



2018 REVIEW – SECONDARY CONSULTATION RESPONSE

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Hi

I sent the attached in before, but it doesn't show up in the consultation portal, so it may be that it wasn't treated as a formal submission – I think it was submitted outside of the initial consultation time period. Here it is again, this time as a formal submission.

Best wishes

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File upload:

Philip Cowley secondary consultation submission.pdf was uploaded

The length of Westminster constituency names, 1950-2020

PHILIP COWLEY and MATTHEW BAILEY^{*}

A submission to the boundary commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The names of the constituencies used for elections to the House of Commons have been steadily increasing in length over the last 60 years – and the nomenclature currently proposed for the next election will increase their length yet further. This short submission demonstrates this increase, briefly discusses why it may have occurred, and asks whether the various boundary commissions should consider whether constituency names have now become too cumbersome.

One problem with this issue is that there has been a lack of constant formatting of constituency names over time. This is especially true in many secondary sources – such as newspapers, where an understandable desire for brevity often trumps precision – but it is sometimes even true in the original primary documents which define constituencies in law. Over time – and sometimes even at the same time – there are especial problems with inconsistent punctuation (such as Bristol South East or Bristol South-East; or St Pancras or St. Pancras).[†] For comparability over time, therefore, the analysis below is based on a stripped down version of constituency names, in which we have removed all commas and stops and replaced any hyphens with spaces.[‡]

However you measure it, though, there is no doubt that over the last 60 or so years constituency names in the UK have been getting longer. Table 1 shows the mean and median length in characters of constituency names for Westminster elections, at the first election following each redistribution. It begins in 1950, the first Westminster election to operate solely with a franchise of one-person, one-vote electing single member constituencies, and it includes a row for the boundaries currently proposed by the various boundary commissions for use in 2020 (or earlier).

As the table shows, the mean length has increased from 12.8 characters at the 1950 election to 15.1 in 2010 – and is due to increase further to 16.7 if the proposed changes go through. The median has also increased (from 12 to 14), and is set to increase further (to 16) if the boundary changes go ahead as promised. The biggest single increase over these 70 years, in both the mean and median, is that due to take place in 2020 when the number of constituencies is to be reduced to 600. Depending on the measure, therefore, by the next election the length of a constituency name in the UK will have increased since 1950 by 30% (mean) or 25% (median).[§]

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[†] For example, Schedule 1 of *The Representation of the People Act 1948* includes Bristol North East and Bristol South-East.

[‡] For the record, however, this produces almost identical findings to using the raw data.

[§] If anything, this may slightly under-estimate the real growth. Many London seats used to comprise both the name of the borough and the specific division (such as 'Kensington and Chelsea, Kensington' or 'Kensington and Chelsea, Chelsea, Chelsea'). In the analysis we have included the full names, but in practice, for understandable reasons, these were frequently known by just the division name.

There are few comparable equivalents today.

1. Constituency name length in characters, mean and median, 1950-2020

Date	Mea	Median	N
1950	12.8	12	625
1955	12.7	12	630
1974	14.0	13	635
1983	13.5	12	650
1992	13.5	12	651
1997	14.4	13	659
2005	14.7	13	646
2010	15.1	14	650
2020 [proposed]	16.7	16	600

Table 2 shows this increase in length over time in more detail. In every election since 1950, the plurality of constituency names have comprised between 10 and 19 characters, with this category getting marginally less numerous over time, falling from 52% of seats in 1950 to 49% in 2010 (and with a clear drop proposed for 2020, down to 44%). There has also been a drop in the percentage of seats with very short constituency names. In the 1950s, just over a third of constituencies had names consisting of fewer than 10 characters. By 2010, that was down to just under a quarter, and of the currently proposed constituencies, that figure falls again to just over a fifth. At the same time, there has been an expansion in longer constituency names. In 1950, 14% of constituency names had more than 20 characters; the equivalent figure for 2010 was 26%, and the proposed figure for 2020 is 35%.^{*}

2. Constituency name length in characters, 1950-2020 (%)

Date	<10	10-	20-29	30-	40	Total
1950	34.7	51.7	12.8	0.8	0.0	100
1955	35.9	51.1	12.2	0.8	0.0	100
1974	29.8	52.1	15.7	2.2	0.2	100
1983	30.2	53.1	16.2	0.5	0.2	100
1992	30.1	52.8	16.4	0.5	0.2	100
1997	27.8	49.6	19.4	3.0	0.2	100
2005	27.4	48.3	20.4	3.6	0.3	100
2010	24.8	49.1	22.6	3.4	0.2	100
2020	21.2	44.0	27.8	7.0	0.0	100

Table 3 shows three other, related, measures of the way constituency names have changed over time. The first is the number of constituency names which comprise just one word ('Gower', 'Westbury', 'Ayr', and so on). This has been in gradual decline since the 1950s. It was at its highest in 1955 (when 282 seats consisted of a single word), dropping to 232 in 1997, 226 in 2005, and 206 in 2010. It is due to fall further, down to just 160 in 2020. In the 1950s, therefore, over 40% of constituency seat names consisted of a single word; that is currently true of just over 30%, and it is due to fall to just over a quarter in 2020.

^{*} For the record, there have also been increases over time in the very shortest constituency names (just three characters in 1950, rising to four in 2005) and in the longest (36 characters in 1950 rising to 42 now, although due to drop to 39 if the 2020 boundaries proceed).

The second is the use of the word ‘and’ (as in ‘Windsor and Maidenhead’, or ‘Moray and Nairn’), linking two (or more) communities.^{*} In 1950, this applied to just 53 constituencies. This has increased steadily over time, and in 2010 it applied to 161 constituencies. Of the names proposed for 2020, a full 216 constituencies have ‘and’ somewhere in their title, despite the drop overall in the number of seats proposed for 2020. In other words, in 1950 ‘and’ featured in fewer than 10% of constituency names; it features in more than a third of those proposed for 2020. The new boundaries are also the first time there will be more constituencies with ‘and’ in their title than there are constituency names consisting of a single word.

The third measure to look at is the total number of spaces in constituency names. This is partly a product of the above two measures, although it also includes constituency names with more than three or four words (‘Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire’, ‘Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford’ or the record-breaking ‘Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East’). In 1950 there were a total of 494 spaces in constituency names; this rose to 786 in 2010 and will rise again to 867 in 2020.

3. Compounds and spaces in constituency names, 1950-2020

Date	Single word	Compounds	Total spaces
1950	272	53	494
1955	282	52	492
1974	238	72	608
1983	250	91	599
1992	250	91	604
1997	232	134	733
2005	226	140	752
2010	206	161	786
2020	160	216	867

There are – and long have been – clear differences by nation. Table 4 shows the average (mean) length of constituency names in each nation. Scottish constituency names are longer than anywhere else in the UK, which has been true since 1950. Constituency names in Wales used to be noticeably shorter than elsewhere in the UK but have grown in length over time, and exceeded those in Northern Ireland in 1997. With the exception of Northern Ireland, constituency names have grown everywhere between 1950 and 2010.

The effect of the boundary changes proposed for 2020 is to drive up constituency name length yet further in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in all three it will do so by more than in any other boundary redistribution since the end of the Second World War. The same is not, however, true in Scotland, where the 2020 proposals barely alter the mean. The largest increase in Scotland since 1950 occurred in 2005, when the number of Scottish seats was first significantly reduced.

^{*} We mean by this, obviously, the use of ‘and’ as a separate word. We do not include here its appearance in place names like Sutherland, Auckland, Copeland, and so on.

4. Mean constituency name length in characters, by nation, 1950-2020

	195	1955	1974	198	199	199	200	201	202
England	12.7	12.6	14.1	13.3	13.4	14.3	14.3	14.8	16.3
Scotland	15.1	15.0	15.8	15.6	15.6	16.5	19.8	19.8	19.9
Wales	9.5	9.5	9.8	11.8	11.8	12.8	12.8	12.7	18.4
Northern	12.3	12.3	12.3	12.4	12.4	12.3	12.3	12.3	16.3

Table 5 shows the percentage of single word constituencies per nation. These were more common in England and Wales than in Scotland and Northern Ireland, although they are in decline everywhere. The proposed constituency names for 2020 involve their use falling yet further everywhere – with the one exception of Northern Ireland. The drop in single-word constituencies in Wales is especially striking. In 1950, around over two-thirds of constituencies in Wales consisted of a single word, with Wales being the only nation in the UK where more than a half of constituencies consisted of a single word; this dropped to below 50% in 1997, and was at 43% in 2010, still the highest figure for any nation in the UK. It is due to fall to just 17% in 2020, below the figure for England and Northern Ireland.

5. Single word constituencies, by nation, 1950-2020 (%)

	195	1955	1974	1983	1992	1997	2005	2010	2020
England	45	47	38	41	41	37	37	33	29
Scotland	23	24	21	19	19	21	15	15	11
Wales	67	67	69	50	50	45	45	43	17
Northern Ireland	17	17	17	12	12	11	11	11	24

Table 6 shows the percentage of constituencies with ‘and’ in the title, per nation. This has risen everywhere over the last 60 years. Compound name constituencies have always been more common in Scotland than elsewhere but other nations are catching up. Indeed, in all four nations, the boundaries proposed for 2020 see this figure rise yet further – and in Scotland to more than half of constituencies. In Wales, where 15% of constituencies currently have ‘and’ in the title, the figure is set to triple in 2020.

6. Compound constituency names, by nation, 1950-2020 (%)

	195	1955	1974	1983	1992	1997	2005	2010	2020
England	7	7	11	13	13	20	20	23	34
Scotland	20	18	21	25	25	31	47	47	53
Wales	3	3	3	13	13	15	15	15	45
Northern Ireland	8	8	8	12	12	11	11	11	18

Westminster constituency names have therefore been getting longer; they are now less likely to consist of single words; and they more likely to be compounds. All of these trends are set to continue if the current sets of boundary reforms are implemented as proposed.

This is probably partly caused by greater public participation in the process of boundary redistribution. Constituency names clearly matter to some people and are a frequent source of dispute at public hearings, which have been increasing in number. Moreover, boundary commissions have in the past been relatively relaxed about agreeing to changes in nomenclature, seeing it as a relatively easy way to demonstrate being consultative, without having to make substantive changes to a seat in a way which would have knock on effects on other constituencies.* Another cause may be the increasing tendency for redistributions to prioritise creating seats of (roughly) equal population size over the desire for seats to represent 'natural' communities – what Rossiter et al call the tension between the organic and the mathematic. This has become even starker with the current boundary reviews, which in addition to being tasked with reducing the number of constituencies, have been given much stricter limits on the extent to which inter-constituency variation is allowed in size. All other things being equal, constituencies named after 'organic' communities might be expected to have shorter, easier, names than those where prioritising the mathematic principle leads to a need to create constituencies out of multiple different areas all with their own identities.

Given this, there may not be that much that can be done about the growing length, and increasing complexity, of constituency name. But it might still be worth the commissions considering at what point constituency names become too cumbersome to be easily or accurately used. The mean average length creeping up by a character or two probably does not matter very much, but the increasing use of multi-word constituencies, often involving two or three distinct places, might well reduce their practical value. This is, perhaps, all part of a broader discussion about who constituency names are *for*. Are they solely for voters in the constituency concerned – who may well prioritise the inclusion of their own particular part of the constituency – or are they for those who live elsewhere (and where more general names might well be more useful to help them identify the area concerned)? What about those who actually *use* constituency names on a regular basis (journalists, broadcasters, those in parliament)? Do the longer constituency names actually get used, in full and accurately, or are they just abbreviated or mangled? If the latter is the case – and anecdotally, it seems to be – then perhaps we should at least attempt to keep the number of long constituency names to a bare minimum.

*Rossiter, D. J., Johnston, R. J., and Pattie, C. J. (1999) *The Boundary Commissions. Redrawing the UK's map of Parliamentary constituencies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 139-140, 324.