-Dunsmore that could be added, although these border South and a divided ward in Coventry city would be the consequence.

Precise equality without carving slices (large or, as in the Coventry example, tiny) from city wards will tend to mean that at the edges of urban areas low-population rural

wards are added when the size of metropolitan wards is too big (and arithmetically inconvenient) to form whole constituencies.

The implications, and indeed the intentions, of this consequence of the policy need to be examined. It will often mean combining areas across important and well-recognised administrative boundaries (in this case, between Coventry and Warwickshire) and sometimes grouping communities with very little in common – quite often rural and small town areas adjoining cities have a strong sense of distinct identity which they wish to preserve, even if it means being in slightly larger county constituencies. A systematic policy of diluting urban seats with rural electors is a very likely consequence of this approach to boundary drawing, and that would be deeply contentious.

The MALDON problem: changing partners

The little Essex town of Maldon, best known for sea salt, has an unfortunate history with its parliamentary representation. It is much too small for a seat entirely of its own, and has found itself switched around nearly every time boundaries have been redrawn.

1955-74: Although the seat was called Maldon, it contained Braintree and Witham.

1974-83: Maldon combined with surrounding rural area.

1983-97: Maldon combined with some southern wards of Colchester town and the rural area between them.

1997-2010: Maldon combined with some eastern wards of Chelmsford town plus the rural area between them.

2010: Maldon combined with rural eastern Chelmsford and South Woodham Ferrers

2015: Maldon combined with Kelvedon and southern rural Colchester?

The Ochil & South Perthshire constituency is another example of a much-redistributed area – its MP Gordon Banks commented in his maiden speech in 2005 that the component towns and villages have been in 11 different constituencies since 1918. Some of its villages have changed partners more often than someone dancing ‘Strip the Willow’.

(ii) The volatility of the electoral registers

It is clear from recent research on electoral registration that the completeness, accuracy and stability of the electoral registers have deteriorated considerably since the 1980s, particularly in urban areas.⁶ The stability and completeness of the registers is likely to deteriorate further in the years to come. Social and administrative change have both destabilised the idea of a definite 'size' to a constituency based on electoral registration. Fluctuations caused by demographic or administrative factors can easily lead to electorate numbers varying by more than the government's chosen range of 5 per cent. Since the boundary review process will be based on the December 2010 electoral registers, there is every chance that the more 'equalised' constituencies in 2015 will come to exhibit greater variations in the number of electors than among the constituencies they will be replacing. It is perverse to insist at this moment on closer arithmetic perfection than ever before.

Broad social change has made it more difficult to maintain complete and accurate electoral registers than in the past. The extent of population turnover in the large cities – especially London – is on a scale that is unfamiliar. The proportion of people for whom family and residential circumstances are complicated, or for whom English is a second language, has increased (again unevenly between areas). Public attitudes have also shifted. People are less willing to comply with official demands to fill in forms and less willing to answer their door or telephone.

The emerging evidence about the state of the electoral registers is particularly important because the proposals involve both reducing the number of constituencies and equalising the number of electors in each. There are significant concentrations of seats with smaller electorates in a number of metropolitan areas. Given existing registration levels, it would appear inevitable that these areas will 'lose' representation relative to other areas. Yet, based on existing evidence about local variations in registration levels, it is clearly conceivable that a successful registration drive could add tens of thousands of electors in individual metropolitan areas. For example, the registered electorate in Glasgow rose by 36,000 (8 per cent) in the year to December 2010.⁷ Such a scenario would be likely to bring a number of constituencies with smaller electorates significantly closer to the arithmetic mean. This could, in turn, have profound implications for the outcomes of the boundary review process.

The nature of electoral registration has changed considerably since the last boundary review started in February 2000, with particularly significant changes being the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in Northern Ireland in 2002 and

⁶ The Electoral Commission (2010) *Completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain*, London: Electoral Commission.

⁷ <http://www.williebain.com/2010/12/william-bain-mp-welcomes-big-increase-in-voter-registration-in-glasgow-during-deputy-pm-questions/>

the extension of the deadline for voter registration to 11 days before poll from 2006: the register grew by 700,000 between December 2009 and the May 2010 election.⁸

Electoral registration will continue to change. One problem in the next few years is money. Compiling electoral registers is a local government responsibility. Funds for electoral registration are not ring-fenced and because it is not a ‘front-line’ service it may be hard for councillors to avoid cutting its budgets – particularly if there is acute social need in their areas and attaining a near-complete register is difficult.

The biggest change will be the introduction of IER in the rest of the UK, in time for the 2015 General Election. IER is in itself an extremely complex public sector IT programme, and if done thoroughly will require extensive data sharing in government and an assertive outreach programme to find voters. Many countries with similar methods of electoral registration have either compulsory identity cards or a system of population registration; neither of these will be available in Britain. IER done properly will be expensive. IER done on the cheap will be disastrous for levels of electoral registration.

Figure 4: Average registered electorate in Northern Ireland constituencies by category

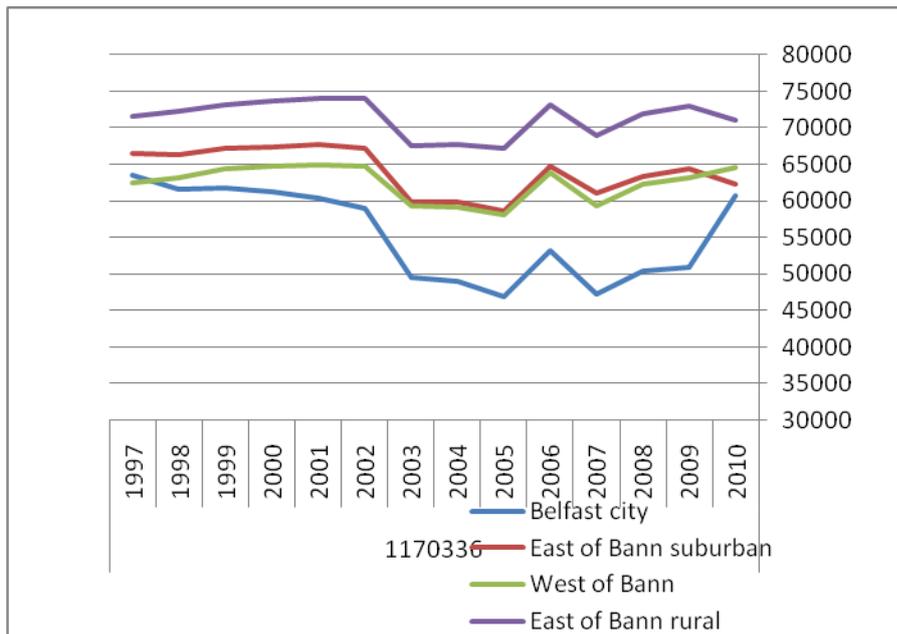


Table based on statistics from the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland, accessed May 2010. Categories: Belfast city – 4 Belfast seats. East of Bann suburban – Lagan Valley, South Antrim, East Antrim, North Down. East of Bann rural – Strangford, South Down, North Antrim, Newry & Armagh, Upper Bann.

⁸ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/100702/Report-on-the-administration-of-the-2010-UK-general-election.pdf

The introduction of IER in Northern Ireland has had two consequences which render registered electorate a dubious basis for strict equalisation in future. One is that there was a sharp initial drop in the registered electorate. While some of this reflected fraudulent or dead names dropping out, Electoral Commission research showed that the proportion of the eligible population registered dropped from 94.4 per cent to 85.1 per cent in 2002. Under-registration was worst among young people, with only 71 per cent of people aged 18-24 on the register.⁹ IER has also made the size of the registered electorate more volatile, as the chart below shows, with the decline and subsequent volatility being most pronounced in the large city, Belfast (although the upward spike in 2010 reflects boundary changes as well as actual registration).

It is beyond doubt that differences in the levels of electoral registration already cause some distortion in the representation of different regions, particularly the under-representation of London. Applying a rigid standard can only worsen this. As table 4 shows, if the current rules had been in force in 2002, the fluctuations in the completeness of the registers associated with IER would have reduced Northern Ireland's entitlement from 16 to 14, with England picking up the two seats, and fluctuations since then would have caused unstable boundaries and radical reviews in more than one nation of the UK.

Table 4: Entitlement to parliamentary seats by nation, 2001- under proposed rules

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
England	499	500	502	502	500	502	501	502	503
Wales	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Scotland	55	54	54	54	54	54	54	53	52
N Ireland	16	16	14	14	16	14	15	15	15

The electoral registration system will be placed under unprecedented strain over the next few years and this could result in inadequate, systematically uneven and widely fluctuating electoral registration totals.

⁹ http://www.nio.gov.uk/electoral_registration_in_northern_ireland_-_consultation_paper.pdf

THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM: volatile registers

Since IER was introduced in 2002, electoral registration in Northern Ireland has been more volatile than in Great Britain, with the result that its entitlement under the rules proposed in the government's Bill has fluctuated up and down. Equity between the different parts of the UK in parliamentary registration, as well as unnecessary disruptive boundary reviews, can result purely from administrative factors.

7. Conclusion

While nobody would seriously deny the importance of some degree of equalisation of the size of parliamentary seats, there are legitimate questions of principle and practicality about the government's proposal to require all but a few constituencies to come within 5 per cent either side of the standard size (save for a few exceptional cases in Scotland), even leaving aside the intention to implement it with undue haste.

The case in principle is easier to make for equalising constituencies on the basis of population, as in the United States, than registered electorate, but there is also room for accepting a few more cases as exceptional (such as heavily populated constituencies and islands) and allowing wider margins of tolerance than 5 per cent so that constituencies can be a better fit with physical and administrative geography, and with communities that the electorate can recognise.

The number of registered electors has become an unstable and unreliable number in the last couple of decades, and the next few years will be unprecedentedly difficult for electoral registration because of cost constraints and the introduction of individual registration. It seems a particularly unsuitable time to be insisting on the absolute priority of numbers of electors at one arbitrary point in time above all other considerations of boundary drawing.

An alternative and more considered approach which avoids some of these problems would have been possible, but the government has chosen to ignore alternatives to its chosen scheme.