

By-elections

A by-election takes place when a seat in the House of Commons becomes vacant between general elections. If there are several vacant seats then a number of by-elections can take place on the same day.

Reasons for by-elections

A seat becomes vacant during the lifetime of a Parliament either when an MP resigns from Parliament, for example to take up a job which by law cannot be done by an MP, or because an MP has died. The law also allows a seat to be declared vacant because of a Member's bankruptcy, mental illness or conviction for a serious criminal offence.

A by-election does not automatically take place if an MP changes political party.

Until a new MP is elected, constituency matters are usually handled by an MP of the same party in a neighbouring constituency.

'Moving the Writ'

Traditionally the Chief Whip of the political party whose MP held the vacant seat will begin the procedure for a by-election. This is known as 'moving the Writ' and takes the form of a motion in the House of Commons.

By-election timetable

A new Writ is usually moved within three months of the vacancy occurring. There have been a few instances of seats remaining vacant longer than six months before a by-election was called, and seats have also been left vacant towards the end of a Parliament to be filled at the general election instead.

The Electoral Timetable

Statutory electoral timetables for both general and by-elections are laid down in the Parliamentary Elections Rules appended to the *Representation of the People Act 1983*. The timetable was amended in the *Representation of the People Act 1985*.

General elections	Day of timetable	By-elections
Royal Proclamation and issue of writs	0	Issue of new writ
Receipt of writs	1	Receipt of writ
	2	
Last day for notice of Elections	3	Last day for notice of election
Earliest day for nomination	4	Earliest day for nomination
	5	
Latest day for nomination	6	Earliest day for nominations to close
	7	
	8	Latest day for nominations to close
	9	
	10	
	11	
	12	
	13	
	14	
	15	Earliest polling day
	16	
Polling day	17	
	18	
	19	Latest polling day

Notes:-

(1) In the case of by-elections, the last day for nominations and polling day are fixed, within certain limits, by the Returning Officer.

(2) For the purposes of the timetable, Saturday, Sunday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Good Friday, a bank holiday, and any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning are disregarded.

By-elections since the 2010 General Election

<http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/commons/hcio/by-elections-2010/>

Constituency	Reason for by-election	Date of by-election	Result (+Turnout %)	New Member	Change from Gen Election
Wythenshawe and Sale East	Death of Paul Goggins - 7 January 2014	13 February 2014	Labour Hold (T=37.5%)	Michael Kane	Lab ↑ 11.4%
South Shields	Resignation of David Miliband to take NGO job in New York - 15 April 2013	2 May 2013	Labour Hold (T=39.3%)	Emma Lewell-Buck	Lab ↓ 1.5%
Mid-Ulster	Resignation of Martin McGuinness to focus on role as Mid-Ulster's NI Assembly member -2 January 2013	7 March 2013	Sinn Fein Hold (T = 55.4%)	Francie Molloy	Sinn Fein ↓ 5.1%
Eastleigh	Resignation of Chris Huhne (Lib Dem) - admission of guilt in perverting course of justice trial - 5 February 2013	28 February 2013	Lib Dem Hold (T=52.7%)	Mike Thornton	Lib Dem ↓ 14.5%
Rotherham	Resignation of Rt Hon Denis MacShane (Lab) - expenses scandal – 5 November 2012	29 November 2012	Labour Hold (T = 34%)	Sarah Champion	Lab ↑ 1.6%
Middlesbrough	Death of Sir Stuart Bell (Lab) – 13 October 2012	29 November 2012	Labour Hold (T = 26%)	Andy McDonald	Lab ↑ 14.6%
Croydon North	Death of Malcolm Wicks (Lab) – 29 September 2012	29 November 2012	Labour Hold (T = 26.5%)	Steve Reed	Lab ↑ 8.7%
Manchester Central	Resignation of Tony Lloyd (Lab) - to stand for Police & Crime Commissioner – 22 October 2012	15 November 2012	Labour Hold (T = 18.4%)	Lucy Powell	Lab ↑ 16%
Cardiff South and Penarth	Resignation of Rt Hon Alun Michael (Lab) - to stand for Police & Crime Commissioner – 22 October 2012	15 November 2012	Labour/Co-op Hold (T = 26%)	Stephen Doughty	Lab ↑ 8%
Corby	Resignation of Louise Mensch (Con) - family reasons - 29 August 2012	15 November 2012	Labour/Co-op Gain (T = 45%)	Andy Sawford	Lab ↑ 9.7%
Bradford West	Resignation of Marsha Singh (Lab) - “serious health problems” – 2 March 2012	29 March 2012	Respect Gain (T = 51%)	George Galloway	Respect ↑ 53%
Feltham and Heston	Death of Alan Keen (Lab) – 14 November 2011	15 December 2011	Labour hold (T = 28.8%)	Seema Malhotra	Lab ↑ 8%
Inverclyde	Death of David Cairns (Lab) – 9 May 2011	30 June 2011	Labour hold (T = 45.5%)	Iain McKenzie	Lab ↓ 18%
Leicester South	Resignation of Sir Peter Soulsby (Lab) to stand for Mayor of Leicester – 1 April 2011	5 May 2011	Labour hold (T = 45%)	Jon Ashworth	Lab ↑ 16%
Belfast West	Resignation of Gerry Adams (Sinn Fein) to stand for the Irish Dail – 26 January 2011	9 June 2011	Sinn Fein hold (T = 37.5%)	Paul Maskey	Sinn Fein ↑ 2.5%
Barnsley Central	Resignation of Eric Illsley (Lab) after conviction in expenses case - 8 February 2011	3 March 2011	Labour hold (T = 36.5%)	Dan Jarvis	Lab ↑ 18.6%
Oldham East & Saddleworth	Previous election declared void by court (Phil Woolas – Lab) – 5 November 2010	13 January 2011	Labour hold (T = 48%)	Debbie Abrahams	Lab ↑ 10%

By-elections 2005 - 2010

Constituency	Reason for by-election	Date of by-election	Result	New Member	Gen Election 2010
Strangford	Resignation of Iris Robinson (DUP) – sex & influence scandal 15 January 2010				(DUP hold)
North West Leicestershire	Death of David Taylor (Lab/Co-op) 26 December 2009				(Con gain)
Glasgow North East	Resignation of Rt Hon Michael Martin (Speaker) – related to handling of expenses issue - 22 June 2009	12 November 2009	Labour win (technically a gain from Speaker)	William Bain	Lab hold
Norwich North	Resignation of Dr Ian Gibson (Lab) – expenses issue - 8 June 2009	23 July 2009	Con gain	Chloe Smith	Con hold
Glenrothes	Death of John MacDougall (Lab) 12 August 2008	6 Nov 2008	Labour hold	Lindsay Roy	Lab hold
Glasgow East	Resignation of David Marshall (Lab) – health grounds - 30 June 2008	24 July 2008	SNP gain	John Mason	Lab regain
Haltemprice and Howden	Resignation of Rt Hon David Davis – to make political point - (Con) 18 June 2008	10 July 2008	Con hold	David Davis	Con hold
Henley	Resignation of Boris Johnson (Con) – became Mayor of London - 4 June 2008	26 June 2008	Con hold	John Howell	Con hold
Crewe and Nantwich	Death of Gwyneth Dunwoody (Lab) 17 April 2008	22 May 2008	Con gain	Edward Timpson	Con hold
Ealing Southall	Death of Piara Khabra (Lab) 19 June 2007	19 July 2007	Labour hold	Virendra Sharmar	Lab hold
Sedgefield	Resignation of Rt Hon Tony Blair (Lab)- after stepping down as PM & Labour Leader - 27 June 2007	19 July 2007	Labour hold	Phil Wilson	Lab hold
Bromley & Chislehurst	Death of Rt Hon Eric Forth (Con) 17 May 2006	29 June 2006	Con hold	Bob Neill	Con hold
Blaenau Gwent	Death of Peter Law (Ind) 25 Apr 2006	29 June 2006	Independent hold	Dai Davies	Lab gain
Dunfermline & West Fife	Death of Rachel Squire (Lab) 5 January 2006	9 Feb 2006	Lib Dem gain	Willie Rennie	Lab regain
Livingston	Death of Rt Hon Robin Cook (Lab) 6 August 2005	29 Sep 2005	Labour hold	Jim Devine	Lab hold (diff MP)
Cheadle	Death of Patsy Calton (LD) 29 May	14 Jul 2005	Lib Dem hold	Mark Hunter	LD hold

By-elections - issues

Seen as test for national government – mini-referendum on its recent actions, competence, policies:

– Govt party often does badly, losing votes and sometimes losing seats. (V damaging for Callaghan's Lab govt in late 70s as it lost its majority) and for Major's Con govt in mid 1990s as it lost its majority and became reliant on Ulster Unionist support. Labour won no by-elections 1998 - 2011 inclusive.

- recent results have been particularly bad for Lib Dems - e.g losing deposits with <5% in 6 out of the last 10 non-NI by-elections – e.g. Nov 2012, 8th in Rotherham, 4th in Croydon North, 4th in Corby; 2013, 7th in South Shields; 2014, 4th in Wythenshaw & Sale East.

- but Cons also embarrassed recently, e.g. 3rd behind UKIP in Wythenshaw & Sale East Feb + the 2 previous by-elections; 5th in Rotherham behind UKIP & BNP

- but bad Lab result in Inverclyde in 2011 (barely hung on vs SNP challenge) & losing to Respect in Bradford West in 2012 shows regional/local issues can outweigh UK ones

- National party leaders spin the results as best they can – e.g. Milliband claiming 2011 Feltham and Heston Lab hold with 8% increase in vote as vindicating his leadership and strategy, while demonstrating the public's rejection of the Coalition. Cameron dismissed the loss of Corby in 2012 as “a classic mid-term result”.

- UKIP have recently made a splash in a number of by-elections – e.g. Nov 2012: 2nd in Wythenshaw and Sale (18% of the vote), as well as Rotherham (21.6%), Middlesbrough (11.8% of vote), and 3rd in Corby (14.3% of vote); and 2nd in Barnsley in March 2011 – no wins but gaining anti-Labour votes at expense of Lib Dems & Cons. In past parliaments SNP and Lib Dems have benefitted from voters willingness to vote for third/minor parties in mid-term by-elections.

Cost – due to the exceptional attention on a by-election, spending limits are raised to £100,000 per candidate, over 4 times the candidate limit at a General Election.

National media attention for a while (much more attention on a single constituency than would be the case in a general election) – especially if the by-election is seen as close or as encapsulating national issues in some way.

- national politicians from all parties will visit, although not normally a PM. Allows parties to try out new themes and strategies.

As **candidates have to be selected v quickly** by all parties, often a chance for up-and-coming politicians to try for a seat, even if it is regarded as unwinnable, as preparation for selection for a safer seat in future.

Turnout often v low – down c25% from Gen Elect – coupled with the above means **large swings** are possible vs the government, allowing occasionally v dramatic results by third parties such as the SNP or Lib Dems – e.g. Brent East won by Sarah Teather for LDs 2003

If a constituency changes hands, it **may revert** to the former party at the next General Election, but incumbents have some advantages, esp as a by-election may give them more profile locally than a General Election would (despite low turnout). Lib Dems have been able to turn some by-election gains into longer-term holds over the last 20 years (e.g. Sarah Teather in Brent East, now Brent Central).

Some academic evidence that good by-election performances by a party have a positive effect on its subsequent General Election performance:

What to make of these findings? We could look at this through two perspectives: one from the party perspective; and the other from the voters'. In the former, these findings might suggest that parties approach general elections in a rather different way than they approach by-elections. By-elections are set-piece events that attract media attention of such disproportional amounts that they would never attract at general elections. Accordingly, parties – whose legal spending limits are four times greater than at by-elections – take

advantage of this by pouring huge amounts of effort into such campaigns, either to defend their seat or to secure a headline-grabbing victory from the (normally government) incumbent. The urge to do this vanishes at general elections when there are 650-odd other contests taking place.

From the voters' perspective, we know that certain by-elections can act as lightning conductors for voters to protest against the government of the day on the salient issues of the day. By-elections offer voters a chance to rebel against their 'normal' preferences, to give the incumbent a 'bloody nose', for whatever reason. But at general elections, the salience of such protests tend to vanish, as most seats which held by-elections earlier on in the cycle become part of several hundred contests on one night (some of which, admittedly, receiving more coverage than others), and voters appear to return to their 'normal' voting choices.

***From: Do by-elections have an impact on British general election outcomes?
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