

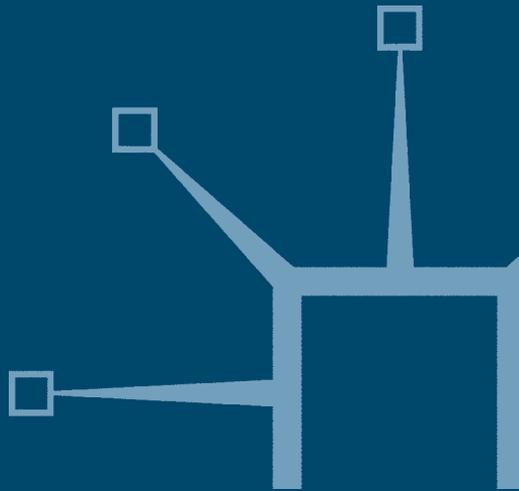
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Elections in Britain

A Voter's Guide

Fifth Edition

Dick Leonard and
Roger Mortimore



Elections in Britain

Also by Dick Leonard

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Dick Leonard

Journalist and Author

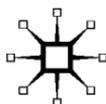
and

Roger Mortimore

Senior Political Analyst, MORI

Fifth Edition

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Appendix 6 reproduces by kind permission a table from Byron Criddle, 'MPs and Candidates', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). Table 7.2 summarises the same data.

Appendix 8 is largely an updating of the introduction by Dick Leonard in Dick Leonard and Richard Natkiel, *World Atlas of Elections* (London: Economist Publishing Co., 1986), by kind permission of Economist Publishing Co.

Foreword

David Butler

Elections lie at the heart of democracy. But their detailed nature is little understood. Few people know in any detail about the rules and administrative arrangements that govern the franchise, or the casting and counting of ballots, or the way votes are translated into seats or the conduct and financing of campaigns. Fewer still comprehend what goes on in the minds of ordinary people as they decide whether to vote as they did last time or to switch to another party.

What decides elections? What do elections decide? The answers to these questions vary greatly in different countries and even in the same country at different times. Since Dick Leonard produced the first edition of this book in 1968 much has changed and continues to change in the nature of campaigning.

The contests of the 1990s saw a new professionalism in party headquarters in the use of direct mail and e-mail and focus groups, as well as in a 24-hours-a-day spinning of news. And since Labour's victory in 1997, new and different electoral systems have been installed for the Scottish Parliament, for the Welsh Assembly and for the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as for the Mayor and Assembly in London. Moreover, the 1999 elections to the European Parliament saw the first nationwide use of proportional representation.

Furthermore, before the 2001 election the government set up the independent Electoral Commission, the first full-time professional body charged with supervising the administration of British elections, and also of investigating and recommending future reforms to the system, whether minor or major. Statutory spending limits now apply to parties nationally as well as in the constituencies, and parties must now submit comprehensive accounts of their income and expenditure.

The behaviour of the public is changing, too. Turnout has fallen across a whole range of British elections in recent years, and a smaller proportion of the electorate voted in the 2001 general election than on any previous occasion since the introduction of universal suffrage. Reversing this trend will pose a continuing challenge both to the Electoral Commission and the political parties.

Dick Leonard and Roger Mortimore are uniquely qualified to present a comprehensive, authoritative and down-to-earth guide for voters – and for others – to Elections in Britain.

1

Introduction

'The disadvantage of free elections', V. M. Molotov (the Soviet Foreign Minister in 1946) remarked to Ernest Bevin, 'is that you can never be sure who is going to win them.'

Perhaps, unconsciously, he had put his finger squarely on the feature which makes democratic systems of government so *interesting*. For it is the uncertainty which attends nearly every general election, at least in the United Kingdom, which adds spice to what might otherwise be regarded as a rather tiresome civic duty.

It is this, possibly, which explains a persistent paradox in British politics: that whereas only a tiny minority – probably less than 1 per cent – take an active part in politics between elections, around three-quarters generally turn out to vote, without any compulsion, whenever a general election is held. Yet the choice which is presented to the 30 million or so electors who record their votes at elections is largely determined by the few thousands who take a continuing part in the activities of the political parties. It is they alone who participate in the selection of Parliamentary candidates and it is they who have a *direct* influence on the policies adopted by the political parties.

At most general elections about 2 million young men and women are entitled to vote for the first time. It was in the hope that it would be of assistance to some of them, and also to those older voters who are perhaps puzzled or uncertain about particular aspects of the electoral system, that some years ago one of the present authors wrote a paperback entitled *Guide to the General Election* (later revised as *Elections in Britain*, subsequently as *Elections in Britain Today* and now – having acquired a co-author on the way – as *Elections in Britain: A Voter's Guide*). It was intended to fill a gap which at that time seemed to exist for a book which explained the complexities of the electoral system in a simple manner

and which also contained an account of how the political parties are organised, both locally and at national level, how their Parliamentary candidates are chosen and how the policies which they put before the electorate come to be adopted.

The years passed and major changes have occurred to the electoral system (votes for 18-year-olds, elections to the European Parliament, the coming of referendums, two fundamental reorganisations of local government and so forth), to electoral techniques (as television, computers and opinion polls have become more and more important) and to the party structure, with the creation of the Social Democratic Party and the subsequent merger to form the Liberal Democrats. With the election of the present government in 1997 the pace of change has quickened, with the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission, a plethora of changes in the administrative rules, and a swathe of elections to an entirely new tier of government, justifying another comprehensively revised edition only four years after the last.

This book is addressed to voters who support all political parties and to those who remain uncommitted. We have attempted throughout to describe *how* the system works rather than explain *why* we approve or disapprove of its different features. It should be emphasised that this work is an account of the British electoral system at the present time, together with some observations on how it has evolved and on how it may evolve in the future. It is not an historical work¹ or a general primer on the British constitution;² nor is it a work of comparative government.³ Again, for the benefit of younger readers, however, it may be helpful to summarise in a few preliminary paragraphs the general characteristics of the British constitutional system in so far as it is relevant to elections.

1. The United Kingdom has a parliamentary form of government. The executive is not directly elected, but is formed from the membership of the legislature. Ministers are members of the legislature. The great majority, including those holding the leading offices, are members of the House of Commons. A minority are members of the House of Lords. This necessarily restricts the field of recruitment for ministers to a far greater extent than, for instance, in the USA.
2. It has evolved basically as a two-party system, though a third party – the Liberals – has invariably polled a substantial vote and has had a small representation in the House of Commons, and several smaller parties from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are also represented in the House. The rise in support for the Liberals and the creation of the Liberal Democrats now places the whole concept in question.

But in the past an election campaign, like a debate in the Commons, was basically a confrontation between the Government and the Opposition. The party which won a majority of seats in the House of Commons formed a government, and its leader became Prime Minister. Most elections have produced a clear Parliamentary majority for one party or the other, though occasionally only a small one. When a single party has not gained a majority of the seats a minority government has been formed rather than a coalition, which is a form of government unknown in modern Britain except in wartime.

3. The electoral system requires a single ballot and the candidate with the largest number of votes wins, even if he or she has polled only a minority of the total votes cast. This is sometimes known as the 'first past the post' system. It is not a system of proportional representation, and it penalises minority parties and inhibits their growth.
4. General elections in Britain are not held at fixed intervals, unlike in a majority of democratic countries. Though the maximum length of life of a single Parliament is five years, it may be dissolved at virtually any time at the wish of the government. This gives the incumbent party a considerable advantage.
5. The United Kingdom has no written constitution: all laws, including electoral laws, may be changed by the passage of an Act of Parliament. It is technically easy, therefore, to change the electoral system at any time. But in practice only minor amendments are adopted with any frequency, and much of the present system is rooted in great antiquity. Nevertheless, the indications are that we may now be in the midst of a period of significant changes.

2

When Elections are Held

Apart from the result, the principal uncertainty about a British general election is its timing. Unlike in the USA and the great majority of democratic states outside the Commonwealth, there is no fixed date for British Parliamentary elections.

There is, however, a limit on the length of life of the House of Commons. In 1694 it was set at three years, which was increased to seven years in 1715. Under the Parliament Act of 1911 it was reduced to five years, which is the present limit. During both world wars annual Prolongation of Parliament Acts were passed after the expiry of this limit to avoid the inconvenience of a wartime election, but though such a measure would theoretically be possible in peacetime it is inconceivable that it would be attempted.

No peacetime Parliament has in fact run its full five years, though those of 1959 and 1992 came so close to it that the general elections at either end were more than five years apart. Table 2.1 shows the length of each Parliament which has sat since 1918, the first to be elected under the 1911 Act.

Except in the case of a minority government or one with a very small majority (as in 1950, 1964 and February 1974) it will be seen that most Parliaments have continued for a period of between three and four and a half years. Unless an election is precipitated by a government defeat on a vote of confidence in the House of Commons (which has not occurred, except to a minority government, since 1886), it is in effect the Prime Minister who decides the date of a general election.

In theory, the Sovereign may refuse the advice of the Prime Minister to dissolve Parliament. In practice, she could not refuse any but the most frivolous request. Especially after a Parliament has passed its half-way mark, the Prime Minister may safely recommend a dissolution at any time.

Table 2.1 Duration of Parliament, 1918–2001

<i>General election</i>	<i>Duration of Parliament</i>		<i>Original government majority</i>
	<i>Years</i>	<i>Days</i>	
1918	3	265	263
1922	–	361	79
1923	–	266	None
1924	4	159	225
1929	2	105	None
1931	3	356	425
1935*	9	200	247
1945	4	189	186
1950	1	213	6
1951	3	183	16
1955	4	104	60
1959	4	342	100
1964	1	127	4
1966	4	41	97
1970	3	251	30
1974: Feb	–	195	None
1974: Oct	4	166	3
1979	4	4	43
1983	3	345	144
1987	4	274	102
1992	4	346	21
1997	4	7	177
2001	?	?	165

* Duration extended by annual Acts of Parliament during 1939–45 war.

The decision is the Prime Minister's alone. In earlier times the agreement of the Cabinet was always sought, but in 1918 Lloyd George successfully set the precedent, which has never since been challenged, of not consulting the Cabinet on this decision. The Prime Minister may seek the advice of senior colleagues, but is by no means bound by it. It is known that both in 1950 and in 1951, several senior Cabinet ministers disagreed with Clement Attlee's decision to go to the country.

Conversely, in September 1978 a large majority of Cabinet ministers were known to be in favour of an election in the following month, but James Callaghan abruptly informed the Cabinet that there would not be one until the following year. There was no discussion, despite the fact that Callaghan's decision had taken his colleagues, and virtually the whole country, by surprise.

In 2001, a May election had been expected but an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in farming areas across the country led Tony Blair to

decide to postpone it until June. The decision was leaked to the press, and Cabinet ministers travelling to a weekend summit at Chequers, at which they thought the election date was to be discussed, were presented with a *fait accompli* in their morning papers.

Numerous factors influence Prime Ministers in their choice of general election dates. The economic situation, the state of the government's legislative programme in the House of Commons, the need for the country to be represented at important international negotiations by a government with a fresh mandate from the people or, if the government majority is precarious or non-existent, as in the February 1974 Parliament, the desire to increase its Parliamentary support. This list could be extended indefinitely, but there is little doubt that the principal factor was neatly summed up by Lord Poole, then joint chairman of the Conservative Party, in 1963: 'The Prime Minister is likely to have a general election at the time when he thinks he is most likely to win it.'

The timing of general elections has become of crucial importance in British politics, as it is also in Australia, Canada and New Zealand where the government also has an effective choice of date. The Prime Minister's prerogative of choice is a powerful weapon for the government and a serious handicap to the Opposition. It has, moreover, assumed greater significance during the past half century when public opinion polls have provided a far more accurate and sensitive, if occasionally fallible, barometer of the relative standing of the political parties than existed in earlier periods. Traditionally, by-elections had been the main measure of political support, but the results of these can often be misleading. Thus in 1880, on the strength of two Conservative victories in by-elections at Liverpool and Southwark, Lord Beaconsfield (Benjamin Disraeli) went to the country, and saw his party defeated.

Sir Anthony Eden was, in 1955, the first Prime Minister to capitalise on the new precision with which public opinion polls enable a Prime Minister to choose a favourable moment for a dissolution, and all subsequent Prime Ministers have sought to follow in his footsteps. Nevertheless, a cautious Prime Minister takes many other factors and indicators into account, and should always bear in mind that a narrow opinion poll lead might melt away during the election campaign. By-elections are still a useful confirmation of what the polls are showing, as are local government election results, including council by-elections which are held periodically throughout the year, as a supplementary indicator.

When a government is clearly and firmly ahead, the Prime Minister can pick his or her moment. Thus Harold Wilson in 1966 waited until a highly encouraging by-election result confirmed the opinion poll

evidence that he could increase his Parliamentary majority, which he did indeed when the election was called. Similarly in 1987, Mrs Thatcher had the encouragement of a sustained opinion poll lead, but waited until Conservative success in the May local government elections before calling a general election the following month, at which she was duly returned with a comfortable majority for a third term.

The advantage which 'naming the day' gives to the Prime Minister is perhaps best illustrated by the 1979–83 Parliament. In the early years of the Parliament, Mrs Thatcher's newly elected government plumbed the depths of unpopularity, and had the election been held in 1981 the polls and by-elections alike suggested that the newly formed SDP-Liberal Alliance would have swept the country. But after the Falklands War and a sudden economic upturn in 1982 the government's popularity recovered and, despite high unemployment, it was clear that many voters distrusted Michael Foot's Labour Party. By calling an election in June 1983, just over four years into her term, Mrs Thatcher was able to exploit the favourable circumstances before anything changed, in (justified) confidence that the ensuing general election would greatly augment her majority.

The decision is more tricky when the message of the polls is less clear cut – or, of course, if the polls are consistently suggesting that the government will lose. Should the Prime Minister wait in the hope that the position will improve, or grasp the nettle and make the best of it rather than risk allowing the position to deteriorate still further? In 1978, James Callaghan avoided an autumn election in which it seemed the outcome would be finely balanced. However, instead of the hoped-for upturn his standing was further undermined by the industrial unrest which came to be nicknamed the 'Winter of Discontent', and the following March all the opposition parties combined to defeat the government in a vote of confidence in the Commons, forcing an immediate election at which Mrs Thatcher was returned with a comfortable majority. In 1992, though, John Major facing a narrow poll deficit hung on to the last moment, 'waiting for something to turn up', and when he finally went to the country secured a narrow (if unexpected) victory.

The same considerations may apply even if the government is nowhere near the end of its term. Following the inconclusive election of February 1974, Wilson was able to choose his moment to call another general election in the hope of gaining an overall majority. This he achieved in October 1974, but only just – his majority was three seats, and this majority was wiped out by by-election losses over the next two years. Much more painful setbacks were suffered by Wilson in 1970, and by the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath in February 1974. Both

called early elections which the opinion polls suggested they would win, and both lost.

Though the Prime Minister's advantage appears immense, the area of choice is more limited than is immediately obvious, for in practice there are normally only a limited number of possible dates between which to choose. The winter months are usually excluded from consideration for climatic reasons, and the summer is the holiday season. A spring election is one possibility, but unless it is held on the same day as the local elections, the first Thursday in May (as it was in 1979 and 1997),¹ it needs to steer clear of that date by several weeks to avoid the campaigning periods overlapping; it is also best to avoid Easter and the spring bank holidays. Early autumn is the only other period which normally would be seriously considered for electioneering. Apart from 1945, when the election was held on the earliest practicable date after the German surrender, all modern general elections have been concentrated in two periods – late February to early June, and October to early November. It may safely be assumed that the great majority of future general elections will take place during these 'windows of opportunity'.

Over the last 50 years, general elections and the great majority of by-elections, local government and other elections have been held on a Thursday (see Table 2.2).² However, in recent years there has been much discussion of moving polling day to the weekend, as in most of continental Europe, which it is suggested would be more convenient for many voters and would encourage a higher turnout. The change was tried on an experimental basis in a few local elections in May 2000, with voting spread over two days, Saturday and Sunday, to avoid causing problems for those electors who for religious reasons would be unable to vote on one day or the other. (It must be said, however, that the initial experiments were not a conspicuous success, and turnout fell rather than rose; more success has been achieved by experiments involving postal voting, which tackle the inconvenience of voting on a weekday in a different way.)

It was only in the twentieth century that voting on a single day became the norm. Before 1918, polling had been spread over a fortnight or more, and results in the first constituencies to poll were already known when voters in other constituencies went to cast their votes. This was sometimes alleged to cause a 'bandwagon' in favour of the party which made early gains. The only occasion since when voting has been staggered was in 1945 when, because of local holiday arrangements, 23 seats in the north of England and Scotland polled one or two weeks later. But as none of the votes in this election were counted until three weeks after the original

polling day, to allow for servicemen's votes to be sent from overseas, there was no risk of a 'bandwagon' being created on that occasion.

Table 2.2 Dates of general elections, 1924–2001

<i>Year</i>	<i>Day</i>	<i>Date</i>
1924	Wednesday	29 October
1929	Thursday	30 May
1931	Tuesday	27 October
1935	Thursday	14 November
1945	Thursday	5 July
1950	Thursday	23 February
1951	Thursday	25 October
1955	Thursday	26 May
1959	Thursday	8 October
1964	Thursday	15 October
1966	Thursday	31 March
1970	Thursday	18 June
1974: Feb	Thursday	28 February
1974: Oct	Thursday	10 October
1979	Thursday	3 May
1983	Thursday	9 June
1987	Thursday	11 June
1992	Thursday	9 April
1997	Thursday	1 May
2001	Thursday	6 June

Dissolution of Parliament is effected by Royal Proclamation, but it is customary for the Prime Minister personally to break the news with a statement giving notice of the dissolution. In 1983, for example, Mrs Margaret Thatcher issued a statement on Monday 9 May, announcing the dissolution of Parliament on 13 May, and polling day was set for 9 June. The last-minute moves preceding the announcement were cryptically reported the following day in *The Times*:

- 10 a.m. Close Cabinet colleagues and Conservative Party advisers gathered at 10 Downing Street for final meeting before the election date is announced.
- 11 a.m. Mr Cecil Parkinson, party chairman, leaves briefly to break the news to Conservative Central Office.
- 11.15 a.m. Mr Parkinson returns to Downing Street for a Cabinet meeting where June 9 date is revealed.
- 12.20 p.m. The Prime Minister leaves for Buckingham Palace and asks the Queen to dissolve Parliament. After an audience lasting