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Representing People and Representing Places – Community, Continuity and the Current Redistribution of Parliamentary Constituencies in the United Kingdom¹

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ABSTRACT

In late 2011-early 2012 the four UK Boundary Commissions published their provisional recommendations for new Parliamentary constituencies. These were produced according to new rules for redistributions legislated in 2011, which make electoral equality the paramount criterion; organic criteria – such as continuity of constituency boundaries and fitting those within the maps of communities represented by local government territories – could only be taken into account so long as the arithmetic criterion that all constituencies have electorates within +/-5 per cent of the UK quota is met. Those recommendations were much more disruptive to the pre-existing constituency map than many had anticipated, and the outcome – should the proposed constituencies (or some variant of them) be finally adopted – will see much less continuity and reflection of community identities than previously. That fracturing is particularly extensive in urban England because of that Boundary Commission's decision not to split wards between constituencies; if that had been done, as illustrated here, the outcome could have been much less disruptive overall. As it stands, the outcome suggests that the underpinning theory of British representative democracy – that MPs represent places with clear identities – is being undermined. The review was halted in early 2013 and – assuming that the legislation is unchanged – will recommence in 2016, and the issues raised here will be at least as important again then.

The implicit theory of representation that underpins the UK's model of democracy has each Member of Parliament representing not only a certain proportion of the national electorate but also an area of the national territory which is more than an aggregation of those individuals' homes. Part of the MP's role, it is argued, is to represent a place, a spatially-bounded territorial unit whose residents have common interests; the place is thus more than a sum of its component parts – and is often equated with the elusive concept of a community. When a new map of constituencies is drawn up, therefore, those responsible for delimiting their boundaries are explicitly required by the relevant legislation to take account of community interests – an aspect of their task frequently impressed upon them by those seeking to influence their decisions during the public consultation phase of the procedure (Rossiter et al., 1999).

In addressing this need to reflect community interests in constituency definition, the Boundary Commissions entrusted with that task since 1944 have built on the precedents deployed ever since an elected house became part of the English parliament (Johnston and

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version – to take subsequent developments into account – of one first published on the journal's website in July 2012. Part of the work reported here was supported by a small grant from the British Academy, which we gratefully acknowledge. We are also grateful to the Secretaries of the four Boundary Commissions and to representatives of the three main political parties for their assistance in the research; they are, of course, not responsible for any of the opinions expressed here.

Pattie, 2012; Johnston et al., 2012a). From the outset, MPs were elected to represent the country's main local government areas – the shire counties and the boroughs. Although the 2011 legislation to be discussed here means that those areas are no longer the units to which constituencies should normally be allocated, nevertheless they remain close to the core of the process, as indicative of the communities that MPs are elected to represent – on the implicit assumption that they are separate entities with particular interests and with which their residents have a clear sense of identity. Between 1944 and 2011, and especially since 1958, when the Commissions were required to recommend constituencies as 'equal as practicable' in their number of electors – subject to a range of constraints, discussed below – with each returning a single MP, a further set of administrative areas has in most cases been deployed as the building blocks for creating constituencies. These are the wards used for electing local government councillors. As with the local government areas into which they nest, it is assumed – explicitly by the Boundary Commission for England in a recent publication – that these largely represent identifiable communities, that they are areas within the administrative counties and boroughs with which electors identify and have collective interests.

These two underpinning conceptions of local government areas and their constituent wards as reflecting the map of communities of interest remain integral to the procedure for defining the UK's Parliamentary constituencies. Major changes enacted in 2011 to the rules deployed in that procedure – which emphasise equality of electorates above all other criteria – have made it more difficult for the Boundary Commissions to recommend constituencies which are consistent with those conceptions. In particular, they mean that the practice of using wards as their building blocks (one that the Boundary Commission for England in particular has remained firmly wedded to²) makes it increasingly difficult for the Commissions to create constituencies that meet the community criterion at the larger scale – i.e. that constituencies nest within the matrix of local government areas – which raises the question which of the two scales is more important when defining Parliamentary constituencies and also asks whether greater flexibility is desirable in the deployment of wards as building blocks. Addressing those questions is the focus of this paper, which uses the initial recommendations of the four Boundary Commissions published in late 2011-early 2012 to illustrate the issues.

Redistributions in the United Kingdom

Before 1944 there was no set procedure for redrawing the map of constituencies for elections to the UK House of Commons. Indeed, the map had only been redrawn on four previous occasions, in each case as an accompaniment to a major franchise extension. In 1942, however, a committee recommended both regular reviews of constituency boundaries and rules for their conduct (Rossiter et al., 1999). These formed the basis of the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1944. Its goal was to incorporate both an organic criterion with regard to community representation – 'so far as is practicable' no county, county borough, metropolitan borough, or county district, or part thereof in each case, 'shall be included partly in one constituency and partly in another'³ – and also an arithmetic criterion, so that each constituency had approximately the same number of registered

² In a Newsletter (4 March 2011) the Boundary Commission for Wales stated that its policy at the third, fourth and fifth reviews under the previous legislation was to use electoral divisions (the equivalent of wards) as the building blocks and that it had decided that 'it would normally be desirable, once again, to use whole electoral divisions to create constituencies where it is feasible to do so': in the event, it split only four of those divisions in its initial proposals.

³ This wording applied to England and Wales; there were slightly different wordings – reflecting their separate local government structures – for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

electors; each electorate 'shall not be greater or less than the electoral quota [in effect, the national average constituency electorate] by more than approximately one quarter of the electoral quota'.

The Boundary Commissions found it very difficult to apply both of these rules during their initial reviews under the new legislation, however, because of the complex matrix of often small local authorities, especially county districts: in its report the Boundary Commission for England (1947, 4) stated that it was not practicable to apply the arithmetic criterion 'without disturbing the unity of local government areas'. The government had already decided, knowing of this problem, to make the organic criterion the prime one, the Labour Home Secretary at the time stating that 'We desire that the principle of community of interest, of local government boundaries, shall be made superior to mere mathematics' (Hansard, 431, 13 December 1946, col. 1560). A 1947 amendment thus placed the rule requiring constituencies to fit within the local government map prior to that limiting the variation in electorates, with the latter merely stating that 'The electorate of any constituency shall be as near the electoral quota as is practicable, having regard to the foregoing rules' and these changes were incorporated into a new House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1949.

The 1944 Act required the Commissions to conduct reviews of all constituencies within their purview every 3-7 years. Thus the constituencies created after their Initial Reviews, completed in 1947, were used for the general elections of 1950 and 1951, soon after which the four Commissions began their First Periodical Reviews. These were reported to Parliament in 1954, with their recommended new constituencies used for the 1955 general election. The Boundary Commission for England's report of that review stated that the changes recommended 'were not wholly welcome because of the disturbance they would inevitably cause both to the electorate and to their representatives in Parliament' (Boundary Commission for England, 1954, 4: no other Commission also made this point – the Northern Ireland Commission had recommended no changes from the constituencies used in 1950 and 1951). The Commission's argument was clearly strongly influenced by the views of MPs and their parties, opinions that were further expressed during Parliamentary debates on the recommendations in 1954. Thus the Act was again amended in 1958 in two ways:⁴

1. the period between reviews was extended to every 10-15 years; and
2. clauses were added allowing Commissions to depart from the organic and, especially, arithmetic criteria 'if special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency appear to them to render a departure desirable' and

'It shall not be the duty of a Commission to aim at giving full effect in all circumstances to the above rules, but they shall take account, so far as they reasonably can –

(a) of the inconveniences attendant on alterations of constituencies other than alterations made for the purposes of rule 4 [which referred to local authority boundaries], and

(b) of any local ties which would be broken by such alterations.

The clear intent, as expressed by the then Conservative Home Secretary, R. A. Butler, was a 'presumption against making changes unless there is a very strong case for them' (Hansard, 582, 11 February 1958, 230). Not only did MPs indicate that the representation of places was much more important than equality of electorates but they also ensured much greater

⁴ The Act was also amended to change the nature of the public consultation process, but that is not relevant to the discussion here.

continuity of representation by the extension of the period between reviews. (The predominance of the organic criterion was stressed by Lord Justice Donaldson in a 1983 Court judgment; use of the words ‘shall take account’ in the new rules set out above indicated that the Commissions must take the organic criteria into account, whereas the arithmetic criterion was, in effect, only a guideline: Rossiter et al., 1999.)

These rules put in place in 1958 were only slightly amended in the following five decades: that about relating to local government boundaries was changed after their major restructuring in the 1970s, and the period between reviews was reduced to 8-12 years in 1992. At each subsequent review, although the Commissions gave precedence to the organic criteria – which were also very frequently used in the public consultations to justify suggested changes from the recommended configurations (Rossiter et al., 1999); greater electorate equality was very rarely used as the reason for a suggested alternative configuration – nevertheless the Commissions were able to ensure that most of their recommended constituencies had electorates that were relatively close to the relevant electoral quota. In the report of its Fifth Periodical Review, for example, the Boundary Commission for England (2007, 481) indicated that 89 per cent of its recommended 529 constituencies had electorates in 2000 (the date at which the review began and for which the electoral data applied; the Commissions do not take account of subsequent changes, either actual or projected) within +/-10 percentage points of the relevant quota; only one – the special case of the Isle of Wight – had an electorate more than 20 percentage points from the quota.

In all of its deliberations about the organic criterion Parliament focused overwhelmingly on local authorities as the territorial units that reflected communities of interest. The use of wards as building blocks was not specified in the ‘Rules for Redistribution’ in any of the post-1944 legislation, except that a 1978 amendment stated that ‘in Northern Ireland, no ward shall be included partly in one constituency and partly in another’.⁵ Nevertheless, with very few exceptions all four Commissions used wards as their building blocks,⁶ the Boundary Commission for England reporting in 2007 (p.14) that ‘we decided, like our predecessors, that we should use district wards as our building blocks for the constituencies’ even though in some metropolitan counties and London boroughs they were relatively large (in Birmingham they averaged 18,032 electors).

In 2010 the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government published a Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. This combined two sets of proposals: the first established a binding referendum on whether the voting system for elections to the House of Commons should be changed from first-past-the-post (single-member plurality) to the alternative vote (a slight Conservative concession to the Liberal Democrats’ desire for electoral reform); the second changed the procedures for the reviews of Parliamentary constituencies (Johnston and Pattie, 2012). The latter was the outcome of growing Conservative concern that the current system led to results that were biased against them (something well-established by academic research since Labour’s 1997 landslide election victory: Johnston et al., 2001, 2006; Borisyuk et al., 2010b; Thrasher et al., 2011) and that variations in constituency electorates – seats won by Conservatives tend to be substantially larger than those won by Labour (Johnston and Pattie, 2012) – were a major cause of this

⁵ Somewhat paradoxically, the shift to larger, multi-member electoral divisions when STV was introduced for local government elections in Northern Ireland meant that the wards prescribed in the legislation were no longer used for electoral purposes.

⁶ Wards were divided in both Edinburgh and Glasgow in the Scottish Commission’s first three post-1944 reviews, for example, and one ward was split by the Northern Ireland Commission in its 2007 review.

disadvantage (but see Johnston et al., 2009). A 2004 pamphlet had argued the case that electorates should be equalised across the United Kingdom (Tyrie, 2004) and this was followed by a Bill debated in the House of Lords in 2007, but not subsequently in the Commons, requiring all constituencies to have electorates within five percentage points of a single UK quota (Johnston et al., 2009).

Although academic commentators had indicated that electorate size variations were only a minor reason why the Conservatives were disadvantaged in the translation of votes into seats (Johnston et al., 2009; Borisyuk et al., 2010b), the party determined to press ahead with the change. This was linked with a decision to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 (another change promoted by Tyrie – 2004 – and justified in the Conservatives’ 2010 manifesto as reducing the cost of politics and thereby refreshing popular trust in politicians after the expenses scandal of 2009), with the number of MPs to be fixed.⁷ Finally, the Bill proposed a fixed timetable of reviews every five years, with the Boundary Commissions required to deliver their recommendations to Parliament no later than 18 months before the date of the next scheduled general election (which is subject to the Fixed Term Parliament Act, 2011, a further constitutional reform promoted by the coalition government). Despite considerable Labour opposition and some of the longest recorded debates in the House of Lords (Johnston and Pattie, 2011) the Bill was passed in February 2011 and the four Boundary Commissions immediately began their first reviews under the new rules, which had to be completed by October 2013.

Unlike their predecessors, the new rules were clear and unambiguous (Johnston and Pattie, 2012). The number of constituencies was fixed at 600; as no constituency boundaries could cross a national frontier there was a clear rule for allocating seats to each of the four countries. With four named exceptions every constituency had to have an electorate within +/-5% of the national quota,⁸ and only so long as that size constraint was met could the Commissions take into account the existing constituency boundaries, local authority boundaries, communities that might be broken as a result of proposed changes, and the inconveniences consequent upon such changes (although, in recognition of the major changes necessary because of the reduction in the number of MPs and the new size constraint, this last criterion was not to be applied in the first review under the new rules).

Implementation of the new procedures began in March 2011 and the Commissions were close to completion of their task in early 2013. In January of that year, however, the House of Lords accepted an amendment moved by four peers (one Labour, one Liberal Democrat, one Plaid Cymru and one cross-bench) to the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill delaying the date at which the four Boundary Commissions had to report on their first reviews by five years (i.e. to October 2018), which required a new exercise to begin in 2016.⁹

⁷ Previous reviews had always resulted in an increase in the number of MPs as a result of the wording of the rules (McLean and Butler, 1997).

⁸ The exceptions were: two remote island constituencies in Scotland with small electorates (Orkney and Shetland – 33,755 – and Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) – 21,837 electors; and two constituencies for the Isle of Wight – 2011 electorate 109,922 – where local opinion was very strongly against part of the island being combined in a constituency with wards on the English mainland.

⁹ There were two main reasons for the amendment. The main one – which accounted for its support from Liberal Democrat peers and MPs despite the review being coalition policy – was in response to the Conservative party’s refusal to agree on a timetable for debating a Bill introduced in 2012 to reform the House of Lords, which led to that Bill’s withdrawal. Liberal Democrats argued that reform of the Lords and changing the rules for redistribution were part of a single package of constitutional reforms, and that if one part had to be withdrawn because of Conservative opposition they would prevent the other part being implemented. A more technical

This amendment – which forms Section 6 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act, 2013 – was accepted by the House of Commons and the review of constituencies started in 2011 was immediately halted. The 2015 general election would thus be held in the already-existing 650 constituencies. Although the work done by the Commissions in 2011-2013 was thus discarded, nevertheless analysis of their recommendations provides insights into issues raised by implementation of the new rules which will almost certainly reappear when the next review starts in 2016.

Implementation of the new rules: the extent of the changes proposed

At the outset of the redistribution that officially began in March 2011, all of the Boundary Commissions indicated that their proposed new maps of constituency boundaries would be very different from their predecessors'. They recognised that however desirable it was to have continuity of representation that would not be feasible in many areas. The Boundary Commission for England, for example, pointed out that although a substantial number of the current constituencies had electorates within the +/-5 per cent constraint around the UK electoral quota of 76,641 and thus could appear not to need changing, nevertheless in many cases this would be necessary because of the situation in neighbouring seats. (The electoral data deployed in calculation of the quota and in the allocation of constituencies to regions are those collated in December 2010 resulting from a canvass in the preceding months, and published in February 2011.) Indeed, of the 533 then-current English constituencies, 200 had electorates within the prescribed range, but of these only 78 were unchanged in the Commission's provisional recommendations published in September 2011 (with a further 77 staying intact but having wards added to them to bring them up to the required minimum electorate). In Scotland, the Commission stated in a press release (4 March 2011) that 'we expect that few, if any, of the existing constituencies will remain unchanged' (this excluding the two 'protected constituencies' noted above). Only one of the 57 existing constituencies (East Lothian) was recommended unaltered in its initial proposals published in October 2011; a further eight were unchanged in that the entire existing constituency remained intact but because they were below the minimum size other areas were added to them; and in two other cases small areas were detached from the existing constituencies which were within the size range but a small number of voters (72 in one case and 720 in the other) were allocated to adjacent seats. In Wales, whose number of MPs was to fall from 40 to 30,¹⁰ only one of the existing constituencies had an electorate within the specified range (72,810-80,473), but the Commission was unable to keep it intact in its initial proposals. In Northern Ireland only three of the existing constituencies were within +/-5% of the UK quota but in the initial proposals none was retained exact; however, the Commission claimed that 'Nine of the existing constituencies [i.e. half] would recognisably continue with only incremental adjustments'.

Just how extensive was the change? After the previous redistribution, Rallings and Thrasher (2007) assessed both the extent to which the previous constituencies had been changed (i.e. what percentage of the electorate of constituency X was reallocated to x, what percentage to y etc.) and the extent to which the new constituencies were comprised of parts of their predecessors (e.g. what percentage of new constituency x's electors came from old

objection was that a change to individual electoral registration proposed for 2014-2015 could significantly alter the pattern of seat allocations across the UK (Johnston and McLean, 2012), and therefore no redistribution should occur until that was completed.

¹⁰ Wales was for long over-represented in the House of Commons relative to England: at the 2010 general election the average constituency electorate in England was 71,882 compared to 56,545 in Wales; the figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland were 65,498 and 63,101 respectively.

constituency X, what percentage from Y etc...). From these figures we derived an index of change (ICx), defined using the standard deviation of those percentages. Thus, for example, in the Boundary Commission for England's proposals the existing Aldridge and Brownhills seat was split into two, with 81.68 per cent of the electorate allocated to one new constituency and 18.32 to another, giving a standard deviation of 44.90; by contrast, 51.03 of Basildon and Billericay's voters were allocated to one new constituency and 48.97 to another, giving a standard deviation of 1.46.

Where a constituency was unchanged the index was 0.0 (i.e. this applied to all pre-existing constituencies for which all of the wards together in 2007 remained together in a provisionally-recommended constituency and to all new constituencies where all of the wards together in a constituency in the recommendations had been together in the same 2007 constituency). For all others, the index varied between 0.01 and 71.0, with the larger indices indicative of less change. For ease of interpretation these have been inverted and rescaled as percentage values, with the smaller values indicating less change, so that

$$ICS_x = [(71 - IC_x)/71] * 100$$

Where ICx is the standard deviation for constituency x and ICSx is the standardised index. A value of ICSx for Aldridge and Brownhills of 37 therefore indicates that the change to that constituency was 37 per cent of the possible total (i.e. 100 represents the most extensive redistribution across two new constituencies); the value of 97.9 for Basildon and Billericay indicates the division was almost at the maximum possible. Indices were calculated for both the reallocation of electors from the pre-existing constituencies (the index of change from old to new) and the origin of electors for the proposed new constituencies (the index of change for new from old).

For comparative purposes, Table 1 shows the distribution of those indices for England and Wales at both the 2007 redistribution and in the 2011-2012 provisionally recommended constituencies, to appreciate the greater degree of change proposed by the Commissions using the new rules as against their final determinations in the last review under the old rules when electoral equality was not paramount. (There was no redistribution of seats in Scotland in 2007, so only the second set of indices is shown for that country and the data are not readily available for making the calculations for Northern Ireland.) Whether one looks at the first block of data, which shows the 'fate' of the pre-existing constituencies, or the second, which shows the composition of the new constituencies proposed in 2011-2012, the conclusion is clear: there was much more change proposed in the latest redistribution than in the one preceding it. In the first block of data for England, for example, whereas – of those constituencies where change was proposed (i.e. excluding the first column) – in 2007 only 77 of the 402 old constituencies had indices exceeding 50.0, indicating change of more than half of the maximum possible, in 2011 this was the case with 204 of the 378 constituencies involved. Similarly, in the second block of data which looks at the composition of the proposed new constituencies, just 77 of the 392 changed new constituencies in 2007 had indices of 50 or more, whereas in 2011 the figure was 225 out of 401. Similar differences are apparent for Wales, too, where there was very little change except in two areas at the 2007 redistribution. When the Commissions were operating under the old rules where continuity of community representation prevailed and the presumption was for minimal change unless a more extensive redistribution was necessary (in most cases because an area – such as a county in England – either gained or lost a seat between redistributions: Johnston et al., 2008,

illustrate this), therefore, change was much less than in 2011-12, when the arithmetic criterion was paramount.

Overall, Table 1 indicates that in the 2011-12 proposals change was considerably greater in Wales and England than in Scotland and Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland had no constituencies with index values above 75, and relatively few of the new Scottish constituencies had large indices. Greater change was to be expected in Wales because of the proportionately larger reduction in the number of constituencies there.

Why the greater change in England that, as one MP described it, was ‘somewhat more disruptive than we had in mind’ (Johnston et al., 2012b)? The legislation indicated that the Boundary Commission for England ‘may take into account, if and to such extent as they think fit, boundaries of the [nine] electoral regions’ used for elections to the European Parliament. (These are also the ‘standard regions’ used for much reporting of official statistics.)¹¹ After a public consultation the Commission decided to take that advice; seats were separately allocated to the regions, whose boundaries were not crossed by any of the proposed constituencies. Some of the nine regions had to lose more seats than others (Table 2). The first four shown there comprise the more rural areas whereas the other five contain the country’s metropolitan counties; in the former, the reduction of seats was only nine out of 242, whereas the latter had to lose 24 of their 258 MPs. All regions – with one exception, the Northeast – had a substantial proportion of their existing constituencies within the acceptable electorate size range (72,810-80,473) but there was considerable variation in the number of proposed new constituencies that were either totally unchanged or the existing constituency was unchanged but further wards were added to it so that it fell within the required range. Thus, for example, 9 of the 26 constituencies in the Eastern region were proposed unchanged, and 10 of the 19 in the East Midlands, compared to 4 of the 20 in both London and Yorkshire and the Humber and none of the 5 in the Northeast.

Table 3 shows the two sets of change indices for each region, emphasising the conclusion from Table 2 that the Boundary Commission for England proposed much more change to the existing set of constituencies in those regions where the reduction in number of MPs was to be greatest. In all but one region – the Northeast – some of the existing constituencies remained intact: as the Commission made clear in the introductory text to its nine volumes of proposals, ‘We have tried to retain existing constituencies as part of our initial proposals where possible, so long as the other factors can also be satisfied’. But there is a clear difference between the four ‘rural’ and the five ‘urban’ regions not only in the extent to which that was feasible (71 of the 234 new constituencies in the former regions had an index of 0.0, for example, compared to 28 of the 266 in the latter) but also in the extent of change proposed elsewhere: many more of the new ‘urban’ constituencies had change indices greater than 50, for example, and so would differ very substantially from their predecessors.

One clear conclusion from these data is that the greatest change was in the regions where the largest number of reductions in number of constituencies was proposed; ‘urban’ England was thus in a comparable situation to Wales. But there was a further reason for this difference which accounts for the extensive change in metropolitan England – the use of wards as the building blocks.

¹¹ Its ‘suggestion’ here was strengthened in later clauses – only added as an amendment by the House of Lords (the government’s original Bill allowed for no public inquiries or similar hearings) – specifying the regions as the areas within which public hearings should be held.

‘Split my ward or split my city’:¹² the problem in urban England

As already noted, the Boundary Commission for England was clear from the outset that it would use wards as the constituency building blocks unless this proved impossible. In the section on ‘Developing proposals – requirements and policy’ in its A Guide to the 2013 Review it stated that ‘The BCE uses wards (in district and borough council areas) and electoral divisions (in areas of unitary authorities that have a county status) as the basic building block’, using the term ward to refer to both types of area.¹³ The rationale for this is given in other documents. Its Newsletter of 4 March 2011 contained a long section on ‘Use of local government wards as building blocks for constituencies’ which presented three sets of reasons. The first was technical. Wards are clearly defined in Statutory Instruments and electoral statistics are available for them. The second was related to the organic criterion, so important in previous redistributions:

- ‘...wards are generally indicative of areas which have a broad community of interest’;
- ‘...wards have an identity that is generally known to the local electorate who understand how they are organised and where they may vote in them’; and
- ‘...local party political organisations are usually based on wards or groups of wards’.

The third set was operational:

- ‘...wards usually have an established and well run administrative machinery in place for organising elections within them’; and
- ‘The Commission’s experience from previous reviews also confirmed that any division of a ward between constituencies would be likely to break local ties, disrupt party political organisations, cause difficulties for Electoral Registration and Returning Officers and, possibly, cause confusion to the electorate’.¹⁴

The Commission recognised that in some situations it may not be feasible to sustain that policy, in which case it would use polling districts, into which many wards are subdivided, as the building blocks, but it stressed that ‘**in the absence of exceptional and compelling** circumstances ... it would not be proportionate or appropriate to divide wards in circumstances where it is possible to construct constituencies that meet the 5% statutory requirement without so doing’ (their emphasis). This approach was also stressed to the political parties in one of their meetings with the Commission at an early stage of the review: the Minutes of the meeting on 4 April 2011 have the Deputy Chairman stating that¹⁵

...the Commission would only split a ward if there was felt to be no realistic alternative in order to create a viable constituency. Counter-proposals could be submitted that included split wards, but reasons to split the ward would need to be compelling, and the representations would need to include robust data for the sub-ward level ...

This argument was clearly generally accepted by the national parties. Only one – the Liberal Democrats – made any proposals for split wards (and then only a small number) in their presentations at the public hearings, although one local Conservative party (Gloucester) did

¹² This phrase was used by Adrian Bailey in a number of representations to the Boundary Commission for England’s public hearings during late 2011: see his Locus blog – <http://ukelect.wordpress.com/>.

¹³ The Guide, the quotations are from paragraph 13, is available at <http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/publications/#guide>

¹⁴ Although, of course, and as the document also notes, no wards had been split in any of the three preceding reviews so it is difficult to appreciate how this ‘experience’ was gained.

¹⁵ These are available at

<http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/publications/#guide>

so, which the central organisation neither approved nor disapproved in its submission but requested that the Commission ‘pay serious attention’ to it.¹⁶

This policy decision regarding the use of wards exacerbated the Commission’s difficulties in creating seats that conform to the two other desiderata set out in the legislation – given the paramountcy of the size constraint: retaining existing constituencies unchanged and proposing seats that do not cross local authority boundaries. This problem is acute in urban England, especially the six metropolitan counties and Greater London, because of the large size of the building blocks relative to the size constraint: most wards there have electorates exceeding 7,663 – the range between the largest (80,473) and the smallest (72,810) allowed. Sheffield, for example, with an electorate of 378,810 was entitled to 4.94 constituencies, which could have been rounded to five within the +/-5 per cent constraint allowing the Commission to recommend constituencies that do not cross the city boundary. But Sheffield is divided into 28 wards with an average electorate of 13,529; if four constituencies were created each comprising six wards, the fifth would undoubtedly have been too small. To counter this problem, without splitting wards, the Commission recommended three constituencies entirely within Sheffield’s boundaries and three others. Two combined Sheffield wards with parts of Barnsley (where wards are on average somewhat smaller): Barnsley West and Ecclesfield comprised four Sheffield wards with average electorates of 13,896 and two from Barnsley averaging 8,749;¹⁷ Sheffield West and Penistone comprised five Sheffield wards (average electorate 14,226) with one from Barnsley (8,992). The other – Rotherham and Sheffield East – combined two Sheffield wards (previously in different constituencies: electorates of 14,711 and 13,787) with five from neighbouring Rotherham (average electorate 9,027), on the other side of the M1 motorway.

The Sheffield example indicates that unwillingness to split wards meant creating cross-borough boundary constituencies that otherwise might not have been necessary, with knock-on impacts on proposals for neighbouring boroughs. Large wards in one place were combined with smaller wards in one or more of its neighbours in order to create constituencies with the requisite number of electors. Those problems were even more extensive in Leeds, whose electorate of 541,763 entitled it to 7.1 constituencies. With 33 wards averaging 13,500 electors each it was not possible for the Commission to propose seven seats all of which would be contained within Leeds’ boundaries. Instead it proposed three – each of five wards – entirely within Leeds and five others which combined parts of Leeds with wards in Bradford (two constituencies), Kirklees, Wakefield, and North Yorkshire; the latter extended into the rural areas of Lower Nidderdale. Creating these cross-border constituencies created problems in adjacent authorities: in Kirklees, for example, the two towns of Batley and Dewsbury, each of which formerly had a constituency covering most if not all of the built-up area, were split between constituencies; Wakefield, too, no longer had a proposed seat covering the core of the urban area. In North Yorkshire County, all eight of the pre-existing

¹⁶ Interestingly, in his written representation to the Boundary Commission for England the Conservative MP for the Forest of Dean, Mark Harper (the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office responsible for steering the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act through Parliament) encouraged the Commission to explore ward-splitting, among other possibilities, to avoid the potential problems that would be caused by incorporating Gloucester city centre in his constituency. (His representation is number 024230, available at http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/have-your-say/?turn=&response_type=ip_reps&p_party=0®ion-1=55&resp_type=2&location=ps&dates=ps&surname=&search=Search&page_trans=&trans_order=&ip_order=&n=&ses=&page_ip=4.)

¹⁷ Interestingly, although 76 per cent of the electors live in Sheffield, the city does not appear in the proposed constituency name.

constituencies had 2011 electorates within the prescribed margins, and it was hoped by the parties and incumbent MPs that these would remain unchanged. Creation of the seat crossing its boundary with Leeds and two others crossing the boundary with Wakefield, however, meant that seven of the eight had to be changed: the failure to split wards in Leeds created the need for extensive change elsewhere that otherwise may not have been necessary.

Birmingham provides a third example. Its 40 wards average 18,293 electors and were formerly divided among 10 constituencies. But under the new rules its electorate of 731,731 meant that the city was entitled to 9.57 constituencies, so that at least one would have to cross the city boundary. Because of the ward sizes, however, the Commission found that it could only recommend seven entirely comprised of Birmingham wards (four each). The other twelve wards were allocated across six further constituencies: four of them contained one Birmingham ward only (in two cases wards from two other local authorities were combined with that Birmingham ward¹⁸); the other two contained four Birmingham wards each plus one (smaller) ward from a neighbouring authority.

The examples of Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield (which are repeated elsewhere in urban England, including cities outside the metropolitan counties such as Nottingham – but not Bristol) indicate that problems fitting constituencies within certain local government boundaries generated solutions that rippled into neighbouring authorities. This is clearly illustrated by the London Borough of Haringey (Figure 1). Its electorate of 150,040 entitles it to 1.96 constituencies, which could be rounded up to two with both having electorates within the +/-5 per cent limit. Of the two current constituencies – Tottenham, and Hornsey and Wood Green (Figure 1) – the former was slightly too small with an electorate of 70,162 and if two seats were to be created both entirely within the borough's boundaries some electors would have to be transferred to it from the Hornsey and Wood Green seat. That has four wards on the border with Tottenham; if any one of them was moved, however, although the electorate of the new Tottenham seat would then fall within the required range that of Hornsey and Wood Green would fall below it.¹⁹ Without splitting one of those wards, it was not possible to create two seats entirely contained within Haringey. As a consequence, the Boundary Commission recommended: a Hornsey and Wood Green seat comprising nine of its current wards less Stroud Green plus one ward from Enfield (to the north of Haringey); a Tottenham seat comprising eight of the current wards but excluding Seven Sisters and adding Stroud Green; and a Hackney North seat – to the south of Haringey – which included the Seven Sisters ward. By not splitting wards, therefore, the Commission created three seats that crossed borough boundaries and disturbed the current constituencies more than might otherwise have been necessary.

This example illustrates the general problem, which has five separate components:

1. The limited range of electorates for constituencies – the difference between the largest and smallest allowed electorates (72,810 and 80,263) is 7,663 voters;
2. Wards in urban areas are on average larger than that figure – 7,897 in the Haringey case;

¹⁸ In one of those seats, one ward from Birmingham and five from Solihull were combined with three from North Warwickshire, an authority (like North Yorkshire in the Leeds example) outside the metropolitan county.

¹⁹ They had 2010 electorates of 7,438, 7,866, 8,321 and 8,196. Adding any one of them to Tottenham would give it an electorate within the prescribed range, but removing any one of them from Hornsey and Wood Green would take its electorate to below 72,810.

3. Because electoral equality is a prime determinant in the definition of wards by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, the variation in ward electorates is small – 7,438-8,472 in the Haringey case;
4. Most local government areas have a fractional entitlement for constituencies (1.96 for Haringey); and
5. The number of wards per constituency is in many places a non-integer: Haringey has 19 wards so with two constituencies this would give a ward:constituency ratio of 9.5.

Together, these five components conspire against creating constituencies using wards as the building blocks which, as far as possible, fit within the local government and existing constituency maps while also meeting the size criterion.

These features were replicated throughout London's 32 boroughs (plus the City of London, which has an electorate of 5,933, smaller than almost all London wards). Table 4 gives the relevant data. Many boroughs would have to be combined with one or more of their neighbours because their constituency 'entitlement' (the electorate divided by 76,641) was far from an integer. Some appear to have characteristics that would allow them to be considered separately – Barnet, for example, has 21 wards and an entitlement to three constituencies – but the situation in neighbouring boroughs requires them to be linked with one of more others. The Haringey situation is repeated in some boroughs: two constituencies could presumably not be created in Greenwich, for example, because it has 21 wards most of whose electorates exceed 7,663 – a situation that applies in almost all of the boroughs, only six of which, excluding the City of London,²⁰ have ward mean electorates less than 7,663. (The larger the ward size the greater the probability that adding it to a possible constituency with an electorate just below 72,810 would take it above 80,473.) As a result, the Commission's recommendations had the following characteristics:

- 37 of the proposed 68 constituencies involved wards from two boroughs (in the 2007 redistribution this was the case with just 10 of the 73);²¹
- 9 boroughs lacked a single constituency comprising wards from that borough alone (Brent was split in five ways);
- only 2 boroughs (Bromley and Tower Hamlets) had no constituency containing wards from another borough; and
- several borough borders (Lambeth-Wandsworth; Croydon-Sutton; Brent-Harrow) were crossed by more than one constituency.

The Commission did not claim that this was the 'best' outcome with regard to the organic criteria – i.e. retaining as many of the existing constituencies as possible and having as few as possible crossing borough boundaries; it did, however, indicate that wherever possible it would propose constituencies that did not contain wards from more than two boroughs, which it achieved – with the exception of the proposed City of London and Islington South seat. The alternative configuration presented to the public hearings by the Conservative party retained five of the existing constituencies rather than the four in the Commission's scheme, for example. And one submitted by the present authors as a written representation left 11 of the existing constituencies unchanged;²² in addition 35 of their proposed constituencies comprised wards from a single borough only, compared to 30 in the Commission's scheme; and whereas the Commission's scheme divided one borough (Lambeth) between six

²⁰ In the past the City of London has been grouped in a constituency with (parts of) the City of Westminster. The Boundary Commission's 2011 proposals linked it with 2 wards from Camden and 7 from Islington.

²¹ One proposal contained wards from two separate boroughs plus the City of London.

²² All of the written representations are available at <http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/have-your-say/>.

constituencies and three (Brent, Ealing and Enfield) between five each, this alternative scheme split none into six and only two (Croydon and Enfield) between five.

Table 5 gives comparable data for the three metropolitan counties from which examples were drawn earlier in this paper, and shows that the problems there were even more acute because wards are on average larger than those in London (mainly because legislation requires that each ward returns three councillors:²³ with single-member wards there would be three times the number and the Boundary Commission's problem much reduced). Only two of the metropolitan boroughs (Barnsley and Wolverhampton) had even one ward with an electorate less than 7,633 and in nine of the 16 the mean ward electorate exceeded 10,000. Creating constituencies in the latter was very difficult without crossing boundaries to incorporate the slightly smaller wards in neighbouring boroughs and some crossing was undoubtedly necessary because of the non-integer 'entitlements' and constituency:ward ratios. Nevertheless, less disruption than that illustrated above for those areas might have been possible; in South Yorkshire, for example, Doncaster and Sheffield could each have had 'stand-alone' allocations, with one constituency crossing the Barnsley-Rotherham border.

The reason why that pattern was not recommended is clear – the Boundary Commission for England's unwillingness to split wards. This was not the case in either Northern Ireland (one split ward) or Wales (four). And in Scotland 29 wards were split, necessary because of the large average ward size there (ranging from 6,000 to 24,000) since the switch in the electoral system to the single transferrable vote in multi-member (3-4) wards. This had been the case when the Boundary Commission for Scotland produced new constituencies for elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2010, which caused few concerns among politicians and the general public (Boundary Commission for Scotland, 2010). It was repeated in the Commission's proposals for 50 UK Parliament constituencies in 2010, when it considered it 'impracticable ... to create constituencies by simply aggregating electoral wards' – especially given the parallel 'desire to fit [constituencies] within council area boundaries'. In Aberdeen, for example, the Commission faced a similar situation to that posed to the English Commission in Haringey. The city had 152,153 electors, entitling it to 1.99 constituencies. But with 13 wards averaging 11,704 electors it could not create two constituencies within the required electorate range using wards only. But by splitting just one (and following the current UK Parliamentary constituency boundary in doing so) it created two seats with electorates of 76,259 and 75,894.²⁴ In total, of the country's 353 electoral wards, 29 were divided between constituencies, 35 of which contained one or more part-wards (which again stimulated virtually no negative comment or, so far as we are aware, any serious administrative difficulties for Returning Officers at the 2011 Scottish Parliament election).²⁵

An experiment

²³ There is no similar legal requirement in Greater London where, nevertheless, three-quarters of all wards return three councillors and one-fifth return two.

²⁴ As well as Aberdeen, the Commission was also able to avoid crossing the city boundaries of both Edinburgh and Glasgow, but not Dundee.

²⁵ See The Electoral Commission, 2011, Report on the Scottish Parliament Election on 5 May 2011, Edinburgh: The Electoral Commission, where the EC finds just 2 instances where there was confusion over which constituency a polling station should report to – in Edinburgh & Argyll, affecting just 290 voters in total, plus a third instance at the 2010 UK election in Glasgow, affecting 700 voters, only 30 of whom were seriously troubled – though different seats in 2010 and 2011, obviously! This can be downloaded from www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/141614/SP-eelection-report-Final-Updated.pdf - see -. 56.

Given the Scottish experience, we conducted an experiment to assess both the impact of ward-splitting there and what might have occurred if that policy were also exercised in metropolitan England: London and the six metropolitan counties. (We could have extended the experiment to some of the country's largest non-metropolitan cities where similar problems might arise – Bristol, Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Portsmouth and Southampton, for example – but for the present purpose restricting the analysis to the major conurbations was sufficient.) The goal was to establish whether ward-splitting meant that there would be less overall change: more electors could be placed in constituencies with their local authority co-residents and more could be placed in constituencies which largely if not entirely comprised voters who had been in the same existing constituencies.²⁶

This experiment involves the concept of a sub-optimally placed (SP) elector – a person placed in a different constituency from the majority of others in the same pre-existing location. Three groups of SP electors are identified:

1. Those placed in a different constituency from the majority in their existing constituency. If constituency X currently has 70,000 electors, 63,000 of whom are allocated to constituency x by the Boundary Commission, 7,000 (10 per cent) are classified as SP;
2. Those placed in a different constituency from the majority in their local authority. If local authority Y has 200,000 electors, 175,000 of whom are allocated to constituencies wholly within local authority Y by the Boundary Commission, 25,000 (12.5 per cent) are classified as SP because they are placed in constituencies parts of which are located in local authorities other than Y; and
3. Those placed in a different constituency from the majority in their ward. If ward Z has 8,000 electors, which is split so that 6,000 are allocated to constituency z by the Boundary Commission, then 2,000 (25 per cent) are classified as SP because they are in a different constituency from the ward majority.

For Scotland we compared the number of SP electors in the Boundary Commission's provisional recommendations with those in an alternative set of 50 constituencies (the two 'protected' constituencies were excluded from the experiment) created without any ward-splitting. (Although there are many possible configurations, the relatively large ward sizes in Scotland meant that in some areas, notably in and around Glasgow, we could identify only one solution that met the arithmetic constraints. Elsewhere, where there was greater latitude we tried, as far as possible, to build on the pre-existing constituency template.) The first columns of Table 6 show that in the Commission's proposals, 29 per cent of electors were classified as SP according to existing seats (i.e. less than one-third were placed in constituencies which contained only a minority of the electors formerly together in the same seat); 8 per cent were classified as SP according to the local authority criterion (i.e. less than one-tenth were placed in a constituency which did not contain a majority of the electors registered in their local authority); and just 3 per cent were classified as SP because of ward-splitting. (It is not possible to sum the percentages to get a total SP figure, because an individual may be categorised as SP on more than one of the three criteria.)

The second set of two columns in Table 6 shows the comparable data from our simulation, in which there was no ward-splitting. The number of SP electors from the pre-existing constituencies is 36 per cent, compared to 29 per cent when ward-splitting was employed, and the number categorised as SP with respect to local authorities almost doubles, to 17 per

²⁶ Full details of all the calculations can be obtained from the authors.

cent. A small amount of ward-splitting, with just 3 per cent of the electorate split away from their ward majority, therefore, resulted in many fewer SP electors overall.

For the English case study, in the Commission's proposals 31 per cent of the 13.6 million metropolitan electors were classified as SP with respect to the existing seats and 12 per cent with respect to local authorities (the second pair of columns in Table 6). Our simulated set of constituencies with ward-splitting employed polling districts, using electoral data and maps obtained either from the relevant local authority website or the Electoral Registration Officer.²⁷ Wards were not divided as a matter of routine but just in those circumstances where to do so permitted significantly lower levels of disruption to either existing constituencies or local authority boundaries, or both. Only 64 wards were split – 21 of them in Greater London – which is less than one per local authority.²⁸

The outcome of this ward-splitting scenario is a very substantial reduction in the number of SP electors. The percentage so categorised with respect to the existing constituencies was almost halved and the number with respect to local authority boundaries was less than half of the 'no-ward-splitting' figure for the Boundary Commission's proposals. To achieve this reduction, only 190,000 of the 13.6 million electors (just 1.4 per cent of the total) were categorised as SP because of ward-splitting. That relatively small amount allowed the creation of one possible alternative set of constituencies that not only has many more whole constituencies within a single local authority than in the Boundary Commission for England's proposals but also much greater continuity of representation; many more electors are together in the same seats as before the redistribution. The organic criteria can be better met overall with a small amount of ward-splitting in areas where it is unlikely that wards and communities are coterminous.

A ward-splitting future?

This small (though time-consuming) experiment raises important questions regarding the Boundary Commission for England's policy on ward-splitting, which are salient not only to the conduct of elections but also to the future nature of Parliamentary representation in England. Part of the Commission's argument for not splitting wards related to the conduct of elections; it is undoubtedly the case that not splitting wards makes it easier for electoral administrators (especially if local authority elections are to be held on the same day as Parliamentary contests), but there is little evidence from Scotland – where an election was held for the Scottish Parliament in May 2011 using constituencies with more ward-splitting than the country's Commission has proposed for its next set of House of Commons constituencies – that ward splitting has created major difficulties for administrators, parties and electors; indeed analysis of the public consultations there showed that it was entirely uncontroversial (Johnston et al., 2013a). A second argument for not splitting relates to data at the sub-ward level: we had no difficulty obtaining data and reliable maps for polling districts in metropolitan England, however.

²⁷ None of the electoral data for polling districts are exactly accurate – i.e. comprise electors qualified to vote at general elections on the roll in February 2011 – which are the figures used by the Boundary Commission. Some come from an earlier register, some include those eligible to vote in local government but not Parliamentary elections, and some exclude postal voters. We thus had to make the (not altogether heroic) assumption that the proportion of a ward's electors registered in each polling district was reasonably accurately reflected in the available data and we then used the (absolutely correct) ward electorate – as reported to the Boundary Commission – as a control total.

²⁸ 15 were split in the West Midlands, 11 in West Yorkshire, 6 in South Yorkshire, 5 in Merseyside, 4 in Greater Manchester, and 2 in Tyne and Wear.

Finally, there is the argument that wards ‘are generally indicative of areas which have a broad community of interest’. This is an assertion rather than a claim based on research evidence – and may in any case be more relevant in rural areas than in large towns and cities. Wards with electorates exceeding 10,000 in very many cases are unlikely to be either socio-economically homogeneous or, given the criteria deployed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, which privilege electoral equality, coterminous with ‘communities’.²⁹ Their splitting – in a small number of cases – is no more likely to be disruptive and inconvenient than the Commission’s current proposals.

The Boundary Commission for England did change its policy on ward-splitting in one case when it published its revised recommendations in late 2012. There was a particular problem in the city of Gloucester, where the Commission’s initial proposals, as reported in its revised proposals,³⁰ ‘proved to be one of the most controversial’ in the region. Both the local Conservatives (supported by their MP but not by the national party organisation) and the Liberal Democrats made similar counter-proposals involving ward-splitting and – accepting that these involved ‘exceptional and compelling circumstances’ – the Commission agreed that there was ‘no more suitable alternative’ to addressing the problems identified than splitting two wards. This sets a precedent for arguments in favour of ward-splitting at the review which will start in 2016.

Apart from the technical and administrative issues, which the Scottish experience and our experiment reported here address, ward-splitting raises important questions regarding the role of community in redistributions. Which scale of community is more important to the geography of representation in the UK: that represented by local authorities, which – despite many anomalies and imperfections³¹ – are associated with places that have an identity with which both MPs and electors can associate; or that represented by wards, units created solely for the administration of local government elections and, especially in the large urban areas, with little link to communities of interest, despite the best efforts of the Local Government Boundary Commission? We have demonstrated here that a small amount of ward-splitting enables constituency maps to be created for urban England that are much more in synchrony with the local government map than those proposed by the Boundary Commission for England in 2011. This would undoubtedly be welcomed by MPs as making much easier their twin tasks of representing not just 76,641 individual electors but also one or more places with clear identities and issues to be addressed.³²

²⁹ In his oral evidence to the Boundary Commission for England’s public hearing in Lewisham on 25 October, 2011, for example, David Evennett MP noted that in Bexley ‘the local government ward boundaries do not equate with local communities at the last changes of the Local Government Boundary Commission, so different communities were put together...’. The transcript of the hearing is available at <http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/have-your-say/>. However, at the same hearing a Labour councillor, Alex Wilson, argued that wards should not be split because ‘wards are much more community possibly than you could argue constituencies are across London’.

³⁰ The report is available at <http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/whats-proposed/south-west/>.

³¹ Some urban places, such as Manchester and Bristol, are significantly under-bounded by the local government territory whereas others, such as Bradford, are substantially over-bounded.

³² Analysis of MPs participation in the public consultation procedure shows that they were divided on the issue of ward-splitting, in part reflecting their partisan electoral concerns (Johnston et al., 2014).

It would also probably be welcomed by MPs because of another consequence of ward-splitting indicated by our simulations: there would be less fracturing of the pre-existing constituency map, giving greater continuity of representation for areas – a central feature of the arguments which led MPs to change the periodicity of redistributions in 1958 and which the Commons and Lords debates over the current rules in 2010-2011 showed remain at the forefront of many Parliamentarians' concerns (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). Less rigidity in the attitude to the building blocks for constituencies could produce outcomes that many of those involved would find more satisfactory.³³

The very substantial change to the constituency map in both the initial and the revised proposals published by the Boundary Commissions in 2011-2012 was in considerable part the result of combining the change of rules with the reduction in the number of MPs. Many argued that any subsequent redistributions would involve less substantial changes, not only because they were scheduled to occur more frequently (and hence there would be less population change requiring a recalibration of constituency boundaries to ensure conformity with the arithmetic criterion) but also because there was no planned further reduction in the number of MPs.

This was undoubtedly somewhat optimistic. Changes in the distribution of electors could lead to alterations in the number of seats allocated not only to each of the four countries but also to each of England's nine regions (on which see Balinski et al., 2010): if, for example, Wales gained a seat in 2016, its entire constituency map may have to be redrawn, as would also be the case if either Northern Ireland or Northeast England had to either gain or lose a seat. Furthermore, local government rewording in a considerable number of areas between 2010 and 2016 will alter the building-blocks and stimulate change that could ripple out from the area rewarded into its neighbours³⁴ – as would also be the case in areas where one or more constituencies either grew or declined so that its electorate fell outwith the +/-5 per cent range. Given the decision to delay implementation of the new procedures until after the 2015 general election, however, it is likely that the Commissions' proposed changes then will be every bit as extensive as those introduced in 2012, if not more so – and that is without taking into account the impact of changing the nature of electoral registration from the current household canvass to the proposed individual process (Johnston and McLean, 2012).³⁵

Conclusions

In the debates over the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill in both Houses of Parliament during 2010-2011 many members placed continuity very high on the list of criteria to be deployed when creating a map of Parliamentary constituencies, so that their representatives can build up and sustain strong relationships with their constituents and local institutions. They also wanted those constituencies to conform to the geography of communities – to have a socio-economic and socio-cultural as well as a political identity. They accepted that some changes will occasionally be needed, and some anomalies (such as

³³ Of course, if the Boundary Commission for England was to undertake ward-splitting in the next redistribution (or was encouraged/instructed to by Parliament) that could mean extensive change from the existing constituencies again.

³⁴ Especially if the new wards are on average larger than those they replace: the Local Government Boundary Commission for England encourages all councils where rewording is to occur to consider the issue of council size, with a clear preference for smaller councils and fewer wards.

³⁵ The Bill was published in May 2012; its goal is to ensure a complete roll, with all eligible persons registered and a civil penalty for those who fail to do so. Calculations suggest that if this is achieved the regional distribution of seats would be substantially different from that in the current proposals. The main change would be in London, which could have 6-8 more seats than its current allocation of 68.

the detachment of one ward of Colchester built-up area from that town's constituency) to ensure that variations in constituency size do not become too large, but wanted those minimised.

Those promoting the changes to the rules for defining constituencies largely agreed with their critics, but argued that the current system is unfair and needs to be changed; variations in constituency electorates mean that some votes are worth much more than others, and this unfairness increases over time with population changes because of both the long period between redistributions under the then-current legislation and the long time that the Boundary Commissions have taken over recent redistributions. That argument prevailed – despite academic analyses that showed its relative weakness in relation to other sources of bias in the operation of the electoral system (Johnston et al., 2009; Thrasher et al., 2011); continuity and community remained as criteria to be deployed in quinquennial redistributions, but only within the unbreakable constraint that all UK constituencies should have an electorate within five percentage points of the national average.

These new rules were implemented by the Boundary Commissions in 2011-2013, each of which produced both initial recommendations for new constituencies to be used in the 2015 general election and revised recommendations after an intensive round of public consultation (Johnston et al., 2013a). The degree of change from the previous map was very substantial in both sets of recommendations – much greater than at previous redistributions (in part because implementation of the new rules has been combined with a 7 per cent reduction in the number of constituencies) and also much greater than, despite being forewarned, many MPs and other observers expected. Although the details of many of the proposed constituencies were altered as a result of the representations made during the public consultation process, the overall pattern of a very much changed map was not, especially in England's major urban areas where, as exemplified here, the constraints were such that extensive fragmentation was bound to occur.³⁶ The parties sought alterations to the proposals to better serve their electoral interests (demands for which were phrased in terms of community and continuity with no reference to partisan concerns); evaluation suggests that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were more successful at this than Labour (Johnston et al., 2013b, 2013c).

The crux of the decision for the Commissions to address before starting work on a redistribution in 2016, and an issue for public debate, is whether splitting wards creates greater damage to community representation than splitting local authorities. In the debates on the Bill some MPs and peers (including the Deputy Prime Minister, who sponsored the Bill on behalf of the government) indicated a desire to see wards retained as constituency building-blocks. They were, however, probably largely unaware of the likely consequences of this. The Boundary Commissions, as in the past, will undoubtedly follow a political lead over this issue (as they did at the previous review over the increase in number of MPs that the rules then being deployed meant was almost certainly a feature of all redistributions); it may

³⁶ As an example of this claim, both the Conservative and Labour parties (the latter through a submission from Shipley constituency party) presented alternative configurations during the public consultations which kept the eight current North Yorkshire constituencies unchanged, and grouped South and West Yorkshire counties together. Their proposals for Leeds displayed as much fracturing as the Boundary Commission's: both proposed only three constituencies entirely within Leeds' boundaries and six others combining Leeds wards with others from one of Bradford, Kirklees and Wakefield. The geographical constraints, with no ward-splitting, make such fracturing of local authority ties and continuity with past constituencies inevitable. The Commission accepted this case and its revised proposals retained the existing eight seats in North Yorkshire, but was unable also to reduce the fragmentation in South and West Yorkshire despite substantial changes to individual constituencies to try and meet the parties' concerns.

well be, for example, that the party(ies) which form the government after the 2015 general election will amend the Act before the review begins in 2016, and the debates over such an amendment could provide clear steers to the Commissions regarding this, and other, issues.

The issue is central to the future of political representation in the UK. Since 1958, the implicit theory underpinning redistributions has emphasised continuity and community: MPs should represent identifiable places, and changes to those constituencies should be as infrequent and small as possible, as long as gross inequalities in the ratio of constituents to MPs did not occur. The changes in the map of constituencies almost certain to emerge from the first redistribution under the new rules mean that the implicit theory will be eroded. The importance of continuity and community in constituency definition – the organic criteria that, although never made fully explicit, dominated in the second half of the twentieth century – will be very much reduced in the new map to be deployed at the 2020 general election, assuming that the legislation is unchanged, because of a combination of the insistence on very firm and tight size constraints and a decision by one Commission – responsible for five-sixths of the UK’s constituencies – to use building-blocks that are incommensurate with the task in virtually all of England’s urban areas. Continuity of representation will be very difficult to sustain given the likely changes because of both population movements and a change in the electoral registration procedure.

MPs address and refer to each other in the House of Commons by the name of the constituency – the place(s) – that they represent. The Boundary Commission for England states in its Guide to the current review that ‘the name should reflect the main population centre(s) contained in the constituency’: this means many more long names because the recommended constituencies incorporate parts of two or more separate places. (Of the 50 recommended constituencies for the Yorkshire and the Humber region, for example, 21 contain the names of two settlements as against 15 in the previous, larger, set.³⁷) Increasingly, such names will have less relevance.

This shift in the underlying theory of representation will continue, as an unintended consequence of the legislation and its interpretation. The 2011 Act was promoted almost entirely on an alternative – arithmetic – theory of fairness and equality, pressed by the largest party in the coalition government because it believed it was substantially disadvantaged by what it perceived as the current unfairness: many MPs and peers indicated the continued importance they placed on continuity and community – but largely because of the feared possible partisan consequences of the changes (Johnston and Pattie, 2011, 2012) – and most did not realise that this would be increasingly difficult to sustain given the over-riding arithmetic criterion. Similar arguments were rehearsed by the parties in their representations during the public consultation processes in 2011-2012 but, as normal in those contexts, their issues were raised to promote partisan interests rather than general principles regarding the nature of political representation.³⁸

³⁷ This was increased to 23 in the Liberal Democrat party’s alternative configuration of constituencies for the region, set out in its written representation.

³⁸ In some regions, such as the Northeast and Yorkshire and the Humber, it seems that the Liberal Democrats – who delegated the development of alternative schemes to regional organisations – did seek a holistic alternative structure rather than one which served their electoral interests: in the former region, for example, in their written representations they argued that all but one of the proposed constituencies should be changed and in the latter they proposed changes to the three Doncaster constituencies even though the Commission recommended that they be unchanged from those introduced in the 2007 review (and where the Liberal Democrats’ chances of winning a set are very slight).

The proposals for new constituencies published by the Boundary Commissions in 2011 and 2012 stimulated much concern among Parliamentarians and the political classes more generally – though less so in Northern Ireland and Scotland than England and Wales. During the elongated debates in the House of Lords, the government promised a review of the new procedures immediately after the 2015 election, but this has now been delayed and no review is now scheduled until after the Commissions report in 2018. At the core of any such review should be the nature of political representation in the UK under the current electoral system (it being assumed that the failed AV referendum in 2011 means that wider electoral reform is currently off the agenda). And if it is concluded, explicitly this time, that organic criteria – continuity of community representation – are more important than arithmetic, then the 2011 legislation may have to be amended, as occurred in 1958. Redistributions may be undertaken less frequently as a consequence; Commissions may be asked to pay less regard to ward boundaries than those of local authorities; or..... The alternative is that the decline of continuity in community representation will continue, producing a system of that few intended and many dislike?

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Table 1. The extent of change at the 2007 redistribution and in the 2011-2102 proposals, by country

Change Index	0	0.1 10.0	10.1 25.0	25.1 50.0	50.1 75.0	75.1 90.0	90.1 100.0
Old to New							
England							
2007 (529)	130	121	91	113	55	16	6
2011 (532)	154	20	55	99	112	71	21
Northern Ireland							
2011 (18)	4	1	3	5	5	0	0
Wales							
2007 (40)	27	6	2	3	1	0	1
2011 (40)	15	3	0	4	11	4	3
Scotland							
2011 (57)	10	3	3	14	10	14	3
New from Old							
England							
2007 (533)	141	128	86	101	55	18	4
2011 (500)	99	12	57	107	143	52	30
Northern Ireland							
2011 (16)	1	1	3	7	4	0	0
Wales							
2007 (40)	25	6	6	1	0	1	1
2011 (30)	0	1	0	7	12	5	5
Scotland							
2011 (50)	3	1	2	15	20	7	2

In the Old to New section of the table, an index of 0.0 applies to all cases where wards together in the previous set of constituencies (i.e. those defined in 2007 for the 2011 row) were in the same constituency in the new set; in the New from Old section, an index of 0.0 applies to all cases where the wards in a constituency in the new set were all together in the same constituency in the previous set.

Table 2. The changing distribution of constituencies by English region

	N	CL	WR	NC	NC+
East	58	2	26	9	13
East Midlands	46	2	19	10	7
Southeast	84	1	45	19	14
Southwest	54	4	20	4	7
London	73	5	20	4	7
Northeast	29	3	5	0	6
Northwest	75	7	22	7	11
West Midlands	59	5	20	10	5
Yorkshire/Humber	54	4	20	4	7

N – number of constituencies in the 2007 redistribution; CL – number of constituencies to be lost in the 2011 redistribution; WR – number of constituencies in the 2007 redistribution whose 2010 electorates were within the requisite size range for the 2011 redistribution; NC – number of constituencies in the 2011 proposals that were unchanged from the 2007 redistribution; NC+ – number of constituencies in the 2011 redistribution that were unchanged in the 2011 proposals but which had further wards added to them. The Isle of Wight is excluded.

Table 3. The extent of change in the 2011-2102 proposals, by English region

Change Index	0	0.1 10.0	10.1 25.0	25.1 50.0	50.1 75.0	75.1 90.0	90.1 100.0
Old to New							
East	22	2	6	10	13	2	3
East Midlands	17	2	5	8	9	3	2
Southeast	32	8	13	15	8	5	1
Southwest	21	3	7	8	11	4	1
London	11	0	11	10	27	11	3
Northeast	0	0	3	6	7	5	2
Northwest	18	2	4	16	19	14	2
West Midlands	15	2	4	11	10	14	3
Yorkshire/Humber	12	1	2	15	8	13	3
New from Old							
East	11	2	9	16	11	5	2
East Midlands	12	3	6	9	9	4	1
Southeast	29	3	13	20	10	4	2
Southwest	19	2	4	10	13	3	2
London	6	0	6	13	29	8	6
Northeast	0	0	5	5	10	2	4
Northwest	7	0	8	11	27	11	4
West Midlands	10	1	2	12	18	6	5
Yorkshire/Humber	5	1	4	11	16	9	4

The Isle of Wight is excluded.

Table 4. The electoral context in the London boroughs 2011

Borough	E	C	W	Min	Max	Mean	W:C
Barking	115,215	1.5	17	5,858	7,689	6,777	8.5
Barnet	222,379	2.9	21	9,654	12,094	10,589	7.0
Bexley	169,394	2.2	21	7,437	8,386	8,066	10.5
Brent	182,653	2.4	21	7,412	10,080	8,698	10.5
Bromley	230,828	3.0	22	4,070	12,312	10,492	7.3
Camden	137,175	1.8	18	6,660	8,654	7,621	9.0
City of London	5,933		[1]	-	-	5,933	
Croydon	243,641	3.2	24	6,849	10,982	10,152	8.0
Ealing	208,701	2.7	23	8,304	10,314	9,074	7.7
Enfield	196,049	2.6	21	7,912	10,670	9,336	7.0
Greenwich	159,670	2.1	17	7,082	10,522	9,392	8.5
Hackney	148,558	1.9	19	6,365	9,173	7,818	9.5
Hammersmith	109,338	1.4	16	4,894	8,208	6,833	16.0
Haringey	150,040	2.0	19	7,438	8,472	7,897	9.5
Harrow	165,363	2.2	21	7,168	9,173	7,874	10.5
Havering	180,545	2.4	18	8,880	11,545	10,030	9.0
Hillingdon	190,558	2.5	22	5,570	9,843	8,661	7.3
Hounslow	163,769	2.1	20	7,362	9,736	8,188	10.0
Islington	136,390	1.8	16	7,542	10,127	8,524	8.0
Kensington/Chelsea	86,412	1.1	18	4,100	5,626	4,801	18.0
Kingston	107,615	1.4	16	6,195	7,718	6,726	16.0
Lambeth	191,664	2.5	21	6,855	10,516	9,127	7.0
Lewisham	171,868	2.2	18	8,530	10,555	9,548	9.0
Merton	133,010	1.7	20	5,969	7,326	6,651	10.0
Newham	177,931	2.3	20	6,082	10,328	8,897	10.0
Redbridge	192,926	2.5	21	8,215	10,927	9,187	7.0
Richmond	128,846	1.6	18	6,613	7,583	7,158	9.0
Southwark	180,837	2.4	21	6,861	10,147	8,611	10.5
Sutton	133,615	1.7	18	6,646	7,986	7,423	9.0
Tower Hamlets	154,500	2.0	17	6,541	12,040	9,088	8.5
Waltham Forest	158,450	2.1	20	7,046	9,004	7,923	10.0
Wandsworth	207,888	2.7	20	9,332	11,106	10,394	6.7
Westminster	125,143	1.6	20	5,059	7,301	6,257	10.0
TOTAL	5,266,904	68.7	649	4,070	12,312	8,115	-

E – electorate; C – constituency entitlement; W – wards; Min – minimum ward electorate; Max – maximum ward electorate; Mean – mean ward electorate; W:C – ratio of number of wards to constituency entitlement (the former rounded to nearest whole number).

Table 5. The electoral context in three metropolitan counties 2011

Borough/City	E	C	W	Min	Max	Mean	W:C
South Yorkshire							
Barnsley	176,015	2.30	21	7,533	9,848	8,382	10.5
Doncaster	220,403	2.88	21	9,348	11,979	10,495	7.0
Rotherham	191,489	2.50	21	8,588	9,522	9,119	7.0
Sheffield	386,512	5.04	28	12,134	17,646	13,804	5.6
TOTAL	974,419	12.7	91	7,533	17,646	10,708	7.0
West Yorkshire							
Bradford	329,954	4.31	30	9,013	13,205	10,998	7.5
Calderdale	145,167	1.89	17	7,965	9,366	8,539	8.5
Kirklees	304,578	3.97	23	12,521	15,058	13,242	5.8
Leeds	545,338	7.11	33	14,500	19,030	16,525	4.7
Wakefield	252,021	3.29	21	10,561	13,505	12,002	7.0
TOTAL	1,577,058	20.6	124	7,935	19,030	12,718	5.9
West Midlands							
Birmingham	731,731	9.55	40	16,075	20,011	18,294	4.0
Coventry	224,755	2.93	18	11,449	14,050	12,486	6.0
Dudley	242,131	3.16	24	9,419	10,692	10,089	8.0
Sandwell	219,710	2.86	24	7,702	9,989	9,154	8.0
Solihull	160,782	2.10	17	8,412	10,510	9,458	8.5
Walsall	191,056	2.49	20	8,402	10,907	9,553	10.0
Wolverhampton	172,294	2.25	20	6,407	9,979	8,615	10.0
TOTAL	1,942,459	25.3	163	6,407	20,011	11,917	6.5

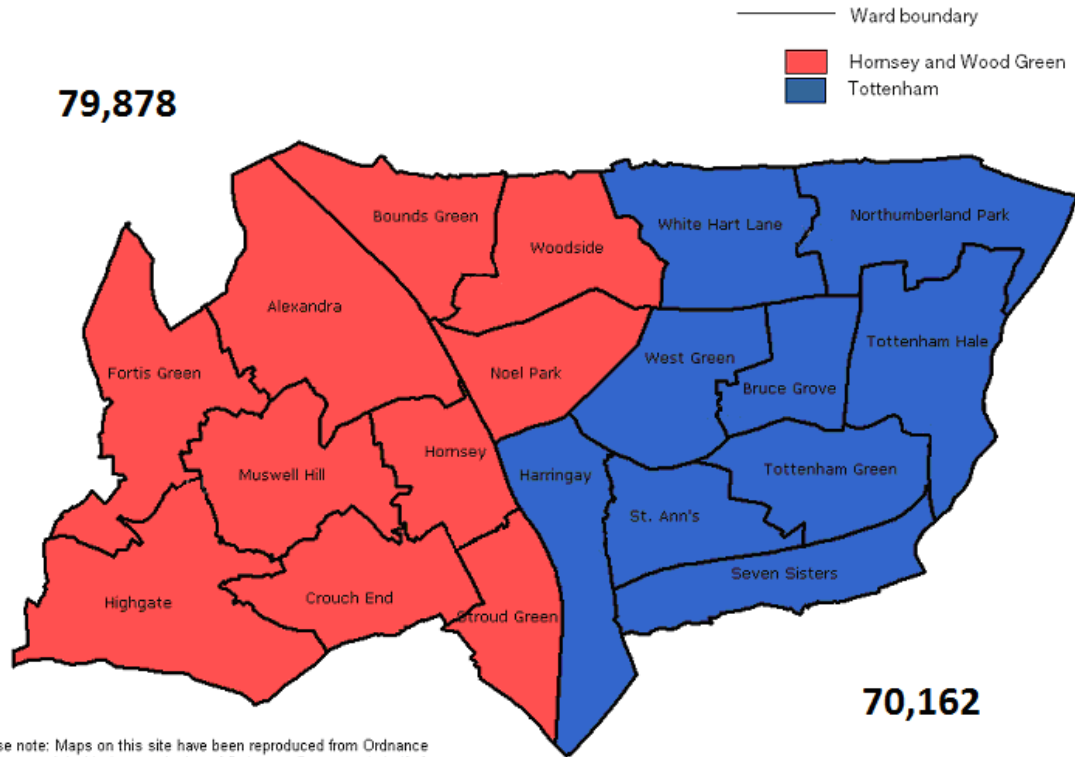
E – electorate; C – constituency entitlement; W – wards; Min – minimum ward electorate; Max – maximum ward electorate; Mean – mean ward electorate; W:C – ratio of number of wards to constituency entitlement (the former rounded to nearest whole number).

Table 6. The results of experiments with split wards – Scotland and Metropolitan England

	Electors With	%*	Electors Without	%*
Split wards				
Scotland				
Suboptimally Placed electors for				
Existing seats	1,125,201	29	1,398,269	36
Local authorities	328,783	9	639,239	17
Split wards	119,340	3	0	-
Total electorate	3,873,387			
Metropolitan England				
Existing seats	2,210,000	16	4,231,608	31
Local authorities	760,000	6	1,621,930	12
Split wards	190,000	1	0	-
Total electorate	13,557,934			

* The percentages are of the total electorate (of Scotland in the first example and Metropolitan England in the second)

Figure 1. Constituencies in the London Borough of Haringey after the 2007 redistribution, with their 2011 electorates. (Source: contains Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright and database right.)



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