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## UK update

# Elections bonanza

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You can use this update to further your understanding.

November 2012 was a busy month for elections across England and Wales, although voters could probably be forgiven if these elections had passed them by. Each election had something to tell us about the state of the parties, and about voting behaviour at the end of 2012.

## Elections for Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs)

On 15 November 2012, elections took place in most parts of England and Wales for newly created Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). Each police authority will now be led by an elected police chief who will appoint and dismiss the local chief constable. The defining feature of these elections was the disappointingly — though predicted — low turnout. Across the 41 PCC areas, the turnout averaged just 15.1%. Commentators blamed several factors — the lack of national publicity given to the election; the low priority the main political parties gave the process, and the timing of the elections in mid-November. The result was that public ignorance and apathy were the defining features. Other than low turnout, the other notable result was the election of 12 independent commissioners (with the Conservatives winning 16, Labour 13 and the Lib Dems none). Unlike almost any other election, independent candidates fared very well, picking up over a quarter of the posts. The lack of political drive to fight and fund these elections may have given independent candidates an opportunity to break through.

## Half a dozen by-elections

November was also a busy month for by-elections. Between 2005 and 2010 14 by-elections were held and between 2001 and 2005 six were contested. On 15 November 2012, three were held and on 29 November another three were fought, making November one of the busiest ever months for by-elections. The six were: Corby, Manchester Central, Cardiff South, Rotherham, Middlesbrough and Croydon North. Newspaper columnists and politicians read all sorts of things into the results of by-elections but it is notoriously difficult to predict longer term trends from the results. Nevertheless, the six November elections were analysed for deeper meaning beyond the local results themselves. Corby produced the biggest headlines with the outgoing Tory MP, Louise Mensch, causing a stir for resigning from her seat after just 2 years in Parliament. Voters in Corby punished her party by electing the Labour candidate in her place. Naturally, Ed Miliband called the win a 'fantastic result' before adding that 'Middle England is turning away from David Cameron'. Equally predictably, David Cameron called the result 'a classic mid-term result'. In Manchester and Cardiff, the sitting MPs resigned to stand as police commissioners, although the Manchester result was more noteworthy for its pitifully low turnout — just 18% — making it the lowest in a by-election since the Second World

War. Turnout in all six by-elections was predictably low, with even the relatively high profile Corby contest hitting just 44% turnout.

Arguably, the more interesting pattern to emerge from these by-elections was the performance of UKIP and the Lib Dems. Continuing the party's string of poor performances since the 2010 general election, the Lib Dems got battered again in November. In Corby, the Lib Dems came 4<sup>th</sup> and in Rotherham at the end of November the Lib Dems came 8<sup>th</sup>, with only 2% of the vote (with the Tories in 5<sup>th</sup> place). By-elections are often seen as a chance for voters to pass judgement on the governing party (or parties) mid-way through its term of office. This was certainly true for the Lib Dems, who lost over 10% of their vote in five of the six contests. On the other hand, UKIP appeared to be the big winner, with two 2<sup>nd</sup> place and two 3<sup>rd</sup> place finishes. Indeed, UKIP's performances led the BBC to wonder, 'Are UKIP the new Lib Dems?', suggesting that UKIP had replaced the Lib Dems as the by-election party to beat. The results demonstrated that the Lib Dems were losing votes and suggested that UKIP are the main up-and-coming force. This bodes well for the party, with local elections in May and European elections in 2014.

## Election for Bristol mayor

An election in Bristol to elect a city mayor also took place on 15 November 2012. In May 2012, Bristol was the only city to vote for a directly elected mayor in a series of 10 city-wide referenda. This looked like a public rejection of the coalition government's localism agenda and its attempts to further 'roll-out' devolution. The election for Bristol mayor was won by George Ferguson — an independent candidate. The election also marked another example of the increasing use of alternative voting systems in UK elections. Like other elected city mayors, George Ferguson was elected using the Supplementary Vote (SV) with first and second preferences deciding the winner.

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