

Teaching resource for parliamentary constituencies and reviews

This teaching aid provides some basic information and suggested activities specifically on the role and importance of constituencies in a democratic electoral system. Some material below might be used as part of broader Citizenship education at Key Stage 3 or 4, while the more complex issues could be used as part of AS or A level Politics teaching.

What are constituencies?

In the context of elections in a representative democracy, constituencies are a defined area from which one or more individuals are elected to be members of a representative body (often the legislature). In this context, constituencies will generally be defined by geographic boundaries. You might give examples of countries from different points on a scale from single-member constituencies (e.g. UK), through multi-member constituencies (e.g. Republic of Ireland) and regional lists (e.g. Spain), to 'party list' voting systems that operate across the entire country (e.g. Israel).

ACTIVITY: Although we refer to these as 'constituencies' in UK Parliamentary elections, what other names are used for the same concept, in both other levels of public elections in the UK, and in public elections abroad?

What factors might be taken into account in establishing constituencies?

A number of factors might be considered - and weighted differently - in drawing up constituencies.

ACTIVITY: Discuss what factors might be considered relevant in establishing constituencies, why might they be considered important, and how might they conflict with each other? Examples of factors that are used in different countries include: broadly equalising the number of electors (or population) in each constituency, to achieve parity of voting strength; protection of local communities; partisan fairness (e.g. congressional redistricting in US states); racial fairness (e.g. 'majority minority' districts in the US, and Maori electorates in New Zealand); and reflecting significant geographic barriers.

Why review constituencies?

Over time the circumstances and factors on which initial constituency boundaries are based will change, sometimes significantly. For example, constituencies in England were originally the medieval shires and towns, each of which sent two individuals to represent their interests to the monarch via an early form of the House of Commons. By the 19th century, the populations of these original constituencies had changed dramatically, in particular due to the industrial revolution.

ACTIVITY: Research on 'rotten boroughs' - what were they, and identify some. For light relief, watch relevant extracts from Episode One of the BBC comedy Blackadder the Third ('Dish and Dishonesty').

Who should make and review constituencies?

There are fundamentally two sources of constituency creation for a sovereign nation: either the executive creates them, or an independent body does. There will often be a role for the legislature itself (in formally making the new constituencies), and potentially the judiciary.

ACTIVITY: Find out how the process works in the UK (for national and local government elections), and in other parts of the world. What are the pros and cons of each different approach?

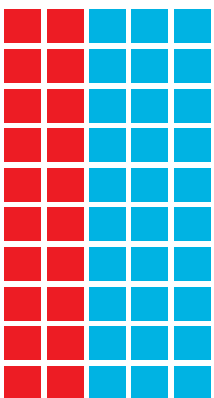
What difference can it make politically?

How and where the boundaries of constituencies are drawn can make a significant difference to the results of an election. 'Gerrymandering' refers to constituency design being inappropriately influenced by consideration of the likely political outcomes.

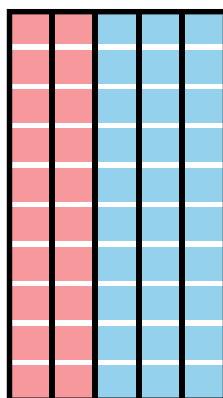
ACTIVITY: Give the students the first of the graphics below, explaining that the voting system is single member plurality ('first past the post'), each square represents one elector, and the colour of each denotes the party that elector usually votes for. Ask them to draw lines between the squares to create five constituencies, each containing ten electors. Examine the very different outcomes from the students' designs, displaying any of the other three graphics below that has not already been created by a student.

Gerrymandering explained

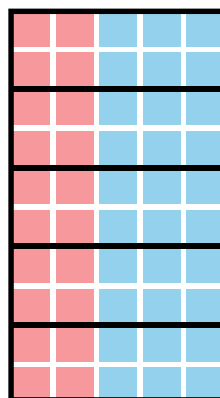
Three ways to divide the same 50 people into five constituencies, with very different political outcomes.



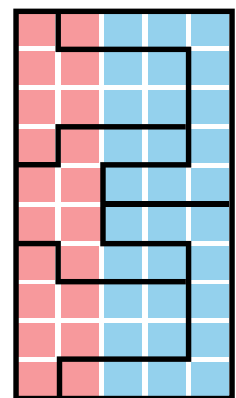
60% blue, 40% red



3 Blue wins, 2 Red wins.
Blue wins majority overall,
with representation for
both in proportion
to support.



5 Blue wins, 0 Red
wins. Blue wins
every seat, with
Red completely
unrepresented.



2 Blue wins, 3 Red
wins. Red wins overall
majority, despite
having significantly
less support.

ADVANCED ACTIVITY: Students can attempt some design of constituencies in England, using real data from the 2018 Review. We suggest using a county area suitable for six or seven constituencies: i.e. small enough to be manageable in a reasonable time, but large enough to provide for a fair amount of flexibility. Examples might be Bedfordshire (six), Buckinghamshire (seven, when including Milton Keynes), Lincolnshire (seven), North Yorkshire (six, when excluding City of York), Oxfordshire (six), or Suffolk (seven). Get students to construct what they feel is the best scheme of constituencies for that county, using the following criteria:

- Local government wards should be used as the ‘building blocks’ to construct a constituency;
- The minimum permitted electorate for a proposed constituency is 71,031, and the maximum is 78,507;
- Proposed constituency boundaries should, as far as possible, minimise change from existing constituency boundaries, avoid splitting local communities between constituencies, and take account of physical geography.

The ward electorates, and the boundaries of wards and existing constituencies can all be accessed from www.bce2018.org.uk (from the Home page, simply select a region to be taken to the map and data), but students should not simply replicate the BCE’s proposals provided there. The class should then critique each other’s proposals, identifying what aspects might be objected to, and why.

