

Reduce and equalise? Why electoral geography matters

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The coalition's programme of constitutional reform includes a commitment to review, and equalise the size of parliamentary constituencies by population. On the surface, the case for this reform makes good sense, but as [Stuart Wilks-Heeg](#) explains, these reforms will not address some deeper inequalities in our electoral system.

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Whether or not we end up voting under a different electoral system at the 2015 General Election, it looks almost certain that most of us will be voting in different constituencies. The Parliamentary Reform Bill, which will make provisions for the referendum on AV and for fixed term parliaments, will also trigger a process of boundary reviews. The purpose of the latter will be to aim to equalise the size of Parliamentary constituencies, at around 75,000 electors each, and reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600.

This will be the most ambitious attempt to redraw the UK's electoral geography in six decades, but it has so far attracted little comment. For any voters w

ho are actually aware of the proposals, the case for equalising constituencies and reducing the number of MPs probably represents common sense. That the Isle of Wight has six times more electors than the Western Isles is hard to justify, and having 50 fewer MPs overall will apparently save £12 million in pay, pensions and allowances.

Clegg's claims make intuitive sense, but are deeply flawed. Equalising constituencies will be far from sufficient if the objective is to address [the inequality of the ballot](#) – which arises from the breakdown of the two-party system, the key role of marginal seats in determining the outcome of general elections, and growing constituency variations in turnout. Of course, even in these times of austerity, it is not all about saving money. For the Conservatives, the equalisation of constituencies is instrumental to what they see as a pro-Labour bias in the current electoral geography. Meanwhile, Liberal Democrats insist that the reforms will assist in ensuring that AV delivers more proportional electoral outcomes than 'first-past-the-post'. The Deputy Prime Minister seems to hold particular faith in this view, arguing that '[by equalising the size of constituencies we ensure that people's votes carry the same weight, no matter where they live](#)'.

Given this, some cynics might see Clegg's announcement as yet another example of the Lib Dems providing a smokescreen for the Tories' ulterior motives. There is a fairly widespread view that boundary changes are initiated by governments as acts of 'gerrymandering'. Thus, it is argued that boundary changes after the mid-1990s helped Labour secure and retain office, and the hidden objective of the coalition, and particularly the Conservatives, is to swing the pendulum back the other way.

The problem with the gerrymandering argument is that there is zero evidence of political manipulation of the boundary review process. Even if the government thinks there will be partisan advantage in reducing the number of MPs, they will not have any significant influence over the process. The reviews will be undertaken by genuinely independent bodies (the respective Boundary Commissions) and informed by detailed mapping of electorates at different geographical scales. There is no automatic reason to assume that this process will result in changes which will benefit the Conservatives and/or the Lib Dems at the expense of Labour.

Image Credit: FCO

The real problems with the 'reduce and equalise' proposals lie elsewhere – in the detail. How do we carve out new constituency boundaries within the context of the UK's existing multi-level electoral geography? The new constituencies will not be permitted to cross boundaries between England and the Celtic nations/territories, but it will almost certainly be necessary to cross either English regional boundaries or local authority/county boundaries. It may be necessary to sub-divide existing electoral wards – used to elect local councillors.

Given this need to cross boundaries, what balance should be struck between trying to equalise electorates and trying to respect local geographical identities? To take the most extreme case, the Isle of Wight has too many electors for a single seat, but not enough for two. Should the wishes of the islanders to remain in a unified Parliamentary seat be respected, or should part of the island be added to one of the Hampshire constituencies? In other words, should the principle of equalisation over-ride everything else?

Next, should such a far-reaching review process be guided solely by the number of registered electors? [The coverage of the UK's locally-compiled electoral registers is known to be hugely variable](#). In some areas, the proportion of eligible electors missing from the registers may be as high as 25 per cent. There is a risk that metropolitan areas, in which under-registration is heavily concentrated, may experience the greatest reductions in the number of seats – largely because of the challenges of getting certain social groups to register to vote. We have a Census of population planned for 2011. Assuming the Census goes ahead shouldn't we wait for the results, so we have a much better idea of the distribution of the UK's population?

Finally, the coalition also plans to accelerate the introduction of a new system of voter registration during this Parliament. This shift to 'individual voter registration' is likely to render the registers more accurate, but is also likely to reduce the total number of registered electors and enhance geographical variations in under-registration. Yet, the boundary changes will be based on electors registered under the old system. The obvious risk is that by the time the boundaries are revised in time for the election, changes to the registration system may mean constituency electorates remain as unequal as they are now.

There can be little doubt that the objective of equalising constituencies by 2015 will prove deeply problematic and will provoke much controversy once the lines start appearing on maps. Yet it is equally clear that the coalition intends to do everything in its powers to reduce the number of seats to its target figure of 600. The tussle over boundary changes may well prove to be as heated as the referendum on AV.

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