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MPs' Responses to a Proposed New Constituency Map: Electoral Prospects, Community Ties and Party Organisation¹

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Until new legislation was passed in 2011, community ties and continuity of representation were the major criteria deployed by the United Kingdom's Boundary Commissions when defining Parliamentary constituency boundaries. Equality of electorates is now the paramount criterion, and the Commissions' first proposals using that new format substantially fractured many of the existing constituencies. MPs were able to respond to the Commissions' proposals under the altered public consultation procedures. Only a small majority did so, however: there were significant differences across the political parties in both response rates and the nature of the responses, the majority of which used community ties as the main grounds for either supporting or opposing the Commissions' proposals.

Keywords: *constituencies, MPs, community advocacy, redistributions*

The loss of a seat in the Commons equates to a major bereavement. An intense relationship exists between the modern MP and his or her constituency. You are there every week, making love to it, ministering to those with problems, in return enjoying their flattering attentions. Suddenly, they have run off with a total stranger....

(Lipsey, 2012, 140)

Members of the United Kingdom's House of Commons refer to their colleagues in the chamber not by personal name but by the name of the constituency they represent. This reflects one of their two main roles (Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, 2011, p.38; see also Morris, 2012): (1) as legislators, debating, making and reviewing laws and government policy within Parliament; and (b) as advocates for the constituencies they represent.² The Report continues that:

It is important to recognise that a Member's responsibilities rest jointly and concurrently at Westminster and in the constituency. It is a modern requirement of the job that a Member has an office in both places and there is a strong public expectation

¹ Some of the research for this paper was funded by a grant from the British Academy (Grant SG111341), which is gratefully acknowledged. We are also grateful to officials of the three main British political parties (Greg Cook, Rob Hayward, Roger Pratt and Tom Smithard) and to the Secretaries of the four Boundary Commissions for their collaboration in that work.

² The paragraph continues: 'The MP can speak for the interests and concerns of constituents in Parliamentary debates and, if appropriate, intercede with Ministers on their behalf. The MP can speak either on behalf of the constituency as a whole, or to help constituents who are in difficulty (an MP represents all their constituents, whether or not the individual voted for them). Within the constituency an MP and his or her staff will seek to support individual constituents by getting information for them and working to resolve a problem.'

that when not required at Westminster, Members will actively participate in the life of the constituency....³

The intensity of that constituency role has increased very substantially in recent decades (Cain et al, 1987; Norton & Wood, 1993; Norton, 1994, 1999; Norris, 1997; Gaines, 1998; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Childs and Cowley, 2011; Rush & Giddings, 2011 – see also Koop, 2012); most MPs now not only have a home there but also spend much time working with, in and for the communities they represent.⁴

Since 1944 the four UK Boundary Commissions have regularly reviewed the map of constituencies to ensure that their boundaries continue to meet the criteria set out in the Rules for Redistribution.⁵ Those exercises included a public consultation procedure, in which interested parties could make both written representations about the Commissions' proposals and oral submissions at Local Inquiries (Johnston et al., 2013). Many MPs have done so, either supporting or opposing a proposal for their area, with their arguments for the latter usually being because it unnecessarily breaks up established communities, destroys well-established organisational structures and creates new configurations that lack a sense of common identity and interests. In most cases they – or their party – have also presented counter-proposals which they claim better reflect the area's community structure. They cannot mention the likely electoral consequences of any changes because the Commissions' considerations are strictly non-partisan. However, a major goal for parties is that their MPs are re-elected and so – as analyses of earlier redistributions show (Rossiter et al., 1999) – they use such community-based arguments to press their electoral causes.

When faced with a potential dislocation of the communities they represent, therefore, MPs are faced with Hirschmann's (1970) classic choice set of 'exit, voice, and loyalty' (Pattie et al., 1997; Rossiter et al., 1999). The loyalty option involves accepting the Commission's proposals, either implicitly by making no representations or explicitly through a positive submission welcoming them. A few may take the exit option, deciding either to retire or to seek a seat elsewhere, although most do so only after deploying the third option – voice. Parties want to ensure that a review outcome is as favourable as possible to their electoral interests and at recent redistributions the Conservative and Labour parties have produced well-researched counter-proposals for each local area and mobilised their MPs (along with local party officers, local government councillors and others) to support these with arguments based almost invariably on community identification and the desire for continuity of representation. Promoting the MP's community role has thus become a highly significant feature of the public consultations – with the parties sometimes disagreeing on an area's community structure.⁶

³ The same argument was also rehearsed during a debate on the Boundary Commissions' proposals in the House of Lords on 12 July, 2012 (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldhansrd/text/120712-0001.htm#12071248000733>)

⁴ Morris (2012, 56) notes with surprise, however, there is no requirement that MPs live in their constituencies. The European Court of Human Rights has identified 'community ties' as an acceptable criterion that a local party can apply when selecting its candidates. She also notes (p.145) that one of the criteria for constituents demanding a recall election could be 'a delegate who does not pay attention to the wishes of the electorate ... [failing] to speak properly on behalf of their constituents'. A draft *Recall of MPs Bill* was published by the UK government in December 2011 – <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm82/8241/8241.pdf> - but this does not cover those issues, only (criminal) misconduct.

⁵ *The House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1944, 1949 and 1958* and the *Parliamentary Constituencies Act, 1986*.

⁶ In the City of Portsmouth, for example, the Liberal Democrats hoped to retain one of the two seats in 2015, which was only feasible if one of the city's wards was split so that the city could have a North and a South seat rather than an East and West as in the Boundary Commission's initial proposals published in 2011. Cases were

In 2011, Parliament passed the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act*, which both reduced the number of MPs and changed the Rules for Redistributions.⁷ All involved recognised that their application at the next review would disrupt the constituency map much more than at its immediate predecessors (Johnston and Pattie, 2012; Rossiter et al., 2012a, 2012b): in England, for example, whereas in the previous redistribution only 77 of the 532 constituencies were changed by 50 per cent or more, that was the case with 203 in the Boundary Commission's 2011 proposals. The parties identified preferred configurations of seats for each area and mobilised support for their counter-proposals, ensuring that many MPs realised the substantial impact this could have on the communities they had developed close working relationships with. The exercise of MPs' voice in defence of their constituencies and communities should therefore have been a major element in the new situation and this paper explores the extent to which they used the voice option during that exercise, and whether variations in their participation were linked to electoral and community concerns.

UK Parliamentary redistributions

Until 2011, constituencies were designed, as far as possible, to comprise compact territorial units that fitted within the boundaries of local government areas (counties and boroughs), with each MP representing approximately the same number of electors: after 1992 redistributions occurred every 8-12 years. Continuity of representation was built-in to the system; a 1958 Act required the Commissions to take into account 'the inconveniences attendant on alterations of constituencies' and 'any local ties that would be broken by such alterations'. Organic criteria – the representation of communities – were thus paramount and the Home Secretary indicated that there was 'a presumption against making changes unless there is a very strong case for them' (*House of Commons Hansard*, 582, 11 February 1958, col. 230). Many of the recommended alterations at subsequent redistributions were relatively minor: substantial changes were only proposed in local authorities where population change meant either an increase or decrease in the number of seats (Rossiter et al., 1999; Johnston et al., 2008).

The 1958 Act also introduced a formal public consultation procedure including Local Inquiries, held after submission of written representations about a Commissions' provisional recommendations. The Inquiries were chaired by an Assistant Commissioner, who advised the relevant Commission whether its proposals should be modified in the light of the evidence received. Over the next fifty years, those Inquiries were important forums for debating changes and the political parties became increasingly sophisticated in preparing cases to present there.

After the 2001 general election the Conservative party began to question this system's efficacy. Although the Commissions are non-partisan, nevertheless the outcomes of their work appeared to favour Labour, which at each of the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections not only gained a disproportionate share of the seats relative to its share of the votes cast but

made at the Public Hearing that the particular ward which the Liberal Democrats wanted to split comprised two separate communities with their own identity and facilities. Against that, the Conservatives – who hoped to win both of the city's seats at the next election – argued that the ward should not be split because it constituted a single community.

⁷ The Act also legislated for the May 2011 referendum on changing the voting system for UK general elections to the Alternative Vote.

was also much more favourably treated than the Conservatives would have been with the same vote shares (Johnston et al., 2001, 2006). This pro-Labour bias resulted from a number of components of which one – although not the most important (Johnston et al., 2001; Rallings et al, 2008; Borisyuk et al., 2010; Thrasher et al., 2011) – was differences in constituency electorates. The Conservatives tended to win constituencies with above average electorates whereas Labour won in the smaller seats, and that difference tended to grow over time – the general population trend was away from the smaller city seats where Labour dominated towards the larger, more rural seats most of which were Conservative won.

To remove this bias source, in 2010 the coalition government proposed changed Rules for Redistributions. An arithmetic criterion was made the paramount factor; all seats (with four named exceptions reflecting special geographical circumstances – islands) had to have electorates within +/-5 per cent of a national quota, and only within that constraint could Commissions take organic criteria such as local authority boundaries, communities of interest and disruption from the previous pattern into account. (When calculated in 2011 the quota was 76,643, so all constituency electorates had to be between 72,810-80,473.) The Bill also reduced the number of MPs and increased the frequency of redistributions to fit the quinquennial electoral cycle established by the *Fixed Term Parliaments Act, 2011* (Johnston & Pattie, 2012).

The *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, 2011*, also changed the public consultation process. The government's initial intention was to abolish Local Inquiries and allow written representations only. Many within the political parties (especially Labour) opposed this and after much debate in the House of Lords the government conceded to their pressure (Johnston & Pattie, 2011). Rather than reinstate Local Inquiries, which its spokesperson had characterised as 'not fit for purpose' and satisfying 'the urges of political parties to put their case at considerable length, but ... rarely successful in engaging the general public' (*House of Lords Hansard*, 8 February 2011, column 128), however, it replaced them by Public Hearings (Johnston et al., 2013). These, limited in both number and length, were to take place in the 5th-10th weeks of the 12-week period for making written representations after publication of initial proposals for an area (the previous Inquiries were held after the closing date for written submissions).

For the first review under the new rules these Hearings, held in late 2011 and early 2012, were as dominated by the political parties and their allies as their predecessor Inquiries (Johnston et al., 2013). In England, for example, at the first – 'Lead' – Hearing in each region all three political parties were given 40 minutes to present their overall response to the Commission's proposals, including any counter-proposals. The remainder of the time there and at most of the region's subsequent Hearings was dominated by individuals (party officials, MPs, and elected councillors) mobilised to speak in favour of the party's overall case – either supporting the Commission's proposals or providing further advocacy for their party's counter-proposals.⁸

At the outset of the exercise, the Commissions indicated that the constituency map would have to change markedly. In England, for example, only 200 of the then-current constituency electorates fell within the prescribed range and the Commissions warned that many of these

⁸ In Wales, all four parties made such a country-wide presentation at the first day of the first Hearing. They also were given time to make an overall conclusion at the start of the final hearing, in which they could respond to the other parties' proposals; such a response was not allowed at the English Hearings. In neither Scotland nor Northern Ireland was a similar procedure adopted.

could not remain unchanged because of necessary alterations to neighbouring seats that fell outwith the range. Furthermore, all parts of the country were to lose seats: England's complement was to fall from 533 to 502, Scotland's from 59 to 52, and Northern Ireland's from 18 to 16; Wales was to lose one-quarter of its 40 constituencies.⁹ Many MPs therefore faced substantial changes to their constituencies: how did they respond?

MPs' representations

Fracturing of their constituency during a redistribution poses two considerable potential threats to MPs. First, it may make the seat less winnable at the next election. Secondly, irrespective of the new seat's 'winnability', boundary changes mean that continuity of representation and relationships – including with local authorities in the area – will be broken and new ones have to be established, alongside a restructuring of the MP's support base; the local party organisations would have to be rebuilt, for example.¹⁰ In general terms, therefore, the greater the change to a constituency in the Commission's proposals the greater the likelihood that a party and its MP would challenge them.

In the new public consultation procedure, MPs can make both a written representation within the twelve-week period and/or oral submissions at the relevant region's Public Hearings. Data derived from Hearings transcripts and the full set of written submissions published on the Commissions' websites show that 53 per cent of all MPs followed one or both of those options (Table 1).¹¹ Most used only one mode, and were twice as likely to make a written as an oral representation: 14 per cent of all 650 MPs both made a written representation and spoke at a Public Hearing.

There was considerable variation across the parties in the extent of MPs' participation. Whereas some two-thirds of Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs made representations, only 42 per cent of Labour's MPs did so; oral representations were much more common among Liberal Democrat MPs. No Northern Ireland MPs made any representation: one oral submission was presented as being on behalf of an MP, who would be submitting a written representation – but he did not.¹² In Wales, none of the three Plaid Cymru MPs either spoke or wrote, and in Scotland only one SNP MP wrote and none spoke. (The response rate was generally low in Scotland: two-thirds of MPs made no representations, compared to 55 per cent of Welsh MPs and 42 per cent of England's.)

That almost half of MPs played no direct part in the public consultation process, given the major disruption involved, is perhaps surprising. To establish whether those whose seats were

⁹ Until the 2011 Act each country had a separate electoral quota (that for Scotland was set as the same as the English quota for the first review after devolution only). Wales had by far the smallest: at the 2010 general election the average constituency there had 56,545 electors, compared to 71,891 in the average English constituency.

¹⁰ Because of the fracturing and much greater crossing of local government boundaries than in the past, this would be a more difficult task. In Greater London, for example, the Commission's original proposals had 37 of the 68 seats including wards from two local authorities, compared to only 10 of the 73 at the previous redistribution.

¹¹ The Commissions' website are: <http://consultation.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/>; <http://www.bcomm-scotland.independent.gov.uk/>; <http://bcomm-wales.gov.uk/?lang=en>; and <http://www.boundarycommission.org.uk/> (Northern Ireland).

¹² In Scotland a party official claimed to be speaking for the two Aberdeen MPs at one of the Hearings but as they made no written submissions they have not been included in the statistics here as having made representations to the Commission.

little altered were less likely to make representations, an Index of Change was calculated for each existing constituency which varied from 0 – no change – to 100 – the maximum possible. A constituency with 51 per cent of its voters allocated to one proposed new constituency and 49 per cent to another had an index close to 100; for one with 98 per cent allocated to one of the new constituencies and 1 per cent each to two others it was close to zero. (A full description of the index is in Rossiter et al., 2012.)

The final column of Table 2 shows the number of constituencies according to a classification based on that index (Northern Ireland and the seats represented by the Speaker and the Green Party – neither of whom made any representation – are excluded from this and later tables). There was an index of zero for 181 seats, which includes both those constituencies that neither lost nor gained electors from the previous set plus those where the existing constituency remained intact but additional electors were added to bring it within the size range. Few of the others were changed only slightly (an index of 1-10) and over 100 had an index of 76 or more, indicating very substantial dismemberment of the existing seat. The other columns indicate the percentage of MPs in those seats according to the nature of their submissions. Although there are some clear trends – notably the increasing percentage of MPs who made both types of submission the greater the proposed change – there are also some surprises, not least the absence of any difference in the proportion of affected MPs who made no submission between the unchanged seats and those with the greatest amount of change.

Two reasons can be suggested for these findings. The first applies to the relatively large number of submissions received regarding seats that were to be either unchanged or only marginally so. The Boundary Commissions encourage positive as well as negative representations, and many of those received commended the proposals and encouraged the relevant Commission not to change them. In some cases the incentive for a positive response may have been that an MP's party feared that opponents would seek changes to the proposed seat, to its electoral disadvantage, so a submission was desirable to sustain the Commission in its original intention. In addition, some MPs may see even proposed minor changes as disadvantageous – splitting an established community, for example – and suggest an alternative, probably only slightly different from that proposed.

To evaluate these potential explanations MPs' submissions were assessed as to whether they were positively or negatively disposed towards the proposal for their current constituency.¹³ We expected that the smaller the amount of change proposed, the greater the probability of a positive response, which Table 3 supports. Although 24 per cent of all MPs expressed approval, there were substantial differences depending on the amount of change proposed – in the expected direction. Where the Index was zero those MPs who responded were over three times more likely to approve of the proposal than object to it: where change was very substantial, they were six times more likely to oppose than favour it.

The second potential explanation concerns the absence of submissions from some MPs representing seats subject to substantial change.¹⁴ Extensive change may not significantly alter a seat's 'winnability' for the MP's party, providing no stimulus to oppose it. Nevertheless, even if that were the case, the community that the MP formerly represented

¹³ For example, at the Exeter Public Hearing Ben Bradshaw MP spoke in favour of the proposal for his Exeter constituency, which was to be unchanged, but also in favour of the Labour party's counter-proposals for Plymouth: his response is treated as a positive one here.

¹⁴ Some may have already decided to retire at the next general election and so leave the issue to their party.

may be fractured. Given the MP's role as community advocate, this would seem undesirable – even if the outcome was electorally favourable – but the MP may be reluctant to challenge the proposals publicly (even if her/his party does). If an MP tells a Public Hearing that, in effect, 'I don't want to represent these people' (residents of wards formerly outwith the MP's constituency¹⁵) but the Commission's final decision does not change the proposal, some 'new' voters may not be favourably inclined towards the candidate now seeking their support.¹⁶ Silence may be the better strategy in such circumstances, especially if there is no likely negative electoral consequence.

To evaluate this argument, we used estimates of the electoral complexion of each proposed new constituency if the 2010 election had been held in those new seats.¹⁷ Each MP was allocated to the new constituency which included the largest component of her/his current seat. The expectation was that, however much change was proposed, the safer the new seat for the 'incumbent MP', whom we assumed would be the party's candidate there, the less likely that he or she would make a submission.

Table 4 fully sustains that argument. Of the 283 MPs who made no submission, almost half 'inherited' constituencies which their party would have won by a margin of at least 20 percentage points if the 2010 general election had been fought there: MPs were generally silent where the Commissions' proposals favoured them electorally, however extensive the change.¹⁸ Further supporting evidence is the percentage of MPs who did respond – according to both the extent of proposed change to their current constituency and the marginality of their 'new' one – and who spoke/wrote against the Commissions' proposal. Because of a small number of constituencies in some cells, the percentages in Table 5 are only reported for rows containing ten or more seats. The more marginal the new seat, the greater the probability that an MP spoke and/or wrote against the Commission's proposal.

Evaluating the pattern and nature of the voice option

Tables 2-5 largely support the arguments adduced here regarding which MPs used the voice option. Some of the factors considered may be inter-related, however (seats held by Labour MPs may be more fractured on average, for example, since the proposed amount of change to the constituency map was greatest in urban areas: Rossiter et al., 2012), so the interpretations

¹⁵ In most cases – the main exception is Scotland (Rossiter et al., 2012) – the constituency building-blocks are local government wards, whose electoral composition is known.

¹⁶ We are grateful to Lewis Baston for raising this possibility with us.

¹⁷ These data were computed by Anthony Wells of YouGov, using a method based on that developed by Rallings and Thrasher (2007) for estimating party strength in each new constituency. They are available on his website at <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/>. We are grateful to him for permission to use them here.

¹⁸ One example of this, concerns the Till and Wylde Valley ward in Wiltshire, part of the current Salisbury constituency. Local councillors opposed moving the ward into the proposed Warminster and Shaftesbury seat, and apparently gained the support of their local Conservative MP, John Glen (according to the *Salisbury Journal*: http://www.salisburyjournal.co.uk/news/salisbury/salisburynews/9311418.Political_foes_join_forces_to_fight_boundary_changes/). There were 36 written representations from within the Salisbury constituency, all but two of which objected to that specific proposal; an objection was also made on behalf of the local Conservatives (the objector said that local Liberal Democrats agreed with him) but their MP made no representations, and the issue was not raised in the Conservative party's overall regional response. It was, however, raised by the Liberal Democrats (and their MP for the nearby Chippenham seat), who proposed a switch of wards between the two constituencies that would keep Till and Wylde Valley in the Salisbury seat. (Salisbury was won by the Conservatives in 2010 with a majority of 12.3 per cent and Anthony Wells' estimated margin of victory for the proposed seat is 13.8 per cent.) The Commission adopted the Liberal Democrat counter-proposal in its revised recommendations.

were checked by two binary logistic regressions; both excluded Northern Ireland MPs, the Speaker and the single Green Party MP, plus the three Plaid Cymru and six SNP MPs (because of the small number of cases; only one of the nine made a submission). Four sets of independent variables were included: country, party, index of change, and the proposed constituency's estimated marginality. As all are categorical variables, the coefficients contrast each group with a comparator; Table 6 gives the regression coefficients, their statistical significance and the associated exponent.

The first regression (Table 6 – columns 1-2) contrasted those among the 621 MPs who made a submission (oral or written, or both – coded 1) with those who did not (coded 0). The goodness-of-fit coefficients indicate a substantial improvement between the final model (with all variables included) and the null model (with membership of the categories randomly allocated): the percentage of the observations correctly classified increases from 56 to 65. Scottish MPs were less likely to make a submission than their English counterparts, though this difference was only marginally significant; there was no significant difference between English and Welsh MPs. There was no difference in rates between Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs, but a very substantial, and highly significant, one between Conservative (and also, by implication, Liberal Democrat) and Labour MPs; the latter were only 0.36 as likely to make a submission as their Conservative contemporaries.

MPs representing constituencies for which the proposals involved substantial fracturing (Index values of 51-90) were at least twice as likely to make a submission as those whose seat was either to remain unchanged or (by implication) be little changed. But – as indicated in Table 2 and discussed earlier – the relatively small number representing seats facing the largest amount of change were no more likely to make representations. Finally, those whose new seats would be extremely safe for the party at the next election were only just over half-as-likely (an exponent of 0.56) to make a submission as those who would be faced with defending an extremely marginal constituency.

The second regression (Table 6, columns 3-4) looks only at those 345 MPs who made a submission: the dependent variable is whether that submission was against (coded 1) or for (coded 0) the Commission's proposal. Again, the goodness-of-fit statistics show that the full model accounts for a substantially larger proportion of the variation than the null model, with statistically significant coefficients for all four independent variables. The first group again shows no difference between English and Welsh MPs, but their Scottish counterparts were much less likely to make a negative submission compared to the English – an exponent of just 0.21. Both Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs who made representations were more than twice as likely to be against the proposals as their Conservative counterparts. The differences according to the Index of Change were even larger: the greater the proposed change the greater the probability that the MP opposed it – about twenty times greater for those representing seats with the most change as against those with least. Finally, the safer the seat that the MP was likely to 'inherit' the smaller the probability of a negative.

Accounting for inter-party variations

These findings are very largely in line with expectations. But why were Labour MPs much less likely to participate? It was not because they were less affected by the changes overall: 26 per cent of all Labour MPs represented constituencies with an Index exceeding 75, compared to 12 and 17 per cent for their Conservative and Liberal Democrat counterparts respectively. Nor were they any more likely to be allocated safe seats: 43 per cent of Labour

MPs would ‘inherit’ seats with winning margins of 20 percentage points or more compared to 45 per cent of Conservatives, although the percentage was just 14 for Liberal Democrats.

The probable reason lies in the three parties’ approaches to the redistribution. At the Fourth Periodic Review (1990-1995) the Labour party pioneered an intensive approach to redistributions, mobilising local support behind its counter-proposals (with major party figures ensuring that MPs and local activists followed the party line); as a result, it was able to persuade the Commissions to recommend revised proposals that were more to Labour’s electoral advantage (Rossiter et al., 1999). For the 2011 redistribution the Conservatives were much better prepared than their opponents, however: party officials had worked on the new rules before the legislation was introduced and undertook a great deal of preparatory work, with regional officials mobilising MPs and others to support their counter-proposals at the Public Hearings and in written representations. Labour, by contrast, had a much lower profile at the Hearings – in part reflecting both the party’s financial condition and its lack of political leadership committed to the task. The official who handled the previous review presented its case at all of the Lead Hearings in England and Wales, but rarely stayed for the rest of that day, let alone the full Hearing, and did not attend the later Hearings. His limited participation was reflected in the relatively low level of mobilisation of MPs and other supporters: only 290 Labour ‘representatives’ spoke at the Hearings in England, for example, compared to 410 Conservatives and 115 Liberal Democrats;¹⁹ the figures for Wales were 16, 51 and 4, and for Scotland (where the Conservatives had only one incumbent MP) 16, 15 and 19 (Johnston et al., 2013).

A clear illustration of the relative weakness of Labour’s participation was in the Yorkshire and the Humber region. Because of problems created by large ward sizes in Sheffield and Leeds, the degree of fracturing of many existing constituencies there was substantial (Rossiter et al., 2012): although eleven Labour MPs had unchanged constituencies in the Commission’s proposals, 13 of the other 21 were in seats with Indexes exceeding 50 (nine of the region’s Conservatives held seats with similar high values, and only one represented an unchanged seat). But the Labour party presented no counter-proposals at the Lead Hearing; its presentation and supporting document simply ‘reserved its position’, as did its later written submission which included statements, such as that referring to the Hull area: ‘We do not ... believe that there is any perfect solution to these problems and would reserve our position on any counter proposal that may be made’. The relevant section of the document ended with statements that

The Labour Party does not wish at this stage to make any objections to these proposals, although we understand the scale of disruption which they would imply for the representational patterns in the region

and

We will again reserve our position on any counter proposal that may be made, knowing that any alternative is likely to bring its own anomalies and disruption.

The clear implication is that there was disagreement across the region regarding any alternative configuration. As a result, only 28 per cent of the regions’ Labour MPs made a submission,²⁰ compared to 58 per cent of Conservative and two of the region’s three Liberal Democrat MPs.²¹

¹⁹ Party representatives were all those who claimed to be speaking on behalf of a party organisation – national, regional, constituency or local branch – plus MPs, MEPs, peers, and elected local government councillors (excluding parish councillors, almost all of whom are elected as individuals and not with a party affiliation.

²⁰ Several Labour MPs from the region put forward alternative schemes for part of the area – Diana Johnson submitted a counter-proposal for four seats covering Goole and Hull, for example, although another Hull MP,

A further indicator of Labour's difficulties was that some of its MPs supported counter-proposals which had not been submitted by the party. In Scotland, where the party also 'reserved its position' with no counter-proposals in its post-Hearings document, five MPs and one constituency party spoke against the Commission's recommendations: one MP – speaking on behalf of 'myself, my local party and my constituents' – noted he had been provided with data and maps by the Scottish Labour party when preparing his counter-proposal; another agreed with contributions made regarding constituencies in the Dundee area by Conservative and Liberal Democrat representatives. Finally, in the Northeast region of England, the party's presentation to the Lead Hearing indicated approval for five of the 26 proposed seats and suggested alternatives for eight more, but 'reserved its position' on the remaining 13; a counter-proposal for five of those 13 was separately presented by a local MP, supported by three others. Labour was clearly divided over the proposals and possible alternatives in some areas: some MPs made representations on their own behalf but there was no mobilisation behind a common 'party line'. There was much greater unity in the other parties and greater mobilisation of MPs' voice.

One further possible explanation of the lack of participation by some MPs is that frontbenchers were less inclined to make representations, especially if they wanted to oppose party policy for their seat, whereas others may have been content to leave their cause to be fought by party officials and local councillors. There is no evidence to sustain this argument, however. Of the 23 Conservatives who were either members of or entitled to attend Cabinet at the time, 12 made a submission. Only one Liberal Democrat Cabinet member did; the other four were all 'inheriting' relatively safe seats (as were all but two of their Conservative colleagues). And members of Labour's Shadow Cabinet were as likely to make representations as backbenchers – even though, as with their opponents on the opposite front bench, most were 'inheriting' safe seats.

The nature of the representations

There was no 'standard model' for MPs' oral or written evidence. Some who supported a Commission's proposal were relatively brief: for example, Ben Bradshaw, MP for Exeter, which was to be unchanged, wrote a one-page letter supporting the Commission's decision to retain a seat comprising the entire urban area – the 'city's interests ... are often quite different from those of far flung rural Devon'. Kenneth Clarke was even briefer: his constituency was to be substantially dismantled (an Index of 72) but he accepted the change without demur and merely suggested an alternative name for the new seat. Dawn Primarolo simply stated that 'I support the Boundary Commission's proposals for Bristol' and Grant Shapps that 'the

Karl Turner, indicated general acceptance of the proposal for his seat; Linda Riordan suggested alternatives for Halifax and Calderdale seats; and Hugh Bayley suggested minor changes to his York Central seat. In his oral presentation Mike Wood, member for Batley and Spen, said that he and his office were working on a proposal which would be submitted later and would keep his current constituency intact (this was presented by the Kirklees Labour party at the Hull hearing); his written representation suggested that if the current proposal was retained it should be renamed and appended a petition asking the Commission to 'keep the town of Batley and the village of Birstall united in one parliamentary constituency'. An alternative scheme – believed to be that developed for, but not agreed by, all local Labour parties in South and West Yorkshire, and presented in a written submission by the Shipley constituency party, kept the two Batley wards together but separate from Birstall.

²¹ The exception in the latter case was the party's leader, Nick Clegg. His Sheffield seat had an Index of Change of only 38, and it was estimated that in the successor seat he would have had a majority of over 18 percentage points if it had been used for the 2010 election.

proposals as regards Hertfordshire are sensible and will ensure that the representation is enhanced by having constituencies of an appropriate and equal size'. Others were less concise: Sir Bob Russell's Colchester seat was recommended as unchanged, but he made a lengthy presentation at the Public Hearing rehearsing the town's history, character and parliamentary representation, plus his own long links with it.

An approach focusing on communities was adopted by many MPs who opposed a Commission's proposals. Their goal – illustrated by Jo Swinson at two of the Scottish Hearings²² – was to establish the strength of communities that would be split by the proposals, which she did in part by using quotations from her constituents. Such advocacy also had a public relations component: their MP was indicating to her constituents that she wished to continue representing them – something that may be picked up by the local media. A similar tactic was deployed by some supporters of proposed, especially relatively small, changes: Peter Bone noted that 'in an ideal world I would have preferred to retain the whole of the existing constituency ... [especially one ward] to remain within the constituency, [but] I do understand on the basis of the number of voters and its location that it will have to be moved' (he did propose a minor change elsewhere); and David Burrowes said that it was 'disappointing to lose the connection' with one ward.²³ Others welcomed wards being added to their constituencies – Angie Bray noted that one new ward 'fits like a glove' with another already in her constituency. And whatever their response to a specific proposal a number of Conservatives indicated – like Nadine Dorries – that 'I am supportive of the objective to equalise constituencies and recognise the need to reduce the number of MPs'.

Most MPs who opposed a Commission's proposals took one of two courses: having indicated the elements of the recommended constituency they felt unsuitable – almost always on community ties grounds – they either made a counter-proposal or indicated support for one put forward in another submission, in most cases from their party. The latter strategy was especially notable in the oral representations at the Public Hearings, where some set out the case for a change in detail: Steve Webb, for example, argued for substantial changes to the proposals for South Gloucestershire on the basis of community ties. (A Liberal Democrat, his majority in 2010 was 14.8 per cent; the proposed constituency he would 'inherit' was estimated to have a Conservative majority of 2.2 per cent.) Liam Byrne presented a substantial document detailing social and economic conditions in his Birmingham constituency and the programmes being taken to counter them, characterised by 'strong political leadership, and a strong partnership between local politicians, the member of parliament, and the community', that would be disrupted by the proposed change.²⁴

²² She spoke at two because she wanted a constituency that included sections of two local authorities that were considered at separate Hearings.

²³ A further reason why MPs may have wanted to express their regret at 'losing' some constituents was their uncertainty whether the redistribution would be implemented. They may have seen little point in their involvement if the exercise was doomed to fail because whatever was proposed would be voted down by Parliament in 2013. Labour was committed to voting against them and some Conservative 'rebels' threatened their own party that they might also if it made too many concessions to its coalition partners (who in summer 2012 indicated that they would vote against)!

²⁴ The City of Birmingham has forty wards, and in the 2007 redistribution was allocated 10 seats, each comprising four wards. The City Council, in line with the government's localism agenda, had devolved much of its budget to ten constituency committees but the Council Leader, Sir Albert Bore, indicated in his evidence that this would no longer be possible under the Commission's proposals, given that 12 of those wards were allocated to seats that contained parts of other neighbouring local authorities.

Almost all MPs confined their contributions to either or both of a written statement and an oral representation, but Paul Farrelly (whose seat had a 2010 Labour majority of 3.6 per cent but estimates suggested that its ‘successor’ would have had a Conservative majority of 16.6 per cent then), attended both days of the relevant Hearing; as well as making his own submission he questioned eleven of the other witnesses (some at length). Alan Duncan wrote on 6 October 2011 commending the Commission for not proposing any changes to his constituency. He then appeared at the local Hearing on 1 November, ‘to fend off a [Liberal Democrat] counter-proposal which I think is nothing short of mischievous’,²⁵ and submitted a further letter on 15 November, enclosing a newspaper cutting showing that the local Liberal Democrats opposed what their regional party had put forward as a counter-proposal ‘without first consulting the local committee’.

Not all MPs either commended the proposals or offered a counter-proposal, however. In his oral submission, Chris Huhne focused entirely on the splitting of multi-ward parishes in the proposed constituency, which would divide communities. No counter-proposal was offered either then or in his subsequent written submission, to which he appended the results of a local opinion poll that sustained his arguments; nor did he mention his party’s counter-proposals. Others just asked the Commission to think again. Hillary Benn, for example, illustrated how the proposals for Leeds split communities and the rules made it ‘extremely hard [for the Commission] to come up with a plan that works’: he followed his party’s line by reserving his position, and was encouraged by the Assistant Commissioner to make the Commission’s task ‘easier in trying to come up with the next set of proposals’ if there were ‘a commonality of view between the parties’! Another Leeds MP, Fabian Hamilton, urged the Commission ‘to rethink this particular proposed constituency and to consider splitting one or two local authority wards in order to make the required numbers add up’. (Hillary Benn was dubious about splitting wards because ‘you breach community links in a different way at the local level’.)

Conclusions

United Kingdom MPs act as advocates for the individuals, businesses, local governments, communities and interest groups in their constituencies: they develop close links with local people and organisations and maintain high public profiles there – identifying with the place(s) they represent and fostering a sense of local identity. The longer their constituency remains unchanged, or virtually so, the closer that symbiosis and the stronger their local party organisation. In recent decades, many MPs have benefited from long-term continuity in the electoral map. In 2011, however, a review of constituency boundaries following a major change to the rules for their definition, combined with a reduction in the number of seats, resulted in proposed extensive changes to many constituencies. Many MPs realised that much effort would be needed not only building up new relationships but also reworking the local party organisation on which they depended; in many cases the proposed changes also impacted on their re-election prospects.

The review’s public consultation arrangements invited MPs to make oral and/or written representations about the proposed new constituency boundaries. Most who did so worked in collaboration with their national and regional party organisations, which had prepared

²⁵ In questions from the Assistant Commissioner, Mr Duncan indicated that ‘two little villages with 300 people’ were added to his constituency before the 2010 election – ‘I was able to call on every single one of them’: but in answer to a further question asking him to name those two villages ‘Now you’ve put me on the spot ... it was tiny little villages that are so small, on the very southeast of the Harborough bit. I could spot them on the map.’

detailed responses with counter-proposals for constituencies that better suited their electoral interests. At the Public Hearings, party officials provided an overall introductory sketch map and MPs and other party members were mobilised to fill in the local detail, portraying organic wholes – territorially-defined communities – whose sundering would make the representation of local concerns more difficult.

Not all MPs participated in this procedure, however, many apparently because either their current constituency was wholly or largely unaffected by the proposals or their electoral prospects were not significantly reduced. In addition, Labour MPs were less active than their Conservative and Liberal Democrat counterparts, largely because the party was less able to mobilise their support for counter-proposals. Few MPs participated in Scotland, with those representing the SNP (like their Plaid Cymru counterparts in Wales) almost entirely silent; presumably those two parties generally felt they had little to gain from making counter-proposals – as in Northern Ireland, where none of the 18 MPs made any representation.

And the future?

Publication of the Commissions' revised proposals in autumn 2012 provided a further opportunity for comment – an eight-week period for written representations only.²⁶ Whether MPs would become much involved was doubtful, however, because of uncertainties regarding the probability of the new constituencies being used for the 2015 general election.²⁷ In August 2012 the Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister indicated that, because the Prime Minister had indicated that the Conservative party could not provide the necessary support in the House of Commons for the *House of Lords Reform Bill*, introduced in June 2012, he would be instructing Liberal Democrat MPs to vote against implementation of the Boundary Commissions' final recommendations when they were laid before the House in October 2013.²⁸ The likelihood of a positive vote for the new constituencies without that support was small; consequently, although the Commissions' reviews continued, each of the main parties decided to select candidates for 2015 in the existing constituencies and the Conservatives outlined their target seat strategy, which significantly reduced the stimulus for further MP involvement in the review.

The future situation is unclear, therefore, although unless the Act is either repealed or amended before October 2013 the Commissions must complete their task and the government lay their recommendations before Parliament plus an Order implementing them. If those Orders are voted down and no further action taken, the current legislation requires the Commissions to undertake a further review and recommend a new set of 600 constituencies to Parliament by October 2018. If a Conservative government is elected in 2015 that exercise will probably form the foundation for the Commissions' work – although the number of seats allocated to two or more of the four countries (and/or two or more of England's nine regions) may change, necessitating substantial fracturing of seats that were designed but never used. If a Labour government, or a coalition government with Labour the major party, takes power in 2015, however, the 2011 Act will probably be either amended or repealed; the next

²⁶ There was an earlier period for written submissions after publication of the Hearings transcripts and the initial written representations. The Commissions received 111 (none again in Northern Ireland): almost all were opposing a counter-proposal from another party, 33 from MPs who had not made a submission in the earlier round.

²⁷ Those submissions will not be published until the final report, due by October 2013.

²⁸ This was debated at some length on 3 September 2012: see *House of Commons Hansard* for that day, columns 36-53.

redistribution will then either use the pre-2011 rules and procedures or a new set will be legislated for.

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Table 1. The number of submissions to the Boundary Commissions' initial proposals during their Seventh Periodical Reviews, by party

	C	L	LD	PC	SNP	NI	O	T
Oral Only	33	25	22	0	0	0	0	80
Written Only	123	42	6	0	1	0	0	172
Both Submissions	43	39	12	0	0	0	0	94
One Submission	199	106	40	0	1	0	0	346
Neither	110	148	18	3	5	18	2	304
TOTAL	309	254	58	3	6	18	2	650

Key to columns: C – Conservative; L – Labour; LD – Liberal Democrat; PC – Plaid Cymru; SNP – Scottish National Party; NI – all Northern Ireland parties; O – Other; the Speaker and the Green Party MP; T – total.

Table 2. The percentage of MPs who made submissions to the Boundary Commissions from constituencies with different values of the Index of Change for their current constituency

Index of Change	N	O	W	B	NC
0	51	8	33	7	181
1-10	42	13	33	13	24
11-25	47	10	30	13	60
26-50	45	9	27	18	117
51-75	39	16	27	19	132
76-90	40	23	17	21	88
91-100	50	14	14	21	28
TOTAL	45	13	27	15	630

Key to columns: N – no submission; O – oral submission only; W – written submission only; B – both types of submission; NC – number of constituencies.

Table 3. The nature of MPs' submissions regarding proposals for their constituencies, by the Index of Change for their current constituency

Index of Change	N	F	A	NC
0	51	38	11	181
1-10	42	33	25	24
11-25	47	23	30	60
26-50	45	21	34	117
51-75	39	21	40	132
76-90	40	10	50	88
91-100	50	7	43	28
TOTAL	45	24	31	630

Key to columns: N – no submission; F – favourable submission; A – negative submission; NC – number of constituencies.

Table 4. The percentage of MPs who made no representations to the Boundary Commissions' proposals for their constituencies by the Index of Change for their current constituency and the estimated electoral marginality of its successor.

Index of Change	Marginality of New Constituency (%)					NC
	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	21<	
0	10	17	19	10	44	92
1-10	33	11	11	11	33	9
11-25	7	14	18	18	43	28
26-50	13	9	11	15	51	53
51-75	6	22	12	2	59	51
76-90	14	14	9	7	43	35
91-100	14	21	14	7	43	14
TOTAL	11	16	15	11	47	283

Key: NC – number of constituencies.

Table 5. The percentage of MPs who made representations against the Boundary Commissions' proposals for their constituencies by the Index of Change for their current constituency and the estimated electoral marginality of its successor.

Index of Change	Marginality of New Constituency (%)					NC
	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	21<	
0	55	25	21	8	14	87
1-10	-	-	-	-	-	14
11-25	-	-	-	-	50	32
26-50	83	57	67	-	48	64
51-75	82	84	57	50	56	81
76-90	-	70	-	-	90	53
91-100	-	-	-	-	-	14

Table 6. Binary logistic regressions of whether MPs made a representation to a Boundary Commission and, of those who made a representation, whether that was against the proposal for their constituency

	Made Submission		Made Submission against Proposal	
	b	exp	b	exp
Constant	-0.28	0.76	-0.18	0.84
Country (comparator: England)				
Scotland	<i>-0.56</i>	<i>0.57</i>	-1.57	0.21
Wales	-0.13	0.73	-0.45	0.64
Party (comparator: Conservative)				
Labour	-1.02	0.36	0.80	2.22
Liberal Democrat	0.09	1.09	0.79	2.20
Index of Change (comparator: no change)				
1-10	0.61	1.84	<i>1.11</i>	<i>3.03</i>
11-25	0.08	1.08	1.72	5.56
26-50	0.36	1.44	1.87	6.51
51-75	0.69	2.00	2.06	7.85
76-90	0.82	2.27	3.02	20.50
91-100	0.34	1.44	2.94	18.88
New Constituency Marginality (comparator: 0-5%)				
6-10	0.17	1.19	<i>-0.81</i>	<i>0.45</i>
11-15	-0.06	0.95	-1.16	0.31
16-20	-0.11	0.90	-1.20	0.30
>20	-0.57	0.56	-1.07	0.34
N		620		345
Goodness of fit				
Model	Null	Full		Full
-2 log likelihood		788.6		378.1
Nagelkerke R ²		0.13		0.33
% correctly classified	56	65	56	72

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better are shown in bold: those significant at the 0.05-0.10 level are in italics.