The calling of the 2017 general election

Prime minister and cabinet

The fact that May had to seek parliamentary approval for calling a general election shows that a limit has been imposed on the prime minister, meaning some degree of power has been lost to Parliament. However, the fact that the prime minister was still able to call an election at a seemingly favourable moment shows that the prime minister still retains the ability to call an advantageous election. That the announcement was made outside Downing Street also demonstrates a presidential style of leadership by Theresa May.

Democracy and participation

An early general election gave the public another opportunity to give consent to the government and approve the proposals outlined in the manifestos, especially important given the major issues triggered by Brexit. However, an early election, 1 month after English council elections and only 2 years after the last general election, created a sense of apathy with few voters being fully engaged and excited by the opportunity to vote again. It also led to complaints that representatives should be governing in the national interest, rather than seeking partisan advantage.

Election campaigns

Unlike the campaigns of 2015, 2010, 1997 and 1992, the early calling of the general election caught many parties by surprise. As such, the campaigns were less high profile with fewer set-piece events and hustings, and delays to manifestos as all parties rushed to prepare for the campaign, rather than having a long build up to an expected campaign. This may have had an impact on turnout.

On 18 April 2017 Theresa May announced, outside Downing Street, that she would be calling a general election for 8 June. The ability to call an early election was supposed to have been ended by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, but it appears to have failed at its first test. Synoptic assessment requires you to work across different parts of the specification and to show your accumulated knowledge and understanding of a topic or subject area. To help with your learning and to demonstrate your synoptic skills, this centre spread show how the calling of the general election can be used to make links across a variety of topics.

Opinion polls

Part of the reason for calling an early election was that the Conservative Party typically held a 20-point lead in opinion polls on voting intentions. This sort of lead would be expected to translate to a potential 100-seat majority, highlighting the importance of opinion polls in informing the prime minister’s decision to call an early election.

The constitution

The limitations of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act were exposed by the calling of an early election. Although the Act had transferred some power from the prime minister to Parliament, the principle of the Act was to stop prime ministers from calling elections for their own political advantage. This therefore illustrates the weaknesses of the post-2010 constitutional reforms. That the Conservatives had a manifesto commitment to repeal the Fixed-term Parliament Act shows the lack of entrenchment in the UK constitutional system.

Parliament

That the prime minister had to gain parliamentary approval before calling the early election demonstrates an increase in Parliament’s power in relation to the prime minister. Although the MPs supported the prime minister’s proposal 522 to 13, the principle of being consulted shows a change in the balance of power. However, the fact that there was so little opposition shows the limitations of this parliamentary power over the prime minister. That the House of Lords was not consulted also shows the limitations of its ability to check executive actions.

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