

Chapter I

‘Plumping Contests’: The Impact of By-elections on English Voting Behaviour, 1790–1868

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Although the word by-election or ‘bye-election’ has been around since at least the early 1830s, it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that its use became increasingly widespread.¹ Prior to this, the terms most commonly used were ‘single election’, ‘single-handed election’, ‘plumping election’ and, on occasion, even ‘thumb-screw’ or ‘screw election.’² This difference of language represents an important point that has been curiously neglected by historians of English electoral politics. The earlier terminology, with its emphasis on a solitary option and references to special electoral pressures, reflects the fact that most English constituencies throughout this period continued to elect two (sometimes more) MPs.³ Even after the 1832 Reform Act’s increase in the number of single seats, only 21% of England’s constituencies elected one MP, and combined together they contained a mere 4% of the English electorate.⁴ The business of having to vote for just one MP at a by-election in this period therefore constituted a very different kind of poll from that experienced in most general elections. Casting one vote is, of course, a matter

¹ *Lords Journal*, lxii. 417, 14 May 1830; D. Butler, ‘By-elections and Their Interpretation’, in C. Cook and J. Ramsden, eds, *By-elections in British Politics* (London, 1973), 1.

² For typical, but by no means exhaustive, examples of these terms see *PP 1842* (458) v, 135; 1852 (1431) xxvii. 135, 249, 469; 1852–53 (78) xii. 235; 1852–53 (1658) xlvii. 30, 53, 108, 173, 262, 372, 444, 465, 468; 1860 (2586) xxvii. 453; 1867 (3776) xxix. 137, 882, 909–10, 1007. Characteristic newspaper usage includes the *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Aug. 1836, and *Essex Standard*, 15 Feb. 1850. On the associated act of ‘thumbing’ in a ‘thumb-screw’ election see *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 19, 26 Dec. 1850, cited in J.R. Fisher, ‘Issues and Influence: Two By-elections in South Nottinghamshire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, *HJ* 24 (1981), 160.

³ Of the 258 English constituencies that existed between 1832 and 1868, 204 (79%) elected more than one MP, compared with 54 (21%) that returned a single member. The single-member constituencies comprised the forty-nine small boroughs listed in schedules B and D of the 1832 Reform Act, plus the single-member boroughs that survived reform (Abingdon, Banbury, Bewdley, Monmouth) and the single-member county of the Isle of Wight.

⁴ In 1832 there were 23,664 electors registered in the fifty-four single-member constituencies, out of a combined English electorate of 614,654: figures based on P. Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–41* (Woodbridge, 2002), 257–63; and P. Salmon, ‘The English Reform Legislation, 1831–2’, in D. Fisher, ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–32* (Cambridge, 2009), i, 411.

of routine to a modern voter. But to the 96% of English electors who were used to having multiple votes at their disposal, a by-election removed a whole range of well-established conventions and electoral possibilities. These included polling for candidates from different parties or ‘splitting’, deliberately choosing to cast a solitary vote or ‘plumping’, and allocating one vote to satisfy a local interest or community, including all those without the vote, in an electoral system where all polling was public knowledge until the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872.

These forms of electoral behaviour, based upon the possession of multiple votes, have been central to some of the most compelling and enduring interpretations of Victorian electoral politics of the last fifty years. The much debated notion of ‘deference communities’, for instance, first introduced by D.C. Moore in the late 1960s and subsequently refined by Richard Davis, Tom Nossiter and Jeremy Mitchell, to name but a few, rests squarely on the idea of landlords, employers and even non-electors being able to exert influence over at least one of an elector’s two votes.⁵ The delicate balance between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ forms of influence, as Alan Heesom and David Eastwood have suggested, also depended upon a complex set of conventions regarding first and second votes.⁶ In more recent years, aided by the advent of computer-assisted pollbook analysis, a second group of influential studies have also used the prevalence of ‘splitting’ and ‘plumping’ at general elections to demonstrate the rise of voter partisanship and the emergence of a more modern two-party system, most conspicuously in the wake of the electoral reforms of 1832 and 1867.⁷ In both types of assessment the possession of two or more votes has been indispensable to the analysis.

By-elections, however, obviously lack any of the above polling dimensions that historians have drawn upon so heavily in their modelling of the Victorian representative system. As such, they barely warrant attention in most studies of electoral behaviour, particularly those constructed around the dark arts of pollbook analysis. If they feature at all, it is as sideshows or anomalies in the broader story of general elections, where all the key political developments are assumed to have taken place.

⁵ D.C. Moore, ‘Political Morality in Mid-Nineteenth Century England: Concepts, Norms, and Violations’, *VS* 13 (1969–70), 5–36; D.C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Case Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System* (Hassocks, 1976); R. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity, 1760–1885: A Buckinghamshire Study* (Newton Abbot, 1972); R. Davis, ‘The Mid-Nineteenth Century Electoral Structure’, *Albion* 8 (1976), 142–53; T.J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion, and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North-East, 1832–1874* (Brighton, 1975); J. Mitchell, *The Organization of Opinion: Open Voting in England 1832–68* (Basingstoke, 2008).

⁶ A. Heesom, ‘“Legitimate” Versus “Illegitimate” Influences: Aristocratic Electioneering in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *PH* 7 (1988), 282–305; D. Eastwood, ‘Contesting the Politics of Deference: The Rural Electorate, 1820–60’, in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds, *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), 27–49; also Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 119–82.

⁷ See, for example, G. Cox, *The Efficient Secret: The Cabinet and the Development of Political Parties in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 1987); J.A. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); J.A. Phillips and C. Wetherell, ‘The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Political Modernization of England’, *AHR* 100 (1995), 411–36.

'Plumping Contests'

Yet this is certainly not how by-elections were viewed by contemporaries. Indeed, the special attention given to contested 'single elections' by the national press and leading election managers such as Joseph Parkes, not to mention the very high levels of expenditure they attracted, is indicative of the distinct and often decisive campaigns and outcomes associated with this separate type of poll.

By-elections could disturb local electoral dynamics in all sorts of ways. How, for instance, would an elector, such as the one from Totnes who declared, 'I would always give one vote for the duke, and the other I would do what I liked with,' behave when faced with a single vote?⁸ What would take precedence, landlord or conscience, and what sort of additional pressures might be brought to bear on the elector during the campaign? And what about the 'splitters' or 'half-and-half men,' as they were often called?⁹ These could comprise a formidable group. In the 1835 and 1857 general elections, for instance, almost a fifth (19%) of all English electors cast cross-party ballots, by giving one vote to a Conservative and another to a Liberal candidate.¹⁰ As an election agent's manual noted as late as 1868: 'In every borough there are many voters who, from various motives, desire to please both parties, and therefore divide their votes; some give one vote for principle and the other for interest; some like to be on the winning side and so "hedge" accordingly; and a few like to get all they can from both parties.'¹¹

How did these electors navigate their use of a single vote? And, assuming that they did not all abstain, did their response provide any of the parties with an advantage? During the 1830s Liberal election managers and the Liberal press became convinced that by-elections tended to favour their opponents in certain types of constituency. Commenting on their defeat in the 1836 Warwick by-election, for example, the *Morning Chronicle* observed that:

The advantage to a Liberal candidate of split votes is well known, and that in a small constituency a 'plumping' contest is the most adverse to a reformer. The electors may, in the first case, more safely divide their vote: in the latter the 'thumb-screw' is unsparingly applied and intimidation has no limit. The coerced elector has to decide 'one way or the other'; he cannot serve two masters.¹²

The question of how voters adapted to 'single-handed' elections, as these examples suggest, has fundamental implications for some of the leading interpretations of electoral politics in this period concerned with voting behaviour and party performance. The issue of how by-elections connected and interacted with general elections is

⁸ *PP 1867 (3776)* xxix, 910.

⁹ *PP 1867 (3776)* xxix, 37.

¹⁰ Cox, *Efficient Secret*, 103.

¹¹ E. Cox and S. Grady, *The New Law and Practice of Registration and Elections* (1868), cited in H.J. Hanham, ed., *Dod's Electoral Facts from 1832 to 1853* (Brighton, 1972), p. lx; *Law Times*, 17 June 1865.

¹² *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Aug. 1836.

clearly an area of study long overdue for investigation. Drawing on the evidence of election agents, the testimony of individual voters, and the ballot records contained in pollbooks and the local press, this chapter examines how Victorian electors and parties responded to these unusual first-past-the-post elections, in which there could only be one victor. More broadly, it explores the relationship between by-elections and the emergence of the more modern forms of partisan voting that have been identified after 1832, which were to have such a profound impact on the development of two-party politics. Before that, however, it is necessary to establish just how significant by-elections were within England's multi-member system.

The growing role of by-elections

One of the most obvious ways of assessing the importance of by-elections in nineteenth-century electoral life is to simply consider the number that went to a poll. In the early decades of this period it continued to be extremely unusual for by-elections to be contested. Most attracted little if any comment, with sitting MPs being routinely re-elected on taking office or being replaced with like-minded nominees when a vacancy occurred, without a hint of opposition. The *History of Parliament* volumes covering these years amply reflect this. Of the 1,225 English by-elections covered by the 1790–1820 and 1820–32 volumes, for example, just 177 (14%) resulted in a poll.¹³ Taken as a whole, during this forty-two-year period the average number of contested by-elections barely exceeded four per year. For the vast majority of electors before 1832, participation in by-elections was clearly the exception rather than the rule.

The contrast with the 1833–68 period is pronounced. Not only were there over twice as many by-election contests, but also and most significantly the proportion of by-elections that reached a poll was nearly three times higher than in the preceding period. In total, 916 by-elections were held in England during these years, out of which a remarkable 384 (42%) were contested.¹⁴ Given that unopposed returns continued to be such a central feature of electoral politics after 1832 – at the nine general elections held between 1832 and 1865, for example, the average proportion of English constituencies that polled was only 59% – this level of contestation is all the more impressive.¹⁵ The number of unopposed by-elections may have still

¹³ These figures amend those in R. Thorne, ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790–1820* (London, 1986) i, 4, 42, and *The House of Commons 1820–32* i, 5, 52, where the number of borough by-election contests for 1790–1820 is given as 96 rather than 98 (pp. 42, 358–63) and for 1820–32 as 60 instead of 59 (pp. 52, 419–25).

¹⁴ Based on the data assembled by F.W.S. Craig, ed., *Chronology of British Parliamentary By-elections, 1833–1987* (Chichester, 1987), 3–52. Note that Craig's table summarising the number of contested and uncontested by-elections (p. 114) is for the entire United Kingdom. This chapter deals only with England.

¹⁵ Between 1832 and 1865 there were 1,360 general election contests out of a possible 2,304 in all English constituencies (excluding the two universities): F.W.S. Craig, ed., *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832–1885* (London, 1977), 624.

‘Plumping Contests’

exceeded the number that went to a poll after 1832, but the relationship between them was now far more evenly balanced. Where there had been just four contested by-elections per year before 1832, there were now an average of eleven per year in the period up to 1868.

These figures alone suggest at least one dimension to the growing significance of by-elections in English electoral politics. But what they cannot reveal is the precise trends in the levels of contestation that occurred year-on-year, and the extent to which contestation either grew steadily or received some form of additional impetus along the way. Figure 1.1 plots the actual number of English contested by-elections that occurred each year from 1790 until 1868. The gradual rise in contestation in the early decades of the nineteenth century is immediately apparent, both from the shape of the scatter and the linear trend line (based on data averages). Aided by the challenge to traditional political allegiances unleashed by Catholic Emancipation and the political fallout from parliamentary reform, in 1831 a peak was reached of thirteen by-election contests, all of them in double-member seats.¹⁶

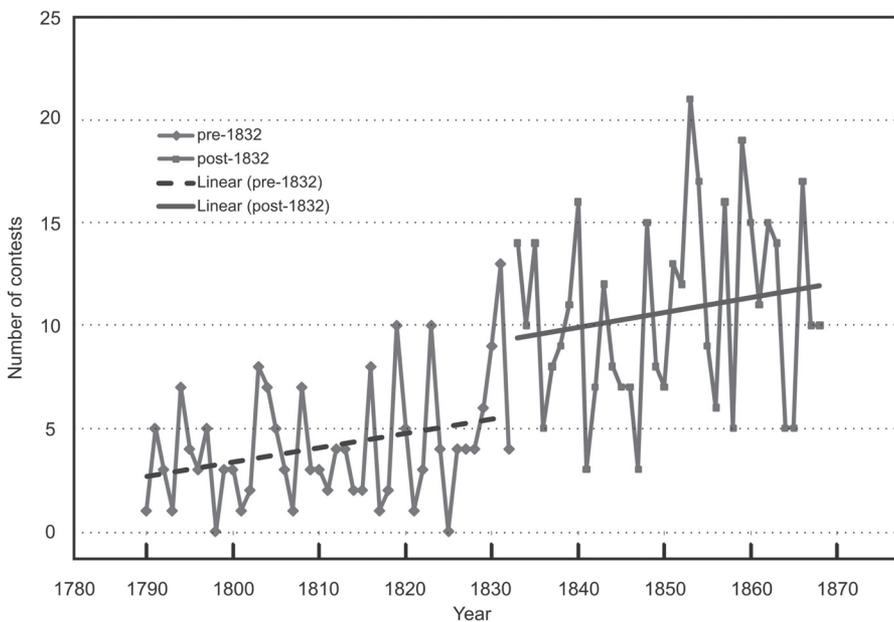


FIGURE 1.1 Total number of contested by-elections in English constituencies, 1790–1868

What is most striking about Figure 1.1, however, is the very substantial jump in contestation that occurred around 1832–33, following the passage of the 1832

¹⁶ Before 1832 there were only five single-member seats in England: Abingdon, Banbury, Bewdley, Higham Ferrers and Monmouth.

Reform Act. This marked shift in the number of contests after Reform represents a leap of around 50% in the linear trend, from roughly 6% to 9%, and is extremely significant. Although a similar pattern of steady growth clearly existed before and after 1832, as revealed by the gradients, the number of contests involved was of a very different order of magnitude. The contests that occurred in 1853 alone, for instance, equalled almost a fifth of all those held between 1790 and 1820.¹⁷ Numerically, then, by-election contests mattered far more following the passage of the 1832 Reform Act than they had done before. Both from the perspective of the increased frequency of by-elections and their greater likelihood of reaching a poll, this different type of ballot became a much more central feature of the electoral landscape after 1832. As such, the question of how voters responded to the new electoral dynamics of using a solitary vote, and how the parties campaigned and fared under these altered conditions, also became far more important. It is these issues that are the remaining subject of this chapter.

Turnout and by-elections

Asked by an 1866 commission of inquiry about why he had split his vote at the previous general election, Richard Harris, a blacksmith in Totnes, explained that 'It is generally considered advisable in Totnes to please both parties,' adding, 'I work for both sides.' Questioned about his future behaviour, he declared, 'I shall always vote one and one, and that is my intention.' The following exchange then occurred: 'What should you do if there was a single election? – I should remain neutral. Not vote at all? – Not vote at all.'¹⁸

Harris's response was an obvious solution to the dilemma facing most cross-party voters in by-elections. Intuitively it made sense for traders and all those under local pressure from competing interests to abstain. The tenant who always 'gave one vote for the duke,' mentioned earlier, for instance, revealed that he had 'never voted on a single election at all' in over twenty years, for the simple reason that he was 'a Conservative at heart and a Liberal by connexion.' Like Harris he participated 'only on the general elections'.¹⁹

Yet although abstention was the most obvious option, it was far from being the widespread occurrence that might be supposed. Participation rates in by-elections after 1832 were often extremely high, sometimes extraordinarily so. In the Sudbury by-election of 1834, for example, the turnout rate was 96%. At Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1842 it was 94%. In Halifax's 1853 by-election, 92% of the registered electors took part, whilst at Totnes in 1863 90% participated. Given the well-documented factors that inflated many registration figures

¹⁷ There were twenty-one by-election contests in 1853 and 110 between 1790 and 1820.

¹⁸ *PP 1867 (3776)* xxix, 881–2.

¹⁹ *PP 1867 (3776)* xxix, 909–10.

throughout this period – multiple entries, deaths, high levels of residential mobility, and disqualification through subsequent receipt of poor relief – these high turnout rates are all the more impressive. Two measures, in particular, help to underline the remarkable extent of voter participation in by-elections during the 1832–68 period.

The first concerns turnout rates either side of 1832. Before 1832 most by-elections, if they ever reached a poll, involved few voters. Many were in reality token or even 'vexatious' oppositions, designed to highlight local grievances or prepare the way for future challenges, rather than all-out attempts to secure the seat. By-elections, in these circumstances, rarely went the full distance, especially at a time when polling could last for up to fifteen days. Even the lengthier contests could prove disappointing. The Southampton by-election of 1830, for instance, dragged on for an interminable five days, yet still only managed to muster a little over two-fifths of the electorate.²⁰

Using the detailed estimates of the English electorate now available from the latest *History of Parliament* volumes, it is clear that the average turnout in by-elections held between 1820 and 1832 was 51%.²¹ The contrast with the 1832–68 period is again striking. In the 140 by-elections analysed in this study, for which unambiguous data are available at both a by-election and the previous general election (see Table 1.1), the average turnout was 67%.²² Based on this sample, which represents over a third (36%) of all the contested by-elections held between 1832 and 1868, a much higher proportion of the electorate turned out in by-elections after Reform than they had done before. This development did not go unnoticed by election managers. As the Liberal agent Parkes remarked in the run-up to an 1841 by-election:

I have observed the last three years that in the present state of politics a considerably higher average of the constituency (especially in the smaller boroughs) polled – *particularly at single elections*. The spurs are stuck deeper into the sides of the pony and donkey electors; and the corrupt and intimidating appliances are now doubled ... Therefore calculate that more than 7/8ths of the constituency ... will probably record their votes.²³

Another way of assessing participation in by-elections is of course to compare how they ranked alongside general elections. Again the findings for 1832–68 appear distinct. Of the 140 by-elections analysed, over a quarter (38) experienced a turnout

²⁰ 612 voted out of an electorate of 1,411: *The House of Commons 1820–32* ii, 450.

²¹ A combined 61,310 voted in the sixty-seven contested by-elections held between 1820 and 1832, out of an estimated electorate of 120,206: *The House of Commons 1820–32* ii and iii, *passim*.

²² A combined 253,073 voted in these 140 contested by-elections, out of a registered electorate of 379,560.

²³ Parkes to J.B. Smith, 16 Jan. 1841, Smith MSS, GMCRO MS 923.2 S336, vi. f. 103. I am indebted to Dr Henry Miller for this reference.

rate that was actually *higher* than at the preceding general election, notwithstanding the awkward dilemma facing many electors. Coventry's 1833 by-election, triggered by Edward Ellice's appointment as a Whig minister, for example, attracted 815 more voters than the general election held just four months earlier, when Reform fever was still at its height. Staged on precisely the same register, the turnout rate at this by-election was 85% compared with the previous 61%.²⁴

Cases such as this, of greater turnouts in by-elections, were by no means confined to the boroughs or those decades in which party activity was most intense. West Kent's 1857 by-election, for instance, involved 75% of the electorate, 12 percentage points more than when the nation had last gone to the polls. Carlisle's 1861 by-election attracted a turnout that was 10% higher than at the 1859 general election. In total, ten of the thirty-eight by-elections noted above produced turnouts that were *at least* 10% higher than in the preceding general election. As we have already seen, in the 140 by-elections for which data have been assembled, the overall by-election participation rate was 67%. The average turnout in all the preceding general elections, by contrast, was 70%, a mere 3 percentage points higher.²⁵ Both from a historical perspective, then, and by comparison with general elections, on which most electoral studies concentrate, by-elections clearly became far more significant in terms of frequency and turnout after 1832.

By-elections and electoral organisation

These high turnouts in by-elections had a number of important consequences for the operation of the electoral system as a whole between 1832 and 1868. Chief among these was the role that by-elections acquired as potential catalysts for political change, given that many electors responded differently to 'single-handed' contests. 'In looking over the votes given,' declared the publisher of one by-election pollbook, 'it will excite much surprise to find them at variance with their former votes.'²⁶ What may have been a winnable seat for one party under the normative conditions of a general election could become far less predictable in the very different circumstances of a single poll. Deprived of second votes, and the possibility of soliciting plumpers if and when they were required, the balance of parties established at general elections could shift significantly. As a Conservative election agent in St Albans told an 1851 inquiry:

²⁴ 2,804 voted in the by-election compared with 1,989 in the general election out of a registered electorate of 3,285. Note that the polling figures given in F.H. McCalmont, *The Parliamentary Pollbook of all Elections from the Reform Act of 1832 to February 1910* (London, 1910), 71 (and later editions), differ from those in *Dod's Electoral Facts*, 75, and H.S. Smith, *The Register of Parliamentary Contested Elections* (London, 1843), 39, which are generally more reliable for this period.

²⁵ A combined 261,710 voted in the previous general elections, out of a registered electorate of 370,849.

²⁶ *Oldham Pollbook* (Dec. 1852), 1.

'Plumping Contests'

There will always be a difference as to the relative strength of the two parties at a general or at a single election. We have always considered that the Conservative party is much stronger at a single election, when one member is to be returned, than at a general election.

Why so? – For this reason, that there are a great many respectable tradesmen voters in St. Albans who usually vote, not strictly and not particularly with regard to any politics, but from a desire to serve families and friends in the town and neighbourhood who deal with them; and there are many respectable voters who always, at a general election, almost invariably divide their votes, one with the Conservative and one with the Spencer [Liberal] party.

So as to offend neither party? – Yes; at a single election I think we get the majority of those votes.²⁷

Other localised factors could also significantly reshape the electoral dynamics of by-elections. In some constituencies, third parties or 'interests' played an important role in general elections. Often associated with long-standing electoral traditions and campaign colours, they would effectively play each nationally-oriented party off against the other, either for their own gain or sometimes in pursuit of a single issue such as opposition to Free Trade or the New Poor Law. Writing to E.J. Stanley about the possible 'result of a plumping contest' at Gloucester in 1838, for example, the Liberal manager Parkes explained that at the previous general elections the local 'green' Berkeley interest, in order to safeguard 'their one seat', had resorted to 'coquetting ... with Radical and Tory parties alternately'. 'Now, being brought to reason', he added, 'all the Liberals will pull together.'²⁸ As another Liberal agent put it in 1852, 'there could not be three parties at a single election, there were only two.'²⁹

Even exploiting the novelty of a by-election could apparently pay dividends. In the fiercely fought North Northamptonshire by-election of 1835 caused by the death of the veteran Whig Lord Milton, for example, Liberal agents began canvassing for two votes, as if for a general election, evidently in the hope of causing all sorts of chaos at the poll. Fearing the worst, the Tory agents had to issue a special address warning the electors not to 'be duped by so shallow an artifice'.³⁰

As well as enhancing the opportunities for political change, higher turnout rates and greater rates of contestation ensured that by-elections became increasingly useful guides to the core politics of a constituency during the Victorian period. Very few voters abstained and all voters were forced to make a choice, one way or the other, making by-elections extraordinarily good barometers of political opinion, as a number of studies have already suggested.³¹ 'If in the single-handed election

²⁷ *PP 1852* (1431) xxvii, 249.

²⁸ Parkes to Stanley, 8 May 1838, Kingsland MSS.

²⁹ *PP 1852* (1431) xxvii, 135.

³⁰ Election poster, 18 Nov. 1835, Messrs Sharpe and Wade MSS, LAS, SW 5/11.

³¹ See Cox, *Efficient Secret*, 139–42.

you have a strong majority’, remarked a seasoned election attorney in 1866, ‘it is indicative of the bias of parties.’³² Local agents, commentators and the press were acutely alive to the differences that by-elections could throw up and their possible implications for a constituency’s future contests. Indeed many publishers added much-needed spice to their pollbooks by contrasting the two sets of votes, or at the very least by including a ‘comparative analysis.’³³ Some even marketed by-election pollbooks as canvassing books for subsequent campaigns. A Carlisle pollbook covering the 1861 by-election, for example, could be ‘had interleaved with writing paper, for adding notes and additional names’, from its enterprising publishers.³⁴

Even if the by-election failed to reach a poll, the preceding by-election canvass and extraction of promises by a party could offer an unprecedented insight into the political instincts of a constituency. Promises given in by-elections neatly side-stepped the more conditional nature of support surrounding a double return, where alliances between candidates and agreements about sharing votes could be made or abandoned during the course of the poll, annulling earlier obligations. In general elections, as one election agent’s manual put it, ‘it will depend upon the state of the poll whether your friends could serve you best by voting as plumpers, or by splitting their votes. Sometimes it happens that an exchange of votes can be effected, in which state of things every plumper will practically count as two for you.’³⁵ Voters who promised to back one party at a general election might respond very differently in the event of a deal being hatched between one of their candidates and a rival, or in the case of a demand being made for plumpers when another candidate from the same party remained in the field. And since some voters promised ‘one vote only’ whilst others happily tendered both during the canvass, negotiations for support could become ‘extremely intricate’ in general elections, especially in so-called ‘three-cornered polls’ involving two candidates from one party and one from another.³⁶

Central election managers, not surprisingly, therefore took an acute interest in by-elections. The Liberals’ defeat in the high-profile Westminster by-election of May 1837 was understandably considered ‘very serious’ by Parkes, who worried that it would ‘damp not a little the ardour and courage of the country reformers and have the effect of giving courage and confidence to the Tories’. Interestingly, however, Parkes also deemed setbacks in ‘little boroughs’, such as the one in Bridgwater that same month, ‘another mortifying matter’. ‘How mortifying is our present political situation’, he lamented to Lord Durham after describing these

³² *PP 1867* (3776) xxix, 1007.

³³ See, e.g., the *1853 Plymouth Pollbook* published by I. Latimer of 20 George Street, ‘showing how every elector voted both at the election in June 1853 and at the election in July 1852’, or the *Bury St. Edmund’s Pollbook for 1857* published by Barker and Son of Hatter Street, with its ‘comparative analysis’ of the previous by-election.

³⁴ *Carlisle Pollbook* (1861), published by Charles Thurham and Sons.

³⁵ Cox and Grady, *Law and Practice of Elections* (1868), cited in Hanham, *Dod’s Electoral Facts*, lxxv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

losses, 'there is nothing except these bye-election matters and the further unlucky vacancy that will be occasioned in Glasgow.'³⁷

Like Parkes, the Conservative election managers Francis Bonham, Granville Somerset and Sir James Graham received regular and detailed reports of 'elections for numbers on single vacancies'.³⁸ They also assisted with candidate selection, advised about the timing of retirements, and on occasion gave financial help, as the well-documented example of the Taunton by-election, which Bonham hoped would 'bring encouragement to the party both at local and national levels', amply demonstrates.³⁹ Indeed, special funds appear to have been available from the central clubs of both parties for those facing 'the certainty of having to stand a single contest'.⁴⁰ The expenses involved could easily outstrip those of a general election. George Smythe's successful by-election campaign for Canterbury in February 1841, for example, cost him approximately £6,000, an extraordinary sum. At the general election five months later, however, he spent just £1,000.⁴¹ His establishment of goodwill and a 'claim' upon the electors through initial largesse were clearly factors here, and there are certainly good grounds for suggesting that by-elections offered more straightforward and reliable opportunities for creating a long-term electoral interest. But as a witness to an inquiry on Cambridge elections also explained, in general elections there were frequently two candidates on the same side, sharing rooms, committees, public houses and all the other paraphernalia associated with a Victorian poll. In these circumstances, 'many of the expenses would be common'.⁴² It was not for nothing that one Tory agent, contemplating whether Sir Robert Carden MP should take the field in a by-election, advised that he 'should not be put to the expense of a contested election, and that a single-handed election too'.⁴³

Some measure of the role that by-elections played in breaking old patterns of voting behaviour can be gleaned from the number of contests that actually resulted in a change of party representation. With far fewer contests and considerably lower turnout rates, by-elections in the pre-1832 period, not surprisingly, only rarely upset established party alignments. Between 1790 and 1820, for example, just twenty-nine English by-election contests overturned a previous political orientation.⁴⁴

³⁷ Parkes to Durham, 16 May 1837, Lambton MSS.

³⁸ Add. MSS 40616, fo. 109.

³⁹ See R.E. Foster, 'Peel, Disraeli and the 1835 Taunton By-election', *SANHS* 126 (1982), 117.

⁴⁰ Parkes to Stanley, 21 Mar. 1838, Kingsland MSS. The forthcoming History of Parliament/Warwick PhD thesis of Seth Thévoz will shed much-needed light on the nature and extent of financial involvement by central clubs in Victorian electioneering, including by-elections.

⁴¹ *PP* 1852–53 (1658) xlvii, 109.

⁴² *PP* 1852–53 (1658) xlvii, 533.

⁴³ *PP* 1860 (2586) xxvii, 453.

⁴⁴ Party affiliations of MPs were not always clear-cut in this period, but using the evidence from *The House of Commons 1790–1820* biographies and contemporary guides such as H.S. Smith, *The Parliaments of England* (2 vols, London, 1844–45), around twenty-nine by-election contests held between 1790 and 1819 resulted in a change of party orientation.

Even in the increasingly politicised last dozen years of the unreformed system, only nineteen contested by-elections were accompanied by a switch of parties.⁴⁵ Taken together, there were forty-eight party swings as a result of by-election polls throughout this entire forty-two-year period, making an average of 1.1 per year.

The prevalence of party swings during the post-1832 period, by contrast, was substantially higher. In total some 124 contested by-elections led to a change of parties between 1833 and 1868, producing a mean rate of 3.5 per year, over three times that of the unreformed period.⁴⁶ Aided by a greater incidence of polls and higher turnouts, by-elections assumed a much greater role as a mechanism for usurping old party allegiances and establishing new ones after 1832, and the special attention they received from agents and the press underscores this. But did any of the political parties fare better as a result of these changes?

Reference has already been made to the supposition, widespread among agents from both parties, that hard-fought by-elections tended to disadvantage Liberal candidates, not least because of the view that cross-party voters, when the ‘thumb-screw’ was applied in a ‘single-handed’ poll, drifted more to the Conservatives. The extent to which other factors beyond the single ballot, such as local organisation, funding and party unity, not to mention the greater prevalence of Liberal ministries in this period, may have also affected party performance needs to be taken into account here. However, on the basis of the results themselves there is no doubt that such a bias existed. Of the 124 party swings that occurred at contested by-elections held between 1833 and 1868, 77 (62%) favoured the Conservatives and 47 (38%) the Liberals. Here, it would seem, is yet another dimension to the Conservative bias that has already been identified in recent accounts of the workings of the reformed electoral system, which is surely worth integrating in the broader political narrative of this period.⁴⁷ There is, however, one more crucial aspect of by-elections that also needs to be taken into account, as the remaining section makes clear.

By-elections and politicisation

Electoral politicisation has emerged as one of the most salient features of recent scholarship on the nineteenth-century electorate. In study after study, English voters have been shown to have behaved in an increasingly partisan way during the Victorian period, either by using both of their votes to support one party or by refraining from using their second vote when there was only one candidate from their preferred party in the field, a form of behaviour termed ‘partisan’ or

⁴⁵ Based on data in *The House of Commons, 1820–32* ii and iii, and Smith, *Parliaments of England*, *passim*.

⁴⁶ Based on data assembled by Craig, *Chronology*, 3–52. Note that Craig’s table summarising gains and losses in by-elections (p. 324) is for the entire UK. This essay only deals with England.

⁴⁷ Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 63–86, 146, 182; P. Radice, ‘Identification, Interests and Influence: Voting Behaviour in Four English Constituencies in the Decade after the Great Reform Act’ (PhD thesis, Durham, 1992), 220–8, 290–314, 441–8, 452, 458–9.

'necessary' plumping. Perhaps the most compelling argument about politicisation, however, has resulted from tracing the behaviour of individual voters over time. Using 'longitudinal' or 'diachronic' analyses of pollbooks, a number of pioneering studies have shown that voters became increasingly likely to vote for the same party at successive elections after 1832, leading to the partisanship of experienced voters becoming increasingly 'fixed'. It was this growth in persistent party voting that ultimately distinguished the behaviour of the unreformed electorate, often fickle and given to swings between different parties, from its reformed counterpart in the period following the 1832 Reform Act.⁴⁸

Work on what lay behind this rise of voter partisanship after 1832, however, has been thinner on the ground. It is one thing to discover a phenomenon, quite another to explain it. Leaving aside the broader explanations associated with the development of party cohesion at Westminster, those specifically centred around the operation of the electoral system have focused primarily on the new voter registration system introduced in 1832 and its stimulus to local party organisation. In the mid-1830s to 1840s, in particular, heated registration battles between local parties helped to 'squeeze' the electorate, effectively forcing voters to adhere to one party or another in advance of a poll, or risk being removed from the register by unscrupulous agents in the annual courts of revision. Neutral or 'floating' voters were often objected to by both political parties in the run-up to a registration, in the hope that the voter would be forced to declare sides. Coupled with the many costs associated with voter registration – from the shilling fee to the payment of all arrears of local rates – voter politicisation after 1832 has been shown to have been embedded within the process of enfranchisement itself and its complex inter-connection with local administration. This had all sorts of consequences, not only for parliamentary voters but also for the development of party activism in local government as well.⁴⁹

Just as the 'squeeze' on electors produced by intense registration battles helped to encourage longer-term and more persistent forms of voter partisanship, it seems reasonable to suppose that the 'squeeze' on voters created in by-elections may have had a similar effect. In both cases the elector was effectively forced to declare sides. And in both cases the elector retained the possibility of altering his partisanship in a subsequent general election, either by completely switching parties or by casting non- or cross-party votes. Those most obviously put to the test, or under the 'screw' as Parkes would have it, were of course the cross-party 'splitters'

⁴⁸ Phillips and Wetherell, 'The Great Reform Bill and the Rise of Partisanship'; Phillips and Wetherell, 'Great Reform Act'; Phillips, 'Many Faces of Reform'; Phillips, *Boroughs*. A summary of the discoveries that emerged in earlier longitudinal studies can be found in 'Communications', *AHR* 100 (1995), 1371–5. For more recent work, refining and extending Phillips's analysis, see E. Jaggard, 'Small Town Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain', *History* 89 (2004), 3–29, and Mitchell, *Organization of Opinion*, *passim*.

⁴⁹ Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 19–42, 185–237; M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832–1914* (Basingstoke, 2009), 162–3.

noted earlier, who against all expectations clearly participated in by-elections in very significant numbers.⁵⁰ The key question here is how did these electors behave in the general elections held *after* by-election contests? Did they simply resume their earlier cross-party voting habits? Or, having been forced to align themselves with one party in a ‘single-handed’ election, did they then maintain this partisan choice in subsequent polls?

One of the most obvious ways of answering this key question is to simply assess the level of split voting that occurred in general elections held before and after a by-election. In Maidstone, for instance, despite a long tradition of party-based contests, the level of non-partisan split voting was still 9.4% at the 1837 general election. Along with the 2.3% of the voters who cast non-partisan plumps (by voting singly for just one of the two Tory candidates), almost 12% of the electors behaved in a non-partisan manner at this poll. Two hard-fought by-elections between a Conservative and a Liberal in quick succession the following year, however, appear to have polarised the electorate to a remarkable degree. When the next two-seat contest occurred at the 1841 general election, cross-party split voting all but disappeared, comprising just 2.1% of the votes cast. Combined with the 0.8% who cast a non-partisan plumper, less than 3% of the electorate failed to register a straight party preference at this post-by-election poll.⁵¹

An even more striking drop in non-partisanship following a by-election occurred in Lewes, another historically contested borough.⁵² At the 1835 general election over a quarter of the voters (26.4%) split their votes between candidates from different parties, in a form of behaviour that had long been a standard component of its pre-reform polls. A by-election between a Liberal and a Conservative in 1837, however, forced every voter to take sides, in a fiercely fought contest that actually mustered fifty-three more participants than the general election. At the 1837 general election just six months later, the level of cross-party voting, rather than continuing as before, now plummeted to a mere 5%. The ‘equilibrium’ of the by-election, as one historian has already noted, was ‘maintained’ at the ensuing general election.⁵³

In order to assess how widespread this sort of development was, a dataset has been constructed of cross-party voting either side of eighty by-election contests held between 1833 and 1865 (see Table 1.2). This selection, which has been conditioned by the availability of detailed voting records for general elections held prior to and after each by-election, accounts for just over one-fifth of all the 384 contested

⁵⁰ Parkes to Smith, 16 Jan. 1841, Smith MSS, MS 923.2 S336, vi. fo. 103.

⁵¹ Based on *Maidstone Pollbook* (1837 and 1841). Phillips’s analysis of the same contests, perhaps using a different set of pollbooks, showed an even more marked decline, with splitting rates of 9.6% and 1%, and unnecessary plumping rates of 2.0% and 0.8%, respectively: Phillips, *Boroughs*, 113.

⁵² See J. Phillips, ‘Partisan Behaviour in Adversity: Voters in Lewes during the Reform Era’, *PH* 6 (1987), 262–79.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 205.

by-elections held between 1832 and 1868, and encompasses over a quarter of a million individual voter choices as recorded in 160 surviving pollbooks.⁵⁴

The data collated show clearly that in many instances there was a very marked drop in the level of cross-party voting at a general election following a by-election. Top of the scale was Bodmin in Cornwall, where almost 80% of the voters polled for a Whig and a Tory candidate in 1841, prior to a by-election showdown between the two parties in 1843. At the subsequent general election split voting plummeted to 28%.⁵⁵ Next in line was Bedford, where the level of cross-party voting fell almost 37 percentage points following the 1854 by-election, and Penryn, where it dropped by 31 points following a ministerial by-election contest in May 1835. These are spectacular falls, but perhaps even more remarkable is the sheer number of by-elections that were followed by a double-figure percentage decline. In well over a third (twenty-eight) the decrease in cross-party voting was 10% or more. Combined with the lesser reductions, a remarkable two-thirds of the eighty by-election contests analysed in Table 1.2 were followed by a fall in the level of cross-party voting at the next general election. This important finding is matched by other measures which can be gleaned from the data assembled here. When added together, a total 123,885 electors participated in the eighty general elections held prior to these by-election contests, of whom 15% cast cross-party votes. In the contests held afterwards, in which 133,174 electors took part, the overall level of cross-party voting dropped to 10%. Based on this very large sample, cross-party voting at general elections appears (on average) to have declined by one-third in the aftermath of a contested by-election.

Of course it could be argued that cross-party voting was becoming less widespread anyway during the nineteenth century, as a number of studies have shown, and that the reductions identified here were therefore simply part of a general trend affecting all constituencies, irrespective of by-election contests. Comparing the levels of split voting that occurred at all general elections, across the board, with those that only took place after a by-election, however, exposes some telling differences. Figure 1.2 shows the rate of cross-party voting in all general elections for the period 1835 to 1865, as calculated by Gary Cox in his broader analysis of English polling behaviour during the nineteenth century. Alongside this, Figure 1.2 also presents the level of split voting at general elections that had been preceded by a contested by-election. The disparity between the two sets of

⁵⁴ In some places, such as Maidstone, there was more than one contested by-election sandwiched between successive general elections, and where this is the case all the by-elections have been listed, to maintain the integrity of the data. It is certainly not clear, for instance, which of the three Aylesbury by-elections held between the general elections of 1847 and 1852 may have had the greatest impact in decimating split voting, which dropped from 35% to just 5%, but by including all three the true number of contests is maintained in any averaging. However, it is worth noting that if by-elections are restricted to a single entry within each parliament, the overall trend remains unaffected.

⁵⁵ On Bodmin, see E. Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform, 1790–1885* (Woodbridge, 1999), 129.

elections is immediately apparent. General elections held in places where there had previously been a by-election experienced a consistently lower rate of cross-voting than that seen across England as a whole, with the single exception of 1852. At this general election the level of split voting was almost identical. Otherwise there was a noticeable difference in the two rates of cross-party voting throughout the period, even though the trends across time were remarkably similar. Clearly contested by-elections mattered. Places without them were still adopting more partisan voting habits, but crucially not to the same extent.

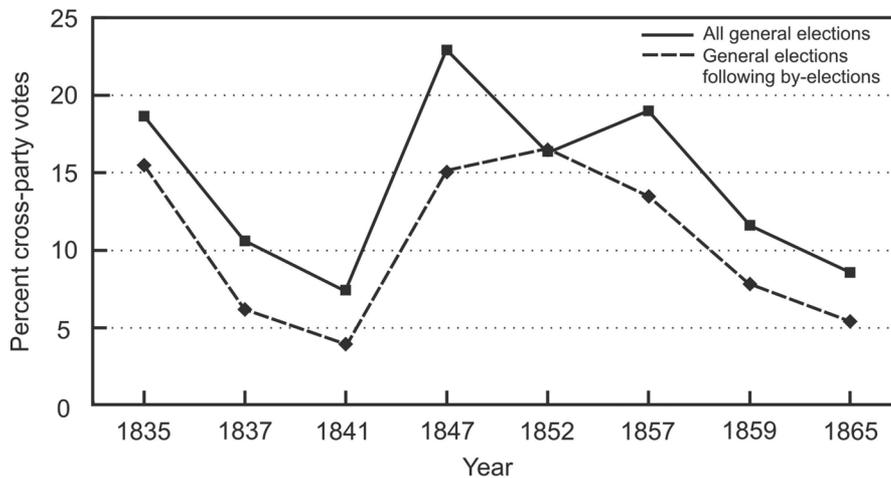


FIGURE 1.2 Comparison of cross-party voting (%) at all general elections and in constituencies with a previous by-election contest, 1835–65

There are, of course, other measures of partisanship that can also be applied to polls held either side of by-elections. One of the most obvious of these involves an assessment of non-partisan plumping, where a single vote was cast for one candidate, even though an additional candidate from the same party was also in the field. Using the same eighty by-elections analysed in Table 1.2, it is clear that this form of voting behaviour also tended to decline following a contested by-election. In Brighton, for instance, the rate of unnecessary plumping dropped from a very substantial 25.9% at the general election preceding the 1842 by-election, to 6% at the subsequent general election. Similarly impressive falls occurred either side of the 1854 Wigan by-election, from 23.6% to 11%, and at the 1863 Barnstaple by-election, from 24.5% to a mere 0.9%. In total, well over half (forty-eight) of the eighty by-elections in Table 1.2 were followed by a decrease in this alternative form of non-partisan behaviour.

Another guide to partisanship utilised by electoral historians of this period concerns the level of partisan or ‘necessary’ plumping, where an elector only used one of his two votes when there was no second candidate from the same party

standing. The difficulties associated with partisan plumping, which involved the deliberate sacrifice of one vote, are well-rehearsed and there is no doubt that a cultural aversion to throwing away votes acted as a brake on political modernisation throughout this period, as a number of studies of three-cornered or triangular contests have indicated.⁵⁶ Even this extremely stringent form of partisanship, however, was not immune from the impact of contested by-elections. In all but six of the thirty-seven by-elections in Table 1.2 in which this form of behaviour was actually possible in the surrounding general elections (owing to the fact that one of the parties only had a single candidate in the field), the level of 'necessary' plumping increased following the by-election. In Pontefract, for example, some 12% of the electors cast partisan plumpers for the solitary Tory candidate at the 1859 general election, prior to the fiercely contested 1860 by-election. At the subsequent general election of 1865, the level of partisan plumping for the single Tory increased to 33%. Although a Tory candidate was elected in second place in both general elections, the party cohesion underpinning his success, as expressed through the strategic use of single ballots, was clearly very different. The more voters were exposed to single-handed polls and the casting of a single vote, it would seem, the more they appear to have been willing to sacrifice one of their votes and cast plumpers in general elections, as and when the lack of a second party candidate made it necessary. Taken as a whole, in the general elections held prior to these thirty-seven by-election contests the overall rate of partisan plumping in the electorate was 30%. Afterwards, it climbed to 36%.⁵⁷

Ultimately, of course, the most revealing measure of the impact of by-elections on voting behaviour involves actually tracing the choices of each individual voter over time, from one election to another, as part of a longitudinal or 'diachronic' analysis. Longitudinal studies, perhaps because of their complexity, have not become the standard psephological tool that they once looked set to be in the mid-1990s, and in the case of by-elections have rarely been applied.⁵⁸ This is a striking omission and what follows is an attempt to begin the process of filling this gap. The two constituencies selected, Maidstone and Bedford, have already been looked at extensively in terms of the voting choices made by individual electors at successive *general elections*, and on the basis of these investigations important conclusions have been drawn about the rise of more persistent forms of partisanship in the

⁵⁶ See, in particular, Phillips, 'Many Faces of Reform', 123–5; Phillips, *Boroughs*, 55–6, 98, 112–15, 130–2, 146, 156, 214–15; Mitchell, *Organization of Opinion*, 57–8, 104–5.

⁵⁷ A total of 19,089 voters out of 62,625 participants cast party plumps before these thirty-seven by-election contests compared with 24,856 out of 68,630 afterwards.

⁵⁸ Jaggard, 'Small Town Politics', 23, offers a revealing comparison of voting in a by-election and subsequent general election in the single-member constituency of Banbury, whilst Mitchell has identified a strong correlation between the party choices made in the 1847 Lancaster general election and a by-election the following year. Crucially, however, Mitchell does not go on to assess how the by-election voters behaved when the double-vote was restored to them at the next general election: Mitchell, *Organization of Opinion*, 59–65.

period after 1832.⁵⁹ What is missing from these studies, however, is an examination of the relationship between the individual voter choices made in general elections and at the intervening by-elections.

Using Maidstone's pollbooks for the general elections of 1837 and 1841 and the press reports of voting at the by-elections of March and June 1838, it is possible to trace the individual behaviour of those electors who cast cross-party votes in 1837, polled in at least one of the 1838 by-elections, and then participated at the 1841 general election. The second elector listed in Maidstone's 1837 pollbook, for example, was one Joshua Aldridge, a master mariner living in the High-Street ward, close to the river Medway on which he presumably plied his trade. In 1837 he cast one vote for Wyndham Lewis, the Conservative candidate, and another for Colonel T.P. Thompson, a Liberal, in a form of behaviour adopted by 9.4% of the voters, as we have already seen. At the by-election in June 1838 Aldridge used his single vote to support John Fector, the Conservative contender. Forced to abandon his former cross-party voting habits, he joined the 58% of electors who polled Tory in this by-election, providing Fector with a comfortable majority. The real test for Aldridge, however, came three years later. With one Liberal and two Conservative candidates in the field, the general election of 1841 presented the same set of choices as the preceding general election of 1837. This voter's behaviour, though, could not have been more different. Rather than resurrecting his cross-party stance, Aldridge opted to stay with the party line he had embraced in the by-election and used both of his votes to support the Conservative candidates, Alexander Beresford Hope and George Dodd. The former splitter, polarised by the experience of a single poll, now turned committed partisan.⁶⁰

Processing all of Maidstone's cross-party voters in this way is highly revealing. Just 8% of this splitting cohort rekindled their previous bi-partisan habits when two votes were again at their disposal in 1841. All the rest cast straight party ballots, bar one elector, who gave a plumper to Hope. Most telling of all, however, the correlation between the party choices taken up in the by-elections and at the subsequent general election was extremely strong. Over three-quarters (77%) repeated their by-election partisanship by either using both of their votes to support the two Conservatives or, in what involved the very awkward sacrifice of one vote, casting a single vote for the solitary Liberal candidate.⁶¹ Not only did this cohort of split voters in Maidstone almost completely abandon their cross-party conduct after participating in a by-election, but they also replaced it with a form of partisanship that was governed overwhelmingly by the choice they had made in the by-election.

Similar evidence emerges from a cross-sectional investigation of contests held

⁵⁹ See Phillips, 'Many Faces of Reform'; Phillips, *Boroughs*, 106–20; Mitchell, *Organization of Opinion*, 80–114.

⁶⁰ Based on *Maidstone Pollbook* (1837); *Maidstone Journal*, 26 June 1838; *Maidstone Pollbook* (1841).

⁶¹ The proportion that switched sides was 13%.

in Bedford during the 1850s.⁶² An analysis of the surviving pollbooks and votes reported in the press reveals that some 184 electors split their votes between the parties at the 1852 general election and then went on to participate in both the 1854 by-election *and* the 1857 general election. How many reverted to cross-party voting when the opportunity arose again in 1857? Just twenty-eight. And how many instead cast votes that were consistent with the partisan choices they had been required to make at the preceding by-election? As with the case of Maidstone, once again the proportion, at 132 electors, exceeded 70%.

Clearly more work needs to be done on integrating individual voting behaviour at by-elections with studies of electoral choices across successive general elections. By-elections are potentially an extremely significant component in the wider story of the emergence of nationally-oriented voter partisanship, and it is odd that their role has not received greater consideration. It will only be by comparing levels of persistence across many more different sequences of polls that a broader picture will be acquired of the importance of by-election contests, and the part they played in polarising the electorate and creating persistent partisans out of non-party voters.

All the evidence gathered in this initial foray, however, indicates that contested by-elections forced substantial numbers of voters to make choices between the parties that they would not otherwise have made, propelling them into partisanship. Having taken sides in these 'plumping contests', they then overwhelmingly stuck with the decisions they had made rather than going back to splitting or unnecessary plumping. At the same time, partisan or necessary plumping, aided and abetted by the experience of casting a solitary vote, became a more established and coherent form of behaviour following a contested by-election. All these developments – the decline of splitting, the rise of partisan voting, the growing familiarity with casting single votes – helped to move England towards a more recognisably modern electoral system, and of course to prepare the ground politically for the transition to single-member districts in 1885.⁶³

Summary

This chapter set out to explore an obvious gap in the historiography of English voting behaviour concerning 'plumping contests'. Accounts of the development of a more party-oriented electorate during the nineteenth century have focused their attention on charting the decline of non-partisan forms of behaviour in Victorian polls, particularly cross-party voting, where electors split their two votes between

⁶² Based on *Bedford Pollbook* (1852); *Bedford Times*, 9 Dec. 1854; *Bedford Pollbook* (1857).

⁶³ For an overview of how the transition to single-member districts affected voters and MPs, see P. Salmon, 'The House of Commons, 1801–1911', in C. Jones, ed., *A Short History of Parliament* (Woodbridge, 2009), esp. 262–8.

candidates from different parties. Since non-partisan behaviour was simply not possible in a single election, by-elections have been almost entirely excluded from the analysis and surrounding story. Implicit in all the contemporary electioneering evidence of this period, however, was the widespread recognition that casting a single vote at a by-election was not the same as deploying multiple votes in a general election, and that this different type of ballot could produce significant variations in voting patterns and act as an important catalyst for political change. The quantitative analysis of pollbooks undertaken in this study leaves no doubt that this was the case.

Another significant finding has been that the differences thrown up in by-elections and general elections came to matter a great deal more in the period following the 1832 Reform Act than they had done previously. Rates of contestation soared in the aftermath of reform, making by-election contests a far more prominent feature of English political life. Somewhat surprisingly, electors immersed in the socio-political niceties of casting more than one vote – a group that comprised 96% of the English electorate – became far more likely to take part in by-elections rather than abstain after 1832, as the extremely high turnout rates for this period clearly reveal. As a result, the numbers of voters actually experiencing by-election contests were markedly different either side of the 1832 Reform Act. And it is in this context that the impact of by-elections provides a new perspective on one of the most striking features of Victorian electoral behaviour after 1832.

By-elections, with their use of a single vote, clearly acted as instruments of politicisation during the early to mid-nineteenth century, assisting the emergence of the new types of nationally-oriented voter partisanship that have been identified in recent studies of English electoral politics. All the anecdotal and pollbook evidence assembled in this chapter suggests that the vast majority of previously non-partisan voters, following exposure to ‘single-handed’ polls, became committed and persistent partisans. Eventually, of course, the distinction between by-elections and general elections traced throughout this chapter would become irrelevant with the move to single-member seats, first partially in 1868 and then overwhelmingly in 1885. The type of ballot used in by-elections and general elections within these later Victorian winner-takes-all districts was precisely the same. Perhaps then it is not without good reason that the term ‘by-election’ itself only came into widespread use during the latter part of the nineteenth century, as these developments began to take hold. Before then, as indicated at the outset, a number of quite different terms were employed by contemporaries, all of them crafted around the distinct dynamics of this separate type of poll. Far too much can sometimes be read into linguistic trends, but in this case it seems that ‘plumping contest’ offers a far more appropriate guide to the electoral realities of the 1790–1868 period than ‘by-election’, with its more modern connotations.

'Plumping Contests'

TABLE 1.1 Turnout in by-elections and general elections, 1833–65

Date	By-election	Turnout at by-election	Turnout at previous general election
27 Feb. 1833	London	54%	62%
7 Mar. 1833	Dover	84.7%	84.5%
18 Mar. 1833	Oxford	85%	93%
20 Mar. 1833	Marylebone	66%	68%
25 Mar. 1833	West Cumberland	85.3%	84.8%
4 Apr. 1833	Sunderland	82%	82.1%
9 Apr. 1833	Gloucester	67%	78%
12 Apr. 1833	Coventry	85%	61%
11 May 1833	Westminster	40%	38%
24 May 1833	Tiverton	67%	87%
12 Aug. 1833	London	33%	62%
11 Nov. 1833	York	76%	92%
17 Feb. 1834	Leeds	77%	85%
17 Feb. 1834	Totnes	81.6%	82.4%
13 June 1834	Cambridge	82.7%	83%
2 July 1834	Finsbury	59%	71%
25 July 1834	Nottingham	42%	64%
25 July 1834	Sudbury	96%	93%
14 Aug. 1834	East Gloucestershire	84%	89%
28 Apr. 1835	Penryn	83%	91%
30 Apr. 1835	Manchester	60%	66%
4 May 1835	North Essex	70%	84%
7 May 1835	South Devon	93%	89%
21 May 1835	Poole	83%	69%
20 June 1835	Hull	67%	73%
8 July 1835	Oldham	78%	82%
25 Nov. 1835	Devizes	88%	84%
21 Dec. 1835	North Northants	85%	86%
9 June 1836	South Essex	69%	68%
1 July 1836	South Warwickshire	81%	78%
27 July 1836	Newcastle upon Tyne	76%	77%
23 Aug. 1836	Warwick	86%	96%
4 Feb. 1837	Evesham	86%	98%
20 Feb. 1837	Buckinghamshire	56%	73%

By-elections in British Politics, 1832–1914

28 Mar. 1837	Warwick	87%	96%
21 Apr. 1837	Lewes	91%	94%
12 May 1837	Westminster	43%	32%
16 May 1837	Bridgwater	90%	72%
3 Mar. 1838	Marylebone	69%	65%
27 Mar. 1838	Sudbury	93%	83%
28 Mar. 1838	Maidstone	87%	86%
21 May 1838	Gloucester	75.5%	76.4%
15 June 1838	Maidstone	82%	86%
23 Aug. 1838	Great Yarmouth	84%	85%
6 June 1839	Ludlow	91%	94%
15 July 1839	Ipswich	87%	89%
26 July 1839	Totnes	96%	88%
31 July 1839	Aylesbury	49%	84%
6 Sept. 1839	Cambridge	79%	76%
7 Sept. 1839	Manchester	54.8%	54.9%
23 Jan. 1840	Penryn	79%	86%
24 Jan. 1840	Beverley	91.7%	91.9%
24 Jan. 1840	Devonport	81%	76%
25 Jan. 1840	Birmingham	51%	60%
25 Jan. 1840	Newark	95%	96%
21 Apr. 1840	Totnes	91%	88%
23 May 1840	Cambridge	75%	76%
23 May 1840	Ludlow	84%	94%
1 June 1840	Cockermouth	72%	77%
3 Feb. 1841	Canterbury	74%	82%
8 Feb. 1841	East Surrey	65%	71%
9 Feb. 1841	St Albans	91%	93%
26 Apr. 1841	Nottingham	80%	63%
11 May 1841	Sandwich	80%	84%
16 Sept. 1841	Bradford	75%	82%
17 Sept. 1841	Sunderland	69%	77%
5 Oct. 1841	Hereford	77%	82%
11 Feb. 1842	Taunton	72%	89%
5 May 1842	Brighton	76%	85%
14 June 1842	Newcastle-under-Lyme	94.2%	94.1%

'Plumping Contests'

4 Aug. 1842	Nottingham	68%	14%
9 Feb. 1843	Bodmin	80%	62%
16 Mar. 1843	Tavistock	69%	65%
21 Mar. 1843	Cambridge	73%	74%
5 Apr. 1843	Durham	82%	84%
18 Apr. 1843	East Suffolk	70%	72%
4 May 1843	Salisbury	61%	89%
26 July 1843	Durham	81%	84%
24 Nov. 1843	Salisbury	81%	89%
30 Mar. 1844	Hastings	76%	84%
15 July 1844	Birmingham	68%	64%
15 Aug. 1845	Sunderland	67%	77%
16 July 1845	Cambridge	77%	74%
19 Feb. 1846	Westminster	46%	48%
7 Mar. 1846	Bridport	84%	91%
11 Aug. 1846	St Albans	76%	96%
4 Sept. 1846	Derby	69%	72%
22 Dec. 1847	Sunderland	76%	78%
9 Mar. 1848	Lancaster	91%	92%
16 Mar. 1848	Lincoln	83%	86%
29 Mar. 1848	Aylesbury	63%	76%
1 Apr. 1848	Harwich	88%	91%
24 May 1848	York	58%	74%
9 Feb. 1849	Bolton	83%	88%
2 Aug. 1849	Boston	77.1%	76.8%
8 Aug. 1849	Reading	75%	87%
9 Feb. 1850	Colchester	81%	89%
24 Sept. 1850	Poole	71%	79%
27 Dec. 1850	Aylesbury	43%	76%
5 Mar. 1851	Harwich	92%	91%
11 Apr. 1851	Aylesbury	70%	76%
22 Apr. 1851	Boston	64%	77%
28 May 1851	Harwich	90%	91%
25 June 1851	Bath	69%	84%
11 Feb. 1852	Northampton	58%	86%
28 May 1852	Sandwich	75%	87%
3 Dec. 1852	Oldham	85%	87%

By-elections in British Politics, 1832–1914

4 Dec. 1852	Bury St Edmunds	90%	89%
5 Jan. 1853	Halifax	92%	91%
7 Jan. 1853	Southampton	62%	76%
24 Mar. 1853	Blackburn	91%	93%
12 Apr. 1853	Lancaster	88%	92%
16 May 1853	Maidstone	81.9%	81.5%
25 June 1853	Peterborough	86%	83%
31 July 1854	Beverley	81%	76%
3 Oct. 1854	Wigan	85%	94%
6 Dec. 1854	Bedford	82%	87%
2 Jan. 1855	Sunderland	83%	80%
5 June 1855	Bath	73%	77%
7 Mar. 1856	Boston	81%	91%
16 Feb. 1857	West Kent	75%	63%
24 Feb. 1857	Colchester	80%	89%
5 June 1857	Leeds	67%	70%
9 Dec. 1857	Harwich	74%	86%
18 Mar. 1859	Harwich	84%	86%
28 June 1859	Bedford	90%	95%
28 June 1859	Norwich	70%	81%
20 Aug. 1859	Berwick	77%	84%
11 Jan. 1860	Reading	80%	84%
31 Jan. 1860	Pontefract	84%	86%
30 Oct. 1860	Boston	82%	79%
21 Nov. 1860	Reading	68%	84%
26 Nov. 1861	Carlisle	89%	79%
23 Sept. 1862	Stoke-on-Trent	82%	85%
9 Dec. 1862	Totnes	49%	83%
20 Jan. 1863	Totnes	90%	83%
29 June 1863	Berwick	80%	84%
20 Oct. 1863	Barnstaple	80%	84%
13 Apr. 1864	Lancaster	87%	92%
21 June 1865	Coventry	86%	89%

Sources: Pollbooks, electoral registers and official registration returns; F.H. McCalmont, *The Parliamentary Poll Book of all Elections from the Reform Act of 1832 to February 1910* (London, 1910); H.S. Smith, *The Parliaments of England*, 2 vols (London, 1844–45); *Dod's Electoral Facts*. The original dataset, on which this table is based, contains all the numbers polled and officially registered.

'Plumping Contests'

TABLE 1.2 Cross-party voting and plumping either side of eighty by-election contests, 1833–65

Date	By-election	Voting in previous general election			Voting in subsequent general election		
		% cross-party votes	% non-party plumps	% party plumps	% cross-party votes	% non-party plumps	% party plumps
7 Mar. 1833	Dover	18.6%	30%		34%	10%	
18 Mar. 1833	Oxford	17.6%	22%	6.8%	34%	22%	12.7%
9 Apr. 1833	Gloucester	18.4%	14.6%		13.6%	14.8%	
11 Nov. 1833	York	10.7%	11%	22.6%	10.5%	5.8%	48%
17 Feb. 1834	Leeds	5.8%	2.1%	38.8%	4%	1.7%	49%
17 Feb. 1834	Totnes	18.9%	3.3%	17.8%	16.4%	3.9%	26.7%
13 June 1834	Cambridge	24.5%	2.5%	18.7%	9.7%	0.5%	41.6%
28 Apr. 1835	Penryn	64.2%	11.9%	8.8%	32.9%	1.6%	24.2%
30 Apr. 1835	Manchester	22.9%	23.5%	22.3%	8.5%	4%	29%
20 June 1835	Hull	13.6%	19.9%		4.6%	10.3%	
21 Dec. 1835	North Northants	8.9%	9.7%		5%	1.2%	
9 June 1836	South Essex	6.3%	4.8%	25.7%	5.5%	4.9%	33.8%
23 Aug. 1836	Warwick	13.6%	5.4%	37%	6.9%	0.8%	44.5%
4 Feb. 1837	Evesham	26.8%	16.5%	11%	12%	1.6%	38.7%
28 Mar. 1837	Warwick	13.6%	5.4%	37%	6.9%	0.8%	44.5%
21 Apr. 1837	Lewes	26.4%	1.1%		4.9%	2.6%	
12 May 1837	Westminster	7.9%	9.9%	27.9%	2%	2%	38.7%
3 Mar. 1838	Marylebone	15%	13.7%		0.6%	4.4%	
28 Mar. 1838	Maidstone	9.4%	2.3%	33.9%	2.1%	0.8%	33.9%
15 June 1838	Maidstone	9.4%	2.3%	33.9%	2.1%	0.8%	33.9%
21 May 1838	Gloucester	23.3%	4.9%		10.7%	3%	
23 Aug. 1838	Great Yarmouth	0.9%	0.5%		0.5%	0.5%	
6 June 1839	Ludlow	11.6%	3.1%	43%	1.6%	1.6%	40%
6 Sept. 1839	Cambridge	2.2%	1.1%		2.6%	2%	
24 Jan. 1840	Beverley	5.5%	1.8%		6%	0.5%	
24 Jan. 1840	Devonport	26.8%	6.5%	19.9%	2.6%	1.3%	42.8%
25 Jan. 1840	Birmingham	4.9%	2.4%	28.4%	8.9%	1.5%	39.6%
25 Jan. 1840	Newark	20.6%	13.8%	27.2%	4.8%	0.9%	34%
23 May 1840	Ludlow	11.6%	3.1%	43%	1.6%	1.6%	40%
23 May 1840	Cambridge	2.2%	1.1%		2.6%	2%	

By-elections in British Politics, 1832–1914

3 Feb. 1841	Canterbury	4.5%	3.2%		6.9%	0.7%	
9 Feb. 1841	St Albans	31.1%	1.4%		21%	3.5%	
16 Sept. 1841	Bradford	4.7%	2.7%		4.9%	2.4%	
11 Feb. 1842	Taunton	15.2%	10.5%		20.9%	4.6%	
5 May 1842	Brighton	20%	25.9%		31.6%	6%	
14 June 1842	Newcastle-under-Lyme	33.9%	1.8%		44.1%	25%	
9 Feb. 1843	Bodmin	79.7%	22%	18.9%	28.3%	6.4%	4.4%
21 Mar. 1843	Cambridge	2.6%	2%		7.5%	2.7%	
5 Apr. 1843	Durham	24.3%	31%	27%	12.8%	2.6%	34%
26 July 1843	Durham	24.3%	31%	27%	12.8%	2.6%	34%
4 May 1843	Salisbury	23.5%	5.5%	30%	25%	13.5%	4.7%
24 Nov. 1843	Salisbury	23.5%	5.5%	30%	25%	13.5%	4.7%
15 July 1844	Birmingham	8.9%	1.5%		10.2%	7.7%	
16 July 1845	Cambridge	2.6%	2%		7.5%	2.7%	
4 Sept. 1846	Derby	6.6%	0.8%		4.8%	39%	
22 Dec. 1847	Sunderland	54.3%	29.5%	12%	37.5%	34%	17.4%
9 Mar. 1848	Lancaster	37%	17%		25.8%	18%	
29 Mar. 1848	Aylesbury	35%	18.8%		5%	3.5%	
2 Aug. 1849	Boston	30%	6.5%		43.2%	17.2%	
8 Aug. 1849	Reading	14.4%	4.9%		9.8%	1.9%	
9 Feb. 1850	Colchester	17%	2.5%		13.9%	3.3%	
24 Sept. 1850	Poole	34%	26.8%		12.8%	39%	
27 Dec. 1850	Aylesbury	35%	18.8%		5%	3.5%	
11 Apr. 1851	Aylesbury	35%	18.8%		5%	3.5%	
22 Apr. 1851	Boston	30%	6.5%		43.2%	17.2%	
25 June 1851	Bath	8.3%	3.4%	45%	4%	1.4%	45%
11 Feb. 1852	Northampton	11.1%	3.9%		7.4%	2.7%	
4 Dec. 1852	Bury St Edmunds	29.8%	9%	18.4%	18.8%	8%	35%
5 Jan. 1853	Halifax	10.2%	4.1%		12.7%	3.8%	
16 May 1853	Maidstone	10.4%	10.7%		2.7%	2.3%	
3 Oct. 1854	Wigan	33%	23.6%	21%	40%	11%	20%
6 Dec. 1854	Bedford	47%	30.3%		10.5%	18.5%	
2 Jan. 1855	Sunderland	37.5%	34%	17.4%	45.3%	37.3%	8.8%
5 June 1855	Bath	4%	1.4%	45.3%	7.9%	4.3%	42.5%
7 Mar. 1856	Boston	43.2%	17.2%		25.8%	2%	
16 Feb. 1857	West Kent	1.5%	1.5%	43.5%	4.3%	1.3%	42%

'Plumping Contests'

24 Feb. 1857	Colchester	13.9%	3.3%	28%	12%	43.7%	43%
5 June 1857	Leeds	9%	4.8%	42%	7.9%	3.3%	43%
9 Dec. 1857	Harwich	16.8%	1.1%		5.3%	0.3%	
18 Mar. 1859	Harwich	16.8%	1.1%		5.3%	0.3%	
28 June 1859	Bedford	7.5%	0.9%		15%	19%	
28 June 1859	Norwich	0.75%	1.6%		0.15%	11%	
20 Aug. 1859	Berwick	8.6%	3.4%		11.1%	3.5%	
11 Jan. 1860	Reading	8.2%	1.6%	36.4%	1%	4.3%	36.4%
31 Jan. 1860	Pontefract	38.4%	6.9%	11.8%	21.6%	4.5%	33.2%
21 Nov. 1860	Reading	8.2%	1.6%	36.4%	1%	4.3%	36.4%
26 Nov. 1861	Carlisle	4.1%	0.7%	44%	5.1%	2.5%	46%
29 June 1863	Berwick	8.6%	3.4%		11.1%	3.5%	
20 Oct. 1863	Barnstaple	23%	24.5%		10.8%	0.9%	
3 Apr. 1864	Lancaster	31%	8.2%		4.2%	0.3%	

Sources: Pollbooks, local newspapers and contemporary election guides, including H.S. Smith, *The Parliaments of England*, 2 vols (1844–45) and *Crosby's Parliamentary Record* (1841, 1847). The full dataset, from which this table has been extracted, contains all the individual vote counts and turnouts for these by-elections and the surrounding general elections.