

LOCAL REPRESENTATION

A key part of choosing an electoral system is how to make the compromise between the quest for proportionality and the desire for local representation.

Much has been written about how different electoral systems can lead to more proportionality (or, more accurately, how they can avoid excessive disproportionality), but local representation remains a much less well-defined concept and one that cannot easily be assessed by a single measurement. Most electoral reformers will agree that it's important, but they may disagree not just on how important it is but also on what it means.

What are the characteristics of local representation?

Different people will have different views, but here it's argued that implications of different constituency sizes need to be considered from the viewpoints of:

- Electors
- Elected politicians
- Political parties

Electors

We want MPs at Westminster who will be guided by the values of the Party and who will promote its policies. However, people, and not just Labour supporters, want to feel that their politicians are people who will take a particular interest in their area and its communities (and, indeed, will have a duty to do so) and whom they can approach if there are issues, whether personal or relating to wider policies, they wish to raise.

Local councils, local businesses and other local organisations all want to feel there are MPs whose job it is to promote their interests – they probably don't want MPs who must represent their interests but only alongside the interests of all similar groups in the region or country.

Elected politicians

MPs need to know the areas they represent, but in what detail? At present an MP may not be familiar with every street in their constituency, but they probably know every neighbourhood / estate, leading local councillors, active parish councils, major employers and significant voluntary organisations. This would clearly be impossible if a MP were asked to represent the whole of Britain but, increasing constituency sizes from our single-member starting point, at what stage does the dilution of an MP's local knowledge become a problem?

Political parties

Local parties are hugely important to our democracy. They are involved in choosing our politicians and holding them to account, and they also allow sections of the electorate to raise issues and express views on local issues.

Although the way in which many parties operate has changed with COVID lockdowns and the advent of Zoom, they remain groups of members who live in defined areas, who organise and campaign together, and who will often interact socially in doing so. The bigger the constituency, in terms of members or area, the more difficult it will become for local

parties to maintain a sense of cohesion and identity. It is of course possible for CLPs to use a branch structure with general committees of delegates, but the larger the units become, or the greater the number of branches, the greater the danger of members feeling marginalised and distant from decision-making. The distances members need to travel to meetings may affect attendances, possibly discriminating against some areas or branches.

In considering how electors, politicians and parties might be affected by changes in constituency size, we must recognise the differences that already exist. All constituencies, with a very small number of exceptions, have roughly the same number of electors, but they are vastly different in area. Some urban constituencies are less than a couple of miles from one end to the other, but the largest constituency is more than seven and a half times the area of Greater London which has 73 constituencies.

The effects of increasing constituency sizes (in terms of seats) can be illustrated by looking at a number of areas with different characteristics. The appendix to this note considers:

1. SE London – typical of most metropolitan areas;
2. Northamptonshire – a county whose population is quite evenly divided between major towns and small villages;
3. NE England – an area with large industrial towns and a quite sparsely populated hinterland;
4. Cumbria – a predominantly rural area;
5. Wales and the problems of finding rational ways of combining constituencies;
6. Scotland and the problems of its geography.

Firstly, however, some general points:

- i. Although a new constituency map need not make use of existing boundaries, it makes sense to create multi-seat constituencies by combining existing constituencies wherever possible. This approach minimizes the disruption that a full-scale re-drawing of boundaries would cause.
- ii. The Good Systems Agreement states that boundaries should take account of local government boundaries. While this is an important point, in practice it may need to be regarded as an aspiration rather than a rule. Even with FPTP, there are constituencies which cross local authority boundaries, and a move to multi-seat constituencies would probably result in more constituencies crossing boundaries (for example, a four-seat London constituency would be larger than some London boroughs). However, it should be possible to ensure that every constituency is contained in a single nation or region.
- iii. Constituencies do not need to contain the same number of seats, and to insist on them having the same number would make it impossible for them to take account of local government boundaries. Larger constituencies, however, offer better proportionality than smaller ones, and it would appear unreasonable if smaller parties needed a much higher share of the votes to gain representation in some constituencies compared with others. In any re-organisation, the number of seats in a constituency should therefore be within a small range -e.g. 3-5, 4-6 or 10-12 - with exceptions only where there are no realistic alternatives.
- iv. Multi-seat constituencies do not necessarily mean any change in the ratio of electors to elected members, but they may nevertheless mean big changes in the demands on MPs. In,

say, a 4-seat constituency there might be only one Labour MP and that person would receive requests for support from Labour supporters right across the area and be expected to speak for Labour on issues in all parts of the constituency.

Some conclusions

In the illustrations given below, it has been assumed that multi-member constituencies would be formed by combining existing constituencies: thus, a '4-member constituency' refers to a constituency formed from 4 existing single-member constituencies. In practice, it is probable that the Boundary Commission would propose minor changes in the same way that it regularly revises boundaries to take account of changes in population.

3 – 5 member constituencies

In most parts of the country, 3 – 4-member constituencies would not seriously weaken the extent to which representation is perceived as local. In many cases such constituencies may be London boroughs or other smaller local authority areas where there is already a sense local identity and in which existing constituency parties are working together in campaigning and electioneering.

In predominantly urban areas, the same may be true for some constituencies of 5 members, but elsewhere they may put strains on the concept of localness and increase difficulties for MPs. Nevertheless, even if 3 or 4-member constituencies were to be preferred, drawing sensible boundaries could be a problem without using an occasional 5-member constituency.

In some areas – such as Cumbria, northern Scotland and parts of Wales – even a 3-member constituency would be large, although not without defining characteristics. These, however, are areas where many need to accept a general remoteness from centres from which services are provided.

5 - 7 member constituencies

In metropolitan areas, such constituencies might be just about manageable (roughly similar to the regions used in London Assembly elections) but, with around half a million electors per constituency, the nature of representation would surely change. Electors may be aware of MPs of their preferred parties who represent them, but difficult for MPs to keep abreast of all community issues in their patch.

In semi-urban/semi-rural areas, constituencies may often comprise major towns and their hinterlands. Constituencies of up to 7 members are not, of course, impossible, but in many cases the distances involved, the heterogeneity of the communities and the formation of cohesive constituency parties would all become more difficult.

In Wales, everything from Ynys Mon to Alyn and Deeside could work as a 5-member constituency, and similarly for the south west of Wales, but the areas involved challenge the concept of locality. In northern and western Scotland, however, even a 5-member constituency (e.g. from the north isles of Shetland to the southern tip of the Mull of Kintyre) would be unworkable and ridiculous. A 6-member constituency covering everything from Aberdeen to the outskirts of Inverness and to Speyside would be just about as impracticable.

If 5 – 7-member constituencies were accepted as the norm, exceptions would need to be made for parts of Scotland (in the same way that exceptions have been made for some existing single-member constituencies).

8 – 10 member constituencies

In metropolitan areas, it may be possible to create constituencies with up to 10 members. These might be areas recognised by the electorate, such as ‘Merseyside’ or ‘South East London’, but, with electorates of up to a quarter of a million, representation would be far from local. Political parties could only operate through branch structures, but it may leave party members feeling far removed from the politicians they elected.

With constituencies of this size, there is also more risk of some areas in which people feel they have no representation: an MP, particularly if the only MP of their party in the constituency, will not be able to provide a service or create a presence in all parts of the constituency and as a result some may find themselves ignored.

These considerations suggest that a meaningful ‘constituency link’ is best achieved with constituencies of 3 – 4, or perhaps 5 members. The case for seeking greater proportionality by using larger constituencies must be balanced against an inevitable weakening of ‘the link’.

Appendix

ILLUSTRATIONS OF MULTI-SEAT CONSTITUENCIES

LONDON

There are many ways in which London’s constituencies could be grouped into multi-seat constituencies, but London borough boundaries provide a good starting point, but as no London boroughs are bigger than 3 constituencies, they can only be a starting point.

Those who plan boundaries generally begin at the edges of a region to avoid ending up with a small area on the perimeter without any available partners. Here we start with Bromley Borough where possible multi-seat constituencies could be:

	Constituency size	Possible constituency		
L1	3	Bromley and Chislehurst Beckenham Orpington		
L2	6	Bromley and Chislehurst Beckenham Orpington	Old Bexley and Sidcup Bexleyheath and Crayford Erith and Thamesmead	
L3	10	Bromley and Chislehurst Beckenham Orpington	Old Bexley and Sidcup Bexleyheath and Crayford Erith and Thamesmead	Lewisham Deptford Lewisham W and Penge Lewisham East Eltham

L1

This is essentially Bromley Borough (although not quite all of it – even with the present single-member constituencies, the Penge part of Bromley is in a Lewisham constituency). The area is reasonably homogenous – mostly moderately prosperous London suburbia. Bromley, the largest centre, is reasonably central and the distances involved are not great -typically around 7 – 8 miles from one side to the other. The constituencies involved have needed to work together for decades in Bromley local government elections.

L2

A 6-seat constituency could be created by adding Bexley Borough, producing an area very similar to the Bexley and Bromley constituency for the London Assembly. Other than that London Assembly link, there is little else that connects the two boroughs other than that together they could be described as outer-SE London. A trip across the area is unlikely to be more than 20 miles, but that would be 20 miles of suburbia with most of the main roads running in the wrong direction (in and out of London rather than round it). That could make the operation a single CLP difficult – how many would be prepared to travel from Orpington to Bexley for an evening meeting? The combined area would have well over half a million electors,

L3

To get to 10 seats, Lewisham would need to be added. By this stage, the multi-seat constituency covers everything from leafy suburbs to much more densely populated, and more deprived inner city areas. Could a single person represent such a large and diverse population (remembering that although the load is theoretically shared amongst 10 MPs, each may feel a responsibility for the entire area). Is there a danger that any MP doing decent job in, say, Lewisham, would get little recognition in Bromley and vice versa? If a party had 3 or 4 MPs in the constituency then they could operate from several offices covering the area, but what if they only had one or two (in this area Labour would hope to be dominant, but there are other areas of London where it might not). A 'CLP' could have tens of thousands of members, and although local branches and borough structures for

local elections could be maintained, the nature of the link between MPs and their local parties, and how mechanisms of accountability work, would be very different from what it is at present.

Commented [KR1]:

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Northamptonshire has already been split into two unitary authorities: they could be regarded as two new constituencies, one of 4 and the other of 3 existing constituencies:

	Constituency size	Possible constituency		
N1	4	Northampton North Northampton South Daventry South Northamptonshire		
N2	7	Northampton North Northampton South Daventry South Northamptonshire	Corby Kettering Wellingborough	
N3	10	Northampton North Northampton South Daventry South Northamptonshire	Corby Kettering Wellingborough	South Leicestershire Harborough Rutland and Melton

N1

Works reasonably well. The 4 constituencies make up the W Northants unitary. There may be tensions between urban and rural areas, but these exist at present. Parts of S Northamptonshire were within the area of the former Northampton Borough Council, and some parts of Daventry are much closer to Northampton than Daventry town.

N2

N2 is Northamptonshire. As well as Northampton (population near quarter of a million), the area would have 4 significant towns of more than 25,000 each – and each with their town councils. Brackley (largest town in South Northamptonshire) to Corby is around 50 miles. Could a constituent in Brackley feel represented by an MP based in Corby?

Northamptonshire with Blaby (then a Leicestershire constituency) was a Euro-constituency prior to the introduction of the list system. Meetings were held, with reasonable attendances, but only by core supporters.

Very difficult, but not completely impossible.

N3

Northamptonshire has only 7 constituencies. Forming one of 10 would mean taking constituencies out of Leicestershire (other boundaries are regional boundaries).

Highly undesirable.

NORTH EAST

	Constituency size	Possible constituency		
NE1	4	Berwick Hexham Wansbeck Blyth Valley		
NE2	6	Berwick Hexham Wansbeck	Blyth Valley Tynemouth North Tyneside	
NE3	9	Berwick Hexham Wansbeck	Blyth Valley Tynemouth North Tyneside	Newcastle East Newcastle Central Newcastle North

NE1

Here it makes sense to start with Berwick-upon-Tweed. If Berwick is not allowed to leave England and become part of Scotland, its only partners are Hexham and Wansbeck. However, adding in Blyth Valley gives the Northumberland CC unitary authority.

NE2

This adds the North Tyneside local authority area (CHECK). While it significantly shifts the urban/rural balance of the electorate, it doesn't make a big difference to the geographic area or distances involved. Labour voters in idyllic spots like Byreness and Keildor would have Labour MPs, but probably based in the inner-city areas of Newcastle: that, however, may be preferable to having no Labour MPs!

NE3

Adds Newcastle, giving a constituency which is everything in the NE north of the Tyne. It would be very difficult for a single MP to cover an area with a population of this size, but not completely impossible.

CUMBRIA

	Constituency size	Possible constituency	
C1	3	Carlisle Penrith and the Border Workington	
C2	6	Carlisle Penrith and the Border Workington	Copeland Westmoreland/Lonsdale Barrow and Furness

C3	9	Carlisle Penrith and the Border Workington	Copeland Westmoreland/Lonsdale Barrow and Furness	Morecambe/Lunesd. Lancaster/Fleetwood Ribble Valley
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C1

This would be a big constituency – more than twice the area of Greater London. Distances, however, are already a problem here with single-member constituencies, and for some the larger constituency could be an advantage – some in Penrith and the Border are much closer to Carlisle than Penrith.

C2

This is much bigger. Although this is a part of the country where people may accept the need to travel long distances, Carlisle to Barrow is about 90 miles and takes, according to the AA, 1 hour 42 minutes. An in-person constituency meeting would be very difficult and it's hard to see how a CLP could develop any sort of social cohesion.

C3

Although the extra constituencies added here are not dissimilar from those of Cumbria, the distances become formidable. An MP with an office Carlisle might be called on to deal with issues south of Preston. It would be an abandonment of the idea of local representation.

WALES

Wales has 32 constituencies, 17 of which are in the industrial and former mining areas of Cardiff and the valleys. These 17, stretching from Swansea West to Newport East, will have a number of common features and they could relatively easily be grouped into:

- a) 3 constituencies of 4 members and one of 5
- b) 2 constituencies of 6 members and one of 5
- c) 2 constituencies, one of 9 and the other of 8 members.

Cardiff has 4 constituencies. With options (b) and (c), a possible drawback might be the creation of a constituency which is dominated by the affairs of Cardiff to the detriment of other areas (a problem which may also arise elsewhere).

With (c), the geographic expanse may be manageable, but a constituency of well over half a million in a large number of relatively small towns would be challenging for MPs.

In Wales, however, the problems arise in what to do with the other 15 constituencies. A possible 4-member constituency could be formed from:

Mid and South Pembrokeshire
Caerfyrddin
Llanelli
Gower

To expand this, Ceredigion, Preseli and Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe could be added to make a 6-member constituency, but it might be necessary to add Monmouthshire as otherwise it would be isolated, resulting in a 7-member constituency which would have very little internal cohesion and which could hardly claim to provide local representation.

There are alternative ways in which the 8 constituencies which make up the northern half of Wales could be divided into two groups of 4, but making it an 8-member constituency would, again, be abandoning the idea of local representation.

SCOTLAND

Scotland has 57 constituencies, roughly half of which are in the central belt. In this area, creating sensible 4-member constituencies should be no more difficult than many parts of England, and Glasgow might even allow a 6-member constituency.

Aberdeenshire and the NE of Scotland have 6 constituencies which can be divided into groups of three:

Aberdeen North	Aberdeenshire North
Aberdeen South	Gordon and Buchan
W Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	Moray W, Nairn and Strathspey

Alternatively, they could be a 6-member constituency, although it would be difficult to argue that Speyside is in the same locality as Aberdeen. CLP meetings could only be by Zoom, but combining the interests of industrial workers in Aberdeen with whisky distillers and sheep farmers may be fraught with difficulty. It might satisfy the needs of proportionality, but there is little else to recommend it.

The north and west are even more problematic. Orkney and Shetland could be linked to Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and to Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Outer Hebrides) to make a 3-member constituency.

As the island constituencies have small electorates (only 21,000 in Na h-Eileanan an Iar and 35,000 in Orkney and Shetland), some may argue for the addition of Inverness, Skye and Wester Ross, and Argyll and Bute. That, however, would result in a 5-member constituency running from the northern isles of Shetland to the southernmost point of the Mull of Kintyre, making a complete mockery of the idea of local representation.

Ken Ritchie, LCER Treasurer