

PRIME MINISTER

LOCAL ELECTIONS/BY-ELECTION RESULTS

You will have seen (although you dismissed) the usual press comment on the outcome of the local elections and the by-elections. As John Gummer pointed out very firmly, it is quite usual for Governments to lose votes in by-elections and local elections. This note sets out in slightly more detail just how usual it is for Governments to be relatively unpopular and, conversely, the relatively unusual position of the Government now being ahead in the opinion polls. I have looked at each Government since the 1955 election. In every case there was a point at which it ceased to be "popular" as measured by the opinion polls and at which the Opposition moved ahead. Below are the dates:

<u>Election</u>	<u>"Cross-over point"</u>	<u>"Period of grace"</u>
1955	November 1955	6 months
1959	August 1961	<u>22 months</u>
1964/66*	April 1967	13 months
1970	January 1971	<u>7 months</u>
1974*	May 1975	8 months
1979	July 1979	<u>2 months</u>

\* I have taken the 1966 election as the operative date since the period between the 1964 and 1966 elections was perceived as being a pre-election period.

The same applies to the two 1974 elections.

In terms of relative popularity between elections, with the exception of the 1964-1966 period, the Opposition was always ahead in the opinion polls for far longer than the Government. Below are the figures:

/ Dates

<u>Dates</u>	<u>Government</u> <u>ahead</u>	<u>Opposition</u> <u>ahead</u>
	(months)	(months)
1955-1959	15	35
1959-1964	22	39
1964-1966	19	0
1966-1970	11	40
1970-1974	5	40
1974-1979	13	31
		(19 months fluctuating)
1979-1983	15	31
		(23 Labour, ( 8 Alliance)

As these figures demonstrate, the characteristic pattern in recent years has been for the Government to start losing popularity fairly quickly after the election and to remain unpopular for most of the period thereafter. For example, one year after the 1966 elections the Conservatives were in the lead by 4% in the polls; a year after the 1970 election Labour were 18% ahead; a year after the October 1974 election the Conservatives were 5½% ahead; and a year after the 1979 election Labour were 5% ahead.

All this has been reflected in by-election results. For example, in July 1966, 4 months after a landslide victory, Labour lost Carmarthen to Plaid Cymru on an 18% swing. In March 1967 the Conservatives were winning seats, e.g. Glasgow Pollok where the Labour vote fell 20%. By September 1967, only 18 months after the election, the Conservatives won two seats, Walthamstow West and Leicester South West on massive swings of over 15%. In the whole period between 1966 and 1970 Labour lost 15 of the by-elections which it fought out of 24 previously held.

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The same pattern re-asserted itself in 1970. Less than a year after the election, in May 1971, the Conservatives lost Bromsgrove to Labour on a 10% swing. On the same day they suffered a 16% swing in Hayes and Harlington. Over the whole period of the 1970-1974 Government, the Conservatives lost 5 of the 13 seats they held (4 of them to the Liberals).

The same again was true of the 1974-1979 Government. For example, in the only by-election in 1975, the Conservatives won Woolwich West on a 7.6% swing. By November 1976 they were winning seats on massive swings, e.g. Walsall North 22% and Workington 13%. Over the period of the Government Labour lost 7 out of the 21 seats previously held seats they fought.

As you know, the same pattern occurred in the 1979-1983 Government. The Government almost lost Southend East on a 13% swing only 9 months after the election. Over the whole period of the Government they lost 4 out of 7 Conservative-held seats in by-elections (3 to the Alliance and 1 to Labour). They also gained 1, Mitcham and Morden, the first Government gain at a by-election since Brighouse and Spenborough in 1960.

The lesson of all this is that it is unusual for Governments to be popular. This Government has now been ahead in the opinion polls for two years, which is the longest period since the 1960s. Judged by the standard of recent times, it has held its popularity (as measured in the polls) for a remarkably long period since the election. It would, however, be very surprising if by-elections did not continue to produce substantial anti-Government swings: indeed, it would be remarkable if they did not.



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