

Do Turkeys vote for Christmas? Yes, when it comes to Liberal Democrat MPs and the boundary review for Westminster constituencies. Nick Clegg's party will lose a fifth of all its MPs.

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One of the few areas where the Liberal Democrats have been able to gain policy concessions from the Conservatives has been in the area of constitutional reform, with electoral reform and changes to constituency sizes being shoehorned into one bill. [Lewis Baston](#) of Democratic Audit models the effects of a smaller House of Commons and finds that while we cannot be completely certain of the outcome at this stage, it could well be disastrous for the Liberal Democrats.



The government's Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill is making its way through the committee stage in the House of Lords this week. It is really two Bills yoked together by the demands of coalition politics – a referendum on AV being there to satisfy Liberal Democrats, while the Conservative element is a smaller House of Commons of 600 MPs with new rules for drawing constituency boundaries. It has been widely assumed that the government's boundary changes are intended to damage Labour, and this no doubt is the intention.

However, the first detailed model of what the new constituencies might look like shows that the worst hit party will probably be taken by the Liberal Democrats, as my first Table below shows. It is possible that the 'reduce and equalise' policy could end up being what is known in Ireland as a 'Tullymander' – an electoral change introduced for partisan reasons that backfires on its authors.

	Current MPs	Model outcome	Change in MPs	Per cent change
Conservatives	306	285	-21	-7
Labour	258	245	-13	-5
Liberal Democrats	57	45	-12	-21
Other	29	25	-4	-14
TOTAL	650	600	-50	-8

The model redistribution was undertaken using the rules proposed in the government's Bill, giving special treatment to two island seats in Scotland and then distributing the 598 other seats across the four nations. Constituencies were then allocated to the English regions, and the entitlement of each county was calculated. Most counties were then paired or grouped, because this is necessary to meet the new rigid rule that a constituency must be within plus or minus 5 per cent of 76,000 registered electors.

The Liberal Democrats are badly affected by the upcoming boundary changes for two reasons. First, their seats tend to be geographically isolated rather than clumped together – they are mainly yellow islands in a sea of red and blue. Changing the boundaries of Liberal Democrat seats will tend to pull in areas of neighbouring seats, where the party's vote is much lower. Second, on average, Liberal Democrats have much smaller majorities than Tory or Labour MPs (their mean percentage majority being 12.5 per cent, compared to 19.0 per cent for the Conservatives and 19.3 per cent for Labour). Their seats are therefore less able to withstand adverse boundary changes.

The casualties among junior ministers are severe – Lynne Featherstone, Sarah Teather, Norman Baker and David Heath may all see their seats disappear. But somehow, the Cabinet are likely to be less affected

personally, with no change to the seats of Chris Huhne, Vince Cable and minor change to those of Nick Clegg and Michael Moore. Danny Alexander, though, may be pitched into an interesting selection contest with Charles Kennedy.

In past elections there have been some impressive Liberal Democrat survivors of adverse boundary changes, including Malcolm Bruce in 1997 in Gordon and Sarah Teather in 2010 in Brent Central. Strong personalised campaigning helped raise their votes in the areas joining the constituency and the seats were held. However, it remains to be seen whether this difficult feat is still possible when the party, and often the key individuals within it, are in government and arousing serious unpopularity for the first time.

In terms of the numbers of Conservative and Labour casualties of redistribution, there are several reasons for this surprising result. One is that the journalistic standby of the 'depopulated inner city' is largely a myth. Constituencies like Manchester Central, Leeds Central and West Ham are actually hugely oversized,

thanks to new inner city flats and population growth since the last boundary review started in 2000. The difference in registered electorate between the average Labour and the average Conservative constituency in 2010 was the smallest it has been since 1959.

Another factor is the regional pattern of the election results. Counties like Kent and Surrey must lose half a seat each, and there are no non-Conservative seats in these areas to absorb the pain (though the boundary changes might make existing marginal Tory seats a bit safer). In addition, our model the policy assumes that the Boundary Commission will tend to keep towns in one Westminster seat, which accordingly produces some reasonable Labour prospects.

Could our model results change?

Any single model 's outcomes can only indicate one possibility. The Bill itself is therefore the start, rather than the end, of the process of redrawing the boundaries. There remain many important decisions about principle and local application to be taken. Our model cannot predict with certainty, because there will be many permutations of constituency boundaries that will fit the rules.

We do not know how the Boundary Commissions will choose between different schemes that are within the rules. Accordingly we looked as hard as we could at other possible extreme results based on essentially the same template, with boundaries systematically tweaked to their maximum extent within the rules so as boost one or other of the top three parties; notional seats in 2010. My second Table below shows the results.

The best case result for the Conservatives would give them a tiny overall majority; the best case for Labour would leave their total of MPs completely unchanged. The mid-point between these two cases is for a Conservative loss of 17 seats, a Labour loss of 18 and a Liberal Democrat loss of 11, which may be a fair adjustment of any inadvertent methodological bias in our core model.

MPs per party	Current	Conservatives best case outcome	Mid-point of Con and Lab best cases	Our detailed model outcome	Labours best case outcome
Conservative	306	302	289	285	276
Labour	258	221	240	245	258
Liberal Democrats	57	51	46	45	42
Other	29	26	25	25	24

A final caveat about the model is that we do not know the December 2010 electorate numbers from which the Boundary Commissions will be working. These might be significantly different from the figures used in the model. The new boundary rules mean that even fairly small changes in the numbers of registered electors can have hugely disruptive consequences for boundaries across a wide area.

The early signs are that some local authorities have been successful in boosting their voter registration rates in recent months, with the city of Glasgow adding 36,000 to the register, nearly half a constituency. It would be richly ironic if the outcome of the 'reform' were even worse for the coalition parties than the model suggests because the imminent Bill has led to a rise in inner urban registration rates. Perhaps in future the

Tullymarder will become known as the Cleggymarder?

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