

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Bristol
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 17 – Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology
<b>Title of case study:</b> Influencing legislation, informing debate and improving public understanding of the <i>Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, 2011</i>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>A new procedure for defining UK Parliamentary constituencies was strongly influenced by research led and directed by Professor Ron Johnston of the University of Bristol. The <i>Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, 2011</i>, created new rules for the redistribution of seats and also reduced the size of the House of Commons from 650 Members to 600. Throughout the proceedings, from initial meetings with the Conservative Party to completion of the legislation, Johnston was a key advisor to all three main political parties, civil servants, MPs (including a House of Commons Select Committee), the Boundary Commissions and members of the House of Lords (in whose debates his advice was cited on several occasions). He co-authored reports, gave oral evidence, and advised individuals. His expertise was called upon by the media during the debates on the Bill, to explain its intricacies and the many amendments. For this work, Johnston received the Political Studies Association's 'Political Communicator of the Year' award in 2011.</p> <p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Ron Johnston has been leading research on the procedures for defining UK Parliamentary constituencies, and their impact on election results, for some 35 years – and for the last 18 at the University of Bristol. He has directed a team comprising himself, Dr. David Rossiter and Prof Charles Pattie (University of Sheffield) and has also collaborated with colleagues at the University of Plymouth on measuring electoral bias, and with Prof Iain McLean (University of Oxford).</p> <p>In 1981 Johnston and Rossiter wrote a computer program that generated a configuration of constituencies for Sheffield as an alternative to that proposed by the Boundary Commission, and which the Commission subsequently adopted. The program's potential was recognised by the Labour party, and Johnston and Rossiter were expert witnesses in the case leading party members brought against the Boundary Commission for England in 1982-3. During the Fourth Periodic redistribution (1990-95) Johnston was contracted by five Essex local authorities to devise and present at Public Inquiry a non-partisan alternative set of constituencies to the Commission's provisional recommendations for the county; the Assistant Commissioner recommended that it should replace the Commission's proposals, advice that was accepted.</p> <p>In 1995, when he joined Bristol, Johnston led a major grant to study the Fourth Periodic redistribution, with Pattie and Rossiter as co-investigators. The grant had three major outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) A book, <i>The Boundary Commissions</i> [1], widely referenced as the standard work on the UK Commissions, comprising a history of redistributions since 1832, detailed quantitative analyses of the outcomes, and material from interviews with all the Fourth Review's main participants.</li> <li>ii) A method to analyse bias in UK election results – the degree to which one party is advantaged in the allocation of seats relative to vote share. Bias was much greater in 1997, 2001 and 2005 than previously and favoured Labour rather than the Conservatives (the beneficiaries in previous decades). The method's algebra isolated the various factors (all geographical) contributing to the bias [2]. These findings were widely cited and used, for example, in the critique of the UK electoral system in the 1998 report of the Independent Commission on the Electoral System – see David Lipsey's (a Commission member) article in <i>The Economist</i> (29 Oct., 1998) – and were the basis of Johnston's 2003 presentation to Conservative MPs and peers, after which the party proposed to change the rules for redistributions.</li> <li>iii) An alternative set of 'Rules for Redistribution', more coherent and explicit in the relative importance of the criteria than the then-current legislation. These were revised and incorporated in a 2006 Report to the Committee on Standards in Public Life [A].</li> </ol> <p>That alternative set of rules stimulated a 2007 draft Conservative Bill debated in the House of Lords. Johnston and his colleagues identified shortcomings in this nascent legislation [3], in particular showing that contrary to the Conservative Party's then understanding, variations in constituency electorates had only a minor impact on bias at recent elections [4].</p> <p>Since enactment of the Bill in 2011, Johnston has reviewed the Boundary Commissions'</p>

implementation of the new 'Rules for Redistribution'. A detailed evaluation of their proposals [6] was widely publicised by *Parliamentary Affairs* and the University of Nottingham School of Politics and International Affairs blog, and was heavily cited by Lord Lipsey and Baroness Taylor in a House of Lords debate (12 July 2012). An evaluation was also published with Iain Mclean on the likely impact of proposals for individual electoral registration; Johnston addressed a meeting on this latter issue in the House of Commons (18 January 2012). Further papers evaluating the new public consultation procedure have been accepted for publication.

These evaluations showed that: (i) academic commentators and the Commissions had rightly argued that this first redistribution under the new rules would be far more disruptive of the constituency map than both previous reviews and MPs had anticipated; (ii) the disruption was especially great in urban England; (iii) the political parties dominated the new public consultation procedure as much as under its predecessor; (iv) if the changes had been introduced before the 2010 election the Conservatives might have had a majority of 79 over Labour (in a smaller House) rather than 48; and (v), if implemented before 2015, individual electoral registration will be very disruptive on the next review.

### 3. References to the research

1. D J Rossiter, R J Johnston and C J Pattie: *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 429pp. (ISBN 0-7190-5083-9) (70 citations\*)
2. R J Johnston, C J Pattie, D Dorling and D J Rossiter: *From Votes to Seats: the Operation of the UK Electoral System since 1945*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, 241pp. (ISBN 0-7190-5851-1) (90 citations)
3. R J Johnston, I McLean, C J Pattie and D J Rossiter, 'Can the Boundary Commissions help the Conservative party? Constituency size and electoral bias in the United Kingdom', *The Political Quarterly*, 80, 2009, 479-494. doi [10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.02053.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.02053.x) (10 citations)
4. G Borisyuk, C Rallings, M. Thrasher and R J Johnston 'Parliamentary constituency boundary reviews and electoral bias: how important are variations in constituency size?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63, 2010, 4-21. doi [10.1093/pa/gsp016](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsp016) (11 citations)
5. M Balinski, R J Johnston, I McLean and H P Young: *Drawing a New Constituency Map for the United Kingdom: the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill*, 2010, London: The British Academy, 2010, 104pp. (ISBN978-0-85672-591-3) (9 citations)
6. D J Rossiter, R J Johnston and C J Pattie 'Representing people and representing places: community, continuity and the current redistribution of Parliamentary constituencies in the UK' *Parliamentary Affairs* (doi [10.1093/pa/gss037](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss037)) (2 citations)

\*Citation numbers as of 15 August 2013 on Google Scholar.

### Research Grants:

- **Johnston** and Pattie (1995-1998) *The Parliamentary Boundary Commissions*, The Leverhulme Trust, £50,280.
- Pattie (Listed as PI) and **Johnston** (2011-2014) *A new electoral map for the UK*, The British Academy, £7,460 (grant SG111341).

### 4. Details of the impact

In October 2009, Eric Pickles, then Conservative Party Chairman, informed a small group of experts (including Johnston) that should it win power in 2010 the party intended to legislate to reduce the number of MPs and both speed up and increase the frequency of Boundary Commission reviews. The experts provided detailed advice about the proposed Rules for Redistribution and their implementation, plus public consultation procedures. Johnston's role in the next two years leading to enactment of the 2011 *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act*, 2011, involved advice to all three British political parties based on detailed studies of the entire process during the three previous redistributions; he led in providing evidence in Parliament, including interpreting amendments, as well as communicating with politicians and party officials, the media and other organisations. His research findings were disseminated through books, peer-reviewed journal articles, commissioned reports, conferences, private consultations, invited advice to the Conservative Party and the coalition government, oral evidence to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee and presentations to The Constitution Unit and the HS Chapman Society; his evidence was heavily cited in Parliamentary debates.

In 2010, when it was clear that the Conservatives would proceed with the proposed legislation, Johnston was invited to co-author a monograph for the British Academy Policy Centre setting the proposals in context and critiquing the Bill when it was published; for this he chaired a British Academy Forum attended by a wide range of interested parties including the civil servants overseeing drafting of the legislation. The Bill was published in July 2010 and the monograph [5], for which he was the main author, in September; it was widely cited in the House of Commons and, especially, Lords debates, as was the evidence presented in Johnston's two appearances before the House of Commons Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform. Johnston also wrote an article on British redistributions on the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network website [B], which is aimed at election administrators and system designers.

Johnston's research and advice over the period 2009-2013 has had three types of impact:

**I. It was influential in the crafting of the legislation.**

A Conservative party advisor said that "...those of us within the Conservative Party who were involved in this process, regarded [Johnston] as one of the key touchstones for advice and views in relation to achieving our objectives" [C]. As an example of his influence, Johnston advocated that the party look to the comparable Australian and New Zealand systems: "This had a marked influence on what we did, both in terms of me pursuing discussions with the Australian High Commission and New Zealand High Commission, and in the preparation of material so that I entered these discussions with authoritative analyses to support me" [C].

Though the legislation was prepared by Parliamentary draftsmen, the adviser crafted the outline and detail of what the Party wanted to achieve and "...material [Johnston] authored or co-authored and [his] oral contributions were useful in the preparation of the legislation itself," [C].

**II. It shaped and informed political debate.**

Johnston's research, particularly the British Academy publication [5], helped inform MPs and peers. One peer stated that this research enabled him to grasp what was going on and led him to put down several amendments that were effectively accepted by government: "This is a rare case of meticulous factual research strongly affecting a crucial national decision: I should also add that the willingness of Ron and his colleagues to make themselves available to advise added greatly to the effect of their work on this debate" [D].

Johnston gave oral evidence to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in July 2010 [E] and February 2011 [F]. During the five months it was before Parliament, he was frequently consulted about aspects of the Bill and the wording of potential amendments proposed by both Conservative party advisers involved with the Bill's progress and peers from both of the other main parties; his advice was non-partisan regarding the changed rules' likely impact. His published work was referred to and given as evidence in debates in both the House of Lords [G-H] and the House of Commons [I].

**III. It improved public understanding of the changes being debated.**

Johnston gave a number of media interviews regarding the Bill, helping to improve public understanding of the changes being debated in Parliament, and provided clarity in several political blogs, including those of The London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Nottingham School of Politics and International Affairs. His interviews included BBC Radio 4's *PM*, *The World This Weekend* and *The Westminster Hour* program, and BBC *Points West*.

The Secretary of the Boundary Commission for England stated that Johnston's work "filled the void of experts" and "turned speculation to fact" in what was a complex process; [J] he 'helped the process along by providing an impartial point of view' that helped to stress the impartiality of the Commission's work. [J].

In November 2011, Johnston received the Political Studies Association's 'Politics/Political Studies Communicator' Award. The jury of distinguished academics and journalists stated that his work with on boundary changes had made "a considerable contribution not only to political studies, but has also helped shape the future of British Politics". They stated further

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that Johnston “stands out as a clear communicator who has the capacity to communicate complex issues in an accessible manner” [K].

Together, this material influenced debates regarding the operation of the UK’s electoral system, especially the biased electoral outcomes post-1992, and was a stimulus to change. The understanding of how constituency maps are drawn influenced discussions among those who wanted change; the principles underlying and the ordering of the 2010 revised set of ‘Rules for redistributions’ reflects his important input. Once the proposals became public, his expertise was frequently called on to inform those debating their enactment, and influenced several of the agreed amendments. That system for defining constituencies is thus based to a significant extent on his long programme of research into this aspect of British electoral politics.

The Review initiated by the 2011 Act was delayed for five years in early 2013. Johnston and his colleagues interpreted this decision – and its likely consequences – in a range of media and other contributions [L]. He has since been consulted by political parties preparing material for their 2015 general election manifestos regarding possible further amendments to the legislation.

In 2013 Johnston joined the advisory committee for a four-year major Law Commission project aimed at rationalising, simplifying and modernising the UK’s complex set of electoral laws [M]. He has also acted as an expert adviser on electoral systems to the governments of Bermuda, Jersey, New Zealand, and Portugal.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. D. Butler and I. McLean (2006) *Report to the Committee on Standards in Public Life: The Electoral Commission and the Redistribution of Seats*. Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Oxford.
- B. R. Johnston, D. Rossiter and C. Pattie. *United Kingdom: Redistribution Process*. Ace: The Electoral Knowledge Network. [<http://aceproject.org/regions-en/countries-and-territories/GB/case-studies/united-kingdom-redistribution-process/?searchterm=johnston>, accessed 15 August, 2013].
- C. Senior Policy Advisor, The Conservative Party). Letter to R. Johnston. December 4, 2012.
- D. Member of the House of Lords, Labour. Email to N. Temple. November 21, 2012.
- E. Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (27<sup>th</sup> July 2010) *Minutes of Evidence, Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill*. Questions 57-59, 60-79, 80-99, 100-108. [Accessed 15 August, 2013, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpolcon/437/10072701.htm>]
- F. Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (10<sup>th</sup> February 2011) *Minutes of Evidence, Parliamentary Voting System*. Question Numbers 45-78. [Accessed 15 August 2013, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpolcon/804/11021003.htm>]
- G. *Hansard – House of Lords debate (8 Feb 2011) Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill Report (2<sup>nd</sup> day)*. Columns 127-150. [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110208-0001.htm#11020837000990>, accessed 15 August, 2013].
- H. *Hansard – House of Lords debate (8 Feb 2011)*, cols.127-1 [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110208-0001.htm#11020837000989>, accessed 15 August 2013].
- I. *Hansard – House of Commons debate (1 Nov 2010) Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill [1<sup>st</sup> allocated day]*. Columns 659-660. [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101101/debtext/101101-0002.htm>, accessed 15 August 2013].
- J. Secretary to the Boundary Commission for England (interview with Nicola Temple, 5 Dec 2012, audio file of interview available on request).
- K. *The Political Studies Association Annual Awards*. [<http://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSAAwards11.pdf>, accessed December 2, 2012].
- L. LSE British Politics blog, In Depth: [http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/30989?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+BritishPolitics+AndPolicyAtLse+%28British+politics+and+policy+at+LSE%29](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/30989?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+BritishPolitics+AndPolicyAtLse+%28British+politics+and+policy+at+LSE%29), accessed 15 August 2013 ].
- M. <http://lawcommission.justice.gov.uk/areas/electoral-law.htm> Accessed 15 August 2013].