

Politics

New boundary changes set to shake up political map of Britain

The 650 constituencies across the UK are due to be reduced to 600 during 2018. What will be the effects of these changes?

650 MPs currently sit in the House of Commons, one of the two Houses of Parliament responsible for drawing up and enacting UK laws. These MPs are elected by their constituencies - a group of voters from a specific geographical area. England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been divided up into 650 constituencies. But that is about to change: to save money the number of constituencies is being reduced to 600, a change which should be in place by 2018.

The relative sizes of constituencies are also being changed. The reason for this is that the Conservative party had long wanted to equalise the size of constituencies, and when they gained power in 2010 as the lead party in the Coalition Government, they put forward the 2011 Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, which set out the changes that were to be made. Consequently, the boundaries of many constituencies are going to be moved and shifted - a change which could have seismic consequences for the political makeup of Britain.

The changes in constituency size are aimed at making the system fairer, so that each person's vote has the same amount of power. Ron Johnston, a Professor of Geography at the University of Bristol, specialises in analysing and studying electoral systems and voting behaviour. He has conducted a research analysis based on the 2015 general election results, examining the potential effects of the boundary changes. He points out that whilst in the 2017 general election the average English

constituency contained 73,575 voters, Scottish and Welsh constituencies contained an average of 67,600 and 57,454 voters respectively. That means that Welsh votes were effectively worth more than English votes. There were also considerable variations within countries. In the 2017 election the smallest Welsh constituency, Arfon, had just 41,367 registered voters, while the largest, Cardiff South and Penarth, had 76,499. That means that a vote cast in Arfon was worth almost twice as much as one in Cardiff South.

“Many of the changes result in disparate places being joined together that have few common interests and close ties, as they have been combined simply to meet the numerical rules,” says Professor Johnston.

To address this unfairness the map will be redrawn so that no constituency, save four exceptions (Orkney and Shetland, the Western Isles and the Isle of Wight), deviates from the UK average electorate, (calculated in December 2015 to be 74,769), by more than 5% - so all must have electorates between 71,031 and 78,508. The Boundary Commissions for England, Northern Ireland and Wales published their initial proposals in September 2016. Scotland published theirs a month later. The changes are substantial. In England, for example, the Commission's proposals leave only 68 of the current 533 constituencies unchanged, including

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only four out of 73 in London and three of 54 in Yorkshire and the Humber.

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“Most MPs will face significant disruption to their seats, but some will suffer more than others. Theresa May’s Maidenhead constituency is entirely unchanged, for example, whilst the seat previously held by Nick Clegg in Sheffield Hallam is split virtually in half. Jeremy Corbyn’s Islington North seat is to be split across three separate seats. MPs will have to build relationships with new areas, perhaps with very different population make-ups and social, economic and cultural issues.”

The change will also affect some regions more than others. Although the overall reduction of MPs is 8%, England and Northern Ireland will only receive a 6% cut. Scotland’s number of MPs will be cut by 10%, and Wales’ MPs will be cut by 28%. But what effect will the proposed changes have on constituencies, and the MPs they elect? Professor Johnston believes that the changes will have a marked effect on the outcome of general elections, favouring the Conservative party.

That’s because Labour has traditionally benefited from variations in constituency sizes, and on average tends to win more of the smaller seats than the Conservatives. Making all constituencies the same size therefore would remove this pro-Labour advantage. Anthony Wells, Director of YouGov’s political and social opinion polling has estimated that if the 2015 election were fought in the proposed new constituencies, instead of winning 330 of 573 seats (58%), the Conservatives would win 319 of the proposed 530 (60%) seats in England and Wales. That doesn’t sound like much of a change, but Labour will find closing that gap difficult because of

how few of the new seats are marginal.

According to Professor Johnston, the data used to calculate the size of the electorate and therefore the new constituencies could also give the Conservatives an advantage. The Boundary Commission used the electoral roll compiled in late 2015, which excluded as many as two million people who registered to vote after this date to vote in the June 2016 EU referendum, many of them young people - a group traditionally more likely to vote Labour, and who certainly did so in 2017. The Government also used 2015 as a cut-off point to switch from the old household registration system - where one person in every household was responsible for registering everyone else who lives at that address - to the new system of individual registration where each person is now required to register to vote individually. In effect this removed many of those who were registered to vote in the 2015 general election from the register.



But who were these people? According to the Electoral Commission, the missing voters are more likely to be people living in large cities who move around frequently, for example young people living in rented and shared accommodation, including university students.

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The consequences of this are that if a general election were to take place in 2022, votes in urban areas could be worth less than those in the country, as there are likely to be many more voters than were taken into account when the new constituencies were drawn up. For example, in Greater London, which has the greatest concentration of students, there were 5,090,487 registered electors in December 2015 whilst in June 2016 there were 5,424,289 - a difference of 333,802 voters, or approximately four more seats that otherwise might go to London rather than other regions. Overall this adds up to inner cities, especially London - which are traditionally more

likely to vote Labour - being less represented in parliament than other regions.

So what happens now? After the Boundary Commissions released their September 2016 proposals there were twelve weeks of public consultation. The Commissions considered all that evidence, and brought forward revised proposals in late 2017; these will again be subject to consultation and the Commissions will send their final proposals to parliament by October 2018.

