

The boundary changes by Lewis Baston

The parliamentary boundaries on which the next General Election will be fought are pretty much finalised. Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher have published their calculations, which will be used by the media when discussing the parties' chances. The changes for Scotland were implemented at the 2005 election.

Over the years, some seats have seen their electorates grow rapidly (North Cornwall had nearly 87,000 electors in 2005) and some have shrunk (Sheffield Brightside was down to under 51,000) and the Boundary Commissions try to adjust the boundaries to bring them more into line. However, because they respect county boundaries and community identity, and also use out of date electorate figures, equality of numbers can only be approximate.

Boundary changes can have important effects on marginal seats - the gain or loss of a rural ward, or a housing estate, can be crucial for one party or another. In some seats, the majority is sufficiently small, or the changes sufficiently radical, that if the new boundaries had been used in 2005 a different party would have won. There are some seats that one can say with confidence would have 'flipped' from one party to another, which are listed in the table below.

SWITCHES	Old seat	New seat	
Arfon	Plaid	Lab	Major changes to boundaries in Gwynedd area might tip this new version of Caernarfon to Labour.
Croydon Central	Con	Lab	New ward boundaries may make seat slightly more Labour.
Enfield North	Lab	Con	Exchanges Lab ward (Ponders End) for Con suburbs
Finchley and Golders Green	Lab	Con	New ward boundaries make seat slightly more Conservative.
Lancaster and Fleetwood	Con	Lab	Old seat Lancaster & Wyre. Exchanges Con rural (Wyre) for Lab town (Fleetwood)
Milton Keynes North	Con	Lab	Successor to old Milton Keynes North East. Made highly marginal.
Northampton South	Con	Lab	Loses large rural and new suburban hinterland.
Rochester and Strood	Lab	Con	Old seat Medway. Small increase in rural territory.
Rugby	Con	Lab	Old seat Rugby & Kenilworth loses Con area to newly created seat
Selby and Ainsty	Lab	Con	Old seat Selby. Exchanges Lab York suburbs for Con Yorkshire dales.
Sittingbourne and Sheppey	Lab	Con	Adds rural area.
Somerset North East	Lab	Con	Old seat Wansdyke.

			Exchanges marginal suburbs for small rural area.
Staffordshire Moorlands	Lab	Con	Exchanges Lab town (Kidsgrove) for Con rural area
Thanet South	Lab	Con	Adds Cliftonville from Thanet North; highly marginal.
Wirral West	Lab	Con	Loses section of Prenton. Hard to tell because of mismatch of local and general election voting.

Staffordshire Moorlands is a particularly interesting case, as it was a seat Labour won initially at the previous boundary review, when Kidsgrove was brought in. The new boundaries reverse that change and put it back in the Conservative column.

Labour gain 6 seats in these changes, but lose 9, for a net loss of 3. The Conservatives gain 9 seats and lose 5, for a net gain of 4, and Plaid Cymru drop one.

It is not possible to make precise statements about how large a majority would have been, because one needs to make educated guesses about how different areas within each constituency vote. Local government elections are a strong indication, but they can be misleading and are not much help in areas where they are not conducted along party lines. There must be some seats that are 'too close to call'. In ultra marginal seats small changes can sometimes cause notional shifts in the seat's partisan allegiance, but in such cases holding everything else equal, tactical position, campaign effort and so on, as one does in compiling notional results is particularly unrealistic. Some of these can also produce different notional results on perfectly reasonable sets of assumptions.

However, the changes do not just involve alteration - some counties receive an extra seat and some areas lose an MP, so there is actual creation and destruction. In some places with extensive changes it is debatable which counts as the 'new' seat.

New seats tend to help the Conservatives, with 9 of them probably being Conservative in 2005 compared to 1 for Labour and 3 Liberal Democrat. Particularly unpredictable and interesting are two seats that do not resemble any previous division and contain elements of seats with very different tactical positions - York Outer (a ring of suburbs around the city) and Filton & Bradley Stoke (north of Bristol).

The abolished seats tend to be in urban areas - each metropolitan county loses one. This means that Labour lose out most from abolition of seats.

ABOLISHED SEATS		
Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath	Lab	Lab seat dispersed to neighbours; helps make Hall Green safe Labour.
Brent East	LD	LD seat dispersed to safe Lab Brent Central and more marginal Lab Hampstead & Kilburn.
Eccles	Lab	Safe Lab seat dispersed to safe Lab Salford and Worsley seats.
Hornchurch	Con	Marginal seat dispersed to safe Con

		Upminster and safe Lab Dagenham.
Knowsley North and Sefton East	Lab	Safe Lab seat dispersed to safe Lab Knowsley and marginal Sefton Central.
Normanton	Lab	Safe Lab seat dispersed to neighbouring seats, increasing Lab hold on Wakefield (?)
Sheffield Hillsborough	Lab	Safe Lab seat dispersed to safe Lab Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough and less safe Penistone & Stocksbridge.
Tyne Bridge	Lab	Safe Lab seat dispersed to safe Lab Gateshead and Newcastle Central seats.
Vale of York	Con	Safe Con seat dispersed among several other seats, principally York Outer.

The net partisan consequences of abolitions are Lab -6 Con -1 LD -1.

In some places an old seat is replaced by a new one with a different name and a different partisan complexion - some people may regard some of the following as involving creation and abolition rather than a change of name.

NOTEWORTHY RENAMED SUCCESSORS		
Aberconwy	Lab	Successor to old Conwy seat - gains rural area, more marginal
Chelsea and Fulham	Con	Successor to old Hammersmith & Fulham. Made from marginal to safe.
Clacton	Con	Successor to old Harwich. Made safer for Con.
Ealing Central and Acton	Lab	Successor to old Ealing Acton and Shepherds Bush. Made from safe to marginal.
Hampstead and Kilburn	Lab	Successor to old Hampstead and Highgate. LD chances much improved.
Kensington	Con	Successor to old Kensington and Chelsea. Still safe.
Milton Keynes South	Lab	Successor to old Milton Keynes South West. Made highly marginal.
Penistone and Stocksbridge	Lab	Successor to old Barnsley West and Penistone (Sheffield Hillsborough also has claim). Still fairly safe though less so than either predecessor.
Sefton Central	Lab	Successor to old Crosby. Made from safe seat to long shot for Con.
South Basildon and East Thurrock	Lab	Successor to old Basildon. Made highly marginal.
Sunderland Central	Lab	Successor to old Sunderland South. Made from safe seat to long shot for Con.
Westminster North	Lab	Successor to old Regents Park and Kensington North. Made from safe to marginal.

This table summarises the net effects of all the sources of change in party terms arising from the redistribution of seats.

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Others
2005 result	355	198	62	31
Switches	-3	+4	0	-1
New creations	+1	+9	+3	0
Abolitions	-6	-1	-1	0
Net changes	-8	+12	+2	-1
Notional 2005 result	347	210	64	30

Under the 'notional' results Labour would have had a majority of 43 rather than 64 at the 2005 election.

The boundary changes make little difference to the Conservatives' prospects of winning outright - the electoral system is still heavily biased against the party. Rather than an 11% lead for a bare overall majority, the target may have fallen to 9-10%, but estimating what would happen on hypothetical large changes in the vote under new boundaries is very imprecise.

However, the principal political impact is to make it less likely that Labour can win an overall majority. The boundary review heightens the risk to Labour from a relatively small swing of votes that already exists because of the number of highly marginal seats. After the changes a swing of only just over 1% would destroy the majority, while under unchanged boundaries it would take a 1.8% swing. The situation was uncomfortably tight already, and now Labour has the tiniest margin for slippage.

In addition to the overall effects, there are some others which are harder to quantify. A personal vote for an incumbent MP can be a small but significant help to a party in defending a parliamentary seat, and boundary reviews disrupt these in two ways. When there are large local boundary changes, large sections of the electorate who have no personal knowledge of the incumbent MP can come into a seat. Boundary changes by causing uncertainty can also precipitate MPs to stand down, as is already the case in the much-altered Selby and Bristol North West constituencies, meaning that the personal vote is completely lost.

Voters can be affected by changes in other ways, too, particularly when transferred between seats where the tactical position is very different. For instance, the electors in the Peacehaven area moved from Lewes to Brighton Kemptown in 1997 adopted the Labour v Conservative mindset of that seat, rather than the Lib Dem v Conservative attitude of their previous seat. Labour voters there were encouraged because there was an understandable perception that Labour couldn't win in Lewes, but that things were different in Brighton. Voters can sometimes, however, be less keen than this and take persuading that the tactical position is different. Boundary changes can, in a subtle way, free up options for voters and make results less predictable.