

A boundary allocation entailing more competitive results would not necessarily be more ‘political’, but it would be more democratic.

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By Democratic Audit UK

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[A recent post](#) by Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter objected to an idea published in the IPPR [Democracy Commission](#) which suggested that the UK Boundary Commission should take a more active role in creating ‘competitive’ constituencies on the grounds that it would politicise the neutral process by which boundaries are decided. Here, the author of the IPPR piece **Sarah Birch** responds to their critique, arguing that creating more competitive results would be good for democracy.



Credit: [Richard](#), CC BY 2.0

We are pleased that the proposal for competitive constituencies set out in [The Democracy Commission](#) has sparked debate, and [we welcome the constructive comments](#) of Ron Johnston, David Rossiter and Charles Pattie.

We are aware that the technicalities of our proposal could quite possibly benefit from improvements, and if the precise means we have suggested of achieving more competitive seats is not viable, we are certainly happy to consider alternatives. We also wholeheartedly acknowledge that tinkering with the current electoral system is very much a second-best option that would have limited impact, and that the ideal electoral reform would be a move toward a fairer electoral system. We do not suggest that our proposal would make electoral outcomes more proportional (the impact of increased competitiveness on proportionality is inherently difficult to predict), but that this measure would spur electoral participation.

That said, we are not convinced that the introduction of competitiveness as a (secondary) principle of boundary delimitation would necessarily make the *process* more political, as argued by Johnston, Rossiter and Pattie. The Boundary Commissions are as impartial as their members are professional. There is ample scope for politicization

under the current system, but we are fortunate in having commissioners who maintain their independence. The additional principle we suggest would not change that. The [impressive research](#) of Professors Johnston, Rossiter and Pattie themselves attests to the fact that under the current system there is a great deal of input from partisan actors during boundary review consultations. If this is what is meant by ‘politicization’, then the current system is already political.

It is worth noting that our proposal does not constitute ‘gerrymandering’ in the sense of bias. In their seminal work on constituency delimitation, [Cox and Katz distinguish](#) between boundary revisions which increase bias and those which increase responsiveness. While the introduction of bias into the electoral system would be extremely unfortunate, this is not what we meant by our usage of the term ‘gerrymandering’; our proposal calls instead for increases in responsiveness, which we believe would be normatively beneficial to British democracy.

We are also puzzled by the idea that having competitive seats should be seen to be a more ‘political’ *outcome*. And if we look at other first-past-the-post systems that have heavily politicized boundary review processes, such as the US, we find that the so-called ‘bipartisan gerrymander’ is very common. Under this system the two main parties collude to maintain safe seats so as to minimize the resources required to contest elections in certain areas. In this sense, the preservation of safe seats can itself be seen as ‘politicized’. Johnston, Rossiter and Pattie acknowledge as much when they note that also in the UK context ‘the parties want, and press for, as many safe seats as possible’. A boundary delimitation outcome entailing more competitive results would not necessarily be more ‘political’, but it would be more democratic.

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Note: this post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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