



Foreign &
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London

INSIGHT UK



Elections

1884 Vote given to two-thirds of adult British men, with one year's residence qualification.

1892 Dadabhai Naoroji elected the first black MP (for Finsbury, London) in the UK.

1918 Women aged 30 or more given the vote; residence restrictions reduced.

1928 Equal Franchise Act gives the vote to women aged 21 or more (as for men).

1948 Residence qualifications for voting abolished.

1969 Voting age reduced to 18 for everyone eligible to vote.

1998 First elections for the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

1999 First elections for the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

The UK holds general elections at least every five years in the UK, when 659 Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected to the House of Commons.

MPs each represent a constituency – the largest is the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England (107,117 voters in 2001) and the smallest is the Western Isles off Scotland (21,941 voters in 2001).

The leader of the party that wins the most seats in the Commons is invited by the Queen to become Prime Minister and form the next Government.

The Government can call a general election at any time during the five years for which it was elected.

MPs are responsible for passing or abolishing laws, raising taxation, examining and debating public policy and airing issues of concern to their constituents.

The last general election was in June 2001.

The Labour Party won, with 412 MPs out of 659.

26.4 million people voted in the June 2001 general election – 59.4 % of the 44,403,238 registered voters eligible to vote.



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All British citizens aged 18 or over registered as electors may vote unless they are legally barred. The following cannot vote: the Queen; members of the House of Lords; non-Commonwealth foreign nationals (except Irish nationals resident in the UK); prisoners; people kept in hospital because of criminal behaviour; and those convicted within the previous five years of illegal election practices.

Each person has one vote. The simple majority system means the candidate with the largest number of votes in each constituency is elected.

A candidate for election must be a British citizen, a Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Irish Republic, aged 21 or over.

'So two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism.'

E.M. Forster

Some people stand for election to draw attention to a particular local issue, or to make a point about national politicians, or for fun.

The Monster Raving Loony Party has been running candidates at elections since the 1970s with their slogan 'Vote for Insanity, You Know it Makes Sense'.

Most MPs come from one of the main political parties, but not all – in 2001, Dr Richard Taylor was elected Independent MP for Kidderminster where he campaigned to keep the local hospital.

Candidates who poll less than 5% of the vote lose their deposit of £500.

In 1997, the first Muslim MP was elected – Mohammed Sarwar, Labour MP for Glasgow Govan.

The largest number of women MPs were elected in 1997 – 101 Labour, 13 Conservative, 3 Liberal Democrat, 2 Scottish Nationalists and the then Speaker, Betty Boothroyd. Two were twins – Maria and Angela Eagle – the first-ever twins to sit in Parliament.

If an MP retires or dies, a by-election is held to elect a new MP for that constituency.

As well as electing MPs, UK voters elect local councillors and mayors and in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland they elect representatives to regional assemblies or parliaments.

The Electoral Commission, established in November 2000, is an independent body to oversee new controls on donations to and campaign spending by political parties and others. It also reviews electoral law and practice and promotes public awareness of the electoral process.

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Once an election is called, Parliament is closed and there are four weeks of campaigning when the political parties try to persuade people to vote for them.

The campaigns use television broadcasts, public meetings and events, canvassing (visiting or phoning people to ask which way they plan to vote and discussing issues with them), advertising in the press and on billboard posters.



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Each party publishes a manifesto setting out their political position and plans.

In the last election, the parties started using internet sites, email and text messages to mobile phones.

The amount of money spent by each candidate in the election campaign is limited by law. In 2001 each candidate could spend £5,483 plus 4.6 pence for each elector in an urban area, or 6.2 pence for each elector in the less densely populated rural constituencies. Spending by parties on national advertising campaigns is also limited by law.

VOTING

Since 1872, votes have been secret.

Polling stations are set up in rooms in public buildings, usually schools, where people who live in the locality can go and vote. They are open between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.

In person: At the local polling station the voter's name is checked against the electoral register and they are given a ballot paper to put a cross by the candidate they want to vote for. The paper goes into a sealed ballot box. There are special arrangements to help people with disabilities.

By post: any voter can vote by post. Postal voters are sent a ballot paper which must be returned by the close of the poll on election day. In the local government council elections of 2002, some councils experimented with all-postal voting, and the turnout (number of people voting) went up.

By proxy: a voter can appoint another person as a proxy to vote in their place, if they can't reasonably get to the polling station themselves.

Electronically: in the 2002 local government council elections, there were experiments to allow people to vote over the internet or by mobile phone.

COUNTING THE VOTES:

The votes are counted at the end of the day. Each constituency has an acting returning officer who is responsible for collecting the sealed boxes and running the count.

In the 2001 general election, Sunderland South was the first constituency to declare (announce the winning candidate) at 10.42 p.m. Fermanagh & South Tyrone, in Northern Ireland, was the last to declare at 10.20 p.m. the following day.

GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS 2001

PARTY	SEATS WON
Labour	412
Conservative	166
Liberal Democrats	52
Ulster Unionists	6
Scottish National Party	5
Ulster Democratic Unionist Party	5
Plaid Cymru	4
Sinn Fein	4
Social Democratic Labour Party	3
Independent	1
The Speaker	1
Total	659
Government Majority	166



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Elections are held for local councillors who run local services such as social services, schools, libraries and trading standards to parking controls, allotments, after-school clubs and sports and leisure facilities.

Councillors are elected for wards, which are much smaller than constituencies – there are 22,963 councillors in principal authorities the UK, plus another 80,000 serving on town and community councils in England and Wales.

In 1999, the first elections for the new Greater London Assembly were held, and the first directly elected Mayor of London was chosen – Ken Livingstone, an independent candidate. The Mayor is responsible for transport, strategic planning, promoting economic development, developing environmental strategies for London, fire services, policing, working to improve health and promoting a cultural strategy.

The Mayor of London should not be confused with the Lord Mayor of London who is the head of the Corporation of London, the local government authority for the old City of London.

Referendums have been held in other areas of the country to see whether voters wanted directly elected mayors there too, as well as their local council and in 2001 mayors were elected in Doncaster, Hartlepool, Lewisham, Middlesbrough, Newham, North Tyneside and Watford.

The first person of African descent to hold civic office in the UK was John Archer, who became mayor of Battersea in 1913.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

At the last European Parliament elections on 10 June 1999 for the first time the UK voted using the proportional simple regional list system. This system means each voter casts one vote in a regional constituency with several seats, and seats are allocated to each party roughly matching the number of votes they received. The system works like this:

VOTES CAST	SEATS WON
380,000	Party A – 3 seats
300,000	Party B – 2 seats
180,000	Party C – 1 seat
140,000	Independent – 1 seat

In other elections, only British citizens can vote, but European Union citizens are allowed to vote in European elections if they live in the UK.

Sources

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