

POLICY IMPACT WORKING PAPER SERIES

WORKING PAPER NO. 1

**DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC POLICY**
Business & Law

FOREWORD

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De Montfort University's Department of Public Policy presents here the first report in a new Policy Impact Working Paper Series, which will explore and analyse government policy initiatives and a wide range of policy problems and solutions.

The first report examines two aspects of the Coalition Government's reform agenda: the shift from household voter registration to Individual electoral registration; and, the equalisation of Parliamentary boundaries and reduction in the number of Parliamentary seats. Any change to the nature of the governing process will be of public concern, but no more so than how we ensure our right to vote and the relationship we have with the MPs we elect. With the 'Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill' progressing through the House of Commons, the paper is a timely contribution to what will be a series of important Parliamentary and public debates, the results of which will have far-reaching consequences for the way in which Britain is governed and represented.

Further Policy Impact Papers, from De Montfort University's Public Policy Department, will follow this one; each paper will focus on key and specific aspects of the public policy landscape and offer a critical analysis of policy proposals as they emerge. The Policy Impact Working Paper Series will provide insights to and understanding of complex policy problems and make a contribution to contemporary policy debates.

The first working paper, Aspects of the Coalition Government's Political Reform Agenda: Voter Registration and Electoral Boundaries, has been jointly prepared with Sheffield University and displays our strong working relationship.



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Aspects of the Coalition Government's Political Reform Agenda: Voter Registration and Electoral Boundaries

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(The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Kerry McCaughie, research assistant in the Department of Public Policy at DMU, for her hard work in conducting the research on which the paper is based).

Summary

The report explores the Government's plans to speed up the move to individual electoral registration (IER), to equalise Parliamentary constituencies and reduce the number seats in the House of Commons.

The current system of household electoral registration is seen to be understandable, publicly trusted, well run and produces high levels of register accuracy and completeness, often attributed to the annual canvass. Accuracy and completeness however, are not comprehensive and research by the Electoral Commission uncovered inaccuracies which indicate that the register reflects wider and more general patterns of under-representation or disengagement in society. In 2000 Commission estimates suggested some 3.5 million people were unregistered.

IER was introduced in Northern Ireland by the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 and displays here some of the consequences that could flow from its introduction across the UK. There was a decline in registration of some 10% between the last Northern Ireland household register of August 2002 and the first IER register of December 2002. While the decline was not all attributable to IER a pattern emerged that saw greatest under-registration occurring amongst:

- Young people
- People living in areas of high social deprivation
- People with disabilities.

Without significant safeguards being introduced and without a more forceful, proactive approach to registration, with the state taking responsibility for ensuring people are registered, it is likely that, at least initially, there will be a decline in registration which will be most marked amongst:

- Younger voters (18-25)
- Ethnic minorities (although not evenly across ethnic background)
- People in areas of high social deprivation
- People with disabilities
- Private tenants
- Residents with short (less than one year) length of tenure.

Research undertaken in local government which explores the ratio between the size of the electorate and the number of councillors found considerable variations, in excess of the Electoral Commission's +/- 5% criteria.

- Generally, district councils have fewer electors per councillor and therefore better representative ratios
- There are progressively higher ratios for unitary authorities and London Boroughs
- Metropolitan boroughs have most electors per councillor

What the research went on to suggest is that as ethnic minority populations tend to be concentrated in more urban councils and as those councils tend to have higher elector to councillor ratios, under-representation occurs. A key finding from the research was however, that there is no strong and systematic relationship between ethnicity and under and over-representation in local government.

Boundary reviews present an opportunity to consider the nature of representation and as the debate is shifting towards representation as a descriptive process, rather than a reflection of political views alone, boundary changes could secure a more

descriptive chamber. US literature shows that this approach comes with a cost and that a more inclusive politics has greater potential benefits to overall, long-term, patterns of representation than boundary changes. Local government experience shows that it is not so much equal size that is the problem, but the size of representative units. Equal size, but smaller and with more representatives would assist in reducing the problem of under-representation, yet that would demand a call for more not fewer politicians.

The Government's call for fewer MPs and equal size constituencies is based on a powerful rhetoric, but one with flaws. Moreover, the Government is pursuing a course in shaping the review process which has inconsistencies. The principle of one person, one vote, one value has been violated by exceptions granted in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The truncated timescale for the boundary reviews, while reflecting the tendency amongst all governments to secure partisan advantage by altering the pace of reviews, makes securing equalisation by the Commissions very difficult. The review process will lack the structure of past reviews as local boundaries are subordinate to the principle of equalisation and as co-terminosity becomes a major casualty of the process; equalisation will override respect for almost every other political boundary so that each Boundary Commission will have to consider each sub-unit in relation to all other sub-units. Considerable disruption to the review process and the constituency map of the UK will result. Removing the provisions for public inquiries conflicts with the notion of a 'big society' of engaged and responsible citizens able to challenge and question boundary proposals.

There are two aspects of the redistribution of seats which are likely to benefit the Conservative Party: a shift in representation from Wales and Scotland towards England; and, within England a shift from urban to rural areas. Yet, such changes do reflect general patterns of population movement.

Politically, the Government's approach to IER and constituency equalisation is a curate's egg, but one based on a political rhetoric which has a resonance in a neo-liberal discourse orthodoxy, where the proposals can be seen as fair, reasonable and based on individual responsibility. Yet, the contradictions inherent in the current proposals are clear and undermine the certainty and speed with which the Government is acting. The issues set out in this summary are explored in detail in the rest of the report.

Introduction

The report examines two aspects of the Coalition Government's political reform agenda:

- 'Speeding up the implementation of individual voter registration'
- 'The creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies' (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.27).

The Political Parties and Elections Act 2009 made it possible to move towards a system of individual electoral registration (IER), where each individual is responsible for identifying themselves for registration. The Deputy Prime Minister reaffirmed in the Commons that the Government want to 'improve the accuracy of the [electoral] register by 'speeding up the introduction of individual electoral registration in Great Britain' (Hansard 27 July 2010). The report also considers the rules for boundary reviews and how these might affect the process of equalisation.

The report contains and presents a review of a range of relevant research reports and the material contained therein, which is then set out and explored; references to academic literature are included where these are appropriate and relevant. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Local Government Boundary Commission and the Electoral Commission and these inform the discussion in the report. Indeed, much of the relevant research presented and considered in the report has been conducted by the Electoral Commission itself and this report draws on and displays that valuable and well researched material.

The first section of the report considers what is known about individual voter registration; the second explores the lessons that can be drawn from electoral boundary reviews using local government experience; and the third section considers the factors emerging from the debates around constituency boundaries for the UK Parliament as a result of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 22 July 2010.

Section One: Voter Registration

The system of electoral registration has remained largely unchanged since the Victorian period. It is one of the only systems in the world not based on individual electoral registration (IER). Rather, one person in each household, the head of household, is responsible for registering everyone living at a particular address. The Political Parties and Elections Act 2009, however, made it possible to move towards a system of individual electoral registration (IER), where each individual is responsible for registering themselves. The Electoral Commission anticipate that IER could replace household registration by 2015 (Electoral Commission, 2010). The Commission itself recognised that initially, at least, a shift to IER could lead to a decrease in registration levels, but that over time, the levels of registration would improve as the new approach stabilised (Electoral Commission, 2003).

Household Registration

Advocates of the retention of the current system of household registration point out that it is well known, trusted, its costs, management and administration are well quantified and that it produces high levels of completeness and accuracy of the register. Moreover, the annual canvass, which has traditionally been followed up with personal household calls, is an effective way of maximising registration (Electoral Commission, 2003).

The robustness of the current register has been tested by the Electoral Commission in its own research (2010) which involved a range of national data sources and case studies in eight local authorities across Great Britain. The main findings of the Commission's research were that:

- The completeness of the electoral register remains broadly similar to comparative countries, but there may be widening local and regional variations in registration levels
- While there is no straightforward relationship between population density and the state of local registers, the lowest rates of completeness and accuracy were found in the two most densely populated case study areas, with the most mobile populations (Glasgow and Lambeth)
- Recent social, economic and political changes appear to have resulted in a declining motivation to register among specific social groups
- The annual canvass continues, on the whole, to be an effective way to update the registration details of electors; but rolling registration has not prevented the completeness and accuracy of the registers declining between annual canvasses
- Under-registration and inaccuracy are closely associated with the social groups most likely to move home and is notably higher than average among 17–24 year olds (56% not registered), private sector tenants (49%) and black and minority ethnic (BME) British residents (31%)

It is clear from the Commission's own findings that while the current system is comprehensive and accurate, it is not free from under or incorrect registration. Indeed, it appears that inaccuracies existing indicate that the electoral register reflects wider and more general patterns of under-representation or disengagement found amongst:

- Younger people
- BME communities
- Private rented tenants

- Those with periods of residency up to one year.

The Electoral Commission's (2005) estimates, using ONS data, of non-registration amongst various groups are shown in table one, as follows:

Table 1: Non-Registration by Ethnic background.

Group	% not registered	Base
Black Caribbean	9	225
Black African	37	116
Black other	24	46*
Indian	6	413
Pakistani	8	220
Bangladeshi	6	63*
Chinese	30	80*
Other/mixed	33	299
Ethnic minority (all)	17	1,462
White	6	21,648

Source: ONS (study sample, England and Wales). Note: *small base sizes:

The same report found that the 52% of non-registrants in 2000 came from:

- Those living with parents (thus weakening the case for household registration)
- Those having moved within the six months prior to the qualifying date
- Those renting from a private landlord.

In addition, the Electoral Commission (2005) identified a gradual long-term decline in the completeness of registers between 1970 and 2000. Estimates based on Census records suggest that register completeness was at 93.5% in 1980, 91–3% in 1990 and 91–2% in 2000. Possible reasons for under-registration are: failure to register at a new address and inaccuracies around dates of birth and nationality.

Using the same ONS data the following regional variations were found, under the current registration system, as shown in table two:

Table 2: Non-registration by Region.

Region	% not registered	Base
England	7	22,594
North East	7	1,244
North West	8	3,203
Yorkshire & The Humber	7	2,338
East Midlands	5	1,994
West Midlands	4	2,498
East of England	5	2,268
London	13	2,895
Inner London	18	985
Outer London	11	1,909
South East	6	3,668

Source: ONS (study sample, England and Wales).

London experiences greatest under-registration which could be reflective of the socio-demographics of London's population. Outside of London, the estimates of under-registration are all below 10 per cent. The estimate of under-registration in 2000, when the research was conducted, was of some 3.5 million eligible people, across England and Wales. The question is: how fundamentally does this figure undermine the current system?

What we can conclude is that under-registration is a factor of household registration and while under-representation of any group or region is a weakness, household registration may mitigate some of the worst aspects. Parental registration, for example, of the under-25s is likely to prevent greater drop off from this group when compared to IER. On the other hand, in some ethnic communities, female occupants of the house, for religious and cultural reasons, do not answer to personal canvassers when the male head of household is absent, thus, potentially decreasing effectiveness of the personal canvass. IER is unlikely to address this if the register is constructed on the same basis as the household register. Moreover, the continued use of the annual canvass militates against individuals recording any change of address between canvasses, since there is little incentive to do so unless a major election is pending.

The strength of the current system rests on:

- The familiarity it has amongst voters – at least with those responsible for completing the annual registration form
- It is a well managed and administered process
- There are relatively low levels of non-registration, at least in percentage terms
- The effectiveness of the annual canvass, often, but not exclusively, followed-up by personal household calls, maximises overall registration.

Indeed, simple changes to the nature of the canvass, online registration and, as in some other European countries, a greater willingness to enforce a legal requirement to register, could reduce under-registration.

Some criticisms of the system stem from changes in attitudes that have occurred over time. The Electoral Commission (2010), for example, has argued that the assumption that electoral registration is the responsibility of a 'head of household' is increasingly outdated and that IER is more suited to today's society, where people are used to applying personally for other public and private services (we do not know if this is a view shared by voters themselves). Moreover, IER would be more in line with data protection and human rights legislation as each individual would be required to provide information about him or herself, rather than have that information provided by a third party. They argue further that IER may strengthen democratic engagement, as individuals would have responsibility for registering to vote.

It is unlikely that there will be public resistance to a shift to IER as research carried out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in 2008 found that nearly two thirds (63%) of respondents thought that the individual registration system used in Northern Ireland since 2002, was preferable to household registration. It appears that the public are tolerant of potentially higher non-registration rates, should the reason for non-registration rest with the individual.

Individual Electoral Registration

IER was introduced into Northern Ireland via the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, as a result of concerns about fraudulent registration (see below).

It is potential fraud which highlights a weakness of the current system, where names may be added to the register that are either not resident at a property, or are entirely fictional and are entered in order to allow one person, or a group of people, to illegally cast many votes for a candidate. Unless such register rigging is widespread, well organised and intensive, it is unlikely, under first-past-the-post, to be successful in changing results in anything but the most marginal constituency. Even so, any fraudulent activity serves to undermine confidence in the system and to raise potential questions about the probity and the legitimacy of the outcome.

The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 replaced the annual canvass with a system of continuous registration, where electors register once and only re-register if their details change. The Act does however, allow for a canvas to be undertaken every 10 years, or as necessary. Reviewing the new system, the Electoral Commission (2004) found that there was a decline of 119,790 registrants, some 10%, between the last household register of August 2002 and the first IER register of December 2002. It cannot be automatically concluded however, that this was all a direct result of the new system as household movement would have accounted for some, but by no means the entire decline.

On the December 2002 IER register, the number of registered voters as compared to census data of the number of eligible voters had dropped to just 86% compared to the 95.5% on the August 2002 household register. But, an assessment by the Electoral Commission threw doubt on the 95.5% figure, suggesting it had been inflated by the fact that some ward registers were in excess of 100% with more people registered to vote in a ward than lived there. But, concerns continued amongst the UUP and Sinn Fein that 50,000 to 60,000 eligible individuals remained unregistered in Northern Ireland in addition to those missing from the December 2002 register.

From the experience of IER in Northern Ireland, research for the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2004) raised the following issues:

An adverse effect had resulted on the levels of registration, particularly among three groups: young people; people living in areas of high social deprivation; and, people with disabilities.

- The age group 18-24 were the least likely to be registered: 29% were not registered under the new arrangements in December 2002, rising to 33% in July 2004
- In the 20 wards with the greatest decline in electoral registrations (between August and December 2002), those in receipt of income support and jobseekers allowance (33.5%) was significantly above the Northern Ireland average (17%). The unemployment rate in these 20 wards was 15% on average, compared to a Northern Ireland average at that time of 6.9%
- MENCAP Northern Ireland and the SDLP were critical of the new electoral registration procedures for being complicated for people with learning difficulties. Disabled people were almost twice as likely not to be registered as other people

A number of reasons were put forward to explain the declining number of voters:

- The removal of the yearly carry forward mechanism
- Eligible voters not returning registration forms
- Individual vs. household registration
- Voter apathy and alienation
- Publicity and education.

It was found that the most 'significant reason for young people and other vulnerable groups not registering appears to be the introduction of individual as opposed to household registration' (Stationery Office, 2004, p.18) and further that a spiral of 'decline in the electoral register' had been caused by IER (p.26). But, that the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 had been 'successful in its main purpose of bringing about a reduction in electoral fraud and a restoration of faith in the integrity of the electoral process' (p.27). The report recommended that IER be extended to the rest of Great Britain but only once safeguards had been put in place to prevent under-registration of particular groups (p.27).

Since the 2004 report, a series of research reports have monitored the impact of individual registration and clearly show that the requirement to conduct an annual canvass tended to have a negative impact on the number of people registered by as much as 2-3% per year. In response to concerns about the decline in numbers registered, the Government, via the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005, reinstated approximately 70,000 electors onto the register for the May 2005 combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections. Those reinstated comprised all eligible persons who had failed to re-register during the 2004 annual canvass but whose names appeared on the register at 1st September 2004. The reinstatement mechanism was employed again to boost the register published on 1 December 2005, when approximately 90,000 electors were reinstated.

The Commission's research informed the Government's decision to move away from the legal requirement for the electoral register to be refreshed each year. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 (NIMPA) replaced the annual canvass with a system of continuous registration, with the final annual canvass conducted in autumn 2006.

The baseline findings suggest that the register has maintained a high degree of accuracy after the first year of continuous registration. But the accuracy and completeness of the register is not static and could be damaged by the speed with which the Government wishes to equalise Parliamentary constituencies. The Boundary Commissions are expected to complete work on the new boundaries by 2013 and it is unlikely action can be taken to improve the accuracy and completeness of the register in this timescale.

Introducing IER

Based on the research, a number of possible implications can be drawn from the experience of IER in Northern Ireland, that, without action before its introduction elsewhere, are likely to be replicated.

Factors to consider are:

- A drop off will occur in registration as a result of IER
- That drop off will be most marked amongst

- Younger voters (18–25)
- Ethnic minorities (although not evenly across ethnic background)
- People in areas of high social deprivation
- People with disabilities
- Private tenants
- Residents with short (less than one year) length of tenure
- To ensure decline in registration is as far as possible minimised, a more strenuous enforcement of registration should be employed, such as:
 - Registering young voters through educational establishments
 - Extended use of canvass (appropriately arranged to meet the cultural diversity of local communities)
 - Carry forward mechanisms, which can avoid under-registration but create a danger of phantom registrations by non-removal from the register of those leaving an area
 - A more forceful policing of registration using the police, letting agencies, estate agencies and councils as sources of information on household removals (some European countries take a more forceful approach to registration than the UK).
- A single registration, only updated after changed circumstances, would safeguard registration but may also result in phantom registrations.
- IER is dependent on the voter providing proof of identity through ‘personal identifiers’ (as in Northern Ireland): this should be rigorous but not exclusory.
- The previous Labour government introduced the possibility of IER to give protection against electoral fraud and to enhance voting legitimacy.
 - It was recognised at the time that the shift to IER was a fundamental change in the registration process and as Michael Wills, then justice minister noted, it risked large numbers of people being unregistered
- The political trade-off required is between reducing fraud and the appearance of fraud with the likely fall-off in registration - which given safeguards - is, if not preventable, then reducible.
- There are examples of electoral fraud across the UK that has damaged voter confidence.
- Given that the Electoral Commission has identified particular areas – notably inner cities – and particular groups – notably the young, transient, and ethnic minorities – as often under-registered, there is a danger that hurrying through a redistribution of Parliamentary constituencies will leave people already possibly alienated from the political process, vulnerable to further political exclusion and marginalisation. Combining constituency boundary changes with the move to IER is likely to compound the problem.

Section Two: Local Government Boundary Changes: Affects on Representation

Research on the consequences of boundary changes in local government has focused on the ratio between the size of the electorate and the number of councillors; and, the extent to which variations exist in representative ratios at council and ward levels. Variations in type of council (district, county, metropolitan borough, unitary council) and the number of councillors in each ward, make drawing lessons from the research and experiences in local government with single-seat Parliamentary constituencies, something to be undertaken with caution. Notwithstanding, local government representative ratios provide some useful lessons for understanding the impact of larger and equal sized constituencies in the Parliamentary context.

Representation and Representative Ratios

A key lesson from the research is the difficulty in achieving equal sized electoral districts. Collecting together a number of electors to be granted a councillor (or MP) is straightforward if there is absolutely no concern that the areas represented are identifiable geographical locations of recognisably cohesive communities with shared experiences, histories and traditions. Added to this is the need to ensure that population groups feel they are adequately represented and securing 'racial fairness in representation' through constituency boundaries, has been a key part of the US experience of redistricting (see, King, *et al*, 1996, Jolly, 2002).

The Electoral Commission's objective in local government of securing an 'average ratio' of not more than a +/- 5% variation in ward size has not been universally achieved as variations of over +/- 10% exist cross the country. Even so, arguments that equal sized constituencies produce fairness are, based on local government experience, contestable, particularly when one examines the ethnic mix of local government electoral areas. Simpson *et al* (2005) employed a classification of wards by ethnic diversity which was developed for the Department for Work and Pensions in analyses of the labour market circumstances of UK ethnic minorities: Council wards were categorised as:

- **Unmixed:** where the adult white ethnic group is 87% (the national average) of the ward adult population or greater.
- **Mixed:** where the white ethnic group comprises more than 50% but less than 87% of the population.
- **Diverse:** with an adult population comprising more than 50% persons in ethnic groups other than white.

Research findings using these categories show that considerable differences existed in representative ratios between the four types of local authority:

- Generally, district councils have fewer electors per councillor and therefore better representative ratios
- There are progressively higher ratios for unitary authorities and London Boroughs
- Metropolitan boroughs have most electors per councillor.

What research suggests is that ethnic minority populations tend to be concentrated in more urban metropolitan borough councils, which have lower levels of representation. Moreover, differences in representative ratios between and within each of the local authority types can be quite marked. Indeed, those metropolitan

areas with larger ethnic minority populations tend to have higher elector to councillor ratios and are thus under-represented.

The reason why such differences persist is because to improve and to equalise the representative ratios in the more populous local authorities (e.g. Birmingham where 710,349 electors are represented by 120 councillors) would mean increasing the number of councillors. The trend however, has consistently been for fewer, not more councillors and successive government reorganisations have maintained the decline in councillor numbers and thus done little for the problem of under-representation. Indeed, the creation on 1st April 2009, of nine new unitary councils from 44 existing councils had the effect of reducing 2,065 councillors to a mere 744 (Copus, 2010).

Purdam, *et al* (2009) found that across England nearly 83% of wards were within 10% of their respective local authority type and that there is effectively a balance between under and over-represented wards. The pattern is consistent across all local authority types, with London Boroughs having the largest proportion of wards within 10%, some 93% across the type. At 80% district councils had the lowest proportion, but still a balance between under and over-representation.

They found that:

- In district councils unmixed wards predominate
- In London the majority of wards are of mixed ethnicity
- London Boroughs contain the largest number of diverse wards in England
- Metropolitan and unitary councils have mainly unmixed wards, but also have substantial numbers of mixed and diverse wards
- The majority of mixed wards had average representative ratios but more were over than under-represented
- Of the 17 wards examined in unitary authorities that were of diverse ethnicity none were over-represented, eight were average, and nine were under-represented
- Some unitary authorities have a tendency for locations with relatively large ethnic minority populations to be less well represented, which may be a consequence of youthful, growing populations and stages in the boundary review cycle.

But, a key finding from their research was a lack of systematic relationship between ethnicity and under and over-representation. Districts and unitary authorities generally had better representative ratios than the London and metropolitan boroughs and that these authorities tend to have higher levels of within district variability. The sub-district variability relates most to urban-rural variations in electorate size and is compounded by the use of one, two and three-seat wards.

Purdam, *et al* (2009) concluded that *'the differences we find in local authority representation ratios are substantial and cannot be ignored when considering the infrastructure of democracy and representation in England'*. A similar conclusion could be drawn from the dangers inherent in larger constituencies with fewer elected members. We can conclude from the local government experience that it is not so much equal size that is the problem, but the size of that equality. Thus, equal size, but smaller and with more representatives would assist in reducing the problem of under-representation. Much depends however, on the drawing of boundaries and nature of the communities collected together to form a constituency.

Representativeness and Representation

Much work on electoral districting and the issue of the representation of ethnic minorities has been conducted in the US. Caution is required however, in using this literature because the political culture, voting habits, party system, parties and the role of ethnicity in US politics varies considerably from the UK. Yet, some general lessons are possible from a brief review of the literature and are summarised below:

- The deliberate creation of legislative districts where non-white ethnic communities are in the majority increases the conservatism of surrounding electoral districts (Bullock, 1995, Lublin, 1997)
- What the US literature refers to as 'race-neutral' districts depends on the size of minority communities, patterns of racial segregation, population geography and the rules for drawing boundaries (Altman, 1998, Barabas, 2004)
- Developing electoral boundaries on geographical or ethnic 'compactness' does not guarantee ethnic representation or political influence (Barabas and Jerit 2004)
- In the search for equal districts in the US (again to ensure that each vote counts the same in any area) electoral experts have advised keeping deviations from the ideal number of voters (calculated by dividing the total population of the state by the number of districts) below 10% and preferably, much below that figure to avoid claims of 'malapportionment' (see, Cain, *et al*, 2006).
- Equal size will mean administrative district boundaries not always adhered to in the calculations (see, Cain, *et al*, 2006).
- Different criteria have been employed in the US to gauge the success of avoiding ethnically based gerrymandering and for measuring the success of efforts to increase minority representation e.g: the number of:
 - Majority-minority districts,
 - Elected representatives from different ethnic backgrounds,
 - Districts with minority influence or with ethnic alliances capable of electing representatives from different ethnic backgrounds (Weisbard and Wilkinson, 2005).
- The greatest gains in 'descriptive minority representation' (numbers from different ethnic backgrounds elected) have been obtained by redistricting but, that few further gains are obtainable by re-drawing boundaries alone and that a more inclusive politics is required (Jolly, 2002)
- The ideological views of white voters are likely to be geographically centred and demonstrated by support for different parties, which has an effect on minority representation or influence (Nakao, 2009)
- The answer to the question whom does a representative elected within a 'descriptive framework' represent varies depending on the nature of the seat and the mechanisms used to enhance levels of representation (the effectiveness of individual representatives has a role to play here) (Bird, 2003).

The US literature provides useful insights, but lessons for UK boundary reviews should be drawn with caution to account for the very different nature of US politics and boundary rules and decisions.

Introducing equal sized constituencies

Local government research and a brief review of US literature point to a number of issues that have relevance to the debates around the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill introduced in the House of Commons on 22 July 2010 (considered in detail in the next section):

- A decision on numbers of constituencies (600) before a boundary review is undertaken makes creating a fair system difficult as boundaries must fit the number, rather than the principle of representation of all sections of the community
- Equal size is less of a problem than reduced numbers of seats
- Equal size may not result in equal representation
- Variations in seat size should be as low as possible and the danger is that the 5% variation becomes widespread and has an adverse effect on minority representation
- A 5% variation would still result in over and under-represented seats
- Equality of representative ratio (and by implication, equality of electoral area size) does not result, necessarily, in equality of representation.
- Assessing and accounting for the population geography of the UK in the construction of new seats would avoid alienation of sections of the community who might perceive that they are under-represented in a 600 member House of Commons
- Gerrymandering of boundaries is best protected against by the creation of strict rules and regulations for the conduct of reviews and thus scrutiny of those rules and their development is an important safeguard
- Boundary changes are an opportunity to consider the nature of representation and representativeness. It is clear that the debate is shifting from representation meaning representation of political views and interests to a cultural and descriptive interpretation, which has significant implications for:
 - Decisions about constituency size
 - The role of elected representatives
 - The party system and party politics in general
 - The voting system
 - Whom is represented and how
 - The nature of political interaction in any elected chamber
- Calls for reductions in the number of representatives, whether councillors or MPs, have a populist ring to them, but such reductions have serious consequences for the quality and inclusiveness of representation and for opportunities for people to engage in politics.

Section Three: Framing the constituency boundaries of the UK Parliament

In June 2003 David Cameron appeared at the Oxfordshire Public Inquiry into the proposals of the Boundary Commission of England's Fifth Periodic Review of Parliamentary Constituencies. He suggested that the number of:

- MPs, then 659, was not too many (p. 42)
- MPs returned from Oxfordshire should not be increased from 6 to 7, even though this would lead to more equal constituency sizes.

He emphasised the disruption that major changes would entail and the importance of respecting local authority boundaries.

The publication of The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill in July 2010 sees Mr Cameron's Coalition Government's change this position. The decision to cut the size of the House of Commons from what the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, describes as an 'oversized' 650 to 600 will lead to considerable disruption (Nick Clegg, Cabinet Office Statement 5/7/2010¹). The principle of equal sized constituencies will inevitably lead to the large scale abandonment of co-terminosity, as the need to balance constituency electorates will be incompatible with the existing boundaries of local authorities and communities.

The decision to speed up the review before the 2015 election recalls previous attempts by Labour and Conservative governments to gain advantage through the well-established practice of changing the pace of the review process. Population shifts from urban (Labour) seats to rural (Conservative) ones, tempted Labour governments to delay the review process (as in 1969, when the implementation of the Second Periodic Review was delayed) and Conservative governments to speed up the process (such as bringing forward the Fourth Periodic Review) (Rossiter *et al* 1999: 125).

Reviewing Boundaries

The existing legislative framework, set out under Section 3(2) of the 1986 Act as amended, states that each Commission (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) is required to report not less than eight or more than 12 years from the date of submission of the previous report. For the Boundary Commission of England, which has the largest number of constituencies to apportion, the Sixth Periodic Review would be due to be submitted between 2014 and 2018, but under the 2010 Bill it would have to complete its task by 2013. Given that the Fifth Periodic Review took six years to complete (February 2000 to October 2006) this is likely to be difficult.

There are two aspects of the redistribution of seats which are likely to benefit the Conservative Party:

- A shift in representation from Wales and Scotland towards England
- Within England a shift from urban to rural areas.

¹ CAB 121-10. http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2010/100705-constitutional.aspx (accessed 12/7/2010).

The proposed legislation will remove the provisions which ensured the over-representation of Wales and Scotland (aside from special provisions for the Highlands and Islands). The effects of these changes, based on the latest figures for the UK electorates, are set out in Table 3. The pattern of change in electorates varies across the UK, with the largest relative growth in Northern Ireland. The electorate in England has grown by 3.61%, a higher rate than in Wales (1.77%), whilst Scotland's electorate has fallen over the period by nearly 4%. The final two columns of Table 3 show the allocation of 600 seats under the rules set out by the Coalition Government's, with two seats guaranteed for Orkney and Shetland and The Western Isles/Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and the other 598 seats allocated between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales using the St Laguë/Webster method. If there were no special provisions for Orkney and Shetland and The Western Isles/Na h-Eileanan an Iar the allocation for Scotland for the 2010 electorates would be 51, and England would be allocated an extra seat.

Table 3 – UK electorates and estimated seat allocations for a 600 member House of Commons

	Electorate for 5th Review	Electorate 2010	% change in electorate	Current seat allocation	5th review allocation if 600 seats	2010 allocation if 600 seats
England	36,995,495	38,332,211	3.61	533	500	502
Northern Ireland	1,097,450	1,196,138	8.99	18	15	16
Scotland	3,995,489	3,848,794	-3.67	59	55	52
Wales	2,225,599	2,265,039	1.77	40	30	30
UK total	44,314,033	45,642,182	3.00	650	600	600

Source: 5th Periodic Review figures from the relevant Boundary Commission reports, 2010 electorates for England, Scotland, and Wales are from the Pippa Norris database of 2010 election results (available at: <http://www.pippanorris.com/>). Northern Ireland figures are from the EONI website (<http://www.eoni.org.uk/index/statistics.htm>). The allocation of seats to Scotland includes the two seats for Orkney and Shetland and The Western Isles/Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

Historically the Conservative Party has been weak in Wales, and more recently its electoral performance in Scotland has been poor. The new boundary review regime would reduce the proportion of seats returned from Wales and Scotland. Table 4 shows the Boundary Commission for England's figures for the English electorate in 2010 (which differ slightly from the 2010 election figures used above) divided into Greater London, Metropolitan Boroughs, and Non-Metropolitan counties. These figures show the electorate for Greater London and the Non Metropolitan Counties growing, whilst the electorate for Metropolitan Boroughs has fallen slightly. Simulating the proportionate distribution of seats, and assuming a 502 seat allocation for England as a whole, it shows a shift of four seats moving from Metropolitan to Non Metropolitan areas, following the changes in electorates.

Table 4 – England’s electorate and estimated seat distributions for a 502 seat allocation to the House of Commons

	Electorate for 5th review	Electorate 2010	% change in electorate	5th review allocation if 502 seats	2010 allocation if 502 seats
Greater London	4974025	5186985	4.28	68	68
Metropolitan Boroughs	8262098	8221081	-0.50	112	108
Non Metropolitan Counties	23759372	24721016	4.05	322	326
England total	36995495	38129082	3.06	502	502

Source: 2010 Figures and classifications from Boundary Commission for England website (<http://www.boundarycommissionforengland.org.uk/electoral-figures/electoral-figures.htm>). 5th review figures from the Boundary Commission for England (2007: Appendix F).

The Conservative Party is likely to benefit from a shift in the distribution of seats from Metropolitan Boroughs to Non Metropolitan Counties.

The Coalition Government’s proposals have tried to make the review process quicker by removing the provisions for public inquiries, replacing the existing process with an extended period (12 weeks) of consultation. In part this may reflect a view that the Labour Party machine performed better at public inquiries than the Conservative Party. There is also an extent to which the rules were biased towards the status quo, which in this case disadvantaged the Conservatives. Many involved in public inquiries saw them as a sham consultation, where partisan interests were disguised as community linkages. Yet, it sits awkwardly within the framework of the Coalition Government’s claims of localism and the ‘big society’ to explicitly curtail public consultation in determining electoral constituencies. Public inquiries provide a forum in which the Boundary Commissions’ criteria can be invoked, debated, and challenged; local considerations brought to the fore; and particular regional sub-units explicitly discussed. Under the system of consultation outlined in the 2010 Bill there is no opportunity to engage with counter proposals, and little framework under which the specific criteria for drawing constituency boundaries can be debated.

The abandonment of public inquiries may reflect a more fundamental problem with the proposed legislation: that the drive for equalisation will over ride respect for almost every other political boundary. This has major consequences:

- Each Boundary Commission will have to consider each sub-unit in relation to all other sub-units. Hence the Boundary Commission for England may not be able to discuss counter proposals for say Northumberland without considering counter-proposals for all other constituencies, down to Cornwall.
- There can not be ‘local’ public inquiries, because under the new regime, there is no local.

The fact that local boundaries are subordinate to the principle of the equalisation of the electorate takes away the structural constraints on the boundary drawing process. In previous reviews the Boundary Commissions had substantial building blocks from which to work, allowing them to segment review areas and determine regional entitlements to seats. Under the new process they will be faced by regional entitlements which do not conform to the narrow requirements of +/- 5% variation in electorates. They will be required to cross regional and council boundaries to a much

greater extent, and this will remove the structure from which previous reviews took their shape. There will be more contingency about the local authority boundaries to be crossed and more potential to challenge Boundary Commission proposals.

To illustrate the problem, the 2010 Bill does not treat the UK as a whole, but defines 'parts of the United Kingdom' (2:3(1)). Yet Northern Ireland is treated as an exception because without special recognition, Northern Ireland (with a current electorate of about 1.2 million, and a proportionate allocation of 16 seats in the UK (see Table 3)) might not get within the +/- 5% limits. If Northern Ireland's boundaries have special sanction, then realistically, all counties and metropolitan areas in the UK, which used to be the building blocks of the boundary process, become significantly weakened, consequently the review process could be seen as subjective and contingent: whether the review starts in the South and moves North, or *vice-versa*, has an impact on the outcome. The 'Northern Ireland subsection' also undermines co-terminosity as a principle. If Northern Ireland needs special protection, then how can councils or MPs argue that contiguity is important? How can a Boundary Commission hold a local inquiry? The new proposals make this very difficult, if not impossible – a counter proposal from Dover could change a constituency in Newcastle.

The Coalition Government's proposals provide other specific exemptions from the principle of more equal electorates:

- The provision for two constituencies for the Western Isles and Orkney and Shetland being maintained, despite the small electorates for both
- The Cabinet Office Statement introducing the 'Charles Kennedy clause', whereby no Scottish constituency can be larger than the current extent of Charles Kennedy's seat: Ross, Skye and Lochaber.

These exceptions clearly violate the principle behind the reforms, which as Nick Clegg stated, aimed to 'ensure that people's votes carry the same weight, no matter where they live'. The 'Charles Kennedy clause' is likely to make the requirement of new constituencies being within 5% of a target quota of registered electors mathematically impossible for the Boundary Commission of Scotland.

The special considerations given to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the Bill are on top of the already generous over-representation of this electorate in the Scottish Parliament. The Mixed-Member Proportional electoral system used for the Scottish Parliament involves both single member and regional constituencies, and the Highlands and Islands benefit from over-representation at both levels, entrenched through a combination of legislative direction and administrative convention.

At the single member constituency level, the Scotland Act lays down that the Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands will be two individual constituencies. Under the provisions of the 2010 redistribution, this results in an Orkney Island constituency with an electorate of 16,340 and a Shetland Island constituency with an electorate of 17,270, compared to an average of 54,728 for the other 71 constituencies. In addition, the Boundary Commission for Scotland recommended that the Western Isles constituency Na h-Eileanan an Iar should be retained, despite an electorate of just 22,200: this generous representation at the single member constituency level is compounded by over-representation of the Highlands and Islands at the regional level. The 1998 Scotland Act provides for eight Scottish Parliament regions, each returning seven members. The 2010 review recommended a Highlands and Islands constituency containing 334,720 electors – 31.7% below the average regional electorate of 489,914, and more than 200,000 fewer electors than in the neighbouring region of North East Scotland.

There is an odd mismatch between the legislative and administrative framework for the drawing of Scottish constituency boundaries at the Westminster Parliament and Scottish Parliament levels. For Westminster constituencies, there is an acceptance that a single constituency can represent Orkney and Shetland, whereas for the Scottish Parliament there is a special legislative requirement that separate constituencies are required for the Shetland Islands and Orkney Islands: despite the fact that a combined seat would lead to a much more equal representation across Scotland. The treatment of The Western Isles/Na h-Eileanan an Iar is similarly inconsistent. There is no legal requirement for a single constituency for the Scottish Parliament, but the Cabinet Office proposals suggest that there is a need for an entrenchment of its special representative requirements in legislation for Westminster elections.

Nick Clegg excused the exemptions with reference to issues such as the time it takes to travel from one part of a constituency to another. Whether in an era of modern communications this is grounds for disruption of the principle of one person, one vote, one value is for Parliament to debate. But in the past these islands have been part of mainland constituencies: up to 1918 the Orkney and Shetland Islands were part of the Wick Burghs constituency, the Western Isles part of Ross and Cromarty constituency and of the Inverness-shire constituency. The arbitrary decision to invoke a maximum geographical size for a constituency, through the 'Charles Kennedy clause', lacks any real justification and makes the Boundary Commission for Scotland's task difficult, if not impossible, as they try to balance the representation of the sparsely populated Highlands with the need to conform to the narrow boundaries for equalisation of electorates. Given the pattern of a declining Scottish electorate, these issues are likely to become even more difficult to reconcile in the future.

There are other potential consequences of the legislation:

- The drive to match representation to a shifting electorate will make representation of inner cities, where existing research shows there to be particular problems with the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register, particularly difficult
- As well as those on the electoral register, an MP has to represent all those living in a constituency. If the population of each constituency is compared to the electorate, MPs from constituencies in cities such as London, Bradford, Liverpool, and Glasgow have a much larger workload than MPs representing rural constituencies in Devon or Dorset.

Possible outcomes of the process

The following implications can be drawn from our consideration of *The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill*:

- There will be wholesale disruption of the constituency map of the UK
- The truncated timetable under which the Boundary Commissions will have to operate to complete reviews by the 2013 deadline could distort the process
- Respect for council boundaries could be a major casualty of equalising electorates and as co-terminosity of constituency and council boundaries cannot be maintained it opens up a boundary review without structure
- The withdrawal of public inquiries in the Bill, to speed up the review process, is a fundamental problem as the resultant lack of review structure means that there can be no grounding in a regional inquiry
- The drive for constituency equalisation over rides the local context
- The constituency element of *The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* is not totally flawed. Using the St Laguë/Webster method is the best way of

achieving a fixed size for the House of Commons in an unbiased and accurate way across countries.² It replaces a flawed system where the Commons increases in size with each review and where seat allocation across the countries of the UK was somewhat arbitrary³

- The equalisation of electorates is in line with the principle of one person, one vote, one value but this is maintained with the exception of the Scottish islands and Charles Kennedy's seat clause
- The Conservatives are likely to secure an advantage from the redistribution of seats to England from Scotland and Wales, and the change in the balance of representation for urban to rural, but this reflects shifting population patterns
- While UK constituencies have not sought to balance the ethnic issues that US redistricting has dealt with, larger constituencies may lead to a political alienation for some ethnic communities
- A loss of urban representation may occur if larger seats are based on:
 - Expanding outwards from an urban core
 - Slicing wedges from an urban core
 - Splitting urban cores
- Community cohesion and identifiable communities of place are factors that the creation of larger, equal sized constituencies are likely to sacrifice.

² The rules for allocation of seats follow the suggestions made by Johnston et al (2009). Balinski and Young (2001) establish the underlying properties for various rules for the allocation of seats, and prove that the St Laguë/Webster method is the best unbiased method.

³ Butler and McLean (1996) review the performance of the Boundary Commissions at the Fourth Periodic Review, and provide a critique of the existing rules for redistribution.

Conclusions

Individual Electoral Registration and electoral boundary changes related to the provisions of the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* offer up the prospect of fundamental changes to the relationship between the voter and the political processes.

It is clear that shifting the responsibility for registration from 'head of household' to individuals will see a decline in the registration of social groups and geographical areas already under-registered; although, research indicates that this is likely to be temporary. Such a shift risks a greater political marginalisation of already excluded groups. In a time of a broadly neo-liberal consensus around political discourse however, the demand that the individual take personal responsibility for securing their vote, will have a resonance with many. But, there is an alternative political discourse which could revitalise and reemphasise a collective responsibility for ensuring adequate political representation, through registration. That responsibility can be secured by stressing the damage to individuals and communities from the prospect of greater political marginalisation that could result from IER. In addition, a shift from a collective responsibility to register resting in households can be replaced, with IER, by an argument that there is now a general, social, collective responsibility to ensure the success of IER. Some European countries are not so shy as the UK in using a range of governmental (collective) mechanisms to ensure high levels of voter registration and while this report has only briefly touched on those mechanisms, more research will provide useful examples to link IER to a wider social responsibility for registration.

The argument of one person, one vote, one value is rhetorically very powerful; this mantra gains even more power through the proposals for constituency equalisation which is seen to reflect population shifts and correct a bias within the current arrangements. Yet, the Government's proposals are weakened by the exemptions to the principle of one person, one vote, one value granted in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

There is little doubt that constituency equalisation and fewer seats will produce a partisan advantage for the Conservative Party, but by linking this to a reduction in the number of MPs the Government may find support for the overall process. The political consequences of equalisation and the reduction in the number of MPs (as with IER) risk greater under-representation and disengagement of already marginalised groups. Equal constituencies, based on smaller, but more seats may be a counter to the Government's proposals, but it is a brave voice that makes a public call for more politicians. What is left then is the need for a public discourse that will emphasise that unfairness and inequality could result from the government's proposals and that stresses the inconsistencies and contradictions in the proposals and the weaknesses in the review procedure; all of which have been highlighted in this report.

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PUBLISHED BY:

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