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The Conservatives and the electoral system

CAER
Conservative Action for Electoral Reform

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Foreword

This paper is intended to inform and provoke debate within the Conservative Party and amongst its supporters on the case for changing our voting system. It has been written by Lewis Baston, the Research and Information Officer of the Electoral Reform Society, on behalf of both the Society and Conservative Action for Electoral Reform (CAER).

It examines the large pro-Labour bias in the First- Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system currently in use for elections to the House of Commons. It looks at the results of the election in terms of national and regional representation before examining the nature, history and current extent of bias between the two main parties.

Many Conservatives since the election have expressed the hope that the forthcoming review of parliamentary boundaries will solve the bias problem. This paper examines the progress of the review and the impact of the current proposals for new boundaries on the strength of the parties, before examining the possibilities for a more radical change in the way parliamentary boundaries are drawn. However, boundary determination is only a small factor in generating bias, and the more powerful reasons – differential turnout and the distribution of the vote – that are mostly responsible.

Given all the problems that exist for the Conservatives under FPTP, the arguments for a reformed electoral system that relates seats more directly to votes are stronger than ever, for both pragmatic and principled reasons. The alternatives – hoping that something will turn up, gerrymandering, or getting used to being a permanent minority party – are not very attractive ones.

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1. The 2005 election

Labour's control of the 2005 parliament is somewhat less lopsided than its dominance in the parliaments elected in 1997 and 2001. But parliament is still a grossly distorted version of what Britain's voters chose in 2005.

In winning a majority of seats, Labour's share of the vote in 2005 was considerably lower than any previous majority government. Labour's 35.2% compares adversely even with the previous two occasions on which majorities have been won with less than 40% of the vote, namely by the Conservatives in 1922 (38.2%) and Labour in October 1974 (39.2%). Because of the low turnout in 2005, the re-elected government's share of the total electorate was also the lowest on record at only 21.6%. This travesty of democracy can only occur under the First Past the Post (FPTP) system.

ENGLAND

The Conservatives had a popular vote lead of 65,704 over Labour in England, but ended up 92 seats behind.

	Votes 2005	Votes %	% change on 2001	Seats 2005	Change on 2001*	Seats %
Labour	9,552,372	35.2	-5.5	355	-57 (-47)	55.0
Conservative	8,785,942	32.4	+0.6	198	+32 (+33)	30.7
Liberal Democrats	5,985,704	22.0	+3.8	62	+10 (+11)	9.6
UK Independence (UKIP)	605,173	2.2	+0.7	0	-	-
Scottish National (SNP)	412,267	1.5	-0.2	6	+1 (+2)	0.9
Greens	258,154	1.0	+0.3	0	-	-
Democratic Unionist (DUP)	241,856	0.9	+0.2	9	+3	1.6
British National (BNP)	192,746	0.7	+0.5	0	-	-
Plaid Cymru	174,838	0.6	-0.1	3	-1	0.5
Sinn Féin	174,530	0.6	-0.0	5	+1	0.8
Ulster Unionist (UUP)	127,414	0.5	-0.4	1	-5	0.2
Social Democratic and Labour (SDLP)	125,626	0.5	-0.2	3	-	0.5
Respect	68,094	0.3	+0.3	1	+1	0.2
Independent (Peter Law)	20,505	0.1	+0.1	1	+1	0.2
Kidderminster Hospital (KHHC)	18,739	0.1	-0.0	1	-	0.2
Speaker	15,153	0.1	-0.0	1	-	0.2
All others and Independents	405,372	1.5	+0.7	-	-	-
Totals	**27,149,332**	**646**	**- (-13)**			

** Scottish representation was reduced from 72 to 59 seats. The figures given are for changes from the actual numbers elected in 2001, and show a net loss of 13 seats. The figures in parentheses are changes from the notional calculations of the 2001 results had the new boundaries been in force then.*

The 2005 election

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Conservative	35.7	194	41,835	36.7
Labour	35.5	286	28,148	54.1
Lib Dem	22.9	47	110,666	8.9
UKIP	2.5	0	N/A	0
Others	2			

The result in England poses some problems for the future. The Conservatives have something of a claim to 'Speak for England', having narrowly "won" the election there, but this claim must be heavily qualified. It rests on only 35.7% of those voting, which is not really more of a mandate than 35.5%, and Westminster is of course not just an English parliament. Unless a Conservative who claims an English "victory" concedes the case for electoral reform the claim is nothing more than a debating point, like previous Labour debating points about the lack of a mandate for Conservative government in Wales and Scotland.

It may be tempting for some Conservatives to put the blame on the current parliamentary boundaries. This would be highly inaccurate, for reasons to be explored later in this briefing.

In some counties the Conservatives, despite having large numbers of voters, were entirely deprived of elected representatives. As with Wales, there are still plenty of Conservatives in the big cities, just a shortage of Conservative MPs to represent them. The Conservatives once again won extremely few seats in the metropolitan counties outside London, a total of 5 out of 124 of these urban seats, unchanged since 2001 and one fewer than in 1997. These five MPs were all that the 1.1 million Conservative voters in the metropolitan counties managed to elect. If the number of MPs reflected the proportion of votes cast, there would have been 30 Conservatives representing these regions.

Representation of one MP for a quarter of a million voters each in Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire can only be regarded as token.

FPTP has not only weakened the voice of the Conservatives in the big cities, it has also weakened the voice of the big cities within the Conservative Party. The national party's task in reconnecting with these areas is made even more difficult by the imbalance in representation. Talented Conservative candidates for high office are more or less forced by the system to abandon these regions in order to seek representation. The lack of a voice for these areas of the country in the Conservative parliamentary party has complicated the debates over the franchise for electing the party leader.

	Conservative votes	Conservative votes %	Conservative seats	Con seats if proportionate
Greater Manchester	245,820	23.8	1	7
Merseyside	108,038	19.4	0	3
South Yorkshire	93,223	18.1	0	3
Tyne and Wear	77,484	17.4	0	2
West Midlands	320,802	29.5	3	9
West Yorkshire	254,779	27.8	1	6
Total Metro	1,100,146	24.2	5	30

SCOTLAND

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Labour	38.9	40	22,681	67.8
Lib Dem	22.6	11	48,007	18.6
SNP	17.7	6	68,711	10.2
Conservative	15.8	1	369,388	1.7
SSP	1.9	0	N/A	0
Speaker also elected				

The Conservatives suffered even worse treatment by the electoral system in Scotland than they did in England. They polled nearly a sixth of the vote but had only one MP out of 59 to show for their pains. With a very similar share of the vote in the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, Scottish Conservatives gained an appropriate amount of representation (18 seats out of 129). This was because of the proportional system employed for elections to the Parliament.

The Scottish Conservatives suffer because their vote is thinly spread across the country. There are only 10 constituencies where the party was in second place in 2005 and within 20% of the winner, and only three of those are currently Labour-held seats. The electoral

The 2005 election

system is likely to continue to under-represent the Conservatives in Scotland and consign them to a minor role in Scottish politics at Westminster. There have now been, following the wipe-out in 1997, two elections in which over a third of a million Scottish Conservatives have had to make do with one MP.

WALES

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Labour	42.7	29	20,511	72.5
Conservative	21.4	3	99,277	7.5
Lib Dem	18.4	4	64,062	10.0
Plaid Cymru	12.6	3	58,279	7.5
Others		1		

Like Scotland, Wales's representation in Westminster is dominated by the Labour Party, to a much greater extent than merited by the party's lead in share of the vote. The Conservatives were once again severely under-represented, although they managed to gain three seats in contrast to being wiped out in 1997 and 2001. Two particularly narrow gains (in Clwyd West and Preseli Pembrokeshire, by majorities of 133 and 607 respectively) were important in getting the meagre level of representation they won in 2005. It was not that Conservative voters were wiped out in Wales for eight years, it was just that they (over a quarter of a million of them in 2001) were not represented by anyone of their choice.

The Welsh Conservatives, like their Scottish counterparts, suffered from having their vote thinly spread across the country. While they were clearly second in terms of votes, with a three-point lead over the Lib Dems, they were joint third in seats, behind the Lib Dems.

A BIASED ELECTORAL SYSTEM

FPTP generally exaggerates relatively small leads in the popular vote into larger parliamentary majorities. This is a feature that its supporters point to as being desirable in giving strong and stable majorities. Others would deny that this is a good feature because it distorts the choices the electorate has made. However, FPTP does not always do this and it does not operate fairly or predictably between the two main parties.

There have been five elections in the last century in which a party has polled 2-4% ahead of its main competitor, a lead which while decisive (unlike cliff-hangers such as 1964) is still not entirely comfortable. The 2005 election produced a much larger gap in terms of seats between the two leading parties than any similarly close election.

	Win Party	Margin of victory %	Margin in seats over 2nd party	Overall majority
1950	Labour	2.6	17	5
2005	Labour	2.9	158	66
1955	Conservative	3.3	67	58
1974 (Oct)	Labour	3.4	42	3
1970	Conservative	3.4	43	30

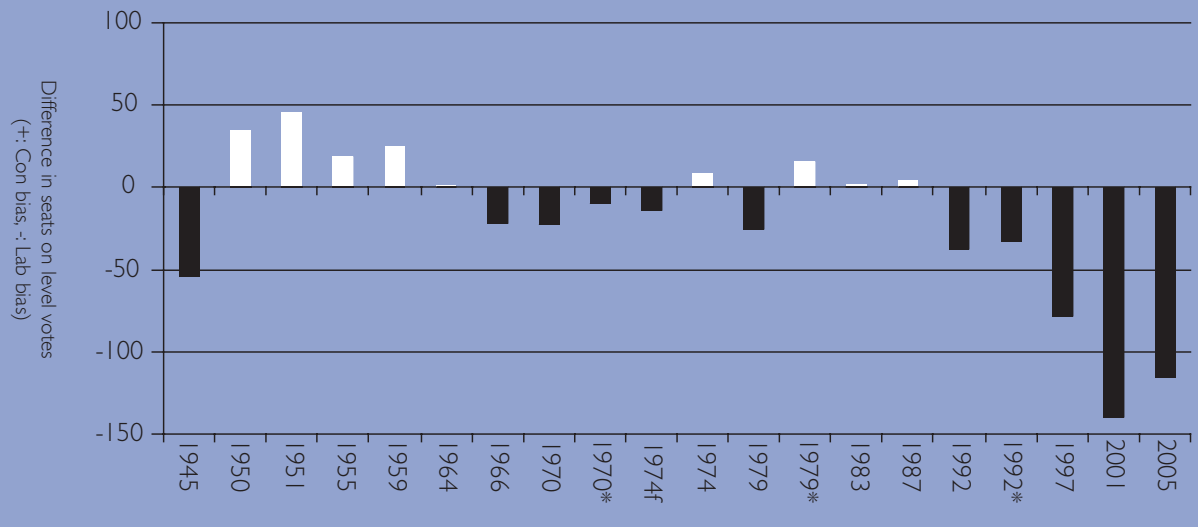
Two elections – 1950 and October 1974 – stand out in terms of giving a party a very poor reward in terms of overall majority for a vote share lead not dissimilar to that which Labour managed in 2005. It is only the bias and inconsistency in the electoral system that manufactured comfortable majorities for Labour in 2005 and the Conservatives in 1955 when similar results produced very narrow squeaks in 1950 and 1974.

These inconsistencies are not necessarily symmetrical – on the electoral geography of 1950, for instance, the Conservatives would have had a comfortable majority with a 2.6% lead in the popular vote, whereas in 2005 a Conservative lead of 2.9% would leave Labour more than 40 seats ahead of the Conservatives. The Conservatives now win many fewer seats than Labour for any given level of electoral support.

If the Conservatives had drawn level with Labour in 2005, with each party polling the same share of the vote (33.8 per cent), they would have gained an additional 19 seats from Labour and 3 from the Liberal Democrats, and one would flip from Labour to the Lib Dems.[1] This would have meant 336 Labour seats to 220 Conservatives, an advantage of 116 seats despite equal numbers of votes. The Labour majority would have been 26 – not very comfortable, but more than the majority

The 2005 election

Electoral system overall bias 1945 to 2005



*(Figures marked * for 1970, 1979 and 1992 are estimates of the result under level votes for the new boundaries that came into force in 1974, 1983 and 1997 respectively).*

of 21 John Major achieved with a 7.5% lead in the party share of the vote.

For Labour to lose their overall majority it would require a uniform 2.2% swing to the Conservatives (taking account of 'collateral damage' in terms of Labour losses to the Lib Dems), i.e. a Conservative lead of 1.4%.

For the Conservatives to draw level with Labour in terms of seats, overcoming the deficit of 158, they would need a swing of 5.2%, i.e. a lead of 7.5% in share of the vote, if it took place entirely due to Conservative gains from Labour. However, they would be helped by collateral effects which would reduce the required swing to only 4.6%, i.e. a vote share lead of 6.3%.

For the Conservatives to win outright with a majority of 2, with 324 seats, they would need 126 gains. If these were all to come from Labour this would require a swing of 8.3%, i.e. a national lead of 13.7%. Taking account of collateral Conservative gains from other parties, the target is a scarcely less daunting 7.3% swing, implying a national lead of 11.7%. This is as high a mountain to climb as it has ever been. In only one election since 1945 (the 1983 landslide) has the party managed more than this; even the 1987 victory would have been a narrow squeak rather than a majority of 100 on this new electoral geography.

For comparison, the 1979 election produced a Conservative lead of about 7% and the 1987 election a lead of about 11%. The swing of 7.3% required to win is larger than the impressive swings the party achieved to win in 1979 (5.2%) and 1970 (4.6%)

To measure and compare electoral bias one needs a common baseline. The principal measure is to imagine what would happen, given the current constituency boundaries and patterns of support, if there was a uniform swing from the party that won the popular vote to its main competitor sufficient for the two parties to draw level in votes. If the electoral system were operating fairly between the two main parties, they would have more or less the same number of seats. The outcome of this calculation is given in the chart.

In 1945 Labour was advantaged by the electoral system, in part because it won a large number of small urban

The 2005 election

seats depopulated by social change and bombing since the last thorough boundary review in 1918. However, by 1950 the Conservatives were benefiting from electoral bias, which had important consequences. Had Labour won a bigger majority in 1950, as the party would have in an unbiased system, the 1951 election would not have been caused and Labour might well have remained in power throughout the 1950s. The reason for the pro-Conservative bias was mainly that the Labour vote was inefficiently distributed – that huge majorities were piled up in working class safe Labour seats (the majority in Hemsworth in 1950 was a staggering 37,680). Turnout in these elections exceeded 80% and was fairly even whatever the social and partisan complexion of the seat.

By 1964 the anti-Labour bias had disappeared, and Labour won the election despite having a smaller lead in the total vote than the party had in 1951. There were several reasons. Turnout had fallen, particularly in safe Labour seats; population had drifted since the 1955 boundary changes so that Labour seats tended to be rather smaller than Conservative seats, and the Liberal vote had picked up a little, meaning fewer wasted Labour votes in safe Tory seats. In 1966 and 1970 turnout and constituency size factors increased the pro-Labour bias. From 1964 until 1992 there was essentially a level playing field, although there were fluctuations from election to election in the size and direction of the bias.

However, the 1992 election opened a new chapter in the history of electoral bias. The Conservatives enjoyed what by historic standards was a pretty comfortable lead – 7.5% over Labour – but their lead in seats was comparatively small (65 over Labour and 21 overall). On the basis of the way the electoral system operated in 1992, if the two main parties had polled the same share of the vote Labour would have won 38 more seats. The boundary changes introduced after 1992 would have reduced the bias a little but not much.

While Labour's vote lead in 1997 was large by any standards, the parliamentary majority and the lead over the Conservatives were swollen by an increase in electoral bias, to the extent that if Labour and Conservative had polled level votes Labour would have been 79 seats ahead. The 2001 election saw a massive increase in electoral system bias, as a moderate swing to the Conservatives (1.8%, comprising Labour losing 2.5% and the Conservatives gaining 1.0%) saw hardly any seats change hands. The level votes scenario would have given Labour an enormous lead over the Conservatives of 140 seats and a comfortable overall majority. The bias fell a little in 2005 from its high point in 2001, but by any past standards it was extreme, with Labour leading by 116 seats on level votes. The current strength of the bias is a problem of historic dimensions for the Conservative Party in attempting to regain power.

The next election will not be fought on the same boundaries, except in Scotland and the occasional exception elsewhere. The next section explores the impact of the boundary changes on the scale of the task for the Conservatives in the next election, whenever it comes.

NOTES

1 The assumptions for this are as follows. There is a uniform national swing, composed entirely of a gain in the Conservative share of the vote of 1.45 percentage points and a corresponding Labour loss in share of the vote of 1.45 per cent, applied in every seat. Votes for other parties remain unchanged. Thus, every Labour seat with a majority of less than 2.9% over the Conservatives will go Conservative. The 'collateral' effect of the change is that the Conservatives end up gaining every Lib Dem seat with a majority over the Conservatives of less than 1.45%, and that Labour will lose every seat with a majority over the Lib Dems of less than 1.45%.

2. The boundary review

The general review of parliamentary boundaries started in 2000, and should be finished by the end of 2006. The review in Scotland was implemented in 2005, but the rest should take effect at the next general election.

The review works county by county and is conducted by a neutral BOUNDARY COMMISSION, one each for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The first step in the process is to ascertain how many seats each county is entitled to on the basis of its registered electorate. The figure for registered electorate that is used for these calculations is that at the start of the boundary review, i.e. February 2000 in England. The next step is for the boundary commission to produce provisional recommendations for the county, which change the number of constituencies if appropriate. More usually, they shuffle the boundaries around so that the constituencies are relatively evenly sized, reflect community ties and where possible are not radically different from the constituencies that existed previously. The process is governed by a number of specifications called the 'Rules for Redistribution', which are impossible to obey in their entirety but provide a framework for finding a reasonably satisfactory outcome.

There is then a period for public consultation and there are usually objections to the provisional recommendations; a local public inquiry conducted by an independent Assistant Commissioner then follows at which the case can be argued. The main political parties, local authorities, civil society groups and individuals can present their cases at the inquiry. The Assistant Commissioner then assesses the arguments that were made at the inquiry, and sometimes goes in person to disputed areas, and then produces recommendations to the Boundary Commission. The Commission tends to accept most of the Assistant Commissioner's findings (but is not obliged to do so) and can revise its provisional recommendations. There is occasionally a second inquiry. The whole process is time consuming.

In general, boundary reviews help the Conservatives because population drifts out of Labour inner city seats and into the suburbs and counties – each review abolishes some depopulated Labour constituencies and creates some safe new Conservative seats. Will the current review, then, solve the bias problem?

The calculations that follow attempt to measure the political impact of the boundary review. More precise calculations await the completion of the review and the modelling efforts of Rallings and Thrasher, and perhaps others, but while there may be errors on individual seats in what follows, it is unlikely to be too far off.

ENGLAND

The following counties (and former counties) will gain a seat each:

- Avon
- Cornwall
- Derbyshire
- Devon
- Essex
- Hampshire
- Lancashire
- Norfolk
- Northamptonshire
- Warwickshire
- Wiltshire.

The following areas, provided that the provisional findings in the metropolitan areas are not reversed after public inquiries, will lose a seat each:

- London
- Greater Manchester
- Merseyside
- South Yorkshire
- Tyne and Wear
- West Midlands
- West Yorkshire.

This suggests a relatively modest aggregate change – crudely, 11 new seats created and 7 seats abolished, compared to 21 new creations and 16 abolitions in England in the previous round of changes finalised in 1995. London in particular was seriously affected, falling from 84 to 74 seats on that occasion. The disparities in the entitlements for each county and region, which were addressed in 1995, were larger than those the current review seeks to correct.

The boundary review

There is no precise way of estimating the impact of boundary changes, because parliamentary election results are not available in units smaller than the whole constituency. Preparation of 'notional' results for revised constituencies generally involves using local authority election results to model how the areas being transferred would have voted in the last general election. Particularly in areas with non-partisan local elections, it can lead to errors even when undertaken in a highly methodical fashion (for instance, the estimates for results in the new Scottish seats of Gordon in 1992 and Dumfriesshire CT in 2001 were clearly in error). Further, votes may change when people are moved into a seat where the tactical position is very different – for instance people formerly in the Lewes constituency who may have voted Lib Dem there may well have started voting Labour once transferred into marginal Brighton Kemptown in 1997.

These estimates are fairly rough calculations for the most part (although detailed working has been done in some cases e.g. Harlow), and are based as is usual on local election patterns. Where the conclusion is particularly uncertain this has been noted. Although individual estimates might be inaccurate, errors may well balance out overall.

ENGLAND: FINALISED RECOMMENDATIONS

England: finalised recommendations

Review area	Change in allocation	Party change	Comments
Avon (former county)	+1	Con +1 Lab –1 LD +1?	New seat (Filton & Bradley Stoke) likely three-way marginal Wansdyke: becomes Somerset NE, probably changes Lab to Con Bristol W: Con eliminated from contest Bristol NW: stays Lab but becomes easier for Con to gain
Bedfordshire Inc Luton	0	-	Minimal change
Berkshire (former county)	0	-	Reading E: possibly a little more Con, but not substantial
Buckinghamshire Inc Milton Keynes	0	-	Milton Keynes N: becomes more Labour and is Con-held ultra-marginal Milton Keynes S: becomes more Conservative; Lab held marginal
Cambridgeshire Inc Peterborough	0	-	Peterborough: Con hold strengthened Cambridge: LD hold strengthened
Cheshire Inc Halton, Warrington	0	-	Minor changes
Cleveland	0	-	Stockton S: slightly easier for Con, but large Lab majority in 2005
Cornwall	+1	LD +1	Camborne & Redruth: Labour target
Cumbria	0	-	Carlisle: adds Con rural territory; not enough to tip it over but makes it more marginal. Same true for Copeland.
Derbyshire Inc Derby	+1	Con +1	New seat (Mid Derbyshire): likely Con, but Lab challenge in a good year Derbyshire South a bit more Conservative Knock on effects strengthen Lab hold on ex-marginals Derby North, Amber Valley, Erewash
Devon Inc Plymouth, Torbay	+1	Con +1	New seat (Central Devon) likely Con with Lib Dem presence May strengthen Lib Dems in other nearby seats Teignbridge, Totnes, Devon W&T Exeter: Lab hold strengthened Plymouth Sutton: slightly more Labour
Dorset Inc Bournemouth, Poole	0	-	Mid Dorset & North Poole: slightly better for LD
Durham Inc Darlington	0	-	Minor changes
East Sussex Inc Brighton & Hove	0	-	Hastings & Rye: slightly better for Con

The boundary review

Essex Inc Southend, Thurrock	+1	Con +2 Lab -1	Marginal Con seats of Braintree, Harwich both split into two safer Con seats. Harlow: minor changes to an ultra-marginal, 97-vote Lab lead replaced by around 200-vote Con lead Basildon & Billericay: likely Con in 05 South Basildon & E Thurrock: likely Lab in 05 but Con improved and very marginal Chelmsford: town seat might revive LD chances, but Con in 05
Gloucestershire	0	-	Stroud and Gloucester both strengthened for Labour
Hampshire Inc Portsmouth, Southampton	+1	Con +1	New seat (Meon Valley): Con with LD presence Basingstoke: reduced to urban core, Lab in 2001 but not 2005 Winchester: little net partisan change despite big alterations Portsmouth North: slightly more Con Romsey & Southampton North: slightly better for LDs than old Romsey Aldershot: strengthened for Con
Herefordshire	0	-	Minor changes
Hertfordshire	0	-	Hemel Hempstead: small shift to Lab, but seat still a Con ultra-marginal Stevenage: Lab hold strengthened
Humberside (former county)	0	-	Minimal change
Isle of Wight	0	-	No change
Kent Inc Medway	0	Con +1 Lab –1	Difficult to assess because of large concentration of very marginal seats. Sittingbourne: slightly more Con, probably upsets Lab majority of 79 Thanet South: slightly more Con, perhaps not enough to upset Lab majority of 664 Dartford: slightly more Lab Medway: perhaps more Conservative
Lancashire Inc Blackpool, Blackburn	+1	Lab +1	New seat (Wyre and Preston North) safe Con Lancaster & Fleetwood: better for Lab, enough to flip the seat back Blackpool N: much more marginal Lab hold
Leicestershire	0	-	Loughborough: slightly easier for Con
Lincolnshire	0	-	Lincoln: slightly easier for Con
London (Central and West): City, Eal, H&F, Hou, K&C, Wm	+1	Lab +1	Complex changes: Westminster North – Lab marginal replaces safe Lab seat Kensington – safe Con seat replaces safe Con seat Chelsea & Fulham – safe Con seat replaces Con marginal Hammersmith – safe Lab seat added Ealing Acton – Lab marginal replaces safe Lab seat Minor or no change: CLAW, Ealing N, Ealing Southall, Feltham, Brentford
London (East): B&D, Hac, Hav, New, Red, TH, WF	-1	Con –1	Hornchurch: effectively abolished.
London (North): Bar, Bre, Cam, Enf, Har, Hill, Is.	-1	LD –1	Brent E: effectively abolished, although LDs could probably win Hampstead & Kilburn Harrow E: rather easier for Con Harrow W: Lab hold strengthened considerably Uxbridge: slightly better for Lab Finchley and GG: slightly better for Con – highly marginal Enfield North and Enfield Southgate: Changes will probably flip them both in opposite directions, as a strongly Con ward moves from Southgate to North and slightly less strongly Lab wards move in the other direction. Both would be ultra-marginal.

The boundary review

London (South): Bex, Bro, Cro, Gre, Kin, Lam, Lew, Ric, Swk, Sut, Wan	0	-	Bexleyheath & Crayford: slightly more Con Beckenham: much more Con Croydon Central: minor changes probably help Con a tiny bit
Norfolk	+1	Con +1	New seat (Norfolk Central) safe Con, but 'Broadland' a LD possibility Norwich North: Lab hold strengthened Norfolk NW: slightly easier for Lab
Northamptonshire	+1	Lab +2 Con –1	Present Daventry divided into two safe Con seats; knock on effects are considerable: Northampton South reduced to urban core and easily flipped to Labour Kettering: loses 14,000 rural voters, flips to Labour Wellingborough: might flip to Labour
North Yorkshire Inc York	0	Con +1 Lab –1	Vale of York (safe Con seat) abolished Selby: flips from Lab to Con Harrogate & Knaresborough: LD hold weakened York Outer: new seat, three way marginal. Difficult to predict; maybe Con in 2005?
Northumberland	0	-	Minimal change
Nottinghamshire Inc Nottingham	0	-	Newark: Con much strengthened Other changes fairly minor
Oxfordshire	0	-	Nothing that affects partisan balance
Shropshire Inc Telford & Wrekin	0	-	Minor alterations to The Wrekin and Telford
Somerset	0	-	Taunton made safer for LDs
Staffordshire Inc Stoke-on-Trent	0	Con +1 Lab -1	Staffs Moorlands: major boundary changes flip from Lab to Con
Suffolk	0	-	Minor changes
Surrey	0	LD +1 Con -1	The very marginal (347 votes) Con seat of Guildford has a small loss of safe Con wards which may account for about 400 votes net; enough to flip it back to LD
Warwickshire	+1	Lab +1	New seat (Kenilworth & Southam) safe Con Knock on effects make Warwick & Leamington more Labour and should flip Rugby seat over to Labour
West Sussex	0	-	Crawley: Lab ultra-marginal unchanged
Wiltshire Inc Swindon	+1	LD +1	New seat (Chippenham): almost certainly LD seat Swindon North: Lab hold strengthened a little Wiltshire North: safe Con on new boundaries Westbury: stronger Con on new boundaries
Worcestershire	0	-	Worcestershire W: Con hold strengthened Wyre Forest: Con position improved Redditch: Con position improved, though still Lab seat.

The Buckinghamshire findings raised the possibility of an interim revision of the Milton Keynes area before the next full boundary review.

The boundary review

England: provisional recommendations			
Review area	**Change in allocation**	**Party change**	**Comments**
Greater Manchester	-1	Lab -1	Eccles: effectively abolished Bolton W: slightly worse for Con Slight changes benefit LDs in Hazel Grove, Cheadle
Merseyside (revised)	-1	Lab -1	Knowsley N & Sefton E abolished Sefton Central: successor to Crosby: considerably easier for Con
South Yorkshire	-1	Lab -1	Sheffield Hillsborough effectively abolished
Tyne and Wear	-1	Lab -1	Tyne Bridge constituency abolished
West Midlands (revised)	-1	Lab -1	Major reorganisation of boundaries in south Birmingham. Yardley probably remains Lib Dem though Lab presence increased Hall Green: becomes safe Labour seat Selly Oak: becomes a bit more winable for Con Edgbaston: Slightly better for Lab Sparkbrook & Small Heath: abolished.
West Yorkshire	-1	Lab -1	Normanton: effectively abolished. Some marginal wards are swapped around between Batley & Spen, Dewsbury and Wakefield; Dewsbury probably a little more marginal but with a significant Green rather than BNP component. Wakefield strengthened for Lab. Elmet: Lab hold strengthened

SCOTLAND

The revised boundaries took effect from the general election of May 2005 and there will not be further changes between then and the next election.

WALES

The changes in most of Wales are minor, and its total entitlement of 40 seats is unchanged. There are small alterations to the highly marginal Conservative seat of Preseli Pembrokeshire, and more major boundary changes in North Wales. These are more difficult to model than those in England, because political behaviour is less easily discerned from local elections and demographic characteristics.

The current marginal constituency of Conwy is altered in a way that makes it a more difficult seat for Labour, adding a Plaid Cymru voting tract of rural territory (and the small town of Betws-y-Coed) from the former Meirionnydd nant Conwy constituency. But the Conservatives are unlikely to benefit. Part of the existing Conwy goes into a new seat called Arfon, which will be competitive between Labour and Plaid Cymru. There are smaller changes to the neighbouring seat of Clwyd West, Conservative by 133 votes in 2005, which might imperil their majority.

It is probably safest to assume no changes in partisan representation as a result of the boundary changes in Wales, although the rearrangement in the Conwy area could gain (or lose) Labour a seat versus Plaid Cymru.

THE NET EFFECT OF THE BOUNDARY CHANGES

The boundary changes do not justify the hopes placed in them by some optimistic Conservatives.

The estimated effect would be to **increase the number of Conservative MPs by around 7, reduce**

The boundary review

Labour by 6 and increase Lib Dems by 3. On the basis of the new boundaries the 2005 result would therefore have been Labour 350, Conservative 205, Lib Dem 65 and others 30, for **a Labour majority of 50 rather than 66**.

The boundary changes have some more subtle effects than this, in that they will also make various Labour-held marginals easier or more difficult for the Conservatives to gain for a given national swing. For instance, the Labour seat of Bristol North West, currently 136 on the target list and a seat that the Conservatives can aspire to only if they win an outright majority, gains the best Conservative areas from Bristol West and becomes much more marginal. The new version of Birmingham Selly Oak is also one where the Conservatives stand a chance, in contrast to the current seat bearing that name.

However, for every case like this there is an example such as Gloucester and Exeter, which become more Labour because they lose territory from the edge of the city where Labour are weak. While Selly Oak is improved, the new version of Birmingham Hall Green is pretty much a write-off from the Conservative point of view.

There are three counties where the creation of an extra Conservative seat has a disastrous effect on Conservative chances elsewhere. An extra seat can damage the party that superficially stands to gain. Northamptonshire is due another seat, an increase from six to seven. The population growth has been in mainly Conservative areas in the south west of the county, so this is where the new seat appears. Instead of one safe seat (Daventry) the Conservatives now have two (Daventry and the new South Northamptonshire). But the creation of an extra seat draws off lots of the best Conservative areas from existing marginals. The Conservative majority in two seats (Northampton South and Kettering) disappears with the villages lost to the new safe seats, and that in Wellingborough almost does too. So the deserved award of a seventh seat in fact means a net gain of two for Labour and a net Conservative loss of one! The same sort of thing also happens in Warwickshire and Derbyshire in this review. In other counties, it is a more straightforward gain for the Conservatives as in Essex and Hampshire, but there are nuances to the process that fascinate people who study elections.

The increased professionalism of the Conservative strategy for this boundary review has meant that the party has focused on avoiding the creation of safe Conservative seats, and instead attempted to increase the number of marginals. In some cases this has clearly worked, as in Milton Keynes where both new seats would have been extremely marginal in 2005 and would go to the Conservatives on any kind of favourable swing in the next election.

The overall picture is far from clear. Some Conservatives hope that they have made the mountain less steep because of detailed alterations such as Milton Keynes, but this remains doubtful. Particularly in relation to Liberal Democrat seats, 'notional' improvements may not be manifest in reality because people's voting behaviour can change once in a different constituency. This is why, although Harrogate and Knaresborough will add a slice of rural North Yorkshire and therefore become notionally more Conservative, there is no guarantee that it will turn out that way. Even apparently radical changes to the balance of a seat, as with Gordon in 1997, have not shifted Lib Dem incumbents in the past. It is doubtful whether there has been much overall change in the shape of the battlefield – the mountain remains pretty much as steep as it has been, and the bias in the system is only slightly reduced. The new boundaries make it unlikely for Labour to win an outright majority despite a Conservative lead in votes, but still makes it pretty much as hard for the Conservatives to win outright or draw level as it is currently.

The fact that the boundary review has done relatively little to counteract the anti-Conservative bias in the electoral system is beginning to become apparent as analysis of the 2005 results progresses and the review draws to a close. The next section examines some perhaps attractive but misleading explanations for why this might be, and the more significant reasons for the continuing bias.

3. Bias: the causes

The reasons for the continuing anti-Conservative bias fall into two broad categories. One set of contributory causes is embedded in the way the boundary review operates. This, despite the disproportionate attention that these factors have attracted in recent discussion, is comparatively minor. The major reason for the continuing bias is that it is caused for the most part by factors that are unrelated to how the boundaries are drawn up.

BOUNDARY COMMISSION METHODS

SLOW PROGRESS

A minor contributory reason to the continuing bias is that the review takes a long time and it is obliged to use electorate figures from 2000, which makes the exercise out of date before it starts. If 2005 electorate figures were used, the following additional changes would take place:

Counties gaining an extra seat: Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire, Somerset

Counties losing another seat: Tyne and Wear, West Midlands, London

Oxfordshire in fact was narrowly entitled to a seventh seat based on the 2000 figures, but the Commission (for what seem to be inadequate reasons) did not grant it. The discrepancies caused by slow progress are not particularly dramatic, but that should be no surprise. Demographic changes happen slowly, and discussion in the media which assumes vast movements of population from the cities to the suburbs happening all the time is badly misinformed. Population movements were much faster and more dramatic in the period between 1945 and the mid 1970s, when millions were rehoused, new suburbs grew up and the New Towns were built.

Labour would almost certainly lose three more seats from the reductions in the urban regions, but the gains are more complicated. The new seat in Cambridgeshire would almost certainly help the Conservatives, but in Oxfordshire and Somerset a review might create new Con-Lib Dem marginals depending on how the boundaries are drawn. Even if the most up to date figures were to be used in the boundary review, it would only make a difference of 6 more seats to the Labour majority – i.e. bring it down to 44. Some of the details within each county would probably also be a little different.

The slow pace of the review is therefore not a significant factor in explaining bias.

WALES

Wales will have 40 MPs in this parliament and the next parliament. This is more than its registered electorate merits – if treated like England (and Scotland) it would only have around 33 seats. The reasons for over-representation are complex and result from the rules under which the Boundary Commissions operate. If Wales were to be cut back to 33, not all the casualties would be Labour. There are two under-populated Plaid Cymru seats in the north west, the Lib Dems would probably lose in mid Wales and the marginal Conservative seat of Clwyd West would probably be abolished (though it is probable that there would still be a Conservative seat in Pembrokeshire). Assuming 5 out of 7 losses from Wales would be at Labour's expense, the over-representation of Wales still contributes only a net three to the Labour majority. If one Conservative, one Lib Dem and one Plaid seat disappear then the contribution is only a net one to Labour's majority and net three to Labour's lead over the Conservatives.

DOES SIZE MATTER?

Boundary reviews are intended to remove disparities between the number of registered electors in each constituency; this is the point of having them. The principle of equal representation is an important one, without which votes are not of equal value. 'Malapportionment' as it is known can have systematic effects on the strength of parties and sectional interests, and it is potentially a powerful gerrymandering tool. However, despite this, the number of electors is not exactly the same in every constituency and disparities are linked to party strengths. The average Conservative seat

Bias: the causes

in 2005 was 6,078 electors (9.1 per cent) larger than the average Labour seat. This fact has led some politicians and commentators to conclude that electoral bias is all about the inadequacies and quirks of the Boundary Commission. This is largely unfounded.

However, it is fair to ask why constituencies are in fact different in size.

1. Physical geography (particularly islands) Islands cause the worst problems for boundary determination – it is no accident that the largest (Isle of Wight, 109,046 electors) and the smallest (Na h-Eileanan an Iar, 21,576; Orkney & Shetland, 33,048) constituencies are based on islands. To get close to the ideal size one would need to link each of the island groups with part of the mainland. The Isle of Wight can only produce one of several unsatisfactory outcomes: a grossly oversized seat at present; two slightly less grossly undersized seats, or one right sized seat and one absurd constituency with a foot on each side of the Solent. The straddle seat would presumably be based on a ferry route (Southampton Central and Cowes? Portsmouth Central and Ryde? Wight West and New Forest South?). The Isle of Wight was technically entitled to two seats in 2000, but there was no demand for this from local people or any of the local parties. The Scottish boundary commission considered a constituency combining the Western Isles with part of the mainland and roundly rejected the idea.

The present rules have a get-out 'Rule 6' for special geographical circumstances, which allow substantial departures from mathematical equality in cases where the physical geography is very difficult. If the commission were to be stricter about equalising electorates and not make exceptions for special geographical reasons, the Isle of Wight would be divided into two seats and Cumbria would lose a seat – but this would also have been true in 2000.

2. Administrative geography Working county by county and using wards as a building block limits the Boundary Commission's freedom of movement to get close to the ideal size. Imagine a county has, say, 385,000 electors and in theory has 5.5 seats based on an ideal constituency size of 70,000. There are three possibilities:

- Have 5 rather big constituencies (77,000 electors each on average)
- Have 6 rather little constituencies (64,166 electors each on average)
- Have 5 proper-sized constituencies and put 35,000 electors in a seat with 35,000 electors from the next county along (or other more complex variants).

This was more or less the situation in Somerset this time. The smaller the county the larger the discrepancies can be. A very large county such as Kent or Hampshire can get pretty close to the ideal average, but small counties cannot. And the smaller a county gets, the more it will tend to produce small seats rather than large ones. If a county is entitled to 2.4 seats (i.e. has 168,000 electors) you can split it into two seats of 84,000 or three seats of 56,000. Each are the same distance from the ideal of 70,000, so anything over a 2.4 entitlement should have 3 seats. This is the mysterious 'harmonic mean'. Before 1997 London boroughs were treated as little counties, generating many small inner city and suburban seats and over-representing the capital by about 10 seats. Also, seats must align with ward boundaries, so in a city such as Leeds with wards of around 12,000 electors let alone Birmingham with 15-19,000, getting close to the ideal number is rather hit and miss.

3. Scotland and Wales The levels of representation for Scotland and Wales were essentially set in a political compromise in 1944, until the recent reduction of Scotland which applied the same entitlement standards to Scotland as operate in England. However, because the Highlands and Islands are more geographically difficult than anywhere in England, Scotland remains slightly over-represented with 59 seats rather than the 57 its registered electorate merits. Wales, because of its guaranteed minimum and technical factors to do with the harmonic mean and county sizes has tended to grow as well. Labour's relative strength in Scotland and Wales (particularly since 1987) has tended to increase the overall bias. Back in 1955 the Conservatives benefited slightly from having under-populated Scottish

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county seats (a combination of the national and administrative geography factors).

4. Population drift Population movements are not random or self-cancelling and a definite trend takes place over the period in which a set of boundaries is in place. Areas that currently tend to lose population are declining industrial towns and cities, large post-war council estates, inner urban areas (except for city centres, which are now gaining population), and some remote rural areas. Places that have tended to grow include towns and villages within commuting distance of major centres, owner occupied estates near towns or motorways, and the south east and eastern counties in general. The preponderance of areas of declining population elect Labour MPs, while expanding areas tend to elect Conservative MPs. Even if the Boundary Commission managed to fix the size of constituencies pretty equally, as it did in 1955, a gap will open up as time goes on. This causes a degree of pro-Labour bias to creep in over the cycle, as it did in the 1955-70 period when a pro-Conservative bias was replaced by a level playing field and then a pro-Labour bias. In the 1970s there were much more extreme differences between the largest oversized Conservative seats than now (such as Bromsgrove and Redditch with 104,375 electors in 1979) and badly depopulated Labour inner city seats (such as Newcastle Central with 23,678 electors, which could fit five times into some other seats). In 1970 there was an area of central Glasgow with three MPs and 64,033 electors, and three other seats in the city with more voters than that in a single constituency.

The most scandalously biased case, in terms of size alone, was 1970 when the average Conservative constituency had 10,278 more electors (17.9%) than the average Labour seat. There were several reasons for this imbalance, principal among them being the Labour government's decision in 1969 to postpone the revision of parliamentary boundaries on the pretext that local government reform should come first. The Boundary Commission report was voted down in Parliament and only approved after the Conservatives had won the 1970 election. For this reason, the boundaries in 1970 were more outdated than usual, having remained the same since the 1955 election and having been based on 1953 electorates. The period from 1953-70 was also notable for a large amount of mobility because of demographic trends and public housing – shifts of population were probably more dramatic than anything since. The lowering of the voting age in 1969 to 18 also widened the gap between small and large constituencies. And yet… the national outcome in terms of electoral bias was no worse than in 1966.

Average electorate in...	Conservative seats	Labour seats	Gap	Gap %
1945	56,713	50,785	5,928	11.6
1950	55,186	55,245	-59	-0.1
1951	55,977	55,797	180	0.3
1955	55,293	55,526	-533	-1.0
1959	57,047	55,345	1,702	3.1
1964	59,443	55,137	4,306	7.8
1966	60,382	56,420	3,962	7.0
1970 old	67,473	57,195	10,278	17.9
1974	65,358	59,918	5,441	9.1
1979 old	68,355	60,026	8,329	13.9
1983	67,296	61,857	5,439	6.6
1987	70,236	61,825	8,411	13.6
1992 old	71,509	62,176	9,333	15.0
1992 new	68,457	64,292	4,165	6.5
1997	70,440	65,152	5,288	8.1
2001	72,117	65,746	6,371	9.7
2005	72,856	66,778	6,078	9.1

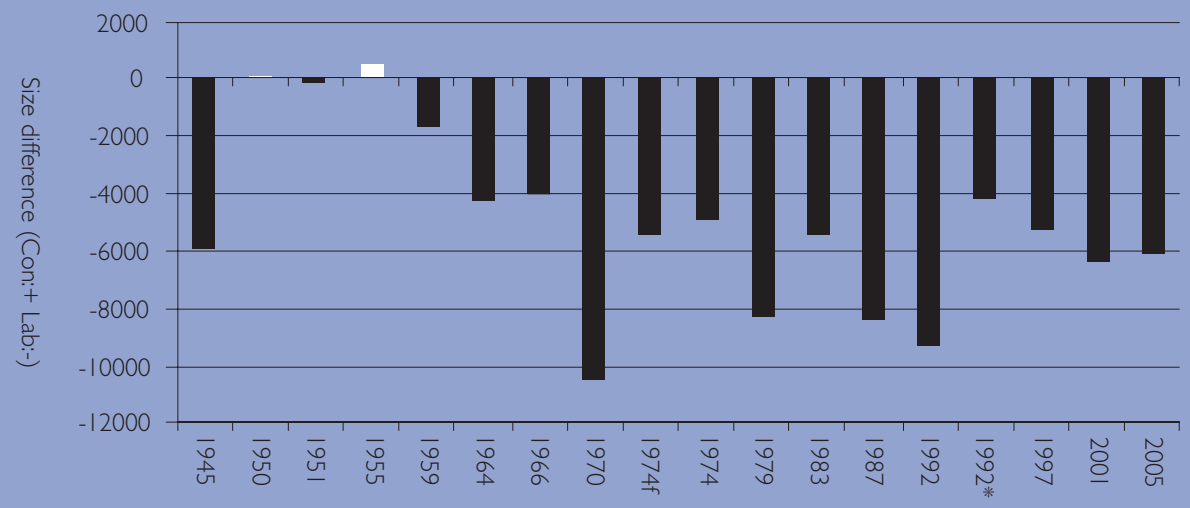
Gap (%): Difference in average size of Conservative and Labour seats as percentage of electorate of average Labour seat.

The table clearly shows the tendency of the average size of Conservative and Labour seats to drift apart over time, and the effect of boundary changes in reducing the disparities. The elections of 1950, 1955, February 1974, 1983 and the '1992 new' notional result are all the first to reflect sets of boundary changes. In all except 1955, the effect has been to bring the parties' seats closer to equal size, with the 1974 changes perhaps being less strong because of the long delay before these boundaries were introduced.

In 1974, on the same register and in the same year, with the size bias working in Labour's favour, the overall bias in the electoral system was pro-Labour in the first election and pro-Conservative in the second. The size

Bias: the causes

Difference in average constituency electorate by party 1945-2005



(1992 is the 'notional' figure for the result if the boundaries introduced in 1997 had been used in 1992.)*

difference in 2005 was in fact pretty typical in historical perspective. Considering that (outside Scotland) the boundaries were based on figures from 1991, 14 years ago, the difference was quite small compared to other elections fought on old sets of boundaries (1970 on boundaries drawn in 1953, 1979 on electorates from 1965, 1992 on boundaries based on 1976 electorates). Larger differences in size than that found in 2005 have in the past been consistent with relatively small pro-Labour bias (1970), overall fairness (1987) and small pro Conservative bias (October 1974).

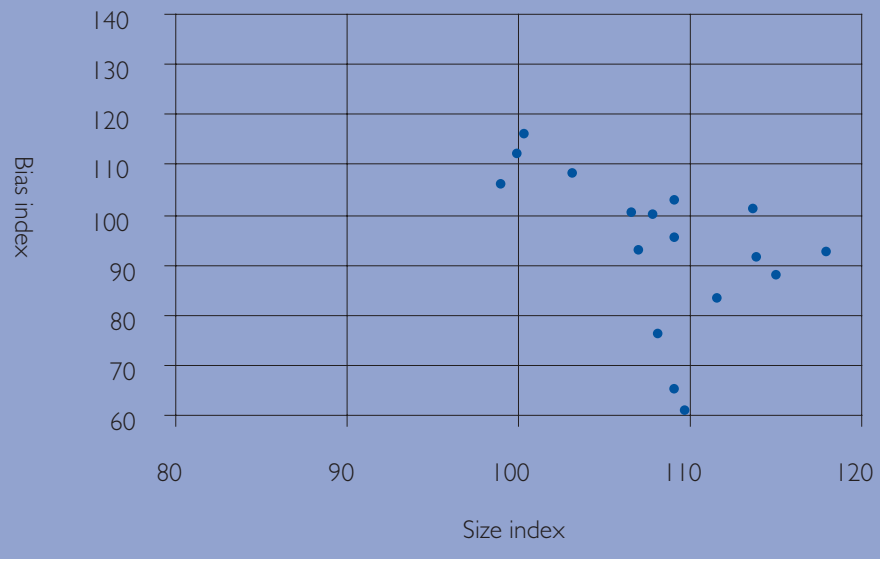
The chart on the next page shows the nature of the relationship between size difference and overall electoral bias.[2] There clearly is some degree of relationship between the two numbers – a trend line can be fitted to most of the data points fairly readily, showing that as Labour seats grow relatively smaller, pro-Labour bias tends to develop in the system. Interestingly, a level playing field between the two parties seems to be most consistent with Conservative seats being 5% or so bigger than Labour seats – the reasons for this finding are probably in social and electoral geography.

Size is a contributory factor in the tendency of overall bias to grow more pro-Labour over a time period when the same set of boundaries is used. The classic example is the boundaries first used in 1955, which initially produced a significant pro-Conservative bias but by the late 1960s were operating in Labour's favour. The same is true to some extent of the emergence of a pro-Labour tilt by the elections of 1979 and 1992. It was not a bad explanation for the relatively small degree of bias that existed before 1997, for the most part within plus or minus 30 seats of equity. Size differences explained over half the variation in electoral bias over that period.[3]

But size does not work as an explanation by itself – otherwise the largest pro-Labour bias would have been in the elections of 1970 and 1992 rather than 2001 and 2005. The elections of 2001 and 2005 fall clearly outside the normal framework of explanation – they are the two outlying data points where the size index is just below 110 and the bias index is below 70, and 1997 is just above them. Taking these three into account drastically reduces the extent to which size and bias are correlated. It is clear from the numbers that size difference can help explain the moderate variations in bias through much of the post-war period, but that it is **no help** in understanding why the problem has become so much worse recently.

Bias: the causes

Size difference and electoral bias 1945-2005



In any case, at a micro level, having large seats need not be bad for the Conservatives' chances. Imagine a county with a town in the middle with a static population of 70,000 surrounded by an expanding rural and small town area with 210,000 electors. Initially, this is fine – we have a town seat (probably, let's say, a Labour held marginal) and three Conservative rural seats around it. Suppose each rural seat adds 10,000 voters by the next review 10 years later. The situation then needs sorting out as the county's seats are now different sizes. This can be done by each rural seat donating 2,500 voters to the town seat, so that the county's seats are now all the same size (77,500 voters) although they are now much larger than the national average. The revised, larger town seat, with this infusion of new rural and suburban voters, may well now tip over to the Conservatives. Take the process on a little further – each of the three rural seats gains another 2,000 voters. The county now has 316,000 electors and is entitled to a fifth constituency and the average electorate will now be a little small – 63,200 voters. The town seat shrinks back to a smaller urban core than before, and goes decisively to Labour. This expand and contract pattern can be seen in the history of several parliamentary seats, including Bedford, Lincoln, Norwich North and Carlisle.

Having looked at the reasons for constituencies having different sizes, it is apparent that the normal procedures for a boundary review can only really correct for the fourth factor, and that is limited to some extent by the slow nature of the review process. Changes in policy on the part of the Commission can change the way that the administrative geography affects the distribution of seats, as it did in the 1990s review when seats that crossed London borough boundaries were deemed acceptable under certain conditions. This was important in reducing the over-representation of London. Changes imposed by statute can of course alter other matters, such as the repeal of the minimum entitlement for Scotland in the Scotland Act 1998 and the consequent review using the same quota as in England that took effect in 2005. It would be open to amend procedures in future reviews, for instance to bring Wales into line with the English quota, to relax restrictions on seats containing parts of two counties, to abolish the Rule 6 geographical get-out, or to give a higher (or absolute) priority to mathematical equality. Conservative MP Andrew Tyrie, in *Pruning the Politicians* (Conservative Mainstream, 2004) proposes a number of reasonable changes that could be made, a paper that offers a starting point for a rational debate on boundaries. However, other politicians and commentators

Bias: the causes

have made sweeping and ill-founded remarks and proposals based on an incomplete understanding of the issues (see, for instance, the leader column in the *Sunday Telegraph* 8 May 2005, John Redwood MP in the House of Commons 17 May 2005 and Peter Oborne in the *Spectator* 6 August 2005).

A tougher approach to equalising the size of constituencies may be a good thing in itself, but even so there are still some costs to the idea that should be borne in mind.

1. Very frequent reviews. The most rational version of an equalised system would not allow population drift to create gaps beyond a trigger point away from the ideal size (a 5% variation either side would allow seats no bigger than 73,424 and no smaller than 66,432). Local population drift will trigger several local reviews every parliament. Part of the reason for the current system was that in 1955 MPs on all sides disliked the disruption caused by frequent reviews (boundaries changed both in 1950 and 1955). Such complaints from MPs, electors and local media would no doubt be heard again if there were changes every single parliament.

2. Knock-on disruption to 'innocent' seats. There may be radical alterations at the other end of a county because of fairly small changes in one area, which is difficult to explain to MPs and electors alike. If, say, the St Ives constituency grew too large, the ripple effects could be felt as far away as Devon.

3. Artificial seats. Some constituencies are currently reasonably close to representing an identifiable community – for instance Folkestone and Hythe in Kent, or Colchester in Essex. Some are comprehensible collections of places that do seem to belong together, such as West Dorset or Newbury. Some are rag-bags of places that would not seem to fit elsewhere (Mid Dorset and North Poole, Hertfordshire South West). The proportion of constituencies that represent an identifiable community would fall under a thoroughly equalised system. The consequences would be administrative complexity and confusion. It would undermine one of the basic arguments used by those who defend FPTP, namely the link between MPs and constituents (as would very frequent reviews). **Cross-county seats** would be particularly likely to suffer from internal problems and incoherence, particularly if the parts in each county tend to vote in different ways.

4. Split wards are a consequence of tougher equalisation, particularly in the large cities where in order to keep councils a reasonable size ward electorates have to be very large (10,000 or more). Split wards are administratively complex; although there are ways round this problem they would involve disrupting local government representative arrangements.

5. More complex review process. The county-by-county process, keeping whole wards together and the other Rules set in the process limit the degrees of freedom in drawing boundaries – there are only a few competing rational schemes and boundary inquiries usually come down to one or two local issues (whether a small town should be in one constituency or another, for instance). With nearly unlimited possibilities, judging competing schemes becomes more difficult.

6. Risks of gerrymandering. In the United States mathematical equality within each state plus unfettered boundary distribution (e.g. counties are not kept together etc) has produced horrendous partisan gerrymandering. If a blatant gerrymander still manages to achieve mathematical equality, there is no way of dismissing it unless other criteria as well as numbers are allowed. It seems logical to uphold a scheme that is not overtly partisan, and does better at keeping communities together, against a gerrymander whose boundaries bear no relation to social geography. In abandoning the current rules, one might not notice the good points of the system until they are gone.

7. Lack of consensus? In the past reforms to the process have arisen principally from Speaker's Conferences and the like and have commanded a measure of all party support. While a compromise plan might command consensus, a radical version would probably not. It would almost certainly not be possible to get non-consensus primary legislation through parliament and then a full boundary review through the inquiry process within a single parliament.

Bias: the causes

With a maximum permitted variation of 5% either side of the quota, if the unit of assessment (county, borough grouping etc) has an entitlement of less than 9.5 constituencies, it is possible that no acceptable internal solution is arithmetically possible, and a cross-border seat must be created. However, there is no guarantee that an acceptable internal solution is possible even if the county average is within the 5% margins of toleration. If the average is, say, close to the upper margin of acceptable size, then the constituencies within that county must all be of an exceptionally uniform size so that no individual constituency exceeds the margin. Such a situation would leave the possibility that a review could be rapidly triggered by random fluctuations and considerable changes could follow to address a trivial problem. To allow for some safety margin, and some internal variation, the county average needs to be much closer to the national average than the 5% toleration bands.

On the other hand, if the unit of assessment is entitled to 10.45 seats or more, there is an expanding margin in the middle in which two solutions are possible within the 5% margin of variation. For instance, an entitlement of 10.47 could be allocated either 10 or 11 acceptably sized constituencies. With very large units this margin can produce several alternatives – somewhere entitled to 100 seats could have between 96 and 105 acceptably sized constituencies. Equal sized constituencies are still compatible with systematic under- and over-representation of areas and parties.

This extended discussion of constituency size is intended to counter the idea which has gained currency during 2005 that the difference in size between Labour and Conservative constituencies is (1) something new, and (2) the factor principally responsible for the anti-Conservative bias in the electoral system. It is neither.

The fact that the current system bias is so weakly related to size differentials is a good indicator that other factors are really responsible.

NOTES

2 The 'size index' is a ratio of the average Conservative seat's electorate to the average Labour seat's electorate: i.e. 100 would mean they are equal, 90 that a Conservative seat is 10% smaller than a Labour seat, 110 that it is 10% bigger. The 'bias index' is an analogous figure for the ratio of Conservative seats to Labour seats if shares of the vote were equal. A figure over 100 means that the Conservatives would win more seats at level votes; under 100 that Labour would win more seats at level votes.

3 In statistical terms, the R-squared correlation between size difference and overall system bias between 1945 and 1992 is 0.63. Including data from the elections since 1997 causes the correlation to drop massively, to 0.24.

4. The real reasons for bias

DIFFERENTIAL TURNOUT

Differential turnout has become a more important factor since the 1950s days of nearly full turnout everywhere. This was particularly so in 2001 and 2005 when there was a very much lower level of turnout, with the fall concentrated in the most working-class safe Labour constituencies. In the 1950s one potent source of anti-Labour bias in the electoral system was that with turnout nearly universal, and both voting and residential patterns differentiated by class, Labour piled up enormous majorities in its safest seats. In 1959, turnout in the average Labour constituency was 78.6% and in the average Conservative constituency it was scarcely higher at 78.8%. In many of Labour's safest seats turnout was particularly high (over 85% turned out in Ebbw Vale, and just under 70% of the whole electorate voted for Aneurin Bevan), while in some safe Conservative seats it was comparatively low (69.8% in Brighton Pavilion for instance).

By 1987 a small gap had opened up. The average turnout in a Labour constituency was 73.3% and in Conservative seats a bit higher – 76.6%. In 2005 it was only 58.0% in Labour seats (including all the Labour marginals) and 65.3% in Conservative seats. The upshot of this was that the gap in overall electorate size between Labour and Conservative seats of 9.1% was in fact 22.9% in terms of actual voters – **47,618 people voted in the average Conservative seat and 38,739 in the average Labour seat**. This gap was ten times larger than the 2.2% difference between total numbers voting in the average Labour and average Conservative seat in 1959.

Imagine the proportion of votes cast for each party had been exactly the same as in reality in each seat in 2005, except that there had been a 100% turnout. The national share of the votes would have been Labour 36.3% (rather than 35.2%), Conservative 31.5% (rather than 32.3%) and Lib Dem 21.8% (rather than 22.0%) and the numbers of seats would be exactly the same. The system 'thought' the Labour lead in share of the vote was 4.8%, while the votes cast showed only a 2.9% lead. There is no way of eliminating this source of bias by changing boundaries.

A simple numerical example can illustrate how differential turnout can produce startlingly biased results. Suppose that there are five constituencies with 70,000 electors each, each fought only by the two main parties. Three are safe Labour urban seats, two are safe Conservative rural seats, and in each safe seat the dominant party gets 60% and the smaller party 40%. Turnout in election A is 80% everywhere, turnout in election B falls to 75% in the safe Conservative seats and 50% in the safe Labour seats. There is no change in the balance between the parties in any of the seats. The votes are as follows:

Labour have slipped behind the Conservatives in the overall vote. There appears to have been a national swing of 2.2 per cent to the Conservatives although they are no closer to winning any of the Labour seats, and Labour now have a 3-2 majority in seats despite having slightly less of the vote. If the Conservatives had a swing of 5% in their favour, they would be even further behind in the vote and still gain no more seats. This, in exaggerated terms, is a representation of what has been happening in Britain since 1992. This factor is nothing to do with any problems in drawing boundaries – in our example, all the constituencies are the right size and there have been no changes in population. Unless the causes of differential turnout are addressed, there is only one way to solve this problem within the First Past the Post system. Any system that is based on

	Election A				Election B			
	Lab		Con		Lab		Con	
Urban 1	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Urban 2	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Urban 3	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Rural 1	22,400	40%	33,600	60%	20,500	40%	31,500	60%
Rural 2	22,400	40%	33,600	60%	20,500	40%	31,500	60%
TOTAL	145,600	52.0%	134,400	48.0%	104,000	49.8%	105,000	50.2%
	3 seats		2 seats		3 seats		2 seats	

The real reasons for bias

constituencies or regions, rather than national proportionality, is vulnerable to distortions caused by differential turnout. There are some reasonable arguments for regarding the effects of differential turnout as being 'legitimate', and it is part of the price of spatial representation. One can easily discard the suggestion (*Spectator*, 6 August 2005) that boundaries should be drawn so that the number of *voters* (as opposed to *electors*) should be equal in each constituency. The number voting is not a fixed quantity for a start, so the system would be in constant review, leaving aside all the other problems with the idea in principle or practice.

The only reasonable piece of electoral engineering that would cure the bias caused by differential turnout is compulsory voting. This would, if it worked and was enforceable, eliminate the bias by eliminating differential turnout. The outcome would not necessarily be to the liking of Conservatives, because it would reconcile the difference by increasing Labour's national share of the vote rather than reducing Labour's tally of seats. To add to this pragmatic point, the principle of compulsory voting is one with few Conservative supporters.

Short of compulsory voting, the answer to differential turnout is a deeper social question, about why individuals and groups are alienated from participation in the political process. The only contribution that the electoral system can make is to ensure that votes count in those areas in which people currently abstain in such large numbers – and to give politicians an incentive to address the concerns of those the system takes for granted.

INEFFICIENT VOTE DISTRIBUTION

The way in which a party's votes are distributed between different constituencies is another element of bias. This concept can be illustrated by a numerical example. Suppose there are three parties, each with a third of the vote but with that vote distributed differently. Party A gets a third of the vote in every constituency. Party B gets 40% in two thirds of seats and 20% in one third of seats; Party C gets 26.7% in two thirds of seats and 46.7% in the other third of seats. Suppose there are 600 constituencies.

	Party A	Party B	Party C	Win party
200 constituencies	33.3%	20.0%	46.7%	C
400 constituencies	33.3%	40.0%	26.7%	B
Total number of seats	0	400	200	
Share of vote	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	

Party A's vote is therefore distributed very inefficiently from the point of view of winning seats, while B's is extremely efficient. Even if Party A is actually a little ahead of the others it can still end up with no seats. The Conservatives have a rather less extreme version of what Party A is suffering, while the distributions of Labour and Liberal Democrat support are milder versions of Party B and Party C in the example.

If a party has evenly spread support and falls much below a third of the vote in a three party system it can be very harshly treated by FPTP, as has happened time after time to the Liberals and Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives are now in this position in Scotland and swathes of urban England, including the North East, the metropolitan counties, and other localities. Conservative voters in these areas can do very little to help elect MPs. There is no way to fix this sort of problem by changing boundaries. While there are substantial numbers of Conservative supporters in South Yorkshire, for instance, there is simply no way of corralling enough of them into a single-member constituency to give them a chance of winning a seat, however much one bends the boundaries. The same is true for, say, Lib Dems in West Sussex. The Labour vote being 'lumpier' (more efficiently distributed), it does tend to be able to achieve representation where it is locally in a minority, although there are cases such as Surrey where it is too thinly and evenly spread. For example, Labour in West Sussex was represented with 21.3% of the vote because its voters were concentrated in Crawley, while the Lib Dems were not because their 26.1% were evenly spread. A similar story can be told in Berkshire and Devon, and most dramatically in East Sussex where Labour, in third place with 25.4%, won half the county's seats.

Avon provides an insight into how the system can work against a party with evenly spread support. In 2005 the

The real reasons for bias

Conservatives were very narrowly the most popular party in the county, with 31.9% support to 31.8% for Labour and 30.9% for the Lib Dems. Yet they won only 2 seats, compared to 3 for the Lib Dems and 5 for Labour. The reason is the arithmetic of FPTP – while the Conservatives got a similar share everywhere, Labour and the Lib Dems' votes were unevenly distributed – for Labour, either a low share or a share sufficiently high to win.[4] A share in the high 20s or the low 30s, while it can bulk out a party's share of the vote, is no help in winning seats – the Avon Conservatives did this in five seats out of ten, while Labour did only in one and the Lib Dems in two.

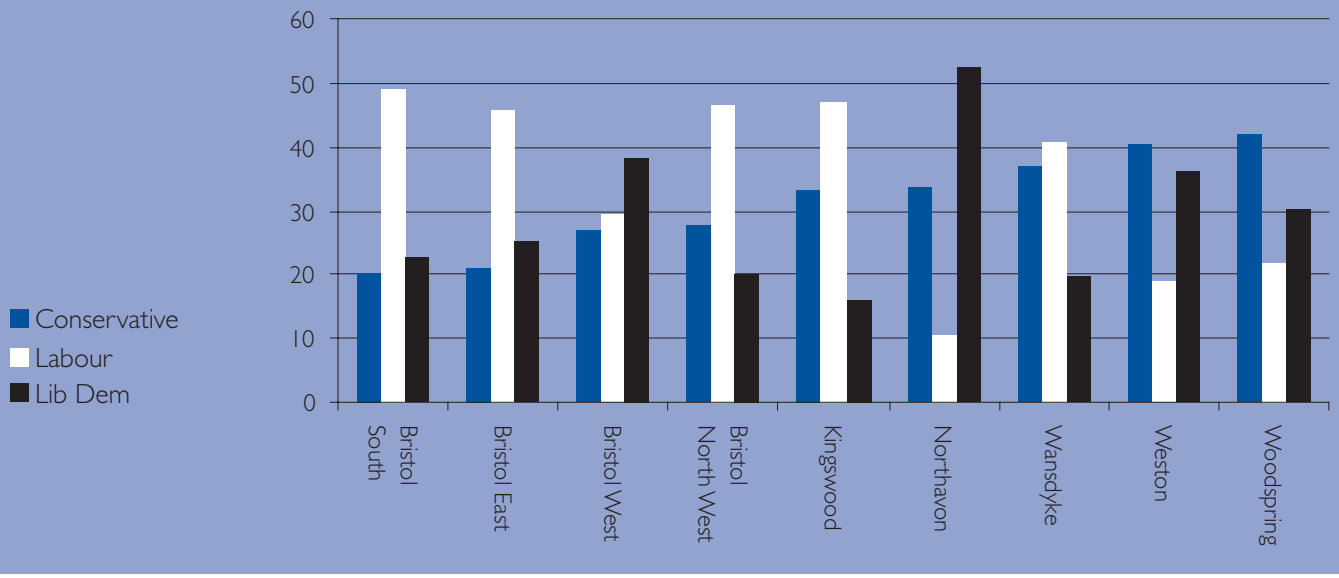
	Con %	Lab %	Lib Dem %
Labour seats			
Bristol East	21.1	45.9	25.2
Bristol North West	27.9	46.7	20.1
Bristol South	20.0	49.1	22.8
Kingswood	33.1	47.0	16.1
Wansdyke	37.0	40.6	19.7
Lib Dem seats			
Bath	33.7	14.8	43.9
Bristol West	26.9	29.4	38.3
Northavon	33.6	10.6	52.3
Conservative seats			
Weston-s-Mare	40.3	18.7	36.1
Woodspring	41.8	21.8	30.2

Just in case any reader remains unconvinced that electorate size is not that important to the bias issue, the average size of an Avon Conservative seat is 73,821, the average Avon Labour seat is 74,279 and the average Avon Lib Dem seat a rather larger 76,669. Changing the size of the electorate in the Avon seats would do nothing to alter the bias either.

Inefficient vote distribution can arise for several different reasons. In the 1950s Labour's vote was poorly distributed because the party piled up massive majorities in safe working-class seats while losing other areas to the Conservatives with relatively small majorities.

Hence, the Conservatives won a majority in parliament in 1951 despite polling fewer votes than Labour, and the difference between Labour's majority of 5 with a 2.6% lead in 1950, and the Conservatives' majority of 58 on a lead of 3.3% in 1955. Inefficient vote distribution can thus be caused simply by **political sociology or geography**; in the current position, if the Conservatives increase their support markedly in rural areas they will gain relatively few seats because their representation is already concentrated in rural areas.

Vote share in Avon (%), by constituency 2005



The real reasons for bias

Political and electoral strategy therefore also affects the calculations. New Labour have targeted the swing voters in marginal seats in terms of campaigning and messages over the longer term, with the aim of keeping on side with these voters who are so pivotal to the national outcome. From Labour's point of view, a move that encourages 2,000 extra people to support the party in Watford and alienates 4,000 people in Liverpool is worth doing. It would decrease the party's share of the national vote, but would enhance the party's chances of winning seats.

The New Labour strategy has worked the system brilliantly, while the Conservatives have not been at all successful. The Conservatives did best at increasing their vote share in 2005 in seats they already held (+1.38 percentage points in English seats they held in 2001) while they stood still in the rest of England (-0.04 percentage points). It was only because of a few successful examples of targeting, and the slide of the Labour vote to Lib Dems and others, that the Conservatives made much progress in seats in 2005. 19 of the 31Conservative gains from Labour were by default, in that the direct swing from Labour to Conservative was insufficient to tip them over and the loss of Labour votes to the Lib Dems or others made the crucial difference.

Efficient vote distribution can also be caused by **tactical voting**. The outcome in the numerical example on page 23 could be achieved by supporters of Party B and Party C trading tactical votes among themselves to keep out Party A. Tactical voting has been a contributory factor in the strong bias against the Conservatives which has developed in Britain since 1992. Electoral system bias is to some extent a manifestation of the fact that the strength of anti-Conservative feeling in the electorate is not adequately represented by the relative strength of the Conservative and Labour parties. In 1992 one had to consider also the numbers of Labour supporters tactically voting Lib Dem, and those people voting Lib Dem and hoping that their actions would help put out the Conservative government. In the past, electoral pacts have made FPTP produce particularly decisive results, most notably in 1931 when Labour's 30.6% produced only 52 seats. A less extreme example was the Liberal landslide of 1906, when on the face of it the Liberal Party only led the Conservatives (Unionists) by 5.4% of the vote (49.0% Liberal, 43.6% Conservative). The Liberals won 400 seats to only 157 for the Conservatives. This was less unjust than it might seem, because the Liberals had an electoral pact with Labour who scored 5.9% of the vote, and the combined Liberal-Labour alliance was therefore 'really' over 11 points ahead, 54.9% to 43.6%. In 1910 pacts helped the Liberals win more seats in Britain than the Conservatives despite being outpolled. Tactical voting is the voters' way of producing an informal electoral pact – a less complete and efficient method, but one that produces similar results.

Related to tactical voting is the **third party factor**. When discussing system bias between the two major parties, seats held by any other parties are taken out of the equation and votes gained in them might as well not have been cast.[5] Since 1997 there has been a very much larger proportion of the electorate covered by Lib Dem and other MPs, and in most of these (particularly in 1997 and 2001) the seats were previously Conservative. This means that a larger number of Conservative than Labour votes are unable to affect the major party seat total. The calculation for England in the last two elections is given below.

Labour's vote was particularly low in the English seats won by the Lib Dems and others, while the Conservative vote was pretty uniform in 'Main Party' and 'Other'

2001	England	England %	MPs	'Other' England	'Main' England	'Main' %	'Main' % 2pty	MPs % 2pty
Lab	9,056,824	41.4	323	280,398	8,776,426	44.0	55.5	66.2
Con	7,705,870	35.2	165	663,630	7,042,240	35.3	44.5	33.8
LD	4,246,853	19.4	40	894,281	3,352,572	16.8	-	-
Oth	861,265	3.9	1	90,820	770,445	3.9	-	-

'Other' England comprises the English constituencies won by the Lib Dems or others (i.e. KHHC) in 2001. 'Main' England is the remainder of England, i.e. the total of all the constituencies won by the Conservatives or Labour.

The 2005 election

2001	England	England %	MPs	'Other' England	'Main' England	'Main' %	'Main' % 2pty	MPs % 2pty
Lab	8,050,302	35.5	286	409,342	7,640,960	37.5	50.9	59.6
Con	8,116,006	35.7	194	733,385	7,382,621	36.2	49.1	40.4
LD	5,201,289	22.9	47	1,031,290	4,169,999	20.5	-	
Oth	1,337,437	6.0	2	144,940	1,192,497	5.8	-	

'Other' England comprises the English constituencies won by the Lib Dems or others (i.e. KHHC and Respect) in 2005. 'Main' England is the remainder of England, i.e. the total of all the constituencies won by the Conservatives or Labour.

England. This meant that in the main party seats, Labour's lead in share of the votes was actually 8.7%, not 6.2%.[6]

In 2005 Labour received less help from this source of bias in the electoral system – because the Lib Dems won several seats from Labour the 'Other' England had more Labour votes in it than the 'Other' England of 2001 or before. Instead of a 0.2% share of the vote deficit in England as a whole, in 'Main Party' England Labour led by 1.3%. The third party effect was a diminishing factor in 2005.

BIAS SUMMARISED

The impact of tactical voting, differential turnout and electoral strategy over the period since 1992 is apparent from the following comparison. The change in the three main parties' share of the vote in England between the elections of 1992 and 2005 was as follows:

Conservative - 9.8%

Labour +1.5%

Lib Dem +3.7%.

If these changes had taken place uniformly across the constituencies, with a baseline of the 1992 notional results allowing for the boundary changes, the outcome of the 2005 election would have been rather different. The gap between the predicted changes in seats, and the actual changes, are summarised in the table below.

The Conservatives failed to win 55 seats[7] that they would have won on uniform changes, and won 7 seats that they would not have done on a uniform swing – a net loss of 48.

Labour failed in only 9 seats[8] which would have been won on a uniform swing; they won another 39 that they would not have managed, making a net gain of 30.

The Liberal Democrats failed in 7 seats[9] they would have won on a uniform swing, but gained another 23 they would not have won – a net gain of 16.

The others won 2 that, by their nature, could not be predicted from uniform swing.

Had major party vote share changes been uniform between 1992 and 2005 Labour would have won 256 English seats, the Conservatives 242 and the Lib Dems 29. Instead of a 92-seat lead over the Conservatives, and an English majority of 43, Labour would have had a lead of only 14 seats over the Conservatives, and no overall English majority.

		REAL RESULTS 2005				PREDICTED Totals
		Con	Lab	LD	Others	
PREDICTED RESULTS 2005	Con	187	37	17	1	242
	Lab	2	247	6	1	256
	LD	5	2	24	0	31
	Others	0	0	0	0	0
REAL totals		194	286	47	2	

The 2005 election

The reasons for the Conservatives' under-performance, and the over-performance of Labour in particular, in the marginal seats is the stuff of politics rather than boundary distribution or electoral mechanics. Tactical voting will account for a certain amount of this, as will organisational factors, but there is politics as well. FPTP puts a premium on appealing to swing voters in marginal seats, and it appears that Labour since 1997 have managed this very successfully. Tinkering with boundaries will not address the fundamental causes of Labour's success and the Conservatives' failure with this all-important sector of the electorate.

The Conservatives could hope that the large bias that appeared between 1992 and 2001 will disappear again just as suddenly. However, they should not rely on it. The 2005 election showed a fairly small reduction in bias compared to 2001, which did not even get the level of bias back to where it was in 1997. This was despite several prima facie reasons for expecting a reduction in bias – the Scottish boundary changes, 'tactical unwind' and third party gains from Labour – as well as not much of a trend in constituency size. Unfortunately for the Conservatives, extreme bias was less a case of '2001: An Electoral Oddity' than a pattern that continued for at least one more election. As long as turnout remains as low as it has in the previous two elections, there is no reason not to expect a substantial pro-Labour bias in terms of translating national share of the vote into seats.

The question of how to reduce anti-Conservative tactical voting, or more ambitiously to replace it with anti-Labour tactical voting, is one that demands a political rather than psephological answer. Even so, differential turnout and distribution of the vote will probably be much more intractable than the Conservatives seem to expect. There is no easy or painless answer

NOTES

4 In statistical terms, the standard deviation of the Avon Conservative vote was only 7.5 percentage points, compared to 11.8 for the Lib Dems and 15.1 for Labour.

5 This is a simplification which does not apply exactly if one is comparing major party seats won on level votes. Votes cast in third-party seats where a swing between the major parties leaving their votes tied would tip the seat over to one of the major parties should be taken into account. Similarly, any major party seats that would be flipped to a third party when the national vote is equalised should be taken out.

6 The ratio of Labour to Conservative votes and seats in 'Main Party' England in 2001 was uncannily close to that predicted by the old 'cube rule' – that in a two party system the seats for parties whose votes are in the ratio A:B will be in the ratio A^3:B^3.

7 Predicted Conservative, outcome Labour (37): Blackpool North & Fleetwood, Brent North, Brigg and Goole, Brighton Kemptown, Broxtowe, Chatham and Aylesford, Cleethorpes, Colne Valley, Crosby, Dartford, Dorset South, Ealing North, Finchley and Golders Green, Gedling, Gillingham, Harrow East, Harrow West, Hendon, Luton North, Medway, Morecambe and Lunesdale, Portsmouth North, Reading West, South Ribble, Selby, Sittingbourne and Sheppey, Stafford, Stroud, Swindon South, Thanet South, Wansdyke, Warwick and Leamington, Watford, Wirral South, Wirral West.

Predicted Conservative, outcome Lib Dem (17): Bristol West, Carshalton and Wallington, Cheadle, Eastleigh, Harrogate and Knaresborough, Kingston and Surbiton, Leeds North West, Norfolk North, Northavon, Richmond Park, Romsey, Sheffield Hallam, Solihull, Sutton and Cheam, Teignbridge, Westmorland and Lonsdale, Winchester.

Predicted Conservative, outcome Other (1): Wyre Forest.

8 Predicted Labour, outcome Conservative (2): Forest of Dean, Gravesham.

Predicted Labour, outcome Lib Dem (6): Birmingham Yardley, Brent East, Cambridge, Chesterfield, Hornsey and Wood Green, Manchester Withington.

Predicted Labour, outcome Other (1): Bethnal Green and Bow.

9 Predicted Lib Dem, outcome Conservative (5): Devon West and Torridge, Eastbourne, Isle of Wight, Wells,

5. The Conservatives and electoral reform

THE CONSERVATIVES IN THE 2005 ELECTION

There are many examples of areas within Britain where the outcome in terms of seats bears little relation to the votes that were cast. Wales and Scotland are particularly glaring, but the pattern is repeated across urban England as well. The following tables examine the Conservative share of votes and seats in all the counties of England, separating them according to whether the Conservatives won fewer, the same, or more seats than their share of the vote.

COUNTIES WHERE THE CONSERVATIVES ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED

	% of votes	Number of Con seats	Number of seats if proportionate
Avon	31.9	2	3
Cleveland	23.1	0	1
Cornwall	31.8	0	2
Cumbria	38.2	1	2-3
Derbyshire	30.1	1	3
Durham	16.6	0	1
Greater Manchester	23.8	1	7
Lancashire	35.0	3	5
London	32.0	21	24
Merseyside	19.4	0	3
Nottinghamshire	33.1	2	3-4
South Yorkshire	18.1	0	3
Staffordshire	34.3	3	4
Tyne and Wear	17.4	0	2
West Midlands	29.5	3	9
West Yorkshire	27.8	1	6
		38	78-80

These counties comprise 51 per cent of England's electorate. Under a reformed electoral system, the Conservatives would have a stronger, probably twice as strong, elected voice in this half of England (which includes all the principal national and regional media centres).

FPTP can exclude parties (such as the Conservatives) with substantial but evenly spread local support from getting a voice at all, and award monopolies to parties in places where there are significant opposing votes. This makes it difficult for opposing parties to secure enough local media coverage and maintain adequate organisation to maintain a challenge; the perception that a minority party does not matter in the area is self-reinforcing.

COUNTIES WHERE CURRENT CONSERVATIVE REPRESENTATION WOULD CHANGE LITTLE IF AT ALL UNDER PR

	% of votes	Number of Con seats	Number of seats if proportionate
Bedfordshire	40.6	3	2-3
Cheshire	37.1	4	4
East Sussex	39.8	3	3
Gloucestershire	41.7	3	2-3
Hereford & Worcester	43.1	4	3-4
Humberside	33.0	3	3
Isle of Wight	48.9	1	1
Northumberland	25.6	1	1
Somerset	41.4	2	2
Warwickshire	40.7	2	2
		26	23-26

Although the Conservatives would be left hardly changed in these counties, in several there would be shifts in representation involving the other parties. In Somerset the Conservatives outpolled the Lib Dems with a lead of just over 1%, but won only two seats to the Lib Dems' three. Under a proportional system, Labour would have had a single representative to two each for Lib Dems and Conservatives.

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COUNTIES WHERE CURRENT CONSERVATIVE REPRESENTATION WOULD BE REDUCED UNDER PR

	% of votes	Number of Con seats	Number of seats if proportionate
Berkshire	43.6	6	3-4
Buckinghamshire	47.6	6	3
Cambridgeshire	42.8	6	3
Devon	38.1	5	4
Dorset	44.1	6	3-4
Essex	46.0	13	8
Hampshire	42.9	10	7
Hertfordshire	44.8	9	5
Kent	45.8	10	8
Leicestershire	37.4	5	4
Lincolnshire	46.8	6	3-4
Norfolk	40.2	4	3
North Yorkshire	43.7	5	3-4
Northamptonshire	43.3	4	3
Oxfordshire	40.9	4	2-3
Shropshire	41.8	4	2
Suffolk	41.7	5	3
Surrey	50.5	11	6
West Sussex	46.7	7	4
		126	77-81

For all the gains in the urban areas, Scotland and Wales, there would be some losses in the areas which currently have a preponderance of Conservative representation. However, there would be benefits in terms of redistributing 'safe seats' around the country. At present, local concentrations of safe seats lead to complaints about 'bed blocking' and undignified scrambles when such a seat does select a new candidate. A reformed electoral system would allow ambitious Conservatives with something to offer to develop their political careers in one place, without having to hawk themselves around the shires and suburbs. The level of Conservative campaigning around the country would be raised. Under STV in particular, there would be no more allegations of 'bed blocking' – it would be left to the voters to decide who would be the best representative in parliament for their constituency. If they grew tired of a long-standing MP they could decide themselves to elect a younger replacement, without doing the party any damage.

SOME LOCAL EXAMPLES OF HOW STV COULD HELP THE CONSERVATIVES

COUNTY DURHAM

The Conservatives have only achieved representation from County Durham in two elections (1983 and 1987) in the last 40 years. This is despite a significant minority in the county loyally voting Conservative year after year. Under the Single Transferable Vote, instead of being composed of seven single-member seats, Durham could well be divided into one four-member seat and one three-member seat, and the boundaries could reflect community identities better than the current arbitrary lines on the map.

A three-member Durham South constituency (including Bishop Auckland, Darlington and Sedgefield) offers some intriguing possibilities. The votes cast in 2005 in the area were as follows:

	Votes	% votes	Quotas
Labour	64,129	50.5	2.02
Conservative	24,947	19.7	0.79
Liberal Democrat	21,222	16.7	0.67
UKIP	2,685	2.1	0.08
Others	6,008	4.7	0.19

A 'quota' is the amount needed to be sure of election in a multi-member constituency under STV.

While Labour would be pretty much guaranteed 2 out of 3 seats (in contrast to the 3-0 wipeout in the last 4 general elections), the other would be very winnable for the Conservatives if they could attract transfers from UKIP voters and supporters of the Sedgefield Independent Reg Keys. Under STV, Tony Blair would probably have to put up with sharing his home base with a Conservative MP.

EDINBURGH

Until 1997 Edinburgh had significant Conservative representation. Now, thanks to political trends and the

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boundary changes of 2005, the party can only manage a fairly distant second place in two of the city constituencies and prospects for winning in the city under FPTP are remote at best, requiring a swing of over 8%. However, there are still a fair number of Conservative voters in Edinburgh. Thanks to the PR system used in the Scottish Parliament they can look forward to continued representation in that institution, but not at Westminster.

A single 5-member constituency for Edinburgh under STV would adequately represent the Conservatives.

	Votes	% votes	Quotas
Labour	70,588	32.9	1.98
Liberal Democrat	67,593	31.6	1.89
Conservative	41,404	19.3	1.16
SNP	22,517	10.5	0.63
Green	8,619	4.0	0.24
SSP	3,181	1.5	0.09
Others	331		

Both Labour and the Lib Dems would almost certainly win two seats, and the Conservatives would pick up one. There would be a Conservative voice speaking on behalf of the party's voters across the city. Under FPTP there is the risk that all resources would go into the off-chance of gaining one semi-marginal seat and letting organisation and the vote atrophy in the rest of Edinburgh. In other cities such as Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool the Conservative vote has declined and they have been crushed by the electoral system. Electoral reform could not only arrest the process in Edinburgh but be the basis for a lasting Conservative revival in the cities and metropolitan areas.

CONCLUSION

FPTP is biased against the Conservatives to a startling degree. While the Conservatives were represented more or less in proportion to their vote in 2005, this masks a structural inequality between the Conservatives and Labour in the competition to win a parliamentary majority and form a government. Given that the Conservative Party needs a 10-point lead over Labour in order to gain a bare overall majority, the target for victory is therefore (depending on the Lib Dem and other votes) set at somewhat over 40 per cent of the vote.

FPTP is an obstacle to the Conservatives in the essential business of politics, namely regaining power. If the Conservatives are happy existing with a bit under a third of the vote, a comfortable lock on representing some of the more attractive places in England, and very little chance of power, they should stick with FPTP. If the Conservatives have more ambitious aims, they need to look further. The gains made in 2005 (some of which were thanks to a defection of Labour votes to Lib Dems that may not recur), and the increased majorities achieved by sitting MPs, are not enough. The future does not look promising for a reversal of the serious biases and defects of the electoral system. The review of parliamentary boundaries will not, and cannot, solve the problem. Nor can the Conservatives hope to emulate Labour's achievement of winning a majority on such a small share of the vote, even if this were a morally defensible course of action. System bias rules that out.

The alternative course favoured by some of a radical redefinition of the boundary system is not a sufficient answer because it does not deal with the causes of bias (although a moderate reform may be a good idea in itself). In addition, it pulls up some of the roots of the FPTP system – most importantly the identification of an MP to a constituency that has more meaning than some arbitrary lines on a map that change every 4 years. Constituencies have become steadily less representative of communities as it is, and cutting the link even more would undermine confidence in the system as a whole, particularly if it were being done for the convenience of one set of politicians rather than the public they are supposed to serve.

Electoral reform would ameliorate some of the problems caused by differential turnout. Because votes would count everywhere, the incentive to focus solely on the marginal seats would lessen and 'safe' areas would become competitive. In addition, because even strongly Labour inner cities would send minority Conservative and Lib Dem MPs to Westminster, even if differential turnout did not decline its effect on party politics would still be mitigated.

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Under some reformed electoral systems, such as AV+ as recommended by the Jenkins Commission, and possibly a small-seat variant of STV, the threshold for a single party majority is about the same for the Conservatives as it is under FPTP. Whatever system is used, the Conservatives need to propel themselves back into the 40%+ range of support, which is essentially a matter of politics as it was when Labour achieved this feat in 1997. The crucial difference is that Labour would also require this level of support in a reformed system, rather than being able to get a free pass back to power with 35% of the vote under FPTP.

Electoral reform, if done correctly, would put an end to tactical voting and also limit the third party effect. It would offer a much more level playing field between the two main parties, which cannot be promised under any variant of FPTP. FPTP can only ever be contingently fair between two parties, particularly if there are significant third and fourth parties on the scene. The future of FPTP is likely to be of continuing differential turnout and electoral system bias – and therefore possibly a future without another Conservative government. It is a risk that Conservative supporters of FPTP need to contemplate.

To continue with the present electoral system risks shutting the party permanently out of power, and giving it the appearance of being a sectional interest party for rural areas and the most affluent suburbs. While Labour would no doubt be delighted at this, no Conservative should, in the interests of the party and of the health of democracy as a whole. The party has set about re-thinking many aspects of policy after the election, and the party's past attachment to an unfair electoral system should itself be part of this re-assessment.

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