Extension

What are the differences between general elections and by-elections?

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You can use this material to further your understanding and aid your revision of this topic.

General elections

- Function to elect a national government
- Traditionally called by the PM at a time of his choosing (though Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 now sets 5-year intervals)
- National focus/campaign
- Usually 60%+ turnout
- Fought across a range of policies and issues (publication of party manifestos etc.)
- Reflects previous 5-year national picture (leadership of parties, policy successes/failures, economic climate etc.)
- Three main parties dominate the results
- Taken seriously by parties and most of the public, as the next government will be formed

By-elections

- Function to elect a single MP
- Called after resignation/death/departure of the sitting MP e.g. Oldham 2011 after de-selection of Phil Woolas
- Local focus — although national party leaders will often visit to give support and attention e.g. Crewe and Nantwich 2008 (Cameron visited several times to ensure victory)
- Low turnout e.g. Manchester Central 2012 was 18%
- Fought across a narrower range of policies, sometimes one issue or a local topic e.g. Blaenau Gwent 2006 was lost by Labour after a rebellion by local Labour activists against the party’s chosen candidate
- Typically reflect perceptions of the parties at a given moment in time — often act as a mini-referendum on the governing party e.g. Lib Dem collapse in Barnsley in March 2011; Labour collapse during Brown’s premiership in Glasgow East 2008 (used by voters to ‘send a message’ in support of, or more likely against, parties in Westminster)
Often involve protest voting against major parties in support of minor parties e.g. Rotherham 2012 UKIP came 2nd, Lib Dems came 8th

Sometimes taken to reflect broader political trends, and used by the media to predict possible results at the next general election e.g. Crewe and Nantwich 2008

Taken less seriously than a general election as only a single seat is at stake, but more likely to have multiple candidates standing because of the media exposure

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