UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO GENERAL ELECTIONS



FOREWORD

This is the second in UK in a Changing Europe's series of 'beginner's guides,' which aim to provide an accessible yet thorough overview of the most pressing issues, institutions and debates in politics and society today.

The rationale for doing something on general elections is obvious. In what follows, we take you through how they work, from prorogation to polling day. You will find everything you need to know about the dissolution of Parliament, the drawing up of constituencies, how candidates are selected, what they can and cannot do on the campaign trail, the laws which govern party spending, and what to expect on polling day- right down to how polling stations are set up.

And, because we're really nice, we've even included a section on what to expect in the days following the election, from government formation to the selection of the Speaker and the State Opening of Parliament.

This guide is perfect for those who are learning about British politics and institutions for the first time, or those who, unfamiliar with the details, are being asked to write about them. Even seasoned professionals will doubtless need a quick reminder of the difference between dissolution and prorogation.

As ever, please do get in touch with any feedback on this guide, or any subjects you would like us to cover in the future.

My heartfelt thanks to Dr Stephanie Luke and particularly to Sophie Stowers for their work in writing this guide. Thanks too to Rob Ford and Jill Rutter for their hard work in reading and improving multiple drafts in the last few months.

I do hope you find what follows helpful and informative. See you on 4 July!

Professor Anand Menon

Director, UK in a Changing Europe

June 2024

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GENERAL ELECTION

A general election is an opportunity for people in the UK to choose their Member of Parliament (MP). Each MP elected will represent a local area (a constituency) in the House of Commons for up to five years. The UK's next general election will be held on the 4 July 2024.

THE TIMING OF GENERAL ELECTIONS

The timing of a general election is ultimately up to the Prime Minister. There are some limits on this power, as Parliament can only sit for a maximum of five years from the day it first met after the last election. Therefore, the next general election had to be held no later than 28 January 2025, with parliament being dissolved no later than 17 December 2024. Within this five-year period, though, the precise timing is up to the Prime Minister - hence Rishi Sunak was able to call an election in July.



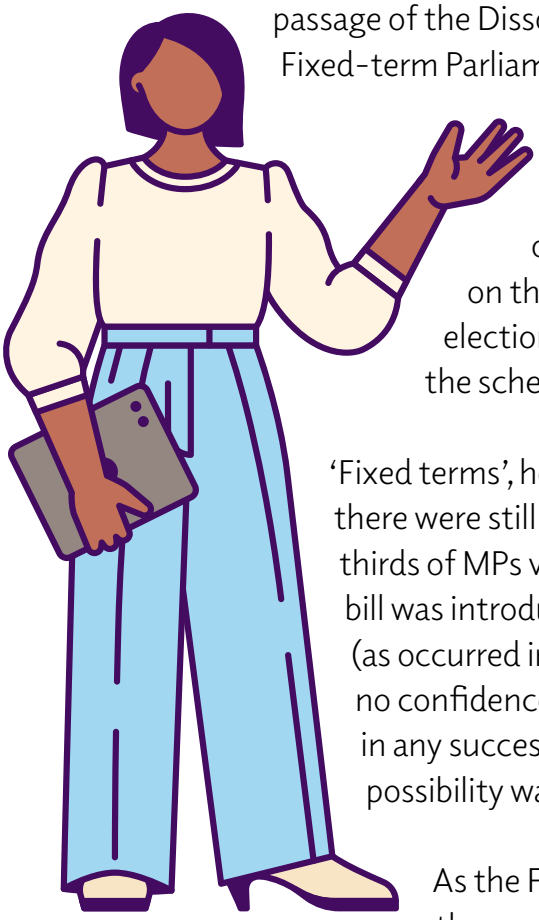
If the Prime Minister wants to hold an election before the five-year deadline, they must ask the monarch to 'dissolve' Parliament - formally end that Parliament's term and make all seats in the House of Commons vacant.

The strong presumption is that the monarch will agree the request. However, a convention known as the 'Lascelles Principles' sets out the circumstances in which the monarch may reject the request: if 'the existing Parliament was still vital, viable and capable of doing its job (2) a General Election would be detrimental to the national economy (3) he could rely on finding another Prime Minister who could carry on his Government'. However, the Lascelles principles have never been put into practice, as no monarch has refused an election request since they were published in 1950.

Once the request for dissolution is granted, a royal proclamation is issued. This sets the date of the election, and of the first meeting of the next parliament. These dates are proposed to the monarch by the Prime Minister.

Members of Parliament can force an election without the consent of the Prime Minister by passing a vote of no confidence in the sitting government, with no alternative government able to command the confidence of the House of Commons. The sitting Prime Minister would then ask for parliament to be dissolved, as occurred in 1979, when James Callaghan's government lost a vote of confidence.

LEGISLATION AND THE TIMING OF GENERAL ELECTIONS



The Prime Minister has regained the power to set the date of an election with the passage of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022. This repealed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (FTPA) of 2011.

In place from 2011-2022, the FTPA took away the Prime Minister's power to call an election and instead set them to occur at fixed five-year intervals; an election would be held on the first Thursday in May five years after the previous general election, as occurred in 2015. This was the only election to occur on the schedule stipulated by the legislation before it was repealed.

'Fixed terms', however, proved to not be so fixed after all. Under the FTPA, there were still ways in which an earlier election could be held. First, if two thirds of MPs voted for a general election (as occurred in 2017); second, if a bill was introduced which specified an election date, by-passing the FTPA (as occurred in 2019) or, third, if the House of Commons passed a vote of no confidence in a government and failed to pass a motion of confidence in any successor within two weeks (this never happened, though the possibility was widely discussed in spring/summer 2019).

As the FTPA has now been repealed, the Prime Minister once again has the power to call an election at a time of their choosing.

DISSOLUTION

Dissolution is the shuttering of Parliament before a general election, triggering the start of the election timetable. Parliament is dissolved by the monarch upon the request of the Prime Minister.

The date of dissolution is usually announced in advance, though the length of time between the announcement of an election and dissolution can vary. For example, for the 2024 election, there was an eight-day gap between the announcement of the election and the dissolution of Parliament.

This time allows Parliament to finish up any outstanding business. Governments will usually fast-track as much unfinished business as possible in the time between an election being called and Parliament being dissolved – known as the 'wash up' period. This often requires cooperation between the government and opposition MPs and Peers, and it is not uncommon for bills to be amended to remove contentious elements and therefore increase the likelihood they will be passed before dissolution.

Upon dissolution, all business in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords ends. Any legislation which is still in progress is abandoned and is not carried over to the new Parliament. For example, with the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024, progress on the Conservative government's bill on smoking, which would have banned anyone born after 2009 from legally purchasing cigarettes

if passed, was lost.

When Parliament is dissolved, 'writs' (legal documents which authorise elections) are issued permitting the election of new Members of Parliament for each constituency in the UK. The day these writs are issued marks the beginning of the election timetable, with polling day 25 days later (excluding weekends and bank holidays).

Dissolution and the issuing of writs is usually timed so that the general election is held on a Thursday. Every general election since 1931 has been held on a Thursday, though this is a convention and not a legal necessity.

When Parliament is dissolved, all seats in the House of Commons become vacant - all sitting MPs lose their seats. Those who wish to continue in the Commons must stand for election again. During the election period, these former members cannot use 'MP' in their name or use any public resources in their campaign (e.g. parliamentary expenses, House of Commons stationery or even their parliamentary email address). They also lose the right to represent their constituents to the government.

Ministers, while no longer MPs, continue to lead their departments, but are expected to avoid making new announcements and to conduct only essential business. Like MPs, they cannot use departmental facilities or resources to support their campaigning for re-election.



THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Electoral systems fall into one of two broad categories: majoritarian or proportional. First Past the Post (FPTP), the electoral system used for UK parliamentary elections, is a type of majoritarian system.

Under FPTP, each voter can vote for one candidate from a list of those standing in their constituency. The candidate who gets the most votes wins and is elected to be the Member of Parliament for that constituency.

What a ballot paper for a UK general election looks like

Election of the Member of Parliament for the Madeuponshire constituency

Vote for **only one candidate** by putting a cross in the box next to your choice [x]

Menon, Anand
4 Wherever Street, Anyplace A12 3BC
The Democratic Party



[ ]

Reland, Joël
26 Thing Lane, Anytown, D45 6EF
The Recycle Party



[ ]

Stowers, Sophie
An address in Maduponshire
The Rose Party



[ ]

Hunsaker, Stephen
106 Exemplar Drive, Anyplace, G78 9HI
Steady UK



[ ]

Wachowiak, Jannike
An address in Madeuponshire
Independent

[ ]

The winning candidate does not need to win a majority of votes cast, simply more than any other candidate (a plurality). Indeed, a candidate can be elected with far less than a majority of the vote, depending on how many other candidates are running and how the vote divides between them. Members of parliament have won election contests with under 30% of the constituency vote nine times in the past, with the lowest ever winning vote share being 24.5% in Belfast South in 2015.

The combination of 650 individual constituency contests and the use of FPTP means that the number of seats parties get in Parliament may be disproportionate to the share of the national vote they win. For example, in 2015, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which won 12.6% of national vote share, ended up with one seat in the Commons. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats won 7.9% of national vote share, but won eight seats in the Commons, as their support was better concentrated in specific parts of the country.

THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE REFERENDUM

In 2011, the UK held a referendum on changing the electoral system used for general elections from FPTP to the Alternative Vote system (AV). This system is used to elect legislators in a number of countries, most prominently Australia, where it is used to elect the House of Representatives.

The AV system involves voters ranking candidates standing in their constituency in order of preference. Voters put a 1 by their first-choice candidate, a 2 by their second choice, and so on, ranking for as many preferences as they choose to express. Should a candidate win more than 50% of first preference votes in the first round of counting votes, they are elected. If no candidate receives half of first preference votes or more, the candidate who received the least number first preferences votes is eliminated, and their second preference votes are redistributed to remaining candidates. This process carries on till one candidate has over half of votes.

Unlike FPTP, under AV it is possible for parties who come second in the initial round of voting to eventually to win seats if they collect more second preference votes from parties whose candidates are eliminated during vote counting.

The AV referendum came about because of the Coalition Agreement signed between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives after the general election of 2010. While the Conservatives opposed any change to the electoral system, the Liberal Democrats called for a fully proportional electoral system in their 2010 manifesto. In the end, they agreed a compromise: to hold a referendum on switching to the AV system (though this was not the Liberal Democrat's preferred electoral system).

The governing parties campaigned on opposite sides of the debate. Labour took an ambiguous position, as the party was internally split on the issue.

During the referendum campaign, the main arguments put forward by those who supported AV were that it would produce fewer safe seats, force politicians to appeal to voters beyond their core supporters and ensure that every MP was supported by more than 50% of the voters. The 'No' side claimed that AV would lead to more coalition governments, undermine the principle of 'one person, one vote,' and would be expensive to adopt, costing approximately £250 million.

Example of what a ballot paper for a general election held under AV may look like

Election of the Member of Parliament for the Madeuponshire constituency

Put the number 1 next to the name of the candidate who is your first choice (or your only choice, if you want to vote for only one candidate).

You can also put the number 2 next to your second choice, 3 next to your third choice, and so on.

You can mark as few or as many choices (up to the number of candidates) as you wish.

Do not use the same number more than once.

Menon, Anand
4 Wherever Street, Anyplace A12 3BC
The Democratic Party



2

Reland, Joël
26 Thing Lane, Anytown, D45 6EF
The Recycle Party



3

Stowers, Sophie
An address in Maduponshire
The Rose Party



4

Hunsaker, Stephen
106 Exemplar Drive, Anyplace, G78 9HI
Steady UK



1

CONSTITUENCIES AND BOUNDARIES

UK voters do not directly elect a Prime Minister. Rather, they elect individual MPs to represent geographically distinct constituencies.

What is a constituency?

A constituency is an area represented by a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons. In total, the House of Commons has 650 MPs, representing 650 constituencies.

The current allocation of seats between the four nations of the UK is:

Nation	Seats
England	543
Scotland	57
Wales	32
Northern Ireland	18
Total	650

The number of parliamentary constituencies increased from 625 to 659 between 1950 and 1997. The number of constituencies remained at 659 until 2005, when it was reduced to 646. In 2010, the number was increased to 650, where it has remained since.

The Coalition government of 2010-2015 introduced legislation which aimed to reduce the number of parliamentary constituencies to 600. However, this plan was abandoned by the Johnson government in 2020.

THE BOUNDARY COMMISSION

The constituency map is drawn up by the Boundary Commission, an independent body made up of four commissions in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. These bodies consider constituency boundaries to ensure each contains a similar number of voters.

The Chair of the Boundary Commission must be a serving Judge of the High Court and is appointed by the Lord Chancellor. They are supported by two deputies, appointed via an open public process.

Parliamentary boundary reviews are meant to occur every eight years, though in practice the schedule is more irregular. Two sets of boundary review recommendations were abandoned in the past decade due to early elections being called.

The number of seats allocated to each part of the UK is based on the number of registered voters

residing there. The number of voters in a constituency must be within 5% of the 'electoral quota' - the average number of registered voters per constituency across the UK. The Electoral Quota for the 2023 review, based on registered voter numbers from 2020, was 73,393. Therefore, each constituency must have between 69,724 and 77,062 voters.

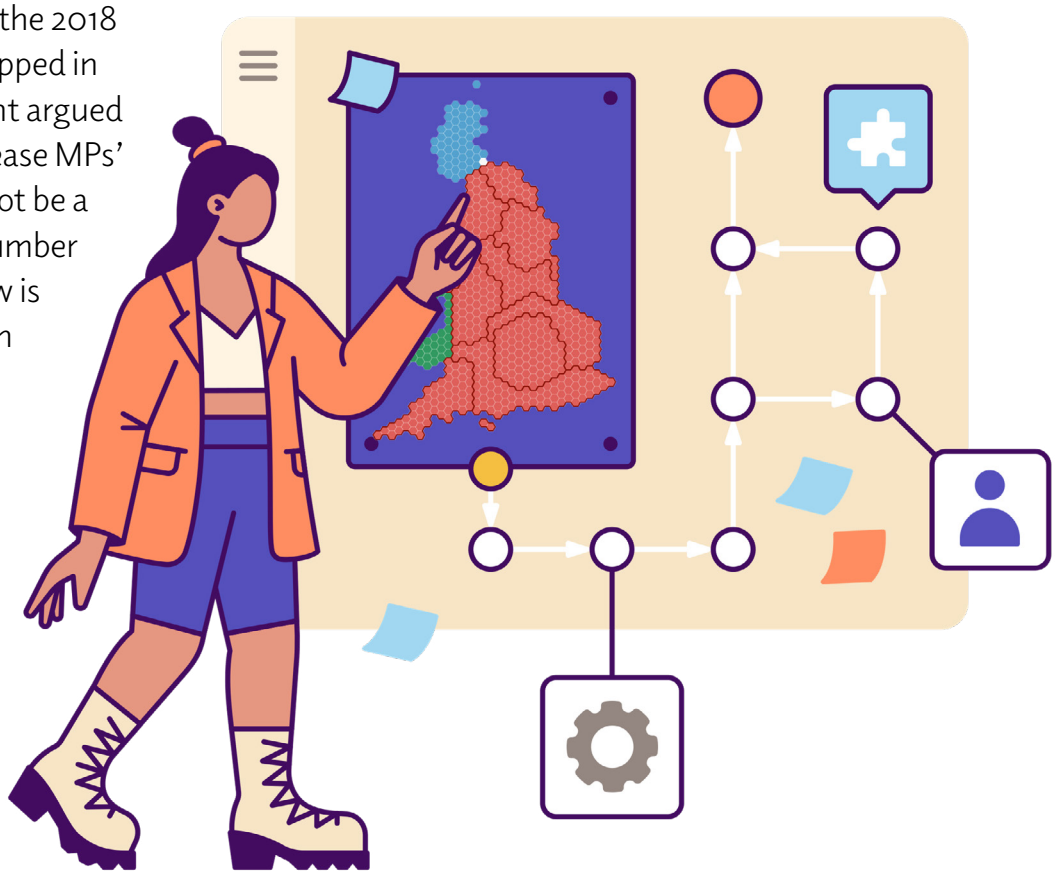
Exemptions to this rule can be granted if local ties would be broken by a change to a constituency (for instance, the link with a corresponding local authority). There are also five island seats that are exempt from the 5% rule: Orkney and Shetland, Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Ynys Môn, and the two seats allocated to the Isle of Wight.

When reviewing constituency boundaries, the Boundary Commission ensures that:

- There are 650 parliamentary constituencies.
- Each has a number of eligible voters within 5% of the 'Electoral Quota', aside from those which are exempt.
- No constituency is larger than 13,000^{km2}.
- Public consultations take place on any proposed changes.
- As the Boundary Commission is an independent body, the government cannot influence the proposals it makes.

There is now no vote in Parliament on final boundary recommendations before they are introduced. The ability to implement proposed changes without a parliamentary vote was introduced by the 2020 Act, to prevent MPs trying to block proposed reforms.

In 2013, the Liberal Democrats voted with Labour to block the Coalition government's boundary reforms. The plan to reduce the number of MPs set out in the 2018 boundary review was scrapped in 2020 after the government argued that, as Brexit would increase MPs' workloads, there should not be a reduction in the overall number of MPs. The current review is thus the first conducted in nearly 20 years.



THE 2020-2023 BOUNDARY REVIEW

The most recent review of parliamentary boundaries took place between 2020-2023, based on electoral registers from March 2020. Constituency boundaries had been unchanged in England and Wales since 2010, and in Scotland since 2005. The boundaries used in England and Wales were based on electoral registers from 2000. The new boundaries therefore reflect the cumulative effects of over 15 years of population change.

The process began with the passage of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, which set the number of constituencies at 650. Initial proposals for changes to these 650 constituencies were put forward by the Boundary Commission in 2021, followed by revised proposals and three rounds of public consultation in 2022.

Final recommendations were issued in 2023. Most constituencies will have new boundaries at the coming election – a mere 55 will not. Just over half of constituencies (332 of 650) will experience relatively minor changes. 76 constituencies have grown, while 73 have shrunk, giving up land to other constituencies.

The biggest changes are in Wales, where the number of constituencies has been cut from 40 to 32 – the consequence of a decision to abolish rules ensuring Wales had at least 35 parliamentary seats and set a lower electoral quota for Welsh constituencies. England has gained 10 constituencies. Scotland will lose 2, while Northern Ireland keeps the same number (18).

Constituencies set to change the most as a result of the 2023 Boundary Review

Current Constituency	Split into how many seats?	Most similar seat following the Boundary Review 2023	Population of constituency moving to most similar seat
Stone	5	*Stoke-on-Trent South*	30%
Ogmore	5	*Bridgend*	31%
Wyre and Preston North	5	*Ribble Valley*	33%
Brigg and Goole	4	*Goole and Pocklington*	36%
Denton and Reddish	3	*Gorton and Denton*	38%
Elmet and Rothwell	4	*Wetherby and Easingwold*	39%
Buckingham	3	*Buckingham and Bletchley*	40%
Wirral South	3	*Ellesmere Port and Bromborough*	42%
Newcastle upon Tyne North	4	*Newcastle upon Tyne North*	43%
North Tyneside	4	*Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend*	43%
Milton Keynes South	3	*Milton Keynes Central*	44%

Penrith and The Border	3	*Penrith and Solway*	44%
Glasgow Central	5	*Glasgow East*	45%
Ochil and South Perthshire	5	*Alloa and Grangemouth*	45%
Dudley South	3	*Kingswinford and South Staffordshire*	45%

Source: House of Commons Library, 2023

Note: By percentage of population in current constituency moving to successor constituencies at the 2024 election.

The Boundary Commission does not conduct reviews with electoral outcomes in mind. Yet there has inevitably been much discussion of what the reforms could mean for the parties at the general election. Some analysts have calculated that if the general election of 2019 were rerun using these new boundaries, the Conservative Party would gain seats, while Labour would lose some, as would the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru.

When calculating changes in electoral support on election night, broadcasters will use 'notional boundaries'- the results we would have seen in 2019 if the new constituency boundaries had been in place - to calculate changes in parties support and seats gained/lost.



POLLING DAY

RETURNING OFFICERS

The role of a Returning Officer in a local authority is to ensure that the election is administered effectively and that the experience of voters and those standing for election is positive. Returning officers are personally responsible for the conduct of their local authority during an election period, including:

- Publishing the notice of election
- Administering the nomination process
- Printing the ballot papers
- Publishing the notice of poll, statement of persons nominated and notice of situation of polling stations
- The provision of polling stations
- Appointing Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks
- Managing the postal voting process
- Verifying and counting the votes
- Declaring the result

POLLING STATIONS

Preparing the polling station

The Returning Officer is responsible for deciding how many polling stations there will be in a constituency and where they will be. These locations can change between elections depending on changes to the electoral register. Polling stations are usually in public spaces such as church halls or schools.

Presiding Officers and polling clerks oversee and run polling stations in the run-up to election day and on the day itself. Returning Officers appoint both Presiding Officers and poll clerks. These cannot be people who have been employed by or on behalf of a candidate.



A polling station's Presiding Officer has ultimate oversight of a polling station

and is responsible for ensuring the secrecy of the ballot, organising the layout of the polling station, receiving postal votes which are handed in at a polling station and managing the ballot box. The Presiding Officer will also keep the (empty) ballot box in their home until election day.

Poll clerks are the individuals who tick off voters' names from the electoral register as they come to vote, check their ID, and hand them their ballot paper. The checking of ID is a new requirement, and the coming general election is the first when it will be in force, although IDs have been mandatory for two cycles of local elections in England and Wales, and photo ID has been required to vote in elections in Northern Ireland since 2003.

Before the polls open, the Presiding Officer will demonstrate to those present (including candidates and their agents) that the ballot box is empty, before it is sealed until the votes are counted later that evening.

Polling day

Polling stations open at 7am on election day. Voters enter the polling station and give their name and address to poll clerks who check an individual is on the electoral register and able to vote. If they are, the clerk will check their photo ID, which must be one of the various forms of ID specified as acceptable under the terms of the Voter Identification Regulations 2022.

The voter's name is crossed off the register, and they are given their ballot. The voter will then go into polling booth to vote.

The ballot paper shows the candidates standing for election in that constituency, the parties they belong to (if applicable), and occasionally the candidate's address, though since 2010 this is no longer obligatory.

The voter indicates who they would like to vote for by marking the ballot, folds their ballot paper and puts it in the ballot box.

Voters are not allowed to take photos or discuss their vote in the polling station.



Volunteers for the parties are allowed to stand outside polling stations and ask voters if they are willing to answer a few questions (which voters do not have to do). Often, these volunteers will ask voters for their poll number and how they voted, to try and get an idea of how many people have voted at a polling station, who for, and where in

the constituency they are from. This will allow them to decide where they should concentrate their campaigning efforts.

Candidates and their agents are allowed inside the polling station (so long as they do not cause any disruption or talk to voters) to monitor the voting process and the preparation of the polling station.

Polling stations close at 10PM. If people are queuing to vote at this time, they are allowed to vote, though no one else can join the queue. The Returning Officer will set out procedures to be followed if there is a queue of electors. This may include issuing tokens to identify electors in the queue; asking electors to move inside the polling station or asking a member of the polling station team to mark the end of the queue.

Staff will tally the total number of votes cast at their polling station, and record this for the local authority's Returning Officer. They will then seal the ballot box so that no more papers can be deposited and take it to wherever the count is taking place. This is usually another public place, where every vote for the constituency is tallied up and will be announced.

ABSENT VOTING

People are sometimes unable to go to the polling station in person on election day. Those unable to do so can apply for an 'absent vote.'

Postal votes

Those opting to vote by post receive a ballot in advance of election day (usually around two to three weeks before). A voter will fill this out and send it back to the local authority's Returning Officer, along with a declaration slip that includes their date of birth and signature. Around 21% of votes cast in the 2019 election were postal votes.

Anyone in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for a postal vote, either for a specific election or a period of three years, after which they must reapply. In Northern Ireland, individuals must provide a reason for requesting a postal vote (such as illness or being abroad). Those wishing to register for a postal vote must do so at least eleven working days before election day.

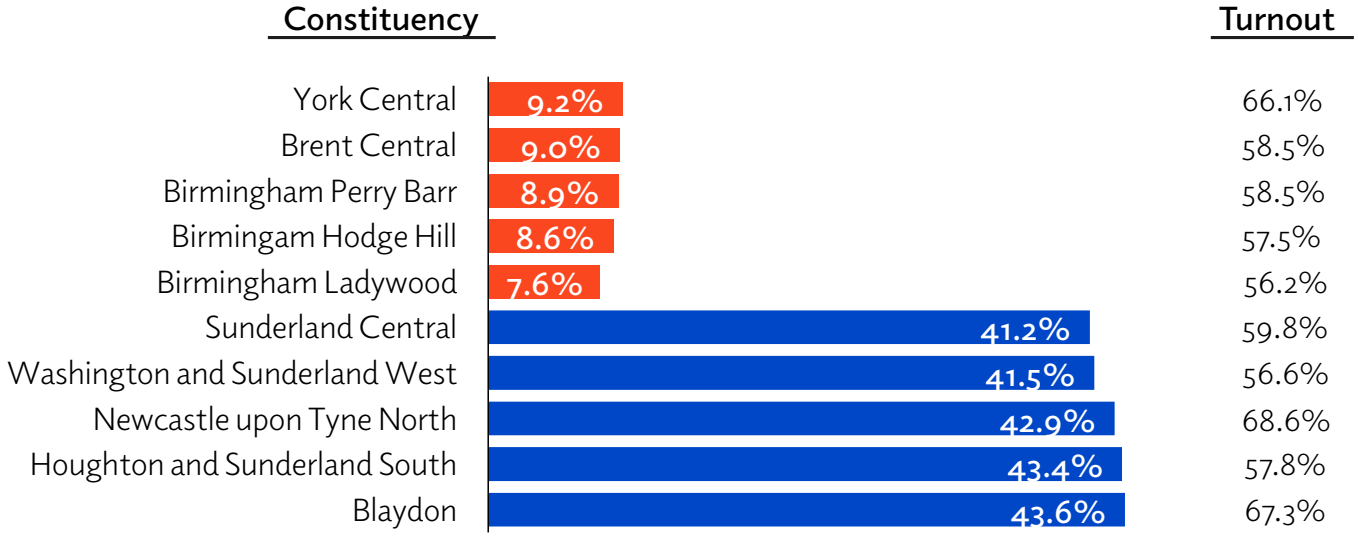
If those with a postal vote can attend in person on election day, or forget to send their postal vote in time, they can hand in their vote at their local polling station.

A local authority's Returning Officer will schedule several 'postal vote opening sessions' in the runup to election day, the number of which will depend on the number of postal voters registered in a constituency. Candidates and their agents can attend these sessions, where the number of postal ballots received is counted. They are counted face-down, meaning no-one present can see who the vote is for. On election day, these postal votes are mixed with in-person ballots and counted together.

The constituencies with the highest and lowest rates of postal voting at the 2019 election

Proportion of votes cast by post and overall turnout, 2019 general election

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Source: House of Commons Library, 2019

Proxy votes

A voter can also ask someone else to vote for them on election day, in the event they cannot attend in person. A proxy voter must be registered to vote, registered to the same polling station as the person they are voting on behalf of, and eligible to vote in the kind of election taking place.

Very few votes cast at elections tend to be proxy votes-in 2019, just 0.6% of voters appointed a proxy.

One person can act as a proxy for up to four voters in parliamentary elections and can hand in a maximum of five postal votes at a polling station.

COUNTING THE VOTES

Returning Officers from local authorities try and get the votes from their area counted as quickly as possible. They generally try and start counting votes within four hours of the polls closing at 10PM.

How long this process takes can depend on a variety of factors - how long it takes for ballot boxes to get to polling stations (particularly if there are still people queuing to vote at the close of the polls), the geography of the constituency, the number of postal votes, and the number of candidates standing.

Ballot boxes will be collected from polling stations from across a local area and delivered to wherever the count is taking place. Often, the votes of numerous constituencies from one area will be counted in a single location - for example, the votes for Liverpool Riverside, Walton, Wavertree, and West Derby will all be counted in one location in Liverpool.

At the count, volunteers from the local area are given the task of counting the votes for a particular

constituency. Ballots are poured onto a table, with everyone present shown the empty box. The volunteers then begin to count the ballot papers in two stages:

- *Stage 1 Counting the number of ballots.* Staff will count how many ballots were in a ballot box and compare this to how many ballots the Presiding Officer at the polling station said they issued throughout polling day. The number should match up, but any discrepancies must be recorded, and candidates and their agents are notified.

- *Stage 2 Counting who the votes are for.* Ballot papers from different ballot boxes (from the same constituency) are mixed together. Staff then begin to sort the ballot papers by candidate (creating a Labour pile, Conservative pile, and so on). They will then tally how many votes each candidate has received from the pile on their desk.

Postal votes will be transferred to the counting centre on election day after the polls close and mixed with the ballot papers from polling stations once counted. All these ballots will then be counted.

Candidates and their election agents, as well as staff they have appointed to do so, can observe the count. They are allowed to draw attention to any ballot papers they think may have been counted incorrectly or placed in the wrong pile.

Once all the valid votes for a constituency are added together and checked against the total number of ballot papers expected based on the first stage of the count, the Returning Officer can let candidates know the result. If there are no requests for a recount, the Officer can then declare which candidate is elected as a constituency's MP, and the successful individual may make a short speech.



INVALID VOTES

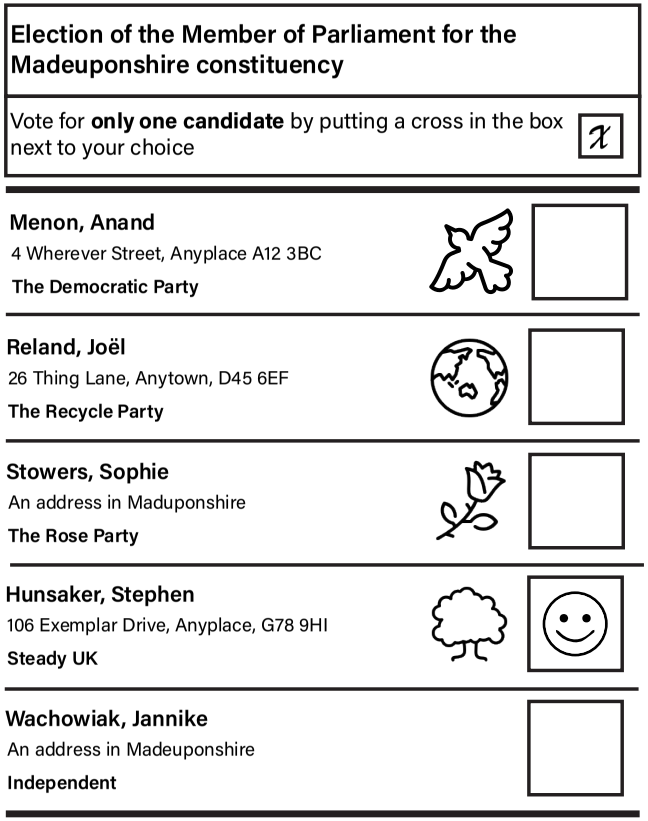
Sometimes, voters may not have clearly marked on their ballot paper the candidate they wish to vote for. If it is unclear who the vote is intended for, or if someone has deliberately spoiled their ballot, the ballot paper will be placed in a separate pile to be considered by the Returning Officer.

The Returning Officer will decide whether this ballot paper is valid, and if so, who the voter intended to give their vote to. Even if the ballot has not been marked with a clear 'X', if the Officer is able to work out who the voter intended to vote for, or who their preferred candidate is, the vote can be counted.

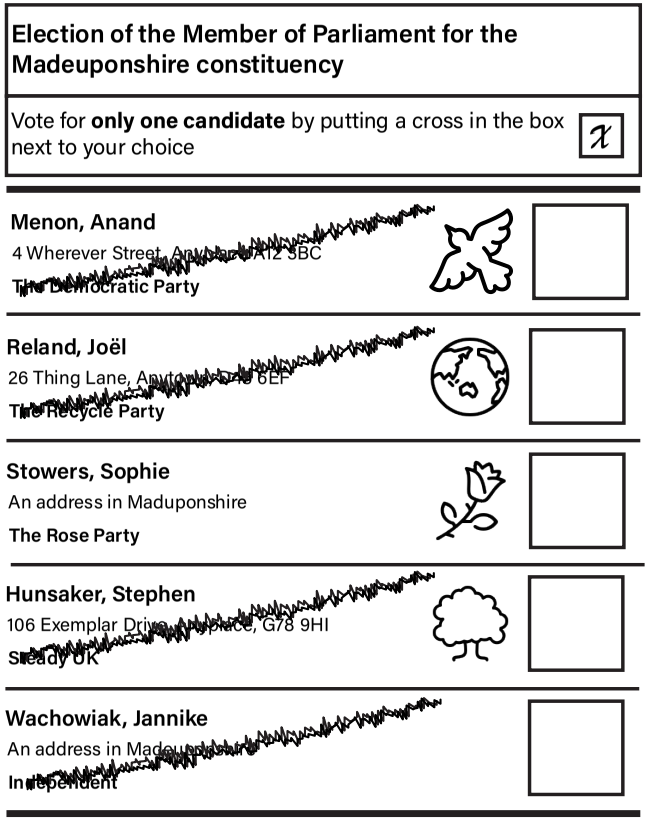
For example, it is suggested by the Electoral Commission that the following ballots should be accepted:

Examples of ballot papers that the Electoral Commission recommends should be counted

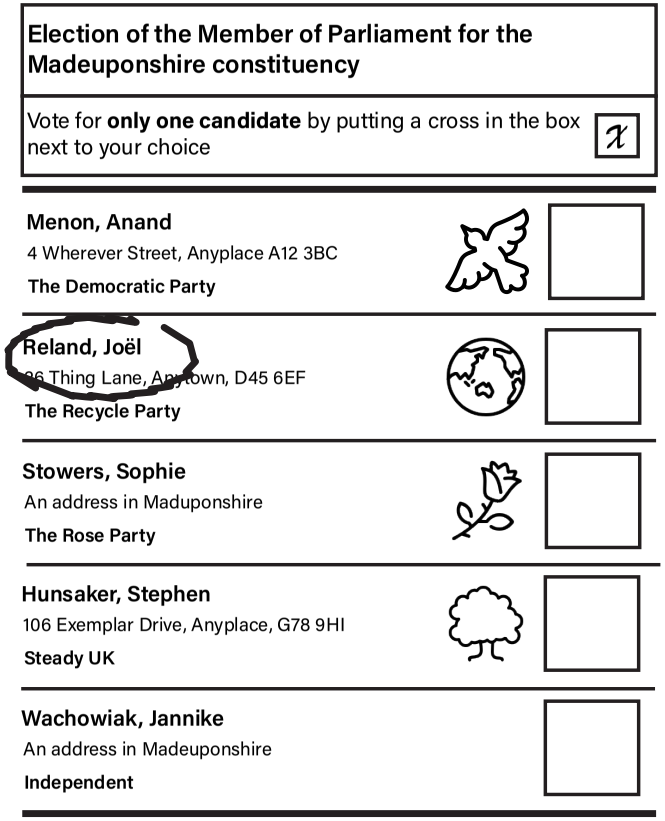
Based on the Electoral Commission's Doubtful Ballot Guidance, 2017



Not a cross, but a clear preference for a candidate is indicated



In this instance, it is suggested that the vote for Stowers would be allowed



Though the mark is in the wrong place, this could be fairly interpreted as a preference for one candidate

If it is not possible to work out the voter's intention, the ballot paper will be rejected. The Returning Officer must keep track of how many ballots have been rejected, and why. Votes will usually be rejected if:

- There is no mark on the ballot paper.
- The ballot paper is not official (i.e. not the paper given out by polling clerks at the polling station).
- There is a vote for more than one candidate.
- You can identify the voter from a mark or writing on the ballot paper.

For example, it is recommended that all of the ballots on the next page should be rejected.

RECOUNTS, APPEALS AND DRAWS

Candidates can ask for a recount. There are no fixed rules governing the circumstances in which one can be granted - the result does not have to be incredibly tight, and votes can be recounted numerous times. Whether a recount request is granted, and how many recounts take place, is solely at the discretion of the Returning Officer. The record for the greatest number of recounts is seven, in Peterborough in 1966, with the Conservative candidate (eventually) winning by just three votes.

The outcome of a constituency result can be challenged after the fact. A candidate for, or eligible voter from, that constituency can register an election petition up to 21 days after the poll. They may do so if they suspect the count did not follow due process, believe the successful candidate cheated, or have reason to think that electoral spending laws were violated.

A judge will appoint a commissioner to consider the complaint and decide if a trial should take place.

The most recent example of an election result being subsequently invalidated was in 2010, when then-Labour MP Phil Woolas won his Oldham seat by just 103 votes. A petition was made against Woolas, with an election court finding he made false statements about a rival candidate, breaking electoral law. He eventually had to resign, and a by-election was held in Oldham in January 2011.

If there is a draw – with the two most popular candidates receiving exactly the same number of votes - the Returning Officer can decide the winner by drawing lots. How they do this – whether by flipping a coin or drawing straws, for example- is up to them. This has not occurred in a general election since 1886, though it has happened a number of times in local council elections.

Examples of ballot papers that the Electoral Commission recommends should not be counted

Based on the Electoral Commission's Doubtful Ballot Guidance, 2017

Election of the Member of Parliament for the Madeuponshire constituency

Vote for **only one candidate** by putting a cross in the box next to your choice

Menon, Anand 4 Wherever Street, Anyplace A12 3BC **The Democratic Party**	X
Reland, Joël 26 Thing Lane, Anytown, D45 6EF **The Recycle Party**	
Stowers, Sophie An address in Maduponshire **The Rose Party**	X
Hunsaker, Stephen 106 Exemplar Drive, Anyplace, G78 9HI **Steady UK**	
Wachowiak, Jannike An address in Madeuponshire **Independent**	X

The voter has placed a mark by more than one candidate's name

Election of the Member of Parliament for the Madeuponshire constituency

Vote for **only one candidate** by putting a cross in the box next to your choice Jane Doe 62 Kings way

Menon, Anand 4 Wherever Street, Anyplace A12 3BC **The Democratic Party**	
Reland, Joël 26 Thing Lane, Anytown, D45 6EF **The Recycle Party**	X
Stowers, Sophie An address in Maduponshire **The Rose Party**	
Hunsaker, Stephen 106 Exemplar Drive, Anyplace, G78 9HI **Steady UK**	
Wachowiak, Jannike An address in Madeuponshire **Independent**	

This ballot paper contains details which could identify a vote

Election of the Member of Parliament for the Madeuponshire constituency

Vote for **only one candidate** by putting a cross in the box next to your choice

Menon, Anand 4 Wherever Street, Anyplace A12 3BC **The Democratic Party**	X
Reland, Joël 26 Thing Lane, Anytown, D45 6EF **The Recycle Party**	X
Stowers, Sophie An address in Maduponshire **The Rose Party**	
Hunsaker, Stephen 106 Exemplar Drive, Anyplace, G78 9HI **Steady UK**	
Wachowiak, Jannike An address in Madeuponshire **Independent**	

The voter's intention here is unclear

ELECTION REGULATION

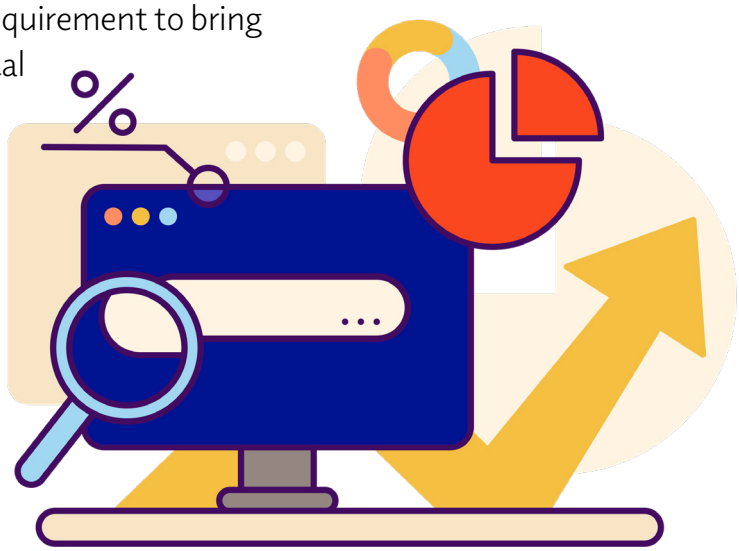
FINANCE

THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Elections (and referendums) are regulated by the Electoral Commission, an independent body created in 2001. Its work is overseen by the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, made up of Members of Parliament from the three biggest parties in the Commons and the Speaker.

The Electoral Commission's decisions are made by its board of Commissioners. Commissioners represent England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and are nominated by political parties. Nominations are scrutinised by the Speaker's Committee, and if approved by the Committee and the House of Commons, nominees are appointed to the Electoral Commission's board by the Monarch.

The Electoral Commission promotes voter participation by advertising the date of elections and the requirements to cast a vote (e.g. the new requirement to bring photo ID to a polling station), scrutinises political parties' finances and campaign spending, and advises local authority returning officers on how to run elections and count votes.



CAMPAIGN SPENDING

Elections cost parties and candidates money- quite a lot of it, in fact. At the 2019 election, the Labour Party spent £12 million on its campaigning, whilst the Conservative Party spent £16.5 million.

Campaign spending is what the party spends on activities to promote themselves or criticise other parties during the regulated period. It also goes towards items or services bought before the regulated period begins, but used during it, and the value of items or services given to the party free of charge or at a discount. Party campaign spending covers:

- Party political broadcasts
- Advertising (e.g. street banners, websites or YouTube videos)
- Unsolicited material sent to voters (letters or leaflets which are not in response to specific queries)
- The party manifesto and other documents setting out a party's policies
- Market research or other methods of assessing what people think (including opinion polls)

- Press conferences
- Rallies and events
- Transport in connection with promoting or publicising a party

Party campaign spending is regulated by the Electoral Commission, while returning officers (local council officials) oversee spending by candidates in each constituency.

Limits to campaign spending apply during the 365 days before polling day – this is known as the 'regulated period'. In the case of a snap election, spending restrictions apply retrospectively, meaning the regulated period usually begins before the date of the next general election is known. As the next UK general election will be held in July 2024, the regulated period began in July 2023.

PARTY SPENDING LIMITS

Party spending limits were introduced by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) 2000. Until November 2023, the overall spending limit for a party was set at £30,000 per seat the party stands a candidate in. A party with candidates in every seat could therefore spend £19.5 million – but since the main parties do not stand candidates in Northern Ireland, or in the constituency of the Speaker, the actual limit was £18.9 million, (631 constituencies). However, each party can only spend £30,000 in each seat.

In November 2023, after 20 years of failing to adjust the limits for inflation, the spending cap per constituency was increased by 80%, to £54,010 per constituency, or about £35 million if a party contests all seats. This is equivalent to £29,412 in 2000; in real terms, the amount of money political parties were allowed to spend had been declining steadily for over two decades before the 2023 adjustment.

All party spending during an election campaign must be reported to the Electoral Commission after the election. If a party has spent less than £250,000, they have three months to report it. If they spend over this amount, they have six months.

If parties break the rules on campaign spending, the Electoral Commission can issue a fine of up to £20,000, or even refer the matter to the police.

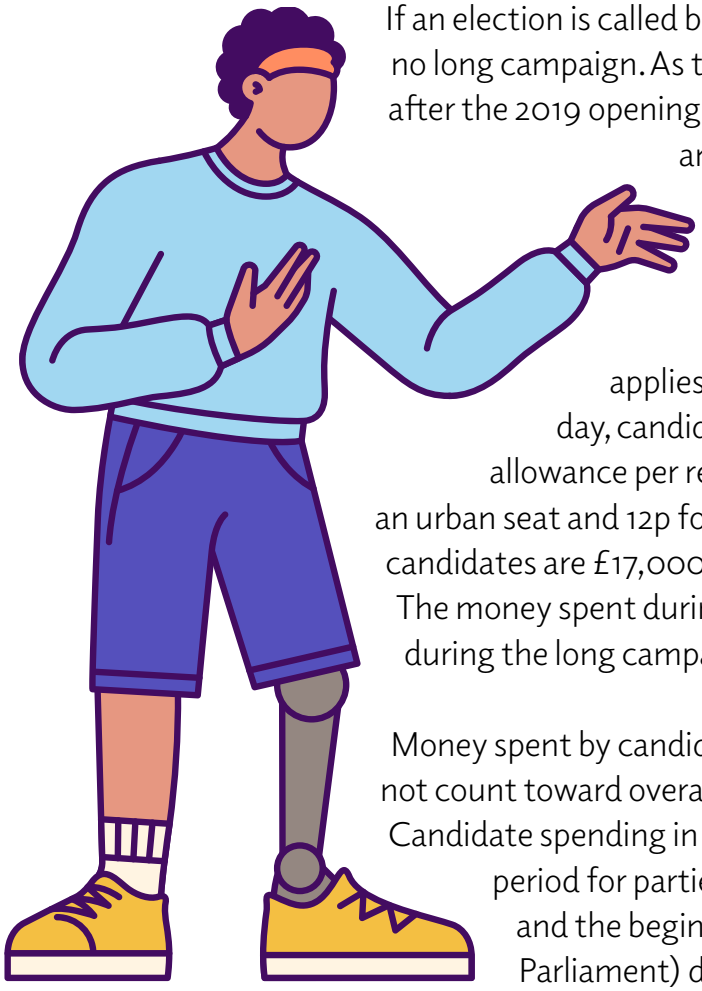


CANDIDATE SPENDING

Spending by candidates is regulated slightly differently, depending on timing, constituency size, and whether we are in the 'long campaign' or the 'short campaign.' It also varies depending on how many registered voters there are in the constituency the candidate is standing in.

The 'long campaign' begins once Parliament has sat for 55 months. At this point, an initial limit of £40,220 is imposed on candidates, plus an additional allowance per registered voter in

the constituency (8p in an urban seat and 12p in a rural seat, as defined by the Electoral Commission). This limit increases every month that a Parliament sits after 55 months (which would have been in July 2024, if the Prime Minister had not called an election) and ends on the day that Parliament is dissolved for an election.



If an election is called before a Parliament has sat for 55 months, there is no long campaign. As the 2024 election was called just over 53 months after the 2019 opening of Parliament, there is no long campaign this time around.

The 'short campaign' begins the day after Parliament is dissolved - for the 2024 election, this is the 30 May 2024. A new set of regulations applies during this period. From this point until election day, candidates must spend no more than £11,390 plus an allowance per registered voter in the constituency (again, 8p for an urban seat and 12p for a rural seat). The average spending limits for candidates are £17,000 in a typical urban seat, and £20,500 in a rural seat. The money spent during this period is additional to any money spent during the long campaign.

Money spent by candidates during the long and short campaigns does not count toward overall limits on party spending, with one exception. Candidate spending in the period between the beginning of the regulated period for parties (a year before the general election campaign) and the beginning of the 'long campaign' (the 55th month of a Parliament) does count toward party spending limits.

Candidates or their agents must submit a spending return covering all their expenses during the campaign to their council's Returning Officer, the local official in charge of elections. If a candidate breaches campaign spending rules, it is up to the police – not the Electoral Commission - to investigate.

NON-PARTY CAMPAIGNERS

Non-party campaigners are organisations which do not stand as parties or candidates in an election. Instead, they may conduct campaigns or activities which promote a specific set of candidates across the country on behalf of a specific cause - for example, promoting candidates who have a certain position on Brexit, or on environmental issues.

Non-party campaigners must register with the Electoral Commission if they plan to spend over £20,000 in England, or £10,000 in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland, during their campaign. They must be on the UK electoral register and UK-based. The amount they can spend during their campaign is capped at £9,750 per constituency (around £6.4 million in total).

CHARITIES

While charities can undertake political activity in support of their charitable aims, they cannot pursue their aims solely through political activities. Whether or not charities choose to undertake political activity, they must never support or oppose a particular political party or endorse a particular political candidate.

DONATIONS

Political parties, campaigners and other groups and individuals can only accept donations or loans from 'permissible sources'. What makes a source 'permissible' is decided by the Electoral Commission, which currently advises that sources should be:

- individuals registered on a UK electoral register; or
- registered political parties in Great Britain; or
- UK-registered trade unions; or
- UK-registered building societies; or
- UK-registered friendly societies; or
- UK-based unincorporated associations that carry out business or other activities in the UK; or
- specific types of trust or public funds specified by the Electoral Commission.

When political parties, campaigners or individuals standing for election receive a donation or loan, they must record the amount received if above £500, and who it was from. It is for the recipient to decide whether the donor is a 'permissible source,' and to decide whether to keep or return the donation.



There are circumstances where donations must be declared to the Electoral Commission as soon as they are received, rather than recorded for a later date. These are:

- Donations/loans to a political party above or which over time total more than £11,180 (or donations of over £2230 if the donor donates again within a calendar year)
- Donations/loans to individuals who are members of political parties of over £2230.
- Donations which are not accepted and are returned.

There is no limit on the total value of donations and loans that can be accepted by parties. For example, the Conservative Party received £10 million in a will from Tory peer John Sainsbury in 2023, the largest single donation ever received by the party. In the same year, Labour received its highest amount from any single donor - £4.5 million. Of the £21.5 million Labour received in donations in 2023, only £5.9 million came from the trade union movement, compared with £14.5 million from companies and individuals.

CAMPAIGN LITERATURE AND ADVERTISING

RULES AROUND CAMPAIGN LITERATURE AND ADVERTISING

Parties and candidates must follow specific rules around literature or activities promoting their campaigns. 'Literature' refers to printed materials, like leaflets, banners or posters, which promote candidates or parties to potential voters.

The Electoral Commission says that campaign literature must:

- Not contain false or overly personal statements about fellow candidates.
- Not contain defamatory statements about other candidates.
- Not look like a poll card or ballot paper (though there are no rules about literature looking like a newspaper or magazine, a tactic regularly employed by the Liberal Democrats).
- Not be abusive, threatening, or risk inciting hatred.

All election literature must state who produced the material, the name and address of the printer, and any candidate or party which the material is publicising. This is known as an 'imprint.' From November 2023, all digital media which is seen to influence voters (like paid-for posts or online ads) must also contain an imprint.

On polling day, parties and candidates are allowed to post leaflets or posters through doors. However, they are not allowed to place posters, leaflets, or other material in or near the polling station.





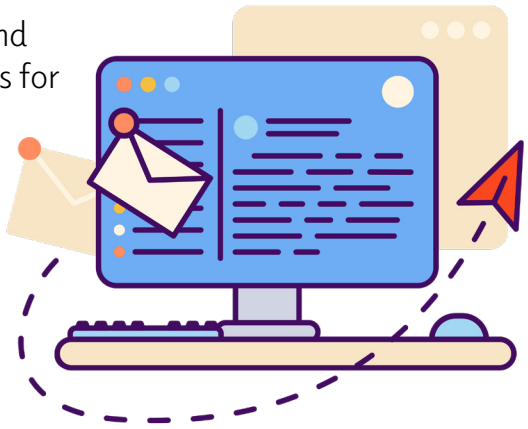
POLITICAL PARTIES

THE REGISTRATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The Electoral Commission manages the registers of political parties for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Parties can only register if they intend to field a candidate to contest elections. If candidates wish to stand as independents, they do not need to register a political party to stand for election.

To register, prospective parties complete an application providing:

- An address for the party's headquarters (which will be publicly available).
- A list of people registered in certain roles: party leader, party treasurer, and nominating officer. The nominating officer arranges the nomination of candidates and approves the party identity marks used on nomination forms and ballot papers.
- Identity marks – the party's name, a party description, and any emblems.
- An outline of how the party's finances are managed.
- A written constitution which outlines the structure and organisation of their party, including governance and rules for conducting business.
- A fee of £150.



As of February 2024, there are 387 registered political parties in the UK.

The following parties have declared that they will be fielding candidates at the 2024 general election as of May 2024:

Abolish the Welsh Assembly Party
Alba
Alliance
Alliance for Democracy and Freedom
Ashfield Independents
Christian Party
Christian Peoples Alliance
Climate Party
Consensus
Conservative and Unionist Party
Freedom Alliance
The Green Party of England and Wales
Independent Network
Kingston Independent Residents Group
The Labour Party/Labour and Co-operative Party
The Liberal Democrats
The Libertarian Party
New Open Non-Political Organised Leadership
Plaid Cymru
Reform UK
SDLP
Scottish Family Party
Scottish Green Party
Scottish National Party
Social Democratic Party
Social Justice Party
Swale Independents
The Liberal Party
Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition
True and Fair Party
UKIP
Ulster Unionist Party
Workers Party of Britain
The British Democrats

PARTY LEADERS

People vote for their preferred candidate in their constituency. They do not vote directly for a Prime Minister. In 2019, voters in Uxbridge and Ruislip could vote for Boris Johnson to be their MP, but as leader of the Conservatives, he was also the incumbent Prime Minister and likely to remain so if the Conservatives won the election.

In reality, as the party that wins the majority of seats in the House of Commons usually goes on to form the government, with that party's leader becoming Prime Minister, most people base their vote on their preferred party and preferred leader - not on the local candidates (though some candidates can accumulate substantial personal votes).

During an election campaign, the party leader tends to perform several roles, including:

- Visiting constituencies on the campaign trail and canvassing with local candidates
- Launching the party's manifesto and key policies with speeches
- Taking part in TV debates and other media rounds
- Recording party political broadcasts

HOW ARE PARTY LEADERS ELECTED?

This process varies between parties and can change over time. For the two largest parties, the current rules around leadership elections are as follows:

The Conservative Party (Contest rules 1998- present)

A Conservative leadership contest can be triggered either by the resignation of the sitting leader or if 15% of Conservative MPs write to the Chair of the 1922 Committee (a committee of backbench Tories which meets on a weekly basis) to say they have no confidence in the party leader. In this latter instance, a vote of confidence will then be held in the leader - if they lose, they cannot stand in the leadership contest that follows.



To enter a leadership contest, a sitting Conservative MP must be nominated by a number of other Tory backbenchers. The exact number of nominations varies between contests and is set out by the 1922 Committee. If there are more than two candidates, Conservative MPs will vote for their preferred option with the candidate with the fewest votes eliminated, until just two candidates remain.

These two candidates are then put to the membership of the Conservative Party, with the candidate receiving over 50% of members' votes elected as leader.

The Labour Party (Contest rules 2021-present)

A Labour leadership contest can be triggered in two ways, both of which lead to slightly different nomination processes.

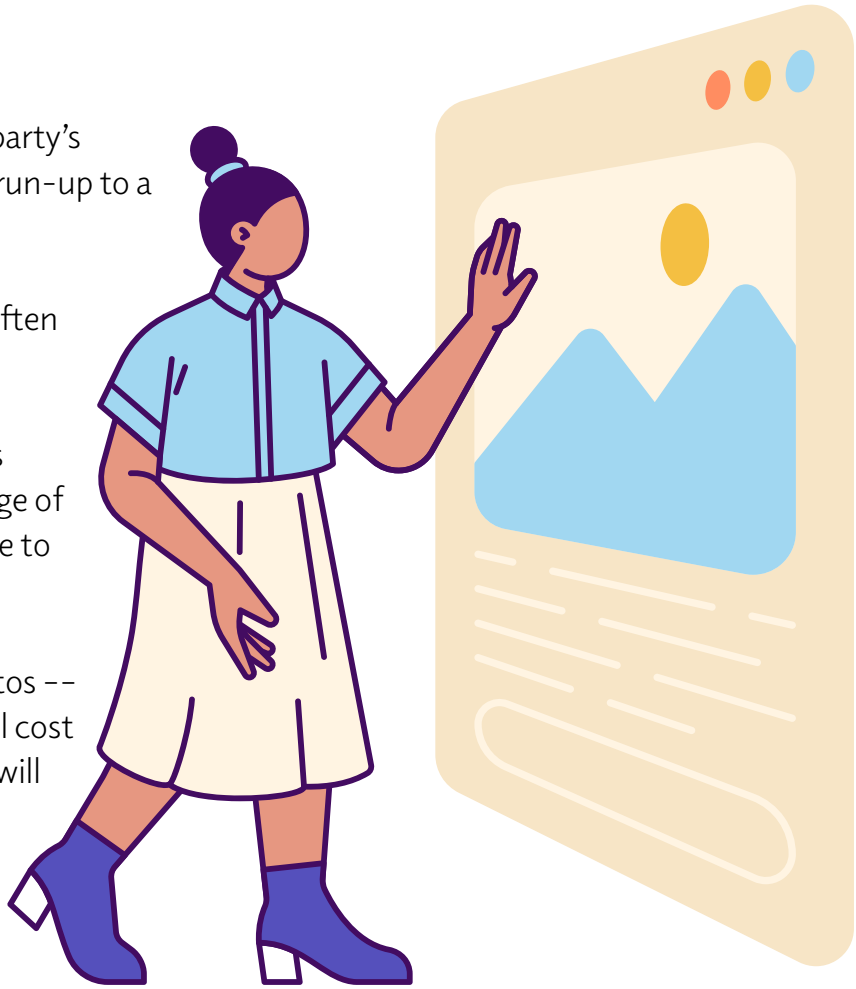
The first is if the sitting leader resigns, Labour MPs who would like to run as leader must get the backing of at least 20% of Labour Members of Parliament. They must also be nominated by at least 5% of constituency Labour parties, or three 'affiliated groups' (such as trade unions) which represent at least 5% of the affiliated Labour membership.

The second way is if another Labour MP challenges a sitting leader. The challenging MP must get the backing of at least 20% of fellow Labour MPs, with nominations submitted to the General Secretary of the Labour Party. The sitting leader will automatically be given a place on the ballot paper for the ensuing leadership contest.

Once a list of potential leadership candidates has been compiled (unlike in Tory leadership contests, there is no ceiling on the number of candidates), or a challenger has received enough nominations to trigger a leadership contest, the membership of the Party gets its say. The party uses a one-member-one-vote system, with members, members of affiliated trade unions and MPs voting.

On the ballot paper, voters rank their candidates in preference order. If no candidate gets over 50% of votes, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated and their votes redistributed. This carries on until a candidate has over 50% support.

PARTY MANIFESTOS



Manifestos are documents outlining a party's plans for government, published in the run-up to a general election.

The policies outlined in the manifesto often form the basis of the party's election campaign (for example, the title of a manifesto will often be used as a party's campaign slogan), and cover a wide range of areas, from the economy and healthcare to the environment and defence.

Parties often try to 'cost' their manifestos -- to work out how much their pledges will cost to implement in practice, and how this will be paid for. Prior to the election period, the party in power can make use of civil servants to work out the costs of opposition promises, and the costs of

revenue raised from their tax proposals. Opposition parties, meanwhile, must rely on think tanks and their own researchers to estimate the relevant figures.

Despite the effort put into writing the manifesto, most voters do not read them. They are often long and technical. Most voters' knowledge of manifestoes, if they have any at all, will come via the media which summarise key commitments and the parties' more controversial or newsworthy proposals.

PARTY MANIFESTOS: 1992 - 2019

Year	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	SNP	Plaid Cymru	UKIP	Green
1992	It's Time to Get Britain Working Again.	The Best Future for Britain.	Changing Britain for Good.	Independence in Europe: Make it Happen Now!			New Directions: Polices for a Great Britain now
1997	New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better.	You can only be sure with the Conservatives	Make the Difference.	Yes, We Can Win the Best for Scotland	The Best for Wales	UKIP 1997	
2001	Ambitions for Britain.	Time for Common Sense	Freedom, Justice, Honesty	Put Scotland First	The Party of Wales	UKIP 2001	Reach for the Future
2005	Britain Forward, Not Back.	Are you thinking what we're thinking?	The Real Alternative	If Scotland Matters to You Make it Matter in May.	We can build a better Wales	We want our country back	The real choice for real change
2010	A Future Fair for All.	Invitation to join the government of Britain	Change that Works for You	Stronger for Scotland	Think Different. Think Plaid.	Empowering the people	Fair is worth fighting for
2015	Britain can be Better.	Strong leadership. A clear economic plan. A brighter, more secure future.	Stronger Economy. Fairer Society. Opportunity for Everyone.	Stronger for Scotland	Working for Wales	Believe in Britain	For the common good.
2017	For the Many, Not the Few	Forward, together: Our plan for a stronger Britain and a prosperous future.	Change Britain's Future.	Stronger for Scotland	Defending Wales: Action Plan 2017	Britain together	For a confidence and caring Britain
2019	It's Time for Real Change	Get Brexit done: Unleash Britain's Potential	Stop Brexit, Build a Brighter Future.	Stronger for Scotland	Wales, it's us.	For Brexit and Beyond	If not now, when?

The commitments outlined in a party's manifesto help shape what ministers do when in government. Parties are often reluctant to break manifesto promises, as doing so can affect not only affect its reputation, but also hinder its future electoral prospects. Broken manifesto promises will also often be unpopular with the party's activists and MPs.

Convention also dictates that when a piece of draft legislation goes from the House of Commons to the House of Lords, the Lords should not reject it if it was foreshadowed in the government's election manifesto. In other words, the unelected House of Lords should not block legislation in areas where the government has a mandate from voters to act. This is known as the 'Salisbury Convention'.

However, manifesto promises are not binding. In other words, there is no legal obligation to do any of the things outlined in a manifesto once a party is elected.



CANDIDATES

ELIGIBILITY

To stand for election as a Member of Parliament, candidates must:

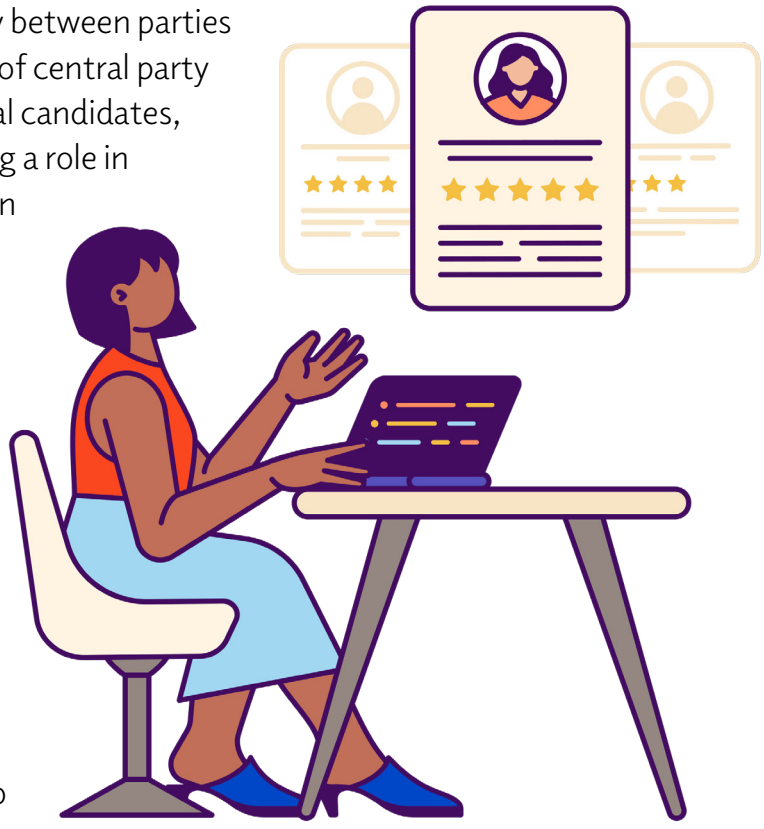
- Be aged 18 or above.
- Be a British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or Republic of Ireland and resident in the UK.
- Not be a member of the police, civil service, armed forces, another legislature outside the Commonwealth, a Bishop, a peer, or a judge.
- Not be subject to bankruptcy or debt relief restrictions.

If a peer wanted to stand as a candidate, they would have to renounce their peerage. This has not happened since a rule change to allow such a move in 2014.

CANDIDATE SELECTION

In the run-up to an election, parties will select candidates to stand in constituencies across the country. Given the long run-up to the forthcoming general election, as the Conservative government sat almost its full term, most parties have been carrying out selection processes in batches of constituencies since early 2022.

Processes for choosing prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) are decided by individual parties. Processes vary between parties and change over time. Generally, some sort of central party body will produce a list of approved potential candidates, with local parties or associations then having a role in shortlisting and selecting a candidate. When time frames are shorter - for example, if a snap election is called and a government does not serve its full term as it has this time around- the central party will usually have more sway over this process.



The balance of power between local members and the central party in the candidate selection process has been a source of controversy. Central party offices are frequently accused of manipulating selection so to ensure the success of favoured candidates, not least those loyal to the current leadership.

The Labour Party's selection process

The Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC), the party's governing body, announces when applications to stand in a constituency are open. The NEC is composed of representatives of the parliamentary party, constituency parties, trade unions and various affiliated groups.



Anyone who has been a member of the Labour Party for at least a year, has membership of an affiliated trade union, and has not been previously barred from standing as a Labour candidate at any level of government, can apply to stand as Labour's candidate in a constituency which is open to applications.

Applicants who receive an endorsement by a trade union or other organisation represented on the NEC are automatically put on to a 'longlist' of potential candidates for a constituency. Those who don't receive any endorsements will be interviewed by representatives from the NEC and undergo a background check. If approved, they are also placed on the longlist.

- The Constituency Labour Party (CLP) for the seat will put together a committee to interview candidates on the longlist. This will then shortlist two or more candidates (though any candidate from the longlist who is endorsed by more than half of the CLP's branches is automatically shortlisted).

The candidates from this shortlist then take part in a hustings- essentially a Q&A session- for local members, who rank candidates in order of preference. Candidates receiving the fewest first preference votes are eliminated, and their votes redistributed to other candidates. Whichever applicant gets a majority of votes first is selected as that constituency's Labour candidate.

Labour's rulebook says that the longlist and shortlist for prospective candidates must be gender balanced and have at least one ethnic minority candidate. The party formerly used all-women shortlists in candidate selection, first introduced in 1993. This was controversial among CLPs and was ruled illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act in 1996.

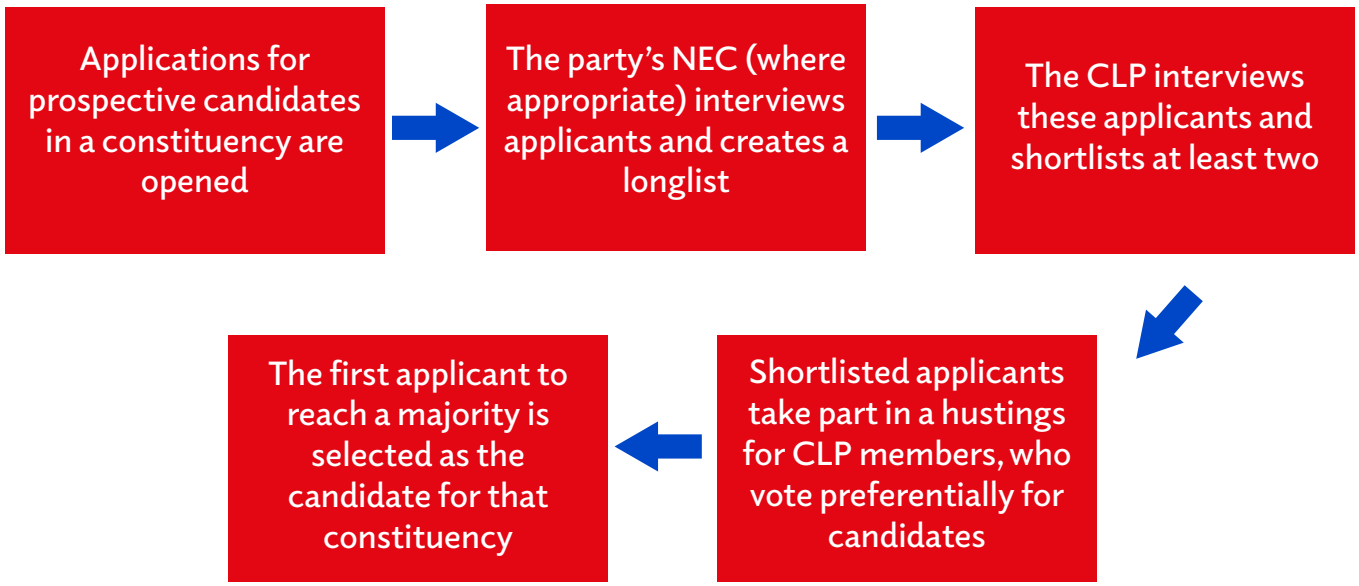
In 2002, the party (now in government) introduced a law which legalised all-women shortlists, which were then used to select Labour candidates for the 2005 general election. The law is still in place today. However, the party was advised in 2022 that continued use of all-women shortlists would likely be illegal, given that most of its MPs were now female.

The process in Scotland is slightly different. Here, constituencies are 'twinned,' with the CLPs of two constituencies joining together to vote for their preferred shortlisted candidates. The male and female candidates with the most votes are picked as prospective Labour parliamentary candidates,

with the person who received the most votes having first pick of which of the two seats they would like to represent.

Candidate selection process: The Labour Party (England and Wales)

As of February 2024



Source: The Institute for Government, Labour Party Rule Book 2023, Labour List

The Conservative Party's selection process

Before applying to constituencies accepting applications, the central party must approve all potential Conservative candidates. The party's National Committee on Candidates (NCC) maintains an 'approved list' of candidates. Those wishing to stand as a Conservative MP must apply to be on this list, take part in a test to assess their skills and ability to be an MP, and pass a background check. Once on the approved list, an individual can then apply to any constituency looking for candidates.

The rules around the shortlist are not as explicit for the Conservatives as they are for Labour. The committee is asked to bear gender balance in mind, but it is not required. For a period under David Cameron, a system called the 'A-list' was created in which ethnic minority and female candidates were given priority in an attempt to diversify Conservative candidates. This was later scrapped.

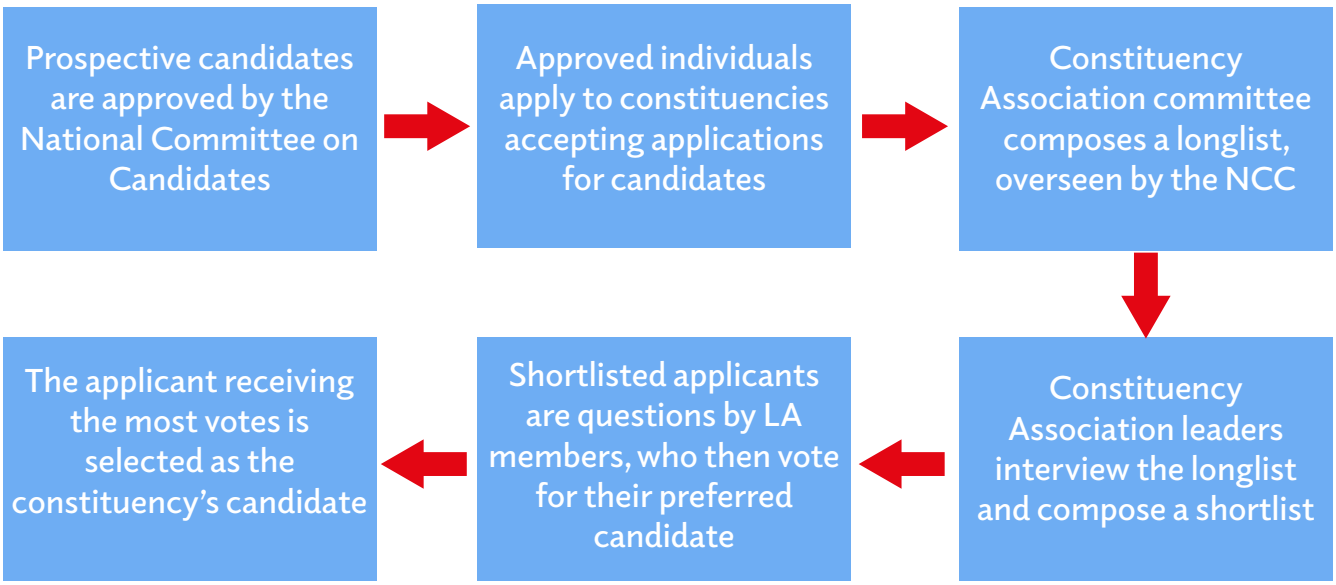
The Constituency Association (the Conservative equivalent of a CLP) forms a committee to assess applications to stand as its candidate. The Committee will draw up a longlist of a maximum of eight candidates -a process overseen by the NCC. Longlisted candidates are interviewed by the leaders of the local Conservative Association, who draw up a shortlist of at least two.

As with Labour, Conservative MPs have no guarantee they can run again in the constituency they currently represent. They must seek the approval of the leaders of their local association to do so. If the association says no, the MP can ask for a vote of association members, but this is not guaranteed.

Shortlisted candidates will then take part in a hustings with the constituency association's members, who then vote for their preferred candidate. Whoever receives the most votes is selected as the candidate.

Candidate selection process: The Conservative Party

As of February 2024



Source: The Institute for Government, Conservative Home

GETTING ON THE BALLOT PAPER

Once selected by a party (or after deciding to run as an independent), prospective candidates are free to campaign in a constituency, no matter how long it is before the election. In general, MPs regularly engage in door-to-door campaigning, canvassing, and collecting constituency data regardless of whether an election is close or not.

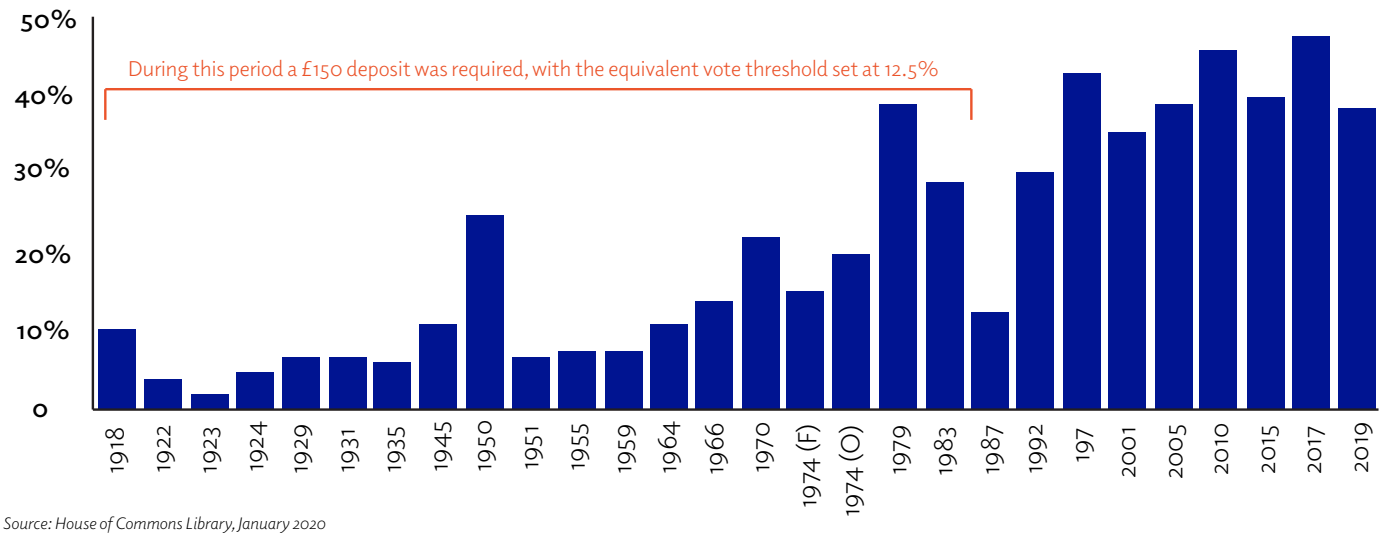
After an election is called, prospective candidates must submit nomination papers to the Returning Officer, the official placed in charge of elections by the local council. The deadline is 19 working days before the election takes place (7 June 2024 for the forthcoming general election). These papers contain a candidate's name, address, and party affiliation, the signatures of ten registered voters from that constituency, and authorisation from a political party for this candidate to represent them (if needed).

A candidate must also pay a deposit of £500 - refunded if a candidate receives at least 5% of the valid votes cast. Around half of candidates standing in recent elections have failed to meet this threshold and lost their deposits. Returning Officers must send any forfeited deposits to the Treasury's Consolidated Fund.

Prospective parliamentary candidates become official candidates on the day Parliament is dissolved. From this point, they are allowed to access copies of the electoral register for the constituency and to use publicly funded rooms and spaces (e.g. schools or community halls) for meetings.

The proportion of candidates losing their deposit at general elections: 1918-2019

Proportion of candidates failing to win at least 5% of valid votes in their constituency



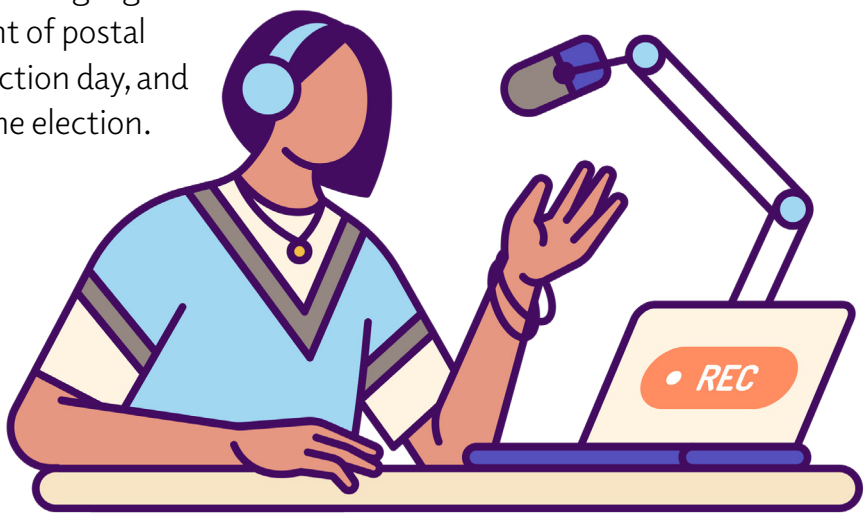
Source: House of Commons Library, January 2020

Candidates can withdraw from a constituency contest, but this must occur at least nineteen working days before election day. Otherwise, their name will still be on the ballot paper. This is the reason why Labour could not replace their chosen candidate in the Rochdale by-election of February 2024, even though the individual had been suspended and was no longer endorsed by the party as its official candidate.

If a party candidate dies before an election, the vote in that constituency will be cancelled and there will automatically be a new election three to four weeks later. The last time this happened was in 2010, in the Thirsk and Malton constituency, when UKIP's candidate passed away two weeks before the election. Thirsk and Malton voted on the 27 May, three weeks after the rest of the country. If an independent candidate dies, the election goes ahead on the scheduled date.

ELECTION AGENTS

Candidates standing for election will usually nominate an election agent to work with them. The agent manages the administration of their campaign, and ensures candidates follow rules about spending, donations and financial reporting. Agents can also attend the opening and count of postal votes, monitor polling stations on election day, and attend the count on the evening of the election.



ELECTION COVERAGE

RULES GOVERNING BROADCAST MEDIA DURING ELECTIONS

The Communications Act 2003 and the Broadcasting Code (enforced by an independent agency called Ofcom) aim to ensure that political coverage in the UK is impartial and avoids influencing voters in the run-up to an election.

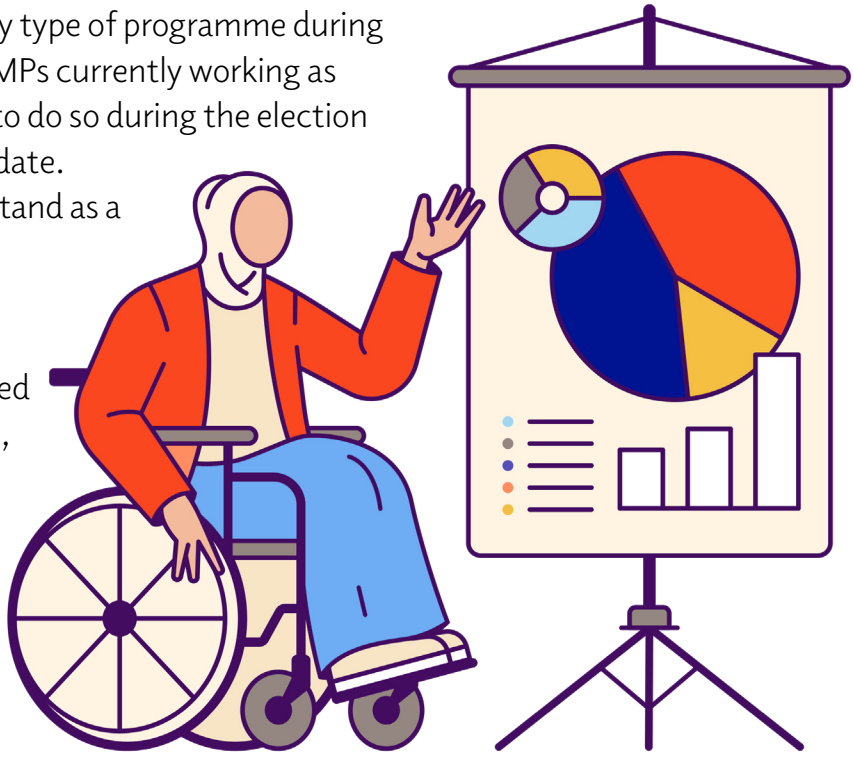
These rules cover allocation of airtime, impartiality, political advertising, and broadcasting on polling day.

ALLOCATION OF AIRTIME

Outside the election period, the two main parties dominate political coverage, given they are usually the governing party and the main opposition. However, during the election period - beginning with the dissolution of Parliament - a fair allocation of airtime must be given to all political parties standing candidates, as well as independents. The broadcasting code applies to all television and radio programmes.

In determining the appropriate level of coverage to be given to parties and independent candidates, broadcasters usually consider the level of support received at past elections and current electoral support (in other words, how well parties are doing in the polls).

Candidates standing in UK elections must not function as news presenters, interviewers or present any type of programme during the election period. For example, any MPs currently working as hosts of programmes will not be able to do so during the election period if they wish to stand as a candidate. Thus, LBC's Iain Dale quit in order to stand as a candidate in May 2024.



Appearances by candidates in non-political programmes that were planned before the election period can happen, but no new appearances should be arranged or broadcast during the period. Candidates can, however, appear as guests or interviewees on political or news programmes throughout the election campaign.

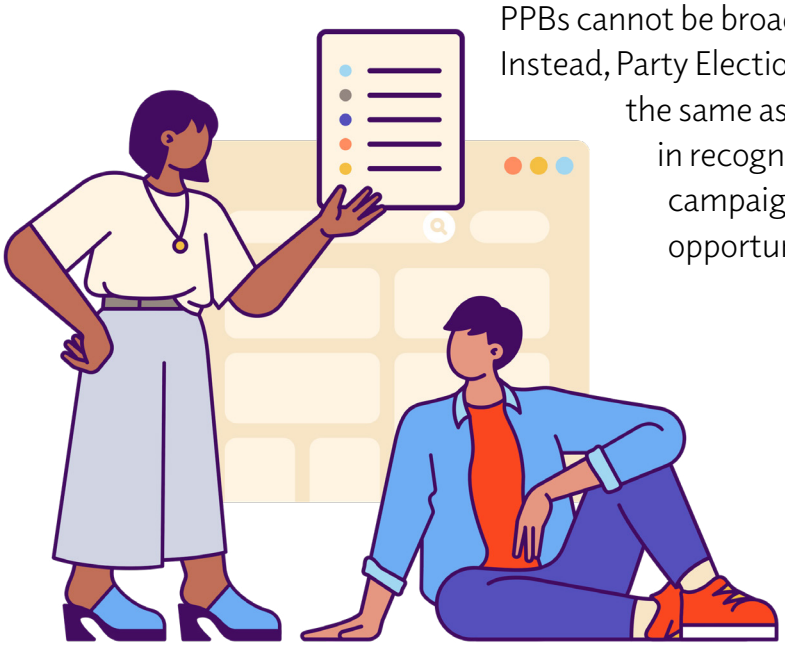
PARTY POLITICAL BROADCASTS AND PARTY ELECTION BROADCASTS

Political parties are entitled to a number of 'party-political broadcasts' (PPB) over the course of a year- usually one in Autumn, one in Winter and one in Spring. These are television or radio broadcasts made by a political party outside of the election period. Parties will be offered one or more PPBs in a 12-month period if:

- They hold one seat or more in Parliament.
- Evidence of a party's past or current electoral support (the number of votes they have won in the past or current voting intention as indicated in the polls) means that it would be appropriate to offer them a PPB.

On the latter point, Ofcom places greater weight on the actual performance of a political party or an independent candidate in elections over opinion poll data, because electoral performance is a measure of how voters have exercised their democratic choice. In considering past electoral support, Ofcom considers:

- Electoral performance of parties (including the number of candidates elected and overall percentage of the vote received) or independent candidates in the previous set of elections over at least two electoral cycles.
- Performance in other relevant elections being contested at the same time, as well as performance in other recent elections.
- Electoral performance over at least two electoral cycles.
- Current support with reference to opinion poll data.



PPBs cannot be broadcast during election or referendum periods. Instead, Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs), which are essentially the same as PPBs, are offered to a wider array of parties, in recognition of the varying ability of parties to attract campaign funds and to allow qualifying parties an opportunity to deliver their messages straight to the electorate.

Parties standing candidates in one-sixth of the seats contested in the UK (around 108 seats) qualify for a national PEB. Each major party is typically offered at least two PEBs during the campaign period. The governing party and main opposition party are allocated the same number of broadcasts, and no party is offered more than five in total.

IMPARTIALITY

All broadcast (TV and radio) media outlets must be impartial in their coverage of election campaigns. They must not favour any particular candidate and must provide equal opportunities for all parties and candidates to be heard. For example, if a candidate takes part in an item about their constituency,

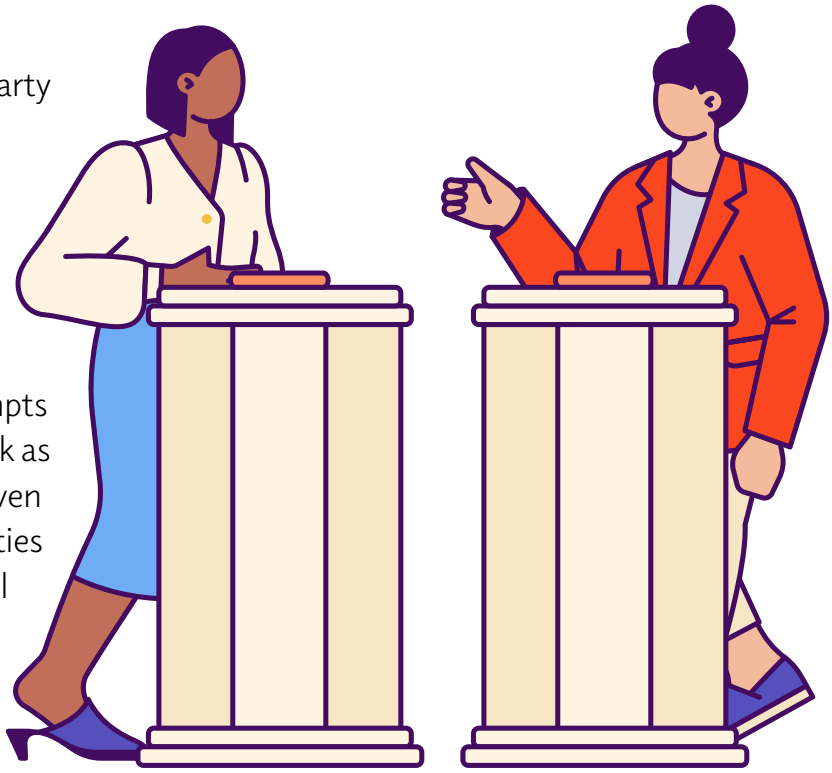
a broadcaster must offer the same opportunity to all candidates standing within the constituency, including independents.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

Any advertisements which try to influence the outcome of an election or promote the interests of a political party are banned from TV or radio. This means that any ads which:

- are placed by, or on behalf of, a body with political objectives,
- are directed towards a political end; or
- have a connection with an industrial dispute (e.g. an advert to rally support for striking train drivers)

cannot be broadcast. This does not include Party Election Broadcasts, which are subject to specific restrictions.



TV DEBATES

TV debates between party leaders are still a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. Attempts had been made to hold TV debates as far back as 1997, with the idea floated to party leaders even in the 1970s, but no agreement between parties and broadcasters had ever been reached until the election of 2010.

2010 saw then-party leaders David Cameron (Conservatives), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) and Gordon Brown (the sitting Labour Prime Minister) debate on live TV. This followed a series of negotiations between the parties and various broadcasters about the style of debates and their timings, with the final agreement specifying (among other provisions) that:

- Three debates would be held: in the North West of England, in the South and in the Midlands.
- The leaders of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats would appear at each debate, in front of a nationally representative audience.
- The moderator would have a podium or desk and remain confined to a small area in front of the leaders and audience.
- Half of each debate was to be themed (i.e. questions about the economy, defence, healthcare) and the rest would be based on audience questions.
- There would be no close-ups of a single individual audience member while the leaders are speaking, with the camera remaining trained on the responding party leader.

Election debates have become a feature of campaigns, having been held in 2015, 2017 and 2019 (albeit in different formats) as the support for various parties (and willingness of party leaders to participate) has ebbed and flowed. Since 2010, there has been much discussion about whether smaller parties like the Greens or UKIP should be allowed to participate.

Election year	Format(s)
2010	-A 90-minute debate with David Cameron (Conservative), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat) and Gordon Brown (Labour) on ITV, moderated by Alastair Stewart -A 90-minute debate with Cameron, Clegg and Brown on Sky News, moderated by Adam Boulton -A 90-minute debate with Cameron, Clegg and Brown on the BBC, moderated by David Dimbleby -Separate debates hosted by the BBC involving the leaders of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish parties
2015	-A Sky News programme with Ed Miliband (Labour) and David Cameron (Conservative) separately interviewed by Jeremy Paxman. Both leaders then (again, separately) took questions from a studio audience. -A two-hour ITV debate with Cameron, Miliband, Clegg, Nigel Farage (UKIP), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Natalie Bennett (Green) and Leanne Wood (Plaid). Moderated by Julie Etchingham. -A two-hour BBC debate with Miliband, Farage, Sturgeon, Bennett and Wood. Cameron and Clegg did not take part. Moderated by David Dimbleby. -A Question Time special with Cameron, Clegg and Miliband taking audience questions separately. Farage, Sturgeon, and Wood appeared later in separate programmes.
2017	-A two-hour ITV debate moderated by Julie Etchingham, with Tim Farron (Liberal Democrats), Leanne Wood, Paul Nuttall (UKIP), and Nicola Sturgeon. -A Sky News programme with Jeremy Corbyn (Labour) and Theresa May (Conservative) separately interviewed by Jeremy Paxman. Both leaders then (again, separately) took questions from a studio audience. -A two-hour BBC debate moderated by Mishal Hussein, with Corbyn, Farron, Wood, and Nutall. The SNP was represented by Angus Robertson, and the Conservatives by Amber Rudd. -A Question Time special with Corbyn and May taking audience questions separately.
2019	-A one-hour ITV debate, moderated by Julie Etchingham, with Boris Johnson (Conservatives) and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour). -A Question Time special with Johnson, Corbyn, Sturgeon and Jo Swinson (Liberal Democrat) taking audience questions separately. -A 90-minute BBC debate, moderated by Nick Robinson, with Swinson, Sturgeon, Caroline Lucas (representing the Greens), Richard Tice (representing the Brexit Party) and Adam Price (Plaid Cymru). Labour was represented by Rebecca Long-Bailey, the Conservatives by Rishi Sunak. -A one-hour BBC debate, moderated by Nick Robinson, between Johnson and Corbyn. -A BBC question time under-30s special, with a panel of Jonathan Bartley (Greens), Nigel Farage (Brexit Party), Robert Jenrick (representing the Conservatives), Adam Price, Angela Rayner (representing Labour), Swinson, and Humza Yousaf (representing the SNP). -A BBC Wales debate with leaders of five parties in the country. A similar debate was also held by STV in Scotland, and UTV/BBC Northern Ireland in NI. -A series of 30-minute interviews with all party leaders aside from Boris Johnson by BBC journalist Andrew Neil.

Unlike in countries such as the US, no central body organises TV debates. As a result (and as demonstrated above) there is no consistent pattern or format. They are also not compulsory, so there is no guarantee they will be held at every election. There is nothing in electoral law that requires televised debates. If they do take place, they are a matter for the broadcasters and political parties to decide and arrange.

In 2011, Labour committed to making leaders' debates a legal requirement in the run-up to an election, though this commitment did not appear in the party's manifesto in 2015. In 2017, the Liberal Democrats made a manifesto pledge to legislate for Ofcom to organise TV debates, but this was not repeated in their 2019 manifesto.

BROADCAST MEDIA ON POLLING DAY

Discussion of all election-related issues on broadcast media is prohibited as soon as polling stations open at 7AM on election day. Broadcasters must not give any indication of the election's outcome before the polls close, meaning they cannot reference any polls on voting intention and cannot interview voters at polling stations to ask how they voted. There should also be no direct discussion about candidates or issues which have dominated the election campaign.



Even though the rules are imposed within the UK, international broadcasters accessible by British voters (for example, foreign news organisations which have a broadcast channel in the UK like CNN or MSNBC) are also covered by these rules. Any outlet seen to be attempting to shape the outcome of the election can be fined and their editors could face imprisonment.

On polling day, parties and candidates can post on social media or post leaflets or posters to voters. However, they are still subject to the constraints stipulated above.

RULES GOVERNING PRINT AND ONLINE DURING ELECTIONS

The regulations for newspapers and online news sites are not as strict as those covering broadcast media. For example, on election day newspapers often publish content which would not be allowed on TV or radio, such as last-minute opinion polls, articles about candidates and parties, and even endorsements for parties. Indeed, election day front pages encouraging readers to vote for a particular party have become something of a tradition - think of the Sun's 'If Kinnock wins today will

the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights' front page from the 1992 Election.

It is, however, illegal for all media outlets - including newspapers - to publish how people have cast their votes or attempt to forecast the result of the election.

OPINION POLLING

Public opinion polls are surveys which aim to find out the views of a particular population on specific topics (see this explainer). A sample of people, representative of a group whose views we are interested in, is asked questions about a variety of issues- for example, their voting intentions at the forthcoming election. The results are then analysed to ascertain the opinions of the wider population.

The polling industry regulates itself via the British Polling Council (BPC). Members of the BPC agree to provide full details of their surveys, questions, results and funding.

Polls are regularly conducted throughout the election period, particularly on voting intention. However, on election day itself, radio and TV programmes cannot discuss or display any poll results until polling stations have closed. The results of any 'exit poll' commissioned by broadcasters cannot be announced by broadcasters until 10PM.

The exit polls announced at 10PM are the first reliable indicator we have of how the parties have done in the election. Often, multiple TV broadcasters - for example, the BBC, Sky and ITV - will come together to commission and pay for a large-scale poll of thousands of voters contacted outside polling stations across many seats who complete mock ballot papers right after they have voted. The results of this exercise are modelled to estimate the result of the election as closely as possible.



GOVERNMENT BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER AN ELECTION

THE CIVIL SERVICE: PREPARATION FOR A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT

Before an election is called, 'access talks' may take place between the opposition party and the Civil Service. These are preparatory meetings between senior civil servants and opposition parties, organised by the Cabinet Office, which help both sides prepare for a change of government, and get to know each other.

The Prime Minister must agree to these taking place following a request from the Leader of the Opposition, but neither the PM nor government ministers are informed of the content of the discussions. How far in advance of an election these talks take place is up to the Prime Minister, but also depends on whether a parliament runs near to its full term. In the latter case, talks usually start well over a year before an election. When there is a snap election, talks are inevitably curtailed.

Once the election is announced, civil servants start preparing for either the return of the current government (with ministerial changes likely) or for a change in government. They pull together briefings which give background on the work and organisation of the department, but also look at how to deliver the commitments parties have put in their manifestos (which are discussed during access talks).

PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

Before an election, there is a period known as the 'pre-election period of sensitivity' or 'purdah,' though the latter term is now less commonly used. It begins 25 days before polling day, on the day parliament is dissolved - for the 2024 election, this was 30 May 2024. During this time, government, ministers, and civil servants must avoid activities or announcements which could impact the outcome of the forthcoming election. If action must be taken, the sitting opposition must be consulted beforehand, and said action must not reduce the choices open to any potential incoming government.

During this period, civil servants abide by guidance issued by the Cabinet Office. As the civil service is impartial, staff must not be involved with party political activities. For example, they must not assist their minister with writing speeches for campaign events.

The civil service is divided into three groups:

1. The 'politically free' – industrial and non-office grades.
2. The 'politically restricted' – including members of the Senior Civil Service; and
3. Civil servants outside of these two groups

All civil servants are disqualified from election to Parliament and must resign from the civil service before standing for election. While 'politically restricted' civil servants are prohibited from any participation in national political activities (e.g. canvassing) all other civil servants may engage in national political activities with the permission from the department.

During this time, government resources cannot be used for election purposes – including speech-writing support, events organisation, and factual briefings prepared by the civil service.

TRANSFER OF POWER

Departments prepare briefing documents for new ministers. However, not all ministers find these useful or have time to read them. The planning for new ministers also includes more practical matters such as thinking about how best to introduce the minister to departmental staff, how their office will work and making sure that items associated with the previous government such as name-badges are removed.



FORMING A GOVERNMENT

The rules and conventions around government formation are set out in the Cabinet Manual, which lays out how the UK government functions. It specifies that the party which has won the most seats in a general election will be asked by the Monarch to form a government, with its leader becoming the Prime Minister. This government can then serve for up to five years.

However, just because a party has won the most seats does not mean it necessarily commands a majority in the House of Commons. A minority government, or a coalition, can also be formed.

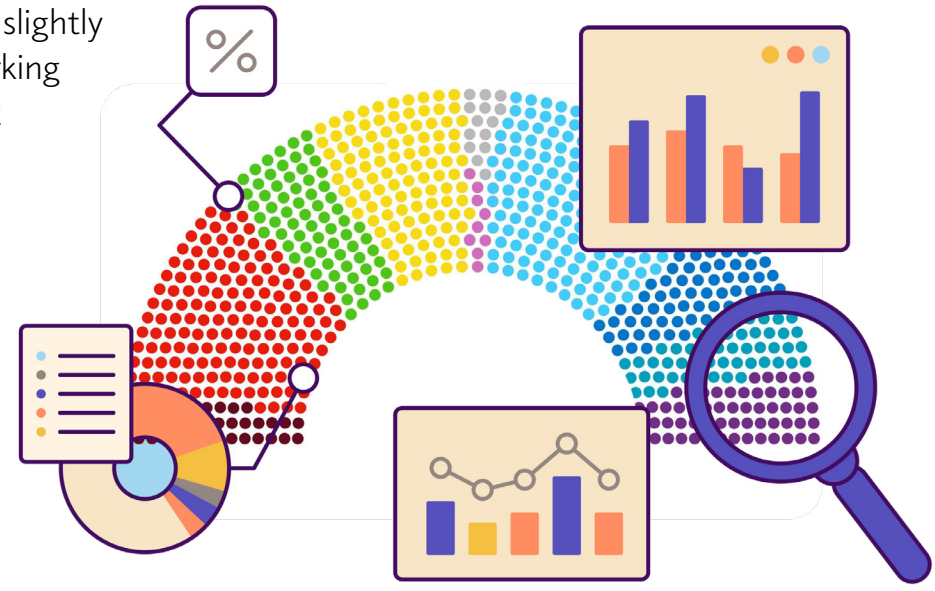
There is no time limit set for government formation, though the UK is not used to the sort of prolonged negotiations seen in other European countries. Coalition negotiations or discussions on potential confidence-and-supply arrangements can, in theory, carry on for an unspecified amount of time after the election.

The House of Commons also has no role in government formation, which is left to parties and their leaders, but the crucial test of any arrangement is whether it can command the confidence of the House. Unlike in Scotland, there is no formal investiture vote, so the first test would likely come with the vote on the first King's Speech of a parliament.

A MAJORITY GOVERNMENT

A majority government forms when one political party wins more than half the seats in Parliament. In the UK, there are currently 650 seats in Parliament. So, to have an overall majority, a party must win at least 326 Commons seats.

In practice, the government needs slightly fewer MPs than this to have a 'working majority,' as some MPs do not cast votes in Parliament. First, because Sinn Féin MPs have historically not taken up their seats in the House of Commons (known as 'abstentionism'). They refuse to take an oath to the British Monarch, and do not accept Parliament's jurisdiction in Northern Ireland. Second, because the Speaker of the House of Commons and their deputies are required to be impartial.



Providing most members of the governing majority vote the same way, the government can pass legislation without needing the support of other parties. Obviously, the smaller the majority, the greater the risk to the majority from backbench rebellions on the government's own side.

Most majority governments can continue their term in government until the Prime Minister decides to call a general election.

A HUNG PARLIAMENT

A hung parliament occurs when no single party wins a majority in the House of Commons. This means that no party has won over 325 seats.

When there is no party with a majority, the Prime Minister in power before the election is given the first opportunity to try and form a government. They can either try to govern with another party (or parties) as a coalition or try to govern alone as a minority government.

If the sitting Prime Minister fails to form a working government able to command the confidence of the House of Commons, they are expected to resign and recommend to the Monarch that the leader of the largest opposition party be invited to form a government.

There are several ways in which governments can be formed, even if no party has won a majority of the seats in parliament.

COALITION GOVERNMENT

In a coalition government, two or more parties agree to form a government on the basis of a formal agreement, often covering a jointly agreed policy plan and the division of ministerial jobs.

In the UK, national coalitions are quite rare, and a national coalition government has only been formed once since World War 2. They are more common in devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales and are legally required in the Northern Ireland Assembly.



Because they are so rare, there are no formal rules around coalition formation in the UK, with the process left mostly up to the parties. For example, in 2010 the Liberal Democrats discussed the possibility of a coalition with both Labour and the Conservatives, even though sitting Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown technically had the right to a 'first go' at forming a

government.

The civil service is able to provide support and legal advice to parties during the coalition formation process, though this was not called on in 2010; civil servants cannot be involved in the negotiations themselves.

Coalitions may break up before the end of a parliament – but the 2010 Coalition lasted the full term.

MINORITY GOVERNMENT

A minority government forms when no political party has a majority of seats in the House of Commons, but no formal coalition agreement is struck. The political party that won the most seats in the election will form the government but will have to rely on the support, or at least the acquiescence, of another political party (or parties) to carry out its program.

Some governments may win an election with a majority, but over time (perhaps due to suspensions, resignations or defections) see this ebb away until it eventually becomes a minority government.



Sometimes, minority governments may pursue a 'confidence and supply' agreement with another party. This is a less formal arrangement than a coalition (the smaller party's MPs will not get any representation in Cabinet, for example) but a deal with a smaller party that its MPs will vote with the government on particular issues, usually in return for something. For example, in 2017 Theresa May's minority government agreed a confidence and supply arrangement with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party and committed to giving the Northern Ireland Executive an additional £1 billion over five years in return for their support on votes of confidence, on the Budget and on Brexit. The Conservatives also agreed to not to pursue some policies that were in their manifesto.

Minority governments inevitably mean that the government needs to seek wider support for its legislative programme to ensure that individual bills can pass and may need to drop controversial measures which the party outlined in its manifesto.

Minority governments are less likely to last a full term than majority governments because they rely on the support of opposition parties. Often confidence and supply arrangements may fall apart because of a disagreement over policy, or the Prime Minister may request an early election in an attempt to win a majority.

AFTER THE ELECTION

Assuming the outcome of the election is clear, the day after the general election, the monarch invites the leader of the party that won the most seats in the House of Commons to become Prime Minister and form a government.

It has long been accepted that the monarch should not have discretion in appointing the Prime Minister, though before the 2010 election, specific rules were published in the Cabinet Manual to make clear that the monarch would play no role in the formation of a new government. This issue could arise when there is a hung parliament, and it is not obvious who should be appointed prime minster after the election.

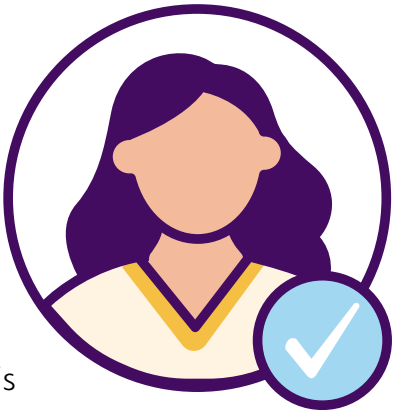
The new Prime Minister then returns to Downing Street and begins the process of appointing ministers to the new Cabinet. The process of appointing the whole government can take more than a day, but the big appointments are made quickly. There is no presumption that ministers stay in the same jobs as they had before the election, if the government returns, nor that people are appointed to the briefs that they shadowed in opposition – however there are strong arguments for continuity where possible.

The new Parliament will meet on the date declared in the monarch's proclamation announcing the election. The amount of time between election day and this can vary; for example, in 2010 Parliament met twelve days after the election, in 2019 five days after the election. After the forthcoming 2024 election, the new Parliament is expected to meet on 9 July, 5 days after polling day.

There are some things that the House of Commons and its newly elected MPs, as well as Peers in the Lords, must do in the immediate aftermath of an election.

THE ELECTION OF THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

One of the first tasks of the Commons is to elect a Speaker, who presides over the business of the House. This process is usually overseen by the longest-serving MP in the Commons, known as the Father or Mother of the House.



The Speaker does not stand for re-election as a party candidate and by convention, the main parties do not stand candidates against the speaker. If the MP who was Speaker before the election is returned to the House of Commons and wishes to serve as Speaker again, they are automatically selected (though a vote usually takes place as a formality). If not, MPs will put themselves forward for the job, and their fellow Members will vote for their preferred candidate by secret ballot. Deputy Speakers are elected in the same way, though this process is overseen by the Speaker-Elect.

SWEARING IN AND MAIDEN SPEECHES

MPs and Peers must take an oath of allegiance to the Monarch or make a 'solemn affirmation' if they do not wish to swear an oath, before they can take their seats in Parliament. This is essentially an oath of loyalty to the state, sworn on a religious or non-religious text of the individual's choice.

MPs swear their oath one by one at the dispatch box in the Commons Chamber to Clerks of the House. This process usually takes several hours, given that all Members (whether they sat before the election or not) must do this.

If an MP or peer refuses to take an oath or make an affirmation, they cannot sit, and therefore cannot speak in debates, vote or be paid, and their seats remain essentially vacant, as if an MP had never been elected there- this is the case with Sinn Féin MPs.

MPs and Peers entering Parliament for the first time make their 'maiden speech'- essentially the first time they speak in Parliament - within their first few months in the Commons or Lords. Traditionally, an MP would not take part in other debates in the Commons via interventions until they have made this speech, but in recent years this has become less common.

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRS

After an election, the Speaker will allot each party a number of select committee chairs, proportionate to the number of seats in the Commons the party won. Chairs must then be elected in votes by all MPs within two weeks.

THE STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT AND THE KING (OR QUEEN'S) SPEECH

The formal opening of a new parliament is known as the State Opening of Parliament and is one of the few occasions on which all parts of the UK legislative system- the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the Monarch- come together in one place. The current ceremony dates back to 1852.

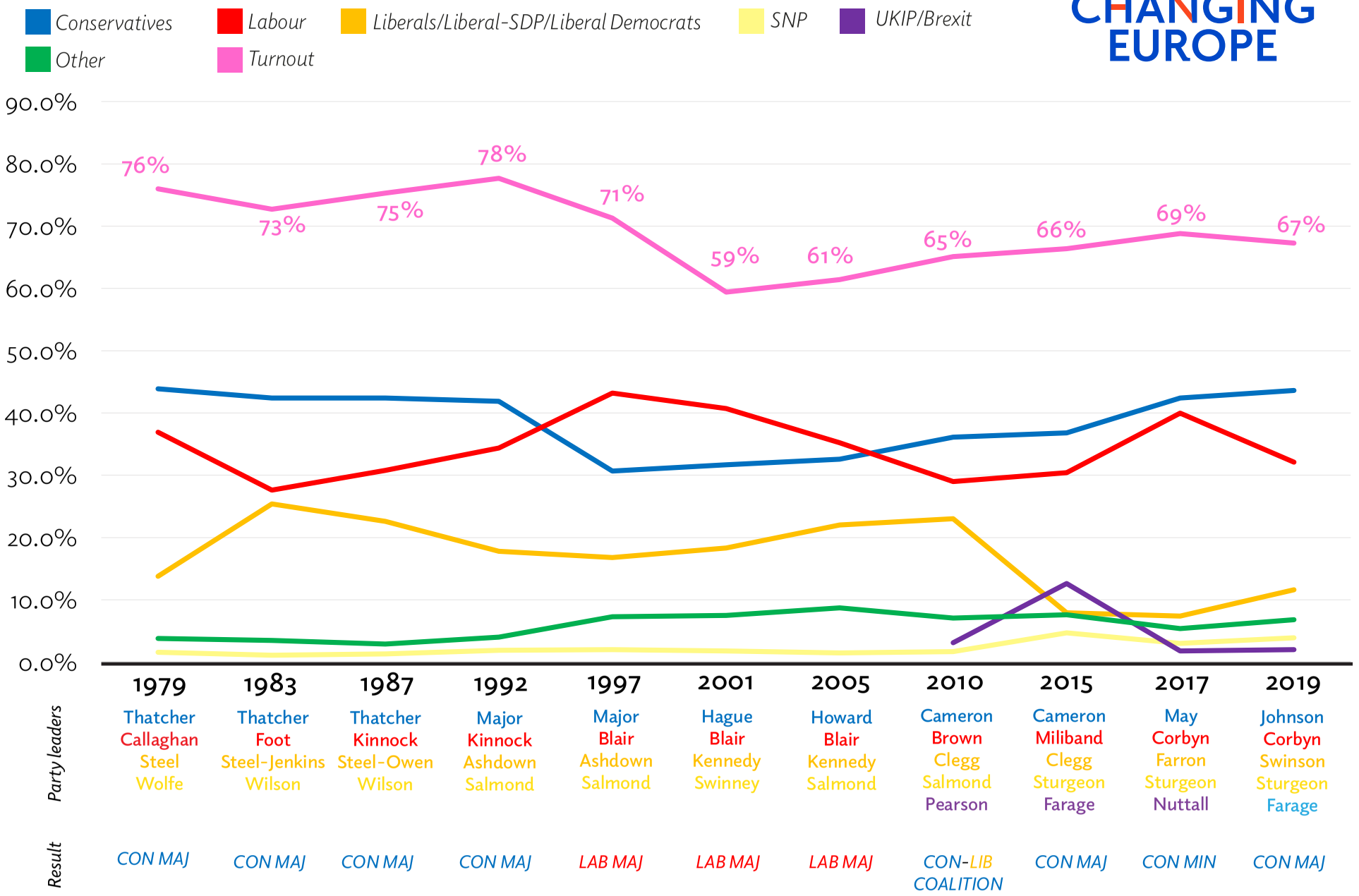
State openings occur not just after an election, but at the beginning of each parliamentary session or 'year'. After a general election, the State Opening will usually take place within two weeks of the new Parliament's first meeting. The 2024 State Opening is scheduled to take place on 17 July, 13 days after polling day.

During the State Opening, the Monarch (or whoever they send in their place) will give a speech, written by the government, in Parliament. This outlines the new government's legislative agenda and is delivered from the throne in the House of Lords to both MPs and Peers.

The speech will be followed by a few days of debate in the Commons and Lords, with each policy area debated and voted on (though not often by the Lords). The votes on the speech are seen as a vote of confidence in the (new) government, though no King or Queen's speech has been voted down since 1924.

Voter turnout and vote share of political parties at general elections: 1979-2019

UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE



Source: The Electoral Commission

UK in a Changing Europe promotes rigorous, high-quality and independent research into the complex and ever changing relationship between the UK and the EU. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and based at King's College London.

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UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

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