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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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